

## ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis: “INVESTIGATING BARRIERS AND PREDICTORS TO MENTAL HEALTH SERVICE UTILIZATION AMONG AFRICAN AMERICAN COLLEGE STUDENTS”

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Many young adult college students experience high levels of stress and symptoms of mental illness while matriculating through school. Despite experiencing these adverse symptoms, few students seek out mental health services. Black students, in particular, are even less likely to seek out services compared to other racial and ethnic groups, and most studies have not assessed mental health service use among students attending a historically Black college or university (HBCU). This study aimed to assess barriers and predictors to mental health service use among HBCU students by holding a sixty minute focus group with participants. Results showed that HBCU students reported unique barriers and predictors to mental health service use. Future studies should focus on gathering perspectives on mental health service use among different groups within the Black community that attend HBCUs.

“INVESTIGATING BARRIERS AND PREDICTORS TO MENTAL HEALTH  
SERVICE UTILIZATION AMONG AFRICAN AMERICAN COLLEGE  
STUDENTS”

by

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# Introduction

Mental health problems are quite common among the undergraduate student population. Many students experience the onset of a mental illness for the first time while attending college (Eisenberg, 2011). Although many students experience mental distress and illness during college, very few actually seek out mental health treatment or counseling. Black students, in particular, are even less likely compared to other racial groups to seek out counseling due to personal and institutional related barriers to accessing care. Past research has established that stigma, limited family support, and mistrust of medical professionals all can inhibit a Black student from seeking mental health care (Barksdale & Molock, 2009). On the other hand, there are certain predictors that can increase the likelihood of a Black college student seeking care with a major one being ethnic representation in the school counseling staff (Duncan & Johnson, 2007). Although research has been conducted on barriers and predictors to care among Black students attending predominantly white universities (PWI), very few studies have focused on barriers and predictors to care among students who attend a historically Black college or university (HBCU). Furthermore, as far as this study is concerned, no research has been conducted on how the racial majority status of a college or university might influence Black students' reported barriers and predictors to mental health treatment. This study aims to understand the perspectives of HBCU students in accessing mental health services and understand the role of a university's racial majority status in influencing how Black students seek out care. This study will utilize a qualitative methods study design with a focus group held with undergraduate students attending Morgan State University. Data will be transcribed and analyzed using coding analyses and a coding tree. The results of this study will glean a perspective on how mental health services can be more accessible and welcoming to the Black student population.

## Specific Aims & Research Questions

This study aims to study differences between self-reported barriers and predictors to mental health service utilization (MHSU) among Black undergraduate college students attending an HBCU. Very little research has focused on MHSU among Black college students attending historically Black colleges or universities (HBCU). This project has three main specific aims to help fulfill this gap:

- Assess reported barriers and predictors among Black undergraduate students attending a historically Black college or university
- Assess if barriers and predictors to MHSU reported by participants align with past research
- Understand how the racial majority status of the university plays a role in students seeking care

The research questions that will be addressed in this study include:

- What do Black students attending HBCUs report as barriers and predictors to mental health service use?
- Do reported barriers and predictors align with past research?
- How does Black students attending an HBCU affect their perceptions of mental health and their intentions to seek counseling?

It is hypothesized that HBCU students will report unique barriers and predictors to mental health service use compared to what has been established previously in the literature. Since MHSU is relatively understudied, new ideas will be brought to the forefront on why

HBCU students either seek out or choose not to seek out mental health treatment. In order to research these aims, a study including the following population and data variables will be conducted.

- Population: Black undergraduate college students attending Morgan State University (MSU)
- Qualitative data will be collected and analyzed to assess MHSU
- Dependent variable: MHSU
- Data analysis: Participant responses will be analyzed using manual coding and coding trees
- Overall project goal: Assess differences in MHSU among students attending MSU and add to the growing body of literature around mental health seeking among the African American college student population

