Boys II Men: A Culturally-Responsive School Counseling Group for

Urban High School Boys of Color

Leyla Pérez-Gualdrón, Christine Yeh, and LyRyan Russell
University of San Francisco

Abstract

Using a participatory and collaborative approach, we developed, implemented, and evaluated a culturally responsive school counseling group, *Boys II Men*, for 11 low-income diverse male students of color at an urban public school. The content of the group focused on five areas: social connections and support, exploring gender roles, navigating identities, school engagement, and future planning. We worked closely with teachers, school staff, and counselors to foster a supportive and positive school climate (Beesley, 2004). Each student was interviewed about his experience in the group to assess the impact of the strategies and techniques used. We also analyzed the specific content of each module for main themes. Strengths and weaknesses of the group were also assessed at post-test. Innovative methods and practical applications for school counselors are discussed.

Keywords: Culturally-responsive school counseling, male students of color, gender roles, school engagement, urban students

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The narratives about urban male adolescents of color in the school system include deficit-oriented perceptions in regards to their educational achievement, and many pessimistic social and health outcomes. These data highlight the so-called achievement gap between boys of color in comparison to White students. For instance, African American and Latino boys living in urban settings are more likely to drop out of school, and are less likely to enroll in college in comparison to their female and White counterparts (Schott Foundation, 2010; US Department of Education, 2013). Not surprisingly, these educational outcomes are associated with disproportionate juvenile detention rates, a phenomenon often referred to as the *school-to-prison pipeline*, leading to further inequities and injustices (Wald & Losen, 2003). Hence, boys of color are overrepresented in the justice system with higher rates than White male boys (Pew Center on the States, 2008).

Schools represent significant ecological sites where sociopolitical inequities can be addressed through transformative practices. In educational institutions, school counselors have the opportunity to facilitate students' cultural empowerment and critical consciousness. However, many schools are also gendered and racialized spaces, where vicious circles of oppression are perpetuated through modern racist practices and microaggressions (Smith, Geroski, & Tyler, 2014). For instance, boys of color are often expected to fail in school contexts (Cammarota, 2004; Noguera, 2003). They are described as having externalizing behavioral problems (Bongers, Koot, Van Der Ende, & Verhust, 2004) and are over diagnosed with learning disabilities (Bloom & Cohen,

2007). We believe that many of the negative statistics about urban young males of color and their educational and social lives are interrelated to historical and current sociopolitical marginalization. In fact, previous research has suggested that many of these issues have been associated with gender identity development and the socio-emotional wellbeing of boys (e.g., Galligan, Barnett, Brennan, & Israel, 2010; O'Neill & Luján, 2009; Watts & Borders 2005).

We present a culturally responsive school counseling group for boys of color with a strong focus on their cultural assets as guiding themes in our counseling strategies. Specifically, practitioners and scholars have promoted and studied specific community strengths such as activism, collective orientation, critical awareness, creativity, and leadership competence (e.g., Cammarota, 2004; Ginwright & Cammarota, 2007; Yeh, Borrero, Tito, & Petaia, 2014). Moreover, the cultural strengths of high school males of color are often institutionally censored in order to maintain the academic hegemony (Camangian, 2010; Camangian, 2013; Nieto 2002). We focused on ninth graders to facilitate their transition to high school and promote their connection to school and their academic and career development.

The experiences of urban young men of color in high schools and society underscore the need for psychologically focused school counseling groups that contest inappropriate colorblind approaches (Smith et al., 2014). However, young males often do not seek or engage in existing academic and counseling services due to gender role stigmas, unfamiliarity about services, and a lack of culturally competent counselors and educators (Kiselica, 2005). To address these barriers to service, we developed and evaluated a school-based participatory, preventative, program, Boys II Men, to promote

social connection, positive gender roles and identities, school engagement, and future planning among diverse young males of color. Our program is innovative in using school counseling interventions to address the intersection of gender and race-related experiences from a cultural strength stand point.

Fostering Social Support and School Connectedness

In order to prioritize cultural assets associated with collective identity, we developed and implemented counseling strategies that facilitated social support and school engagement. Research has found that feelings of being supported contribute to positive ethnic identities (Yeh, Borrero & Tito, 2013), school engagement (Libbey, 2004;) and career development (Turner & Lapan, 2002) among youth of color. Moreover, social support has also been found to increase ethnic minority youths' interpersonal skills (Ma & Yeh, 2010). We also believe that fostering social connections in high school males contributes to the development and use of positive coping skills to deal with educational and social stressors. In this context, it was also critical to consider how relational support is shaped by the intersections of gender and race in the boys' experiences in school. This brings innovation to school counseling practice, as it is not until recently that the intersection of different identities (e.g., gender, race, sexual orientation) has been incorporated into counseling and education practice.

