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## **We're Helping Them but We're also Helping Ourselves: Transformational Processing of African American Boys in an Afrocentric Service-Learning Journey to Ethiopia**

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## ACCEPTANCE

This dissertation, WE'RE HELPING THEM BUT WE'RE ALSO HELPING OURSELVES: TRANSFORMATIONAL PROCESSING OF AFRICAN AMERICAN BOYS IN AN AFROCENTRIC SERVICE-LEARNING LEARNING JOURNEY TO ETHIOPIA, by LIYA ENDALE, was prepared under the direction of the candidate's Dissertation Advisory Committee. It is accepted by the committee members in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree, Doctor of Philosophy, in the College of Education & Human Development, Georgia State University.

The Dissertation Advisory Committee and the student's Department Chairperson, as representatives of the faculty, certify that this dissertation has met all standards of excellence and scholarship as determined by the faculty.

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WE'RE HELPING THEM BUT WE'RE ALSO HELPING OURSELVES:  
TRANSFORMATIONAL PROCESSING OF AFRICAN AMERICAN BOYS IN AN  
AFROCENTRIC SERVICE-LEARNING JOURNEY TO ETHIOPIA

by

LIYA ENDALE

Under the Direction of Ann Cale Kruger, Ph.D.

ABSTRACT

The history of educational inequality in the U.S. is well documented. Researchers have identified deleterious consequences of learning in a Eurocentric educational system (Boutte and Strickland, 2008; King and Swartz, 2014) and health benefits of internalizing Afrocentric worldviews for students of African descent (Burbanks et al., 2020; Chipungu et al., 2002). Critical international service learning has shown promise in addressing needs of African American learners (Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2017; Boyle-Baise, 2007). However, it hasn't been studied in combination with place-based pedagogy connecting participants' heritage and location in ways that affirm identity. Ethiopia, the only African soil that defeated colonization, plays an integral role in the freedom narrative of the African diaspora. This exploratory case study investigated how eight African American male adolescents processed their experiences on a two-week Afrocentric Critical service-learning program in Ethiopia. Data were from participants' journal entries, interviews, and

pre and post questionnaires. Using qualitative data analysis framed by Whaley and McQueen's Cognitive-Cultural Model of African American Identity for Black Youth (CMAI; 2010, 2017, 2020), themes revealed that each of the identified processing domains—cognitive, behavioral, and emotional—experienced its own transformation. This study offers a new application of the CMAI, demonstrating how the framework can be expanded to account for the identified social roles that evolved and mediated participants' transformational processing. Findings illustrate how participants engaged in critical reflection, identity reconstruction, and advocacy, contributing to a deeper understanding of how Afrocentric education and place-based pedagogy can facilitate transformational learning. Conclusions provided insights into participant processing that can inform future program design of Afrocentric curriculum/education and critical international service-learning initiatives for African American male adolescents. This study also expands the application of the CMAI by demonstrating how place-based Afrocentric service learning facilitates transformative identity development through evolving social roles.

**INDEX WORDS:** African American youth, diasporic travel, place-based learning, critical service learning, international service learning, adolescent processing, cognitive-cultural model of identity

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in

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Atlanta, GA  
2025

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2025

This dissertation is dedicated to my village—those who saw me, held me in person and in prayer,  
and reminded me whose I am. This work is ours.

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“Go down to the potter’s house, and there I will give you my message.” So I went down to the potter’s house, and I saw him working at the wheel. But the pot he was shaping from clay was marred in his hands; so the potter formed it into another pot, shaping it as seemed best to him. Then the word of the Lord came to me. He said, “like clay in the hand of the potter, so are you in my hand, [Liya].”  
(Jeremiah 18:1-6)

In this passage, Jeremiah the prophet is speaking to a rebellious, stubborn nation. Israel has gone their own way. They’re about to face judgment, but God is still reaching out. So, He sends Jeremiah to observe something tangible—something tactile and earthy, a potter at work. And in that moment, God speaks.

The clay is you. The hands are His. The wheel is life, spinning even when you don’t understand the direction. And the remaking is purposeful—not punishment, but grace. He doesn’t discard you. Upon your invitation, He presses His hands deeper in.

I acknowledge everyone who pointed me back to the Potter’s hands. You may not have known the shape He was forming, but your presence helped steady the wheel.

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To my **best friend**, my spiritual sister, whose companionship never wavered. When words failed, you broke into spontaneous prayer. When I felt alone, you reminded me we were walking parallel paths through scripture, each of us following the same Light. You are a divine gift.

To my **husband**, my covering, my cheerleader, my grounding place. You never let us close our eyes without prayer. You shouldered the weight of this season while making it look easy. Thank you for making me feel like I was doing something monumental even when all I had was a blinking cursor and a weary spirit. You are amazing, and I love you deeply.

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## 1 AFROCENTRIC INTERVENTIONS IN REVIEW

I cannot, in good conscience, embark on this academic journey with you without first introducing myself. My research examines how African boys construct their identity, and it requires me to bring my whole self—my history, my identity, and my experiences—into this inquiry. Who I am unfolds like an endless origami sculpture, each fold revealing a new layer of complexity. Let's begin with this thread: I am a Black Ethiopian-born American woman, a child of history shaped by identity and displacement.

I was born during a pivotal moment in Ethiopian history, when the last emperor of the only African nation to defeat colonization, Emperor Haile Selassie, was overthrown and killed. My mother recalls hearing the news on the radio and stepping outside to see if the sun was still in the sky. To my Rastafarian readers, I extend my deepest respect for your belief in Haile Selassie I, your Messiah. I understand that our holy books overlap, prophesying the coming of a messiah—yours being Haile Selassie, mine being Jesus Christ. That our emperor and your Jah created a holy land for your safety in Ethiopia, the first country to adopt Christianity in its earliest form, speaks to the ways identity transcends religious canons, even amidst differences.

