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INCLUSIVE MALE ADOLESCENT IDENTITY FORMATION IN GROUP SETTINGS

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INCLUSIVE MALE ADOLESCENT IDENTITY FORMATION
IN GROUP SETTINGS

A Project
Presented to the
Faculty of
California State University,
San Bernardino

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Social Work

by
Austin Miller
May 2021

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ABSTRACT

The principal developmental task of adolescence is the formation of an individual's identity. Through much of human history there has been an intentional design of practices that harness this developmental energy and channel it through structured experiences where the individual earns a targeted identity through certain actions. These practices continue in recognizable forms that target specific identities and fulfill the individual psychological need of identity formation and the societal need of transition into adulthood. Inherent to these identity formation experiences is the group setting, where a variety of capabilities for identity achievement exist. This research project explores what structures and interventions effectively support high performing and low performing male adolescents through these identity formation experiences. Organizations working with male adolescents which use structured experiences to support a targeted identity achievement of all participants were study sites for the project. Qualitative data was gathered through the form of interviews with staff working directly with male adolescents at these organizations. Results of the project suggest that there are common strategies that support an inclusive experience for all participants, as well as strategies specific to supporting identity achievement among low performing and high performing participants. These strategies offer the potential to improve the programmatic development of identity formation experiences for male adolescents as well as targeted interventions for male adolescence engaged in identity formation experiences.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I arrived at this project due an unrelenting desire to support the aching and necessary transition from boy to man. I was able to maintain the commitment to this project due to the love and support of my wife, Jen, and my inspiring children Bodin, Givan and Tenley. *Estamos Juntos.*

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CHAPTER ONE

ASSESSMENT

Introduction

Chapter One begins with the focus of the research project; intervention strategies that support male adolescents through structured identity formation experiences in group settings. This section also clarifies the labels that will be used throughout the project to identify the practices, interventions and participants which this project focuses. The next section describes why the post-positivist paradigm is the most appropriate paradigm for this project. The chapter then includes a literature review on identity formation experiences for male adolescents, the value of those experiences and intervention strategies which aim to support participants in successful achievement of the desired identity. The next section describes use of Erikson's psychosocial theory of development, Marcia's identified statuses along the ego-identity continuum, and subsequent elaborations of Marcia's identity status model for interpreting the project data. The final section describes potential implications this project offers to social work.

Research Statement/Focus/Question

This paper accepts that identity formation is the major developmental task of adolescence. Across human culture, history and geography this developmental task has been structurally translated into *rites of passage* experiences through which an individual achieves a socially recognized identity

through performing certain activities (Delaney, 1995; Warfield-Coppock, 1992). So powerful is the concept of *rites of passage* experiences that many sociologists point to a variety of contemporary peer initiation experiences (i.e. gang rituals, fraternity initiations, athletic tryouts) as attempts to fulfill socio-evolutionary needs once facilitated by families and communities (Delaney, 1995; Lévesque, Molgat, Moreau, 2017; Warfield-Coppock, 1992). While the label of *rites of passage* is not applied to many experiences which support identity formation in adolescence, many established societal practices fulfill this developmental need. This paper will use the label *structured identity formation experiences* to identify practices which intentionally support achievement of a targeted identity.

The aim of this research project is to identify strategies that support male adolescent participants through identity formation experiences in a group setting. Many identity formation experiences are defined through task performance and the expulsion of individuals who are unsuccessful in the task completion. Some examples of these experiences are gang initiations or tryouts for a competitive sports team. In these examples the individual is either accepted as a member of a group or is excluded from that group. This research project is focused on identity formation experiences which are defined through task performance and then intentional support of the outlier individual participants who are at risk of task failure or conversely who are not challenged by the task, but ultimately included in the “passed” group. The author labels these identity formation experiences as *inclusive* identity formation experiences in order to differentiate

from the common *exclusionary* process at work in many group identity formation experiences.

The following example offers a useful analogy of the project focus and further clarity regarding the label of “at-risk participant” which the project will use. Imagine a coach who has forty players tryout for a ten-member basketball team. Due to the disparity between willing players and roster space, the coach excludes certain players in favor of other players. Exclusion of potential team members supports the identity formation of players who achieved team membership as they now have achieved the recognized status of “basketball player”. This process also creates group cohesion amongst the team because every other team member was chosen over a potential player. Players selected for the team achieve an identity as a team member and the team feels bonded because they are among those selected. Imagine the same scenario with only eight players arriving for the tryout. The coach is attempting the same task of identity formation and group cohesion, while experiencing a great deal of pressure to build these concepts without using exclusion as a strategy. In this scenario, two types of “at-risk” participants emerge. The obvious “at-risk” participant is the player who is unable to perform the tryout tasks. The inconspicuous “at-risk” participant is the player who is able to perform the tryout tasks with such ease that they feel no sense of achievement and remain unchanged by the tryout process. This project attempts to identify what intervention strategies are useful in that latter scenario when there is *inclusive*

pressure at work to include both “at risk” participants in the identity formation experience.

Research has concentrated on the benefits of identity formation experiences for male adolescents and the common elements associated with successful implementation; however, there is a lack of research on interventions targeting participants who are “at-risk” of failing the identity formation process or “at risk” of feeling untransformed by the required tasks due their ease. This project will explore what strategies are useful to implementing an identity formation program that aims to include both “at-risk” participants in successful identity achievement.

The central persons of the project are the individuals responsible for the implementation of the structured identity formation experiences. This project will use the term *group leader* to identify the person implementing the structured identity formation experiences and responsible for responding to the “at-risk” participants. Based on the previous metaphor, the basketball coach would be considered to be this *group leader*.

Paradigm and Rationale for Chosen Paradigm

This research project will use a post positivist paradigm to examine strategies targeting male adolescent identity formation processes. The post positivist paradigm is the preferred perspective because extensive literature exists supporting the importance of identity formation during adolescence, but the mechanics of how to accommodate the wide variety of abilities in a group setting

remain relatively unexplored. This project accepts that identity formation experiences are a necessary component of an adolescent male's maturation process. The post positivist paradigm uses qualitative data collection to explore the research topic uninhibited by a specific hypothesis (Morris, 2014). This qualitative data collection will consist of interviews of *group leaders* at the study sites.

The post positivist paradigm allows for the project to continually refine the area of focus in an effort to identify, define and explain the research problem (Crabtree & Miller, 1999). This adaptability is crucial to this research project because structured identity formation experiences involve processes that move participants from one cognitive and behavioral stage to another (Wozniak & Allen, 2012). In the case of "at-risk" participants this process is interrupted and non-linear. The post positivist model allows the researcher the flexibility to explore these non-linear processes within the study sites.

