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The Experiences of Successful Formerly Incarcerated African American Males

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Walden University
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Abstract

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MA, Bradley University, 2003

BS, Southern Illinois University, 1991

Dissertation in Partial Fulfillment

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Abstract

African American men are incarcerated at alarming rates and often recidivate at high rates within 3 years. Researchers have demonstrated that recidivism rates last through years 4 and beyond. There is limited qualitative data to provide strategies from formerly incarcerated African American males who have been successful at not recidivating for 10 or more years after their release. The purpose of this Afrocentric-hermeneutic phenomenological study was to bridge the gap in the literature and explore the lived experiences of African American males who were formerly incarcerated and have positively changed their lives to avoid further criminality. A purposeful and snowball sampling of 8 African American men was used to identify information-rich data to understand the phenomenon. The implications of this Heideggerian study enhanced multicultural competence through the participants' worldview, which provided insight into recidivism, program development, strategic planning, criminal justice reform, and academia by listening to the voices of African American males which is often different from the worldview of the counselor. The results of this study yielded 10 key themes: (a) historical factors; (b) defining moments; (c) preparation for release; (d) religious beliefs; (e) self-actualization; (f) positive peer relationships; (g) mental health counseling; (h) allies; (i) relocation; and (j) giving back. All participants reported their perception of themselves changed when their perception of the world changed. The findings from this study serve several aspects of social change, including addressing social and community factors relevant to program development, intervention services, and the negotiation of race-matched counseling services.

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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my amazing grandson, Anthony, my late father, John L.L. Gordon and my late sister, Bobbie Faye Thomas.

“Problems you solve and situations you deal with; figure out which one you have and take action.” -John L.L. Gordon

Acknowledgments

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

The mass incarceration of African American men is also referenced as the modern version of slavery (Range et al., 2007). African American males historically have faced marginalization and oppression, which exacerbate social, emotional, and economic challenges (Brinkley-Rubenstein et al., 2014; Gwathney, 2021, Perry et al., 2011). Educational barriers have increased the likelihood of unemployment, underemployment, gang affiliation, criminal activity, high school dropout rates, depression, anxiety, and low self-esteem, which often plague African American youth into adulthood (Dancy, 2012). A *school-to-prison pipeline* pushes scores of African American males out of the school system and eventually incarcerates them; this system of incarceration begins as a juvenile and continues throughout adulthood (Ewert et al., 2014; McCarter et al., 2020).

The unfair treatment that African Americans experience by police personnel was thrust into the forefront on May 25, 2020, when African American, Minneapolis resident George Floyd was suspected of being in possession of a counterfeit $20 bill and died when a White Minneapolis police officer pressed his knee on his neck for nearly nine minutes. The incident was captured on video and shared across the world calling for a change in the way African Americans are treated. While claims of discrimination and unfair treatment is an ongoing conversation, the death of George Floyd raised an increased awareness of racial disparity among African American men in the criminal justice system.

Thorp (2020) posited increased reports of police brutality and unlawful arrests have prompted a further conversation in the treatment of African Americans as well as unjust arrests and disparity in sentencing among African American men. To this matter, the exploration of experiences of successful formerly incarcerated African American men must become a significant inclusion in the narrative.

Psychological stress experienced by African American children and adolescents increases the incidence of behavioral problems among children leading up to challenges in adulthood (Stinson, 2011). Further, having a strong racial identity is a significant factor in overall academic success for African American children (Stinson, 2011). However, American school culture is not designed with cultural consideration of African American children (Howard, 2016). Inequities in school systems have led to increased reports of academic failure, behavior problems, suspensions, and dropout rates (Cakir et al., 2022; Nowicki et al., 2004).

Specifically, to the African American male, incarceration is correlated with challenges from early childhood. Services to assist African Americans include mental health counseling. Providing mental health services to African Americans is more effective when the counseling professional is culturally competent and aware of systemic racism that influences the manner, in which, they view the world. Multicultural competence in counseling African American individuals and families is necessary when providing mental health services to this population (Banks, 2006b; Clark & Hays, 2017; Matthews et al., 2018). Whaley (2001) explained the negative expectations and

experiences that some African Americans hold regarding their mistrust of White mental health professionals due to acts of racism and discrimination in other aspects of their lives. Notwithstanding, well-intentioned White mental health professionals sometimes are unaware of microaggressions that create barriers in the therapeutic alliance (Chang & Berk, 2009; Constantine, 2007). In counseling African American men, there are challenges regarding the lack of culturally specific programming from early childhood (Ani, 2013; Tucker et al., 2010). African Americans experience racism, marginalization, and oppression, which conceptualize the way they view the world (Ratts et al., 2016). Many researchers have conducted studies regarding the challenges faced by African American males, but little research has been conducted on how African American males who were formerly incarcerated view the world, what it means to be an African American male, and how their racial identity affects what they hope for from an Afrocentric perspective (Borum, 2007; Harvey, 2003).

In this chapter, I begin with the background of the incarcerated African American population. I include the problem statement and purpose of this study. I provide detailed information regarding the research question and the theoretical framework of Heidegger and the Afrocentric lens. I explore the nature of the study with a list of definitions relative to understanding the study. I also include assumptions, limitations, delimitations, the scope of the study, and the significance of the study to the counseling field.

Background

The Federal Bureau of Prisons (2016) reported African American men were imprisoned 3.8 to 10.5 times more than White Non-Hispanic men and 1.4 to 3.1 times more than men who were identified as White Hispanic. Numerous articles have detailed the history of African Americans in relationship to strategies to assist with understanding challenges and identifying the root causes of incarceration. Strategies for success before, during, and after incarceration are needed to assist African American men in living productive lives.

African American men are a population who receive less attention through research studies; yet their high rates of recidivism among returning prisoners pose challenges for the promotion of community health and public safety (Gordon et al, 2013). Leff et al. (2014) found that developing leadership efficacy in African American youth decreased the likelihood of aggressive behavior into adulthood. The school-to-prison pipeline has been a factor in examining the rate of incarceration among African American men (Ewert et al., 2014; McCarter et al., 2020). Inequities in school systems have led to increased reports of academic failure, behavior problems, suspensions, and dropout rates (Nowicki et al., 2004). According to Ewert et al. (2014), the racial inequality of the data that document African Americans who have attained a high school diploma, general equivalency diploma (GED), or higher education is skewed due to the use of household population studies that do not include incarcerated individuals. As a result, the

educational attainment of African American males is overestimated because numbers reported do not include inmates in jails and prisons.

Ani (2013) studied African American students in junior high to measure their ability to succeed, despite economic and cultural disparity. The participants in the study were students who demonstrated a strong agency in goal setting and achieved goals above the standard of their school. The findings suggested that racial and ethnic identity and values improved their level of hope and functioning.

Byrdsong et al. (2013) asserted the lack of cultural inclusion in school systems was positively compensated through a grassroots organization called the Community Empowerment Association. The aim of the organization was the creation of a program that provided insight to assist African American participants. Using the assertion that African Americans benefit from social interventions aimed at including their historical experiences and cultural identities, Afrocentric frameworks and theories were used to assist the participants in improving academic performance, reducing criminal activity, and improving family cohesion. Among the 288 African American participants, school attendance was improved by 83.2% and their grades improved by 66.4% within a 1-year period after enrollment in the program. The success of the program was associated with the human and social service workers' ability to relate to the client's worldview.

When an individual is African-centered, an affiliation with African historical figures, symbols, music, literature, art, and familial and community pride is increased (Asante, 1988). Asante (1988) asserted there is a greater protection of the integrity of the

African culture in decision-making processes through a commitment to the social, economic, religious, or spiritual agency. Intra-group diversity, help-seeking and coping behaviors, and the use of language are significant considerations in employing an Afrocentric theoretical framework when working to assess and treat African American clients (Borum, 2007).

As the world is increasingly raising awareness regarding racial disparity among the African American community, Afrocentric studies are significant. Pellebon (2012) conducted an exploratory study seeking information regarding college professors' knowledge of Afrocentricity, and the findings suggested the need to raise awareness in Afrocentricity due to the lack of participants who were familiar with the framework. The results were that 89.4% of the 85 participants reported they were not familiar with Afrocentricity and 10.6% reported they were very familiar or somewhat familiar with the concept of Afrocentricity. The author reported he was disappointed to receive a 29.9% return rate from the 280 participants solicited. The suggestion was made to raise awareness in teaching Afrocentricity in social work education.

Schiele (1996) noted that African Americans experience increased hope and faith when an Afrocentric conceptualization is practiced in oppressive environments. Isom (2016) conducted a correlational analysis to examine the significance of serious offending among 667 African Americans. The average age was 18 years old and 46% were males. The interaction of violent offending was analyzed based on discrimination, depression, anger, and their racial identities. The injustice of the criminal justice system

and microaggressions were also assessed. The findings from the study suggested microaggressions and discrimination evoked anger, which was associated with violent offending, but depression was not. Further stated, criminal justice injustices were not correlated with serious offending. Strong racial identities of the participants were found to lessen the effects of discrimination, which the author found surprising.

Parole is a conditional basis of release granted to many inmates. The purpose is to make the transition from prison back to their home communities an easier process (Chamberlain et al., 2018). Prior to release, scores of inmates attend prerelease programs. Gordon et al. (2013) conducted a quantitative study in a prerelease reentry program to examine the influence of masculine norms on the length of incarceration, the relationship between peer support and incarceration, and the combination of masculine norms and peer support as a predictor of length of incarceration. The findings rejected their null hypothesis that masculine norms were related to the length of incarceration. Their second hypothesis that a relationship existed between peer support and length of incarceration was accepted. Their final hypothesis that elevated levels of peer support combined with lower levels of masculine norms would decrease the length of incarceration was positively associated with the length of incarceration. Still, incarceration poses psychological effects and barriers to reentry, which influence the way inmates view themselves (Schnittker, 2014).

When African Americans are participants in research that is specific to them and understand that they are acting agents and subjects of human history, the result is an

increase in their self-worth (Asante, 1988; Garrett, 2006; Isom, 2016). When an individual is African-centered, an affiliation with African historical figures, symbols, music, literature, art, and familial and community pride is increased (Asante, 1988). Asante (1988) asserted there is a greater protection of the integrity of the African culture in decision-making processes through a commitment to the social, economic, religious, or spiritual agency. This study was needed to close the gap between views of Afrocentric work in counseling practices when working with African American males regarding recidivism.

Problem Statement

African American men are one of the most invisible and understudied populations (Gordon, et al., 2013). The high incarceration rate of African American men is problematic. Additionally, the high rate of recidivism among returning prisoners poses several challenges for the promotion of community health and public safety. Half of all African American males return to prison within 3 years. In 2014, President Obama acknowledged a critical need to track positive data from formerly incarcerated people of color through the My Brother's Keeper (MBK) initiative (Schott Foundation, 2015). The number of individuals incarcerated are tracked; however, there was limited data focused on the success of African American men who were formerly incarcerated.

Racial microaggressions are present among social institutions, including health care, education, employment, housing, and the criminal justice system (Bleich et al., 2019); however, Wright (2011) explained African American children and adolescents can

transition into adulthood in a successful manner when they have increased awareness of their racial and ethnic identity**.** Many researchers have conducted studies regarding the challenges faced by African American males, but little research has been conducted on how African American males who were formerly incarcerated view the world, what it means to be an African American male, and how their racial identity affects what they hope for from an Afrocentric perspective (Borum, 2007; Harvey, 2003; Harvey & Coleman, 1997).

Gaining insight from African American men who have changed their lives post-incarceration from a qualitative perspective is critical in reducing the recidivism rate. This study was not intended to denounce, exclude, or stand in opposition of Eurocentric values, but instead offered additional perspectives to raise awareness specific to counseling this population. Counselors who are aware of biases, microaggressions, racism, discrimination, and systemic oppression faced by African American men may benefit by incorporating culturally relevant treatment strategies to assist in providing appropriate mental health services. Without this information, counselor educators and supervisors are ill-prepared to train counselors to meet the needs of this invisible population of African American males.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this Afrocentric-hermeneutic phenomenological study was to bridge the gap in the literature and explore the lived experiences of African American males who were formerly incarcerated in prison and have positively changed their lives

so that they avoid future criminality. Afrocentric-hermeneutic phenomenology afforded a comprehensive method for interpreting the meaning of being a formerly incarcerated African American male. The objective was to enhance multicultural competence through the participants' worldview, which provided insight into program development, strategic planning, criminal justice reform, and academia by listening to the worldview of African American males, which is often different from the worldview of the counselor.

The findings from this dissertation study serve several aspects of social change. By also using an Afrocentric framework applicable to the culture of African American males, the analysis produced culturally relevant information to inform the reduction of behaviors associated with recidivism, appropriate programming, criminal justice reform, and neighborhood safety. Counselor educators and supervisors could use this information to increase multicultural competence, advocate social, political, and economic influence, and create interventions, programs, and resources applicable to the needs of African American males.

Research Question

What are the lived experiences of African American males who were formerly incarcerated in prison and have positively changed their lives so that they avoid future criminality?

Theoretical Framework

The Heideggerian theoretical framework, which is an interpretive approach called hermeneutics, guided the study to allow examination of the participants' experiences

through narrative accounts of what it means to be a formerly incarcerated African American male who has been successful post-incarceration in society today. By using the interpretive approach of hermeneutics, I conducted a study allowing the participants to share their experiences as successful formerly incarcerated African American men. Heidegger asserted the experiences of man could not be objectified but, instead should focus on being in the world (Heidegger, 1962). Further stated, Heidegger focused on how meaning is formed between the event and the person. Heidegger explained that the way we interpret and apply meaning to our experiences influences how we experience our being in the world (Gadamer, 1989). The term *Dasein* was coined by Heidegger as an entity of being-there and being could not exist without being in the world (Heidegger, 1962). This manner is the conception of being in terms of fundamental solidarity of subjective experience in the objective world minus the duality of what reality is. It means there is interdependence between what we are and what the world is. The truth of our being is based on our perspective through an ongoing process of concealing and revealing. The hermeneutic circle is a process of interpretation that we continually move between smaller and larger units of meaning to determine the meaning of both.

All understanding is context dependent. The aim was to understand the experience that led to the expression. This type of understanding allows me the opportunity to interpret the participant's meaning of a phenomenon as it was experienced by them. It began with a preliminary observation of the context, then the interpretation involves me visiting the part and the whole throughout the process, which has a back-and-forth

relationship that led to a constructive interpretation. Heidegger (1962) asserted that we are never in the world neutrally and being in the world is a matter of care. The care structure is an interrelated dimension of facticity, fallenness, and existentiality. Facticity is the past and is the manner people are thrown into the world and inherit circumstances without a choice (i.e., birthplace, historical time, race). Thrownness is a basic principle of facticity. It is individual existence in which we are thrown into the world without any say so in the matter (Heidegger, 1962). This is already informed and taken up in existence. Fallenness is the present and, according to Heidegger (1962), is the way we are influenced to live our lives based on what others say. Fallenness, in its authentic state, does not get lost in attempting to find a relation to other entities (Heidegger, 1962). We exist in an inauthentic manner when we move away from our destiny by doing what Das Man say we should do. Das Man is anonymous forces and dynamics. Existentiality is the authentic and inauthentic existence of *Dasein*, which may be decided by choice in one's Being and the manner, in which a person interprets Being in the world (Heidegger, 1962). Existence is the manner in which *Dasein* understands itself as absorbed in the world. *Dasein* is absorbed into the world along with and next to other *Daseins* in the world. Being in is a mode of absorption into the world in terms of *Dasein's* everyday modality. Existence is decided only by each *Dasein* based on the awareness of possibilities throughout the lifespan (Heidegger, 1962). Thus, existentiality, facticity, and fallenness are interrelated dimensions in Heidegger's care structure (Wrathall, 2005), which brings awareness to the manner people comport themselves in the world. Authenticity is

achieved when *Daseins* cease their potential for living toward mortality thus living for the future. Heidegger (1962) stated when *Daseins* face the reality of mortality as a compelling force authenticity is realized. Being is the way we interpret and understand our experiences, which influence how we experience things, which influences how we interpret our experiences. Heidegger stated the manner of Being belongs to the person; therefore, a person is responsible for his or her own Being in the world (Wrathall, 2005). The existentialism of a human being's relation to their own existence in the world is the uniqueness of being a human being. Gadamer (2005) posited the significance of merging historical, social, cultural, and interpersonal horizons, which is important in considering what worked yesterday may not work today in effecting change.

As a counselor working with the forensic population, using the hermeneutic approach avoided the need to bracket (suspend judgment) regarding the event and the person, and how meaning was formed in that relationship. Heidegger's philosophy attempts to get to the subjective experience and find the genuine nature of things (Gadamer, 2005; Heidegger, 1962). Humans are self-interpreting beings, situated in time, and have historical and cultural practices that are communicated through language (Heidegger, 1962). Cultural conversations include facts that historicize otherness, by which the otherness of the other becomes the object of objectivity (Gadamer, 2005). As Gadamer (2005) asserted, preconceptions are inescapable because interpretations will include my experience, which is notwithstanding the awareness of the otherness.

Hermeneutics is the art and science of interpretation. Hermeneutics is a philosophy that describes an understanding of communication by studying the interpretation of text from a culture, time, linguistics, and world view. Hermeneutics is the study of language and traditions to understand life as presented. The text, in my research, refers to meanings provided by the participants reflecting on their experiences.

My focus was to understand what the experience was like for the participant in the role of a successful formerly incarcerated African American man, which required entrance into the hermeneutic circle during the interview process and during the process of research. The process involved capturing data during the interview experience, reflecting on interpretations through shifting contexts to produce qualitative data that reached completeness when my interpretation matched the participant's meaning of the information shared. The interpretation was enhanced when the participant's meaning and thoughts matched my interpretation of the experience shared. A reciprocal interaction among the observation of the text, interpretation of the text, and meaning of the text established completeness to the right interpretation of the intent.

An Afrocentric lens was used in this study. Afrocentricity is a social change paradigm centered on helping African people reestablish a sense of agency to live a healthy sociocultural life (Asante, 1988). There are varying definitions of Afrocentric inquiry. For its use in my research, Afrocentricity was viewed as a multicultural approach to study history and sociology (Asante, 1988). The Afrocentric paradigm is focused on the process of viewing African and African American people as subjects in history rather

than as victims who operate on the fringes of society (Borum, 2007; Byrdsong et al., 2013). Researchers who employ Afrocentricity consider the historical and cultural aspects of African Americans and applied principles to seek unity and harmony (Asante, 1988).

In this study, I employed the four principles of Afrocentricity developed by Asante (1988): (a) Cosmology (consider the associations and disassociations between Africans and non-Africans' conceptions of race/racism, culture, gender, class, and traditions); (b) Epistemology (considers conceptions of truth and knowledge, and the acquisition and use of truth and knowledge); (c) Axiology (conceptions of morality and conduct in the home, community, and the systems of society); and (d) Aesthetics (conceptions of the importance and utility of art forms and other modes of expression), which evoke a consciousness that determines being.

