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## **Black American fathers, their children with autism, and the utility of School-Based Family Counseling: A narrative inquiry**

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**The narratives of six Black American fathers of children with autism were analyzed to determine the most rewarding aspects of their fathering experience. Data was collected via semi-structured interviews. Results suggested that their children’s success (i.e., interpersonal and intrapersonal successes) was the most rewarding aspect of fathering. A rationale for school based family counseling (SBFC) as conduit for father-school engagement is provided, along with recommendations for future research.**

**Keywords: autism, school based family counseling, school counseling, Black fathers, Black families**

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### **Introduction**

Autism refers to a range of more specific diagnoses on a continuum of autism spectrum disorder (ASD). It is “...characterized by severe and pervasive impairments in several areas of development that can include: reciprocal social interaction skills, communication skills, or the presence of stereotyped behavior, interests, and activities” (APA, 2013, p. 69). The autism diagnosis rate among children in the United States is one in 68 (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2014). However, disproportionality in diagnoses between Black and White American children yield questions about symptom perception in children from different racial and ethnic groups. These differences have important implications for school personnel, and school counselors in particular.

The Center for Disease Control and Prevention reported White American children’s diagnosis rates were higher (1 in 63) than Black American children (1 in 81 in) (CDC, 2014). The CDC (2014) also reported that 48% of Black children with autism are dually diagnosed with intellectual disabilities, compared with 25% of White children. Those dual diagnoses are frequently conduct

disorder or adjustment disorder (Mandell et al., 2002; Mandell, Ittenbach, Levy, & Pinto-Martin, 2007). Mandell et al. (2009) found that patterns of delayed and missed autism diagnoses may be exacerbated among American racial and ethnic minority children. Gourdine, Baffour, and Teasley's (2011) research supports this conclusion when they found autism diagnosis in racial and ethnic minority children occurs later than in White children. Attention to differences in diagnosis rates and the resultant implications for service providers of the students converge in the school setting.

### **School counselors of students with autism**

School counselors have a critical role in supporting students with autism (SWA) and their families. School counseling programs aspire to be comprehensive in design, developmental in nature, and preventative in scope (Dollahide, Gibson, & Saginak, 2008; American School Counselor Association [ASCA], 2012). In order to do so, counselors should aspire to understand the experiences of parents of SWA, especially parents from racial minority groups in the United States (Hannon, in press; Hughes & Talbott, 2017). Toward this end, the ASCA published 'The Professional School Counselor and Students with Disabilities', which articulates school counselors' role in supporting special education students, including those with autism (2013, p.1). The position statement, in part, reads:

...providing school counseling curriculum lessons, individual and/or group counseling...; short-term, goal-focused counseling in instances where it is appropriate and to include these strategies in the individual educational program (IEP); encouraging family involvement in the educational process; [and] advocating for students with special needs in the school and in the community.

Research is available to inform school counselors' support of SWA. Congruent with the ASCA National Model (2012), Baumberger and Harper (2007) suggest ongoing data collection and the use of evidence-based interventions. Rock and Leff (2007) recommend involvement in the planning, implementation, and evaluation of special education services as a collaborator and service provider. Auger (2013) highlights how SWA are at risk for social and academic challenges, and those from racial or ethnic minority groups are less likely to receive out-of-school support. Dipeolu, Storlie, and Johnson (2014) document the limited resources available for school counselors serving SWA, and recommended professional development to stay current with successful treatment modalities. Krell and Perusse (2012) suggest that school counselors maintain highly collaborative relationships with special educators and post-secondary institutions for effective career planning.

### **Autism's influence on Black American fathers: A social and cultural capital framework**

One important consideration for school counselors is how an autism diagnosis influences the family system, including fathers, who are discussed significantly less than other family members (e.g. mothers or siblings). Interpreting this phenomenon through a social and cultural capital framework illustrates how salient these forms of capital are for fathers, and Black fathers in particular. Bourdieu (1986) suggests that capital (i.e., power, influence, resources) comes in three forms: economic, social, and cultural. Social and cultural capital can, at times, be leveraged when there is a dearth of economic capital. Resources and influence that emerge from one's social connections represent social capital. And cultural capital represents resources and influence

resulting from one's possessions, whether inherent or acquired (e.g. educational attainment, skills, accent, clothing).