Literature Review

The majority of literature on structured identity formation programs for adolescent males focuses on the traditional use of rites of passage programming, ushering a boy into manhood. This concentration of literature is understandable. Societies have long had a need to differentiate between *child* and *adult* and the rites of passage experience has been the process for that transition. The traditional rite of passage experience casts such an immense evolutionary shadow that all subsequent identity formation experiences inevitably operate

along the same biopsychosocial-evolutionary path. While a young person may not participate in an explicitly identified rites of passage practice, the developmental progression from child to adult happens and the societal context of that progression determines what privileges and responsibilities accompany that “passage” into adulthood.

Rites of passage programming has followed the same socioevolutionary rooted trend of creating a defined experience whereby adolescent males successfully transition from boyhood to manhood. While this literature is important in emphasizing the necessity of identity formation experiences for male adolescence and common elements of those experiences, it relies on a limited concept of identity that revolves around *manhood*.

Universality of Rites of Passage Experiences for Male Adolescents

The seminal figure of rite of passage literature is Joseph Campbell who observed, “boys everywhere have a need for rituals marking their passage to manhood” (Pinnock, 1997). The current vacuum of explicit rites of passage experiences available to adolescent males is the exception rather than the norm (Allen & Dyck, 1987). The majority of human societies have recognized that rites of passage experiences are a preventative and promotional tool offering healthier outcomes for its male members as well as preventing male abuse of other community members (Lines & Gallasch, 2009).

Male Adolescent Identity Formation Outside of Rites of Passage Programming

This project does not solely focus on programs that target *manhood* as the identity to be achieved, however, it is important to recognize the impact of *manhood* as an identity. *Manhood* is the overarching identity that has driven male adolescent identity formation for millennial and its evolutionary residue is at work in the programs studied. In research on adolescent beliefs about *manhood*, researchers found that both male and female adolescents view *manhood* as an “achieved status” which can be “lost or taken away” (Weaver, et al., 2010, p. 241). A primary method in which male identity is earned and maintained is through physical aggression (Weaver, et al., 2010). Other identity formation research notes the unique importance male adolescents assign to physical activities and their identity compared to female adolescents (Sharp, et al., 2006). This combination of potential identity loss and physicality suggests that male adolescents navigate identity formation in a world of fragility and physically demonstrable tasks.

Common Components of Identity Formation Programs

Two consistent commonalities within identity formation programs are the communal context and the distinct phases of a structured identity formation program. The identity formation experience is fundamentally a communal process (Blumenkrantz & Gavazzi, 1993). Designated members of the community offer the participants the mentoring and support necessary to

complete the process. Of particular value to the transformational potential housed within the rites of passage process is the idea that the “passaged” group takes on certain behaviors. Successful completion of the rite of passage process then implicitly demands behavior that is consistent with the “passaged” group (Blumenkrantz & Gavazzi, 1993). The broader community then confers a privileged status to “passaged” individuals in return to this expected behavior.

In their description of Afrocentric rites of passage programs, Harvey and Rauch (1997), identify common elements of rites of passage programs including separation from the at-large community, team building experiences and participating in ceremonies that demarcate specific transformations. These same essential elements exist in other rites of passage programs involving a distinctly different ethnic focus (Blumenkrantz & Gavazzi, 1993; Delaney, 1995; Lines & Gallasch, 2009).

Interventions Addressing “At-risk” Participants

The literature that represents the closest attempts to address the inclusivity of structured identity formation programs is the research of Blumenkrantz and Gavazzi, who outline a complete model that targets micro, mezzo and macro level implementation of a rites of passage program (1993). The Blumenkrantz and Gavazzi model relied on “passage” related tasks that were chosen by the individual participants. In this model the task completions are individualized and so an “at-risk” participant could be redirected to a new

task. Consequently, the model never explores alternative interventions directed towards participants who are at risk of failure nor does it address the affects that separate tasks have on the social cohesion of the participants.

Mutual-Aid Model for Groups

The research that best addresses the psychosocial process of the group setting is the Steinberg's (2014) mutual-aid model. Steinberg's model clarifies the various psychosocial responses that are unlocked when a group of individuals gather with a common cause. A targeted identity formation activity certainly qualifies as a common cause. A psychological barrier that is unlocked in the mutual-aid model is through the "all in the same boat phenomenon" (Steinberg, 2014, p. 30) which creates a sense of safety for group members to explore taboo topics. In structured identity formation experiences, this "all in the same boat phenomenon" is heightened because not only is a targeted identity a common desire among group members, but the experiences of attaining that identity are shared.

The literature review reveals the crucial role that rites of passage experiences play in the maturation process of male adolescents. Despite the variety of contexts rites of passage programs, the literature identifies common elements across programs. This established pattern of common components has the potential to bolster the relevance of this study's findings to a diversity of programs. The literature also identifies the limited intervention strategies that

programs can use to intervene with “at-risk” participants as well as the power of mutual-aid within the group experience.

Theories Guiding Conceptualization

Programs that incorporate structured identity formation experiences are harnessing the psychosocial stages of development identified by Erik Erikson and create a concentrated experience for both the identity v. identity confusion stage and the intimacy v. isolation stage (Zastrow & Kirst-Ashman, 2016). Rites of passage experiences are an example of intentionally constructed “benchmarks” that guide our transition from one developmental stage to the next (Blumenkrantz & Gavazzi, 1993).