In this Afrocentric-hermeneutic phenomenological study, human relations, humans' relationship to the supernatural, and humans' relationships to their own being within the Heideggerian framework was appropriate in understanding cultural constructs and the lived experiences of being a successful African American male who was formerly incarcerated. This Afrocentric-hermeneutic phenomenological study included culture, social context, and the historical timeline. This study afforded the participants the opportunity to state more than the facts relevant to their experiences, but also give meaning through their cultural lens by sharing their experiences as an African American male who was formerly incarcerated and has successfully moved beyond criminality .

Nature of Study

The aim of this Afrocentric-hermeneutic phenomenological study is to provide insight, analysis, and understanding of the experiences of African American males, who were formerly incarcerated and who are living a life absent of criminal activity. This Afrocentric-hermeneutic phenomenological research project allowed the participants an opportunity to bring to their consciousness historical and cultural experiences relative to events which occurred over time, thus sharing the meaning they attribute to a phenomenon. People attribute meaning through experiences, mental and emotional connections, and interactions with the world.

The interpretive process of hermeneutics affords a well-established manner for analyzing and understanding how people make sense of their lives (Strong et al., 2008). Hermeneutic phenomenology allows participants to speak and attempt to understand through described experiences, which are interpreted from their place and time in the world (Gadamer, 1998; Heidegger, 1962; Van Manen, 2014).

The cyclical approach of hermeneutic phenomenology is aimed at allowing an openness to the meaningfulness exchanged (Gadamer, 1989). Heidegger (1962) explained the hermeneutic circle as a revisionary process of understanding the text which emerges through themes or parts that make sense of the whole. I finalized the investigation with an awareness of biases and presuppositions, which required constant revisions as the meaning of the lived experiences shared by the participants emerged.

A Heideggerian framework with an Afrocentric lens guides this study. Martin Heidegger's (1962) approach to phenomenology is interpretive and is based on an educational aspect (Large, 2008). Heideggerian phenomenology is subjective and focused on the core concept of human beings being unable to separate themselves from the mind and the body (Wrathall, 2005). Heidegger asserted human beings bring their experiences and consciousness into the world; which is a shared world (Wrathall, 2005). The universal concept proposed by Heidegger is referred to as Being in the World, which provides a structured process for the manner in which we function in the world (Heidegger, 1962, p. 414). Over time, the meaning applied to a phenomenon may change; therefore, the interpretation changes.

Important to advancing multicultural competence, an Afrocentric lens developed by Asante (1988) offers a cultural context, which lends itself relevant to the hermeneutic circle of the client-counselor relationship. The perspective of an Afrocentric lens views the world through African experiences, including group cohesion and an African awareness of one's existence. Individuals with higher levels of Afrocentricity tend to embrace their culture and promote values, attitudes, and behaviors consistent with resisting internalized and overt oppression (Hollingsworth & Phillips, 2017; Kambon, 1998). The interrelatedness of Afrocentricity and *Dasein* offer an exploration of *Being and Time* combined with cognitive process, intentionality, and action orientation through the phenomena of incarceration. To this matter, the information obtained brings to light existential considerations from African American men whom we seek to empower within

the scope of diversification and inclusion in counseling practices. It is the way studying the interpretation of text, through the interdependence of the structure of care, in consideration of culture, time, linguistics, and world view was achieved.

Operational Definitions

For the purpose of this dissertation, the following words and phrases are defined as follows:

Aesthetics: a principle of Afrocentricity utilizing art forms and other modes of expression to evoke consciousness (Asante, 1988).

African American: an American of African descent. This term is used interchangably with Black (Collier-Thomas & Turner, 1994).

Afrocentric inquiry. a multicultural approach to study history and sociology (Asante, 1988).

Afrocentric paradigm: viewing African and African American people as subjects in history rather than as victims (Borum, 2007; Byrdsong et al., 2013).

Afrocentricity: placing African ideals at the center of any analysis that involves African culture and behavior (Asante, 1991).

Axiology: the concept of morals and conduct in the home, community, and the societal systems (Asante, 1988).

Being: is the way we interpret and understand our experiences, which influences how we experience things, which influences how we interpret our experience (Heidegger, 1962).

Black: racial classification associated with African American people and their culture. This term is used interchangably with African American (Sigelman et al., 2005).

Cosmology: the associations and disassociations between Africans and non-Africans' conceptions of race/racism, culture, gender, class, and traditions (Asante, 1988).

Cultural competence: understanding the importance of social and cultural influences on beliefs and behaviors (Betancourt et al., 2003).

Dasein: a term coined by Heidegger as an entity of Being-there and being could not exist without being in the world (Heidegger, 1962).

Epistemology: conceptions of truth and knowledge, and the acquisition and use of truth and knowledge (Asante, 1988).

Eurocentric: the theory and practice of giving privilege to Europeans (Hostettler, 2012).

Existentiality: the authentic and inauthentic existence of *Dasein*, which may be decided by choice in one's Being and the manner, in which, a person interprets Being in the world (Heidegger, 1962).

Facticity: is the manner people are thrown into the world and inherit circumstances without a choice (Heidegger, 1962).

Fallenness: the way we are influenced to live our lives based on what others say (Heidegger, 1962).

Heidegger's care structure: the interrelated dimensions of existentiality, facticity, and fallenness that raise awareness to existence in the world (Wrathall, 2005).

Hermeneutic circle: the researcher visiting the part and the whole throughout the process, which has a back and forth relationship leading to a constructive interpretation of the lived experience (Heidegger, 1962).

Incarcerated: confined in a jail or prison as a result of a criminal act (Dmitrieva et al., 2012).

Marginalized: to assign an unimportant or powerless position within a society or group (Stein, 2012).

Oppression: a marker of privilege to define a subordinate group and deem how that group ought to be treated in society (Stein, 2012).

Parole: supervised release from prison with the promise of good behavior (Yelderman et al., 2022).

Probation: a period of time when individuals are supervised to ensure their continued good behavior (Harding et al., 2022).

Racial identity: the attitudes, beliefs, and cognitions that people acribe to as their racial group membership (Sellers et al., 1998).

Racism: discrimination or racial prejudice (Hadden et al., 2016).

Recidivism: tendencies of parolees to return to prison (Meehan, 2017).

School-to-prison pipeline: a system, in which scores of African American males are pushed out of the school system, which often leads to incarceration (Ewert et al., 2014; McCarter et al., 2020).

Success: a person released from prison who is not re-arrested, avoids new convictions or imprisonment for violating the terms of their release conditions (Andersen et al., 2020; DeVeaux, 2022). For the purpose of this study, the definition also include the ability to abstain from criminal activity beyond a 10-year recidivism period.

Assumptions, Limitations, Scope, and Delimitations

In this study, I assumed that all participants provided detailed, honest answers to all questions proposed and that my personal experience in counseling individuals who are on parole and probation as well as those incarcerated can create biases, which would produce limitations for this study. My optimistic attitude in positive change among this population is deeply ingrained and it was important to remain neutral during the interview process. The qualitative nature of this study does not lack transferability, and provides detailed information regarding the participants' viewpoint of experiences that assisted in their development over time post incarceration. The participants were African American, male, and at least 18 years old who were formerly incarcerated in prison and had been absent of criminal activity for a minimum of 10 years since being released from prison.

Significance

The findings from this dissertation study may serve several aspects of social change. There is a need for more research to address racial, cultural, and ethnic disparities in physical and mental health (Snowden, 2005; Watson, 2014; Wright, 2011). This study was aimed at addressing social and community factors that may provide information relevant to program development and appropriate services to assist in creating greater multicultural competence in providing services for African American males who were formerly incarcerated. This research project may contribute to the understanding needed for program improvement, criminal justice reform, neighborhood safety improvement, and an increased awareness in understanding the consciousness of the African American male preparing for release and reentry into their communities rather than waiting until after they are released to begin the supportive work.

The Heideggerian framework supports the importance of understanding self in the world in which we live and the application of appropriateness (Wrathall, 2005). Further stated, Heidegger asserted human beings are best understood when their culture, social context, and the period are incorporated. The Afrocentric lens may assist service providers in learning behaviors and beliefs that further impede the success of this population and the information gained can assist in staff and organizational training (Stepteau-Watson et al., 2014).

Summary

I began this chapter with a brief background of the plight of African American males in the criminal justice system, school system, reentry systems, and the need for cultural responsiveness in the counseling profession. I then discussed the problem statement, the purpose of the study, and the research question that guide this study. In this chapter, I provided a detailed account of the theoretical framework and operational definitions to assist the reader in understanding terms used throughout the dissertation. In the conclusion, I stated the significance of the study and provide a preface to the literature review that is found in the second chapter.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

As stated in the previous chapter, the purpose of this Afrocentric-hermeneutic phenomenological study was to bridge the gap in the literature and explore the lived experiences of African American males who were formerly incarcerated in prison and have positively changed their lives over the past 10 years so that they avoid future criminality. The mass incarceration of African American men was the necessary catalyst for gaining insight into reducing recidivism. Many researchers have conducted studies regarding the challenges faced by African American males, but little research had been conducted on how African American males who were formerly incarcerated view the world, what it means to be an African American male, and how their racial identity affects what they hope for from an Afrocentric perspective (Borum, 2007; Harvey, 2003). Literature in the following areas is reviewed: incarceration statistics; recidivism; school-to-prison pipeline; school systems; self-esteem, self-concept, self-confidence, self-efficacy; internalized oppression; interventions; African centered theory; and parole supervision. Afrocentric-hermeneutic phenomenology affords a comprehensive method for interpreting the meaning of being a formerly incarcerated African American male.

Literature Search Strategy

In a search and review of the literature and research related to the experiences of African American males who were formerly incarcerated and successfully transitioned into society, I found limited research through an Afrocentric lens. In addition, there was limited information from a qualitative perspective to lend a voice to the population

studied. A search of past and current peer-reviewed articles was utilized through Walden University Library EBSCO Host and databases such as PsychINFO, PsychARTICLES, and Psychology: A SAGE Full-Text Collection. Search terms used varied individually and in combination to conduct the literature review. Key terms used included *African American males, Black men, Incarcerated African American men, Recidivism and African American men, Racism, Incarceration, Afrocentricity, Heidegger, mass incarceration, Afrocentric, Afrocentrism, counseling, successful reentry,* and *school-to-prison pipeline.* Numerous books were used to provide knowledge related to Afrocentricity and the association with cultural responsiveness. Due to limited research related to recidivism through an Afrocentric lens, dissertations were also reviewed.

Statistical Context

The United States of America leads the world in the number of individuals incarcerated and this number has increased by 500% since 1970 to 2015 (The Sentencing Project, 2016). A total of 1,561,500 prisoners were held in state and federal correctional institutions in 2014, which was a reduction of an estimated 15,400 prisoners from the previous year (Carson, 2015). Approximately 53,000 inmates were sentenced to a term of 1 year or less, which left 97% of the remaining prisoners with sentences of more than 1 year (Carson, 2015). There is an overrepresentation in the penal system for people of color (Sentencing Project, 2016). African Americans males were the most prevalent population to have been incarcerated and accounted for 37% of the prison population sentenced to more than 1 year. White males populated the prisons by 32%, followed by

Hispanic males at 22%. By yearend, the prison population in the United States in 2014 was comprised of 2,724 out of every 100,000 African American males, 1,090 Hispanic males out of every 100,000, and 465 White males out of every 100,000 (Carson, 2015). Among all age groups, African American males outpaced other race and ethnicities by 3.8 to 10.5 times. The largest difference in rate of incarceration was between African American males who were 18-19 years of age and White males of the same age. For every 100,000 inmates among that age category, 1,092 were African American compared to 102 per every 100,000 who were White. African American males, ages 18-19, were housed in a prison 10 times more often than White males of the same age. The rate of incarceration increased more for African American males between the ages of 30-34, which was documented at 6% or 6,412 out of every 100,000, compared to Hispanic males at 2%, and White males at 1% (Carson, 2015). This disproportionate rate has led to scores of studies examining the root cause. Further inquiry was necessary to examine the recent reduced rate of incarceration in the United States. Six years after the statistical data provided by Carson (2015), the Bureau of Justice Statistics presented by Carson (2021) reported a reduction in imprisonment. The number of prisoners in state and federal penal institutions was down 15% or 214,300 from 2019. While the reduction of prisoners incarcerated may seem to represent progress in crime reduction and improved recidivism, 2020 was the year of the COVID-19 pandemic and court proceedings were significantly delayed thus the reduced number of sentences to state and federal penal institutions.

Nonetheless, in 2020, Black males were 5.7 times more likely to be imprisoned than White males (Carson, 2021).

School-to-Prison Pipeline

Incarceration among African American males spiked in the mid-1980s, and the reasons are multifaceted. Social and criminal justice legislation contributed to the increase with the War on Drugs policies, which was an effort to deter drug sales, drug convictions, and substance abuse (Johnson & Jones, 1998; Sirin, 2011). Some would argue the War on Drugs policies were established to target African American males (Steffen, 2018; Willis, 2019). The sentencing policies, such as the three-strike law, resulted in mandatory life sentencing for third-time offenders convicted of selling drugs. Minimum sentencing policies allowed judges to impose lengthy sentences for first-time offenders. Also, police personnel were more likely to patrol impoverished neighborhoods, which were more concentrated with African American males, because of the higher prevalence of criminal activity (Desai & Abeita, 2017).

African American males who dropped out of high school or were otherwise involuntarily removed from the school system are more likely to have been incarcerated (Mingo & Haskins, 2018). Numerous studies have been conducted regarding the school-to-prison pipeline. The school-to-prison pipeline is a term focused on the lack of discretion in decision-making for disciplinary action due to strict zero-tolerance policies in schools (McCarter, 2017; Mallett, 2016; Miguel & Gargano, 2017). The result is an increase in school suspensions and expulsions, which lead to students getting arrested for

actions that would normally not be considered dangerous (Pigott et al., 2018). Heitzeg (2009) described the school-to-prison pipeline as a process in which students are removed from the educational system and transferred to the criminal justice institution. Among African American boys, adverse childhood experiences are common and can lead to problematic behavior because of environmental, psychological, and emotional challenges, including substance abuse, incarceration, and increased exposure to violence (Reidy et al., 2021)

African American Males and the School System

African American males are met with challenges from the time they enter the school system as toddlers and the challenges are multifaceted as they grow older. Gilliam and Shabar (2006) conducted a qualitative study which surveyed 119 teachers in Massachusetts. Prospectively, 39% of the teachers surveyed indicated they expelled one or more children and 15% suspended one or more children over the previous 12 months. The study indicated risk factors for problematic behavior resulting in suspensions and expulsions, which included low-income economic status, school setting, teacher stress, and work experience. Further stated, preschoolers enrolled in for-profit and community-based programs were more likely to have been expelled than those in Head Start programs housed in public school institutions. An average of 27.42 preschoolers out of 1,000 were expelled, which was thirteen times higher than the national average. This number was thirty-four times higher than the average for students enrolled in the public-school system in Massachusetts in grades K-12. Notwithstanding students in grades K-

12, who attended for-profit and community-based programs in Massachusetts, were more likely to have been expelled by a teacher who reported high job stress.

Wright and Ford (2016) asserted the importance of understanding how implicit and explicit forms of bias and racism experienced by African American boys in both schools and society play a pivotal role in attempting to reduce criminalization into adulthood. African American boys were categorized as having an emotional or behavioral disability and were placed in special education based on testing that was culturally and subjectively biased. Testing instruments should be fair and unbiased.

When teachers understand the strengths of African American boys, they are more likely to develop a better relationship. Further stated, the success of African American boys in the school system is increased when the pedagogy is culturally relevant and provided in a culturally responsive manner, including the use of books, videos, and other instructional material reflective of African American culture.

Graham and Nevarez (2017) discussed the significance of transformative leadership in creating a school environment that fosters social justice, culturally relevant pedagogy, and empowerment. In addition, creating a relationship between students' homes and their schools builds stronger connections. Educators who recognize implicit and explicit biases and actively pursue eliminating them are more likely to model empathy and respect in creating a diverse and inclusive environment, which reflects understanding social injustices and the importance of developing strong self-efficacy and ethnic identity (Graham & Nevarez, 2017). Diversity and inclusion are often used

interchangeably; however, diversity is described as differing components and inclusion is described as the act of being invited to participate notwithstanding any differences (Chao et al., 2015). In navigating from childhood to adolescence to adulthood in a healthy manner, many challenges are faced when the racial identity is African American (Otuyelu et al., 2016).

Compared to any other racial group, young African American males are more likely to have been incarcerated (Forrest-Bank & Jenson, 2015; McCarter et al., 2020) and 3.5 times more likely to have been suspended or expelled (U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, 2012). African American males who were incarcerated had academic failure in approximately 70% of their school transcripts (Stein, 2012). It is widely known that African American men who have low educational achievement are more likely to spend time imprisoned (Martin & Beese, 2017). The school-to-prison pipeline is the beginning of a life of instability, under employment, criminal activity, and hopelessness. Yip (2014) posited the ethnic and racial identity that is developed from the stages of adolescence into adulthood is shaped through experiences within the context of the family dynamic, peer relationships, school setting, neighborhood, and society at large. When African American males experience discrimination, marginalization, and oppression, it influences the way they see themselves. Demo and Hughes (1989) conducted a study to understand factors attributable to adult mastery among African American males. Using a national sample, the authors sought to understand the way African Americans can have high self-esteem and low personal efficacy simultaneously.

They hypothesized interpersonal relationships within the family dynamic and community influence self-esteem as opposed to institutional inequality; self-esteem among African Americans was based on racial self-esteem or low socioeconomic achievement blamed on the system; and educational attainment, occupational status, and income were factors in institutional inequality (Hughes & Demo, 1989, p.138). The findings suggested Black consciousness had a significant effect on racial self-esteem. Positive relationships with family, friends, and occupational prestige, including contact with White people, were significant. Socioeconomic status played an influential role in personal efficacy. While high self-esteem was not negatively affected by racial inequality, personal efficacy was a characteristic that was negatively influenced by inequality.

Pigott et al. (2018) studied the effect of the presence of school resource officers on the number of school incidents that were reported to the police. It was hypothesized that the mere presence of having school resource officers in schools increased the number of expulsions and police reports filed. Using the 2009–2010 School Survey on Crime and Safety (SSOCS), 950 schools were included. The dependent variables included removals from school without provisions, total number of problematic events, situations reported to police personnel, and violent incidents recorded. The independent variables studied included school demographics, including racial tension, school size, bullying, student disrespect of school personnel, and gang activity. In measuring the effect of having school resource officers or security guards present on high school campuses, a meaningful relationship was measured that demonstrated reduced student removals from

schools when security guards were present. Furthermore, when there was an increase in the presence of sworn non-school resource officers present, the number of student removals was reduced as well. When schools attempted to increase the presence of both security guards and school resource officers, there was an increase in student removals. Factors related to increased student removals included the high rate of crime in the school, the principal's perception of the crime, the high male student population, special education placement, high teacher-to-student ratio, and frequent racial tensions. The findings from this study suggested the importance of a congruent relationship between school resource officers and security guards in school settings. When both parties worked together there were reduced incidences of serious violence. The authors suggested further research to understand the removal of students in high school settings, which often leads to the school-to-prison pipeline and high-volume incarceration of African American males.