Fathers of SWA have been found to be acutely aware of their economic, social, and cultural capital (Hannon, in press; Hannon, 2013; Hughes & Talbott, 2017; Naseef, 2001; Seligman & Darling, 2007). Garcia-Lopez, Sarria, and Pozo (2016) found that autism symptom severity and family income were strong predictors of parents' adjustment to their children's needs. Therapeutic support for students with autism, particularly outside the school, can often require significant financial resources from parents. Given that the social construction of American fatherhood is grounded, in part, in their capacity to financially provide, this research highlights how different forms of capital are important for Black American fathers as they assume multiple roles in their families (e.g. provider, protector, shared decision-maker, child socializer, and supporter of his partner/spouse, if applicable) (McAdoo, 1993, 1988; McAdoo & McAdoo, 2002). However, understanding Black American fatherhood requires an acknowledgement of how racism (i.e. systemic and individual) influences their ability to fulfill the aforementioned roles (McAdoo, 1993). This framework aligns with DeKanter's (1987) conceptualization of fatherhood that acknowledges fathers' intrapersonal you mean 'interpersonal'? negotiation of three levels: the person of the father (i.e. father's embodiment), the position of the father (i.e. father's socio-cultural capital), and the symbol of the father (i.e. the father's role in the life of his child) and Hannon's (2013) description of how Black American fathers assess their social and financial capital in order to adequately support their children.

The dominant research on fathers of individuals with autism can be categorized in three broad domains: (1) fathers' stress levels; (2) coping and adjustment strategies; and, (3) experiences with being stigmatized as a result of their children's diagnoses (Bendixen et al., 2011; Donaldson, Elder, Self, & Christie, 2011; Flippin & Crais, 2011; Hannon, 2013; Hannon, 2014; Hannon & Hannon, 2013; Hartley et al., 2010; Hartley, Barker, Seltzer, Greenberg, & Floyd, 2010; Meyer, 1995; Naseef, 2001; Smith & Elder, 2010; Vacca, 2013). Unfortunately, not many studies are exclusive to fathers, are comparative in nature, and investigate the perspectives and experiences of Black fathers of children with autism.

### **A rationale for school-based family counseling (SBFC) for families of students with autism**

The coordination of care required to support the development and success for SWA can overwhelm parents (Naseef, 2001). It requires knowledge of connected systems that include, but are not limited to school, therapeutic care, and medical care systems. An acknowledgement of these interconnected systems is evident in the theoretical underpinnings of Bronfenbrenner (1979), Boyd-Franklin (1987), and Adler (1930). Gerrard (2008) highlights the need for school-based family counseling (SBFC), due to the inadequacy of traditional school counseling and family counseling in supporting students who experienced difficulty in school. He further wrote (2008, p.2):

“SBFC is an integrated approach to mental health intervention that focuses on both school and family in order to help children overcome personal problems and succeed at school. SBFC is practiced by a wide variety of mental health professionals, including: psychologists, social workers, school counselors, psychiatrists, and marriage and family therapists, as well as special education teachers. What they all share in common is the

belief that children who are struggling in school can be best helped by interventions that link family and school.”

SBFC has been identified as a culturally-responsive modality, effective with diverse populations (Gerrard & Soriano, 2013). Evans and Carter (1997) offer a rationale for SBFC in urban schools, which enroll significant numbers of Black students, to support students and families, given the influence of multiple and interconnected systems on students’ learning in schools. SBFC has been found to be useful for SWA and their parents. Marchetti-Mercer (2008) suggests that once children with autism enter school, SBFC should supplement community counseling to help facilitate the students’ (and families’) successful transition to the school community. Hing, Olivier, and Everts’ (2013) investigation of parents of SWA highlights the utility of SBFC. The authors emphasize the importance of a multi-disciplinary team to provide support for students and parents. Counseling parents (individually or together) to understand their personal feelings about their children’s diagnosis is important, and educating them about advocacy strategies within and outside school are among their recommendations (Hing et al., 2013).