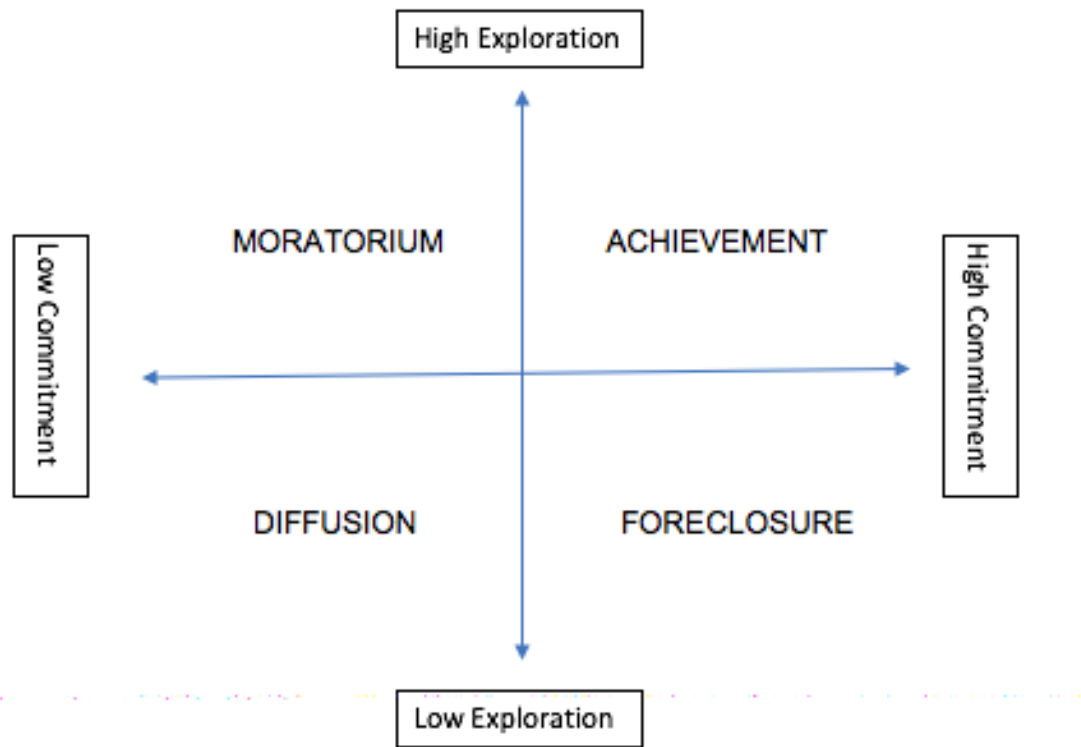
This paper will use Erikson’s psychosocial theory of development as well as Marcia’s expansion of Erikson’s theory on identity formation. Erik Erikson’s fifth developmental stage of identity formation will be a consistent topic throughout this paper. Marcia differentiates between “identity achievement” and “identity diffusion” within Erikson’s developmental stage of identity formation (Zastrow & Kirst-Ashman, 2016).

Marcia (1966) offered differentiated identity statuses within Erikson’s theory of identity formation. The *exploration* status involves an active exploration of alternative identities before deciding on an identity. Once a person decides on pursuing a specific identity then they move into the *commitment* status where they engage in activities associated with that identity. After engaging in those related activities, a person reaches *achievement* status. Marcia (1966) hints to

the rite of passage experience when he describes a psychosocial task of adolescence as establishing a “reciprocal relationship with his society and maintaining a feeling of continuity within himself” (p. 551). Structured identity formation experiences offer adolescents the opportunity to formally transfer their commitment of an identity into an achievement. This transfer takes place through demonstrable action which demands some exertion and/or sacrifice on behalf of the participant. While identities remain malleable even after the commitment status, evidence suggests that there are positive links to mental health outcomes that accrue to adolescents who reach commitment status (Berzonsky & Adams, 1999; Crocetti, et al., 2008; Marcia, 1966).

According to Marcia, an individual progresses along a continuum of identity statuses (diffusion, foreclosure, moratorium and achievement). Berzonsky and Adams (1999) elaborate on Marcia’s model and suggest that these sequences describe a structuring (the committed foreclosure stage), a “destructuring” (the exploratory moratorium stage), and a restructuring (the integrated achievement stage). Berzonsky and Adam’s expansion is important when examining the structural, psychological mechanism at work when staff are offering interventions for “at-risk” participants.

Figure 1: Marcia's Identity Status Model



Contribution of the Study to Micro and/or Macro Social Work Practice

There is wide evidence of rites of passage experiences being important vehicles in male adolescents' transition from adolescence to adulthood. This transition has an impact at the micro level as an individual's identity shifts and a new self-narrative forms. The transition also has an impact at the mezzo level as the identity formation experience encourages a "rite of solidarity" amongst group participants (Vigil, 1996). Inclusion or expulsion from a group are powerful forces in adolescent identity formation because it is within the context of their social

group is that adolescents understand their own identity (Crosnoe, 2000). Structured identity formation experiences have an impact at the macro level as the community recognizes and accepts the new identity of the passaged participants. Social workers operate in many contexts (schools, community-based agencies, families, individual) where various identity formation experiences are at work.

At the micro level, social workers work with individuals who have intentionally or unintentionally sought out experiences that inform their identities. Structured identity formation experiences offer preventative and/or rehabilitative interventions which promote self-efficacy and support identity achievement. In work with individual male clients, social workers should be attentive to the importance of demonstrable actions which serve as the benchmarks for male identity achievement and offer clients support for tasks which serve as effective benchmarks.

In the mezzo (group) level, social workers must be attuned to the group cohesion that fosters the most beneficial forms of interpersonal interactions. Incorporating a structured identity formation experience offers social workers a method to enhance group cohesion. At the macro level, social workers must be attuned to the social roles that and behavioral expectations that exert pressure on those roles. Systemic identity formation experiences that formally or informally operate create expected behaviors assigned to certain identities. The crucial role identity formation experiences play in the psychosocial development of an

individual demand that social workers are attentive to these forces. Social workers have a role in promoting structured identity formation experiences that aim to alter identity, create group solidarity and define roles and responsibilities within a community structure. The project focus on intervention also allows a greater congruence with the rites of passage practices representing a journey into manhood. If a male adolescent fails a rite of passage ceremony which carries communally recognized status of manhood, the societal strategy cannot be expulsion from the society.

The ultimate goal of the research project is to inform the practices of other programs that use or are considering structured identity formation experiences for male adolescents. Strategies identified within the project will support programs to improve their practices and/or implement a practice that is both inclusive and effective at the micro, mezzo and macro levels.

Summary

This chapter began with a description of the structured identity formation topic to be researched using a post positivist paradigm. A review of literature relevant to structured identity formation programming was then presented. The psychosocial theories that will be used to interpret research data was discussed. Lastly, the chapter describes the research project's potential contribution to the field of social work.

CHAPTER TWO

ENGAGEMENT

Introduction

Chapter Two begins with a description of the study sites in the research project. The chapter then identifies the strategies used to engage the gatekeepers at the study sites. Next, the chapter discusses the preparation the researcher took in order to improve the data collection process. The chapter then addresses how the project responded to the diversity amongst the study sites. Next, the chapter considered the ethical and political issues relevant to the research project. The chapter then describes the technology utilized during the study.