The presence of school resource officers emerged in the 1950s to help reduce violent incidents in school settings in Flint, Michigan **(**Johnson, 1999). Racial tensions grew in the 1960s because of *Brown v Board of Education*, which desegregated schools requiring increased police presence to control anti-desegregation climates. Although many non-Black students were transferred to private or gifted schools, many of the best teachers transferred as well. The Black male student-teacher relationship suffered and with increased school resource officers present, many African American males were further disconnected from the learning environment due to zero tolerance policies.

Marchbanks et al. (2016) conducted a study related to the strict discipline policies applied to urban, rural, and suburban youth, which found that youth of color who lived in urban areas were more likely to have been disciplined at higher rates, including expulsion, and were more likely to enter the juvenile justice system. Hirschfield (2018) asserted that African American youth are disciplined by teaching personnel with culturally biased views of what they deemed threatening behavior. Further stated, the impact is greater due to policies that are enforced evenly, yet the student population is predominantly African American.

Numerous studies related to incarceration and recidivism reported that criminal activity often began during adolescence (Mowen & Boman, 2018; Simons et al., 2018; Walters, 2018). Zero tolerance policies were enacted in schools, which increased the number of students being suspended and expelled. During the time suspended or expelled and students were out of school, there was an increased likelihood for disconnect from the school environment, reduced community supervision, and increased delinquent behavior. Suspensions and expulsions often begin as early as preschool, which research demonstrates implications for further challenges throughout the education of the child (Mallatt, 2016; McCarter, 2017). Keenan and Wakschlag (2004) asserted that approximately 8% of children between the ages of 3 and 5 display behavior problems that would best be served through a mental health examination, rather than a suspension or expulsion.

Agudelo (2021) endorsed a restorative justice approach focused on a reciprocal relationship of respect among teachers, staff, and students to reduce the school-to-prison pipeline. It is significant when school staff recognize implicit bias prevention strategies to improve relationships between students and parents. Agudelo (2021) considered the school climate and how it effects the student relationship. Feelings of connectivity and a culture of humility as well as a reduction in discipline that excludes students of color was endorsed as prevention strategies. In addition, intervention methods suggested included peer mediation, community service, restorative circles as alternatives to suspensions and expulsions. The framework of Agudelo's restorative justice approach was to challenge institutional racism that students of color experience through disciplinary disparities (2021).

Self-Esteem, Self-Concept, Self-Confidence, and Self-Efficacy

According to Hughes et al. (2017), the exploration and commitment to racial identity began as a fluid experience in early adolescence and became stagnant in early adulthood. In examining the experiences of African American males, it was critical to review their early childhood experiences. Consideration of time and context is rooted in the experience of being African American and male. Experiences that perpetuate a lower academic expectation, decreased intellectual capacity, and reduced access to resources lead to feelings of hopelessness, and therefore it is important to conduct research aimed at understanding the Black male identification in a holistic manner (Howard et al., 2012).

All African American males who experienced incarceration have not all failed academically, been placed in special education courses, lived in poverty, or have mental health challenges. Increased research to explore the scores of African American males who have experienced challenges and have navigated throughout the educational system in a manner which placed them in a position to attend a higher institution of learning was worthy of contributing to the identification of characteristics and circumstances attributed to their success. African American students who performed extremely well academically were often overlooked.

In a qualitative study conducted by Flowers and Banda (2018), African American male college students were researched to explore the way they see their giftedness and how it contributed to their self-identity. The participants did not see themselves as gifted and considered their learning to have been a natural process, which indicated the importance of promoting high intelligence as a natural phenomenon associated with the African American male experience. Further stated, the term *gifted* served as a disassociation from their African American counterparts who may have not had similar levels of intellectual functioning. The study further established the significance of cultivating environments that foster the positive development of African American males in academia. An additional finding from the study promoted the importance of mentoring African American males who have established backgrounds of poverty to better assist in improving their self-concept and self-esteem to better navigate through higher education with increased confidence. In other words, the importance of feeling like one belongs

makes a significant difference in sustainability. For instance, Palmer and Gasman (2008) presented research findings from a qualitative study of 11 African American men who attended a Historical Black College and University (HBCU) to learn about the factors that contributed to their success prior to college entry and during their collegiate studies. Positive peer relationships that encouraged and supported their success were essential in the transition to college. Once on campus, continued peer relationships, empathetic and caring professors who cared about their overall wellbeing beyond the classroom, and the assignment of mentors and role models to assist them along the way increased their social capital. As a result, the students in the study reported increased self-confidence and connectedness to the university. When students of any age feel disconnected from their academic setting, the difficulty in successful completion is heightened. Howard et al. (2019) conducted a study of Black and Latino males to identify what they considered success. Six themes emerged as their definition: Reaching a desired outcome, having an awareness of one's identity, helping others, using positive adjectives to describe themselves, and having future ambitions.

Hines et al. (2015) explored the college experiences of two African American males described as first-generation college graduates from poor, rural towns. Already considered a minority, they were encompassed within a minority population on the predominantly White campus. Experiences with the campus police included asking them for identification to prove student enrollment, discrimination, racism, and the burden of expected representation of the entire African American race. In addition, challenges with

acculturation predisposed by insufficient college preparation contributed to a deficit in their cultural capital. Both participants reported different experiences with their high school counselors, suggesting trade school for one and advanced classes for college placement for the other. The experiences were reflective of the potential the counselors believed they possessed. Their internal locus of control, which centered on the belief that a higher education was an avenue to attain a better life and the ascribed belief that it was possible to earn a college degree proved beneficial. When African Americans are reared from a culturally responsive perspective, knowledge of their culture and community will create learning establishments from PreK and beyond that seek a greater commitment to reducing marginalization, oppression, and discrimination (Wright, 2009).

In preparing African American males for college, Denson and Hill (2010) examined self-efficacy. Using Kram's theory of mentoring combined with social learning theory, 21 at-risk African American male students were randomly selected from an alternative high school in North Carolina to participate in a mentoring program provided by members of the National Society for Black Engineers. The control group of another 21 students did not receive mentoring. The purpose was to explore the impact of an engineering mentorship on the perceptions the students held as engineering being a viable career choice. The focus was on self-efficacy in the areas of mathematics and science. The New Traditions Project (http://newtraditions.chem.wisc.edu) designed the instrument that Marat **(**2005**)** included in the measurement of perceptions and self-efficacy related to science and math. All participants answered background information related to their

academic level, racial identity, gender, grade point average, and their parents' highest level of education completed. Perceptions related to the participants' confidence in an engineering field were also assessed as well as confidence in their ability to solve engineering related problems. The findings suggested there was no significant difference between the participants in the treatment group and the control group. The exit interview revealed qualitative information to suggest the need to have longer, culturally relevant, and structured activities when working to improve the self-efficacy of at-risk, African American, male students.

Schools are often the first places children socialize consistently outside of their family dynamic. Potts (2003) indicated that the school is the first place an African American child experiences separation through racism, classism, and gender inequality as an African American male. As the child navigates the educational system, attempted acculturation to mainstream teaching methods often results in him being placed in special education classes, diagnosed with mental health challenges, and faced with suspension and expulsion, which experiences lower his self-esteem. The result is unequal access to opportunities and hopelessness (Potts, 2003). Particularly important to note is the African American male student and predominantly White female teacher ratio. African American male students who have predominately White female teachers often feel disconnected in the classroom when they are taught by teachers who they think do not trust them, expect lower academic performance from them, and interact with them less often (Ford & Harris, 1996). White teachers would benefit from understanding the multifaceted trauma

experienced by people of color when they lack cultural responsiveness in teaching (Matias, 2013).

The importance of learning family dynamics was emphasized in a study conducted by Kourea and Owens (2016). The collaborative effort of combined culturally responsive teaching and inclusion of parental perspectives regarding cultural values, experiences, and expectations in school settings was hopeful in working with African American students (Kourea & Owens, 2016). Studies referencing the importance of parental involvement in the rearing of African American males who are failing academically, incarcerated, and underemployed are plentiful, but there are few studies that discuss variables that lead to positive outcomes for African American males (Ford, 2006; Ford & Harris, 1996; Snell & Thomas**,** 1998; Trask-Tate & Cunningham, 2010). Hill et al. (2004) described parental involvement in academic settings as an interaction by parents with school personnel and their children and said the involvement is a beneficial component of academic success and is most beneficial when established at the school entry point. The findings from a study focused on African American males who successfully completed college focused on the participants' perceptions of parental involvement. Odom and McNeese (2014) provided insight from the participants who shared the importance of having parents who established appropriate expectations in working hard in school, student accountability, structure and rules at home, educational opportunities outside of school to pique curiosity, and elevated expectations for academic success from school entry throughout high school graduation. There are numerous studies

focused on African American males who enter the judicial system during adolescence and transfer negative life scripts into the adult criminal system. Limited research is available to describe the life script of African American males who have a history of criminal activity but changed the narrative to lead to a life free of criminal behavior. Brown et al. (2010) conducted a study of 122 African American male participants to measure racial identity, psychological empowerment, and self-esteem. The findings indicated self-esteem of African American males was increased when they were empowered psychologically, and their racial identity is included in fostering competence and a mastery of their environment.

African American Males and Internalized Oppression

Understanding the way African Americans see themselves is important in analyzing their behavior and creating interventions to assist in healthy development (Snell & Thomas, 2010). Internalized racial oppression was described by Bailey et al. (2011) as a manifestation of experiencing discrimination and racism, which becomes an adoption of negative stereotypes, oppressive acts, and destructive behaviors as expected by the oppressors. It is important for people working with African American men to understand internalized racial oppression and its implications on academic achievement and motivation (Bailey et al., 2022; Brown et al., 2017). In helping to understand the subjective experiences of African American men, the larger social context including cultural, economic, political, and health conditions are important to research (Franklin, 1999; Franklin, 2007). While the school system is one place where institutionalized

racism may exist, there are examples throughout the community beyond the school campus. Whether it is shopping in a department store, driving a vehicle, or seeking employment, discrimination can occur in many forms. National headlines exhibit examples of African American males from all social classes being subjected to racial profiling, discriminatory practices, and unfair labor markets. The internal dialogue when enduring traumatic events may increase the incidence of internalized oppression and internalized racism. As the media increasingly portray misconduct by police personnel against African American males, the spirit of legal cynicism is increased. Kirk and Papachristos (2011) explained legal cynicism as incompetence in the criminal justice system. When African Americans do not trust the legal process, they are more inclined to take matters into their own hands. Racial segregation, poverty, and disadvantaged educational, economic, and employment structures further exacerbate a culture of self-reliance as a measure to survive (Kirk & Papachristos, 2011; Yang & Chen, 2018).

African Americans have endured years of slavery, which continue to have lingering effects through systemic racism that links Jim Crow laws and members of society disregarding the value of African American lives (Basevich, 2019; Graff, 2011; James, 2015). Dating back to the 1960s, Martin Luther King led the Civil Rights Movement, which was considered an inclusive cause. Racism and discrimination continue to be a factor in the lives of African Americans, particularly African American men. The media often highlight police-involved shootings, which have catapulted the challenges faced by African American men into the forefront within the African

American community and beyond. While there have been scores of magnified police-involved shootings of unarmed African American males, the Black Lives Matter movement was organized after George Zimmerman was acquitted of the murder charges of Trayvon Martin, an African American male, who was walking through his father's neighborhood and was considered suspicious to the defendant (Palmer, 2013). The case brought significant media attention and America paid closer attention through media coverage and social media sites to share similar cases around the country (Loken, 2017).

Two years after the Trayvon Martin shooting, the world was informed through media outlets about a police-involved fatal shooting of an African American male in Ferguson, Missouri on August 9, 2014. The death of Michael Brown led to a closer look at corruption within police jurisdictions. The outpour of allegations regarding police brutality from the citizens of Ferguson caused the United States Justice Department, numerous politicians, celebrities, and citizens across the country to conduct a review of community policing and discrimination within the criminal justice system (Halpern, 2015). The citizens of Ferguson were outraged when the officer involved was acquitted of Michael Brown's death. As the video of the incident and the unrest of the citizens spread around the world through social media, an increased concern regarding questionable police practices occurred.

The Black Lives Matter movement was formed in 2013 after the Trayvon Martin shooting and gained notoriety after the Michael Brown shooting. To bring justice to victims of police misconduct, in a uniformed manner, the premise for the Black Lives

Matter movement was to promote the importance of valuing Black lives as much as non-Black lives through nonviolent marches, educational forums, and raising awareness (Sawyer & Gampa, 2018). Ugorji (2017) charged that the Civil Rights Movement was instrumental in exposing overt discrimination and the Black Lives Matter Movement exposed covert discriminatory practices.

African American Men and Interventions

African American males experience race-based trauma that counseling professionals may not fully comprehend (Chang & Berk, 2009; Hemmings & Evans, 2018). Goodman et al. (2015) asserted the importance of social justice advocacy in counseling training programs. Hargons et al. (2017) proposed the significance of counseling psychologists gaining a better understanding of the African American experience and enhanced training beyond multiculturalism when entering communities to assist with trauma and crisis situations. Beer et al. (2012) conducted research to examine the experiences of counseling students regarding the training of social justice and an associated commitment to advocacy efforts. The findings from the mixed-method study found that it was important for counseling professionals to receive support in intertwining social justice and spiritual values into their work. Experiential work at public forums focused on social justice was listed by the participants as relevant to professional growth. Beer et al. (2012) recommended that training programs include faculty and students who represent people who are marginalized.

As it relates to counseling individuals within the criminal system, counseling professionals are responsible for assessing the psychological needs of a diverse inmate population, which includes preparing them for post-release (Varghese et al., 2015). Considering African American males have the highest incarceration rate and the highest rate of recidivism, correctional counseling has an integral role in an inmate's life. Prisons have a hierarchical structure, which can cause some inmates to lack trust in the counseling process for fear information shared will be revealed to direct clinical supervisors, security staff, or the warden (Carrola et al., 2016). Bartoli et al. (2015) asserted the importance of counselors understanding their positioning through status, life scripts, and roles, which may stem from cultural dominance and power. All African Americans share a history linked to the implications of slavery; therefore, counselors who understand this population's frame of reference, values, and worldview are more effectively able to engage in the counselor-client relationship (Todisco & Salomone, 1991).

Skinner-Osei and Stepteau-Watson (2018) used nonrandom sampling to select 10 African American fathers ranging in age from 23-56 years of age who were formerly incarcerated to explore their experiences with post-release. Using a phenomenological approach, the researchers sought to explore the phenomenon African American fathers experienced with reentry, family reunification, and recidivism post-release. Along with challenges associated with a lack of affordable resources (i.e., housing, mental health services, employment opportunities), childhood trauma, stress, and self-identity barriers

were listed as unaddressed issues, which social work practitioners would benefit from better training to assist individuals and their families effected by incarceration (Skinner-Osei & Stepteau-Watson, 2018). Self-reflection and self-assessment are integral components of positive changes for formerly incarcerated individuals to lead a more productive life (Maier & Ricciardelli, 2021).

African Centered Theory

Afrocentrism is described by Asante (1990) as a historical and cultural perspective from an individualistic and communal viewpoint, which attributes to an understanding of the African experience, including contributions, historical values, and instillation of hope through a sense of pride. African-centered theory is rooted in a strength-focused point of view, which serves to empower clients through the understanding of their heritage and historical contributions from a social, economic, and political perspective. Moreover, the idea of embracing creativity, values, healthy living, and overall community wellness is attributable to a sense of cultural pride (Roberts et al., 2000). Tidwell (2015) conducted a critical ethnographic study focused on a small demographic of African American men to provide a voice for members of the hip-hop generation surrounding the stigma associated with incarceration. The participants were born between 1965-1984 and the purpose was to allow cultural sensitivity through an Afrocentric voice regarding mass imprisonment and its implications. Views common to the participants included the influence of music lyrics that suggest the importance of voting to instill a change among institutional microaggressions. There was a sense of

hopelessness due to powerlessness. The importance of love and understanding starting at home within the family unit was expressed. The participants also mentioned the need to review the African American church since the rise of the mega church caused a loss of community connection as previously experienced in smaller churches. The school-to-prison pipeline was also considered a result of cultural insensitivity and a disconnect with the African American family structural unit. Tidwell (2015) suggested the need to conduct further research involving African Americans conducted by African Americans to increase perspectives through a color matched representation. In a study of 41 African American men conducted by Hatcher (2010), based on the principles of Afrocentricity, participants reported attending faith-based functions was one of the easiest things to do upon release to help toward success post-release.

Parole Supervision

Many inmates are released from prison on a conditional status called parole. The initial purpose of parole supervision was to make the transition from prison into society an easier process (Chamberlain et al., 2018). Parolees have restrictions and requirements that they must adhere to, including living arrangements, employment, counseling, drug tests, and check-ins with their parole officer. The role of a parole officer is important in the parolee's reintegration into society in a successful manner. Increased chances for continued criminal behavior occur when individuals on parole enter severely impoverished communities (Ricci & Barry, n.d.). In a recent study conducted by the United States Department of Justice (Alper et al., 2018), the length of parole supervision

measured recidivism over different follow-up periods. While recidivism is commonly measured within 3 years of release, the findings of the study revealed that 15% of the participants were arrested within 6 years and 24% were arrested 9 years post-release.

Blasko et al. (2015) conducted a study to examine the relationships among a parole officer, therapist, and client as a collaborative intervention method than a typical supervision method, which include a parole officer and client only. A total of 253 clients were assigned to the collaborative group and 227 were assigned to the parole officer only group. The study found that the therapist served as a positive buffer between the parole officer and the parolee, which strengthened their relationship and less parole violations occurred. Moreover, the perception of a positive parole officer-parolee relationship resulted in a positive outcome in reducing recidivism.

Louis (2017) explored how eight African American men, between the ages of 37 and 72, successfully reentered society. The purpose of the qualitative, grounded theory study was to understand the lived experiences of the participants before, during, and after incarceration. The eight participants expressed common themes, including their willingness to change their behavior, their desire to remain out of prison, employment challenges, connection to others, lacking support, and taking responsibility. None of the participants were on supervised release at the time of the study. The conclusion of the study suggested that African American men are less likely to recidivate when they have committed to changing their behavior, accept responsibility for previous choices, connect with people with whom they can relate, secure gainful employment, and find stable

housing. In addition, Louis (2017) asserted that intervention programs were not a necessary component of successful reentry.

On the other hand, Bent-Goodley and Smith (2017), stated the relationship between the African American community and police personnel would benefit from using an Afrocentric approach, which may enhance equality, justice, and stronger reentry efforts. Smith (2013) conducted a study using the Cultural Resilience Model and Social Disorganization Theory as theoretical frameworks, which included 10 African American men who were formerly incarcerated and had a history of chemical dependence. The Cultural Resilience Model included social support and family cohesiveness, which heightened the ability of the participants to adapt outside of prison. Clarke and Mayer (2017) posited the use of culture as a resource can increase social and community resilience. Central to Smith's study was how the participants transitioned from prison into socially disorganized communities and cultural resilience factors deemed helpful in their success (2013). There were four themes captured through qualitative interviews which included altruistic values, help-seeking, self-reliance and self-control, and stigma rejection. Seven out of the ten participants chose a field that allowed them to give back to the community. All participants stated they felt guilt and remorse related to their criminal history and did not want to carry the stereotype of an ex-offender, which meant they wanted to show people that they changed their behavior. On the other hand, Bent-Goodley and Smith (2017) stated that the relationship between the African American community and police personnel would benefit from using an Afrocentric approach,

which may enhance equality, justice, and stronger reentry efforts. Afrocentric ideals advance the promotion of seeing the good in people, understanding the importance of the family unit, community support, spiritual resilience, interdependence, individuality, and functioning as a unit (Bent-Goodley, 2005). The Afrocentric lens may assist service providers in learning behaviors, and beliefs that further impede the success of this population and the information gained can assist in staff and organizational training in the counseling field.