As a young girl, I emigrated to the United States by way of the Netherlands, carrying a melanin story distinct from those who had long inhabited the sovereign nations of the Dine, Dakota, Ndee, Haudenosaunee, and countless others. Yet there are scholars and oral traditions that place melanated bodies in these lands (the Americas) before European contact (Wilson, 1998). I witnessed the heated debates over these narratives during the pandemic on Clubhouse, where believers clashed with Black academics dismissing these claims as tools of division. They argued: how can we claim reparations when we assert that Black people have been on these lands for thousands of years?

As an African American scholar, I engage with these narratives not to assert their historical veracity but to recognize their cultural and intellectual significance. For African Americans, these stories provide a means of reconnecting with ancestral roots and challenging the erasure of African contributions to history. They resonate with my own exploration of African diasporic identity and the transformative role of place-based experiences in shaping our understanding of self and community.

My place-based experiences in Ethiopia and the United States have fueled my curiosity about these intersections of melanin, belonging, and identity. But I carry with me the wounds of grappling with systemic racism in academia. As a graduate student in Industrial-Organizational Psychology, I once asked a professor to clarify whether the theories we were studying implied that Black people were inherently less intelligent. He reluctantly admitted that the theories did, referencing Herrnstein and Murray's *The Bell Curve* and drawing a diagram to illustrate a supposed one-standard-deviation difference in intelligence between Black and White populations. "So, you're saying we're only a little bit dumber?" I asked. His lack of critical engagement with the cultural and methodological biases of these claims left me reeling.

I tried to challenge these ideas academically, but as the only non-White student in the cohort, my voice was met with resistance. I received lower grades on subjective assignments, was denied departmental support for a mandatory internship, and was even pressured to step down from an independently secured internship because my grades did not reflect my peers'—despite earning one of the highest GRE scores in the cohort. When I turned to a civil rights lawyer, they reminded me that the law did not guarantee my right to feel safe in that classroom. Exhausted, I left the program in my final year, starting over in a new field.

This experience did not break me. Instead, it deepened my resolve to question systems of knowledge and the definitions imposed on Blackness. In a subsequent research course during my Professional Counseling master's program, I wrote my first academic inquiry into "the essence of Blackness." It was surface-level, shaped by an Ethiopian-born American's privilege and an ego still reeling from the punch of racism in America. It was an early attempt to understand that racism does not always differentiate between ethnicity, nationality, or culture. This dissertation represents the continuation of that inquiry, shaped by the wealth of perspective I have gained since then and the knowledge I will continue to gather.

I bring my whole self to this work: a Black woman shaped by place and history, determined to explore how identity is constructed across contexts and generations. This work is personal, intellectual, and deeply rooted in a commitment to equity and truth. My experiences and identity fuel my curiosity about how Black people come to understand and articulate their sense of self.

Researchers have long shared this curiosity, studying racial and ethnic identity development for over a century (DuBois, 1903; Randolph, 1921; Washington, 1909; Woodson, 1917). Through decades of inquiry, they have generated a rich body of knowledge, particularly focusing on the racial and ethnic identity development of African Americans. For the purposes of this chapter, African American refers to Black Americans whose ancestors endured the systemic oppression of slavery in the United States, from the nation's inception to the abolition of this practice in 1865.

### Guiding Questions

The trending complexity in the empirical quest to understand African American identity development calls for a close examination of the contexts in which young people learn, including

schools and communities (Davis, 2017). This chapter begins with a review of the literature pertaining to African American identity development in U.S. public schools and the African centered school movement. The discussion leads to a case for the examination of literature investigating community based programs to supplement learning in a way that affirms African American identity. Literature examining both traditional and nontraditional Afrocentric programs is reviewed before introducing Whaley and McQueen's Cognitive-Cultural model of African American Identity for Black Youth (CMAI; 2010, 2017, and 2020). The four studies that led to its development are reviewed in detail as it is the framework for this study.

### Review

I was asked to complete a simulated job application in my 5th-grade class in Texas asking for my race. The only option for my racial identity was African American. I vehemently opposed this designation, not yet a naturalized citizen. Having lived almost my entire life as an asylum-seeker—a status for which I had renounced my Ethiopian citizenship and therefore had none—multiple countries had made it abundantly clear that I did not carry their national designation. For my family, this was a dangerous question. Call me Black. Call me African. But your president said I'm not American. My teacher insisted I check the box for African American because, she said, that is what I was. I complied and hoped the government would not find out.

This personal anecdote highlights how identity development is deeply intertwined with the schooling experience (Andrews, 2009; Buckley, 2018; Houston et al., 2020; Hilliard, 1999; Marsh and Noguera, 2018; Nasir and Saxe, 2003; Nunley, 2020). King (2006) argues that traditional schooling systems often function as sites of dysconscious racism, where students internalize dominant narratives that marginalize African-centred ways of knowing. This is particularly relevant when considering the role of education in shaping African American

identity development. Rather than fostering a critical consciousness among Black youth, mainstream schools often reinforce deficit-based perspectives that undermine their self-concept and cultural pride.

Developmental psychologists have long theorized that identity exists across multiple domains (Marcia, 1966), each influenced by interconnected ecological systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). These frameworks provide a lens through which to examine how youth navigate the complex intersections of imposed and self-constructed identities. The relationship between identity domains and ecological systems can determine measurable outcomes. For example, the domain of academic identity is defined as the mental representations a student has about their academic abilities across academic pursuits (Bunner et al., 2009, Cokley and Chapman, 2008). Cokley and Chapman (2008) report that the relationships among academic identity, cultural identity (of which racial and ethnic identity are constructs), and school environment together predict African American student achievement. Researchers have also confirmed that racial identity development in schools is deeply influenced by the broader social and cultural context in which students live and that experiences of racism and discrimination can have lasting negative effects on their sense of self, academic motivation, and mental health (Chavous et al., 2008; Oyserman et al., 2006; Sellers et al., 2003).

