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Relationships as Embodied Counterspaces in the Academy

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Abstract

This study explores the experiences of 24 Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) students and four staff members affiliated with a transitional undergraduate research program that facilitated a bi-directional socialization process that nurtured students' cultural backgrounds and identities. This critical qualitative case study considers the possibility of relationships as embodied counterspaces in the academy, encouraging us to reconsider the ways in which we imagine spaces of restoration and empowerment in higher education. Findings reveal that counterspaces can transcend physical spaces and can become embodied within relationships that move with, and can be accessed by, students throughout their college journey. Within these relationships, students are affirmed and empowered, which supports them in navigating college. Implications for research and practice are provided.

Keywords: counterspaces, relationships, BIPOC students

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Relationships as Embodied Counterspaces in the Academy

Historically White Institutions (HWIs) can be racially hostile for Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) students* (Keels & Davis, 2020; McCoy et al., 2015; Winkle-Wagner et al., 2019). BIPOC students are more likely to experience their campus as unwelcoming, sexist, and intolerant than their White peers (Abrica & Hatch-Tocaimaza, 2019). A racially hostile campus climate causes BIPOC students to feel marginalized and isolated (Harper & Hurtado, 2007). BIPOC students often experience racial microaggressions, which can include verbal and non-verbal assumptions and narrowed and lowered expectations of students' abilities (Keels & Offidani-Bertrand, 2020; Solórzano et al., 2000). Experiencing racial microaggressions and the accompanying negative racial campus climate can lead to feelings of self-doubt, isolation, and discouragement (Keels & Offidani-Bertrand, 2020; Solórzano et al., 2000). Moreover, first-year campus climate experiences are related to senior-year psychological well-being for BIPOC students, thus creating a positive campus experience for BIPOC students is important to their mental health (Koo, 2021).

As a result of racially hostile campus climates, BIPOC students often seek places of refuge in counterspaces (Brooms et al., 2021; Keels & Davis, 2020; Solórzano et al., 2000; Tichavakunda, 2021), which can be empowering and restorative spaces for students. Counterspaces are "sites where deficit notions of people of color can be challenged and where a positive collegiate racial climate can be established and maintained" (Solórzano et al., 2000, p. 70). Counterspaces allow for students to feel validated and for their experiences and knowledge to be viewed as valuable (Luedke et al., 2019; Solórzano et al., 2000). One well known form of a campus counterspace is a cultural center, where BIPOC students can be affirmed (Patton, 2010; Yosso & Lopez, 2010). Cultural centers have been described as places on the margins of college campuses (Yosso & Lopez, 2010). These margins can be empowering places that provide a physical location of resistance and possibility (hooks, 1990). Another counterspace is ethnic studies courses (Nuñez, 2011) where students' backgrounds and identities are explicitly a part of the curriculum. Culturally based student organizations are a student created counterspace (Luedke, 2019). Some BIPOC students create their own counterspaces by surrounding themselves with other BIPOC students (Keels & Davis, 2020). Existing scholarship on counterspaces has primarily centered on physical spaces of refuge or affirmation (Case, 2014; Patton, 2010). What is lacking in the literature is considering what a counterspace might be outside of physically confined spaces.

The purpose of this study is to examine how one academic transition program, Project Scholar, facilitated relationships of affirmation and restoration within an HWI. While

* In this study BIPOC refer to students who identify as/within a racially or ethnically minoritized group such as African American or Black, Latina/o/x, Native American or Indigenous, or Southeast Asian.

Project Scholar became a counterspace for students, in this article I will argue that relationships which were initially established through Project Scholar transcended the physical spaces of the program and hold potential as embodied counterspaces for BIPOC students. These counterspaces were not strictly attached to physical spaces, but rather were embodied within relationships and within the presence of others, which is distinct from how we often discuss counterspaces within existing scholarship. Better understanding how embodied counterspaces are established and maintained will provide insight into strategies institutions and institutional stakeholders can employ to continuously challenge racist campus environments and work toward enhancing the sense of belonging for BIPOC students. Thus, I explore the following research questions in this study:

1. How are meaningful relationships established in and through Project Scholar?
2. How do these relationships transcend the program and become embodied counterspaces where students are affirmed, empowered, and supported with persisting in college?

Literature Review

BIPOC students often experience a lifetime of lowered expectations placed upon them (Oakes, 2005; Solórzano et al., 2000). These lowered expectations present themselves in many forms from narrowed representation in the media (Donahoo, 2017), lowered expectation in the classroom (Keels & Offidani-Bertrand, 2020; Oakes, 2005; Solórzano et al., 2000), limited career choices (McCoy et al., 2017), to being told to limit their ideas around their potential for success (McCoy et al., 2017). These narrowed expectations placed upon BIPOC people can be negated through the creation of community with other BIPOC people who lift them up and encourage educational achievement (Guiffrida, 2005; Luedke et al., 2019; Luedke, 2020; Tichavakunda, 2021).

Within colleges and universities, counterspaces can be created to serve as a buffer from the larger campus (Case, 2014; Solórzano et al., 2000) and even negative societal messages. Some Black students have made conscious decisions to disassociate from many aspects of campus life due to racism and hostility they experienced on campus (Keels & Davis, 2020). This is in contrast to the wealth of literature that advocates for the importance of finding culturally sustaining ways to connect on campus as contributors to persistence (Brooms & Davis, 2017; Brooms et al., 2021; Luedke, 2019). In this literature review, I will review existing literature on counterspaces in higher education to help us understand what they are, where we find them, and their benefits, and I will conclude with a working definition of counterspaces for this study.