Exploring Gender Roles in the Context of Race

Culturally responsive practices for boys of color must consider the impact of masculine gender role norms and conflicts on their experiences in school. Masculine gender role norms refer to rules and standards ascribed to men, which tend to guide and/or constraint their behaviors, emotions, and thoughts (Mahalik, Talmadge, Locke &

Scott, 2005). In the United States, these may include: restricted or controlled emotionality, self-reliance, risk taking behaviors, aggression, acting masculine, being non-relational, and homophobia (Levant, 1992). Gender conflict is defined as the psychological status in which rigid gender roles cause restriction, devaluation, or harm of the self or others (O'Neill & Luján, 2009). These masculinity gender role norms and gender role conflicts influence young males' academic self-concept, behaviors, and achievement as well as their health, stress levels, and self-esteem (Mahalik & Burns, 2011; Mahalik, Good, & Englar-Carlson, 2003; Reichert & Kuriloff, 2004; Pleck, 2008; Watts & Borders, 2005).

It is also important to consider the racialized experiences that lead young boys of color to experience a different kind of marginalization in society and schools. Specifically, when considering the intersection of race and gender experiences, societies and schools tend to expect negative outcomes for boys of color. For example, boys of color are often stereotyped as aggressive, and de-identified with school success (Yeh, Borrero, & Tito, 2013; Cammarota, 2004; Noguera, 2003, Watts, Abdul-Adil, & Pratt, 2002). These societal stereotypes are pervasive and need to be deconstructed and addressed in schools. Our culturally responsive counseling for boys highlighted masculine gender norms in the unique context of an urban multicultural educational setting. To address these negative societal messages, our program also included building social connections with role models.

Navigating Possible Identities

Research on urban youths has described the need for positive role models in community contexts (Yeh et al., 2014; Rhodes & DuBois, 2008). For young men of

color, role models have the potential to serve as mentors as a way to scaffold and advance the community (Portes & MacLeod, 1996). Further, many of the role models available to ethnic minorities and urban boys of color in particular are romanticized in the media (e.g., rap singers, actors, basketball players, wrestlers, etc.) and do not reflect their everyday experiences and interactions in community contexts. With limited options for role models, urban young men may experience *relative functionalism* and pursue opportunities for achievement in contexts that reflect prominent role models (e.g., sports, entertainment) when other avenues to success are perceived as closed (Sue & Okazaki, 1990). In contrast, role models and mentors have been identified as critical protective factors that may promote academic engagement and success of urban youths (Yeh et al., 2014; Somers, Owens, & Piliawsky, 2009). Therefore, in our intervention, youths explored, discussed, and diversified the ways in which they assessed and acknowledged community and school role models as a way of navigating possible identities.

Gang activity was prevalent in the neighborhoods that many of the group participants lived in. Therefore, the young men requested a group session in which they could discuss gangs and their impact in their communities. Hence, we developed a session to discuss gang involvement from a critical consciousness framework (i.e., Freire, 2000), in which the young men discussed the sociopolitical and cultural factors associated with gangs. Specifically, we explored and discussed the history of marginalization and poverty in communities in order to develop an ecological understanding of gangs (Conchas & Vigil, 2013). Furthermore, the reasons why young people may join gangs were also explored in the group. We specifically discussed

community stressors, poverty, social pressure, and the need for protection as important factors associated with youths' gang involvement (Bell, 2009; Esbensen, Deschenes, & Winfree, 1999). We hoped that our in-depth discussion of gang involvement and its consequences, would provide participants with the space to critically assess their situations and support each other in preventing gang involvement. In this context, our group also emphasized school engagement as a meaningful alternative to participation in gangs.

School Engagement and Empowerment

Schools can be a place where youths, especially urban young males of color feel they belong or don't belong (e.g., Borrero, Yeh, Cruz, & Suda, 2012; Deschenes, Tyack, & Cuban, 2001; Horvat & Antonio, 1999). Academic isolation distances young males from the narratives around academic success (Weis, 2003), and possibilities for educational citizenship (Kliewer & Biklen, 2007). Specifically, the predominant discourse on standardized tests and measures and the well-chronicled "achievement gap" fails to acknowledge the deeper issue—that many boys of color are completely disconnected and disengaged from school, and therefore cannot envision achieving academically (Banks, 2008; Delpit, 1995; Duncan-Andrade, 2007).

Hence, our program focused on the multiple embedded and contextual factors that are associated with youths' school experiences (Irizarry, 2007). School engagement is one such factor, as it includes students' belonging in school and the degree to which they feel connected to teachers (Wehlage, Rutter, Smith, Lesko, & Fernandez, 1989). These contextual and relational aspects of student learning are critical because they reflect sociocultural (Irizarry, 2007; Lee, 2008; Nieto, 2002) and

ecological perspectives (Bronfenbrenner, 1997) that acknowledge the importance of learning across and in between multiple contexts (Yeh & Borrero, 2012a). Especially for young men of color, connections between the contexts of home, cultural background, and school are essential in making learning authentic and culturally relevant (Delpit, 1995; Groulx & Silva, 2010; Nieto, 2002). In addition, because many marginalized communities that are exposed to gang violence may present hopelessness and lack of vision for the future (Bolland, 2003), we also focused on youths' future planning to foster empowerment and a greater sense of hope.