Study Sites

The unit of analysis for this project are three organizations that employ structured identity formation experiences in group settings. All three organizations work with male adolescents and importantly, all three organizations aim to support all their participants in identity achievement. All three organizations operate within the educational system, but the focus of the identity formation experience is varied within each study site. One of the study sites focuses identity formation in a military leadership model. One of the study sites directs identity formation around an athletic model. One of the study sites structures identity formation around a cultural model. Programmatic elements

common in all three study sites are summarized and interventions targeting “at risk” participants are analyzed. A synthesis of these practices is presented in Chapter Four of the paper.

The military leadership study site examined in this project is a combined junior high and high school in California. This site employs structured identity formation experiences throughout the time that students are at the school. There is a concentrated identity formation experience during the beginning of the program when incoming adolescents begin at the school. Staff at this site employ a variety of intervention strategies to support an individual’s successful transition into the school as a student.

The athletic study site examined in this project is a small high school in California. The student body population of the school is such that it cannot support a traditional football team and so is included in the eight-man high school football teams league. This school was chosen as a study site due to the great pressures placed on coaches to balance the identity formation experience of a team tryout with the necessity to include every available player. In this setting, coaches must have more refined intervention strategies than their coaching peers, who typically have a much broader group of available players for selection. Team coaches were targeted as interview subjects, but due to COVID pandemic restrictions, a school administrator served as the interview subject.

The cultural model to be examined is a “rites of passage” program operated within a school district on the Eastern Coast of the United States. This

program offers rites of passage workshops targeting African-American male adolescents. This site was chosen for research for several reasons. The first is that rites of passage practices targeting African-American males are the most heavily researched programs. Additionally, the program has an emphasis on individualized interventions which contributes to its inclusivity of identity achievement of participants.

An important common trait amongst all three study sites is that there is a commitment to identity achievement amongst the group leaders. All three sites seek to balance the demands of the structured identity formation experience while maintaining a commitment to individual success. All three sites emphasize intervention as opposed to expulsion when working with an “at risk” participant.

Engagement Strategies for Gatekeepers at Research Sites

This researcher used professional social networking to identify and initiate contact with gatekeepers in all three study sites. All three study sites expressed interest in the project due to a desire for programmatic of improvement and contribution to the research topic. When data collection was to begin, several of the study sites had altered their programming as a result of COVID restrictions. Despite having to focus their attention elsewhere, all three study sites remained committed to the project.

Self-Preparation

The researcher has personal familiarity with the programs at all three study sites either as an indirect participant or previously involved in the program implementation. This experience was useful in separating intervention strategies from inherent program content. An alteration in research language took place following the interview with the cultural study site. This study site facilitates rites of passage experiences and utilizes the formal title of *rites of passage* to describe their programming. Initially, this researcher had planned to use the phrase *rites of passage* to describe the project focus, however, it became clear after interviews, the term *rites of passage* described a more explicit process targeting the transition from boy to man. This researcher felt compelled to preserve the integrity of the phrase *rites of passage* and instead use the phrase *structured identity formation* to describe the project focus. The phrase *structured identity formation* incorporates a much broader range of activities. Additionally, for *rites of passage* practitioners it provides a useful differentiation that preserves the integrity of the phrase *rites of passage* while allowing for a broader applicability into experiences which do not focus on the transition from boy to man, yet target a specific identity for achievement.

Diversity Issues

It was this researcher's experience that the culture of the educational setting facilitated an interview primarily composed of essential questions. This was due to the quasi-military environment where the communication norm is

direct. The rites of passage programs of the Massachusetts based organization target male, African-American adolescents primarily from the northeastern U.S. The staff of the programs is predominantly male and African-American. This researcher is male, Caucasian and from the western US. Based on this researcher's experience with the Massachusetts based organization inclusion of throw-away questions were important to establish rapport with research participants. The eight-man football team programs of the athletic site were the environment with which this researcher was least experienced. Consequently, all four questioning varieties (essential, extra, throw away and probing) were used during interviews to establish rapport and elicit responses relevant to the research topic.

Ethical Issues

The researcher used phone calls or email to prepare interviewees prior to the interview. Information exchanged during these initial contacts included basic information about the research study, the interviewees role in that study, the purpose for the interview, maintenance of privacy and confidentiality, recording procedures and answering questions from the interviewee. Informed consent was explained during the initial contact, sent digitally to the interviewee for their review and then will signed prior to the interview. In one instance the signature exchange was done verbally due to accessibility concerns.

The informed consent form contained an opt out clause for those participants wishing not to be video and/or audio recorded. In one case, audio

recording was not available and note taking was prioritized during and after the interview. In the majority of instances, the study participants agreed to video and/or audio recordings and the interview was recorded via Zoom and then transcribed into a Word document by the researcher. Once the transcription had taken place, the audio/video file was deleted.

In an effort to protect study site anonymity, the study sites are referred to as “educational”, “athletic” or “cultural” sites rather than their agency name.

In an effort to protect confidentiality, study participants are coded numerically in order of participant (i.e. 1,2,3, etc).

Political Issues

The political issue that had the greatest potential to interfere with the research project was concerns about the research project exposing unflattering information about the study sites. This concern did not emerge from any of the study sites, as the focus of the project was not measuring the effectiveness of the agencies, but exploring how their intervention strategies create inclusive identity formation experiences. This concern was also be mitigated by the researcher’s explicit lack of observation of the study sites as all interactions with the study sites occurred via videoconferencing or teleconferencing.

The Role of Technology

Telephone calls and email were the primary medium of communication until interviews were arranged. Five of the interviews were conducted via Zoom

videoconferencing. One interview was done via teleconferencing with some follow up occurring via email. One interview was done via email exchange with interview questions between the researcher and participant being exchanged via email. Videoconferencing recordings were stored on the researcher's personal computer until being transcribed. The recording of the interview was deleted once it was transcribed. All transcribed documents were protected with a password.

Summary

This chapter opened with a description of the three study sites to be included in the research project. Strategies for engaging the gatekeepers at the study sites were then discussed. Intentional preparation on the part of the researcher was then included. The chapter then examined the potential diversity, ethical and political issues present in the research. Lastly, a review of technologies included in the project was specified.

CHAPTER THREE

IMPLEMENTATION

Introduction

Chapter Three begins with a description of the study participants. Next, the chapter describes how participants will be selected at the study sites. The chapter then outlines the method and timing of data collection. The chapter then discusses how the data will be recorded. Next, the chapter describes how and why the study will use the “top-down” approach to analyze project data. The chapter then outlines the termination plan as well as the proposed distribution of research findings.