Understanding Counterspaces in the Academy

Counterspaces are spaces where negative experiences with racism can be challenged and negated and where a more positive racial environment can be established (Brooms et al., 2021; Solórzano et al., 2000). For example, Brooms and colleagues (2021) found that within Black men's groups, men were able to learn new things about one another and Black men that challenged deficit tropes about Black men. For example, one participant shared that he learned there are more Black men in college than in prison which is counter to inaccurate portrayals in the media. Within their Black men's group, participants were able to further develop their critical consciousness, create bonds with one another, and build positive identities. Counterspaces are crucial to students' ability to manage and cope with these stressors as well as thrive in college (Brooms, 2018; Luedke, 2017; Luedke, 2019; Tichavakunda, 2021). For example, Tichavakunda (2021) described the racialization of campus life and highlighted the ways in which Black students sought and created joy through recreation, leisure, and celebratory events that centered Black students. Students often seek out counterspaces due to the "placelessness" they experience on their larger HWI (Case, 2014, p. 92).

As a result of a lack of belonging, racism, and discrimination experienced by BIPOC students, many campuses have established programs to support BIPOC students in their transition to campus. Transition programs often focus on the summer between high school graduation and the first year of college and students typically move on to campus early for a summer program. These transition programs may include enrollment in courses (Cabrera et al., 2013; Gonzalez Quiroz & Garza, 2018) and activities to support students' integration (Cabrera et al., 2013). Other transition programs support students during the first year of college (Grier-Reed et al., 2016). Grier-Reed and colleagues (2016) examined the participation of African American students in a program called the African American Student Network which provides a weekly social support group over the lunch hour. The program is loosely structured to create a space where students can develop relationships and discuss their experiences at their HWI (Grier-Reed et al., 2016). Transition programs have been established to aid in the transition to college and can sometimes be counterspaces for participants.

Where Do We Find Counterspaces

Counterspaces are often developed in cultural centers (Case, 2014; Patton, 2010), culturally based student organizations (Garcia, 2019; Luedke, 2019), ethnic studies courses (Nuñez, 2011), departments (Garcia & Okhidoi, 2015), and academic programs that provide a culturally nurturing environment (Luedke et al., 2019). Researchers have traditionally discussed counterspaces in relation to physical spaces of refuge (Case, 2014; Nuñez, 2011; Patton, 2010). However, more recently, scholars have begun to explore the role of counterspaces not attached to physical settings. For example, George Mwangi et al. (2018) explored online counterspaces in their critical discourse analysis of the *I, Too, Am* social media movement. They found that BIPOC students used

social media as a platform to develop solidarity with other BIPOC students. Ong et al. (2018) explored peer-to-peer and mentoring relationships among Women of Color in STEM fields as another form of counterspace that was not necessarily attached to a physical setting. In fact, Ong and colleagues (2018) found peer-to-peer relationships that Women of Color experienced were the most prevalent form of counterspace (74% reported a peer-to-peer relationship as a counterspace that supported their persistence in their STEM field). Keels and Davis (2020) found that Black women who attended HWIs created their own counterspaces in community with other Black students as a strategy for persistence.

Flint and colleagues (2019) investigated the role of space, and rights to space in higher education for nonbinary and agender students. They challenged scholars and practitioners to think more dynamically about space. Spaces are not static, and they do not occur within a vacuum but are rather a result of interactions and fluidity. Flint and colleagues (2019) suggest that claiming space and taking up space as counterspaces occurs physically, through expression, and with kinship networks. The results of recent scholarship warrant further exploration into expanding our conceptualization of counterspaces, how they are created and sustained, and how they serve students.

What Is Gained in Counterspaces?

Counterspaces have myriad benefits, including providing a place of refuge (Patton, 2010); a culturally welcoming and validating environment (Luedke, 2019; Druery & Brooms, 2019) and a collectivist orientation (Druery & Brooms, 2019; Luedke, 2017); to places of more formal resistance where negative perceptions and ideology can be refuted (Nuñez, 2011; Ong et al., 2018). Counterspaces can provide a place for coping with stress induced by experiences with racial microaggressions (Grier-Reed et al., 2016). Keels and Offidani-Bertrand (2020) shared that in addition to counterspaces providing a critical mass of students from a particular racial/ethnic group, they also facilitated students being able to move beyond relying only on their own coping strategies and sharing resources and information with one another.

Rudick (2017) examined the experiences of BIPOC students in college classrooms as they navigated racism and explored ways to resist within these spaces. BIPOC students engaged in various communication tactics to resist institutionalized racism and to protect themselves (Rudick, 2017). Latina/o/x students in ethnic studies courses developed tools to manage feelings of isolation, enhanced their cultural knowledge, created deeper student-faculty relationships, and developed strategies and tools to handle racism (Nuñez, 2011). Case (2014) found that highly involved members of a Black Cultural Center (BCC) received significantly more from their engagement with the center and spoke more highly of the center than students who had minimal involvement with the center (some with low involvement described it as unwelcoming).