Future Planning

Students need more positive role models in the community, because they allow youths to envision a range of future trajectories that extend beyond everyday stereotypes (Yeh et al., 2014). Research on urban ethnic minority students in a New York city school reported increased feelings of self-efficacy, collective self-esteem, and ethnic identity when they were engaged in a future planning curriculum. Such resources allow for youth of color to develop positive cultural identities in school (Nasir & Saxe, 2003) and the creation of meaningful and culturally relevant academic and career trajectories (Yeh et al., 2014). Hence, a school-based program that provides support around future plans has the potential to foster school engagement, and increased self-awareness (Yeh & Borrero, 2012b). With a greater sense of awareness and future planning (e.g., career goals; planning for future success), students may be more hopeful and engaged in school.

To assess the impact of our culturally responsive school counseling program, we evaluated participants' experiences and attitudes after their participation in this collaborative school counseling program.

Implementation of a Culturally Responsive Group for Boys of Color

Participants

The group was delivered to 11 ninth-grade high school male students attending an urban public school in San Francisco. All of the students qualified for free or reduced lunch indicating their low-income socioeconomic status. Their mean age was 15.2 years (range: 14-16 years). In terms of cultural background, three were African American, three were Latino, three were Asian American, one was Pacific Islander, and one was Croatian.

Procedure

In collaboration with a school counselor and support from school administration, our team implemented and evaluated a nine-session group, Boys II Men (named after the African American pop/R&B musical group, Boyz II Men). When developing a culturally responsive program, it is important to involve key stakeholders in the process to identify their main priorities. Hence we used a participatory approach that involved discussions with the school counselors, principal, assistant principal, wellness center counselors at the school, and two teachers. This group reported that a top priority for the school was to support the transition from middle school to high school for African American male students. African American male students were of particular interest because many of them had been labeled as "at risk" and "struggling academically." It is important to note that school counselors should also engage in assessing critical issues

of school climate and practices that may explain these concerns and observations. Having this critical evaluation would also facilitate systemic interventions to support all students. With respect to the student counseling intervention, the culturally responsive counseling group engaged students through the social, cultural, and political contexts of their lives. Using a participatory framework, the counseling team as well as participants in the group provided input on topics of interest.

Description of Group

The group was designed and implemented in a participatory way, in which group participants, school staff, and counselor partnered and worked together to design the group curriculum based on the students' needs and input (Smith, Davis, & Bowmik, 2010). The authors worked closely with the school counselor to plan and comfortably "broach" topics related to race, ethnicity, and culture during the counseling process. Using the counselor's sociopolitical awareness, critical perspectives related to gender, race, and cultural assets, was emphasized throughout the group. Moreover, the counselor used experiential activities to increase awareness, knowledge, and skills to promote multicultural competence among adolescents (see Roaten, & Schmidt, 2009 for specific experiential activities). These culturally centered strategies and techniques resulted in a group delivered in five different modules based on their content: social connections and support, exploring gender roles, navigating identities, school engagement, and future planning. These topics were explored across a total of nine sessions. An Appendix summarizes the content of each session: gang membership, school success, strategies for dealing with conflict (with friends, family, teachers, etc.), talking to significant others, being respectful, community assets, role models in your life,

cultural identity, what does it mean to be a man, and talking to teachers, and future plans after school.

Each session began with an icebreaker and activity. Counselors and teachers referred the students to participate in the group as they identified them to be at academic risk due to low school engagement (e.g., absences, tardiness, school suspensions). The program was facilitated by a male African American school counselor at the specific school site. Two of the senior school counselors at the school provided onsite supervision and guidance to the main counselor of the group (Nelson & Johnson, 1999). Therefore, the senior counselors were also available to consult about students' responses, behaviors and issues of confidentiality (Moyer & Sullivan, 2008).

Module I: Social connections and support. In this module cultural strengths, togetherness, peer, and school connections were emphasized. Specifically, we emphasized collectivistic self-orientation to also foster cultural bonding to school. The young participants connected with each other emotionally and culturally, we hoped to increase sense of tolerance for a positive school cultural climate. This module included sessions 1 and 2, (see Appendix for activities done in these sessions).

Module II: Exploring gender roles. In this module, the group participants explored gender norms, gender socialization and the impact this has in their relationships. Female and male gender norms were explored in a cultural and racial context. This module was comprised of sessions 3 and 4, which are further described in the Appendix.

Module III: Navigating identities. In this module, the group participants and counselor focused on identity and relational issues embedded in their communities.

Students discussed issues pertaining decision-making, conflict and relational issues pertinent to role models. Per students' request, they also discussed community gangs from a critical perspective. This module was mostly covered in sessions 5 and 6.

