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Interpersonal Relationships: Exploring Race and Relationship Decisions Among African American College Men

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This study explores how race influenced African American men’s interpersonal relationships with other men at a predominantly White institution. The use of both semi-structured and photo-elicitation interview formats provided participants an opportunity to reflect on their precollege experiences, identity, and relationships. Two categories emerged during data analysis: (a) racial diversity of hometown and relationship formation, and (b) environmental influences on racial identity and decisions about relationships. Implications for future research and practice are offered.

Research on how college influences student development has examined peer influence as the dominant change agent during the college years (Astin, 1993). For African American students at predominantly White institutions (PWIs), the peer group takes on an even greater level of significance in their matriculation experience when negotiating an environment that in many cases differs from their cultural and socioeconomic background (Bonner & Bailey, 2006). Attending college is a transition and can often be facilitated through relationships that connect students to others within the institutional setting (Schlossberg, 1981). Although the goal of student affairs educators is to help students with this transition, the question of how race influences social interaction on campus is of great theoretical and practical importance.

Race is a central organizing concept that influences an individual’s lived experiences, social interactions, and worldviews. Contemporary examinations of students’ conceptualizations of race are important to consider, as students are entering college with greater awareness of racial group-based inequalities (Gurin & Nagda, 2006). Previous research reveals how students resist conversations about racial issues on college campuses (Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Quaye, 2012). Nevertheless, having students make meaning of their racialized experiences is essential, as “the college environment is the first place in which deep questions of identity may be broached and the last place in which challenge and support for those inquiries and journeys are an intentionally structured aspect of the student’s experience” (Stewart, 2009, p. 253). Thus, this study sought to investigate how race influenced African American men’s interpersonal relationships with other men at a PWI. Of note, interpersonal relationships are defined as platonic social interactions between two or more individuals (e.g., close peer relationships and friendships).

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Within the literature, there are three contemporary issues influencing African American college men’s interpersonal relationships. First, African American men’s perceptions of the campus racial climate shape how they develop interpersonal relationships. African American students encounter significant challenges navigating the PWI based on racism and alienation (Jackson & Moore, 2006), which in turn affects how they create and maintain peer connections. Second, African American men’s scant representation in college enrollments have implications on the social climate of the institution. In a report from the National Black Male College Achievement Study, Harper (2012) revealed that African American men encompass 4.3% of all students in college, the same percentage as in 1976. Although explanations for this enrollment trend are multifaceted and based on a myriad of factors, it could provide context to why African American men rely on one another to successfully matriculate in college. However, some African American men find alternative ways to create peer connections on campus, which may include men from other racial and ethnic backgrounds. Third, increased attention has been devoted to African American men’s retention (Cuyjet, 2006; Palmer & Wood, 2012). Both identity challenges (Cuyjet, 2006) and lower levels of sense of belonging (Strayhorn, 2008) are cited as potential causes of their departure from college. Developing a sense of belonging is an important factor in determining student retention (Strayhorn, 2012); thus, research focused on the varied ways African American men develop interpersonal relationships in college could answer much needed questions about what compels them to persist and earn their degrees.

Despite numerous empirical investigations centered on African American college men’s experiences in the higher education literature, few have explored within-group differences among African American men and the complexities of their friendship dynamics. Harper and Nichols (2008) examined relationships and within-group peer engagement trends among 39 Black male students at a private university and suggested that common social interests among Black men superseded race when selecting friends on campus. Participants in Harper and Nichols’s study described their engagement with same race peers outside of their respective subgroups as “rare, conflict-laden, and competitive” (p. 13). While exploring friendship groups and the impact of interpersonal interactions among students at a public research university, antonio (2001) suggested that African American students were most likely to report having racially homogenous friendship groups. Furthermore, in his investigation of how race and racial diversity carry meaning for 18 college men from different racial backgrounds in the construction of their interpersonal environments, similar to Harper and Nichols’s findings, antonio found (2004) indicated that most of the participants in his study mentioned sharing common values as a basis for friendship.

As indicated in the literature above, African American students are underrepresented in the college environment, enter college with varied understandings of race, are more likely to have homogenous friendships, and encounter challenges navigating the campus based on racism, alienation, and discrimination. The present study grew out of a need for more empirical investigations exploring how African American men, as they persist through college, make meaning of their race and its influence on their peer connections in college. The following research questions guided this analysis: (a) How do African American college men perceive race influencing their relationship decisions? (b) How do African American college men describe interpersonal relationship development within the context of their racial identity?