In addition to gaining skills to maneuver their HWI, BIPOC students have also reported a benefit of a counterspace is a place they can bring their full self (Luedke,

2017; Tichavakunda, 2021). BIPOC students across myriad studies have shared that through their largely racially/ethnically homogeneous student groups and spaces they have found a sense of family or home away from home. For example, Luedke (2019) found this for Latina/o/x students through engagement with student organizations, Tichavakunda (2021) found this sense of family for Black students through involvement and leisure activities, Brooms and colleagues (2021) found this for Black men in a Men of Color group, and Tachine and colleagues (2017) found this through a Native American cultural center.

Meaningful Relationships

The right relationships can be impactful for students. Culturally responsive approaches to teaching and interacting with diverse students is critical. Grapin and Pereiras (2019) and Luedke et al. (2019) suggest that valuing and building upon students' cultural backgrounds, assets, and experiences is important if faculty and staff members want to successfully reach their students. Valuing students' backgrounds can lead to a greater sense of self and belonging. While faculty, staff, and administrators can create and sustain places that are comfortable and welcoming, they should also support "students' right to take up, create, and produce other spaces of campus" (Flint et al., 2019, p. 450).

Women of Color gain validation, confidence, and skills or tools from the counterspaces they co-create with peers and in mentoring relationships that often occur with other BIPOC people or women (Ong et al., 2018). This confidence and belief in themselves and their abilities facilitated their ability to navigate and overcome challenges they experienced on campus (Ong et al., 2018). Guiffrida (2005) found that Black faculty took on othermothering roles with Black students, where they not only supported students' academic experiences but also their social emotional experiences, set high standards for achievement, and took a vested interest in the success of their students. Students described othermothering strategies as going above and beyond to support their sense of belonging and success in college (Flowers et al., 2015; Guiffrida, 2005).

The concept of othermothering is rooted in enslavement, where women took on a mothering role for children left motherless due to separation from slave trading (Collins, 2000; Flowers et al., 2015). Within the context of higher education, othermothering is used to describe a family-like or caring relationship where the student is supported holistically inside and outside of the classroom (above and beyond what would be expected of faculty/staff; Flowers et al., 2015). McCallum (2020) explored how othermothering contributed to Black students' decision to pursue doctoral study, finding that caring, keeping it real, holding high expectations, and having identity connections contributed to students' desire to pursue graduate school. For BIPOC students, having a mentor or role model who is a person of Color can have a significant impact on one's sense of belonging (Luedke, 2017; Brooms & Davis, 2017; Flowers et al., 2015; Reddick, 2011). Prior scholarship signals hope in the ways that empowering

relationships create momentum that supports BIPOC students in finding and nurturing a sense of belonging in their college experience.

Defining Counterspaces in the Context of This Study

Drawing from existing literature and within the context of this study, counterspaces are defined as spaces where BIPOC students can bring their full selves and identities (Luedke, 2017; Tichavakunda, 2021), their educational aspirations are encouraged (Brooms & Davis, 2017; Luedke et al., 2019), and they feel empowered (Brooms et al., 2021). This is the working definition of counterspaces that I will center in this work as I explore how meaningful relationships established in Project Scholar transcend the program and become embodied counterspaces where students are affirmed, empowered, and supported with persisting in college.

Theoretical Framework

I utilize Critical Race Theory (CRT; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; McCoy & Rodricks, 2015), in particular the work on counterspaces (Solórzano et al., 2000) to inform the theoretical underpinnings of this paper. Critical Race Theory unapologetically foregrounds race and racism in society and centers the experiences of BIPOC (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; McCoy & Rodricks, 2015). Central to CRT is the understanding that racism is endemic, institutional, and systemic (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). The four primary tenets of CRT are (a) racism is an ordinary, everyday part of life (racism is central to the way the United States functions); (b) interest convergence (when the interests of Whites can be advanced, and interests converge, progress can be made); (c) race is a social construction, not biological; and (d) differential racialization and its consequences (how society racializes different groups at different times based on its needs, i.e. finding a scapegoat; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017).

Through a CRT approach, Solórzano et al. (2000) examine the creation of counterspaces. Solórzano and colleagues (2000) conducted focus groups to better understand how African American students experienced their campus racial climate. They found that African American students created counterspaces in opposition to the racism and microaggressions they experienced on campus in academic and social spaces (see also Keels & Davis, 2020). Counterspaces are places where positive affirming relationships can be established, students can feel restored, and deficit-oriented perspectives can be negated. Counterspaces have traditionally been associated with physical spaces in the literature. While physical spaces can be paramount to finding places of belonging, this study explores expanding our understanding of physical counterspaces to embodied counterspaces present within relationships that flow within, between, and across physical spaces. Critical Race Theory informed this study by centering the experiences of BIPOC students as they navigated their HWI. Critical Race Theory informed program identification (Project Scholar) and participant recruitment (which

was a two-way process where I provided a workshop and served as an invited speaker for the program prior to and after participant recruitment). Critical Race Theory also influenced data analysis by bringing a critical perspective that led me to consider the influence of meaningful relationships as counterspaces on students' experiences. Critical Race Theory served as a lens to analyze issues of race, racism, and power within my analysis, and it facilitated the understanding of how the relationships that students relied on and nurtured influenced students' sense of belonging. In this study, I will focus on the ways that Project Scholar creates an affirming community where program affiliates create relationships that serve as embodied counterspaces not only within the program, but also transcend the program to support students in their navigation of an HWI.