Summary

African American males make up an overwhelming number of those convicted of criminal offenses in the United States. African American males who dropped out of high school are more likely to have been incarcerated due to a lack of resources available to prevent or assist in linkage to positive alternatives. Racism has proven to have been an ongoing concern that is considered in the systemic connections to the individual and family of people of color. While studies have concluded numerous reasons that may account for choices people make, very few are presented from an African American perspective and even less from a Heideggerian framework.

People of color, specifically African American males, experience the ramifications of racism from early childhood. As early as prekindergarten, African American boys are suspended and expelled from school at higher rates than any other child. Once they enter the school system, they are more likely to have a non-Black teacher and an increased possibility of encountering people in the school system and

community who perceive them as aggressors. Many African American boys grow into young adults who lack basic learning skills due to reasons such as falling behind in academia, and many drop out of high school as a result. When young African American men are undereducated and undervalued, there is an increased likelihood that they will turn to criminal activity to survive. Often, they spend time with their peers or older adults who participate in negative behaviors and follow suit. The result is an increased likelihood of police contact and incarceration. Social media has catapulted police-involved shootings and discrimination into the spotlight across the globe, which has raised awareness and increased racial tension. The ongoing challenges associated with mass incarceration, which break up the family unit, increase poverty, inflame hopelessness, and have a reciprocal negative relationship within societal institutions have been explored from numerous perspectives. When enlisting strategies to assist African American men in counseling, professionals would benefit from understanding race-based trauma, internalized oppression, and hopelessness. Further stated, scores of African American males experience racism and trauma in higher education and throughout the duration of their lives regardless of their educational and career background.

In addition, the importance of understanding the misconceptions related to what may appear to have been traumatic, but instead may be a way of life for some people is worthy of further exploration. For instance, many African American boys are considered the man of the house when their father is absent (Roy et al., 2014). The significance of cultural responsiveness includes social advocacy from the counseling profession and a

clear understanding of cultural competence without using stereotypical views in relationship building. Many African American males who were formerly incarcerated considered their parole officer to have been an attribute or a hindrance in their post incarceration supervision.

The empowerment of African American males transcends into their family dynamics, community, and the larger society when they have a sense of pride. Color-matched studies through an Afrocentric lens, exploring the experiences of formerly incarcerated males who have been successful post-release is minimal. The marginalization of Afrocentricity is noteworthy when considering its implications in studying a marginalized population. There is a plethora of research to study the causes of recidivism; however, there is limited data to suggest strategies to reenter society from the voice of those who were able to beat the odds. This study could increase competence in counseling African American men as well as provide data to develop strategies to reduce racial microaggression in this underserved population. The urgency for a change in racial injustices further lend the need for research supporting efforts to raise awareness and create positive societal implications. Far too often, programming aimed at supporting African American men fail to include them in the development stage. I provide the research method that I employed for this study in Chapter 3.

Chapter 3: Research Method

The purpose of this Afrocentric-hermeneutic phenomenological study was to allow examination of the participants' experiences through narrative accounts of what it means to be a successful formerly incarcerated African American male in society today. By using the interpretive approach of hermeneutics, I conducted a study that allowed the participants to share their meaningfulness associated with the phenomenon. Heidegger asserted that the experiences of man could not be objectified but, instead should focus on being in the world (Heidegger, 1962). Further stated, Heidegger was focused on how meaning is formed between the event and the person. Heidegger explained the way we interpret and apply meaning to our experiences influence how we experience our being in the world (Gadamer, 1989). The term *Dasein* was coined by Heidegger as an entity of *Being-there* and being could not exist without being in the world (Heidegger, 1962). This manner is the conception of being in terms of a fundamental solidarity of subjective experience in the objective world minus duality of what reality is. It means there is interdependence of what we are and what the world is. The truth of our being is based on our perspective through an ongoing process of concealing and revealing.

The hermeneutic circle is a process of interpretation that we continually move between smaller and larger units of meaning to determine the meaning of both. All understanding is context dependent. The aim was to understand the experience that led to the expression. The type of understanding which allows us to interpret the participant's meaning of a phenomenon as it was experienced by them. It begins with a preliminary

observation of the context, then the interpretation involves the researcher visiting the part and the whole throughout the process, which has a back-and-forth relationship that leads to a constructive interpretation. Heidegger (1962) asserted that we are never in the world neutrally and being in the world is a matter of care.

As a counselor working with the forensic population, using the hermeneutic approach helped me avoid my need to bracket (suspend judgment) regarding the experiences of successful formerly incarcerated African American males. Heidegger's philosophy attempts to get to the subjective experience and find the genuine nature of things (Gadamer, 2005; Heidegger, 1962). Humans are self-interpreting beings, situated in time, and have historical and cultural practices that are communicated through language (Heidegger, 1962). Cultural conversations include facts that historicize otherness, by which, the otherness of the other becomes the object of objectivity (Gadamer, 2005). As Gadamer (2005) asserted, preconceptions are inescapable because interpretations will include the researcher's experience, which is notwithstanding the awareness of the otherness. Hermeneutics is the art and science of interpretation and is a philosophy that describes an understanding of communication by studying the interpretation of text from a culture, time, linguistics, and world view. Hermeneutics is the study of language and traditions to understand life as presented. The text in my research refers to meanings provided by the participants reflecting on their experiences. My focus was to understand what the experience was like for the participant in the role of a successful formerly incarcerated African American man, which required entrance into

the hermeneutic circle during the interview process and during the process of research. The process involved capturing data during the interview experience, reflecting on interpretations through shifting contexts to produce qualitative data that reached completeness when the interpretation from me matched the participant's meaning of the information shared. A reciprocal interaction among the observation of the text, interpretation of the text, and meaning of the text brings completeness to the right interpretation of my intent as researcher.

An Afrocentric lens was also used in this study. The premise of Afrocentricity is centered on helping African people reestablish intrinsic and extrinsic values to live a healthy sociocultural life. Afrocentric Inquiry has various definitions. For its use in this study, I adopted the terminology coined by Asante (1988) that defined Afrocentricity as a multicultural approach to study history and sociology. African American people are viewed as subjects in history rather than victims who operate on the outside of society in the Afrocentric paradigm (Asante, 1987; Byrdsong et al., 2013; Mazama, 2001). Researchers who optimize Afrocentricity consider historical and cultural factors applicable to African Americans seeking unity and harmony. Asante (1988) developed four principles: (a) Cosmology considers race/racism, culture, gender, class, and traditions; (b) Epistemology considers truth and knowledge); (c) Axiology considers morality and conduct in the home, community, and the systems of society; and (d) Aesthetics considers the importance of art forms and expression, which elicit a consciousness that determines being.

In this Afrocentric-hermeneutic phenomenological study, the Heideggerian framework was appropriate in understanding cultural constructs and the meaning of the lived experiences of being an African-American male who was formerly incarcerated because it affords the participants the opportunity to state more than the facts relevant to their experiences, but also give meaning through their cultural lens.

Phenomenology Research Design

The purpose of this Afrocentric-hermeneutic phenomenological study is to bridge the gap in the literature and explore the lived experiences of African American males who were formerly incarcerated in prison and have positively changed their lives so that they avoid future criminality. Through the identification of factors, specific to their perception of the world, assumptions are potentially decreased when counseling professionals understand the belief systems, values, and worldviews of African American males. Because this approach allowed the ability to gain a deep understanding of in-depth information through inductive data collection methods, it is shared through the perspective of the participants. Using semi structured interviews, participants shared their perspectives. I selected phenomenology as the research approach to illuminate the participants' perspectives. The goal of the study was to understand cultural constructs applied to experiential accounts from successful formerly incarcerated African American men. Hermeneutic phenomenology is how human beings understand the nature of being and existence. The consciousness of being is in consideration of time. I utilized the art of understanding interpretations shared through verbal and nonverbal communication.

While phenomenology has some similarities to ethnographic research, my study was not focused on the immersion of the researcher in the participants' natural setting. The phenomenological researcher has some subjectivity and interprets the perspective of the views of the participants, including assumptions, philosophy of language, presuppositions, and meaning (Ginev, 2019; Heidegger, 1962). Hermeneutic phenomenology allowed a description of the phenomenon through interpreting historical and cultural context to understand my intent (Ginev, 2019).

Research Questions

One central research question and nine semi-structured interview questions will guide this study. My interview protocol is included in Appendix B. In my initial interaction with the research participants, I explained the Heideggerian framework, Afrocentric lens, and the definition of success related to post-incarceration. The following research question guided my study:

What are the lived experiences of African American males who were formerly incarcerated in prison and have positively changed their lives so that they avoid future criminality?

Participants

Participants in this study were African American males over the age of eighteen who were formerly incarcerated and have surpassed the 10-year recidivism mark. The longer period enables researchers to understand more complex patterns of desistance (Alper et al., 2018). In addition, participants had no further criminal activity post-release.

The sampling methods chosen for this research project were snowball and purposeful sampling. Snowball sampling is the identification of participants by sampling people who know people who are good candidates for participation in the study (Patton, 2002). Purposeful sampling is the selection of participants for the purpose of providing information specific to the study (Patton, 2002). Although there are no rules for sample size in qualitative inquiry, the sample size chosen for this study was a minimum of eight participants. The size of the sample was determined by informational considerations (Patton, 2002). When redundancy of information was reached the sampling size reached saturation. After interviewing eight participants, I determined saturation had been achieved.

I took the steps outlined below in recruiting participants. Utilizing both snowball and purposeful sampling, I contacted individuals I knew at a social service agency located in the Midwest. This agency is geared toward assisting formerly incarcerated individuals in their transition into society. I asked these individuals to identify eligible potential participants who were successful after incarceration and asked these men who they considered to be successful to contact me if they would be willing to be interviewed by me for my study. In addition, I contacted individuals at a community center located in the Midwest. This community center is aimed at providing opportunities for successful reentry into society through the arts for at-risk members of the community. I asked these individuals to identify eligible potential participants who have been successful after incarceration and asked these men who they considered to be successful to contact me if

they would be willing to be interviewed by me for my study. Finally, social media (i.e., Facebook) was another avenue for recruitment. This process allowed each person I talked to an opportunity to recruit other eligible individuals until 8 participants agreed to participate in my study.

Ethical Considerations

Participants were notified via email or telephone as the initial stage of contact, which provided the purpose of the study. The participants received detailed disclosure statements explaining any implications or potential harm to them. I identified no risks for participants in this study. If I determined during an interview that a participant was emotionally disturbed due to discussing his experiences, I was prepared to provide him with a referral to a counseling resource. Once participants agree to proceed with the research process, an additional notice included disclosure statements and consent forms via email. Ethically sound research involves informed consent, confidentiality toward the participants, an explanation of benefits and potential risks of participating in the research project, and that the researcher will conduct the study in a conscientious manner.

Specifically, all participants received disclosure and consent documentation explaining the purpose of the study, an explanation of the data collection process and procedures, a no-risk statement, and a notice that withdrawal from the study was available at any time throughout the process. Participants signed documentation electronically, which included their willingness to participate.

I protected the participants' identities by using pseudonyms (Participant 1-8). To avoid a breech in confidentiality, all documentation included a confidentiality statement in the signature line of each email. The participants participated in the interview process in their own environments via Zoom, which reduced any potential for harm. All computer-generated data and written documents were kept in my home, in a locked file cabinet, for confidentiality purposes.

Role of Researcher

I am a licensed clinical professional counselor with 28 years of experience working in the counseling field. I facilitate counseling groups in a private practice for individuals on parole and probation and in the Peoria County Sheriff's Office in Illinois. The participants for this study have no professional relationship with me.

My experience working with individuals on parole and probation as well as incarcerated individuals often created within me some trepidation surrounding informing them that I previously worked as a 911 dispatcher. I am aware that many African American men do not trust police officers and saying that I previously worked with the police could have created distrust. I decided to share my experience with full transparency. I discussed how important it would be to be as open and honest during the interview for trustworthiness and credibility. I mentioned my experience counseling in jails and with individuals on parole and probation, which resulted in several of the participants responding similarly that I probably understood people who were in prison. I informed them that my goal was to seek descriptive information from them to understand

more clearly from their lived experiences of being a successful, formerly incarcerated African American man.

Although I had professional experience working with individuals who engaged in criminal activity, I do not have much experience from a personal perspective. My parents, siblings, and friends have always been law-abiding citizens. While I grew up in a low-income neighborhood, we had a nice house, car, and family support. Although this was my experience, I know that some people with more or less resources made decisions that were detrimental. I can recall the 1980s when several men in the community were known as drug dealers. They drove nice cars, dressed in the latest designer fashions, and flashed lots of money. Often society associates opportunities for success with available resources. I have often said that we are all one decision away from incarceration regardless of our backgrounds. I find it amazing that I counsel individuals who are incarcerated because it was never my desire. It was a suggestion of a college advisor to help another classmate with her internship. I was recruited to help her because of my experience working as a 911 dispatcher and the college advisor thought it would be safer if two of us ran a group counseling class together. It is interesting how I have conducted those same counseling groups alone for 20 years since. The experience taught me that everyone does not successfully experience reentry.

The experience of interviewing the men in this study helped me gain insight regarding their journey toward success. I did not expect the plethora of information that I received related and unrelated to the study. The participants all shared how they were

happy to be involved and had never had an opportunity to share their story. After the first two interviews, I learned the importance of leading the conversation toward the research questions while still allowing rapport to develop.

Data Collection

The interview process began with an introduction of my professional background, the purpose of the study, an explanation of the 60 minutes allowable time for interviews and the possibility of follow up interviews, and disclosure regarding audio recordings. Face-to-face, semi-structured interviews via Zoom was the data collection method. I elected to use semi-structured questions because of the allowance of a natural flow of conversations. This method was less formal and asked the participants open-ended questions. In addition, flexibility was afforded by the possibility of slightly changing the words or order of the questions asked. Semi-structured questions also assisted in clarification with follow up questions when needed. Follow-up interviews were necessary for two participants for clarification as well as filling in missing information. For example, the timeline of some information provided by participant 5 was confusing. I followed up via a telephone call to ensure accuracy of the information. The interviews were audio recorded, which assisted in analyzing the data. I provided a telephone number to all participants for any questions that may arise and for data collection purposes. I utilized field notes during data collection to aid in understanding the lived experiences of successful formerly incarcerated African American males. A field note is a draft to document important observations, interactions, and perceptions for me and the participant

during the interview process. My field notes were congruent with the Afrocentric-hermeneutic framework. Along with the theoretical framework, the methodological approach aligned with the inquiry and field notes documented. The value of field notes was essential to documenting information relevant to the theoretical framework and methodological approach (Mulhall, 2003). It was critical to keep notes of concrete details to connect experiences, feelings, and beliefs. I took small notes during the interview and wrote comprehensive field notes immediately after the interview ended (Phillippi & Lauderdale, 2018). Participant privacy and confidentiality were paramount during the entire process.

In qualitative research, the researcher is the main tool. Qualitative interview questions were reflective of what it means to the participants to be a formerly incarcerated African American male in society today. By basing the questions on the participants' feelings, opinions, knowledge, sensory experiences, and perceptions, insight into their worldview was increased (Patton, 2002). I designed the interview questions to further understand the participants' expectations, experiences, challenges, and strengths in various situations.

Data Analysis

Researchers have a responsibility to report analytical procedures and processes as fully and truthfully as possible (Patton, p. 434, 2002). In addition, to recorded interviews and field notes, organization of the data collected assisted in accurate analysis. This study was transcribed and hand coded. The steps I used in data analysis are as follows: (a) Step

1: Read the transcripts in entire form and take out unnecessary language, (b) Step 2: Preliminary meaning units, (c) Step 3: Final meaning units, (d) Step 4: Situated narratives, (e) Step 5: General narratives, and (f) Step 6: General description.

Step 1: Reading and Deleting Irrelevant Information

The first step involved in data analysis consisted of reading the transcripts in their entirety to ensure they were consistent with the audio recorded interviews. I took out unnecessary language in this step.

Example of Step 1

The original transcription for Participant 5 included the following quote: "So, you know it was like I um knew that I could learn from people who were like um smarter than me so I started you know kinda listening to the older cats." My revision to that quote was "I knew that I could learn from people who were smarter than me, so I started listening to the older people in prison."

Step 2: Preliminary Meaning Units

The second step was to read the transcripts again and create initial meaning units one line at a time while focusing on the research topic. The goal in this step was to identify preliminary meaning units that revealed a feature or trait of the lived experiences of successful formerly incarcerated African American males.

Example of Step 2

In this example, I identified two meaning units. Participant 5 stated, "My role as (1) a poor Black boy of a single mom was (2) to be the man of the house." The first

meaning unit describes Participant 5's view of his role as an African American boy, and the second meaning unit is viewing his role as one who supported the family.

Step 3: Final Meaning Units

The third step in data analysis was to break down all the preliminary meaning units to final themes, which were informed by a deeper understanding that I developed of each participant's description.

Example of Step 3

In response to Question 4, "What did you do while incarcerated to prepare for a successful transition after prison?" Participant 7 had two preliminary meaning units. Preliminary meaning unit 1 was that Participant 7 shared similar experiences among culturally similar participants regarding his plans post-incarceration. Preliminary meaning unit 2 was that Participant 7 planned for his release early in his incarceration.

As such, my final meaning unit was the following: Having a plan early for prison release.

Step 4: Situated Narratives

The fourth step was a situated narrative, which was a reiteration of each participant's story where I organized specific information and experiences into themes under the interview question. Direct quotes were used to highlight the meaning of each participant's experience.

Example of Step 4

One theme from the data was "Religion Played a Role in Success." The following three examples elucidate this theme.

> I heard a voice while I was in jail waiting to get shipped to the department of corrections, and people think I am crazy when I say this, but I heard it as clear as day just like I am talking to you. God said, I am going to strip you of everything to make you whole again. (P1)
>
> As a man thinketh and a man believeth, so is he. I did something different this time and I stayed in the church. I was raised in church, and I went back to my roots. I am in school to become a licensed pastor. It was nobody but God that brought me this far. (P2)
>
> I had a come to Jesus' moment and it was like a spirit came over me and told me that I was not supposed to be serving drugs. I was supposed to be serving God. I knew I had to get in church when I came home. I did just that and attend every Sunday and during the week if I can. (P5)

Step 5: General Narratives

I created general narratives from the situated narratives, which unified the participant's accounts into a general description of all the participant's narratives. In this step, the goal was to organize the data from the situated narratives while highlighting all of the participants' meanings of their experiences. Each narrative was organized by the interview questions.

Example of Step 5

Interview Question 1 asked, What factors contributed to changes in the way you make decisions over time?