Study Participants

Study participants consisted of staff from three different agencies who work directly with youth served by the organizations. The three agencies chosen for the project had vastly different staff structures. The educational setting offered the largest pool of potential participants with ten to fifteen participants. Of these, five educational based participants took part in the project. The athletic setting offered a pool of two potential participants and yielded one project participant. This number was greatly impacted by the COVID pandemic as athletic programs were severely restricted and availability of staff was severely limited. The cultural setting offered two to three potential participants. Ultimately one participant from the cultural setting was included in the project data. One

additional individual was interviewed for the project, but the interview was discarded as the participant's role was more administrative than in direct work with adolescents. Six of the seven project participants were male. Amongst the project participants, there was likely a wide range of economic, educational, age and ethnic diversity although this specific information was not collected as part of the interview. This range of diversity is inferred due to geographical location of the organization, targeted service population and educational requirements for role occupied at the organization.

Selection of Participants

Criterion sampling and typical case sampling were employed as the primary approaches to sampling within the research project. Criterion sampling is based on a particular characteristic useful to the research focus. In this project criteria sampling was used to identify the three organizations mentioned as potential sources for data gathering. The four particular characteristics identified as the essential criteria for this research were: 1) programs that included a structured identity formation experience as part of their program, 2) programs that included adolescent males in these practices, 3) programs that intervened when participants were demonstrating signals of failure and 4) the perception of potential failure on behalf of the participants. All three programs identified for inclusion in this research project met the criteria listed.

In all three settings, the identity formation experiences were paused due to COVID restrictions. These restrictions forced the researcher to work with the

gatekeepers to identify participants who had worked in structured identity formation experiences in previous years. The researcher also worked with gatekeepers to identify staff members who worked with “at-risk” program participants. Past experience and direct experience with “at-risk” participants were the main criteria for interview consideration by the researcher.

Data Gathering

Project data was largely gathered in the form videoconference interviews using Zoom. Due to technological constraints one of the interviews was conducted via teleconferencing. Due to time constraints on behalf of the participant one of the interviews was conducted via email exchange. Study participant responses were then gathered as data and analyzed. Aligned with post-positivist practices, this researcher used a structured set of questions before the interview while allowing for changes to this structure in order to accommodate ideas gained from previous interviews or literature. Due to the variety of settings that this project used for data collection, structured interviews were tailored to each setting. Often this tailoring consisted of maintain the essence of a question within the study sites unique context. A structured set of questions appears in Appendix B and questions were modified to address each setting.

Interviews consisted of descriptive and structural questions. The descriptive questions for program staff were focused on what tasks and activities are associated with the identity formation process, how the targeted identity

formation experience fits into the larger program, how a participant's progress is monitored in the structured identity formation process, what strategies are used for those participants who are determined to be "at-risk" of program failure and how group cohesion is maintained in the midst of a differentiated delivery of resources for "at-risk" participants.

Structured questions for program staff were focused on why certain tasks and activities are included with the identity formation experience (i.e. what activities do participants do to build a new identity for themselves?), what purpose the identity formation process serves participants (i.e. how does the structured identity formation experience impact participants?) and what interventions support program participants moving from "at-risk" of identity formation failure to successful completion (i.e. what happens when a participant is demonstrating that they may fail or not be challenged by a certain task?). All of the questions that have been provided as examples are taken from the comprehensive structure of questions found in Appendix B.

Phases of Data Collection

Data was collected through individual interviews based on study participant availability. The chronology of data gathering was consistent across all three sites and included an identification of study participants within the organization. Once study participants were identified, the researcher initiated contact in an introductory phase, explaining the research project and addressing questions and concerns of the study participant. During this introductory phase,

exchange of consent forms were coordinated and videoconferencing or teleconferencing interviews were scheduled. The collection phase consisted of the videoconferencing or teleconferencing interview where the researcher asked the study participants open ended questions and potential expansions or clarifications of the study participant's answers in the form of a dialogue. Journals were kept for initial reflections after the interview as well as reflections after transcriptions of the interview.

Under the post positivist approach data collection and data analysis are not separate processes. Due to the combined process, it is important to clarify the order in which data was collected and analyzed as that strategy was a determinant in the quality of data. The educational site was the first setting of data collection. This decision was based on potential sample size and accessibility. Of the three settings, the educational site offered the largest potential sample size for data collection. The number of staff who work directly with the participants is between ten to fifteen staff members. This setting was also the most accessible setting, as the program is in operation year-round. This combination of factors made it an ideal choice for the first collection of data, so that the data collection process can be refined.

The second setting for data collection and analysis was the athletic site of the eight-man football team in Central California. The final setting for data collection and analysis was the cultural setting program run by the

Massachusetts based organization, as this program offered the fewest number of potential research participants.

The strategy of data collection outlined in this section accounts for the pre-determined schedule for the various study sites as well as frontloading the setting in the data collection process that was both more accessible and had a larger sample size. This strategy allowed for the collection process to become more refined as data collection settings became increasingly inflexible.

Data Recording

Data from interviews was recorded through videoconferencing recording and written records. For recorded interviews written transcripts were then compiled that extracted material most relevant to the research topic. In the case of one of the interviews that could not be recorded, a written record of the interview was compiled shortly after the completion of the interview.

Research journals were also included in the data recording process of the research project. Research journals were completed after interviews, transcriptions as well as after literature reviews. The journals related to interviews were used to improve future interviews and limit the effect of the researcher's own values and biases. Journals completed after literature reviews were used to specify the research topic, formulate interview questions and to limit the researcher's values and biases.

Summary

This chapter described the various participants in the study, the data to be gathered and the process used to gather the data. The chapter ended with a description of the data recording process used in the project.

CHAPTER FOUR

EVALUATION

Introduction

This chapter discusses the findings from the data collected. The chapter begins with a description of how the data was coded. An analysis of the findings is presented according to the themes and categories present in the data. The findings are then applied to the micro and macro level practices in social work. Lastly, areas of further investigation are offered based on research findings.

Data Analysis

Saladaña (2016) recommends considering the function of interview questions when deciding on codes. The function of interview questions was intended to explore how certain processes and actions (structures and interventions) at the study sites supported identity formation of male adolescent participants. Two coding methods were used in the analysis of the project's data. The first method used was structural coding as described by Saldaña (2016). The synthesis of information from the literature review suggested that there were commonalities that were likely to exist across the study sites. These commonalities are reflected in the outline of interview questions that targeted common aspects of identity formation practices and formed the basis for the structural codes that operated as the initial coding method. The secondary coding method chosen was process coding. Process coding is useful "to connote

action in the data” (Saldaña, 2016, p. 111) as well as processes that occur in patterns. Both actions and patterns were evident in the collected data.