Module IV: School Engagement. On this module, academic advocacy skills and academic habits were emphasized. In addition, the students' behaviors in relationship with teachers were also discussed within a cultural context. The module was mostly covered during session 7; however, students discussed academic issues/strategies throughout all the sessions.

Module V: Future planning. On this module a future orientation was promoted by emphasizing career planning, decision-making and prioritizing. This module was covered during session 8.

During the last session, the group participants discussed their participation in the group and the lessons they learned. They acknowledged each other, the group, and discussed ways to continue to support each other in their school and communities.

Evaluation of the Culturally Responsive Group

Data Collection and Analyses

We conducted semi-structured interviews with each of the 11 participants in the program. The interview protocol inquired about strengths and weaknesses of the program, lessons learned, and reflections about their experience in the group. We hoped to use youths' feedback to reflect on, evaluate, and improve our culturally responsive group school counseling practice. Sample questions from the interview protocol included: (a) How has this group influenced you academically?; (b) How has this group influenced you socially?; and (c) How has this group influenced how you think

about your future?. A research assistant conducted the interviews in person and audiotaped each interview. All of the interviews were transcribed and cross-checked by the research assistant (interviewer) and the research participants for accuracy.

Next, the transcripts were read and coded by two independent research assistants using open and axial coding procedures in qualitative data analysis. First, the data was read several times by the research assistants (raters). Next, the research raters used open coding and wrote notes and themes from the readings in the margins of the transcripts (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2013) to generate ideas for possible categories. Main themes and categories were developed and then the data were recoded using axial coding methods (Miles et al., 2013). During the open coding process, organizing the data in terms of strengths and weaknesses in each of the intervention modules seemed to provide the most meaningful way of presenting and categorizing the data. Hence, the themes and quotes below pertain to content that emerged by intervention module when discussing the intervention with the youths. Participants' names and identifying information have been changed to protect confidentiality.

Results

We categorized the main themes emergent from the data and corresponding quotes. The main themes included: developing relationships and building connections, exploring gender roles, negotiating identities, school engagement, and future planning.

Developing Relationships and Building Connections

The first two sessions focused on introducing the participants to the group, establishing collaborative goals, and developing trust and connection. Subcategories in this theme were safety, collaboration, and openness.

Safety. Participants felt it was helpful to have very clear rules and instructions for the group. This structure and focus created a safe and consistent space for the youth of color in the group.

Collaboration. Participants appreciated being involved in developing group rules and in developing the main content of the curriculum. This was achieved by having the counselor lead initial discussions asking them about their main interests, challenges, and questions about being a young man of color. Participants reported that they had a good understanding of how the group works and their role in it.

> CJ (African-American): "Uh everybody liked was in the group. We set good group goals. Uh every group every week we had group we know what we wanted to do, we wanted to know, we know where we wanted to be what um, yeah, just where we want to be and what we wanted to get across during that group time. If we didn't have enough time then yeah we try to fit everything."

Openness. Participants also shared that the group allowed them to open up to others, which also opened their minds to new ideas, cultural perspectives, strengths, and friendships. It appears that this level of openness allowed for closer social connections and support to develop in the group.

> Ricky (Latino): "Everyone kinda opened up about what they thought the certain meanings were, like the definitions that they didn't really close too much inside of them like they were actually revealing some personal stuff kinda like their family background and stuff, where they came from and their story so that was, that was pretty good."

Openness and sharing in the group also allowed for people to begin trusting one another and for participants to feel as if they were part of a larger community or cultural-social group beyond their own specific friendships. However, on the flip side, there were some people in the group who were uncomfortable with sharing and there were also occasional side conversations during the group.

> David (Latino): "We had a greater sense of community. For high school males they are not socialized to connect in a personal and cultural way about their family. Saw each other in a different way, connected in a different way. Saw commonalities, which increased connection and trust and sharing. Strength is that we got to see like the person's background, where they're from more and get to know more of who they are and you start to trust them more so you're able to share more. We got to get to know new people, maybe even people we weren't even um friends with and um some weaknesses are probably that um we're just getting to know people and we've had to like share some like experiences. Maybe some people were uncomfortable with that."

Exploring Gender Roles

Another theme that emerged from the group was exploring gender roles. Group members were encouraged to think about and discuss meaningful questions about what it means to be a young male of color growing up in an urban community. The counselor encouraged participants to ask any question about girls, women, boys, gender/cultural issues and/or being a man by allowing them to write questions anonymously on a piece of paper and putting them in a box. The group discussed these questions openly and confidentially. These questions were also used in a panel of women that visited the group. Subcategories included respect for women and gender role socialization.

Specifically, participants in the group reported that they were able to discuss and learn ways to be more respectful to women in a variety of social and cultural realms.

They reported that they learned a lot about women experiences, sexism, and reached a deeper level of understanding about women that they didn't understand before.

> Jon (African-American): "…the counselor actually brought women to the class to discuss you know how it was to be a woman and then you know, u know just basically answer any questions that we had."