# Literature Review

## General Overview

Many young adults experience mental health problems while matriculating through college. At a time when many are living independently for the first time, adjusting to a new environment, and spending significantly less time away from family and friends, students may find themselves struggling with a range of mental health symptoms. It is also important to note that college students are in the age range when many mental health disorders have their first onset of symptoms. When examining the literature, a significant number of students struggle with symptoms related to serious mental health conditions. 20.3% of college students meet criteria for at least one diagnosable DSM-IV disorder with anxiety, depression, alcohol use disorder, and suicidal ideation being commonly reported (as cited in Pedrelli et. al, 2015; Auerbach et. al, 2016). A study conducted by Eisenburg found that 17.3% of students screen positive for depression, and 9.7% report symptoms of anxiety (2013). Six percent of students report serious thoughts of suicide. Although there is a dearth in literature regarding psychosis in college students, some students may experience early manifestations of psychotic disorders in college (Eisenburg et. al, 2013).

Current and past research on mental health in college students have also begun to study the distribution of mental health problems among different demographic groups. Overall, women tend to report higher rates of major depression, panic disorder, and generalized anxiety disorder compared to men (Eisenburg et. al, 2013). On the other hand, research conducted with different racial and ethnic groups has yielded mixed results. According to some research, Black, Asian, Hispanic, and multiracial groups all report higher levels of depression compared to white students (Eisenburg et. al, 2013; Hunt et. al, 2015).



However, other studies have found different results in regards to mental health problems among racial and ethnic minorities. Another study found that Hispanics, Blacks, and Asians had lower rates of depression and anxiety compared to white students (Liu et. al, 2019). These differences might be due to geographic location and the unique perspectives and characteristics of the samples used in each study. However, it is also important to note that researchers have just begun to evaluate mental health disorders among different racial and ethnic groups. Therefore, this is still a relatively new topic in the area of college mental health. One consistency found in all studies of racial minorities, however, is that multiracial students report higher levels of mental disorders and self-injury compared to other racial and ethnic groups.

Clearly, many college students report mental health problems that are influenced by factors such as race and ethnicity. College students often experience a wide range of these symptoms throughout their college career and have to balance these mental health issues in their daily lives. Given that 75% of college students will experience their first onset of mental health disorders before the age of 25, it is vital to understand what treatment options are available to students and how students utilize these services (Eisenburg, 2011).

### *Mental Health Service Utilization among College Students*

Although many students struggle with mental health problems, few seek out treatment. One study found that among students reporting at least one mental health issue, only 35.6% received treatment in the previous year, and only 21.8% were receiving care when the study took place (Eisenburg et. al, 2011). Past research has shown that ethnic and racial minorities have even lower rates of mental health service utilization (MHSU). There is significantly lower use of both medication and therapy among Asians, Blacks, and Hispanics than among whites (Eisenburg et. al, 2011; Hunt et. al, 2015). When reviewing the literature

on MHSU among minorities, it is clear that African American students specifically have a range of unmet mental health needs and a unique relationship with MHSU compared to other racial and ethnic groups. For example, Black students typically seek mental health services at a much lower rate compared to white students with white students seeking mental help at twice the rate of Black students (Eisenburg, 2011; Hunt et. al, 2015; as cited in Barksdale & Molock, 2009). One study focusing on mental illness among young college students of color found that Black students had a 73% lower odds of being diagnosed with a mental health condition compared to other students of color (Lipson et. al, 2018) Black students also use psychological medication at a much lower rate compared to other minority groups (Eisenburg et. al, 2011). There are multiple reasons these disparities exist, some of which have to do with personal, institutional, and cultural related barriers to seeking mental health care.

### *Barriers and Predictors to MHSU among Black Students*

Researchers report a plethora of barriers to MHSU among Black students that inhibit them from seeking services that they very well may need. One major barrier reported by students include negative family norms and stigma (Hayes et. al, 2011; Barksdale & Molock, 2009; Busby et. al, 2019; Masuda et. al, 2012). Many Black students report being discouraged by family in seeking mental health services and there being a family history of stigma surrounding mental illness, distrust of mental health professionals, and lack of understanding around what happens during therapy. More barriers reported from Black students were unfavorable attitudes towards mental health services, utilization of outside resources for counseling, lack of available culturally competent mental health providers, and self-concealment (Barksdale & Molock, 2009; Busby et. al, 2019, Masuda et. al, 2012; as cited in Barksdale & Molock, 2009). Another interesting barrier to MHSU was school size, and if the university is classified as public or private (Barksdale & Molock, 2009). Research has also