Methods

A group of researchers and I (the lead Principal Investigator) conducted a critical qualitative longitudinal case study (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2016; Flyvbjerg, 2006). The case study was bounded by participation in an academic program, Project Scholar, at a comprehensive institution in the Midwest. Our critical approach informed all aspects of the study from the development of interview questions, relationships with participants, and the data analysis. A critical case study approach was appropriate because we sought to explore the role of the program in students' collegiate experience, both during formal participation and beyond. Project Scholar sought to expose students to undergraduate research (as a form of early graduate school anticipatory socialization), connect students with institutional resources, and create a culturally nurturing environment at an HWI. The initial research team included faculty members and graduate students who were involved in conducting interviews and preliminary data analysis and two undergraduate research assistants (year one only) engaged in participant observation and gathering literature.

Research Site

The research site is a public comprehensive university in the Midwest. Demographics of the undergraduate student population (approximately 12,000 students) at the institution during the first year of data collection (2014) was: (5% Latina/o, 5% Black, 1% Asian, <1% Native American, <2% Asian, 4% Bi/Multi-Racial, and 83% White). Project Scholar is a transitional bridge program into college that provides intentional bi-directional socialization through early exposure to undergraduate research, with a deliberate focus on encouraging students to see and use their backgrounds and identities as assets during college. The idea for the program was born out of a desire to create a larger pool of potential future McNair Scholars (an undergraduate research program) at the institution. Project Scholar is not a national program and is specific to

this campus. Criteria to be invited to participate in Project Scholar included identification as a racial/ethnic minoritized student; a 3.0 cumulative grade point average (high school) or a 20+ composite ACT score; and participation in one of the following federal programs: the Talent Search Program (supports students from disadvantaged backgrounds by providing academic, career, and financial counseling to help prepare them to graduate high school and pursue higher education), Upward Bound (preparing low-income high school students and students where neither parent has a bachelor's degree for college readiness), or GEAR UP (preparing low-income students in 7th–12th grade for college readiness; U.S. Department of Education, 2022).

The program director works with the admissions office to identify potential participants based on the number of scholarships available each year. Students who meet the program requirements are sent a letter describing the program and participation requirements and are invited to participate. Committed students attend a one-week summer bridge program the week prior to fall semester, enroll in the Project Scholar course, and receive a scholarship each semester during their first year of college. The summer bridge program includes early access to the residence halls, workshops on the transition to college, guest speakers, information on high impact practices, team building activities, and more.

The program is typically staffed by a director and a graduate coordinator. During the summer transition camp former Project Scholar students (still enrolled in college) are hired as peer mentors to support students in their transition. At the time that we collected data, all staff members identified as People of Color. The program formally provides support for the first year of college while students are enrolled in the three-credit course in the fall and spring semesters. In addition to the summer bridge program and course, the program has a couple social events per year to gather current and former scholars. Program alumni (currently enrolled in college) continue to engage with the program and current students in both formal (peer mentor, serving on a panel) and informal ways (stopping by the program cookout, etc.).

Data Collection

We employed respondent-driven sampling (Heckathorn, 2002) where participants are recruited from the social networks of members of the desired sample (in this case, Project Scholar). For example, I led recruitment efforts and informed prospective participants about the study via announcements at program meetings and during a workshop presented to the students on research (by researchers of the study). In addition, program administrators and participants in the study recommended others to participate.

This longitudinal study includes 11 cohort students (of the 42 enrolled in the program) who initially agreed to participate and who were invited to be interviewed once per year for four years (data collection occurred between 2014–2018), and 13 one-time

student alumni interviews. Alumni of the program were students enrolled in the institution at the time of data collection but had completed the one year of the program in a prior cohort. Because of the sample size of the cohort, and to reach saturation in data analysis, in year two we added the data collection with alumni participants and conducted alumni interviews in years two, three, and four. In sum, data collection included interviews with 24 students: six African American/Black, four Latina/os, four Hmong, and 10 Biracial college students. In addition to student data, four interviews with program affiliates were conducted (founder of the program, director, coordinator, and graduate assistant). All program affiliates identified as Black.

I also engaged in active membership observations (Bhattacharya, 2017), where I observed several class sessions, served as a guest lecturer in two class sessions, and attended program events. Undergraduate research assistants (involved during year one of the study) and I wrote field notes after observations at class sessions and program events (Bhattacharya, 2017). Other members of the research team assisted with collecting interviews. Interviews were conducted on or near campus at a location agreed upon by the participant and researcher and lasted one to two hours. Participants completed a demographic form prior to the interview. Participants selected their own pseudonym and other identifying information was assigned a pseudonym. Student interview questions central to this manuscript focused on the transition to college, experience in Project Scholar, and meaningful relationships during college. Staff interview questions related to this manuscript focused on assets of the program, how it has changed over time, how it influences students' persistence, and what types of relationships they hope students develop through the program. Finally, I collected program documents including historical documents, program syllabi, and lecture series flyers. Observations, document analysis, and field notes provide a greater context and informed the analysis of interview transcripts.