Participants also spent time in the group exploring what it meant to be a man of color, their gender role socialization, what are the expectations, pressures, challenges, and life decisions. They discussed different areas in their life where they felt specific pressures to conform to gendered behaviors such as sexuality and relationships.

> David (Latino): "We got to share our own opinion about what a man is and hear others not just what he looks like but whether he can provide for his family, or sexuality, like is he straight, gay or how many woman he get, how many he sleeps with."

The discussion was facilitated by an activity where participants created collages of different images. However, a challenge for some participants involved not wanting to conform to an image from a magazine. This allowed for in-depth discussion of contesting stereotypical images of masculinity and a critique of biased representations of men of color in the media.

> Jon (African American): "Like you got to pick it (image) out of a magazine and describe that but what if someone had a definition of a man that wasn't in a magazine? Then we should've gotten kind of into more of that like well if this is one of them now are there other definitions of a man you know like that kind of stuff."

Negotiating Identities

The theme of negotiating identities also came forth from the data revealing how the participants grappled with different potential roles in their lives. Subcategories

include importance of role models and positive and negative aspects of gangs, which were some things that the participants had requested to discuss in the group. With respect to the importance of role models, group members were asked to discuss different role models in their lives, which allowed them to think about who is their role model, qualities of a good role model, why having positive role models is important, and learning from their role models.

> Joshua (Croatian): "...my role model was my older brother…well my only brother and he's older and I didn't really talk much about him but when I did, uh, I think other people like really, mm, realized how much I really did like him and that he was like close to me and stuff."

> CJ (African American): "Um yeah, some people, some of their role models were uh they were good overall but uh I think there was maybe 1 or 2 people who I don't want to say looked up to the wrong people but in my opinion, I wouldn't have looked up to them. But you know everybody's situation is different so I don't judge them on that."

However, as indicated from the quote from CJ, participants also shared that some students had negative role models and this was concerning because they may be a bad influence on them. This further underscores the importance of discussing role models and qualities of a good role model through school counseling interventions.

With respect to the positive and negative aspects of gangs, the data revealed that this discussion was helpful for group members because it provided an in depth perspective of why people may join gangs for social connection. However, the participants also learned about sociopolitical factors as well as the dangers of gang involvement. For instance, there was elaboration about violence, dangers, peer pressure, and illegal activity associated with gangs. Participants did feel it would have been helpful to have former gang members come speak to the group.

Steve (Asian): "…I learned that gangs have a good side about them and bad side about them. They stay good their relationships, their friends, their "homies"…bad side is they do the gang stuff like drugs and violence..."

Ramon (Latino): "Like some of the things I liked was people they just like shared things about like their families and like who's in the gang and stuff like that so that was just nice…"

School Engagement

School engagement was also revealed as an important theme in our results with academic self-advocacy and effective study skills as categories. In terms of academic self-advocacy, participants reported that the group spent time discussing and learning how to be a better student and better citizen in the school context. They focused on and learned to use proper body language that would demonstrate their respect for teachers. They also discussed and learned more about teachers' expectations in class and how to talk to teachers respectfully. The group members also practiced effective communication skills with teachers. The importance of recognizing students' cultural assets and experiences were also integrated throughout the discussions of teacher-student relationships.

David (Latino): "Strength is learning to be a better student, not just academically, just like your body language in class, like not slouching over, try not to sleep. Um we also learned like if there's an issue between the teacher and you, like most people will say "oh it's the teacher it's not me" but we learned it is, if it is mostly you if you don't like a teacher you may need to try even harder in the class."

Ramon (Latino): "Well, we learned how to talk to teachers, how to approach them like not them just being teachers but also being like a friend and if not like you know someone you're at least comfortable talking to and not to like waste their time because they're there for you to learn and not there to fool around like so I mean yeah that's some things I learned."

Students also expressed that not all teachers are fair so they also had to learn the skills to deal with difficult teachers. Participant data also revealed a category of effective study skills. Students were pushed to work harder to get better grades and be more academically involved. They also learned how school is important, that it can prepare someone for getting into college, and that going to an afterschool program may be helpful in students' development.

> Joshua (Croatian): "Um you guys helped me go to the after school program and uh just to go after school and get better grades. If I have better grades I could have a better life and all that stuff. And that's what I really want for me and my family."

> CJ (African American): "I'm not gonna say it's not important, all school is important but middle school you're still growing up so once you get to high school you know um this group has helped me academically in being more involved with learning, knowing how to get involved talking to my teachers, uh not holding things back. Say I missed a few questions on a test and got a bad grade I'm not just gonna keep that to myself you know I go back to my teachers…how can I make this better?"