Half of the participants shared similar experiences related to understanding how the time in prison was connected to the time that they utilized to focus on creative ways to exist. All participants noted the importance of changing their social circles. Some of the participants relocated to a different city or state. Regardless of where they lived, most of the participants were empowered by giving back to the community. Their *Dasein* changed as they recognized the value in being a mentor.

In another example, Interview Question 6 asked, How has the way you are perceived as a formerly incarcerated African American man influenced your life since your release from prison?

Most of the participants reported that they preferred to keep their imprisonment from others for fear that they would not get a good job or would not be trusted. Many reported that people are surprised when they are informed about their criminal history because of the level of success they have achieved.

Step 6: General Description

The sixth step of the data analysis was the general description. This step moved away from the participants' daily perspectives. The goal of this final step was to discuss the themes that were implicit in all or most of the participants' descriptions of their experiences as a successful formerly incarcerated African American male. During this

step, “some” was used when necessary to address a topic where participants had varying responses. The general description united the major phenomenological themes into a cohesive general description.

Example of Step 6

All successful formerly incarcerated African American males stated that they had goals but no clear direction in how to accomplish them prior to their incarceration. Most aspire to be professional athletes. They describe high school memories of inadequacy and a lack of support. They took on a self-imposing obligation to be the “man of the house.” African American men experience changes over time that stem from a defining moment while incarcerated that helped them establish a sense of direction toward success beyond prison. African American men mention having a plan before being released from prison. While in prison, most report their *Dasein* changed within a brief period of time by aligning with people who are smarter than them and offer words of encouragement. African American men consider it to have been how they began the process of transitioning back into society after prison. The scope of the information shared by African American men focus on support systems related to success once they are released from prison.

Trustworthiness

I maintained trustworthiness during this study through active listening during the interview process, seeking clarification when needed, transcribing the information verbatim, and utilizing an electronic version of the data for review. I aimed to understand

before being understood through this charitable act of openness from another (Gadamer, 1989). Gadamer asserted that qualitative researchers should use various strategies to make their studies credible and rigorous while understanding that trust is a continuous process of what is before us and what is within us (1989). I utilized the validation strategies of member checking, peer debriefing, self-disclosure, discrepant information, rich and thick descriptions, and journaling.

Member checking

I provided the participants with a transcription of their interviews to check for accuracy, clarification, and credibility. The participants played a vital role in the information that I transcribed, which enhanced trustworthiness. The purpose of member checking was to create a fair account of the participants' information. The best way to determine the accuracy of what participants said in the interviews was to ask them to review the transcripts of their interviews (Maxwell, 2013).

Peer Debriefing

I debriefed with my dissertation committee members, which provided an ongoing check of the validity of the research process. In addition, I designated a qualified peer who served as an external auditor to review my work. The peer I choose was a doctoral graduate who was familiar with qualitative research methods. My peer asked questions about methods, meanings, and interpretations. Maxwell (2013) asserted consulting with a peer for review provides the researcher an opportunity for catharsis by lending a sympathetic ear to the researcher's feelings.

Discrepant Information

Emergent themes were presented in this study along with contradictory information. The discussion of discrepancies allowed for increased trustworthiness of the study. Maxwell (2013) posited the significance of including discrepant information and allowing readers to evaluate and draw their own conclusions.

Rich and Thick Descriptions

The information gathered provided rich data through intensive interviews. I included various perspectives on each theme. The data encompassed verbatim transcripts of the interviews. Maxwell (2013) stated the importance of avoiding notation of information only the researcher deems significant, but recording all information shared by the research participants. Phenomenology research involves rich, descriptive information which was best managed through organized efforts that allow me to categorize and analyze the data in a systematic manner. The result eased the manner of writing textual and structural descriptions.

Reflective Journal

Journaling assisted in identifying my biases that may exist. In reporting the information collected, a thick rich description was achieved by presenting the participants' voices under each theme during the coding process and by providing detailed descriptions of each of the cases. Reflecting during the data collection period deepened the authenticity of insight and historical consciousness (Gadamer, 1989). Journaling thoughts, feelings, nonverbal and verbal information tracked the data where

there was an absence in measures for interpretation. It helped to keep at the forefront the significance of information shared. Journaling shortly after the data was collected allowed a tracking system associated with moving forward, back, and in a circular motion to gain an understanding (Walker, 1996).

Summary

In this research method section, I introduced the research problem and the reason the Afrocentric-hermeneutic phenomenological approach was selected. I discussed ethical considerations which included my role as a researcher and potential bias. I summarized the data collection, data analysis, illustrated analysis steps, sampling procedures, interview processes, and protocol. In addition, I summarized the trustworthiness of the study including member checking, peer debriefing, discrepant information, descriptive information, and reflective journaling. I will discuss the analysis of the data in chapter 4.

Chapter 4: Results

In Chapter 4, I present the research findings and connect the findings of the study with Afrocentric-hermeneutic phenomenology. I discuss the process of data collection and analysis. I provide excerpts of each participant's experience related to prison and decision-making post-release. The identification of common experiences was the focal point to capture the rich data consistent with phenomenological methodology. I include information describing the demographics, data collection, data analysis, trustworthiness, and the results of this study. I discuss the coding process and identification of themes. During my analysis, common expressions were revealed as I explored the participants' lived experiences.

The purpose of this Afrocentric-hermeneutic phenomenological study was to bridge the gap in the literature and explore the lived experiences of African American males who were formerly incarcerated in prison and have positively changed their lives so that they avoid future criminality. The participants in this study were deemed successful because they were able to create a life absent of criminal behavior for a minimum of 10 years since being released from prison.

Setting

I used Zoom video communications to conduct the interviews for this study. I also used a digital audio recorder as backup. Six participants were in their homes, one participant was in his car, and another was in a hotel due to work travel. I conducted all interviews from the same location inside my home office. There were no personal

conditions that negatively influenced the interviews. Participant 6 had some difficulty with the internet connection due to being in a hotel but was able to restart and had no further connection problems. Participant 7 stated that he overslept for the meeting, so we started 15 minutes late. He had plans to meet someone after the meeting, so he elected to meet in his car for privacy and efficiency. I was concerned that he would rush the interview, but he assured me that he was excited and ready to fully participate.

Data Collection

As I previously discussed in Chapter 3, the research process consisted of identifying participants through purposeful and snowball sampling. I used social media (Facebook), a community center, and a social service agency in the Midwest to advertise the research study. The first and the fifth participants were acquired through a Facebook announcement I posted that detailed the information regarding my research study and the criteria necessary for participation. Participant 2 contacted me after hearing about the study from a member at a social service agency. Participant 4 contacted me after hearing about the study from a member of a community center. Participants 3, 6, 7, and 8 contacted me after being told about the research study by a confirmed participant. It took approximately 4 months to obtain eight participants. Two people agreed to participate but did not return a phone call to schedule an interview. Another person explained a personal matter that interfered with his schedule. One participant forgot it was his birthday on the scheduled interview date, so we rescheduled. Finally, another participant became ill and was unable to participate. This participant contacted me after the interviews were

completed. He shared that he wanted to be honest and was not absent of criminal activity for 10 years. He stated he "backslid" for a brief time 2 years prior and sold drugs for approximately 4 months. He stated he recognized that he was back on track but did not want to lie to himself or to me. I thanked him and told him that I appreciated the information and honesty because of the importance of participants being absent of criminal activity for at least 10 years post-release.

A total of 16 additional African American men contacted me to participate in the study; however, I had previous or current professional contact with them, so they were informed that they did not qualify due to the researcher role conflict. I anticipated that I would not have much difficulty recruiting participants because of my work experience, but I became concerned when most of the men who contacted me in the first 2 months were men whom I had previously counseled through either the jail or in private practice. The recruitment process went much smoother when participants shared that they knew others who fit the criteria and shared the research study advertisement. The eight participants agreed to interviews via Zoom and were not paid for their roles in this study. The actual interviews took another 3 months to complete due to mutual schedule accommodations necessary to meet via Zoom. Each participant read the consent form again prior to the interview. I informed them about privacy, confidentiality, and I explained that their identity would be anonymous. All participants verbally consented to participate prior to the start of the interview. They were informed that they could stop the interview at any time or decline to answer a question. I interviewed a total of eight

participants regarding their lived experiences of being a successful formerly incarcerated African American male. I used open-ended questions to guide the interviews, which ranged in duration from 45 to 90 minutes.

Data Analysis

I hired a transcriptionist for the first interview, but I did not feel like I was immersed in the data, so I decided to transcribe the interviews myself. I transcribed all eight interviews, utilized journaling to reflect on the process of engagement in the hermeneutic circle, and reviewed the audio tapes several times while reading the transcripts. As described in Chapter 3, I used the circular method of data analysis to enhance my understanding of the phenomenon. With the first interview, I used the circular method of data analysis by keeping a record of my impression of the meaning of the entire text. The second step involved going line by line to capture the details of the text. The next step involved returning to the larger meaning of the text. The protocol of data analysis was the same for each interview. I listened to the audio tape while reading the transcripts to ensure accuracy. For each interview, I made notes during the interview and followed up with a summary of my reflections. Participants were sent a copy of their transcripts by email attachment to check for accuracy. None of the participants requested corrections. My peer research team and committee members were provided a copy of the initial analyses.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

Credibility

I maintained trustworthiness during this study by actively listening to the accounts provided by the participants. I asked questions when clarification was needed, transcribed the information provided verbatim, and audio recorded the data for accuracy. Credibility in qualitative research is achieved when it is honest and accurate. Gadamer (1989) viewed hermeneutics as a manner to view the circumstances in which understanding, perceptions, experientiality and knowing take place. Further stated, trust is a continuous process of understanding what is before us and what is within us. To ensure credibility, I used member checking, peer debriefing, self-disclosure, discrepant information, rich and thick descriptions, and reflective journaling.

Transferability

In qualitative research, transferability refers to the ability to apply the finding of the study to individuals in other settings. The ability to apply a study to other settings increases the validity of the research because of implications of trust (Tuval-Mashiach, 2021). When a study is replicated, it increases the knowledge base for the phenomena (Nosek & Errington, 2020). Hermeneutics emphasizes a representation and interpretation of social phenomena (Hammersley, 1992). To achieve this process, I have provided a rich and thick description of the study and findings that can apply to future research. The transferability of the study may be limited because of the participant size, demographics, and location.

Dependability

The dependability of a study is determined by consistency in the research findings. To meet the criterion for dependability, a review of the audit trail was conducted. The use of the methods used to collect, analyze, and interpret the data determined dependability. The audit trail is instrumental in providing a blueprint for the study to be replicated. The audit trail used in this study included a flyer and social media post to seek interested participants for the study, contacting interested participants, emailing consent forms, scheduling interviews via Zoom to discuss the lived experiences of successful formerly incarcerated African American males, transcribing data and storing the information in a secure location.

Confirmability

Confirmability was achieved when the outcome or findings of this study were realistically and authentically aligned with the views of the participants. I used journaling to identify areas of bias and to anticipate projections in the quest for understanding. I concentrated on the lived experiences of participants throughout the constant emergence of distractions and biases. My consistent goal was to replace my conceptions at that time with more suitable ones through the process of reflection. Through journaling, I revised personal biases, and my biases created the questions necessary for revising my thoughts. The revisions of a preconceived projection created a new meaning, and competing projections surfaced alongside each other until the agreement of meaning was clear.

A total of eight participants were involved in this study. The age range of the participants was between 39 and 59 years of age. The duration of time spent incarcerated in prison was between 2 years and 20 years. A total of 50% of the participants had been incarcerated two times and 50% had been incarcerated in prison one time. The range of years since release from prison without further criminal activity was between 10 and 28 years. Four of the participants were convicted of drug-related charges and four were convicted of a violent crime (i.e., armed robbery, unlawful possession of a firearm by a felon, attempted murder, and first-degree murder). All eight of the participants were employed. The education range was between ninth grade and a master's degree. All the participants lived in the Midwest at the time of incarceration. Upon release from prison, three of them relocated to another city. One went back on a parole violation prior to his most recent release and has not returned to prison. The participants are identified as participant (P) 1-8. See Table 1.

Table 1

Participant Demographic Data

Participant	Age	Job Title	Conviction	Years Incarcerated	Number of Prison Incarcerations	Years Post-Release
P1	39	Laborer/ Entrepreneur	Drug Possession	8.5	2	10
P2	54	Counselor/Case Manager	Armed Robbery	16.5	2	10
P3	54	Printing Operator	Drug Conspiracy	2	1	23
P4	42	Applications Systems Analyst	Drug Possession	5	2	13

P5	53	Certified Nursing Assistant/Teacher's Aide	Possession of a firearm by a felon	10.5	2	13
P6	59	Traveling Laborer	Drug Possession	2.5	1	28
P7	47	Tower Technician	Attempted Murder	10	1	15
P8	58	Security Guard	Murder	20	1	14

Findings

I analyzed the data using the circular hermeneutic process and 10 themes emerged. The process consisted of reviewing each transcript in its entirety. I then went back and reviewed the transcripts line by line, making notes about voice inflections, pauses, and my personal reactions. I then went back and reviewed the data word by word. Hermeneutic research does not have a prescribed coding structure (Löfgren, 2013). All the participants started the interview describing their childhood and historical factors that led to incarceration. They described their upbringing, school experience, and associated challenges that led to incarceration. All of them discussed their experience as an African American boy trying to take care of their family without adequate resources. They discussed the process of change over time while in prison. They discussed the support they received and how they have evolved over time. The most significant discussion came when they discussed sustainability since their release from prison. All the participants discussed the importance of understanding where they came from as an avenue to understand how they became the person they are today.

Summarized Participant Background

Participant 1 (P1) is 39 years old and was raised in a single parent household by his mother. Although he dropped out of high school in the 10th grade, he stated he received straight A's with minimal effort. He did not feel challenged in school. His mother struggled to make ends meet and he was often unsupervised at home. He found himself going to jail as a juvenile at age 14 for doing "stupid stuff" hanging with friends who were also getting into trouble. He went to state prison for the first time at age 17 for selling drugs. He completed 3 years of state prison time for that offense. Approximately twenty years later, he went to federal prison for selling drugs. He was required to complete 5.5 years of imprisonment. He has been free of criminal activity for 10 years since being released from federal prison. He earned a college degree and is employed as a laborer and owns two businesses. He is married and a homeowner.

Participant 2 (P2) is 54 years old and was raised in a single-parent household. He would later discover that the person who he thought was his father was not his biological father. He stated that the person whom he thought was his father was abusive toward him. His mother struggled financially, and he was teased by kids at school because of his clothing. He used his love of basketball to attend college, where he felt home sick. He had become a father prior to leaving for college so he transferred home to a local college. He stated that he found acceptance from gang members upon his return. He began to sell drugs and soon after began using drugs. He started getting arrested within a month of selling drugs. By the time he was 23 years old he was sentenced to state prison for

burglary and retail theft. He served 5 years in prison. He was home for one month before returning to prison. He explained how his last conviction was for a crime that his brother committed but no one believed him, and his brother was too addicted to drugs to remember the crime. He was sentenced to 21 years in prison for armed robbery. He was required to complete 11.5 years in prison. He has been absent of criminal activity since being released from prison 10 years ago. He is employed as a lead case manager at a substance abuse center. He is currently enrolled in seminary school to become a licensed pastor. P2 is married and a homeowner. He serves as a basketball coach and a youth mentor.

Participant 3 (P3) is 54 years old and was raised by his grandparents in a middle-class neighborhood. At the age of fourteen, he was informed that his grandparents were not his parents as he always thought. His grandfather told him that he had to go live with his mother because they were getting older, and she needed help. He was confused because he always thought that his mother was his sister, but he went to live with his siblings and her. His mother was an alcoholic and often worked as a prostitute. She was not home often, and he took on the role of caring for his younger siblings. They lived in a crime infested housing project, where he went from having his own room at his grandparents' house to sleeping in the same room with his five siblings. He was laughed at by the kids at school because of his clothes. His mother allowed drug dealers to sell drugs out of their house while he was at school. He noticed the men had a lot of money, so he asked them how he could make money and they allowed him to sell drugs in

exchange for $100 per day. He cooked meals, walked his siblings to school, attended school, and bought school clothes for himself and his siblings. He sold drugs for a few years and made the decision to stop. He looked for his biological father, but no one knew where he was. He worked two full-time jobs without further criminal activity. A few years later, the FBI showed up at his job with a warrant for his arrest for drug conspiracy. While awaiting his trial, he realized his father was a man that he talked to every weekend at a bar. This recognition came when he heard a patron call the man by his first and last name. Shortly after, he was convicted and sentenced to 29 months in prison. He served two years in federal prison and was released at the age of twenty-five. He had no further incarcerations. P1 moved to another state and is employed as a blueprint printer. He is married and a homeowner.

Participant 4 (P4) is 42 years old and was raised by a single mother in a low-income housing area. He grew up without basic needs being met and often their house did not have heat. At the age of sixteen, he worked a job but did not consider the paycheck enough to relieve the pressure off his mom. He graduated from high school with above average intelligence and enrolled in college a month later. His roommate sold marijuana and he soon decided that he would start selling marijuana to his classmates to attract girls. He considered school to have been too technical for him. He decided to transfer to another college and major in something less technical. His uncles, aunts, and cousins sold drugs, so he decided that he no longer wanted to not have money, so he joined “the family business.” His mother was aware that he was selling drugs. She never questioned

him but told him to buy clothing for his little sister if he went to the mall. He began selling cocaine to earn money to pay his tuition when his job working at a hotel was not enough money. He was arrested for possession of a controlled substance with intent to deliver prior to returning to school. He was sentenced to 8 years and completed 3.5 years for a Class X felony. He considered incarceration to have been fun due to seeing many childhood friends there. He returned from prison and four months later he decided to sell marijuana instead of cocaine. He was arrested 14 months later for a parole violation due to a new parole officer walking into his open door and searching his apartment. He completed 11 months and no additional charges occurred for the marijuana. He returned to college, worked two jobs, and felt motivated by the birth of his son. He has been absent of criminal behavior since his release from prison 13 years ago. He is currently married and a homeowner. He is currently employed at a hospital as an Applications Systems Analyst.

Participant 5 (P5) is 53 years old and was raised by his single mother. His father was not involved. While his mother worked and left him unsupervised, he began stealing cars at age 13. His mother relocated them to another city, but their house was within proximity of criminal activity and “all kinds of drugs.” By age 14, he engaged in “smoking weed, stealing cars, vandalism, and drinking alcohol”. He was sent to a juvenile justice center for 60 days. He was expelled several times from different schools for selling drugs inside of the school. When he was sent to live with his aunt and uncle in another city, he graduated from high school. He was soon arrested for selling marijuana

and a judge gave him an ultimatum to go to prison or to the military. He joined the military and was given a general discharge for fighting a police officer. Upon his return to civilian life, he began selling drugs again. He was arrested, convicted, and completed 3.5 years in state prison for possession of a controlled substance with intent to deliver. He began trafficking drugs a few years later. He was caught when he mailed drugs to himself from a different state. When the FBI intercepted the package, he was arrested and sentenced to 7 years in Federal Prison. He has been absent of criminal activity since his release 13 years ago. He lives in the Midwest. He is married and a homeowner. He is employed as a certified nursing aide, teacher's assistant, and the founder of a mentoring program for at-risk boys.

