



**Cultural Immersion Project: An in depth look at the African American Culture and
Community**

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For this cultural immersion project, I chose to focus on the African American community. I chose this specific people group because it is the one collection of people that I believe I know the least about and have the least social ties to. I chose this cultural group because I believed I could stand to learn quite a bit from them, and over the course of this time spent researching and being immersed in their culture, I believe I have. To begin, I would like to first discuss the research portion of this immersion project and the four key elements that I focused my findings on. The four key elements that I chose were Intergroup vs. Intragroup characteristics, common attitudes/beliefs relative to the group, historical events that impact the cultural and societal perceptions of the overall group, and patterns of immigration.

First, let's dive into the Intergroup vs. Intragroup characteristics of the African American community/culture. Intergroup characteristics can be described as the feelings, beliefs or behaviors cultural group members might have towards members of another cultural group. Intragroup characteristics are described as the processes by which relations within a group categorize goals and roles within that set group. Research suggests that the dynamics of both intergroup and intragroup dynamics play a large role in perceptions of people groups. Often, one's perception of their cultural group to which they belong can be drastically different from that of another group looking in. I chose to discuss intergroup characteristics because as it pertains to research, findings show that when members of other groups attempt to understand those who are different from them, they can bridge important gaps of racial bias and prejudice. Research on first year college students has found that intergroup friendships have produced outcomes that are reducing prejudice, creating increased empathy for other people groups, and thus creating lower intergroup anxiety and miscommunication. (Schofield, Hausmann, Ye, & Woods, 2010). Pervasively negative intergroup attitudes have been found to be quite harmful to intragroup dynamics. While there is little research on this impact cross-sectionally with multiple populations compared to the African American cultural group, some research has found that it is common for predominantly white groups to have strong opinions about African Americans. (Gonzalez O'Brien, Barreto, & Sanchez, 2020). A study done on African Americans showed how intragroup preferences based on skin tone can lead to an increase in feelings of internalized racism, skin color dissatisfaction and higher levels of psychological distress. This study is quite interesting because it shows how the dynamics of preference within one's own cultural group can heavily impact mental health, whether it be positively or negatively. (McGoldrick, Giordano & Pearce, 1996). However, this study did show that experiences of colorism differ for men and women within the same cultural group. Which in turn, impacts feelings of internalized racism and discrimination differently. (Alexander, & Carter, 2022).

The second key element of the African American culture are the common attitudes or beliefs that are relative to the overall people group. This element is important because it dives deep into the reasons as to why certain attitudes or beliefs about people groups have become common over time. One study found that attitudes towards African Americans can be a unique predictor of one's personal decision to either seek counseling services or not. The presence of stigma and bias can directly correlate to African American's mental health and well-being. (Fripp, & Carlson, 2017). I found this study to be quite intriguing because it clearly illustrates the lengths of which perceptions and attitudes towards a people group can vastly impact the individuals belonging to that group. One study looked at the impact of negative emotions and affect experienced by non-African Americans, and how this can be linked to predictable discriminatory behavior towards African Americans. The impact of implicit bias towards African Americans from non-African Americans can have direct implications of discrimination. (Lee,

Lindquist, & Payne, 2018). This study is captivating because it gives an insight into the link between bias and fear of African Americans. This attitude of fear typically comes with a cycle of hatred and further discrimination, because of the misunderstanding and systematic oppression of this people group. Some other common attitudes of African Americans can look like superiority complexes and microaggressions that attempt to make African Americans feel inferior. In one study it was discovered that there has been an uptick in findings of microaggressions on college campuses towards racial and ethnic groups. Considering African American's individual experiences with microaggressions is essential in looking at how the attitudes and beliefs about the people group begin to form and are continually reinforced through these actions.

The third element to look at is that of the historical events that impact the cultural and societal perceptions of the overall group. It is no secret that African Americans have been experiencing systemic racism and barriers of inequality since the establishment of the United States. While some people argue that African Americans no longer experience institutionalized racism, research says otherwise. Given the historical events of slavery of African Americans for a myriad of years, it is not a far jump to assume that these attitudes and systems of oppression still exist today. The beginning attitudes towards African Americans that sought to dehumanize them by making them "property" is something can do severe damage to the community of African Americans, and because of institutionalized racism and microaggressions towards this community today, many feel as though they are still being dehumanized. These historical events of mistreatment and injustice towards African Americans directly influenced today's culture. Often African Americans are depicted as uneducated in movies or books, often they are painted as dangerous or criminals. There are a lot of institution barriers within our society that prevent African Americans from attaining the same level of wealth and status, comparative to their white counterparts. One study found that reinforcing systems of housing, education, employment, etc. that function by oppressing African Americans, in turn reinforces discriminatory behaviors and attitudes towards African Americans. (Bailey, Krieger, Agenor, Graves, Linos, & Bassett, 2017). These systems of oppression and continual barriers can serve as major detriments to African American's mental health and well-being, as well as their intragroup connections and overall personal satisfaction.