investigated predictors to MHSU among Black students. Proximity to campus, beliefs about treatment's effectiveness, ethnic representation in the school's counseling staff, one's perceived severity of mental health problems, perceived lack of support from family, previous counseling experiences, low socioeconomic status, and age were predictors of MHSU among Black students (Hayes et. al, 2011; Duncan & Johnson; 2007; Masuda et. al, 2012). Two especially interesting predictors to MHSU were reported levels of cultural mistrust and racial consciousness. One study found that Black students who reported less racial consciousness and less cultural mistrust were more likely to utilize mental health services (Duncan & Johnson, 2007). Black students who are less aware of their racial identity might not perceive the same threats in a predominantly white environment or are more trusting of this environment than students who are more aware of those threats or cultural dynamics. Lastly, lack of family support is cited as both a barrier and predictor to care in the literature. More research is needed to understand why some students are motivated to seek treatment when they perceive lack of support from family whereas others are discouraged.

### Gaps in Literature

Although many research studies have assessed the barriers & predictors to MHSU among Black students attending PWIs, little have given focus to students attending HBCUs. Most of the studies were conducted in a predominantly white environment, neglecting to understand how the racial majority status of the university might play a role in treatment seeking among African Americans (Hunt et. al, 2015). Studies on HBCUs found that students have felt the environment to be more nurturing relative to PWIs (Gilbert et. al, 2011; Sun, 2021). This might have some implications for MHSU among Black students attending HBCUs. Additionally, racial identity is only considered a psychological stressor for Black students in PWIs (Gilbert et. al, 2011). The main goal of this project will be to focus on

reported barriers and predictors to MHSU among students attending an HBCU. It is hypothesized that reported barriers and predictors to treatment among Black students attending an HBCU will differ from barriers and predictors previously established by the literature. This will be a qualitative study design consisting of a focus group of students attending MSU.

# Research Design and Methods

## Conceptual Model

This study was modeled after the Andersen Healthcare Utilization Model to assess mental health service use among Black students and different factors that contribute or discourage students from seeking services (Aday, 1974). In the Andersen Healthcare Model, there are a number of factors that play a role in patients seeking out care. These include predisposing factors, enabling factors, and need for care. In this study, the predisposing factors included one's race/ethnicity, perceptions of mental health, beliefs about mental health treatment, and one's enrollment as a college student. The enabling factors include access to mental health service counseling, attending an HBCU, family support, and one's cultural background. Factors that might influence one's need for care include school stressors, the COVID-19 pandemic, murders of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor, Black Lives Matter (BLM) Protests, interpersonal stressors, and mental health symptoms. Under this model, it is assumed that all of these factors can play a role in one seeking out mental health services and affect the likelihood of students accessing services.

## Study Design & Description of Participants

This project used a qualitative methods study design to assess reported barriers and predictors to MHSU among Black college students attending MSU. Eligible participants were of African American descent and over 18 years of age. Participants enrolled at MSU at the time the study were eligible to participate. Participants were recruited with flyers sent out via email to different professors and student organizations on campus. Students were able to freely enroll up until the sample size limit was reached. The recruitment aim was to recruit six students to participate in the focus group. A small sample of students was chosen to allot

enough time for each participant to speak during the focus group and give an in-depth perspective on their counseling service experiences. Participants were awarded a \$10 Amazon gift card as incentive for participation in this study.

### Data Collection

Consent forms: Students were required to read and sign a written consent form before participation in this study. The consent form was sent via email to participants prior to the focus group.

Demographics questionnaire: After completion of the consent forms, students were asked to complete a brief demographics questionnaire. The demographics questionnaire collected information on the following variables:

- Gender
- Age
- Transfer status
- Race/ethnicity
- Classification (whether students classify themselves as a freshman, sophomore, junior, or senior)

Focus groups: Once the demographic questionnaires were completed, the principal investigator held a sixty minute focus group with an interview guide. The interview guide for the focus group was developed utilizing past literature and feedback from faculty and staff from the University of Maryland. The first set of questions required students to give a brief introduction of themselves and background. After the initial set of questions were completed, the remaining questions focused on the main topic of this study (barriers and predictors to MHSU, perceptions of mental health and mental health counseling). The focus group was held virtually via Zoom and audio recorded. Although the questions were pre-drafted, this

was a semi-structured focus group with the researcher free to explore different topics as they arose.