**Conceptual Framework**

Consistent with constructivist grounded theory, this study aimed for an emergent understanding of racial thinking grounded in participants’ experiences in place of using *a priori* theory. I
used Cross and Vandiver’s (2001) expanded nigrescence model as a sensitizing concept to understand African American students’ racial identity development. Cross (1971) presented a theory of psychological nigrescence, which examined the racial identity development that African Americans negotiate as they interact with members from the majority group. Howard-Hamilton (1997) noted that Cross’ theory is a suitable framework for investigating African American male experiences given its Afrocentric roots. Building on the original model, Cross and Vandiver’s expanded nigrescence model has three thematic categories: pre-encounter, immersion-emersion, and internalization. Within this framework, consciousness is raised as people progress through the thematic categories. Although this article does not focus on placing students into the thematic categories, these themes could provide context to how African American men form interpersonal relationships with other men on campus. Pre-encounter themes describe individuals with attitudes or low racial identity salience attributed to being Black. Immersion-emersion themes describe individuals with an identity in a state of transition. Internalization themes occur when an individual is comfortable being Black and views race as being positive. Within this framework, Cross and Vandiver posited that individuals can possess multiple attitudes concurrently, which can influence how they make meaning of their social sense of self.

Methodology

This article is based on a larger qualitative study that sought to explore the development of African American college men’s interpersonal relationships with other college men. I approached this study from a constructivist epistemological perspective (Crotty, 1998) using grounded theory methodology (Charmaz, 2006). Constructivist epistemology allows individuals to construct their own understanding and assign meaning across multiple contexts. As a result, I developed a conceptual model that explained the process of how African American men develop interpersonal relationships. For the present study, data were extracted from the larger data set and analyzed based on this study’s research questions and conceptual framework. I used analytical methods consistent with constructivist grounded theory, which allowed for broader understandings of participants’ racial conceptions.

Research Site and Sample

The context for this sample is a large, public, research university in the Midwest, Hillside University (pseudonym). Men comprise 50.1% of the undergraduates and African Americans account for 4.2% of the overall population. Participants for this study were obtained through a purposive snowball sampling procedure (Patton, 2002). To recruit study participants, I sought four gatekeepers, administrators with extensive contact with African American men on campus. The criteria for study participants were full-time African American undergraduate men of at least sophomore status. First-year students were not considered due to their lack of exposure to the campus. Each participant created a pseudonym to maintain confidentiality and the sampling technique yielded 17 traditional-aged students including seven seniors, five juniors, and five sophomores. Eleven participants were first-generation students, meaning they were the first person in their immediate family to attend college. Eight participants grew up in predominantly White hometown communities with the remaining nine being from predominantly African American hometown communities. The data reached saturation after 17 interviews given that new data did not shed additional insights.
Data Collection

I used two data sources in this study: semi-structured interviews (Patton, 2002) and photo-elicitation interviews (Harper, 2002). The initial interview lasted approximately 60–75 minutes and the second interview lasted 45–60 minutes. The initial interview protocol was open-ended and allowed participants an opportunity to discuss their early understandings of identity development and the role race played in their interpersonal relationships with other men. I developed the interview protocol based on major points in the literature review and gaps within the literature. I assessed participants’ racial identity attitudes based on responses to questions throughout the interviews that were verified during the member-checking process. At the conclusion of the initial interview, I asked participants to submit photographs that illustrated their close relationships with other men and describe how these relationships influenced their campus experiences.

During the second interview, I used photo-elicitation, a qualitative interview technique that uses photographs in a research interview (Harper, 2002). Photo-elicitation is a means for deeply understanding the beliefs, perspectives, and experiences of people and could overcome the difficulties posed by standard interviewing because it is anchored in an image that is understood by the researcher and participant (Harper, 2002). This technique serves as an appropriate method to explain cultural differences, and few studies have used photo-elicitation in studies involving African American college students. During the photo-elicitation interview, participants were asked to explain the ideas and objects embedded in the pictures. Participants submitted photographs of their best friends, places on campus where they felt affirmed, academic classrooms, cocurricular activities, and social gatherings. Images have no intrinsic meaning; thus, participants have to assign various meanings to the pictures they take during photo-elicitation interviews (Ruby, 1995). The words participants used to make meaning of the photographs were fully transcribed, analyzed, and incorporated into the data analysis process.