Participant 6 (P6) is 59 years old and was raised by his mother and stepfather in a low-income neighborhood. His stepfather worked and his mother was a homemaker because she did not trust daycare. He had seven siblings and the family struggled to meet finances beyond the basic needs. He identified a lack of support from his parents when he played sports. He began comparing his parents to his friend's parents who attended their sporting events. He was expelled in ninth grade for hitting a girl in the eye with a piece of steel for calling him the N-word. He went to an alternative school for about 3 months and dropped out to hang out in the streets. He played basketball on local basketball courts. He was recruited to play basketball for a college. He enrolled in college and played until they discovered that he had not earned his high school diploma. He was dismissed from college. He returned to his hometown and attempted to get his GED. He stated he gave up

because he did not have family support. He worked odd jobs and played basketball in summer leagues in his twenties. The lack of support from his parents "led him to selling drugs." He started selling drugs in his early thirties after meeting a man on a bus who was dressed nicely and wearing a lot of jewelry. The man was a drug dealer and connected him with selling drugs. He sold cocaine for several years until he was riding with a friend and was stopped by the police. The rule was that the driver never holds the drugs, so he was holding his friends' drugs and reported that he was sentenced to 7 years for possession of a controlled substance with intent to deliver. He completed 2.5 years in prison. After his release, he relocated to another state and had no further criminal activity for the past 28 years. He lives in the Midwest and is employed as a traveling laborer. At the time of the interview, he was in the South. He is married and a homeowner.

Participant 7 (P7) is 47 years old and was raised by his maternal grandmother when the Department of Child and Family Services (DCFS) removed him from his mother's care due to her abusing him (broken hips, burns from hot water, and knots on his head). His grandmother raised him in the church, and they attended church seven days a week. He ran away from home at the age of eleven when DCFS attempted to return him to his mother. He lived in vacant homes and joined a gang when he was 12 years old. His juvenile arrests began shortly after when he committed robberies and vehicle theft, including stealing a police car to earn money from the gang members so that he could feed himself. By the time he was twenty, he was selling drugs. At 23 years old, he was set up to be robbed. During the attempted robbery, Participant 7 shot the three people who

tried to take his money. He was sentenced to 20 years in prison for three counts of attempted murder. He served 10 years in state prison. He was released in 2006 and had no further criminal activity. He lives in the Midwest. He is single and the father of five children. He is employed as a cell phone tower technician, owns two homes, and founded an organization aimed at community service.

Participant 8 (P8) is 58 years old and was raised by his parents in a Christian home. He grew up attending church several times weekly and was heavily involved in sports throughout his life. He had no major problems until he began drinking heavily when his best friend was killed in a car accident when they were 24 years old. That same year, he was with friends and witnessed a woman being beat up by her boyfriend. He and his friends broke the fight up but was told that the guy was coming back with a gun. Another friend supplied him a gun and he started playing around pulling the trigger. He was urged to stop but continued until the gun fired and shot his friend. His friend died, and he was convicted of First-Degree Murder. He was sentenced to 40 years in state prison and completed 20 years. He has been absent of criminal behavior since he was released fourteen years ago. He lives in the Midwest and relocated to another city away from his hometown. He is single. P8 is employed as a security guard, a motivational speaker, and a co-founder of a mentoring program for children.

Themes

Ten themes emerged from the data. Six themes were shared by all participants, while four themes were shared by anywhere from three to five participants. Table 2 names the themes and shows which participant data helped identify the themes.

Table 2

Participant Inclusion in Themes

Themes	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6	P7	P8
Troubled Childhood	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Life Changing Moments	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Having a Plan for Prison Release	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Reliance on Support Systems	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Religion Played a Role in Success	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Experiencing Self-Actualization	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Finding Positive Peer Relationships	X	X		X			X	X
Utilizing Mental Health Counseling	X	X					X	X
A Need to Relocate			X		X			X
Giving back		X			X		X	X

All the participants started the interview describing their childhood and historical factors that led to incarceration. They described their upbringing, school experience, and associated challenges that led to incarceration. All of them discussed their experience as an African American boy trying to take care of their family without adequate resources. They discussed the process of change over time while in prison. They discussed the support they received and how they have evolved over time. The most significant

discussion came when they discussed sustainability since their release from prison. All the participants discussed the importance of understanding where they came from as an avenue to understand how they became the person they are today. In the following subsections, each theme will be explained with representative quotes.

Troubled Childhood

All research participants stated that they had goals but no clear direction in how to accomplish them prior to their incarceration. Two wanted to be professional basketball players, one wanted to play college basketball, one wanted to be a professional football player, one wanted to be a rapper, and two of them had no idea what they wanted to do with their lives. They described high school memories of inadequacy and a lack of support. They took on a self-imposed obligation to be the "man of the house." In describing their journey, they shared similar ideals surrounding the desire to succeed by any means necessary.

> It was too many of us in the house with too little resources. I had to find a way when I could not play basketball to take care of myself. Kids were mean and teased us for not having decent clothes. I became addicted to the drugs that I was trying to sell but I tried. (P2)

> I knew what it was like to have nice things because my grandparents made sure I was well taken care of, but when I had to go live with my mother she was never there, and we had nothing. I no longer had guidance and I learned how to sell drugs from the drug dealers that she rented our apartment out to so I could take

> care of my siblings. (P3)
>
> I was an intelligent kid, but I got tired of being broke. There were times when we had no heat. I had to look out for my little sister. My mom was struggling. There was no one to tell me not to sell drugs because everyone in my family sold drugs too. (P4)

P7 received guidance and support from his grandmother, but by the time he reached his teenage years the Department of Child and Family Services said his mother was fit to have him live with her. He ran away because he did not want to go back to live with his mother who had abused him when he was younger.

> I let the streets guide me because I would rather be homeless than go live with my mother. She burned my body. She broke my hips and put knots on my head. I kept running away every time they came to get me, and my grandmother did not want the police at her house, so I just went to the street. I found guidance there; even if it was bad guidance at least I had something. (P7)

P4 reported that his mother knew he was selling drugs but only told him to make sure he bought his sister some clothes when he went shopping. The internalized perception was she was okay with it, but just did not want to know the related details. He stated she worked a low wage job and knew that her income was not enough to support the family.

P5 detailed how his mother tried to guide him into a better direction by sending him to live with his aunt and uncle, but the new school environment was within proximity to criminal activity.

> A new environment is not always the best option. The people who are trying to help may not know what is going on behind closed doors and inadvertently be providing opportunities for destruction. I got caught up with some real good criminals. I went to a new school in a new city and learned new ways to self-destruct. (P5)

It was apparent that P5 did not consider his behavior self-destructive at the time as he paused and added "Man, if only I would have listened to my uncle. I could have saved myself a lot of problems. I did listen to the drug dealers and learned how to do that very well."

P8 explained how he thought he had good parents and mentors growing up, but he was arrogant and did not want to listen to anyone.

> Since I was a star athlete, I was used to doing things my way and getting what I wanted. I had no direction because I was closed off to listening. I was loud and wanted to be seen. I figured sports would be my ticket to whatever I wanted to do so even the coaches couldn't tell me nothin' and they usually did not try. As long as I performed on the field, you know it's like that's all they cared about. (P8)

Life Changing Moments

All participants reported changes over time that stemmed from a defining moment while incarcerated that helped them establish a sense of direction toward success beyond prison. P1 and P5 reported initial thoughts of planning to learn better ways to sell drugs to avoid getting caught next time. P3 had been absent of criminal activity for 4 years prior to being arrested so his defining moment was his actual arrest. P2 and P7 shared similarities related to connectivity within the prison. P6 reported disconnection as his defining moment. P8 reported prolonged resistance prior to acceptance.

P1 explained how his thought process changed over time.

> The moment they put the handcuffs on me that was my defining moment. At first, I was still thinking that I would get a good job when I got out and hustle on the side. That way if I was caught with a lot of money no one would question me. That was the moment when I said to myself that something has to change without a doubt. So, when I was in prison and I decided that I wasn't going to go back to prison I started to look for individuals inside the walls that knew how to survive outside the walls legally but chose not to and the thing about federal prison is that you're not just locked up with your neighborhood drug dealers. You're locked up with bankers, politicians, your Wall Street people. You know you got all these people from different walks of life and if you humble yourself, you can actually learn from these people. So that was my plan to learn how to survive on the other side of the fence and not go back to the hustle side of the

fence. So, I just started talking to people and asking questions. (P1)

P1 laughed when he said, “They used big words and I had no clue what those words meant. I started going to the library and looking the words up to learn the meaning. He discussed the process of transformation.

> I found myself drawn to the older, smarter people and totally steered away from the troublemakers. I started feeling like I could fit in with the successful people instead of the gang bangers. I changed my circle after about two months of being in prison and I never looked back. (P1)

Like P1, Participant 5 stated that he initially spent the first 2 years trying to figure out how to become a better criminal when he was released.

> I was not thinking about bettering myself until I met an illiterate millionaire. My cellmate had millions of dollars and was serving 40 years in prison. He was older so he was going to die in there. He did not know how to read or write so I used to read his letters to him and write letters for him to send to his family and friends. When other people started asking me to help them, I knew that I had a bigger purpose. I started tutoring inmates to help them get their GED. I realized the more I helped them the better I felt. I started thinking of how I could do the same thing when I got out. I had a come to Jesus moment. (P5)

P3 recognized the first day of incarceration that he did not want to be there and that he had to do better for his children. He was angry because he had just officially met his father and did not want to leave his kids.

> The look on my kids' faces was enough for me to know that I wanted to do my time, work on myself while I was in there, and come out a better man. I had finally met my father. Even though I was talking to him every day I had no idea that he was my pops, and he had no idea that I was his son. I was so mad because if he had been there when I was growing up maybe I would not have been in prison. (P3)

During the interview, he became emotional and stated that he felt like crying because he had not thought about those days in a long time.

P6 stated his defining moment was on the first day that he arrived in prison.

> Day one, I knew that I had messed up and it was going to cost me a lot to be in there. My girlfriend left me within the first six months while I was locked up. She tried to be supportive but by her being in college she had to go on with her life. She tried to get me to stop selling drugs and I was both sad and mad that I did not listen. I was depressed and broken. I stayed to myself and one day an older man told me that I was smart and that I should never come back to prison. He told me to change my life. I learned to listen to the older people in there because they had wisdom. I found support in there from other men, and I had never really had that from a man or anybody for that matter in my life. (P6)

P2 and P7 discovered positive connections by singing in the prison church choir and also talking to positive people. Both did not consider themselves to have support upon release that would be different than when they went into the prison. P2 stated:

> I was in prison for a crime that my brother committed and because he was on drugs, he did not remember committing the crime, so I knew I was changing when the anger was not as intense. I had to work on myself because I had not committed that crime, but you know I was not living a clean slate life before I went to prison this second time.

P7's realization of internal change looked a little different. He noted,

> I was raised in church, and I knew how to sing so it made sense to me to join the prison choir and that made me feel like I was in a good kind of gang. I was a skinny guy, so I was scared while I was there and singing helped me feel better. I was in the gang for Jesus. I got into a lot of fights so that I could get sent to solitary confinement. That's when I knew that I was changing. I was learning how to remove myself from people that messed with me. I didn't know how to do that before I went in.

P8 recognized his desire to be the center of attention could be done in a more productive manner. He was incarcerated for 10 years before he began to change his way of thinking.

> I was just angry for the first ten years. I was a hot head. I had fights and was relocated to other prisons more times than I can count. As I started getting older and was approaching 33 years old, I had been locked up for 10 years and I just woke up one day and had this light bulb moment and I said I'm tired of doing the same things and getting nowhere so I had to humble myself. That was the day

> that I stopped resisting. By stopping resisting inside of prison, I got out and learned that it was better for my life if I lived in a positive way. (P8)

Having a Plan for Prison Release

All participants mentioned having a plan before being released from prison. They all considered it to have been how they began the process of transitioning back into society after prison. P3 began working on his plan before he went to prison by lining up a job to come home to upon his return.

> I used my work ethic and relationship at the job that I was working to secure employment upon my return. My boss knew I was a hard worker, and I was always respectful so he told me that my job would be waiting for me when I got out. I went back to work the day after being released. (P3)

P1 and P4 shared how they spent extensive time building their work ethic while inside of prison. Both shared that having a plan is not enough to succeed beyond prison.

> I started taking a lot of classes to learn different trades. I didn't know anything about building credit, but I was willing to learn. I worked four jobs in prison, and I was in college while I was inside the prison. I withstood being talked about and rejected by the savages in prison. I was an outsider to them because I was doing things differently. You know I was being positive, and they didn't like that. (P1)

Inmates have opportunities to work while they are incarcerated based on their behavior. Some states do not pay wages for inmate jobs in prison. The national average

of pay for inmates is between $0.14 and $0.63 per hour (Fallk, 2021). According to P4, he was making fifteen cents an hour.

> I was making fifteen cents an hour and I was cleaning that poop trap like it was $50 an hour. Working wasn't my problem. I always had a job. It was greed and taking shortcuts to success that was my problem. I knew if I humbled myself around all of those hard bodies then I knew I could do it when I came home. I started reading everything that I could get my hands on related to bettering myself. I wanted that career that I started before I got off track, so I had to put in the work but legit work this time. Man, I was doing some foul shit in there. I was working cleaning the poop trap for the whole prison system. I didn't care because it was something to keep me out of my cell and to keep me busy. I tried to stay out the way up in that joint. It was the job that nobody wanted, and I decided that I was going to be the best poop trap cleaner in that joint. I knew if I could do that nasty job then I could do any job outside of prison. (P4)

P6 stated that he read a lot and surrounded himself around educated people while in prison. He used prayer to deter feelings of depression.

> My mom always told me to keep my hand in God's hand and he will lead the way. I went home to the same neighborhood, around the same people, doing the same thing. I didn't want to fall back into the same trap. Old friends offered me drugs to sell to get back on my feet, but I knew they weren't my friends, so I stayed away. So yeah, I moved to another state with my mother to make a fresh

> start. Getting away from the people who betrayed me was the best thing that I could have done. (P6)

Many people have difficulty finding a location to parole to. When an inmate is released on parole, the place that they will live must be approved by the parole board. P7 met a girl through a Pen Pal program that he created while in prison and they decided that he would live with her upon his release. He realized that was not a promising idea.

> I knew messing with her I was gonna end up going back to prison cause all she wanted to do was fuss and fight, so I left and went to a homeless shelter. I lived in that shelter for seven months while saving money from my job for an apartment. (P7)

P8 spent the year before his release reconnecting with his family and networking with individuals from an organization that was interested in hiring him to do motivational speaking around the country.

> The day I was released my family came out in droves. They had clothes, food, money, and a place for me to live until I got established. It was beautiful and even though I was gone for 20 years we picked up just like we left off showering each other with love and support. (P8)

Reliance on Support Systems

Support systems are important to individuals who are incarcerated. Feelings of loneliness, depression, and anxiety are common. The scope of the information shared by

the participants was focused on support systems related to success once they were released from prison.

> One of my four jobs in prison was in education. We weren't supposed to be on the internet or nothing like that, but I feel like God put certain people in my pathway to help me. My boss in there was very instrumental into my release. (P1)

P1 shared this information with hesitancy as he knew that rules had been broken by staff members to assist him with college enrollment prior to his release from prison.

> She let me get on the computer when she wasn't supposed to. She let me enroll in college and fill out my FAFSA paperwork and everything on her computer so that when I did get out. I think I got out in July or something like that and less than thirty days later I had to be in my first class. I used that window of time and told myself I got 30 days to find a job. That was real rough. (P1)

P1 reflected on his journey and recognized the work ethic and determination that he developed while incarcerated in prison. He further stated,

> Now that I think about it that was real rough. Jobs want references and I did not have any for the past 5 years. I had to doctor up my prison jobs and make them look like they were actual jobs I had on the street without lying about it though. I filled out 5-10 job applications daily and walked everywhere I could to seek employment. (P1)

P1's second ally came from a counselor at a different work release center who was informed of how many applications he was filling out daily. The counselor went to

his location and picked him up. She told him that she had connections to get him a job through a family member. The counselor's sister-in-law hired him to work in a manufacturing plant. He listed a third ally as being his supervisor at his job who allowed his work schedule to be flexible so that he could also attend his college courses. Like P1, P2 connected with an employee in prison. He talked with a counselor consistently as his time was nearing to apply for parole. He felt discouraged when his counselor told him that he likely would not get it.

> I'm not going to lie. He discouraged me when he told me that he could put me in for early release but to prepare myself because 90% of the inmates with a Class X felony are denied early release. I told him to put me in anyway and he did. Once I was granted early release, he encouraged me more and more by telling me that I was smart and that I could live a different life when I get out. He told me to go back to school. 3-4 months after being released I was enrolled in college. The first thing that I did when I got out was reconnect with an old mentor. I knew him from my early years of getting in trouble but this time I was ready to make a change. He did not give up on me and also told me that I was smart and helped me get enrolled in college. He hired me to be a motivational speaker for his organization and that put a little cash in my pocket. I also met some White people in a White church that gave me the money to start my nonprofit organization. The Black people turned their back. It was the White people that helped me. (P2)

While incarcerated, P3 developed a close relationship with his father with whom he had just met prior to entering the prison system. He credited a close friend as well for supporting him during and after his incarceration.

> You know while I was locked up my father was there every step of the way. He made sure I was straight. When I came home, he helped me get an apartment and made sure I had money in my pocket. Remember I also had my old boss to thank for keeping my job for me, so he definitely was helpful in me never going back to selling drugs. I had a friend that had been there too. She checked in on me and encouraged me when I touched down. We ended up getting married and the rest is history. (P3)

P4-P8 all reported using the assistance of counseling services as guidance and support before leaving prison. P4, P7, and P8 enrolled in a support group as a condition of their parole status. P4 stated,

> I didn't really have people that were positive in my life but that lady that was my counselor was nurturing and tough at the same time. She expected us to do better and called my ass to the carpet if I even thought about going back to criminal life. I respected her and she taught me to respect myself and that I mattered. I also ended up getting a lead position at the restaurant that I was working at and that motivated me to know that some people wanted me to succeed. My boss was cool and trusted me even though I didn't really trust her but that was because there are a lot of snakes out there and you know I had to stay clear of the booby traps.

P7 also discussed attending counseling sessions after he was released from prison and difficulty with his living arrangements. He moved from living with the woman he met through the Pen Pal organization he developed in prison when things did not work out between them. “Well, I was living in the shelter and went to counseling. The counselor had a list of jobs that would hire felons and that helped me stay focused on work instead of struggling and hustling like I was used to.” (P7)

Religion Played a Role in Success

All the participants discussed their religious beliefs as a cultural factor that played a role in their success during and after they were released from prison. In the African American community, the church and prayer are central to being in the world. Afrocentricity leans on the belief that conceptions of morality play a role in how African Americans experience consciousness in the world. All the participants described being raised in church as young boys. None of them continued going to church in their late teens and adulthood prior to incarceration. They attended church with the adults in their lives and once they became of age they no longer attended.