Racially charged current events contribute to the ecology of development within schools. For the one-year anniversary of the Columbine school shooting, a student at my predominantly White high school announced a plan he had to shoot all of the n\*\*\*ers at school. There were only 11 of us in my grade, so I felt certain that I would be among his victims. My parents, not understanding the agency they had in keeping me home, were denied a request to excuse my absence. We were in tears as they sent me off to school that day, not knowing if I'd return.

Following the rules was part of how we had survived and became a non-negotiable. I learned about the value of my life within these walls that day.

More recently, a politicized debate over Critical Race Theory (CRT) in the classrooms, a pandemic that brought traditional learning to its knees, and an economic crisis including inflation and rising housing costs all disproportionately affected African Americans. The enduring tale of racism in America (USA) reached yet another climax with the public execution of George Floyd, an unarmed Black man in Minnesota in 2020. With no standard with which to address student grief following Floyd's murder, schools responded in a variety of ways ranging from restricting any mention of the incident to collaborative memorials organized between staff, students, and other stakeholders (Barnum and Belsha, 2023). We are still learning the ways that African American adolescents navigated this unprecedented climate during a time when they were also developing their racial and ethnic identities. However, research allows us to hypothesize that African American academic achievement and motivation will suffer.

Across disciplines, study results evidence that U.S. school rooms are spaces where Black youth and culture are criminalized, Black history and heritage are excluded, and empowering narratives are replaced with incomplete, false, and demoralizing ones. Further, larger systems operate to remove resources and displace students of color into less effective education, such as under resourced schools (Buras, 2011; Ewing, 2018; Hilliard, 1988, 1999; Okonofua and Eberhardt, 2015; Peterson et al., 2016; Scott, et al., 2018). Due to pervasive stereotypes adopted by school staff, Black students receive harsher punishments for minor infractions at alarmingly higher rates than their White peers. In effect, African American students' perception of their school's climate declines, leading to academic disengagement and lower achievement (Del Torro and Wang, 2022).

As early as 1939, research has supported the notion that schools serve to socialize African American students into Whiteness to the point that young African American students misidentify themselves as White (Horowitz, 1939). Attempts to address this concern have been met with policy reform to maintain existing power structures. This interplay of racialized politics and education occurs at the systemic level. For example, immediately after Hurricane Katrina ripped through New Orleans, the state of Louisiana organized the Recovery School District (RSD), a program to address the reconstruction needs of the local educational system. The teachers' union was met with the nullification of their former bargaining agreement. Teachers were also fired en masse and replaced by Teach for America participants. The outcomes have been devastating for students of color. This strategy has since been used in districts across the nation (Buras, 2011).

Some researchers who recognize these systemic issues work to create and evaluate data-driven learning alternatives, supports, and interventions to counter the effects of Black students' internalizing harmful messages. Some of these efforts focus on identifying and strengthening protective factors like resilience (Johnson and Wiechelt, 2004), grit (Duckworth et al., 2007), academic engagement and motivation (Cokley, 2003; Elsaesser et al., 2016), and fostering racial and ethnic identity (Cross et al., 2001; Phinney, 1990; Sellers et al., 1998). Others work to move the system towards inclusivity, cultural relevance, and a capacity to educate all students (Asante, 1991; Hilliard, 1999; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Nobles, 1990). Yet others work to build theories and frameworks to help educators comprehend the nuanced interplay of teaching, learning, being, and knowing in educational spaces and how this interplay affects racial and ethnic identity development (Asante, 1988, 1998; Baldwin, 1985; Hilliard, 1985; Kambon, 1992; Karenga, 1986, 2006; Whaley and McQueen, 2020).

## **How Did We Get Here?**

One theoretical framework that helps make sense of the systemic conditions necessitating such interventions is Critical Race Theory (CRT), which examines race-related issues within the context of U.S. law and traces a shift from overt to covert racism back to Civil Rights legislation (Delgado and Stefancic, 2012). Though this series of laws intended to end racism, the theory chronicles how these Civil Rights laws led decision makers across sectors of society to invent and normalize systemic practices of exclusion and ostensibly work around the laws. The results reversed African American progress that had been made since emancipation and the Jim Crow era towards accessibility to careers, higher incomes, home and property ownership, wealth building, and education.

The culminating desegregation of U.S. schools between the 1950s and 1970s ironically acted as one mechanism to perpetuate inequalities seen in schools today. African American educators who affirmed their students' identities prior to desegregation were fired in droves while their students were absorbed into White schools. Black students went to schools where they were not safe because of the color of their skin and were forced to either assimilate or be pushed out of education (Beardslee, 2021; Butchart, 2010). White students were not required to make such concessions. Instead, their classrooms became spaces where the false narrative of their racial superiority was reified through social, political, and educational structures. In addition to the firing of tens of thousands of Black educators, Black schools were closed. In effect, the Black community experienced the loss of identity affirming traditions, records of accomplishments, culturally representative mascots, and support systems (Beardslee, 2021; Butchart, 2010).

Mainstream narratives did not acknowledge this misstep in a righteous effort towards equality. Grassroots efforts assembled to shed light on this conundrum, such as the Black Panthers, the Nation of Islam, and communities of academics, were quickly labeled domestic insurgents and criminalized (Camp and Heatherston, 2016). Elders of the Black community such as Senator John Louis expressed their dismay as apathy set in in African American communities. Days before his assassination, secondhand accounts quote Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. saying, “For all the steps we've taken toward integration, I've come to believe that we are integrating into a burning house” (Chatelain, 2020).