Data Analysis

Procedures consistent with constructivist grounded theory methods described in Strauss and Corbin (1998) formed the primary analytic structure. I analyzed the interview transcript data using three levels of coding: open, axial, and selective (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). During the open coding process, I assigned words to each line based on initial impressions and assumptions of the data. This coding resulted in initial codes that were organized into categories. Criteria for the initial categories consisted of two or more related concepts that arose out of the data. During axial coding, I explored relationships among the initial categories to compare similarities and contradictions. Concepts that appeared to be related were subsequently grouped together and assigned a new code. For instance, the concepts “race-first,” “seek friends who look like me,” and “finding commonalities” were grouped under the category “creating relationships.” Lastly, I used selective coding to reorganize the data and the relationships between the categories that emerged from axial coding. This process involved revisiting memos and examining how the categories aligned together.

Trustworthiness

I used Lincoln and Guba’s (1985) trustworthiness strategies in this study. First, I relied on a peer debriefer, an experienced qualitative researcher who has extensive experiences working with African American college men. He helped me establish, clarify, and apply the coding criteria consistently. Second, I used member checking and wrote summaries that were later shared with all participants to verify interpretation of the conversations. Third, I kept a reflexive journal as part of the
data collection process when interviewing participants and also later as a running self-commentary during the data analysis process. Lastly, I wrote a positionality reflection, an acknowledgment of worldviews and epistemological underpinnings influencing the research process (Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2013). I situated myself within this study and reflected on how race influenced my interpersonal relationships with other men over time. My position as an African American man from a predominantly African American hometown community required me to reflect and evaluate my interpretations of the participants’ stories.

Findings

Two categories emerged during data analysis: (a) racial diversity of hometown and relationship formation, and (b) environmental influences on racial identity and decisions about relationships. Participants offered insight into the various ways in which they made meaning of their race and its influence on their interpersonal relationships with other men at Hillside. Each emerging category is discussed with direct quotations gathered during the semi-structured and photo-elicitation interviews.

Racial Diversity of Hometown and Relationship Formation

Participants’ explanations of their racial identity emerged as an important factor that influenced how they constructed interpersonal relationships with other men. During the interviews, participants were asked to discuss their racial identities and whether or not it influenced their interpersonal relationships. Because this research is focused on the role of race in the creation of African American men’s interpersonal relationships, understanding the various ways in which participants formed connections on campus is important.

Limited Same Race Peer Interactions. In most cases, participants who came from predominantly White hometown communities tended to have a low race salience, retreated from Black culture, and formed relationships exclusively or primarily with White men. These men described forming interpersonal relationships based more on common social interests and communication styles, not race. When asked if there was a connection between race and their decision to form friendships with other men, Charles shared:

No, for me it is mainly through common interests. I really don’t see people through color. On campus, actually I have a lot more people that are completely unlike me. I have a lot more friends that have different hair, different height, just everything.

Charles’s perspective reinforced a colorblind paradigm that ignores racial differences. James exclaimed, “No, for me it is having interests in common. Basically, if I can have a conversation with you. If I can’t have a conversation with you, then generally I can’t be around you because I like to talk.” For students like James, being able to hold a conversation influenced the extent to which he interacted with peers at Hillside, not race.

Some participants acknowledged how limited opportunities to interact with other African American men before attending Hillside influenced their precollege attitudes. When asked about developing interpersonal relationships with other African American men, Daron shared, “I did not do it much. My town was very, very White and had few Black people.” Jamar described the tension between growing up in a predominantly White hometown where he formed friendships with White people and the messages his mother offered about racism:

Race doesn’t matter to me. I don’t care if you’re White, if you’re Black, if you’re Hispanic, if you’re Asian—I really don’t. Personality and sense of humor and communication, those things matter so much more to me than what one looks like on the outside. And it’s been very difficult for me like I said
earlier, my mother grew up in [hometown] where there’s racism going on, so for her it’s always been like, you have to be better than your White counterparts, better than the White man.