Data Analysis

As a research team we began coding transcripts independently using in vivo coding (in participants own words) as we analyzed small sections of data and used two-to-five word codes alongside the data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Next, we placed the emergent codes into a list and clustered the codes to develop themes and larger categories emerging from the data. We created an "other" code for discrepant data and recoded it to create new codes. We developed a codebook that represented the emerging themes and engaged in triangulating analysis (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) where we independently coded transcripts then came together to discuss the coding until consensus was reached and created themes and sub-themes. Our codebook included nine primary codes and eleven sub-codes. Analysis led to the significant role of relationships and their continuation beyond the program throughout students' educational journeys. In an additional round of analysis, I reviewed the data related to influential relationships (a primary code), reexamined the data for greater levels of inference, and discussed

my findings with research team members. Lastly, I engaged in a priori coding and coded the data with counterspaces (Solórzano, 2000) as a lens. I conducted this final round of coding by adding codes next to excerpts of data that indicated relationships that appeared to serve as embodied counterspaces initially established through Project Scholar. Data analysis was an iterative process, where I moved back and forth between transcripts and other forms of data collected as I read, coded, and analyzed the data (Bhattacharya, 2017).

Researcher Positionality

I am a mixed-race Latina scholar. I was a first-generation college student and I participated in a college transition program. I found joy, a sense of belonging, and increased confidence in self through meaningful relationships which were often initially established through engagement with organizations and programming targeting BIPOC students. These relationships gave me a place of refuge where I felt I belonged. I shared my identity and background experiences with participants as I introduced myself at program events and also prior to the start of interviews as a way to build rapport, which I believe were assets in the research process and enhanced students' willingness to participate and share their experiences with me. Other primary research team members involved with conducting interviews included a White faculty member, three Black graduate students, and one Biracial Indigenous graduate student. Two Black first-year undergraduate students were research assistants during year one of the study and were involved with participant observation, field notes, and gathering literature. Other research team members were involved in the larger study and other manuscripts from the project, but they were not involved in this manuscripts' development.

Trustworthiness

I employed several trustworthiness techniques including triangulation, where I collected multiple sources of data (interviews—with students and administrators—observations, and document analysis; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I also engaged in member checks where I invited participants to review their transcripts and provide changes. Finally, I engaged in peer debriefing, where I worked with colleagues to review my analysis (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Findings

The first section of the findings begins by highlighting how relationships were initially established through Project Scholar and how they served to empower participants

within and beyond the program. The first theme demonstrates the role of relationships in resisting messages present in society about students' potential. I then demonstrate how these relationships transcended the program and served as embodied counterspaces present in relationships, beyond the physical classroom space of Project Scholar. Within these embodied counterspaces, students were empowered to excel beyond the limited expectations placed on them by society. Students were affirmed and inspired within these counterspaces and were able to return to the larger campus with a greater sense of belonging.

Project Scholar sought to create an environment where BIPOC students were restored, empowered, and connected. In observations during program events, student peer mentors sought to break down walls and be honest about their experiences as they shared recommendations with students (about topics such as student involvement, balancing academics, and more). During class sessions the program director set a semi-informal yet inviting space where he weaved in jokes as he shared information and resources with students. In the pages that follow, I share quotes from participant interviews from staff and students.

Relationships Developed Within Project Scholar: Empowerment & Resistance

Project Scholar participants stressed the ways that the program was not only staffed by BIPOC, but also intentionally sought to introduce them to other BIPOC on and off campus. This occurred as Project Scholar staff invited BIPOC faculty, staff, and professionals into the classroom space to give mini lectures, share their experiences, potentially open students up to new career pathways, and provide recommendations regarding successfully navigating their college experience.

When asked about influential relationships in college, Matthew, a Biracial (Black and White) alumni of the program still enrolled in college shared:

> Dr. Michael as well as Lakisha always said that we were able to be successful no matter what we do. It's putting our mind to it and putting our—everything we have behind what we wanna do with college . . . Get the degree, but do well . . . we wanna continue our participation in high-impact practices, then do that, but do it extremely well . . . So both of them I talked to a lot.

Matthew shared the empowering and affirming messages that he received from program staff members and affiliates, messages counter to those prevalent in society regarding his potential for success. While the encouraging and motivational messages were powerful, they did also suggest a higher standard of performance which could translate to added pressure. Matthew shared that for him these messages were encouraging and inspiring as he explored options to gain new experiences on campus. These

messages served to inspire Matthew and his peers and to build up their resistant capital to counter limiting expectations present in society. However, it is possible that for other students, these messages could produce added pressure.

Ahani, a Black student and member of the cohort, highlighted how the program exposed her to BIPOC in various career fields, something she had not experienced personally before.

> You can be anything you want to. I was really excited having people from professions, really high positions, to CEOs and doctors. I've never met in my life a Black or Latino doctor of anything. And there's Dr. Michael there's Jorge Rodriguez. There's all these People of Color in these powerful positions . . . This is exciting. That could be me one day.

Ahani emphasizes how critical it was to be exposed to BIPOC that she could look up to and build relationships with. It is evident from her statement that the messages she received were counter to messages she received in society and former schooling experiences. The inspiration she received encouraged her to develop resistant capital to the negative stereotypes regarding her potential and future career options. Affirming relationships inspired Ahani that she could be anything she wanted to be. While these relationships were initially established in her first year in Project Scholar, she goes on to reflect on them in years two and three of the study below:

> They had a lot of People of Color who came to give us speeches and they were so knowledgeable . . . it was so awesome to see positive prominent, People of Color. [Interviewer: Role models?] Yeah. I don't really have any . . . I know a lot of successful White people and they're like really awesome and really cool and really helpful . . . But I didn't really have any role models . . . So—I was really happy to see them. I also got close to Dr. Michael and Jorge Rodriguez . . . And it was so helpful and amazing . . . When school started, it wasn't just like I came here, sink or swim! Go ahead! Fly!