Given the intersection of our knowledge about autism diagnosis rates, autism’s influence on individuals, families, and in this case fathers, along with pointed considerations about how race influences both phenomena, this study sought to address the overarching question among a sample of Black American fathers of children with autism: “what are the most rewarding aspects of your fathering experience?” The responses to this question yielded important considerations for school counselors and other school personnel who integrate SBFC in their practice.

## **Methodology**

Narrative inquiry was used to investigate the most rewarding aspects of fathering SWA. The narrative is “the primary form by which human experience is made meaningful” (Polkinghorne, 1988, p.1), and is a distinctive way of ordering experience and constructing reality (Bruner, 1986). This qualitative tradition asserts that people construct meaning in their lives through shared narratives (Polkinghorne, 1995). Narrative inquiry was chosen because it requires an “...extensive and complex examination of the historical predicaments to be considered” (Casey, 1995, p. 214).

The existing research about autism’s influence on Black American fathers informs the normative challenges (e.g. financial costs of care, stress on parent relationship) confronted regularly by parents. However, a narrative study offered an examination of this phenomenon through the vehicle of stories from Black fathers to share how their fathering experiences are rewarding and, as a result, tapping into the strengths of their roles as fathers. Consequently, the design offers a counter-narrative to the dominant stress narrative readily present in the literature, making it an important contribution to the knowledge base.

## **Researcher as instrument**

It is important for qualitative researchers to document their roles in the research process, and their relationship with the study topic (Glesne, 2011; Kline, 2008). The author is a Black American, male school counselor educator, and father of two children: a typically developing daughter and a son with autism. He researched topics related to the mental health and identity of fathers of children with autism. As the sole data collector, he engaged in bracketing, or the practice of documenting researchers’ biases and assumptions before entering the field for data collection

(Creswell, 2006; Patton, 2002) to document personal experiences with this phenomenon (i.e. ideas, opinions, perspectives on influences on fathering style among Black fathers). This was done to increase awareness of potential influences on data analysis.

### **Participant recruitment**

Participants were recruited using snowball sampling (Patton, 2002; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000) to identify Black fathers of children with autism, based on the author's personal and professional network and referrals of eligible participants. Snowball sampling requires identifying a case example, and subsequently relying on that case to refer other fathers (Hays & Singh, 2012) until an adequate sample size was identified. Participation criteria were: individuals who were fathers of children with autism, spoke and understood American English, and identified as Black or African-American. The author contacted potential fathers via email or phone, inquiring about their interest in being participants. After each father was determined eligible and willing to participate, they were sent IRB-approved informed consent documents and along with the interview protocol.

Six Black fathers, ranging in age from 38–54 years old, with an average age of 44, were the participants in this inquiry. All were married to the biological mothers of their children with autism, and had attained college degrees. They reported their children's diagnoses as: pervasive developmental disorder-not otherwise specified (PDD-NOS); autism; or high-functioning autism. The children were between 5–22 years old ( $M=12$ ;  $SD=5.8$ ); five were male, one was female. Pseudonyms were created for fathers and their children to conceal identifying information. Table A provides more demographic data on the fathers.

### **Data collection procedures**

Data was collected through semi-structured interviews (Seidman, 2006) designed to provide a detailed understanding of participants' experiences, and meaning they derived from those experiences through language. Interviews were audio-recorded and professionally transcribed (Seidman, 2006). Interviews focused broadly on how raising a child with autism influenced the lives of the participant fathers. Fathers were asked about their knowledge of autism prior to their children's diagnosis, their beliefs about autism and other disabilities, and how autism affected their day-to-day experiences. Results presented address the overarching research question: "what is most rewarding about fathering an individual with autism?"