Since these historical accounts were left out of mainstream narratives, policies quickly filled in the silence on Black history with a narrative targeting historical victims as hopeless criminals in the 1980s and 1990s. The Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1986 mandated a five-year minimum penalty for possession of five grams of crack cocaine. At the same time, Black communities across the nation were enduring a devastating crack public health crisis. The same penalty applied to 500 grams of powder cocaine, a more expensive drug of choice for mostly affluent, White users. Through President Clinton's 1994 Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act, 13-year-olds could receive life sentences for possession of marijuana if such a charge was their third. Those who did receive such sentences, many still incarcerated today, are disproportionately Black and Latina(o).

Half a century later, concerted efforts across racial lines have brought this grievance back into a national conversation through education. Educators have called for the nation's history to be taught with the inclusion of Black history. Studies reveal that learning African and African American culture, history, and heritage fosters racial and ethnic identity development. A developed racial/ethnic identity, then, increases academic engagement/outcomes and self-esteem

while protecting against the deleterious consequences of systemic racism; i.e., substance abuse and gang violence, behavior and mental health issues, poor academic performance (Hill, 1992; McKenry et al., 1989; Steinberg, 1993; Wright and Anderson, 1998). A backlash of White parents from schools around the country began complaining to their lawmakers that a curriculum entailing the history of African Americans makes their children feel guilty, working with their local legislators to successfully ban it in their schools. Some publicly expressed fear that Black students would become aggressively angry in response to learning the depth of cruelty endured by African Americans, putting themselves, their peers, and educators at unnecessary risk (King, 2023; Oberg and Kartchnet, 2016; Reeve et al., 2021). This decision and the allusion to the “dangerous Black man” and “angry Black woman” stereotypes preserve a White supremacist ideology in the educational system. As such false stereotypes shape policy, this nation follows a pattern of systemically eliminating narratives that counter that which says Whites are a superior race.

### **The Education Debt**

The current state of the African American student is not consistent with the rich African and African American history of education. The education gap, so often studied in research, reflects academic outcomes such as standardized test scores, dropout rates, and enrollment in rigorous courses between Black and White students. It represents the snapshot without the ecological or historical context (Davis, 2017). Ladson-Billings rejects this concept and suggests replacing it with an education debt, an examination of disparities in academic outcomes that includes “historical, economic, sociopolitical, and moral components” (2005, p. 2).

Building on Ladon-Billings’ work, King (2016) underscored the importance of diasporic literacy as a framework for addressing historical and contemporary injustices in Black education.

This perspective reinforces the need for Afrocentric curricula that equip students with the knowledge and tools to navigate and resist systemic oppression. King (2006) asserts that Black education must be transformative, fostering both academic achievement and a commitment to social justice. Diaspora literacy, a mechanism by which to accomplish this task, includes the transfer of knowledge about both African heritage and the global structures that have shaped Black experiences across time and space.

Examining racial educational disparities without the historical and global context moves the conversation backward, abetting the dangerously false narrative of the inferiority of the African American child. In the past, such cultural deficit-oriented research wrote the narrative of African American children as hopeless victims of their own pathological lifestyles (Hess and Shipman, 1965; Bereiter and Engleman, 1966; Deutsch, 1963). This body of work led to the aggressive integration of Black students into White classrooms, with its own set of devastating consequences for the Black community (Coleman et al., 1966).

### **African Centered School Movement**

In the 1970's African American communities came together once again to take control of the educational crisis of their students. The African school movement was a campaign run by scholars, educators, and parents who designed culturally affirming curricula in schools specifically for Black students (Durden, 2007). This movement took a philosophical shift from focusing on the gap in performance between Black and White students to the gap between the current and potential performance of Black students (Gordon, 1994; Hillard, 2006; Lee, 2005). African centered schools utilize an Afrocentric philosophy and education model described previously (Durden, 2007). They can be both private or incorporated into the public school system.

Little empirical research exists documenting the effectiveness of African centered schools. In what exists, scholars document the benefits as enabling students to become intellectually competitive, imbuing cultural pride, and demonstrating excellence (Lee, 1992; Teicher, 2006). In one study, students at an African centered school showed a difference in how they respond to challenges they identified as a group. A more communal response was identified in this population over a group from a non African centered school. Specifically, the students at the African centered school focused more on the systemic roots of the challenges rather than on individuals. They also expressed more empathy and a desire to do something in response, even when they were not facing the identified challenge themselves. Finally, they distinctly imagined ways that change could occur by acting collectively (Davis, 2016).

Anecdotally, public reports on the transformative power of African centered schools have attracted international attention. In 1991, Chick Elementary School made news when grassroots efforts successfully transformed it from a failing to a top performing school in the state of Missouri by changing its pedagogy to an African centered one (Teicher, 2006). Sanford B. Ladd school quickly followed suit and experienced the same transformation (Teicher, 2006).

Yet, African centered schools have both challenges and critics. Some question whether immersing children into an African centered education will prepare them for a transition into mainstream America as adults and believe a diverse learning environment is best for all student learning (Teicher, 2006). Even those who believe in their philosophical benefits report challenges including that of teacher training. Having instructors both versed in African history and effective teaching techniques is a vital part of the success of such schools (Lee, 1992). Adding the additional requirement of traditional credentialing is asking a lot of one teacher. Another challenge is the absence of a standardized curriculum, requiring teachers to build their

own (Binder, 2000). Accessibility also remains a challenge to the growth of this movement. Transforming a public school into an African centered school is impossible in most school districts across the country. The examples cited in this section exist in unique sets of circumstances that allowed them to succeed. Many African centered schools are private schools that often have high tuition.