### *Dependent Variable Definition & Description of Variables*

**Barriers to MHSU:** Barriers to MHSU are defined in this study as personal or institutional related difficulties that prohibit or delay participants from seeking mental health services.

**Predictors to MHSU:** Predictors to MHSU are reported as indicators that encourage or increase the likelihood of participants seeking mental health services.

**Racial majority status:** The racial majority status of the university refers to whether the college campus consists of majority non-Black students or majority Black students.

**Dependent variable:** MHSU is the main dependent variable in this study defined as a student seeking out or accessing treatment at the counseling center at MSU.

**Data analysis:** All data (audio recordings and field notes) were kept on a password protected computer accessed by the researcher in this study. The audio recordings were transcribed by a confidential, third party app-temi.com. However, participants' identities remained anonymous in the transcription process. Results were analyzed using open coding to evaluate participants' responses and identify key themes emerging from the focus group (LeCompte & Schensul, 2010). A coding tree was also established to analyze data with parent and children codes used to identify themes and subthemes (LeCompte & Schensul, 2010).

**Ethical & logistical considerations:** As stated above, participants' identities remained anonymous throughout the course of the entire study. No one's names or identities were shared outside of those authorized to work on the study. Before recruitment efforts began, the researcher in this study obtained approval from the Institutional Review Board at the University of Maryland (UMD). The principal investigator received informed consent from all participants before the study took place, and participants knew that they could stop

participating in the focus group at any time with no penalty. All interviews and recruitment of participants were held remotely to abide by social distancing guidelines. Lastly, discussing issues related to mental health and mental health access may have been triggering for some. All participants were given information to the counseling services offered on campus to alleviate any lingering psychological discomfort.



## Results

### Description

Five students from MSU participated in the focus group. All participants identified as female and were between the ages of 18-24 years old. Only students of African American descent were recruited for the focus group, and all participants were undergraduates currently attending MSU. One freshman, one sophomore, one junior, and two seniors attended the focus group, and one student identified as a transfer student. Six key themes emerged in the focus group: 1. the pandemic's effects on mental health, 2. police brutality & the BLM protests' effects on mental health, 3. HBCU influence on perception of mental health, 4. a preference for African American, female counselors, 5. barriers to MHSU, 6. predictors to MHSU and self-care mechanisms.

### Pandemic Effects on Mental Health

Participants reported increased feelings of loneliness and stress as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. One participant stated that living at home with her family at the beginning of the pandemic made quarantine a little bit more manageable. However, transitioning back to campus was difficult as she has more time alone than she did when she lived with her family. Another student reported that quarantine was a very "isolating experience". Students also reported an increased need for social support from family and friends during this time and reported utilizing social media as a way to connect with people. One participant stated that social media is the only way of connecting with loved ones' amidst the pandemic.

### *Police Brutality and Black Lives Matter Protests Effects on Mental Health*

When discussing questions related to the murders of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor and the subsequent BLM protests that followed, participants reported feeling overwhelmed and powerless. The BLM protests co-occurring with the COVID-19 pandemic felt “congested” according to one participant and that there were “problems upon problems”. Furthermore, two participants mentioned feeling powerless since they could not physically attend protests due to social distancing guidelines. One participant stated “I wanted to help here, here, and here...but I couldn’t which made me feel even worse.” Students also reflected upon past historical events that mirror the BLM protests in the summer of 2020. Throughout the focus group, students described the BLM protests in terms related to other historical events related to racial injustice and violence. Participants made parallels between the BLM protests of 2020 and the Civil Rights protests of the 1960s. One participant described the murders of Breonna Taylor and George Floyd as “modern day lynching.” Lastly, other participants reported increased levels of anxiety and experiences of vicarious trauma when completing everyday tasks as a result of the murders. One student remarked that the deaths were a “stark reminder that no matter where I am I could be at a grocery store or coming out of the grocery store like George Floyd. It doesn’t matter if I’m wrong or right, I could be sleeping in my bed like Breonna Taylor and basically anything could happen to me.”