### **Data analysis procedures**

Interview transcripts were prepared by a professional transcriptionist and reviewed by the author while simultaneously listening to the recorded interviews for accuracy. The author modified transcripts to include indicators of nonverbal behavior, emphases, and other qualities not evident to the transcriber but memorable from the interviews as needed (Ochs, 1979). Data was analyzed through the analysis of narratives, using the emergent themes approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Polkinghorne, 1995). This method required extensive review of the six interview transcripts to identify at least two things: (a) commonalities in experiences and shared perspectives, and (b) interpretation of fathers' experiences.

***Coding and theme identification.*** Interview data was initially open-coded manually and labeled to identify recurring words, phrases, and descriptors in the transcripts (Strauss & Corbin,

1990). All references from the fathers' responses associated with rewarding experiences were then organized into more abstract categories, with each category including the initial references from the interview data. Open codes were then categorized, based on their common properties, frequency and consistency of shared experiences, perspectives, and interpretations (Lavlani, 2011). These identified codes were organized under more abstract categories, with each category containing a cluster of codes that reflected broader themes. After initial theme identification, transcripts were sent for review to an external auditor with extensive qualitative data analysis experience to help determine consensus in the analysis, when saturation was achieved, or when no new themes or subthemes emerged from the data evidencing saturation (Patton, 2002). Responses to the question confirmed one overall theme of success, with two subthemes of intrapersonal success and interpersonal success, evident in the data about how these Black American fathers described rewards of fathering SWA.

***Trustworthiness.*** Trustworthiness involves the close monitoring of various aspects of the research endeavor in order to substantiate a study's findings (Hays & Singh, 2012), and establishes the investigation's credibility, transferability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1995). Three strategies (i.e. member checks, external auditor, reflexive exercises) were used to ensure the study's methods and the trustworthiness of findings. Member checks (Lincoln & Guba, 1995) took place at two stages: during interviews (i.e. asking for clarity and confirming understanding) and after interviews (i.e. forwarding transcripts for review and confirmation). Engaging an external auditor allowed for crosschecks to produce, confirm and validate results for certainty in data analysis (Morrow & Smith, 2000) and reduce researcher error. Lastly, throughout the research process, the author engaged in reflexive exercises that included making journal entries during data collection and analysis to capture and monitor how the research process affected him, to document reactions to fathers, and to document inclinations about potential findings. The journal entries sensitized the researcher to his prejudices and the influence of those prejudices on research outcomes; it is a form of reflexive introspection that requires one to examine his/her own experience from which insights emerge, and to form the basis of a more generalized understanding and interpretation (Finlay, 2002). The cumulative effect of these strategies enhanced the study's credibility, confirmability, and transparency.

### **Results/analysis of the narratives**

True to narrative inquiry tradition, these six Black American fathers of children with autism offered their narratives and allowed the author to interpret them. What follows is an introduction of the fathers, and how their children's diagnosis informs their daily lives. This information represents their orientation (i.e. context) and complicating action (i.e. plot/autism diagnosis), as recommended by Polkinghorne (1995). Authorized interpretations and quotes from the fathers' narratives provide evidence of the identified theme of success as most rewarding.

### **Fathers' context and complicating action**

***Alvin.*** Alvin is the 54-year old father of a 16-year old son, Xavier, whose autism diagnosis is Pervasive Developmental Disorder-Not Otherwise Specified (PDD-NOS). Alvin and his wife, Victoria, have been married for over 18 years. Xavier was diagnosed two weeks before he turned 3 and is the youngest of three children; he has two older sisters. Alvin describes Xavier as a verbal, social, affectionate young man who loves interaction with his peers, and whose autism symptoms are mild. Alvin works in educational sales, providing reading comprehension software to school

districts. Alvin described himself as a coach. He was a high profile student-athlete in high school and college. He spends a significant portion of his free time coaching basketball, football, and soccer in his community, and created a program that facilitates positive interactions between children with developmental differences and typically developing children.

**Brandon.** Brandon is a 38-year old father of two children: daughter, Ivy, who is seven and Brandon, Jr. (BJ), who is five. BJ was diagnosed with high-functioning autism (HFA) at five years old. Brandon has been married to his wife, Sheila, for twelve years. Brandon is an artist; he loves music and is a graphic designer. Brandon and his family are very active in their local church where he oversees the church's audiovisual operation, and Sheila oversees the children's ministry. He is very open about how his faith influences how they respond to BJ's needs. Brandon and Sheila waited to get BJ evaluated by a developmental pediatrician to receive a formal diagnosis. Instead, they used their own research (i.e. talking with friends, using the Internet as a resource, talking with their children's pediatrician), and assumed BJ would likely meet autism diagnosis criteria. BJ has receptive language and limited expressive language.