Future Planning

The final theme emerging from the group was future planning which included the categories of importance of prioritizing and need for supportive structures in school. The final sessions of the group focused on discussing how to plan for the future and the role of school in developing a path to college and career. Activities concentrated on demonstrating to students how to balance and make decisions about their multiple interests. These activities helped participants realize the importance of prioritizing:

> Jon (African American): "[the group] was pretty good because it showed you like how to get your priorities straight. What is a necessity and what is you know, just for fun. And it kind of showed me that …I didn't need to skateboard for like two

hours every day. but then it showed me that I did need to do some stuff like I might need to study and take a hour of skating and put an hour of studying in there. So that was a good thing showed me how to prioritize."

Ramon (Latino) reported: "Well for me like it made me think like that if like going to school is like the main thing because like just like school will get you a better future practically."

Group members also noted the need for supportive structures in school/community in future planning and were able to see how meaningful it was to have supportive networks in place at school. This feedback is of particular relevance for the delivery of comprehensive and collaborative school counseling services.

CJ (African American): "Um being, being a man and growing up how to plan my future that's how it influenced me you know uh I feel like I had the support of the group and I have support at home so that was that that's the starting foundation for me to get to my future, knowing that I have people behind me is a good feeling. I know I can proceed and go forward with all my plans."

David (Latino): "Definitely. I made new friends. I was given a chance to share whatever was bothering me and then like with its, the whole thing about students and teacher relationships really help because I had a lot of like trouble with teachers and it helped me just to transition into high school in general."

In this regard, the group members discussed how to find support from one another and hold each other accountable when they see each other making damaging decisions related to school and future planning.

Applications for School Counseling Practice

The Boys II Men school-based intervention was originally designed to support a group of boys of color as they transitioned to high school. The young men attended all the group sessions and the group was implemented as intended, in a participatory way. One important component of the approach was that the school counselor partnered with

teachers, the school administration, and the wellness center to most effectively design and deliver this group at the school. Consultation with teachers and school administration was a key element of the outreach process and implementation plan of this group. Collaboration was particularly important given that we intended to reach youths who were more vulnerable in their high school transition period.

The evaluation of the group through group participants interviews and feedback revealed that the main strengths of the Boys II Men intervention included learning practical skills to support academic performance, fostering social and school connections and support, exploring gender role and identity, and learning how to deal with life conflicts/decisions, which facilitated the boys' transition to high school in their ninth grade. The emphasis on cultural strengths and experiences as diverse young men was also a key contribution of this program. The school counselor actively discussed the youths' experiences with respect to their race, gender socialization and cultural background. Suggestions for improvement from the participants' perspective included: more and longer sessions so they have more time to process the content discussed in the groups. Below we discuss specific themes that emerged from the interviews as they may impact school counseling practice and research.

Social Supports and Connections

In historically targeted communities, such us urban boys of color, there is a hypervigilance, which impacts sense of safety and trust, so counselors need to insure that participants feel safe and protected in the group (Carter, 2005; Sue & Sue, 2012). This can be promoted through establishing clear group rules and boundaries, which is something we emphasized from the beginning of the group. Further, the boys were

actively engaged in creating the group rules and had input about the content covered. The participatory nature of the group may be associated with the sense of safety, collaboration, and openness that the participants reported about the group.

In addition, one of the emerging themes from the interviews revealed that the boys felt more comfortable relating and understanding others in the group. Our group was composed of diverse youths living in an inner city; although they may share some common experiences as urban young boys of color, often times groups separate across racial/cultural lines in schools (Barajas & Ronnkvist, 2007; Tatum, 2003). In this context, many school-based interventions have been developed for specific racial/cultural groups (e.g., Lewis, Andrews, & Gaska, 2012; Villalba, Ivers, & Ohims, 2010; Yeh, Okubo, Cha, Lee, & Shin, 2008). We recognize the strengths and the need for such interventions; however, it is also important that counselors work with diverse groups of students to deconstruct privilege/oppression and increase tolerance as it was done in this group of students (La Roche & Tawa, 2011; Rubin, 2007). Overall, counselors' proactive engagement of diverse groups, will lead to a better school climate and greater engagement.

Exploring Gender Roles

Two themes emerged with respect to the exploration of gender roles in the group: (a) respect for women and (b) gender role socialization.

Respect for women. For heterosexual males of color, there are gendered norms with respect to male-female interactions that are often unspoken but that may have a profound impact the men's behaviors and attitudes (Mahalik et al., 2003). We found that the young boys in the group were eager to navigate gender roles, discuss issues related

to sexism and increase their awareness and sensitivity towards women issues. Our approach, in which the young males conversed directly with a panel of woman, was helpful in fostering real conversations between the boys and girls about their internalization of ascribed gender roles. It is important to note that more school counseling interventions and conversations with the boys about these issues would have been beneficial as some of them still reported feeling self-conscious about needing to conform to specific gendered ways of being when interacting with their female and male peers. School counseling interventions targeting gender socialization may lead to better health outcomes and wellness among students in their school (Hammer & Good, 2010). Respect for women is an issue that should be intentionally addressed in schools at different levels.