### *HBCU Influence on Perception of Mental Health*

Students reported that attending an HBCU had an overall positive impact on their perceptions of mental health and mental wellness. Students noted that student organizations that promoted mental health on campus helped them keep a positive view of mental health. They cited certain events on campus like Wellness Wednesdays as helpful in remembering self-care. Additionally, students discussed increased comfortability with the idea of counseling as a result of attending an HBCU. Ethnic representation of the counseling staff

was highly valued among participants. One student said that “I think I’ll be comfortable going to a mental health counselor on a HBCU campus rather than the PWI only because I feel like most likely the therapist who work there will probably be white and won’t really understand my lingo or like my family structure or whatever I may be dealing with from an African American perspective.” Additionally, cultural understanding of family structure/values, cultural linguistics, and the overall African American experience were important to them when seeking help. Participants were confident they would not have felt as comfortable receiving counseling at a PWI because the cultural understanding and representation would not be the same. One student during the focus group stated that “I was at an event, with a person from the counseling center...I saw most of the counselors are African American and that makes me a bit more comfortable in terms of sharing my struggles because, whether people want to acknowledge it or not, there’s a major cultural disconnect between black people and white people. We have very different life experiences and having someone to talk to that has those same experiences, at least for me, makes me more likely to want to talk to them.”

### *Preference for African American Female Counselors*

All participants in the study reported having a preference for an African American counselor with two participants emphasizing a desire for an African American female counselor. They cited understanding and connection with cultural experiences such as one’s family upbringing and cultural linguistics as reasons why they preferred an African American counselor. One student said a white counselor “would not understand my upbringing or like the culture, like they will probably think like my mom saying like “is your head okay” like they’ll probably think that’s abuse but like a Black person would understand that’s how a lot of Black parents say these low blows and stuff like that.” Also, students emphasized that they preferred African American counselors because they most likely would understand some of

the microaggressions they experience in the workplace and in more diverse environments where African Americans are not the majority. For instance, one student told a story of how she witnessed her boss call another Black employee “too soft” for being disappointed that her project proposal was rejected. The student stated that this was the type of situation that she would prefer to speak with an African American counselor about since they would understand why that comment was offensive compared to a counselor of another race. Two other students made remarks on how they would not want to spend time elaborating or explaining their culture to a counselor of another race. One student said that “If I have a choice I will want 10 times out of 10 times choose someone that's African American in terms of seeking constant help over someone that is Caucasian because I know there's going to be that cultural disconnect.” All participants cited that having a counselor of another race meant that they probably would not understand their cultural background or experiences to the extent a Black counselor would.

### *Reported Barriers to MHSU*

Students reported the following barriers to MHSU: MSU’s infrastructure, perceived quality of counseling services, lack of promotion of health services, beliefs that problems aren’t serious enough, self-management of symptoms, & cultural perception of mental health. Three students reported that the counseling center did not have an accessible location making it difficult to find out where they could seek counseling. All students reported receiving no information about the counseling center via email even amidst the pandemic, and that they did not see promotion of the counseling center via email or on-campus. Additionally, students reported that the counseling center probably would not be able to assist them with the problems they were experiencing. According to participants, Morgan’s campus is pretty large and there might not be enough counselors to meet student needs. Additionally, three students reported that they did not feel their problems were “serious enough” to require attention from

a mental health professional. When asked what makes a problem serious versus not as serious, students cited domestic violence, suicide, emergency situations, and chronic mental health conditions as serious problems whereas interpersonal conflict and school stressors were not serious problems. All students reported self-management of symptoms as a way of coping with their mental health and lack of need for counseling services. Even when asked if the pandemic pushed them to go get counseling, many reported contemplating it, but ultimately deciding to deal with their problems and feelings on their own. One student said that “When I’m feeling that something is off, mentally, my first thought isn’t to automatically go seek professional help or anything. It is to try and do it myself, or ask for advice from someone that’s close to me.” Cultural perception of mental health also played a role in students deciding not to seek mental health services. Stigma within their community and negative perception from family and friends prevented some from seeking counseling.