Data Interpretation

Analysis of the data produced four general themes with aligned categories. The two types of “at-risk” participants that this section discusses are the *high-performing* participants who are not challenged by the collective tasks of the structured identity formation experience and the *low-performing* participants who are overwhelmed by those collective tasks. This section discusses common and divergent strategies which support identity formation in both groups. These themes and categories are outlined in the table below:

Table 1. Themes and Categories of Inclusive Identity Achievement

Supporting Identity Achievement in the Group Setting	Common Strategies for “At-Risk” Participants	Strategies for <i>High-Performing</i> Participants	Strategies for <i>Low-Performing</i> Participants
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identifying the group identity • Establishing trials as a pathway to identity • Gaining trust of participants 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gaining knowledge of participants • Describing identities needed by the group 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Locating fear of participants • Connecting individual identity to collective identity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Manipulating peer interaction • Affirming identities

Supporting Identity Achievement in the Group Setting

Central to the idea of identity formation in male adolescents is the role of the group. In fact, it is difficult to separate identity achievement from a group experience. Erikson's psychosocial theory would expect many developmental experiences in adolescences to involve peers. Group Leaders attest to the importance of identity formation as a peer-centric group process. As male adolescents take steps to cross a threshold, the group serves as witness to this threshold being crossed. The group is the setting which most supports and affirms identity achievement. The group setting becomes even more necessary for supporting the identity achievement in "at-risk" participants, as will be clear in later sections. Due to the centrality of the group, a major task of group leaders is to harness the group activity into an identity-oriented purpose. Interview data revealed several categories within this theme (See Table 1).

Identifying the Group Identity. Group leaders do not begin with a blank slate. In all settings, the Group Leaders described using the experiences and examples of veteran participants to model and mold the group identity. When discussing how participants discover and decide on attending their program, Group Leader 5 explained that "most kids find us through social media. They see one of their friends posts and think 'I'd like to be that'". Group Leader 1 described when presenting their program to potential participants, they will "show a video and bring a couple of graduates and we talk about the expectations". When participants arrive at the group, they often have been exposed to a part of the

group, whether through the modeling or broadcasting of a previous or current group participant or through information provided during the referral process. For group leaders the important recognition is that participants arrive with preconceived expectations about the group. These expectations may align with the intended group identity, but once participants arrive in the group setting the group leader has to address the multiple individual expectations and support the group embracing a collective group identity. Group Leader 6 described that this next step is to identify what “it means to be part of the group”. This conversation takes place before any demonstrable tasks are demanded, as the characteristics that the group members identify will then determine what tasks may offer evidence of such characteristics.

Establishing Trials as Pathways to Identity. All of the Group Leaders described early activities, requiring full participation of all group members, to be central to individual identity formation. In addition to full participation another key element to these early experiences is the stressful demand for both group leaders and participants. As Group Leader 2 explained, the orientation process in their program was a “high intense stress level for the students”. When faced with a new group of participants, Group Leader 3 described the “big challenge” that s/he knew was necessary to provide the participants. Group Leader 6 described this phase of activity as the “baseline”. It is this flurry of demands that establishes the connection between identity and task.

A varsity athlete is not an athlete because he wants to be an athlete, but because he has done something to prove that he is an athlete. It is during this collective action-oriented process that the resemblance of *rite-of-passage* processes is on display. There is some collective experience that all participants have to endure and only after that experience can they be considered for the next task. This connection between identity and effort becomes the basis for subsequent experiences. As Group Leader 1 explained, a participant just doesn't become an accepted group member because they show up, but because they have met "a list of requirements".

Gaining Trust of Participants. The identity formation process is an intimate experience for participants and group leaders. Five of the Group Leaders interviewed mentioned the importance of gaining the trust of participants. The principle way that Group Leaders gained the trust of the participants is through their physical and emotional presence during the collective trial activities (Group Leaders 2, 3, 4 & 5). Group Leader 3 was emphatic about the importance of program staff being present as witness to trial process and that this presence forms an incredibly powerful component of the "strength of our relationship". Another strategy that group leaders use is a collective processing of emotions. Two of the group leaders discussed the importance of prioritizing group conversations around emotions. These group leaders believed that "building emotion in a group setting is very important" (Participant 5, personal communication, August 18, 2020). A major task of creating an environment

accepting of risk is “getting these *group members* to embrace the idea of vulnerability” (Participant 6, personal communication November 3, 2020).

Group leaders pointed to two reasons that a group level trust is important. The first reason is to maintain the group cohesion. The group members will not progress along the identity formation continuum simultaneously, therefore, participants need to trust the accommodations the group leader makes for those outlying participants. The second reason that trust is important is because the approval of the group leader will likely become a task that the group confronts (Group Leaders 2, 3 & 5). This task will only be worthy of pursuit if the group leader has established trust with the group.

Common Strategies for “At-Risk” Participants

The data outlined two common strategies for supporting “at-risk” participants along the identity formation continuum. The first of these strategies is the Group Leaders investing the time and effort to gain a personal knowledge of their participants. The second strategy is to describe the various roles needed within the group.

Gaining Knowledge of Participants. Unsurprisingly, many of the group leaders discussed the importance of developing personal knowledge of the “at-risk” participants. Group Leader 2 described the value and required consistency for this strategy to be effective:

“Finding what they are interested in and letting them know they’re important because some of the (participants) that struggle have never really felt like they’re important, have never really felt like part of the group. They feel like they’ve been an outcast...And it’s not just a one time thing with (participants) that are like that; that I struggle to find their place. You have to put that effort into showing that you’re interested.”

A key component of this personalized knowledge is the ability to create personalized experience in the midst of the group experience. The collective experiences “aim for the majority” (Group Leader 2, personal communication, August 14, 2020), but for “at-risk” participants, group leaders “have to craft it individually” (Group Leader 6, personal communication, November 3, 2020). It is evident from the above description is that the group leader is an extension of the group and if the group leader has established trust with the group then the acceptance of the “at-risk” participant can motivate other group members to accept the “at-risk” participant as well as provide a feeling of group acceptance by the “at-risk” participant.

Describing Identities Needed by the Group. Group Leader 3 described when speaking to the whole group s/he targets specific identities that some of the group members are desiring and then describes the actions that those identities would take. For instance, if reprimanding a team, the coach or staff member may describe what actions a captain of the team would take in this type of situation. It

is this actionable description that motivates group members who desire that identity to take action aligned with the prescribed actions. Group Leader 5 explained a powerful strategy for pulling forth various identities is to describe the various identities that are likely to be found within the group and once those identities are described some members will “want to measure up” to those expectations.