Gender role socialization. The group participants acknowledged and discussed stereotypes related to gender and culture in the group. For instance, there were discussions in which the boys elaborated on the positive sides and also the pressures of male gender identity. Congruent with the theorizations from the psychology of men, the participants discussed the importance of seeing their identity as providers, strong, and protective figures (Hammer & Good, 2010). In addition, they engaged on a critical discussion about pressures associated with their sexuality (Levant, 1992). In this context, the boys were also able to challenge stereotypical images of men presented in society, and how they would re-define their own gender identities based on their perceptions/experiences. This is a positive outcome as scholars have found that a flexible gender identity is associated with a more positive self-concept and overall health (Hammer & Good, 2010; Mahalik et al., 2003). School counseling groups and

interventions should also explore the intersections of culture, race, gender socialization, identity, and sexual orientation to provide safe place for youths to discuss their experiences.

Navigating Identities

The group participants also engaged on critical conversations about community factors that may impact their identity and behaviors as young men. These conversations included their critical assessment of role models and the presence of gangs in their communities.

Positive and negative aspects of gangs. The group participants discussed positive and negative aspects associated with gang membership. Specifically, the participants identified relational and community aspects associated with gang membership. However, they also elaborated on the dangers and/or criminal activity associated with gangs. For many participants, this was a critical and sensible way to approach the presence of gang activity in their communities. Specifically, some of the boys commented on their direct experiences with family involvement in gang, which is a risk factor for further gang involvement (O'Brien, Daffern, Chu, & Thomas, 2013). The nonjudgmental and supportive approach from the school counselor about this issue may welcome future conversations with school staff/adults about the pressures associated with gang in the community (O'Brien et al., 2013; Sharkey, Shekhtmeyster, Chavez-Lopez, Norris, & Sass, 2011). It is important for school counselors to engage in open conversations with students when addressing gang risk factors. This way, students will feel safe and welcomed to discuss their perceptions or pressures pertaining to gangs in the community. A critical discussion about sociopolitical inequities and factors

associated with gangs would also be important to increase students' critical consciousness as a prevention measure.

Role models. The literature about urban boys' experiences highlights the importance of positive role models to increase positive emotional, academic, and social outcomes (e.g., Hurd, Zimmerman, & Reischl, 2011; Rhodes, Grossman, & Resch, 2000; Somers et al., 2009). Specifically, given the prevalence of negative media images and the stigma often ascribed to young men of color, a discussion about role models in the group was particularly relevant. For many ethnic minority males in school, there is a perception that their school counselors are just not available to them (Vela-Gude et al., 2009). This group provides much needed resources and attention to an often-neglected group. Moreover, having critical conversations among the group members and school counselor about role models helped the young men to better assess and select positive role models.

School Engagement and Future Planning

As intended, our intervention seemed to increase school engagement and future planning as illustrated by the themes discussed below.

Academic self-advocacy and skills. Boys reported an increased sense of academic skills and advocacy in school. After participating in the group, they reported being more knowledgeable about the school resources, expectations, and the impact of their behavior in school. In addition, they reported feeling more comfortable approaching their teachers to get their academic needs met. Students were also able to discuss issues related to fairness and ways to handle difficult communications/conflict with

teachers. This is particularly relevant as the boys' relationship with their teachers is directly related to their sense of belonging in the school (Booker, 2006; Johnson, 2009).

Future planning. Students reported that the school counseling group intervention helped them to think about their future as they make decisions and make priorities in their current educational/social lives. The subcategories that emerged in this section were the importance of prioritizing and identifying supportive structures for future planning in school. The boys reported how important was to keep a balance in which they also realized how everything they did in school matters for their future. This finding was encouraging, as researchers have reported that future and career planning increases academic performance and school engagement (Kenny, Blustein, Haase, Jackson, & Perry, 2006; Perry, Liu, & Pabian, 2010). Further, school counseling interventions that focus on developing a future orientation may translate into increased engagement and hope, which is critical for urban youths, especially boys.

Limitations

Although our evaluation revealed many strengths of our school counseling intervention, there are several areas of improvement for future culturally responsive programs for boys of color. Specifically, the present group was an initial pilot of the Boys II Men intervention, for which the generalizability of the findings are very limited due to our small sample of participants (N = 11) and the single school in which the intervention took place. We also focused primarily on the experiences of heterosexual boys since all of the boys had identified their sexual orientation as "straight." Future school counseling groups that explore notions of masculinity should further integrate sexual orientation

with gender role identity and gender role conflict as an important aspect of multicultural competence (Bidell, 2012).

In addition, results indicating the effectiveness of the intervention should be taken with caution due to the lack of a control group to compare the results with. For instance, it could be possible that the increased school connection and/or engagement reported after participating in the group could also be explained by other factors such as maturation and/or time to get adjusted and socialized into the high school. However, many of the boys explicitly shared how this group allowed them to relate to other students that they would generally have not interacted with, which in turn helped them to feel more connected to others in the school. Moreover, the absence of pre-test qualitative data did not allowed us to establish how the boys' ideas and attitudes towards some of themes addressed in the group, such as gender identity, role models, and gang involvement, changed after their participation in the group. Finally, it would have also strengthened our results to assess academic markers and also the longitudinal potential effects of this intervention.