#### *Reported Predictors to MHSU*

Students reported some predictors that encouraged them to seek mental health services. One participant cited her mother’s openness about her mental health journey as making her more comfortable with seeing a therapist. She stated that her mom was “very very open with us about mental health awareness” and how this made her think about therapy in a more positive light. Additionally, one student reported how a change in her outlook and goals made her seek counseling. She stated that 2021 “was a time for reflection so I did go in and decide to go find a therapist.” Students also reported that severe mental health problems warranted seeking counseling as well. As alluded to in the previous section, seeking mental health services was not necessary unless you were dealing with chronic symptoms or if you were in danger of hurting yourself or others. Students also emphasized that if there was Black

counselor or therapist readily available at a time they would like to seek treatment, that that would increase the likelihood of them utilizing mental health services.

### *Self-Care Mechanisms*

Students reported self-care mechanisms that they used to de-stress or cope with life circumstances. One coping mechanism cited by all participants was receiving emotional support from loved ones. Participants reported seeking advice from friends and family to help solve problems or receive comfort and support. Additionally, two students stated that they either temporarily deleted social media or implemented social media restraints in an effort to protect their mental health especially during the BLM protests. In an effort to protect themselves from being retraumatized by videos of police brutality, students avoided violent videos or temporarily left social media. One student stated that “I had to like leave social media for a little bit and also stop watching TV and stuff because I just didn’t know what to do.” Another participant stated that “Everytime I see a video and it says potentially sensitive content I can't watch anymore. I just got so sick and tired of seeing people that look like me getting hurt and brutalized and shot up.” Students also discussed various hobbies that they had adopted to practice self-care during the pandemic which included learning how to do their own hair and nails and with others reporting baking as one of their hobbies.

## Discussion

### *Pandemic Effects on Mental Health*

Although the effects of the pandemic were not discussed in as great of detail as other topics, students reported increased feelings of isolation and loneliness. This matches past research which has found that there has been an overall increase in stress and isolation in college students since the start of the pandemic (Wang et. al, 2020). Students also reported an increased need for social support from family and friends which also aligns with past research that students are still seeking means of connection even during the pandemic, and that this support is needed to ward off feelings of loneliness in students (Wang. et. al, 2020). Students noted that living with loved ones during the pandemic alleviated feelings of loneliness. Future public health efforts should focus on facilitating community among college students in the onset of the pandemic and adjustments to this new, virtual environment.

### *Police Brutality and Black Lives Matter Protests Effects on Mental Health*

The BLM protests and murders of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor also increased feelings of anxiety, frustration, and powerlessness among students, and the effects of these events were discussed in-depth by participants. The co-occurrence of the pandemic and the BLM protests in the summer of 2020 overwhelmed students. Students reported wanting to be physically involved in the protests, but could not due to social distancing guidelines. This implies that students were coping with not only the isolation and trauma that resulted from the COVID-19 pandemic, but also the traumas of witnessing the murders of Black people victimized by police brutality and being restricted in how they could support their community. Research has shown that Black college students are often engaged in civic engagement efforts especially if they are racially conscious (Hope et. al, 2016; Leath & Chavous, 2017 ). The fact that students were not able to be involved in protests made students

not only feel isolated, but helpless in their efforts to support other members of their community. Black young adults did find different ways to spread awareness and support one another virtually during the summer BLM protests of 2020. However, these other methods of civic engagement were not explored in this particular focus group. There also was a sense in many of the responses that students were reliving past traumas that mirror the brutality and racism Black people continue to face today. During the focus group students described witnessing the protests as similar to the Civil Rights protests or lynchings in the early to mid-1900s. There have been plenty of studies examining intergenerational trauma among Black people, and the BLM protests in 2020 seemed to have students revisit some of the past traumas that previous generations faced (Bryant-Davis et. al, 2017). Participants routinely referred to these past events to describe the BLM protests, and the emotions that accompanied witnessing racial violence and police brutality.