> I heard a voice while I was in jail waiting to get shipped to the department of corrections, and people think I am crazy when I say this, but I heard it as clear as day just like I am talking to you. God said, I am going to strip you of everything to make you whole again.” It scared him but he stayed true to prayer once he was released from prison and reflected on being raised in church as a child. (P1)

P2 explained that he had to let go of his childish ways while he was incarcerated. He explained how he did something different once he was released by staying in church. He stated he was raised in church and decided to go back to his roots. He is currently in school to become a licensed pastor. “As a man thinketh and a man believeth, so is he. It was nobody but God that brought me this far.” (P2)

P5 described his church attendance as regular and include weekdays and Sundays. He stated that he knew it was important to involve himself in church when he was released from prison to stay grounded in his plan to continue improving the quality of his life. “I had a come to Jesus moment and it was like a spirit came over me and told me that I was not supposed to be serving drugs. I was supposed to be serving God.”

P3, P6, P7, and P8 were raised in households with Godfearing parents. All mentioned daily prayer to stay on track but did not report the importance of attending church. The principle of axiology in Afrocentricity is focused on the conceptualization of moral principles and behavior in the home, community, and the societal systems (Asante, 1988).

Experiencing Self-Actualization

To create positive avenues upon release, many people take inventory of their skillset and talent acquisitions. In alignment with hermeneutic phenomenology, the participants shared how they understood the nature of being and existence. The consciousness of being is in consideration of time. For instance, P1 discussed his work ethic inside of prison and with a sense of pride stated, “Now that I think about it. I

worked so hard to learn how to work hard." Referring to his current employment status, notary public business, and real estate business. Being in the world was an awakening that he was present in time with his thoughts and actions. P5-P8 shared similar experiences related to understanding how the time in prison was connected to the time that they utilized to focus on creative ways to exist.

> Going back and forth with losing time was like going nowhere fast, so the time that I exist is the time that I manifest what was created for me by God. I had to serve my time then so that I can value my time now. (P5)

Similarly, P3 became emotional when he reflected on his life in a space that he never imagined.

> I never thought that I could live this type of life with a beautiful home, nice car, nice job, and you know like peace but as long as I stay focused every day and realize what yesterday taught me, I know that I will be okay. I won't give them people no more time. (P3)

Finding Positive Peer Relationships

As the men told their stories of reentering society after prison, all participants noted the importance of changing their social circles. P1 laughed when he said,

> "I wore the same clothes every day when I looked for a job when I got out. Nobody even noticed me. When they did notice me, they said that I now talked White. I guess because I worked on my grammar and was bettering myself there was a disconnect and I was okay with that. I no longer connected to old friends

> anyway because they were doing the same things when I got out that they were doing when I went in. I was on a mission to accomplish my goals. My new circle was small but filled with successful people."

It is common for people who have been to prison to say that they had to change people, places, and things; however, it can be challenging to do so. For instance, when P7 recognized that his relationship with his girlfriend was not working out, he removed himself and went to live in a homeless shelter. "I would rather live in a homeless shelter than live with someone who didn't care if I went back to prison." On the other hand, P3 identified his wife as his inspiration for change. "She was always supportive and talked positivity into my life. She believed in me." P4 explained the difficulty with returning to family environments that consist of longtime drug dealers.

> I took up White people sports like golfing and that created a new world of friends for me. Older White men who I met through my wife. She is White too and so we do White people shit sometimes and there ain't no drama just fun. Talking about finances on a different legit level was new and exciting to me so yeah I blend in real good at my job since I'm the only Black man at the gig. (P4)

P5 was humbled by his developed circle of friends that he identified as teachers, politicians, community leaders, doctors, and lawyers.

> When you do what is right, your mission will make room for new people to enter. I had to prove myself because at first some people didn't trust me because they knew about my past. I just kept showing up to community meetings and

> networking. I became a man of action. I walked the walk instead of talking the talk. (P5)

P6 stated that he had friends who never wrote to him or put money on his books offer him drugs to sell the same day he got out.

> I knew they weren't my friends. The person that I took the wrap for laughed and wanted to party like doing that kind of time was nothing. I ended up moving to a small town down south to get away from any temptation. I met this older man who told me that I was smart and should be a basketball coach. He connected me to other positive people who are laid back and chill. Everybody works and take care of their families. I like to soak up knowledge from them. (P6)

An established relationship prior to his release is what P8 identified as the catalyst for major changes in his life.

> These people from that University program believed in me so they flew me around the country when I got out to speak to inmates, schools, and all kinds of clubs and stuff. I became used to being surrounded by super educated and respectable people and wanted to be one of them. (P8)

Utilizing Mental Health Counseling

Underlying mental health challenges are often at the root of decisions people make that lead to criminality. All participants reported feelings of depression while incarcerated. P7 reported anxious symptoms during his incarceration. "I was a skinny kid.

I weighed like 140 pounds. I already had PTSD from the abuse that I went through from my mother. I was scared in there."

P2 and P8 reported feelings of anger because they believed the system failed them. P1 and P2 reported utilizing counseling services while incarcerated to assist with mental clarity upon release. P1 said,

> The reason I ended up in prison was because I was so focused on materialistic things that drug dealers had like cars and jewelry. I wanted to impress girls and get street recognition. I had unspoken respect for people who can survive in the street, make money, and wear it like a badge. Nobody could tell me anything as a kid because I would not listen. I did what I wanted to do. It was a glorified dead end. Counseling helped me with my stinking thinking.

After being released from prison, P4, P7, and P8 reported seeking mental health counseling. P4 explained how he was mandated to attend counseling as a condition of his parole. He stated that he was hesitant initially but enjoyed the support of the group counselor and the members of the group who were also on parole. P4 explained,

> I learned a lot about how to self-regulate, improve decision-making, and just be an overall better person. Years later, I was struggling with depression and anxiety. After so many of my friends had been killed from my hometown and the death of my best friend, you know like that shit took a toll on me. I started seeing a White lady therapist, but she didn't understand me and kept pushing meds. She wasn't

> trying to understand the Black man. I didn't feel like I could talk about the stuff that Black men go through like racism and police brutality. So, I had to let her go.

P4 shared how he tried a second mental health counselor who happened to have been an Asian man and he was pushing meds too, so he never went back. He stated he started drinking a bit more than usual, so he sought the counselor who helped him when he was in the mandated group counseling. P4 noted,

> I called up the counselor that helped me when I first got out and she started seeing me on an individual basis. She is a Black lady, and she understands me. She understands Black people. I can talk to her about shit like George Floyd and she don't get all weird about talking about culture type things. She don't push meds, she push me to learn healthy ways to manage the hard times. I still see her now and love it.

P7 reported attending a counseling support group as a mandated condition of his parole as well as P8. Similarly, they shared having a place to hold them accountable while adjusting to reintegrating into society as being helpful toward their success.

> My counselor went above and beyond to help everyone find jobs or at least she tried to help us with stuff like that on top of learning how to deal with temptation and depression. I was depressed because it was hard. Remember I was homeless or living in that shelter, but I looked forward to talking to her. She was an African American lady who was firm but fair. She did not let us slide with playing ourselves short. She pushed us to really work on our mental health. I

> started to look at her as a mentor. She wanted us to be better and do better and we knew it. (P7)

In relation to the Afrocentric principle of Cosmology, which considers the associations and disassociations between Africans' and non-Africans' conceptions of race/racism, culture, gender, class, and traditions (Asante, 1988); P4 and P7 explained the importance of having an African American female mental health counselor who understood their culture and traditions.

A Need to Relocate

Reintegrating into neighborhoods that are filled with criminal activity can result into a revolving door of recidivism for African American men. P1, P2, and P4 returned to their hometowns after being released. P5 initially moved to another state and returned to his hometown after designing an at-risk program. P3, P6, P7 and P8 all relocated to a different city or state. P3 stated,

> "I came home to a job and family support, but I wanted more than my hometown could offer me. I was tired of seeing the same things and I just wanted to grow. Leaving and living here was the best thing that I could have done. It was hard at first, but I just stayed the course. I moved after about 2 years of being out of prison and I haven't looked back. People don't really know that I went to prison. Sometimes you just gotta leave to live."

P6 stated that he wanted a change. He explained how his mother moved to a southern state and he also moved there to get a fresh start. His employment opportunity

allowed him to meet positive people and travel all over the country. “It opened my eyes to so much more than my hometown and people don’t know my background so that help me move past going to prison.” Employment is often difficult for individuals convicted of a felony. P8 was convicted of murder and stated that he had a difficult time finding a sustainable job. “I was finding little factory or odd end jobs and I was getting frustrated. I wanted to get on with the school district working with kids, but I could never get on.” He was inspired when a friend informed him about a job that was located 3 hours away from his hometown. P8 excited stated, “I don’t carry a gun or nothing because I can’t do that, but I work as a security guard at a nightclub, and it is working out for me.”

Giving Back

To acquire truth and knowledge is as important as the use of truth and knowledge. Many people who are released from prison are empowered by helping others. As in the case of P2, P5, P7and P8. P2 reported leading a youth program at a community center, coaching children in basketball, and speaking to incarcerated and formerly incarcerated men to help them make positive changes in their lives. P5 has a mentoring program aimed at helping at-risk youth and he volunteers in a juvenile justice center helping boys and girls steer away from criminal activity. “I figured I caused so much havoc that I could at least help someone else not go down the path that I went down. It is one way to hold myself accountable and also show our youth a better way.” P7 explained how he took his love of cars and created a car club for enthusiasts. “We do stuff like visit sick children, teach kids how to work on cars, feed the homeless, and a lot of the members of

the club have been to prison and are looking for ways to get involved in community service." P8 explained how he co-created a youth group to teach boys and girls life skills through dance. "I figure if I can save one child from going down the path that I went down then I have made a difference."

General Narrative

All research participants stated that they had goals but no clear direction in how to accomplish them prior to their incarceration. Most aspired to be professional athletes. They described high school memories of inadequacy and a lack of support. They took on a self-imposed obligation to be the "man of the house." All participants reported changes over time that stemmed from a defining moment while incarcerated that helped them establish a sense of direction toward success beyond prison. All participants mentioned having a plan before being released from prison. While in prison, most reported their *Dasein* changed within a brief period of time by aligning with people who were smarter than them and offered words of encouragement. They all considered it to have been how they began the process of transitioning back into society after prison. The scope of the information shared by the participants was focused on support systems related to success once they were released from prison. All participants reported feelings of depression while incarcerated. Half of the participants reported using the assistance of counseling services as guidance and support before leaving prison. Two participants reported the importance of having an African American mental health counselor only when talking about race-based trauma. A few enrolled in a support group as a condition of their parole

status. All the participants discussed their religious beliefs as a cultural factor that played a role in their success during and after they were released from prison. All the participants described being raised in church as young boys. None of them continued going to church in their late teens and adulthood prior to incarceration. Their *Dasein* changed when they recognized that they could not successfully reenter society without a solid foundation embedded in their Christian faith. All mentioned daily prayer to stay on track but did not report the importance of attending church. Half of the participants shared similar experiences related to understanding how the time in prison was connected to the time that they utilized to focus on creative ways to exist. All participants noted the importance of changing their social circles. Some of the participants relocated to a different city or state. Regardless of where they lived, most of the participants were empowered by giving back to the community. Their *Dasein* changed as they recognized the value in being a mentor.

General Structure

All successful formerly incarcerated African American males stated that they had goals but no clear direction in how to accomplish them prior to their incarceration. Most aspired to be professional athletes. They described high school memories of inadequacy and a lack of support. They took on a self-imposing obligation to be the "man of the house." The participants experienced changes over time that stemmed from a defining moment while incarcerated that helped them establish a sense of direction toward success beyond prison. Moreover, they mentioned having a plan before being released from

prison. While in prison, most reported their *Dasein* changed within a brief period of time by aligning with people who are smarter than them and who offered words of encouragement. African American men consider the changes over time while incarcerated to have been how they began the process of transitioning back into society after prison. The scope of the information shared by African American men focused on support systems related to success once they were released from prison. All African American men reported feelings of depression while incarcerated. Half of the successful formerly incarcerated African American men reported using the assistance of counseling services as guidance and support before leaving prison. Two African American men reported the importance of having an African American mental health counselor only when talking about race-based trauma. A few enrolled in a support group as a condition of their parole status. All the African American men discussed their religious beliefs as a cultural factor that played a role in their success during and after they were released from prison. All the African American men described being raised in church as young boys. None of them continued going to church in their late teens and adulthood prior to incarceration. They attended church with the adults in their lives and once they became of age they no longer attended. All mentioned daily prayer to stay on track but did not report the importance of attending church. Half of the African American men shared similar experiences related to understanding how the time in prison was connected to the time that they utilized to focus on creative ways to exist. All African American men noted the importance of changing their social circles. Some of the African American men relocated

to a different city or state. Regardless of where they live, most of the successful formerly incarcerated African American men were empowered by giving back to the community.

Summary

I discussed the research questions, the outcome of the study, themes that emerged from the participant responses, and the participant summary in Chapter 4. I hand-coded the interview data and developed themes. I identified themes from the interviews, which represented the perceptions and experiences of each participant. The following themes emerged: Theme 1: Historical Factors; Theme 2: Defining Moments; Theme 3: Preparation for Release; Theme 4: Religious Beliefs; Theme 5: Self-Actualization; Theme 6: Positive Peer Relationships; Theme 7: Mental Health Counseling; Theme 8: Allies; Theme 9: Relocation; and Theme 10: Giving Back. In Chapter 5, I will discuss the findings of the study in relation to the literature, theoretic framework, social change implications, recommendations, and limitations.

Chapter 5: Discussion

The purpose of this Afrocentric-hermeneutic phenomenological study was to bridge the gap in the literature and explore the lived experiences of African American males who were formerly incarcerated in prison and have positively changed their lives so that they avoid future criminality. The objective was to enhance multicultural competence through the participants' worldview, which can provide insight into program development, strategic planning, criminal justice reform, and academia by listening to the worldview of African American males, which is often different from the worldview of the counselor. This Afrocentric-hermeneutic phenomenological research project allowed the participants an opportunity to bring to their consciousness the historical and cultural experiences relative to events which occurred over time, thus sharing the meaning they attribute to their success post-incarceration.

The high incarceration rate of African American men is problematic. Additionally, the high rate of recidivism among returning prisoners poses several challenges for the promotion of community health and public safety. Half of all African American males return to prison within 3 years. In 2014, President Obama acknowledged a critical need to track positive data from formerly incarcerated people of color through the My Brother's Keeper (MBK) initiative (Schott Foundation, 2015). The initiative is aimed at investing in boys and men of color to reduce disparities and increase opportunities for success. The number of individuals incarcerated are tracked; however,

there is limited qualitative data focused on the success of African American men who were formerly incarcerated.

Many researchers have conducted studies regarding the challenges faced by African American males, but little research has been conducted on how African American males who were formerly incarcerated view the world, what it means to be an African American male, and how their racial identity affects what they hope for from an Afrocentric perspective (Borum, 2007; Borum, 2014; Harvey, 2003).

Gaining insight from African American men who have changed their lives post-incarceration from a qualitative perspective is critical in reducing the recidivism rate. Most studies are quantitative and do not offer descriptive data, including implications for counseling strategies from the population. This study is not intended to denounce, exclude, or stand in opposition of Eurocentric values, but instead offer additional perspectives to raise awareness specific to counseling this population. Counselors who are aware of biases, microaggressions, racism, discrimination, and systemic oppression faced by African American men may benefit by incorporating culturally relevant treatment strategies to assist in providing appropriate mental health services. Without this information, counselor educators and supervisors are ill-prepared to train counselors to meet the needs of this invisible population of African American males.

The following themes emerged from the circular hermeneutic analysis of this study:

- Theme 1: Troubled Childhood;

- Theme 2: Life Changing Moments;
- Theme 3: Having a Plan for Prison Release;
- Theme 4: Reliance on Support Systems;
- Theme 5: Religion Played a Role in Success;
- Theme 6: Experiencing Self-Actualization;
- Theme 7: Finding Positive Peer Relationships;
- Theme 8: Utilizing Mental Health Counseling;
- Theme 9: A Need to Relocate; and
- Theme 10: Giving Back.

The findings from this dissertation study may serve several aspects of social change. By also using an Afrocentric framework applicable to the culture of African American males, the analysis may produce culturally relevant information to inform the reduction of behaviors associated with recidivism, appropriate programming, criminal justice reform, and neighborhood safety. Counselor educators and supervisors could use this information to increase multicultural competence, advocate social, political, and economic influence, and create interventions, programs, and resources applicable to the needs of African American males.

Interpretation of Findings

The participants shared insight into their experiences as successful formerly incarcerated African American males. As I analyzed the data through the circular hermeneutic process, 10 themes emerged from the data: (a) Troubled Childhood, (b) life

changing moments, (c) having a plan for prison release, (d) reliance on support systems, (e) religion played a role in success, (f) experiencing self-actualization, (g) finding positive peer relationships, (h) utilizing mental health counseling, (i) a need to relocate, and (j) giving back. In this final chapter, I apply the themes to the previous literature discussed in Chapter 2.

School-to-Prison-Pipeline

According to a study conducted by Reidy et al. (2021), adverse childhood experiences can negatively change the trajectory of a child's potential to prosper. Adverse childhood experiences (ACE) are more beneficial to preventive care when variables were measured individually (Reidy et al., 2021). All participants in this study reported adverse childhood experiences as indicators that led to incarceration. Their accounts reflected the school-to-prison pipeline discussed in the literature. They expressed the importance of understanding how they ended up in prison before understanding how they were able to live a life absent of criminal activity. They explained living in poverty and having inadequate resources during their childhood, which resulted in dropping out of high school for some of the participants. This was consistent with Mingo and Haskins (2018) account that African American males who dropped out of high school are more likely to have been incarcerated. None of the participants reported school intervention focused on discretion to avoid suspensions and expulsions. The zero tolerance policies in schools discussed in the literature by Mallet (2016); McCarter (2017); and Miguel and Gargano (2017) posited the lack of discretion

in decision-making for disciplinary action and aligned with the participants' exit from the school system and into the prison system. People do not always respond to adverse experiences in the same manner; therefore, the troubled childhood presented by the participants was important to understanding their individual circumstances. Suggested or imagined, the participants took on the role of being "the man of the house," which is common in African American families with an absent father, unavailable parenting due to employment constraints, responsibility of taking care of siblings, or inadequate resources.

Self-Esteem, Self-Concept, Self-Confidence, and Self-Efficacy

Participants shared a range of moments that changed the trajectory of their thought process. They all explained a pivotal moment that sparked the desire for change. For example, P1 and P5 reported no plan to curtail criminal activity during the initial time in prison and spent time thinking of ways to improve their method of criminology. P1 recognized that he really needed to change since he was still thinking of a plan to continue criminal activity once released. This defining moment made him rethink his life. P5 was inspired to help himself when he realized he was able to help inmates with reading and writing. P5 described a sense of purpose by teaching**.** P3 and P6 reported the feeling of the handcuffs on their wrists as the catalyst to create change immediately. P4 reported the recognition of his unnecessary greed that caused him to sell drugs and violate his parole as a defining moment toward the initial process for change. Like many African American men, P4 returned to the same area that he left prior to incarceration. He vowed to change his mindset if he could not change his environment. Increased chances

for continued criminal behavior occur when entering severely impoverished communities (Ricci & Barry, n.d.). P2 and P7 recognized the importance of finding positive support inside of prison due to the absence of a support system outside of prison. P8 reported resistance to change until he was 10 years into a 20-year sentence. Imprisonment creates a forced time of self-reflection and the self-assessment allow for a review of what changes prisoners need to make to lead a more productive life post-incarceration (Maier & Ricciardelli, 2021). Supportive networks contribute to increased self-efficacy toward recidivism success (Bahr et al., 2010). Increased self-esteem, self-concept, self-confidence, and self-efficacy was a catalyst toward a changed mindset for the participants.