Supporting Theories

The data within this theme points to strengths perspective and its focus on opportunities embedded within a narrative approach. Narrative theory suggests that male adolescents are drawn to group participation through the individual stories that are representative of the group. This concept is clearly at work when Group Leader 5 describes the social media storytelling that captures the attention of the potential participants or when Group Leader 1 describes how their program is presented to potential participants. The entirety of the program is too complex for a brief description and so the presented portion is the dominant story that allows for a coherent and meaningful description (Turner, 2017). As participants engage in the structured identity formation experience they confront the complexities of the process. Using a strengths perspective the group leader attempts to present “new possibilities” (Dybiczy, 2011, p. 248) for group participants. As Group Leader 5 explains the group leader must, “create a vision and then create these breadcrumb steps for (the participants) to measure up to”.

Strategies for *High-Performing* Participants

The *high-performing* participant represents an “at-risk” participant because he is not challenged by the collective tasks demanded of the group. In order to progress along the identity formation continuum, the *high-performing* participant must be willing to commit to a certain identity. In a group setting this commitment is displayed through endurance of some trial.

Locating Fear Within the Participants. The two most common emotions that group leaders mentioned were “pride” and “fear”. Group Leader 6 wove these emotions together as s/he described the process s/he uses to locate fear in adolescent males. Directly talking about what an adolescent male is scared of is likely to produce little material, especially early on in the relationship. However, the most important transformations that occur for male adolescents involve confronting fear. Group Leader 6 asks group members what experiences they are most proud. Their answers often reveal what scares the individual because fear is “why that action evoked pride”. Group Leader 6 used public speaking as a common task that can be assumed to evoke fear in participants. Fear of public speaking is such a common phobia that requiring all participants to engage in it is likely to produce fear. Group Leader 5 used failure as an experience that was likely to produce fear in participants and purposefully gives participants, “an impossible task” that is designed to result in failure. *High-performing* participants may be more likely to have a fear of failure because they may have had less

experience with it. For Group Leader 5 this experience of failure is important because participants need to “understand success and failure and my reaction to it is not going to be the same as what he’s used to. So you failed at this task, but you are not a failure”. This interplay between fear and targeted experience seems to be a powerful to the identity formation process. As Group Leader 6 stated, “without fear, there is no ability to transform”.

Linking Individual Identity Achievement to Collective Identity Achievement.

A common component in the education and athletic settings was the idea of leadership. The concept of leadership became a mechanism for group leaders to support the identity achievement of the *high-performing* participant. While a *high-performing* participant may not struggle with a task on an individual level, it is likely that he will struggle with supporting other group members through the task. For the *high-performing* participant, the demanding task is not whether they can individually do the prescribed push-ups or math equations, it is supporting fellow group members to do the push-ups and equations. In order to heighten the challenge presented to *high-performing* participants, the group leader does not offer their identity affirmation after individual achievement, but rather links it to collective achievement. Group leaders in the athletic setting placed a heavy emphasis on this aspect of collective identity achievement, considering being a “team player” the foundational skill to being considered for a team (Group Leader 7, personal communication, November 12, 2020).

Strategies for *Low-Performing* Participants

The more obvious “at-risk” participant is the *low-performing* participant who struggles with the group tasks, such that these tasks overwhelm the participant. Group Leaders across all three settings identified two strategies that support identity achievement for *low-performing* participants. These two strategies are manipulating the peer interaction so that *low-performing* participants interact with non-*low-performing* participants and intentionally seeking opportunities to affirm actualized or desired identities of *low-performing* participants.

Manipulating Peer Interaction. Anyone who has experienced a group setting recognizes the pattern that often happens when the “outcasts” of the group separate from the group and begin to form a greater connection with other “outcasts” than with the broader group. Within the context of a structured identity formation experience, this fragmentation can lead to the “outcast” group engaging in an identity formation experience at odds to the collective experience. This separation intensifies as the whole group engages in increasingly unachievable tasks (as perceived by the outcast group). In an effort to combat this cyclical pattern, Group Leader 1 discussed how s/he intentionally “disrupts” the *low-performer* group formation through physically positioning those participants away from one another. This same group leader described intentionally designing group experiences where a *low-performer* was engaged with a *high-performing* participant. This Group Leader arranged field trips where there was an intentional mixture between *low-performing* participants and *high-*

performing participants. This strategy is more effective when the desired identities of the *low-performing* participants can be paired with those same realized identities in peers. Using their personalized knowledge of “at-risk” participants, group leaders can strategically place *low-performing* participants who have expressed interest in becoming a basketball player or honor’s student, with participants who have realized that identity.

Affirming Identities. All of the group leaders employed some formal celebration as part of their identity formation experience. This formal celebration was public and followed some collective task that all group members achieved. Amongst these formal celebrations, group leaders expressed constantly seeking opportunities to acknowledge minor achievements in *low-performing* participants that pointed to the larger goal of the desired identity. This praise was intentionally done in public, to give both the *low-performing* participant affirmation of their effort, but also to support their level of peer acceptance. Group Leader 7 emphasized that these impromptu affirmations served as reminders of the *low-performing* participants commitment to the group. As long as that perception of commitment is in place, the group will “offer encouragement to those (participants) who are struggling” (Group Leader 7, personal communication, November 12, 2020). A powerful component of the public stage is that the identity affirmed can become a reference point for future behavior that is not aligned to that identity (Group Leader 2, personal communication, August 14, 2020).

Implication of Findings for Micro and/or Macro Practice

Social workers should expect to encounter identity formation problems in any setting working with adolescents. This research highlights some aspects of male adolescent identity formation that are likely to apply to many male clients and how best to support those clients in progressing through Marcia's identity formation continuum. At the Macro setting, social workers may be involved in the programmatic implementation of structured identity formation experiences. In the Micro setting, social workers may be involved in supporting individual clients through the identity formation experience.

Macro Setting

An important component of male adolescent identity formation is the necessity of male adolescents to prove their identity. This sentiment is supported by literature referenced in Section 1, which discusses the fragile nature of "manhood" and the belief that the identity of "manhood" can be lost (Weaver, et al., 2010). While "manhood" was not a specified identity this project emphasized, the application of the same fragility existed in the identities expressed in the researched settings. As Group Leader 5 described, male adolescence is a perceptual journey of "trying to prove something to someone". What distinguishes a male adolescent from a desired identity to an affirmed identity is action. Group Leader 6 explained this actionable step as a "threshold". Social workers who are working on programmatic design should make sure that demonstrable tasks are attached to the identities conferred to participants.