Ahani felt empowered by the BIPOC role models she was introduced to through Project Scholar, and she finally felt like she had role models who she could relate to on a personal level through some shared experiences. Through Project scholar she felt herself represented and felt empowered. These were the relationships that she turned to when challenges arose, and she needed support or guidance.

While many participants generally spoke about the significant impact of BIPOC role models introduced through Project Scholar, the data also revealed a particularly significant impact that Black role models had on Black students in Project Scholar. At one point, I paused to follow-up on this with Skylar, a Black alumna of the program who was enrolled in graduate school at the time of her interview. I asked Skylar what it meant to her to have differing Black mentors support her during her educational experience. Skylar responded:

> I think it's important that they are Black because it shows me that they did it. I can do it. Especially being at a PWI, you see White professors and their success, but it doesn't seem attainable for you as a minority [sic] student. It feels different, they had a different set-up or a different path than you, so it doesn't seem reachable. Whereas when you see a person like Dr. Michael . . . Or Ann . . . they're relatable. They make themselves approachable to talk about not only just school, but personal life, and I feel like they could understand me and understand why certain things don't happen the way that they do, or why I may struggle with certain things that other people may not struggle with . . . I think having people who look like you is important.

Skylar spoke extensively about the relationships that she cultivated through Project Scholar and how they extended beyond the program throughout her undergraduate career, and even into her graduate program. She found these relationships as more personal, caring, and longer lasting. She described the folks in Project Scholar as being invested in her success, unlike others and they served as role models who inspired her. It was in their presence that she felt she was in a counterspace, a space that provided care, inspiration, investment, and resistant capital. The next theme dives deeper into the ways in which the relationships transcended the physical space of Project Scholar and travelled with students throughout their college experience.

Embodied Counterspaces: Relationships Transcending the Program

To this point findings have highlighted how Project Scholar, a critical counterspace at this HWI, was designed to nurture students' identities and backgrounds and foster students' aspirations, contributing to their confidence in navigating campus. The final theme demonstrates how relationships developed through Project Scholar transcended the program. In the embodied counterspaces (within relationships), students acquired knowledge and information that supported their larger persistence in college. Christine, a Biracial (Latina and White) student, shared the vital role and impact of "familiar faces" as she travelled through campus:

> I knew that if I ever needed anything, I could call my [peer mentor] Anthony and be like, 'Anthony, help me out here.' He'd be like alright, and he'd be right here helping me out . . . I think that knowing people, like I know Dr. Michael, I know my [peer mentors] . . . I feel comfortable when I see certain people, kind of like you're at home, if you see familiar faces you feel a little bit safer and a little bit more at home.

The meaningful relationships that Christine cultivated during the summer bridge program allowed her to feel that she always had individuals who would be there for her. She felt comfort and security when in the presence of other Project Scholar students

and staff, as they developed an embodied counterspace, or buffer, within the full campus that allowed her to feel a sense of being at home on campus. This also suggests she did not feel this way in other areas of campus or with other individuals. She could approach them with questions and acquired information that would support her persistence.

Michelle, a Biracial (Black and White) alumna of Project Scholar, served as a peer mentor during the summer bridge program. She shared a similar sentiment, illuminating how she intentionally sought to be a source of inspiration and support to new Project Scholar students.

> It's good to have at least one person on campus that you know, 'cause you won't feel alone, 'cause if you see me in the hallway . . . I'm gonna give you a big hug and ask you how you're doing? I genuinely care about them and I wanna see them succeed.

Regardless of where they find themselves on campus, it is in one another's presence that students recharged and returned to the campus at large. Michelle wanted students to know that she cared about them, believed in them, and wanted to see them succeed, suggesting that students may be receiving other messages to the contrary. With Michelle they would be in an embodied counterspace that was filled with care and affirmation.

Sue, another alumna and a Biracial (Black and White) student also talked about the ways that Project Scholar connected her to influential relationships during college:

> I think if I hadn't had Project Scholar my first year would have been more uncomfortable for me—I might have probably gone home a lot more . . . Because of Project Scholar, I always had someone to get lunch or dinner with. I think it was really good for helping me with my comfort level and getting used to being on campus and away from home.

Sue cultivated supportive relationships with her Project Scholar peers that helped her transition to campus and encouraged her to spend more time on campus over the weekends. She felt a sense of belonging in the embodied counterspaces with her Project Scholar peers that she did not feel across the larger campus.

Jordan, a Black student, highlighted the ways that the program administrators maintained relationships with her beyond the program, sharing valuable information and encouraging her to defy odds and pursue graduate education.

> Ann, Dr. Michael, they were great! So Ann . . . I got to know her on a level through the program, but outside of the program is when she became a great resource. Still now, if I have a question about something . . . it was just like having a family member on campus. And then Dr. Michael

> was great! He was a great resource, he knew so much about campus, and he also encouraged me to go, keep going, like continue my education for grad school and that was really helpful.

Jordan highlighted investing in and maintaining relationships with both Dr. Michael and Ann beyond the formal year of the program. Within the embodied counterspace they co-created, they continued to mentor and guide her, sharing valuable information about navigating the larger campus and they gave her a sense of family while away from home. Dr. Michael also encouraged her to pursue graduate education, instilling aspirational capital and lessening potential limitations. She describes the way she is supported as experiencing othermothering.

I followed up with Skylar, introduced earlier, by asking her to describe what made the program feel like a piece of home.