Finally, the element of immigration patterns. African Americans have a sorted history when it comes to immigration because most of the African Americans did not migrate to America by choice, they were taken captive and forced into a life of slavery for generations. This component of immigration by force is key to understanding perceptions of African Americans to this day. Since African Americans were taken from their homes and brought to the United States to be property and possession of others, this act against them really created a sense of inhumanity. Even until this day, African Americans can feel as though they are valued as lesser because of the history of them at one time being a possession. When it comes to the "Great Migration" between 1915 and 1930, the arrival of 1.5 million African Americans caused a shift in white attitudes of African Americans. In one study, they suggest that when whites were more willing to accommodate African American migrants there were higher rates of assimilation and lower rates of segregation amongst the two people groups. The research suggests that social acceptance can be directly linked to a positive effect on minority groups. (Fouka, Mazumder, & Tabellini, 2021). This research is pertinent to seeing how immigration ties into the historical context of African Americans and how these events directly impact the cultural and societal aspects of life for African Americans.

These aspects of historical oppression do not stop there, there is an obvious presence of current oppression of African American people. The historical oppression of African Americans started with the enslavement of men, women and children and served as an institution of stripping them of their human rights. These inhumane actions caused a ripple effect that is felt to this day by African Americans. After centuries of slavery, infringement of rights, and the eventual abolition of slavery, African Americans still heavily experienced discrimination. The period of segregation and laws that were put in place to separate white and African Americans caused extreme criminalization within their community. Because of these laws, the upholding of these laws was taken to the extreme and in most cases ended in either death or severe abuse for African Americans. Eventually, African Americans were given recognition and some reconciliation during the civil rights movement. But this overcriminalization of African Americans bled into the parts of society that spoke to the masses, the media. African Americans were shown on media to be “savage” or “dangerous”, furthering the criminalization of their community. There is statistical evidence that shows how African Americans have and are still being punished more punitively than their white counterparts, when it comes to committing the same or even smaller crimes. The rate of incarceration of African Americans is nearly five times higher than white Americans. (The Sentencing Project, 2022). Statistics also show the disparities of education for African Americans. African Americans are often placed in lower income schools that have less funding and resources and are typically overpopulated. This broken education system perpetuates the inequity experienced by African Americans and continues the cycle of inopportunity for African Americans. All these structures within society impact the African American community and their sense of well-being and ability to thrive. Studies show that when met with so much continuous opposition individuals begin to feel higher and higher levels of stress and lesser feelings of self-efficacy to overcome adversity. (Yoon, Coburn, & Spence, 2018). ■

In conclusion, I chose these four key elements to focus on for research because I believe that they are all interconnected and give a broader understanding of the African American culture and community. These four elements all feed into one another and help shape the picture of the average African American’s experience today. Intergroup and intragroup characteristics directly impact shared attitudes both held within group and across group dynamics. These attitudes and beliefs, or possibly assumptions, can lead to things like microaggressions. These microaggressions can be reinforced through systemic and institutionalized racism. The systems in place that reinforce systematic oppression of African Americans, can be traced back to the establishment of America when African Americans were treated as less than and dehumanized. This string of historical events, as well as patterns of immigration thus directly impacts both the cultural and societal attitudes and perceptions of African Americans. All these things and more are interconnected, and eb and flow into one another, giving us a fuller picture of all the areas in which African Americans experience the world around them. All this research and these studies have helped me personally to gain a better understanding of how the average African American experiences things in life and how all these issues can directly permeate their lives and minds and even lead to psychological distress. We must address the ongoing oppression of the African American community and work to eradicate the grips that it has on systematic structures within our society, and hopefully mend cultural attitudes towards them as well. I believe that it is up to all of us that do not belong to the African American community to educate ourselves on their experiences and history, to progress towards societal reconciliation and demand humane treatment of this community.

Now that I have discussed at length the research aspect of this cultural immersion project, I would like to turn to the events portion. I attended two events related to my selected cultural group and I learned valuable lessons from each experience. On Sunday October 9th, I spent the day with my friend Marnasha who is a friend of mine from my undergrad, and she is African American. I asked her if I could tag along on her Sunday morning to afternoon and experience the traditions she has within her family. She gleefully accepted and was excited to bring me along with her and her husband on a typical Sunday for them. We began the day by attending a church service at the First A.M.E. Zion Church in Portland Oregon, where Marnasha grew up attending with her mother's side of the family. I got to experience going to not only a black church, but the oldest black church established in Oregon! I was given the privilege of getting to see the traditions and culture of the black church firsthand and understand the principles and teachings of the black church. This was quite the experience for me, as it was very different from the college church, I attend in the small town I live in. While the story of Christ and our belief in him and what he did on the cross for us remains the same, the ways in which this news was celebrated is different. While my predominantly white church that I attend every Sunday in my small college town I live in celebrates the good news, the black church does so in such a way that is truly captivating. At my home church, Resonate, we celebrate the good news of Jesus with a couple worship songs and a benediction at the end of the service, the black church sings praises throughout the entire service and it is a very interactive experience. What I mean by interactive experience is that at my home church you have the pastor that speaks, and the congregation just listens quietly, at the black church the pastor speaks and does a sort of call and response with the crowd, and it is expected of people to participate. I thought that this aspect of the service made the experience feel very personal and inviting and I felt welcomed and accepted right away! The church service lasted for a duration of about an hour and a half. This event taught me so much about how the African American community functions and the values they place on community, family, and religion. All aspects of the experience pointed to the collective value of taking personal responsibility for one another and serving each other well. I found this entire experience to be so lively and exhilarating, I would love nothing more than to go back and experience another church service. Upon my exit I was invited to a cookout at a local park!