The increased level of anxiety among students is also to be considered. Students described witnessing videos of police brutality on social media as traumatizing and reminded them that they were not safe from facing violence and racism in their everyday lives. Vicarious trauma refers to when a person experiences a traumatic event through a secondary source such as through the media or through word of mouth (Pryce et. al, 2021). In this focus group, it seemed that participants were dealing with the residual effects of witnessing violence and police brutality even if they were not directly experiencing it which led to increased feelings of unsafety and anxiety (Pryce et. al, 2021). A few cited everyday activities such as going to the store or sleeping in their bed as anxiety-inducing. It can be said that students in this focus group were experiencing vicarious trauma. More research needs to be done on vicarious trauma in college students and how racialized violence can have detrimental effects on not only victims involved in these encounters but the communities to which these victims belong.



### *HBCU Influence on Perception of Mental Health*

Overall, attending an HBCU had a positive effect on students' perception of mental health. Although students did not report seeking counseling at Morgan, they did report that there was promotion of mental wellness and health among student organizations on campus. This implies that seeing other students from organizations promoting mental health had a positive effect on students' perceptions. Seeing one's own peers promoting the importance of self-care and mental wellness might alleviate some stigma surrounding mental health and utilization of mental health services. These findings align with past research that has established that HBCUs have a nurturing effect and a more positive influence on mental wellness (Gilbert et. al, 2006; Sun, 2021).

### *Preference for African American Female Counselors*

Another theme that emerged in the focus group is that all students reported a strong preference for an African American counselor, specifically, an African American female counselor. Past research has established that students usually prefer counselors who match their cultural background and have similar life experiences (Eisenberg et. al, 2011). In this case, students showed a strong preference for having an African American counselor because it was assumed that Black counselors would have an increased level of cultural understanding and connection with participants. Many participants reported that they did not want to have to explain their culture to a person of another race or accidentally offend them. In another sense, students also wanted a female counselor since they wanted their experiences as a woman and with other systemic issues to be understood. Overall, students' preference for an African American counselor aligns with research that suggests Black students tend to prefer counselors of their own race and background.

### Reported Barriers to MHSU

Students reported MSU's infrastructure, perceived quality of counseling services, beliefs that problems were not serious enough, self-management of symptoms, and cultural perceptions of mental health as barriers to them seeking mental health services. A few of the mentioned barriers to care such as stigma, self-management of symptoms, quantity of counselors, and lack of support from family and friends were barriers commonly reported among Black students in previous studies (Busby et. al, 2019; Masuda et. al, 2012; Hayes et. al, 2011; Barksdale & Molock, 2009). Students often avoid counseling due to stigma with receiving mental health services and the fear of being labeled as "crazy". Stigma continues to be a prominent barrier for Black students when seeking mental health services. All students in the focus group mentioned that their cultural background negatively influenced their perception of counseling services. Despite attending an HBCU where self-care and mental wellness is encouraged even among their peers, the cultural stigma that was taught to them by family and enforced by others in their lives still prevented many of them from seeking help. This implies that having a supportive college environment where other Black people are encouraging mental wellness is not enough to undo the years of conditioning Black students are taught when it comes to mental health.

Many of the perceived barriers to care were specific to the structure of Morgan and the counseling center. For one, perceived quality of counselors affected students' desire to seek services. Many students in the focus group did not believe that the quality of counseling services and the quantity of counselors working there sufficed to meet students' needs. One student even told a story of visiting the counseling center, and being displeased with the service that she received. Students also reported that the infrastructure of Morgan's campus made it difficult to pinpoint where they could go. The counseling center does not have a central location on Morgan's campus.

When asked why they chose not to seek services at their university's counseling center, students also reported that they did not believe their problems warranted professional counseling. This was an interesting finding due to the fact that this attitude leads into another barrier with seeking mental health services which is self-management of symptoms. If students perceive that their problems are not "serious enough", they will not seek mental health services and will cope with symptoms in other ways. This attitude also implies that students do not seek mental health services for preventative purposes. Even if students are not experiencing any adverse mental health conditions, seeking mental health services is often encouraged by therapists for even minor stressors. The Morgan counseling website states that students can discuss a range of topics with their counselor including everyday, routine stressful situations (MSU, 2021). The fact that students believed that mental health services were only for severe problems shows that students only believed seeking mental health services is needed once problems have reached the point where they are extremely severe.