African American Males and Proactive Strategies

Having a plan prior to being released from prison was mentioned by all participants. P3 secured employment prior to entering prison since he had a good work ethic and relationship with his employer. He used the time to practice staying away from negative people, which he identified as a common barrier in prison and a challenge that resulted into him entering prison. P1 and P4 focused on building their work ethic to build a skillset upon release. Both men shared how being Black and a convicted felon would hinder them, and they knew that they had to work hard to overcome the challenges. P1, P7, and P8 joined support groups and read often to learn as much as they could. P1 spoke specifically about not wanting to feel inferior after he was released from prison. He surrounded himself around people who were smarter than him and people from whom he

could learn. All participants stated that they wanted to be successful and recognized that they had to do something different prior to leaving prison to prepare for reintegration. They began seeking employment opportunities prior to being released. A lack of employment is the biggest barrier to successfully reintegrating back into society and is the strongest predictor of recidivism (Varghese & Cummings, 2013).

African Centered Theory

All participants in this study reported religious beliefs as a factor in their success during and after release from prison. They were all raised in church and adhered to their upbringing during incarceration and after but did not attend church or religious affiliations from late adolescence to the time of their incarceration. They all reported currently being practicing Christians who held religious beliefs. People who considered themselves religious in prison are more likely to participate in support groups and faith-based programming (Stansfied et al., 2019). Studies have been conducted to demonstrate the significance of the instillation of hope among African Americans through religious practices during and after incarceration (Hill, 1999; Roman et al., 2007; Stansfield et al, 2019),.

Some people who are incarcerated have authentic and inauthentic reasons for participating in faith-based programs, including time out of their cell. The participants in this study continued attending faith-based programs and church after being released from prison. P2 is attending college to become an ordained minister. P4 reported not attending church due to his work schedule, but he practiced prayer daily. One of the easiest things

to do after being released from prison is to attend faith-based functions (Hatcher, 2010). In my study, the participants discussed their religious beliefs and P2 was the only person that asserted a position based on race or ethnicity. P2 reported a deeper religious connection with White people whom he considered to have been more supportive than the African American people with whom he sought support.

African American Males and Internalized Oppression

The participants in this study reported that they benefited from going to prison. All participants posited learning to recognize areas of deficiency, including familial, educational, vocational as well as a lack of direction prior to having confined time to assess their lives. Over time, they began to view themselves differently and see potential that they had not previously valued. Flowers and Banda (2018) asserted the promotion of the importance of mentoring African American males who have established backgrounds of poverty to better assist in improving their self-concept and self-esteem to better navigate through higher education with increased confidence. Self-doubt, identity confusion, and feelings of inferiority are often associated with sustained denigration and injustice that oppressed groups endure (David et al., 2019). P4 attended college but did not feel like he belonged. He was accustomed to being around friends and family members who sold drugs. P4 felt oppressed from early childhood. Since his release from prison, he found positive mentors to make connections for personal and professional growth. Being involved in a study about their success was quoted by them all as rewarding. P1 stated, “Now that I think about it, I worked so hard to learn how to work

hard.", which indicated he had not previously thought about his journey toward living a life absent of criminal activity. When considering success, there is often reference made to a title, socioeconomic level, academic pursuit, or fame; however, like the findings in this study Howard et al. (2019) conducted a study of Black and Latino males to identify what they considered success and the results indicated that reaching a desired outcome, having an awareness of one's identity, helping others, using positive adjectives to describe themselves, and having future ambitions were correlations. Similarly, P3, P5, and P8 stated that they were proud to make their parents proud and that was enough for them to consider their life successful.

Positive Peer Relationships

The participants noted the importance of positive peer relationships that helped them maintain their goal to change their lives post-incarceration; however, P1 preferred to be alone to focus on completing college courses, maintaining employment, and building a business. He reported that he only knew people who were criminals and had to "ride solo" to avoid falling back into the trap of prison. Gordon et al. (2013) studied masculine norms and peer support among incarcerated African American males. The findings suggested the importance of positive social networks both during and after incarceration for African American men. As described by all the participants, they connected with positive men while in prison. P4 reported he missed the mark the first time when he returned to his original group of friends who were selling drugs, but the second time that he was released he changed people, places, and things because he had a

different mindset. P3 noted that his girlfriend, father, and children were the focus of his accountability to himself to stay free of criminal activity. He reported that he knew he could never go back to selling drugs because he had too much to lose, including time away from the people who supported him during his incarceration.

African American Men and Interventions

African American men have the highest incarceration and recidivism rate. They are more likely to have undiagnosed and untreated mental health challenges. Unhealthy negative responses to life stressors often become contributing factors to incarceration. Substance abuse and alcohol addiction are prevalent among this population. All the participants in this study reported the use of cannabis prior to incarceration. One person reported an addiction to alcohol and was under the influence of alcohol when he committed the crime that led to his incarceration. He reported grief and depression as an unbearable feeling that he attempted to mask with alcohol. Another participant reported the use of cocaine that led to a string of violent crimes. He reported that he felt rejected by his father as a kid. Three of the participants reported an addiction to the street life, which they identified as seeking love in the wrong places. For instance, P7 reported that he never felt supported by his parents throughout his entire life. He stated that he was often depressed, and his idea of love was when people sought him out to bring them drugs. Many African American men have self-medicated mental health symptoms by using illicit drugs.

Correctional institutions conduct mental health screenings upon entry, which assist in providing counseling and psychotropic medication if needed. Two participants reported seeking counseling services while incarcerated. One participant received counseling as a child but did not continue because of low parental-involvement. He reported that he has seen a mental health counselor regularly since being released from prison. The mental and emotional state of African American men is critical to improving their outcomes upon release from prison (Skinner-Osei & Osei, 2020). While five of the participants utilized counseling services in prison or upon return to society, three of them did not. Of the three who did not, one participant reported that he should have because he would have managed the trauma from his childhood much better. On the other hand, one participant reported that he tried several mental health professionals before finding the right fit. He stated that he recognized the importance of having a counselor who understood his plight as an African American man. He described his anger that stemmed from his best friend being killed by a police officer. He stated, “A White counselor couldn’t understand my pain. She just wanted to put me on medication instead of acknowledging that my anger is legitimate.” Race or gender was not a factor in counselor-client satisfaction for the remaining participants receiving counseling services. The information provided suggest mental health professionals provide culturally competent supportive work aimed at assisting the needs of the individual.

Parole Supervision

Individuals who are incarcerated have limited access to resources. Allies often are formed prior to their release as described by several of the participants. After they were released and aligned with the study conducted by Blasko et al. (2015), relationships among a parole officer, therapist, and client as a collaborative intervention method was helpful with their initial reintegration into society. P1, P2, P7, and P8 found their mental health counselor to have been helpful in serving as a buffer to help sustain a positive relationship with their parole officer.

Connecting to Heidegger

The Heideggerian theoretical framework guided this study and allowed the eight participants to share their experiences through narrative accounts giving meaning to what it means to be a formerly incarcerated African American male who has been successful since being released from prison for 10 years or more. Heidegger asserted the experiences of man could not be objectified but, instead should focus on being in the world (1962). Each participant revealed their truth based on how they interpreted and applied meaning to their experiences, which influenced how they experienced being in the world. The truth of their being was based on their perspective through an ongoing process of concealing and revealing. The Hermeneutic circle is a process of interpretation that we continually move between smaller and larger units of meaning to determine the meaning of both. All understanding is context dependent (Heidegger, 1962). The aim was to understand the experience that led to the participants' success. This type of understanding

allows us the opportunity to interpret the participant's meaning of success post-incarceration as it was experienced by them. Heidegger (1962) asserted that we are never in the world neutrally and being in the world is a matter of care. The care structure is an interrelated dimension of facticity, fallenness, and existentiality (Heidegger, 1962). *Facticity* is the past and is the manner people are thrown into the world and inherit circumstances without a choice (Heidegger, 1962). The participants all found it important to discuss historical factors. Thrownness is a basic principle of facticity (Heidegger, 1962). It is individual existence in which we are thrown into the world without any say so in the matter. The participants had no control over their circumstances as children. This was already informed and taken up in existence. *Fallenness* is the present and according to Heidegger (1962) is the way we are influenced to live our lives based on what others say. Fallenness, in its authentic state, does not get lost in attempting to find a relation to other entities. All participants stated they wanted to be treated as a human being with the same opportunities as everyone else. We exist in an inauthentic manner when we move away from our destiny by doing what Das man say we should do. Das man is anonymous forces and dynamics. *Existentiality* is the authentic and inauthentic existence of *Dasein*, which may be decided by choice in one's Being and the manner, in which a person interprets Being in the world (Heidegger, 1962). Existence is the manner in which *Dasein* understands itself as absorbed in the world (Heidegger, 1962). *Dasein* is absorbed into the world along with and next to other *Daseins* in the world. Being in is a mode of absorption into the world in terms of *Dasein's* everyday modality. Existence is decided

only by each *Dasein* based on the awareness of possibilities throughout the lifespan. The participants contributed to society in a positive manner as their *Dasein* changed. Thus, existentiality, facticity, and fallenness are interrelated dimensions in Heidegger's care structure, which brings awareness to the manner people comport themselves in the world. Authenticity is achieved when *Daseins* cease their potential for living toward mortality thus living for the future. Heidegger (1962) stated when *Daseins* face the reality of mortality as a compelling force authenticity is realized. Being is the way we interpret and understand our experiences, which influence how we experience things, which influences how we interpret our experiences. The participants in this study all experienced increased confidence and pride from the changes they made, which influenced how they made decisions over time. Heidegger (1962) stated the manner of Being belongs to the person; therefore, a person is responsible for his or her own Being in the world. The existentialism of a human being's relation to their own existence in the world is the uniqueness of being a human being. Gadamer (1989) posited the significance of merging historical, social, cultural, and interpersonal horizons, which is important in considering what worked yesterday may not work today in effecting change. Asante (1987) posited the importance of allowing African Americans to tell their own story rather than making assumptions about their story.

Speaking through the Afrocentric Lens

The interrelatedness of Afrocentricity and *Dasein* offered an exploration of *Being and Time* combined with cognitive process, intentionality, and action orientation through

the phenomena of incarceration. The four tenets of Afrocentricity developed by Asante (1988) were interwoven in the participant's voices. Cosmology considers the associations and disassociations between Africans and non-Africans' conceptions of race/racism, culture, gender, class, and traditions. All participants in this study were African American men who discussed growing up in poverty as an African American boy with lacking resources. All were aware that they did not have adequate resources. Epistemology considers conceptions of truth and knowledge, and the acquisition and use of truth and knowledge. The self-actualization the participants discussed exposed the recognition of the self from a historical perspective and the trajectory of change over time based on how they used the truth and knowledge acquired. None of the participants identified with Afrocentricity in its entirety. Axiology considers conceptions of morality and conduct in the home, community, and the systems of society. Over time, their being in the world changed the manner in which they navigated the world, but their changes were not based on their race but aligned with a deeper connection with purpose and humanity. All based religious backgrounds as a foundation that they considered pivotal toward reintegrating into their homes, the community, and society. Aesthetics considers conceptions of the importance and utility of art forms and other modes of expression, which evoke a consciousness that determines being. Participants identified music, art, and verbal communication as healthy expressions. Asante (1987) asserted that Black people must be centered in their own narrative and without such centeredness, they will never mature. He further stated the importance of psychological integrity, which he described as being on

the path that you are supposed to be on by doing what is right. All the participants in this study were on the path of success by being aligned with their history and reality. None of them endorsed culture as a contributing factor to their success. As a result, they were contributing in a positive manner as subjects within the African American race based on their determination to succeed, but they did not hold Black conscientiousness as a source for their success. Afrocentric principles encourage self-love and confidence to compete with anyone in the areas of education, economics, science, and technology. It encourages self-respect thus creating positioning of respecting others (Asante, 1987). I was surprised that the Afrocentric lens did not fit within the scope of the study. At best, I was able to plug pieces of their experiences into the four tenets of Afrocentricity, but none of them endorsed an African-centered lens from which they navigate the world. Race was not a factor in the needs of the participants toward success. The information obtained brings to light existential considerations from African American men whom we seek to empower within the scope of diversification and inclusion in counseling practices. It is the way studying the interpretation of this data through the interdependence of the structure of care in consideration of culture, time, linguistics, and world view was achieved.

Limitations

A limitation of this study is it is a small sample size and may not be generalizable to a larger population. A limitation of this study is that all participants lived in the Midwest prior to incarceration and it may not speak to other participants from other

geographical areas. A limitation of this study is the participants were not African-Centered.

Recommendations

The research participants were limited to a demographic within one geographic area. It would be beneficial to collect data from participants across different geographical locations and different ethnicities to enhance the richness of the study. Due to rates of recidivism also being high among African American men during years four through 9, more qualitative research focused on formerly incarcerated African American men beyond the 3-year recidivism rate is critical to understanding and implementing strategies for sustained success. The participants in this study did not fit the Afrocentric lens; therefore, studies that include African-Centered participants would be beneficial.

Implications

The goal of the study was to understand cultural constructs applied to experiential accounts from successful formerly incarcerated African American men. The participants in this research project represent scores of African American men with similar upbringings, criminal histories, inadequate resources, and adjustment difficulties who have spent time in prison and changed the trajectory of their lives. Unfortunately, narrative accounts of such individuals are often untold or discussed in summation through quantitative analysis. This research project represents individual accounts of strategies to create effective plans to reduce the possibility of recidivism beyond the 3-year mark. Most recidivism research measures 3 years post-incarceration; however, this study

extended to 10 years or more to provide further insight to the sustainability of successful reentry. The findings from this dissertation study may serve several aspects of social change. It will contribute to the gap in research aimed at addressing social and community factors relevant to program development and appropriate services to assist in creating greater multicultural competence in providing services for African American males who were formerly incarcerated. This research project may contribute to the understanding needed for prevention efforts, program improvement, criminal justice reform, neighborhood safety improvement, and an increased awareness in understanding the consciousness of the African American male. Heidegger (1962) asserted human beings are best understood when their culture, social context, and the period is incorporated. Far too often, decisions are made for African American men without including them in the discussion. It is reasonable to incorporate the accounts of African American men who have successfully transformed their lives post-incarceration into the decision-making process.

Conclusion

This Heideggerian hermeneutic analysis with an Afrocentric lens described the experiences of eight African American men who served time in prison and have been absent of criminal activities for 10 or more years. The results of this study indicated consistent data among the participants that revealed the importance of understanding their circumstances before, during, and after incarceration from their own narrative. The Afrocentric lens aligned with the importance of the participants in the study being talked

to instead of talked about. None of the participants were longtime hardened criminals. It was a lack of resources that led to their poor choices. The data suggest African American men would benefit from proactive culturally competent support from early childhood. The school-to-prison pipeline among African American boys and men could be significantly reduced with the assistance of research driven data to support program development, mental health counseling, and legislative efforts aimed at curing detrimental behaviors resulting in imprisonment. The participants did not indicate a requirement of same race mentoring or support, but they preferred culturally competent allies throughout their life span. Taking responsibility for their actions was key to their development as they transitioned through the penal institution and back into society. Preparation was key before their release and solidified plans as well as necessary adjustments identified early was critical to their success. Peer, parole, and family support was pivotal but not an absolute catalyst for change. Self-actualization and the realization of their capabilities led to their success. All participants had the dynamic of purpose and the desire to be treated like human beings. They were compliant in prison except for one who later recognized the importance of compliance and adjusted. They felt empowered prior to leaving prison and created programming or joined programs that allowed them to give back to the community. Their determination to avoid criminal activity regardless of the challenges led to success.

The empowerment of African American males transcends into their family dynamics, community, and the larger society when they have a sense of pride. All

participants in this study recognized their inclusion in this study as a representation of their work to overcome the obstacles in their lives. It was determined that historical factors of African American men were an important consideration when attempting to understand the challenges they face and a strong factor in advocacy for implementing changes in program development, criminal justice reform, mental health counseling, and neighborhood safety improvement. Counseling professionals must focus on cultural competence but not hold the requirement of being an African American to assist this population of African American men.

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Appendix A: Demographic Questions

1. Are you 18 years of age or older? (*Forced-choice yes/no response format)*
2. Do you self-identify as a male? (*Forced-choice yes/no response format)*
3. Do you self-identify your ethnicity as African American? (*Forced-choice yes/no response format*
4. Have you been absent of criminal activity for at least 10 years since release from prison? (*Forced-choice yes/no response format)*

If a "yes" response is provided to the above questions, the participant will continue informed consent. If the participant provides a response of "no" to one or more *items, they will be asked to confirm the responses. If the "no" response is absolute, they will be thanked for their time and participation. The participants will be informed that they will not be asked any further questions due to incompatibility with the research criteria.*

Appendix B: Interview Protocol

I will begin my interview with participants by providing a brief introduction and a review of the consent document. Once the initial procedures are completed, I will explain the purpose of the study and answer any questions, if applicable. I will begin the interview by asking the central question. The central question will be followed by sub-questions as deemed necessary to gather rich and descriptive data. The sub-questions will only be utilized if the participant has not already provided adequate information.

I. Initial Procedure

   a. Brief Introduction: "Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study. I am a doctoral student in the process of completing my dissertation and your voluntary participation in this study is appreciated."

   b. Obtain Completed Forms

   - Informed Consent
   - Consent to Record Interview
   - Demographic Information

II. Introduction

   a. It is the ethical responsibility of counselors and counselor educators to serve as an advocate for underserved communities. This study will provide a voice for individuals in the criminal justice system. This study will provide information by exploring the experiences of successful, African American males who were formerly incarcerated.

III. Central Question

- Please tell me what it has been like for you since you left prison?

IV. Additional Interview Questions (if necessary):

- As you know, many African American men who leave prison are arrested and convicted of crimes. You have been successful. How have you been able to be successful since you left prison?
- Do you think life after prison is different for African American men in relation to what it is like for White men? If yes, how?
- What did you do while incarcerated to prepare for a successful transition after prison?
- As you have grown older, the world continues to evolve. What factors contributed to changes in the way you make decisions over time?
- What cultural factors (i.e., art, music, community, spirituality, etc.) influenced the person you have become?
- How do you think support systems for African Americans have helped or hindered your success?
- What training or professional support have you received that was specific to being an African American man?
- How has the way you are perceived as a formerly incarcerated African American man influenced your life since your release from prison?

- What defining moments led to being successful post-release after incarceration?

V. Closing

a. Would you like to add any additional information?

b. Thank you for your participation and valued time. You will receive a summary of your interview via your preferred manner of correspondence (email, United States Postal Service, or in person). You will be allowed to check for accuracy and in the event of any discrepancies, corrections will be made to ensure accuracy.