**Cameron.** Cameron is a 41-year old father who has been married to his wife, Liz, for 15 years. They have three children: Tyler, Jermaine, and Nicole. Tyler (13) is the oldest. He was diagnosed with Pervasive Developmental Disorder-Not Otherwise Specified (PDD-NOS) when he was two years old. Cameron described himself as an Information Technology (IT) professional who works at a major university. He is a man of deep Christian faith and volunteers at his church. At the time of data collection, Tyler had been suspended from school three times that year for behavior Cameron described as symptoms of his diagnosis. Cameron describe his family's relationship with Cameron's school teachers and administrators to be contentious, which was very stressful. He is currently seeking legal recourse against the school district.

**Darryl.** Darryl is 49-year old father and husband who is a banking executive. He has been married to his wife, Janine, for over 25 years. He and Janine have one son, Malik, who is 22 years old. Darryl shared that Malik was diagnosed with autism when he was three. Malik's most severe symptom is challenges with expressive language. Malik uses adaptive technology to communicate with his parents and others, and has recently transitioned out of secondary school, requiring Darryl and Janine to think intentionally about an occupational fit for him.

**Ethan.** Ethan is a 39-year old father and husband of three children. Ethan has been married to his wife, Karlene, for 12 years. Their children are Jason (10), Kayla (7), and Aubrey (5). Ethan is a pharmaceutical salesman and manager. Prior to entering pharmaceutical sales and management, he played briefly in the National Football League. Ethan and Karlene's middle child, Kayla, has a dual diagnosis of Cri-du-Chat and Pervasive Developmental Disorder-Not Otherwise Specified (PDD-NOS). The PDD-NOS diagnosis was given when Kayla was 3 years old. Cri-du-Chat is Kayla's primary diagnosis. It is a rare genetic disorder whose symptomology includes significant intellectual delays and significant gross and fine motor impairment. Kayla's activities of daily living (e.g., walking, bathing, brushing teeth) are influenced by her diagnosis. She has receptive language and minimal expressive language.

**Frederick.** Frederick is the 42-year old father of William, who is nine and diagnosed with Pervasive Developmental Disorder – Not Otherwise Specified (PDD-NOS). Frederick is married

to Serenity and they have 3 other children in addition to William. Their oldest daughter, Shanelle, is 26 and does not live with the family. William has an older brother Frederick, Jr. and a twin sister, Wandria. Frederick is a manager at a local distribution center. William's symptoms are mild. He has receptive and expressive language and generally enjoys social interactions.

### **Success is most rewarding (resolution)**

The theme across the fathers' narratives included descriptions of how experiencing (e.g., seeing, hearing about, celebrating) their children's success was the most rewarding part of their fathering experience. They believed that their children's success reflected their own success as fathers and motivated them to be an encouragement to their children and families. Two types of success were evident from this theme: intrapersonal success and interpersonal success.

***Intrapersonal success.*** Three of the fathers' reward narratives were interpreted in terms of their children's intrapersonal success, or success experienced based on the emergence of a personal quality or skill. Frederick discussed William's academic success in school, and Cameron discussed Tyler's spiritual development. Frederick shared the following in response to the most rewarding question:

"I would say his accomplishments, you know. I'll give an example, um, you know, just in school. Um, math-wise: [he's] perfect... to see him at that level already? It's just...it's just....just rewarding, you know. And I take that positive aspect and try to apply it to my own life because I said, you know, there's some areas I could do better..."

Cameron's response to being asked about rewards was framed in Tyler's spiritual development. He shared:

"His life story is still being written. Because I can yell at him, because...he's an easy target. That brother will come right back and sit next to me, give me a hug, lays his hands on me and start praying because that's what we [laughing] do at the house. We lay hands on each other, we pray. But his hand on my head and hearing Holy Spirit, that's enough to put me in check. That's enough to give me that boost I need."