Despite this reflection on his openness to same race peer relationships during the initial interview, Jamar only submitted photographs of White men when describing his friendships during the first two years of college. This discrepancy was a recurring theme among many men in this study from predominantly White hometowns, as they provided numerous examples of being “open” to same race male peer relationships but submitted photographs with mostly Whites and in a few cases Asian counterparts during the photo-elicitation interview.

**Internalized Racial Stereotypes.** Few participants described adhering to negative stereotypes about other African American men that hindered their ability to develop friendships. They described feeling “uncomfortable” around African American men who had differing dress styles, cultural interests, and codes of communication. While describing his interactions with other African American men, Charles changed his conversational tone, raised his voice, and stated, “If I don’t feel like I can be comfortable around those people [African American men], then there’s no reason for them to be my friend.” Similarly, Daron stated, “I grew up in a town where there was just very few Black guys. I feel comfortable around White guys and around Asian guys.” Daron further described his preconceived stereotypes about African American men by stating:

A lot of times, I’m not going to go hang out with African American males because I just feel like I don’t really gel with them that much. There are some African American males that are just very thug, very masculine, like, “I don’t want to be smart.”

Daron and Charles internalized negative stereotypes associated with African American men, which subsequently influenced how they chose their friends.

Although most participants from predominantly African American hometown communities felt comfortable forming interpersonal relationships with their same race male peers, a few participants found this process uncomfortable. These men described facing adversity in their hometowns that subsequently influenced their friendship decisions. Michael described preferring friendships with White men on campus and stated, “Most of my good friends are White because like I said, they don’t have any, you know, hidden agendas. They just want to hang out and have a good time.” Michael also described instances where he felt betrayed by his same race male peers. Similarly, Donte discussed being fearful when forming connections with other African American men:

I would feel a lot more comfortable to approach a White male on like I said, a connection or a friendship type thing versus a Black male because it’s almost like this intimidation factor, based on how I grew up and being around so many Black males.

Similar to Michael, Donte’s upbringing caused him to have negative feelings about interacting with his same-race male peers.

**Intentional Cross-Racial Friendships Prior to College.** Despite most participants from predominantly White hometowns having either “colorblind” approaches to selecting friends or preferring to have friends who were White, few participants from these areas described the explicit choice to form relationships with both African American men and men from differing racial and ethnic groups prior to attending Hillside. These students tended to enjoy establishing relationships with men from differing racial and ethnic backgrounds. Shaun discussed the values he associated with cross-racial friendships:
Every race has its own perspective because if you’re friends with only one race, that’s kind of bad because you only see one side of things. I learned that especially by going to [high school] because there are a lot of different races. There’s not that many Black people there, so I hang out with the Whites, Asians, Hispanics, and they all have different perspectives. Their cultures are different; their lifestyles are different, so you get to see how like they’re all different and that makes you more culturally accepting. I approach it in that way here [at Hillside]. I guess it also helps out with the ladies, too.

For Shaun, having cross-racial friendships elevated his social status and reputation with his female counterparts on campus.

Kobe described the process of cross-racial friendships as being “simple.” During the photo-elicitation interview, Kobe described this process and shared, “It is easy for me. My friend group, in general, is pretty mixed, but as far as how much we hang out with each other, it varies to certain degrees just depending on what’s going on at the time.” Given their desire to have diverse friendships prior to attending Hillside, they arrived to campus valuing cross-racial interpersonal relationships.

“Race-First” Approach. Students from predominantly African American hometown environments tended to have a high race salience and entered Hillside having close relationships exclusively or primarily with other African American men. Henry described a hypothetical scenario and illustrated his “race-first” approach to friendships:

I do consider myself a Black male, I am conscious of that. As I become more familiar with my settings it is who do I have commonalities with … My initial thought is well, if it’s 300 White people in here, I will find the first Black male and then maybe start from there or if there is no one else that looks like me then we just go off of commonalities.

Henry’s friendships were initially based on race and then common social interests. Similarly, Ryan discussed his preference to create friendships with same race peers and stated, “I tend to seek friends who look like me—you know what I’m saying? I’m not excusing my Blackness at all.” For participants like Henry and Ryan, forming interpersonal relationships with same race peers was intentional and deliberate.