A 2004 study by Ginwright echoes these concerns of accessibility. This study documents the failed attempt of transforming an Oakland city school into an African centered school. Results indicate that graduation, enrollment, and dropout rates did not change. Ginwright criticizes African centered schools as a philosophy for the middle class Black community. His critique is shared by other scholars who express concern that this philosophy leaves out the important economic context of poverty to which many Black Americans are subjected (Burden-Stelly, 2020; Darder and Torres, 1997).

To address these concerns, it is of value to consider independent community learning spaces where Afrocentric education is provided to participants as a supplementary tool for affirming their identity. Though they share some challenges as African centered schools like training and standardized curriculum, they are free of the historical and contemporary constraints and oppressions of schools (Davis, 2017). Afrocentric community based education and interventions have utility in cultural, ethnic, and racial identity for students of African descent. They also show a consistent correlation with academic, psychosocial, and behavioral outcomes. (Alford, 2003; Chipungu et al., 2000; King et al., 2001; Pinckney et al., 2020). Continued research will provide the data needed to shift educational systems towards inclusivity and effectiveness for all students while methods can offer the how.

## **Afrocentric Paradigm: Definitions and Histories**

Afrocentric programs and education center the African perspective and re-locate students of African descent from a dislocated sense of self both locally and historically. In other words, the Afrocentric paradigm protects students of African descent from the barrage of erroneous messages about their inferiority to people of European descent, leading to academic disengagement, miseducation, negative identity formation, and self-destructive behavior (Asante, 2007). This portion of the literature review examines empirical literature investigating Afrocentric programs and education for adolescents of African descent across the United States from 2000 to 2020. It specifically highlights empirical outcomes (academic, social/emotional, and developmental) that offer insight into how the Afrocentric paradigm has been incorporated into the concerted effort to offer appropriate learning and developing opportunities to African American adolescents through community programs.

Afrocentric programs and Afrocentric education are two closely related constructs in empirical literature. These and other related constructs are often conflated or misused in studies referencing the Afrocentric paradigm. To clarify, the Afrocentric paradigm is “a consciousness, quality of thought, mode of analysis, and an actionable perspective where Africans seek, from agency, to assert subject place within the context of African history” (Asante, 2007, p.16). An adequate explanation of this paradigm begins with the concept of Maat.

Maat is a Kemetic (ancient Egyptian) ideal studied by many scholars. Karenga (2004) describes how Egyptology largely dismisses this concept due to its multiple connotations. Others celebrate it for its layered meaning conducive to expanding knowledge about the fabric of the ancient world (Cua, 1978, Karenga, 2005, Morenz, 1984, Westendorf, 1966). Karenga aptly describes the evolution of the term Maat from a literal meaning of straightness/levelness as

evidenced by its hieroglyphic symbol of a wedge, to a construct that expands to ontological ideas of being and epistemological knowing, ecological ideals of cosmic balance in nature (Bilolo, 1988), feminine divinity, a moral barometer (Westendorf, 1966), and a political stance for justice (Obenga, 1990). After a detailed discussion of these scholars' assertions, Karenga offers this definition to consolidate salient aspects of Maat touched upon in each of these mentioned texts: "an interrelated order of rightness, including the divine, natural and social...the foundation and order of the world" (Karenga, 2004, p. 7). Asante, an Afrocentric thought leader, refers to Kemet and Maat as "a leading edge, a symbol of our Afrocentric consciousness" (2007, p. 70). Afrocentric scholars have gleaned seven cardinal virtues from the body of ancient writings on Maat that span multiple Kemetic kingdoms. These values include truth, justice, propriety, harmony, balance, reciprocity, and order. They imbue the Afrocentric framework (Kalonji, 2014; Wells-Wilbon and Simpson, 2009).

The Nguzo Saba is another set of guiding principles that works in tandem with the Maatian cardinal virtues to guide Afrocentric interventions and education (Karenga, 2004). These principles originate from various African regions where the "first fruits," referring to agriculture, are celebrated. These celebrations date back to Kemet, Nubia, Ashantiland, and Yorubaland among other ancient lands (Johnson, 2000). Karenga incorporated modern African American values into the values of these first fruit celebrations to comprise the Nguzo Saba and relocate African heritage to a space and time that is relevant to the modern day lived experiences of African descended peoples (1988). These seven principles—Umoja (unity), Kujichagulia (self-determination), Ujima (collective work and responsibility), Ujamaa (cooperative economics), Nia (purpose), Kuumba (creativity), and Imani (faith)—undergird the Afrocentric value system to different degrees based on the scholar developing the theory.

A portion of this literature review covers studies investigating Afrocentric programs and education as developed by Dr. Molefe Kete Asante in his body of work on the topic (Asante, 1987, 1988, 1991, 2007) and refers to this body of work as traditionally Afrocentric. Clarifying the tenets of Asante's paradigm helps one to distinguish its scholars from others, both supporters and critics. These scholars have conflated the Asante's Afrocentric paradigm with constructs like Afrocentrism and Culturally Relevant Pedagogy. Afrocentrism specifically is a term used by some critics of Asante's paradigm (Adeleke, 2009; Lefkowitz, 1996; Walker, 2001). These authors share three main criticisms of the construct they refer to as Afrocentrism, including its assertion that African perspectives are superior to European perspectives, its inaccurate rendering of African history, and the assumed immutability of African identity and culture. However, the concept they criticize does not accurately reflect Asante's Afrocentric paradigm. Asante mentions, several times, that the Afrocentric paradigm does not value African perspectives over European ones, but that the two must coexist laterally with other cultural perspectives (2007). Asante's and Karenga's discussions on African history are also supported with evidence and confirmed by recent findings in archeology and anthropology. Finally, Asante makes clear that the Afrocentric paradigm is an open system that continually asks what it means to be African and acknowledges the reciprocal cultural influence between Africans and other world cultures (2007).

Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (CRP) is a theory that differs from the Afrocentric paradigm, Afrocentric intervention, as well as Afrocentric education. Gloria Ladson-Billings (1995) first introduced this theory in response to a body of research that approaches students of the global majority (often referred to as minorities) from a deficit orientation. Its tenets include the experience of academic success, development/maintenance of cultural competence, and

development of a critical consciousness that challenges the status quo. These tenets overlap with the Afrocentric value system previously discussed. Though the Afrocentric paradigm supports these CRP tenets, it then goes beyond them to address identity as a foundation to meet the needs of the whole person. CRP focuses on shifting the perspective of the researcher, theory, and methodology to address learning. The Afrocentric paradigm further focuses on healing the learner in the educational context. CRP is an educational theory. Education is one area addressed by the Afrocentric paradigm among other Humanities disciplines such as Ethics, Sociology, Psychology, among others. This literature review does not cover Afrocentrism or literature solely investigating CRP. It focuses on the Afrocentric paradigm as it applies to interventions and education with adolescents of African descent in the United States.

#### Afrocentric Education

Many argue that education of non-White students in the United States historically serves as a function of assimilation, or “civilizing,” into Whiteness. In early America (land that is now the United States), education of this demographic focused on topics like vocational training, the principles of Christianity, manual labor, and character building (Konadu et al., 2012; Watkins, 1993). Naturally, a struggle for control of the education of African descended students ensued between Black communities and White institutions. This struggle has been documented as far back as the 1700s (Konadu et al., 2012; Ratteray and Shujaa, 1987), continued into the 20th century with the Freedom School efforts of the Civil Rights movement, and continues today. The simultaneous emergence of Afrocentric theory during the 1960s marked the transition from a loosely defined African informed schooling model to Afrocentric Education.

Afrocentric education serves as a counter to the assimilationist models prevalent in the U.S. educational system. The inextricable definition and history of Afrocentric Education (AE)

have evolved together with reciprocal influence. Akua (2020) defines the AE movement as “an intentional, self-directed, and self-determined effort to build, coordinate, define, develop, and defend independent Black institutions while also carving and creating sacred cultural spaces in public schools and school systems” (p. 110). Asante’s Afrocentric paradigm describes the intentional centering of the African perspective in all investigations and interactions that affect people of African descent. It was after the failed attempts of the Civil Rights movements to desegregate schools in a manner that benefitted Black and White students equally that Asante “began to operationalize concepts in AE to serve as a guide for how education should be delivered for African people” (Akua, 2020, p. 108). Asante aligns his work about AE with that of Woodson (1933/2017) in *The Miseducation of the Negro*. Woodson purports that the dislocation of the African descended student in educational contexts results in miseducation. Afrocentric scholars point out that AE should continuously be revised and expanded to incorporate new ideas in a process of becoming (Akua, 2020; Asante, 1988).

Some of the major players of the “becoming” of AE include Woodson (1933/2017), Asante (1987, 1988, 1991, 2007), Hilliard (1978, 1991), King and Goodwin (2006, 2016) and Akua (2020). King (1991, 2006) contends that transformative Black education must reject deficit-based models and, instead, embrace an African-centered praxis that fosters critical consciousness and cultural self determination. Additionally, King and Goodwin (2006) published 19 standards for educators teaching about people of African descent. Most recently, Akua (2020) developed 13 AE standards based on the work of these scholars and others to serve as a summary of their contributions. These standards include (1) centering Africa, Africans and African points of view, (2) critical examination of the content’s relation to the image/interests of Africa and Africans, (3) an African value system, (4) restoration of African identity and history, (5) tapping

into the spirit of children, (6) a social justice orientation, (7) unique/indigenous methods for the nature and needs of African children, (8) a quest for agency and consciousness of victory, (9) asking if it is good for African people, (10) understanding of the pan-African perspective, (11) understanding and appreciation for all cultures, (12) an understanding of cooperative economic empowerment strategies, and (13) children's preparation for sovereignty (Akua, 2020).

The miseducation of students of African descent has been recognized in and out of the ivory tower since the incipience of education in the United States (Brawley, 1921; Clarke, 1976, 1995; DuBoise 1903/1996; Garvey, 1986; Harris, 1983; Nobles, 1990; Thompson, 1997). As such, many have claimed to address this issue by developing, implementing, and measuring the impact of programs and education that center curricula on Africa (Mazama, 2021). Asante (1987, 1988, 1991, 2007) has developed a detailed orientation that sets parameters around what is and what is not Afrocentric. Many researchers and community organizers use the term Afrocentric to describe their work when, in fact, their work lies outside of Asante's definition. Many also use other terms like African centered, Africa centered, or Afrocentrism when they are referring to Asante's Afrocentric paradigm.

Conceptual variations of Afrocentric frameworks and program structures in this review highlight both the versatility and philosophical nuances of this paradigm. Though versatility increases the reach of the Afrocentric paradigm across disciplines, the resulting decentralized lexicon makes it difficult to find continuity in related empirical research (Mazama, 2021). One research team conducted a systematic review of Afrocentric interventions for adolescents and reported that out of the 1,000 articles initially identified, only 10 were found viable for inclusion (Lateef, 2022). Their criteria included U.S. based empirical studies of Afrocentric programs with majority Black/African Americans under 18 years of age. Though they noted the collective

positive associations with academic achievement, self-concept, cultural identity, and positive behaviors, they also emphasized that “the small number of studies identified support the need for additional research with high standards of methodological rigor to further determine effectiveness of using [Afrocentric programs]...” (Lateef, 2022, p. 1).

Without a centralized lexicon, search terms used by researchers studying the same phenomenon can look different. For example, some scholars began using the term “Africentric.” This philosophical shift in terminology represents an attempt at alignment in this field. The prefix “Afri” corresponds directly to the name of the continent as opposed to “Afro,” a more colonial term than “Afri”. In this review, these two terms refer to the same body of work. The terms used here correspond directly to the terms used in the referenced articles.