Summary and Implications for Research

The implementation of the Boys II Men group helped us learn about important practices that may be effective when working with diverse urban boys. Specifically, we found that the boys responded well to our relational approach in which the boys connected with each other in ways usually boys are not socialized to. In addition, the group was lead in a participatory way, which seemed empowering to increase the boys' investment in the group and the school. Additionally, the discussion of diverse experiences associated with gender, race, and culture increased the group members'

openness towards students of different backgrounds, which may lead to a more positive school cultural climate. These counseling practices helped the students to have a positive transition to high school facilitating their social connectedness and engagement in school.

Future research on school counseling practice should further investigate the complex interactions between gender, culture, and race in urban youths in schools. Future studies may replicate the group design with other populations. Further, long-term evaluation and specific markers of academic engagement should be incorporated when observing the impact of gender and race socialization in the academic performance of urban youths. In addition, based in our findings, we recommend further study of the impacts of gender socialization, racial identity, and inter-group school relations on youths' empowerment and on the development of a social justice orientation in urban schools.

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Appendix

Session/Topic	Objectives	Activities overview
Session 1: Introduction/Building connections	Introductions Creating rules for the group Challenges facing young men of color	Share something about yourself. Talk about your interests in and out of school Group collaboratively develop ground rules Discussion about challenges as men of color
Session 2: Introduction/Building connections	Building social support and connection Developing trust and rapport Learning about each other's lives and backgrounds	Community tree activity Students wrote on note cards and taped them to a community tree Each member spoke about what he wrote: *Where are you from? *Interests| *What does being independent mean to you? *How would you define respect? *What does communication look like? *What does family mean to you?
Session 3: Exploring gender roles	Discussing and exploring what it means to be a man of color	What does it mean to be a man? A man of color? Participants cut images of man from magazines and made collages Explored themes from collages: Family, job, partner, status, image, education, race
Session 4: Understanding women	Examining and discussing how to respectfully interact with women in and outside of school	Women's panel. Group met during the week at lunch to generate questions for the women's panel. Discussing themes included: Showing respect, being an example to your own sisters, talking to women, approaching and understanding women, offering support
Session 5: Negotiating identities	Identifying role models	Who is your role model? Each student selected and discussed a role model. Conversation related to exploring positive identities as young men of color
Session 6: Negotiating identities	Exploring the pros and cons of gang affiliation	Why do people join gangs? Themes included love, acceptance, family, protection, interests, respect, etc. What are other ways to seek these same qualities without joining a gang (such as doing a sport, club). Risks and negative aspects of gangs
Session 7: School engagement	Learning educational advocacy skills Understanding teacher expectations	How can you advocate for yourself with your teachers? Talk about how to improve grades What makes it hard to communicate with your teacher? Changing behavior
Session 8: Future planning	Life after high school Planning for the immediate and more distant future	Future goals activity Students were given paper plates and attached Post-it's with future goals and things they like to do. They worked on finding a balance for goal attainment and success
Session 9: Celebration	What they gained from the group	Group members and the counselor had a party where they informally shared what they learned from the group and what they will take with them. Themes included: exploring gender roles, making new friends, being more self-efficacious in school, and supportive friends

Biographical Statements

Leyla Pérez-Gualdrón is an assistant professor in the school counseling program at the University of San Francisco. She teaches courses such as counseling theory and practice, and career counseling for school counseling students. She is certified by the National Career Development Association as an instructor for career development facilitators. She has provided school-based interventions addressing educational engagement of youths as related to career development, acculturation, and racial identity. She conducts research on the relationship between school cultural variables and the development of social justice orientation and academic outcomes in youths.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Leyla M. Pérez-Gualdrón, University of San Francisco, Department of Counseling Psychology, School of Education, 2130 Fulton Street, San Francisco, CA 94117-1080. Email: lperezgualdron@usfca.edu

Christine Yeh is the coordinator and a professor in the school counseling program at the University of San Francisco. She was previously associate professor and director of the school counseling program at Teachers College, Columbia University. Her scholarly interests center on fostering positive cultural identities and educational equity for historically targeted groups through culturally responsive and anticolonial school- and community-based programs. She is the recipient of several national awards for her collaborative work with diverse youth in urban schools and communities.

LyRyan Russell is a school counselor at Sacred Heart Cathedral Preparatory high school and a graduate of the school counseling program at the University of San

Francisco, where he is also currently an instructor. He is also the director and founder of

Dream to Achieve, a nonprofit organization that provides youth and young adults timely

resources and support as they mature academically, socially, and professionally into

productive citizens in their schools, communities, and future work environments. He is

also the 2014 recipient of the Fr. Stephen Privett Living the Mission Award for his

outstanding record of advocacy for youth.