Some participants from predominantly African American hometowns also reported that race did not factor into their friendship decisions during the initial interview but later realized it did matter. During the initial interview, Sebastian responded, “I don’t consider it.” During the photo-elicitation interview, however, when asked to explain why all of his photographs were exclusively with other African American men, Sebastian chuckled and shared, “It just happens. The reason I hang with so many Black people is because that’s just the kind of the community that happens. In the Black community, I can be cool, I can be chill.” Similarly, in the initial interview Preston shared that the way he creates friendships has “nothing to do with race.” Yet, during the photo-elicitation interview, Preston shockingly acknowledged, “I didn’t realize it. I guess race does matter.” For participants like Preston and Sebastian, race did influence friendship decisions although they described it not doing so in the initial interview.

Environmental Influences on Racial Identity and Decisions about Relationships

Participants’ explanations of specific campus experiences shaping their racial identity and decisions about relationships emerged as a powerful influence. Participants offered numerous examples of how specific aspects of the campus environment confirmed or changed previously held views about relationships. Participants either intentionally sought ways to connect with Black culture, negotiated culture shock within their friendships, or developed cross-racial relationships via the academic classroom.
Exploring Black Culture. A key concept that arose from participants who entered Hillside with a low race salience regardless of hometown affiliation were the intentional efforts to connect with Black culture during their first two years on campus. These men went through an exploration phase in their attempts to embrace Black culture that in some ways impacted their interpersonal relationships. Participants explored Black culture in varying ways including purchasing books for leisure reading, taking Black studies courses, or attending campus events with other Black students. At the conclusion of his first year at Hillside, Jeff described attempts to form relationships with his same race male peers through leisure readings and academic coursework:

Over the summer, I did buy this book called How to be Black by Baratunde Thurston and I ended up reading more than half of the book in 1 day. It's actually pretty interesting … I started getting more of an appreciation for African culture. That's part of why I'm in my African American Sports History class.

Similarly, when asked about his racial identity and connecting with other African American men, James recalled intentional efforts to learn more about Black culture:

I took one of his classes [black studies professor] and we have read a couple of books like Black Boy and Passing. I read those books and then it does really set in that you know. [Pauses] I don’t know. It's kind of weird like I just had to open it and like Blacks did accomplish a lot of things.

For Jeff and James, exploring Black culture to better connect with their same race peers was important. Despite taking these steps to learn more about Black culture, participants like Jeff and James still felt more comfortable having relationships with White peers as reflected in their initial semi-structured interview and confirmed through their submitted photographs.

There was one notable exception regarding this finding about taking steps to connect to Black culture. Neal arrived to campus with a low race salience and initially made conscious decisions to create friendships based on common interests, not race. When asked about how he created friendships at Hillside, Neal described having a sense of relief:

The shift happened more towards the end of my sophomore year. I was just completely enthralled and all of the people that I was around were White, and me not getting jokes, and me not understanding things in Star Trek analogies and all that stuff. I’m just not getting it so I was like, you know what, I’m missing a lot of what makes me, me.

For Neal, the inability to connect with his White peers in social settings prompted him to seek out venues on campus where African Americans were located to create new friendships. Neal, subsequently, joined a historically Black fraternity for cultural validation, which positively enhanced his interpersonal relationships with other African American men. Although Neal entered Hillside with a low race salience, he later immersed himself into all things associated with Black culture, including his friendships.

Negotiating Culture Shock via Friendships. The need to create a racially homogenous interpersonal environment was critical to some participants, given their perception of the racial campus climate. These men, primarily from predominantly African American hometowns, described acclimating to the environment at Hillside as a “culture shock.” They discussed being from hometowns where African Americans were a critical mass and did not perceive themselves as being minoritized until they arrived at Hillside. Given this dissonance, participants relied on their same race peers for support. When asked about the campus environment and creating peer connections, Tre discussed his preference to form connections with other African American men:
[Hillside] made me this way because in high school, I had a diverse group of friends but here at [Hillside], I've grown a filter to someone who looks like me. I automatically flock towards them. I mean, not to say that I don't talk to anyone outside my race, someone who doesn't look like me, because I do, but I definitely take note of who looks like me and then after that, I guess how they present themselves.

During the photo-elicitation interview, Ryan, a member of Hillside's band, submitted photographs of his White band members and described experiencing shock and feeling silenced when attempting to form meaningful relationships with each of them:

Lately I've been more quiet when I'm around White people just because I want to see where they are coming from first you know. When I was in the music school, a lot of times me coming in and actually being talented, as an African American male … Sometimes people misunderstood where I was coming from and would quickly assume that I was a threat rather than just trying to get through school like they are you know. It was hard to build a relationship with them, it was hard being the only African American in my section.