#### Empirical Studies of Afrocentric Community Programs

This portion of the review covers both non traditionally Afrocentric and traditionally Afrocentric research. These papers were identified by searching for Afrocentric, culturally, ethnically or racially affirming programs for Black and/or African American students, and racial and ethnic identity interventions for Black and/or African Americans. Studies are included in the traditionally Afrocentric section if they were empirical and adhered to the following criteria following Asante’s Afrocentric paradigm. First, they assume spiritual knowledge is valid in empirical research. The entire paradigm need not be included in a single study, nor does Asante need to be overtly referenced, but they do need to mention African heritage, culture, and place. They construct or contribute to knowledge about Afrocentric interventions/education and do not use a White control group. Participants practice learning and interacting in ways Africans have learned and interacted since before the Transatlantic Slave Trade. Education and interventions are student-centered; empower racial, ethnic, and cultural identity; and are actionable.

### ***Non-Traditional Afrocentric Community Programs in Research.***

In examining community programs within Black and African American populations, various studies explore a multitude of objectives, including enhancing academic achievement (Akom, 2003), reducing high-risk behaviors (Flay et al., 2004), and fostering social capital (Ginwright, 2007). To gauge their alignment with Asante's Afrocentric paradigm, one must scrutinize both their theoretical underpinnings and program components. While the studies are framed by theories that share common ground with the Afrocentric paradigm, none fully embody its principles. This section delves into three examples of empirical research that each represent a position along the Afrocentric spectrum. This discussion includes the diversity of theoretical frameworks and their practical applications with this population, offering insights into their respective conclusions.

Community programs often target high risk behavior in African American adolescent populations (Green et al., 2023; Hsieh et al., 2021; Reilly et al., 2022). Those tailored to the needs of Black students report differences in outcomes. Flay et al. (2004) conducted a study involving three different 3-year risk prevention interventions across 12 Chicago schools, targeting 5<sup>th</sup> graders. They compared two interventions that included the Nguzo Saba principles to a control group. They measured violence, provocative behavior, school delinquency, substance use, and sexual behaviors and found no significant differences for girls and an increase in all risky behavior for boys. However, the rate of increase was significantly slower for those in the treatment interventions.

One interesting outcome worth noting is the difference between the two treatment groups. They used the same risk prevention curriculum and Nguzo Saba principles. However, one included a community approach and involved families, schools, and community stakeholders.

The community inclusive treatment group experienced a significantly slower growth of at-risk behavior than the non-community oriented treatment group.

Despite the conceptual overlap between the Nguzo Saba principles and the Afrocentric paradigm, these interventions implemented them as a separate component from the behavior change theories central to the intervention. Notably, these theories included the Theory of Triadic Influence (Flay, 1994), among others. While most acknowledge the cultural influence on adolescent behavior, they were not specifically Afrocentric. The authors only cited two theoretical goals to align their study with the Afrocentric paradigm; growth of sense of self and cultural pride and the strengthening of family and community ties (Hammond and Yung, 1993; Kolbe, 1993). Since these goals do not encompass the Afrocentric paradigm and can be accomplished outside of this framework, this study is not considered traditionally Afrocentric.

Further along the Afrocentric spectrum, Ogbu's Cultural-Ecological Model of Racial-Ethnic School Performance describes how voluntary and involuntary minorities respond to systemic mistreatment in educational settings. Involuntary minorities is a term Ogbu uses to refer to groups who were forced into a minority status like those brought here through the trans Atlantic slave trade or members of the original sovereign nations often referred to as Native Americans. While sharing some assumptions with the Afrocentric paradigm, like the inherent bias built into educational systems, Ogbu's model examines the experiences of all non-White and European-descended groups without an exclusively Afrocentric lens. In addition, it notes a distinction between Black Americans who emigrated voluntarily and those whose ancestors were brought here involuntarily that Asante does not make.

Akom's empirical study on the Nation of Islam as a community organization expands upon Ogbu's theory, highlighting the organization's role in fostering academic achievement

among African American girls (2003). Akom argues that the original model neglects the Nation of Islam as a subgroup of involuntary minorities that respond to mistreatment in distinct ways. For one, this organization provides avenues for resistance within the educational system without assimilating. In addition, it incorporates a Black achievement ideology that pushes back on dichotomous definitions of Black resistance. Community organizations that spotlight structuring social interactions through a Black achievement ideology can affect the academic achievement of African American participants. Akom finds this focus on structuring social interactions more comprehensive than focusing on cultural nuances of minority populations.

Building upon Akom's work, Ginwright (2007) emphasizes the significance of community based organizations in providing Black youth with community social capital through their case study of 15 participants of a community program based in Oakland, California. Sampson et al.'s define social capital as essential social connections and resources. Programs that foster social capital, like the one in this study, serve as platforms for political awareness and civic engagement. Ginwright's findings underscore how such social capital is found inherently in Black communities and equip youth to confront and address the challenges prevalent in their neighborhoods.

It can be concluded, then, that interventions that incorporate principles overlapping with Afrocentric ideals, like the Nguzo Saba, demonstrate added benefits in promoting the overall health of African American adolescents compared to interventions lacking Afrocentric elements entirely. These studies all share the common theme of community, a central tenet of the Nguzo Saba principles underpinning Asante's Afrocentric paradigm. Collectively, they demonstrate that incorporating a dynamic support network for interventions with African American adolescents can have a great impact. However, the Afrocentric paradigm distinguishes itself by its broader

aim of shaping individual identity, transcending specific behaviors or outcomes to encompass the lifelong cultivation of a healthy cultural, ethnic, and racial sense of self.