This leads me to the second event I attended related to my selected cultural group. I was first invited to a cookout by my friend Marnasha and her family, prior to attending the church service. But upon my exiting the church service I was invited by multiple members of the congregation as well! A cookout is traditional for the African American community in which they gather at a community space to socialize with one another and share a meal. The interesting thing about cookouts is that usually they are potluck style, and, in this case, all the members of the church had come and brought a dish of their own to share. This experience was truly something I have never really had before. I got to see a community of people come together to serve one another and serve others in the community. Because this event was at a local park, tons of people passing by were also invited to grab a plate of food and it was a really inviting experience. I got to meet so many people from all different walks of life and ask questions about their personal experiences and learn a lot about their cultural values and norms. I was also privileged to get to experience some traditional African American food and delicacies like sweet potato pie, collard greens, Caribbean coleslaw, and all different kinds of marinated meats! This was a unique experience both for my social experience but also my culinary experience. I ended up visiting, chatting, and eating delicious food for about three hours. I was blessed to go home with a loaded plate of leftovers!

To sum up this entire project and experience, I would say that I have a greater knowledge of African Americans, both in their culture and in their shared experiences. I have a deeper appreciation and admiration for their culture and their shared customs. I truly enjoyed participating in this project and I thought it was a very innovative way to submerge myself into the African American culture. I desire to continue learning more about this cultural group. I learned many things from these experiences, but I will boil it down to three key ideas. The first, I learned that the African American culture is one that is honestly so warm and so inviting. The amount of love and acceptance I felt the minute I walked through the doors of the church was overwhelming. I was so nervous that because I was a white girl walking into their place of worship, I would feel rejected and judged. But I was met with the complete opposite and all I felt was respect. I found this to be quite emotional because I think often that is what African Americans wish to experience when they walk into a predominantly white church and are not met with that most of the time. Secondly, I learned this culture group highly values family structure and ties to spirituality. I felt this when I was at both the church service and the cookout. At the church service it was apparent how important faith is to each one of the attendees, given how involved and joyous they were. The presence of family was also very important, as I looked around during the church service, I could see family members altogether young and old. At the cookout, there were many discussions about God and what they were learning from Him in their lives. There were also many discussions about family struggles and triumphs and there was a consensus of sharing and being transparent about what they were experiencing. Lastly, I learned that they are a group of people of tremendous bravery and ability to overcome adversity. There were so many stories of personal experiences of discrimination, whether it be someone who lived through the civil rights movement and discussed their experience marching for their rights or someone discussing how their coworker displayed microaggressions towards them. All these stories portrayed to me such a sense of having each other's backs and being in the fight for justice altogether and it was beautiful to see the older generations encouraging the younger ones. I learned all three of these things by becoming submersed in their cultural context and meeting them in their values and beliefs, being truly willing and accepting of those beliefs. I think these three lessons are significant for their culture because it is a part of their group identity and sense of belonging. They are very bonded over the shared love and value for family, God, and striving for justice while looking out for one another. I admire all these qualities because I truly believe it is what makes this community so strong and united!

Among the major counseling theories, I believe that the two empirically validated ones as being effective for the selected group are the Adlerian approach and the Psychodynamic approach. The Adlerian theory of counseling focuses largely on social interest and collective unity to contribute to their own community. The characteristics of this counseling theory work to support African Americans because the theory aims to help individuals achieve a sense of belonging within a large context. This emphasis on social interactions and community involvement I believe is central to the African American culture with their heavy emphasis on community. These characteristics make this counseling approach for African Americans quite effective because it can directly help them build healthy and meaningful relationships within their community, thus bettering their mental health and well-being. (Heltner, & Ohrtman, 2019). The Psychodynamic counseling approach focuses largely on the individual and their own emotions, early life experiences and personal beliefs. This emphasis on personal emotions and thoughts I believe is effective in helping the individual feel like an individual that has their own opinions and thoughts, not just someone whose identity is only tied to their community. These

characteristics make this counseling approach for African Americans a reasonable option for effectiveness when paired with an Adlerian counseling approach because of the focus on both the community and interpersonal relationships as well as a balanced perspective on the individual's needs and beliefs and values. (Powell, 2018). I believe that a holistic and multidimensional approach to counseling African American individuals is the right way to go, to ensure that all aspects of the person are both identified and effectively addressed within the counseling context.



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