For Ryan, the uncomfortable feeling of being the only member of the band coupled with feeling silenced prompted him to leave and be a part of spaces where he felt affirmed and validated.

When describing how they coped with culture shock, participants discussed their campus involvement and campus leadership positions as venues where they developed strong bonds and were committed to looking out for one another. Preston, Sebastian, and Henry shared the words, "I am my brother's keeper" during their respective interviews. These men were involved in a range of campus activities including fraternities, cultural centers, choirs, religious groups, and clubs in their academic majors; all of whose membership was primarily comprised of African American men. They developed a sense of obligation to each other in these spaces.

**Developing Cross-Racial Friendships via the Academic Classroom.** There was some evidence of participants’ efforts to establish interpersonal relationships with men from different racial and ethnic backgrounds after their prolonged experience on campus. This finding emerged among the junior and senior participants who entered Hillside preferring interactions with their same race male peers. These men shared experiences they believed were reflective of their newfound peer connections. When discussing cross-racial friendships, Preston shared:

He's actually a White guy …. we met last year [in class] and he just started to hang out with us [peer group]; he came to one of our parties I believe. We used to party in our apartment at that time … he started to come hang out with us more and you know, you kind of see how he picks stuff up from us.

Based on a connection formed in the academic classroom, Preston developed a meaningful friendship with the White male student, which ultimately led to them becoming roommates later that year. In another case, Henry stated:

One of the reasons why I didn't necessarily reach out to maybe more Caucasians or Asians or anything outside of the Black race is because, for one, at least in my situation, I already had best friends that were here with me. It wasn't necessary that I needed to develop a new circle of friends, but because I was also comfortable inside of the Black community. I knew the culture. I knew what was going on and stuff like that. It was more comfortable for me to stay inside that circle. Now that I feel I've accomplished that comfortability, I feel like I could reach out. I feel like I've established myself. I know who I am.

For Henry, he created interpersonal relationships with men from differing racial and ethnic backgrounds after reaching a strong sense of cultural validation in the Black community. For participants like Henry...
and Preston, the ability to establish interpersonal relationships with men from differing racial and ethnic backgrounds was beneficial. The academic classroom became a launching point where participants embraced having friendships across differing racial and ethnic backgrounds.

Discussion

Findings from this study illustrate how African American men are not a monolithic group and the hometowns where participants grew up served as powerful influences in situating their racial identity and relationship decisions prior to attending Hillside. Students constructed and interpreted their interpersonal relationships differently based on the degree to which race was a salient aspect of their identity. Barring few exceptions, most participants from predominantly White hometown environments tended to have a low race salience, retreated from Black culture, and formed relationships exclusively or primarily with White men. Most participants from predominantly African American hometown environments, however, tended to have a high race salience and entered Hillside having close relationships exclusively or primarily with other African American men. A few men, regardless of hometown affiliation, found it important to have diverse friendships.

Race was a key factor in participants’ decisions to initiate these relationships. This finding differs slightly from Harper and Nichols’s (2008) and Antonio’s (2004) studies, suggesting that common social interests served as the basis of peer relationships with each other instead of race. Though common social interest played an important role in how participants maintained relationships, race emerged as an integral component to why these men chose certain friends on campus. In the initial interview, many participants mentioned that race did not influence how they made friendship decisions. During the photo-elicitation interview, however, only a few of those participants submitted photographs illustrating diverse friendships. After questioning this discrepancy, these men later acknowledged that race did influence the way they created interpersonal relationships.

College served as the first opportunity for a few participants to develop friendships across differing racial and ethnic backgrounds. Despite literature acknowledging the numerous educational benefits associated with cross-racial interactions, Harper (2012b) acknowledged the lack of consideration for “possible psychological and emotional costs of such engagement on the few minoritized students who make interactional diversity possible on college campuses” (p. 19). This point must be considered when encouraging African American men to engage in cross-racial interactions with peers on campus. Of note, participants who did develop meaningful cross-racial friendships cited the academic classroom as the origins of these connections. These students, albeit a few, discussed how opportunities to engage in cooperative learning (e.g., small group in-class exercises and group projects) prompted deeper cross-racial engagement outside of the classroom setting.