***Interpersonal Success.*** Three of the fathers' narratives were about their children's interpersonal success, or success in relationship building. Alvin's son, Xavier, has experienced success in and out of school, which has been particularly rewarding for Alvin. Xavier's success in the community via being accepted by fellow athletes and the broader football community has been especially important. Alvin recalled Xavier's participation in a youth football league and how Xavier's teammates supported him:

"Just seeing how they rallied around him and really wanted him to be successful and feel good about himself...So, that's something that really, really stuck with me, you know, that his team embraced him, he was developing this pride in participating in something like this...when he graduated from elementary school and was going to on to the upper elementary school and [we] had a party for him and all these kids, just all these kids came to his party."

Brandon, described the rewards of fathering his son, BJ, by sharing the following anecdote about using appropriate expressive verbal language:

"...And then there's the surprises. You know, it just comes totally out of the blue and it



makes your whole day and you just can't help but smile and grin....A lot of my son's dialogue comes from video games and television and [pause] a handful of times, he'll take a scripted sentence from a game and it'll be the right thing to say and I'll be like, yes, that works."

Ethan, shared a similar sentiment about how he and Kayla successfully communicate, in light of her not having expressive language yet and significant delays in her gross motor development. He said:

"When she wants to eat now, she gets to the table, she stands up, puts her butt in the chair and says something like it's time to eat, let's go. Before...you had to go get her, but now she tells you she wants to eat, she tells you she wants more [showing sign for 'more'], she says thank you [showing sign for 'thank you'], she goes potty, she says, 'done'...the little things she didn't do last year, I revel in those little moments because they're priceless."

## **Discussion**

One of the study's aims was to inquire how Black fathers identify rewards in their fathering children with autism. The results, while arguably applicable in a variety of settings, have a particular relevance for school counselors and other school personnel. Students' success is a form of cultural capital; fathers have been found to pay particular attention to their children's occupational and social status (Seligman & Darling, 2007), which are forms of social and cultural capital. The fathers' articulation provides a counter-narrative to the dominant stress, stigma, and coping narrative documented about parenting children with autism. The findings illuminate how these fathers identify rewards in an experience that has been documented as stressful, and provide insight for school counselors and other school personnel about how they might engage and support Black fathers of children with autism via a SBFC model, sensitive to notions of social and cultural capital.

The findings from this study align with prior research on how autism affects fathers. Naseef (2001, 2013) has discussed how fathers of individuals with autism might consider learning about their children's autism diagnosis as traumatic. However, given a number of factors (e.g. severity of symptoms, support, resources, acceptance), fathers have the capacity to experience post-traumatic growth (PTG) when accepting their children's neuro-diversity. The findings also align with fathers' sensitivity to their own (and their children's) social and cultural capital (Seligman & Darling, 2007), acutely aware of accessing resources in order to provide adequate care for their children with autism. Seligman and Darling (2007) suggest that this is especially true for fathers of boys with autism and other diagnosed differences. Lastly, in a study of White American fathers of sons with Asperger's disorder, Hannon (2014) found that the most rewarding aspect of fathering was developing a communication system, given the communication differences associated with an autism diagnosis.

## **Recommendations for school based family counseling practice**

The narratives offered by the fathers in this study—using the children's success as a catalyst – provides school counselors with an evidence base to potentially ground their SBFC practices with Black American fathers of children with autism. The following recommendations for school counselors and other personnel to support this population of fathers are discussed in detail:

- become oriented with families' other interconnected systems;
- assist fathers in their assessment of their social and cultural capital, to help identify and access resources; and
- identify how students with autism experience success outside school to possibly facilitate similar success inside school.