Micro Setting

In the micro setting there are three primary areas of support. The first is to support clients with identifying what tasks would signify identity achievement, who needs to witness those tasks being performed and how will the client maintain commitment to the task in the face of the necessary challenge that is embedded within meaningful identity achievement.

When working with individual clients, social workers can support male adolescence along the identity formation continuum through the following strategies identified in the data: exploring with clients how they might best contribute to the group, helping clients locate their fear through strategic questions about pride and failure, and identifying tasks that a client might consider significant enough for identity achievement. The data also provides some strategies for behavioral intervention when working with individual clients. These strategies include: exploring peer interaction that is enhancing/preventing desired identity formation and confronting behavior that is misaligned to desired identity.

Further Investigation

Additional research should focus on the impact that social media may have on male identity formation. For instance, if performed acts are required for the affirmation of an identity can these acts be broadcasted through social media in a way that affirms a new identity.

There is a clear tension between the possibility of real failure (i.e. expulsion, requiring the participant to repeat the task) and the psychological safety that participants need to feel for optimal learning and well as group processing. Further research should examine this intersection between failure and safety.

Summary

The chapter began with an analysis of the interview data. The data was coded in two phases, beginning with a Structural Code and then refined using a Process Code. Representative categories were created which captured the data and these categories were arranged into generalized themes. Relevant theories were then applied to the themes to interpret the data and support application of the data in micro and macro social work practice. Suggestions for further research was then described.

CHAPTER FIVE

TERMINATION AND FOLLOW UP

Introduction

This chapter will explain the termination process of the project and the communication of the project findings to the study sites. The chapter will also address the ongoing relationship that the researcher will maintain with study sites if requested.

Termination of Study

Termination of the project began in the engagement phase with the various study sites. Early in the relationship, gatekeepers were informed that the project had an anticipatory end date of April 2021. As part of the informed consent process with study participants, the researcher explained the project timeline to all participants, including anticipated end date and plan for communication of results. After the project has been officially accepted by Cal State University - San Bernardino, the researcher will contact each of the gatekeepers at the study sites to inform them of the termination of the study and make arrangements for a presentation of the project results. Once the presentation has been scheduled, the researcher will contact the study participants via email to thank them for their participation and invite them to the presentation.

Communication of Findings to the Study Site and Study Participants

The project's findings will be communicated with the study site via access to the completed project as well as a summary of the findings presented via Powerpoint. The termination email will include the link to both the final project published on Scholarworks (<http://scholarworks.lib.csusb.edu>) as well as an attached version of the Powerpoint that will be presented to the study sites.

Ongoing Relationship with the Study Sites

Since the majority of the study sites follow the academic calendar, the projects findings will be presented at a timely opportunity for all three study sites as they will be considering programmatic changes during May 2021 for the academic year of 2021/22. The researcher will make himself available via email and phone to answer questions and/or clarify project findings with the study sites through May 2021. Additionally, due to the disruptive nature of the COVID pandemic there may be a need for continued contact with study sites as new staff is brought into the study sites beyond May 2021. The researcher will arrange future contact information with study sites on a case by case basis.

Summary

This final chapter explained the termination process of the project, including how project findings would be made available to the study sites and how ongoing support will be maintained with the study sites.

APPENDIX A
INFORMED CONSENT

INFORMED CONSENT

The study you are asked to participate is designed to examine interventions used to support male adolescents in completion of a "rites of passage" experience where the adolescent is attempting to achieve a new identity through completion of certain tasks or display of certain behaviors. The study is being conducted by Austin Miller, a graduate student, under the supervision of Dr. Armando ~~Boroglio~~, Assistant Professor in the School of Social Work at CSUSB. The study has been approved by the Institutional Review Board at CSUSB.

PURPOSE: The purpose of the study is to examine the interventions used to support identity achievement while maintaining group cohesion.

DESCRIPTION: Participants will be asked questions about how they identify participants who struggle with the "rites of passage" experience, what interventions they direct towards the "at-risk" participants, and how group cohesion is maintained amidst the interventions.

PARTICIPATION: Your participation in the study is completely voluntary. You can refuse to participate in the study or discontinue your participation at any time without any consequences.

CONFIDENTIALITY: Your responses will remain confidential with neither your name nor affiliated organization being reported.

DURATION: The interview is expected to take between 30 to 60 minutes.

RISKS: Although not anticipated, there may be some discomfort in answering some of the questions. You are not required to answer all questions and can skip a question at any time during the interview without consequence.

BENEFITS: Study participants will contribute to research with the potential to improve "rite of passage" experiences for adolescents.

CONTACT: If you have any questions about this study, feel free to contact Austin Miller at (805) 503-8395. Dr. ~~Boroglio~~ can be contacted at (909) 537-3501.

RESULTS: Results of the study can be attained from the Pfau Library ~~ScholarWorks~~ database (<http://scholarworks.lib.csusb.edu/>) at California State University, San Bernard no after July 2021.

I agree to have this interview audio recorded (the audio record will be promptly deleted once the interview has been transcribed)

_____ YES _____ NO

I understand that I must be 18 years of age or older to participate in your study, have read and understood the consent document and agree to participate in your study.

Place an X mark here

Date

APPENDIX B
INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

- 1) Describe the participants of your program?
- 2) Why do you believe that participants are attracted to your program?
- 3) How do you introduce the desire of a new identity into your participants?
- 4) How do participants react to creating a new identity for themselves?
- 5) What activities do participants do to build a new identity for themselves?
- 6) Which of those activities do you think has the most leverage in building a new identity?
- 7) What role does the group play in the identity formation experience?
- 8) What happens when a participant is demonstrating that they may fail a certain task?
- 9) What happens when a participant is demonstrating that they may not be challenged by a certain task?
- 10) What specific strategies do you use when supporting those participants?
- 11) How do participants respond to those interventions?
- 12) How does the group respond to the interventions?
- 13) How do you explain to the group the unequal resources (e.g. staff time and attention) devoted to “at-risk” participants?

APPENDIX C
IRB APPROVAL LETTER

IRB #: IRB-FY2020-218

Title: Inclusive Rites of Passage Experiences for Male Adolescents

Creation Date: 2-15-2020

End Date:

Status: **Approved**

Principal Investigator: Austin Miller

Review Board: Main IRB Designated Reviewers for School of Social Work

Sponsor:

Study History

Submission Type	Initial	Review Type	Exempt	Decision	Exempt
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Key Study Contacts

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