### *Self-Care Mechanisms*

Students found a myriad of ways to cope with their own personal stressors. All students discussed relying on family and loved ones for social and emotional support. Past research has shown that Black students often rely on loved ones for emotional support as a replacement for therapy (Sun et. al, 2021; Eisenberg et. al, 2011). Additionally, social media breaks or restraints also were methods used by participants for self-care. Many students found it especially useful to refrain from social media during the BLM protests. Past research has found that social media breaks are very good for one's mental health and wellbeing and can alleviate feelings of depression and anxiety (Lin et. al, 2016).

### Strengths

The study will add to the growing body of literature regarding MHSU among Black students, and MHSU among Black students attending HBCUs. Although many studies have focused on examining MHSU among Black students attending PWIs, very few studies have explored MHSU among HBCU students. Additionally, this study will add to research examining how the racial majority status of a university might play a role in treatment seeking among African American students. Past research has shown that Black students have a preference for mental health professionals who look like them, especially if these students are culturally and racially conscious (Duncan & Johnson, 2007). Therefore, this study will help add to the growing body of research studying how the racial majority status of universities might play a role in students seeking treatment and what unique barriers and predictors students report between HBCUs and PWIs. Another strength of this study is the use of qualitative data analysis. Qualitative analysis allows for more thematic exploration on MHSU, and more context on barriers and predictors to MHSU than in past studies. Many past studies have utilized quantitative methods to explore these variables, but this study will add more context around the topic using qualitative methods.

### Limitations

One limitation of this study is that it uses a relatively small sample size. The results of this study are not generalizable to African American students attending other HBCUs. This study is only meant to explore certain themes, barriers, and predictors to MHSU among small groups of students attending an HBCU. Additionally, this study utilizes a strictly qualitative approach meaning that, once again, the findings are not generalizable and are only meant to explore certain themes around MHSU among Black students. It is also important to note that all participants in this study identified as

female. Therefore, this study did not gather data related to how other groups within the Black community perceive mental health and use mental health services. Future studies should recruit a more diverse sample size. Another limitation that must be considered is that the focus groups were held virtually instead of in-person due to COVID-19 social distancing restrictions. Traditionally, focus groups are held in person. The fact that the focus groups are being held virtually makes it a bit more difficult to have nuanced conversation and thorough observation that is performed in in-person focus groups.

### *Public Health Significance*

One of the goals of public health professionals is to help everyone, regardless of social identity, achieve the best health and healthcare possible. This study will broaden understanding of how effective universities are in reaching the Black student population and helping them achieve optimal mental health. This study will also help universities understand how the services they offer are perceived by Black students and what can be done to help improve services for the Black student population. With the history that the Black population has with the healthcare system and mental health services, it can bring increased understanding to both parties on how this relationship can be improved. Hopefully, the results of this project can be used to help the counseling services at Morgan State University better serve their students and make progressive change.

### *Master of Public Health (MPH) Competencies Addressed*

This study addresses two competencies under the Master of Public Health Health Equity concentration. One competency that this study addresses is that it identifies and “evaluates the main components of the organization and delivery of healthcare and their impact on population health and health disparities.” This study mainly focuses on understanding the delivery of mental health services to the Black population attending MSU

and students' perception of these services. This study also aims to understand why Black students use mental health services at a lower rate compared to other racial and ethnic groups. It is clear that my study aligns with this competency in the health equity concentration which aims to understand the delivery of healthcare services and how this delivery can contribute to health disparities. The second competency that is addressed in this study is that it “values health equity and the importance of social determinants of health in addressing barriers and eliminating health disparities.” This study is looking at a major social determinant of health, race, and how this determinant can shape the experiences of Black college students in seeking care and discrimination they may face when seeking out treatment. This study highly values health equity and aims to understand specific barriers that Black students face and how these barriers can be resolved so students can receive the mental health care they need.

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