School counselors can support Black students with autism and their fathers by orienting themselves to their various systems of support. Effective SBFC support requires counselors to acquaint themselves – to the extent possible – with diverse support providers, to demonstrate empathy for students and their families, and to increase their knowledge base of service providers. This systems orientation has been identified in the literature as valuable and effective for Black families (Boyd-Franklin, 1987; McAdoo, 1998), in order to address and overcome potential barriers to success. The American School Counselor Association National Model (2012) reinforces this by encouraging school counselors to advocate for populations put at risk for their learning, racial, sexual and gender identities, at both micro and systemic levels. Knowledge of the families' service providers demonstrates a level of sensitivity to their lived experience that can be marked by impersonal and challenging interactions with mental, behavioral and medical specialists.

School counselors and other personnel integrating a SBFC model should carefully consider how Black fathers negotiate DeKanter's (1987) three levels of meaning - particularly the position of the father, which considers fathers' various forms of capital. Portes (1998) defines social capital as the ability of actors to secure benefits by virtue of membership in social networks or other social structures. As fathers consider their own capital, it is foreseeable that they consider their children's social capital. Seligman and Darling captured this by writing "Fathers are...more anxious about the social status and occupational success of their offspring." (2007, p. 223).

Given the racialized trends with autism diagnoses and resulting support, the Black fathers' assessment of their capital is critical. Learning about social networks, group memberships, and other forms of social and cultural capital can be used as an evidence base to refer Black fathers to sources of additional support and answers. It also can assist in developing their efficacy in further contributing to their children's success and advocating for them.

Because of the intrinsic value of their children's success (both interpersonal and intrapersonal), it behooves school counselors integrating tenets of SBFC to assess where and how students with autism are successful outside the school. These fathers expressed profound joy and pride in knowing that their children with autism accomplished things like complete tasks, learn new skills, and develop new friendships. School counselors can use this success as a connection point with fathers to assist in educational planning for their students with autism.

### **Recommendations for future research**

The exploratory nature of this study yields several additional questions. The knowledge base of Black fathers of children with autism will continue to benefit from inquiries about how fathers experience rewards and contribute to their children's success. Toward that end, additional qualitative studies about fathers of children with autism - specifically phenomenological and ethnographic - have the potential to enrich, validate, or challenge what has been learned from this study. These types of qualitative studies offer important contextual (e.g. community, geographic,

economic) clues as to how men experience life as fathers of children with autism, which are important for the development of policy intended to reach this demographic. Studies investigating barriers to involvement for parents, particularly for Black fathers of individuals with autism, are crucial in informing the research base about more effective engagement with the family system. This should influence local, regional, state, and/or federal policy to deepen Black fathers' engagement with their children with autism.

Quantitative studies with larger and more diverse sample sizes can also impact positively on the knowledge base. The emotional demands of raising individuals with autism can be readily investigated, as well as the financial cost of providing adequate services for individuals with autism. Investigations conducted to increase understanding about how financial stressors can influence father involvement are useful. That is, studies that address questions about how raising individuals with autism can influence job and career choices for parents and caregivers, because of therapeutic and emotional costs, can provide insight into how this horizontal stressor influences the family experience. This particular research question has far-reaching implications for policy designed to help families navigate care systems, obtain financial and emotional support, and find appropriate educational programs for their children.

### **Limitations**

The study has limitations that warrant acknowledgement. The first limitation is the sample, comprising a very unique population of Black fathers of children with autism. While their perspectives are informative and needed, the author does not assume that these fathers' experiences represent those of the broader population of Black fathers, or Black fathers of individuals with autism. Black fathers with more diverse demographic profiles can provide our knowledge base with a more robust perspective on fathering individuals with autism. A second limitation is transcriptions. Due to a change in personnel, in most cases fathers were given the transcripts up to two weeks after interviews for review and feedback. While this delay did not influence data analysis, transcript review should happen as soon as possible to facilitate ease in remembering the interview for participants. A third limitation is with data analysis. The author acknowledges that an additional researcher could have provided another form of trustworthiness via consensus coding.

### **Conclusion**

Given the aforementioned limitations, this study still makes an important contribution to the school counseling knowledge base. The results offer school counselors important considerations for diverse families of students with autism. School-based family counseling (SBFC) offers a fitting and culturally-responsive framework from which to work with Black fathers of students with autism.

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