> We have faculty and professors who treated us as students and their child. For example, I still contact Dr. Michael. He still writes me letters of recommendation. Ann she was just a person where, she gave you that auntie feeling where she would call you if you didn't show up to class . . . they were resources in themselves, and the program was a resource in itself. And they didn't just leave it as that semester or that year. It was continuing to check up and continuing to provide you with opportunities and resources on campus and that's what made it a family and not something stagnant, because my LC was just that. It was just the first year and then that's it. I don't talk to anyone else, nobody reached out to be like 'Oh! Have you heard about this?' Why would they? They wouldn't, because they don't know about the programs that's associated for like, minority [sic] people so they can be successful, so yeah.

Skylar highlighted the deep level of care that Project Scholar staff members had for their students. This care was modeled and evolved into critical relationships that supported students. Students were restored and empowered in the embodied counterspaces created with Project Scholar staff, students, and affiliates. This care and investment are distinct from the interactions she had with other campus staff who she suggested had a lack of care and information about resources or targeted support for BIPOC students on campus. The relationships and social capital that initiated through Project Scholar transcended the program and empowered students with valuable information and strength. Within these embodied counterspaces, students could bring their full selves. Students felt empowered and developed deeper beliefs in themselves and their potential, which led to nurtured and expanded aspirations. This stronger sense of self and belief in their capabilities and potential facilitated their ability to combat racist messages in society about their ability to persist and succeed.

Discussion

This study complicates the understanding or association that counterspaces have of being physical spaces on campuses (Case, 2014; O'Meara et al., 2019; Patton, 2010; Yosso & Lopez, 2010). Findings provide a more robust view of the ways that relationships between campus stakeholders (faculty, administrators, staff, and program alumni) and students have the ability and agency to become embodied counterspaces on campus that transcend physical spaces (see also Linley, 2017). The first theme I highlighted addressed how relationships initially established through the physical counterspace of Project Scholar and how these relationships served to empower participants and support them in resisting negative messages or limitations placed upon them. The second theme introduced embodied counterspaces. Embodied counterspaces took shape as relationships initially established through the physical Project Scholar space transcended the program. These relationships became embodied counterspaces as students were no longer affiliated with the program but continued to maintain relationships that restored students and negated negative messages prevalent in society to affirm and empower students. Within these embodied counterspaces students could be their full selves, their educational aspirations were encouraged, and they felt empowered.

Counterstories of success of BIPOC peers (Druery & Brooms, 2019; Linley, 2017), BIPOC mentors (Brooms & Davis, 2017; Luedke, 2017), and also BIPOC in leadership roles inspired students. In several instances, students described the relationships as providing something they did not get elsewhere on campus, they developed a community of BIPOC that told them they could (inspiring their aspirations), so they would and they did, despite societal messages to the contrary. These relationships created a more culturally sustaining environment where students felt they could be their full selves.

Existing scholarship on counterspaces primarily connects students receiving this type of culturally sustaining and empowering support on campus to physical spaces such as cultural centers (Patton, 2010), ethnic studies classrooms (Nuñez, 2011), or informal support programs (Grier-Reed et al., 2016; O'Meara et al., 2019). Other work, such as Linley (2017), examined the role of peer relationships serving to instill resistance through counterstorytelling through mentoring roles. Keels & Davis (2020) also highlighted the role of peers (particularly peers of the same racial/ethnic background) in co-creating counterspaces in HWIs. O'Meara et al. (2019) examined how a STEM support program for racially and ethnically underrepresented students created a "third space" for participants that advanced communalism and affirmation, not competition and hierarchy. Building upon findings from these various studies, I seek to bring together and illuminate the ways that counterspaces can transcend physical spaces. Relationships were associated with feelings of empowerment, with knowledge and information that students applied across campus to persist. Students may be able to accrue this support through relationships that transcend physical spaces and expand the boundaries of how and where students find a sense of belonging on campus.

As students reflected on their participation in Project Scholar, they reflected on ways they felt at home. When students met with and saw others from Project Scholar, they described an immediate experience of relief, restoration, and an opportunity to be their authentic selves. The bonds and relationships cultivated and sustained within and beyond Project Scholar affirmed students and their identities which they brought with them to college. The spaces of affirmation initially created through the program and sustained through the relationships they developed became embodied within these relationships. Students often referred to these relationships as family-like relationships, similar to how prior work has explored how students define othermothering (Flowers et al., 2015; Guiffrida, 2005).

In these critical embodied counterspaces that transcended physical spaces, students acquired additional knowledge and information that supported their persistence. Participants acquired strategies to navigate campus as staff members and student mentors shared knowledge, tips, and information that assisted the participants with overcoming challenges they experienced on campus. Perhaps most important, students were affirmed, supported, and encouraged to expand their aspirations in various areas such as engaging in undergraduate research opportunities and considering graduate education. These affirmations were counter to the messages that students often received in society and were often absent on campus outside of the counterspaces established through Project Scholar. Their aspirations were cultivated when introduced to BIPOC in various career fields who exposed students to new career opportunities.

While the findings generally applied across participants and their identities, it is important to acknowledge that most of the staff and administrators of Project Scholar were Black with the exception of one Latino staff member (the peer mentor group was more racially diverse). Many of the Black participants spoke in depth about the significant impact it had on them to see prominent Black leaders who cared deeply about their success, inspired them to consider new academic and career paths, and shared knowledge that students could later employ for educational success. Research suggests that having BIPOC staff and faculty is meaningful to the experiences of BIPOC students (Luedke, 2017), and having a same race mentor can also be significant (Brooms & Davis, 2017; Reddick, 2011).