Participants from predominantly White hometowns with negative precollege attitudes towards African Americans made intentional efforts to connect with other same race peers with mixed results. Despite going through an exploration stage, these participants still felt more comfortable forming interpersonal relationships with White men. Consistent with previous literature, participants from predominantly African American hometown environments described experiencing a culture shock based on their perception of the campus racial climate and, as a result, formed racially homogenous peer groups as they matriculated through Hillside. Thus, participants in this study who formed interpersonal relationships with other African American men made intentional efforts to look out for another as they progressed toward degree attainment.
Implications for Practice and Future Research

This study's findings could aid student affairs educators and faculty in their efforts to better understand and foster African American men's interpersonal relationships. Student affairs educators should counteract precollege assumptions about the formation of interpersonal relationships among African American men and identify how they are applying racial identity development theories. This involves expanding their perspectives on African American men and not treating them as a monolithic entity. The manner in which practitioners gain insight as to where students are developmentally could be used to explore how race influences African American men's interpersonal relationships. Doing so could help unpack why African American men make friendship decisions on campus. This study's findings also suggest that educators who work with African American men should pay attention to their hometown characteristics as they could shed light into how they made friendship decisions prior to attending college.

Strayhorn (2008) suggested that African American men's sense of belonging is predicated upon the ability to interact with peers from different racial and ethnic backgrounds. Given the importance of peer influence for African American men (Bonner & Bailey, 2006), college educators should become more race conscious and feel comfortable facilitating difficult dialogues across different student peer groups. Given some participants' ability to form diverse friendships based on their experiences in the academic classroom, faculty may want to develop culturally responsive teaching and inclusive practices while creating group opportunities for students to meaningfully interact across differences in the classroom. As some participants described discomfort in forming peer connections with other African Americans, collaborative programming between multiple university functional areas could be beneficial. Student affairs professionals working with student organizations should encourage meaningful collaborative partnerships across different groups and create opportunities for meaningful, sustained cross-racial dialogues.

Students need more opportunities to develop complex racial identities in college. College educators must recognize that some African American men will encounter challenges at the PWI that may begin a process of identity exploration. Few participants entered Hillside with a low race salience and intentionally sought ways to connect with Black culture. Therefore, college administrators should encourage African American men to explore their racial identity through academic coursework such as Black studies courses, as they had a profound influence in participants understanding their racial experiences on campus and in society at large.

The results of this study must be considered in the context of the limitations of the research. Although four gatekeepers were asked to recruit students, selection bias likely prohibited some eligible students from participating in this study. This study was also limited in that participants' precollege racial identities were not fully explored. Additional insights could have been offered on participants' manifestations of their racial identity. This study's findings present several opportunities for future research that delves into student precollege attitudes on race. Understanding messages participants received about race prior to entering college could shed light on how they negotiated the campus environment. Future research should also explore other factors influencing relationship development that extends beyond race such as social class, gender, and sexual orientation. Future studies should also consider different institutional contexts such as community colleges and Historically Black Colleges and Universities, as these environments could influence how interpersonal relationships are formed.

This study used photo-elicitation to understand the influence of race on African American men's interpersonal relationships. Photographs submitted during the photo-elicitation interview
sometimes did not correspond to the initial interview data and showed interesting discrepancies between the two approaches. Some students were unaware of the extent to which race actually factored in their friendship decisions. Future work could explore this phenomenon in greater detail. Using photo-elicitation allowed for the combination of visual and verbal language and is a beneficial approach to triangulate findings across different types of data sources to identify variance in students’ experiences and perhaps highlight the layered and complex nature of identity. More studies need to employ visual methods to explore the experiences of African American college men.

This study extends our understanding about how race influences African American men’s interpersonal relationships. The men in this study entered Hillside with certain assumptions about race that in some cases were either confirmed or challenged based on their campus experiences. Some of the men described specific incidents and events that helped them to begin transcending precollege assumptions about race and develop peer relationships across differences. Given the changing racial dynamics on college and university campuses coupled with larger societal events centered on race and racism, this line of research could help African American college men unpack their racialized experiences. Furthermore, findings from this research study can help educators broaden their perspectives on how African American men negotiate peer relationships on college and university campuses.

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