While the embodied counterspaces worked to provide greater access to a counterspace and a sense of belonging on campus, it is evident from student interviews that the campus at large remains one in which not all students are supported, nurtured, and encouraged to dream beyond. Implicit in what students shared is the ways that these relationships supported and encouraged students' accomplishments and aspirations. Expanding the pockets of safe and nurturing embodied counterspaces (relationships of affirmation) is not enough; this merely provides a cushion to the racism or hostility, perhaps neutrality, but not inclusion or affirmation, that students experienced on the campus at large—or with many campus stakeholders. There is still much work to do for colleges and universities to be places where all students feel that they belong. Lessons can be learned from this study about the value in mentorship, role

models, and invested and caring staff members who develop meaningful long-lasting relationships with their students. While these embodied counterspaces are instrumental for participants, we must continue to challenge our campuses to be spaces of inclusion and belonging, where students can bring their full holistic selves without fear of critique, lowered expectations, hostility, or lack of interest/engagement from campus staff.

Limitations

This study was conducted at one mid-sized comprehensive institution in the Midwest. The research team gathered data from 28 participants (24 students and 4 staff members) who were affiliated with an institutionally specific program, thus the findings are not generalizable to all institutions or all student populations. However, we have much to gain from the findings of this work as we consider supporting BIPOC students in higher education. Grounded in the findings, I develop implications for practitioners to consider in enhancing the support provided to BIPOC students. I also share recommendations for future related research.

Implications for Practice

The relationships that students developed in and through Project Scholar extended beyond participation in the program, they provided lasting effects. Campuses seeking to create a widespread institutional culture shift must value care and relationship building. As representatives of our institutions, as hiring managers, and as committees, we must consider ways to take this type of student support into account as we draft position descriptions and craft required and preferred qualifications of candidates. We must seek out and evaluate staff members'/new hires' desire and ability to nurture and support students, particularly historically marginalized students. We must take into account applicants' prior experiences in relationship building with students and their contributions to the culture of a program, department, and campus. These contributions should be accounted for during the hiring and evaluation processes.

Moreover, it is vitally important that we consider ways to recognize and reward the staff, administrators, and faculty who engage in this often unrecognized labor of love with their students (Reddick, 2011). Researchers have found that diversity workers often experience burnout given the significant emotional labor involved. Anderson (2021) calls for a reframing of burnout experienced by individuals to the role of institutions who "burn through" diversity workers. Anderson (2021) found that diversity workers were burned through by "supporting struggling minoritized students . . . and being limited in their ability to effect positive change (p. 368)." While this emotional labor and investment in students is significant in student lives, we must also attend to

the experiences of these staff members who engage in this work, work which can be referred to as othermothering (Guiffrida, 2005).

These are not responsibilities that should be carried by a select few, but rather should be a shift in the culture of institutions that seek to create more welcoming and inclusive environments where students can be their full selves across campus, not only in limited spaces or relationships. Institutional staff demographics should mirror their student demographics. These values must be accounted for across the hiring, evaluation, and promotion processes to ensure equity. Some of the specific strategies that were taken by the staff members and peer mentors that others can adopt to create a more culturally sustaining environment for BIPOC students across campus include:

- Explicitly valuing students' racial/ethnic background and providing opportunities for students to access same-race faculty, guest speakers, lecturers, staff members, and potential mentors;

  "You can be anything you want to . . . That could be me one day." —Ahani

- Providing consistent encouragement, belief, and praise for the students;

  "Dr. Michael as well as Lakisha always said that we were able to be successful no matter what we do." —Matthew

- Reaching out to students and checking in with them, as persons and as students. i.e., developing long-lasting meaningful relationships;

  "She gave you that auntie feeling where she would call you if you didn't show up to class." —Skylar

- Being reliable and present for students when they needed support, encouragement, or guidance.

  "I knew that if I ever needed anything, I could call my [peer mentor] . . . He'd be like alright, and he'd be right here helping me out." —Christine

Implications for Research

Future research should longitudinally explore how an institutional commitment to valuing mentoring across faculty/staff and students in meaningful ways leads to increases in mentoring as reported by students. Exploring different ways to value, support, and recognize mentoring is needed. For example, exploring the following research questions is warranted. Which approaches to valuing mentoring contribute to an increase in mentoring? What types of support for faculty/staff facilitate the flourishing of mentoring relationships? How can adequately recognizing mentoring contribute to its maintenance over time?

Conclusion

In our current environment, counterspaces are critical to the persistence of BIPOC students in higher education who often experience a racist campus environment (Harper & Hurtado, 2007). Counterspaces provide a space of refuge, restoration, encouragement, and empowerment that support students' ability to return to the larger campus and navigate obstacles in their way. Continuing to challenge our campuses to be racially just is critical. One step in that direction is hiring and supporting staff members who make campus a more welcoming and sustaining place. The counterspaces identified here began through a physical program, but the relationships that students developed stayed with them throughout college. Within relationships that became embodied counterspaces, students could be their full authentic selves, their educational aspirations were encouraged and expanded, and they felt empowered. They also acquired valuable knowledge and information that supported their persistence, and they were empowered to believe in themselves in important ways. Future scholarship must continue to explore ways to transform our campuses into inviting, supportive, and empowering spaces for our most marginalized students.

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