### **Traditionally Afrocentric Community Programs.**

Investigations of traditional Afrocentric programs have tracked our increasingly complex understanding of Black identity with their increasingly complex variable structures. Due to the qualitative and mixed methods structures of their designs, they empirically establish benefits of Afrocentric interventions and programs as well as offer valuable insight into the how and why these interventions work for specific outcomes. In addition, they evidence the diverse utility of this framework across disciplines and program goals, from drug and behavior intervention to academic. Arguably most importantly, they identify specific problem areas in program and study design that have stymied the growth of the empirical body of work. This small collection of literature is vital for any researcher looking to investigate Afrocentric programs and hoping to make solid empirical conclusions. Table 1 in Appendix A presents author/year, goal, methodology, duration/frequency, age, gender and number of participants, curriculum, measurements, and outcomes for each article in this section of the review.

Early in the century, studies of traditionally Afrocentric programs have empirically established certain benefits. A program evaluation design study by Chipungu et al. (2001) concluded that participants in twelve Afrocentric drug prevention programs engaged at higher rates and reported higher rates of satisfaction and perceived program importance over participants in 35 non-Afrocentric interventions. In another example, a 2003 grounded theory study design by Alford (2003) explored four Afrocentric programs through a thematic analysis targeting program effects on self-esteem and ethnic identity. Through this thematic analysis focused on collective identity, Alford concludes that Afrocentric program philosophy heightens

awareness of African descended identity and strengthens self-esteem and cultural values (2003).

With empirical groundwork beginning to be laid, studies could conduct increasingly complex investigations, strengthening the rigor of conclusions. Belgrave et al. (2004) and Pinckney et al. (2020) confirmed the findings that Afrocentric programs enhance ethnic identity in two different research designs. Belgrave et al. (2004) bolstered this empirical claim with the use of multiple theories and established instruments such as the Multi-Construct African American Questionnaire (MCAIQ; Smith and Brookins, 1997). The MCAIQ is a self-report questionnaire that captures various dimensions of psychological functioning, experiences, and cultural factors that may be particularly relevant to African American populations. It specifically measures cultural identity, experiences of racism, mental health and well-being, social support and community connectedness, health behaviors and coping and resilience. Pinckney et al. enhanced the qualitative rigor of this claim with a multiple case study of 10 successful traditionally Afrocentric programs utilizing a Rites of Passage structure (2020). They concluded that the programs improve racial identity and increase positive outcomes such as academic success, prosocial behaviors, and the adoption of positive recreation and leisure activities.

Significant variability was found in the level of intentionality with which each program used Afrocentric principles in implementation, shifting this discussion back to an important point in this body of work. The variability of Afrocentric elements in these programs parallels the variability in empirical research investigating the traditional Afrocentric paradigm. Surprisingly, only one of the programs in this study had directors who stated they were aware of Afrocentricity and intentionally built the intervention based on its principles. However, nine of the ten programs exposed participants “to historical and contemporary themes centered on the lives, contributions,

and challenges experienced by Blacks” (p. 188). Three of these nine programs even took their participants to Africa during the intervention.

Though some variability in research can be explained by the vast utility of this paradigm, there exists a category of variability that contributes to the lack of continuity in the body of literature noted by researchers such as Lateef (2022) and Mazama (2020). As discussed in the “Terminology” section of this review, a decentralized lexicon and lack of a standard definition of Afrocentricity contribute to this variability. It is important to note that Afrocentric elements can exist in programs and in literature that do not overtly cite the Afrocentric paradigm, calling for careful methods of identification.

One such method is to investigate a program’s formal curricula. Pinckney et al. (2020) identify formal curricula as one of seven elements in their study outcomes. Specifically, curricula reflect foundational goals. Therefore, when Afrocentric elements are found in the curriculum of a program, that is an indication that Afrocentric goals exist in that space even when there is no overt mention of the Afrocentric paradigm.

Another standard of interest in this study is adult leader training. The authors describe formal training of leaders as vital to the success of Afrocentric programs. Inadequate training can also limit researchers from drawing conclusions about the effectiveness of Afrocentric programming.

One example of this type of limitation exists in King et al.’s 2001 quasi-experimental approach investigating an Afrocentric criminal behavior intervention. The authors note as a limitation that the treatment was not fully implemented due to the lack of facilitator training. This research team tracked the nonviolent criminal behavior of participants in adolescence and into adulthood by comparing the number of felonies, misdemeanors, court violations, arrests,

probation, and imprisonment of each participant during the intervention and again once the participants reached adulthood. The inconclusive results only showed a moderate effect of the intervention up to the age of 18 years. There was no difference in criminality recorded between the two groups as adults. This study highlights complex challenges in empirical research regarding Afrocentric programs that are implemented through community programs.

In addition to the cautionary tales mentioned here, Harvey and Hill (2004) encountered a common issue in community programming: consistent enrollment through the duration of the program. Their goal was to evaluate the effects of this Afrocentric substance abuse prevention program on participants and their caregivers. However, they did not have enough participants until after the eight-week orientation and did not administer the pre-test until that time.

Researchers still reported significant increases in self-esteem and drug abuse knowledge in student participants. Treatment participants reported more of an increase in these variables than the control group. Even though most of the participants and their caregivers reported that the program increased ties between caregiver and child, there were no significant differences between any of the caregiver pretest and posttest scores.

Other researchers discuss similar obstacles related to implementing community programs conducive to empirical research. For example, formal evaluations are associated with program success in prior Afrocentric Rites of Passage program studies (Woodland, 2008). However, only six of the ten programs evaluated by Pinckney (2020) implemented them. The researchers name budgeting constraints as the reason more formal evaluations were not conducted. Adequate resources are often a hindrance for empirical work to be done effectively in community programs. Some point to the lack of clear instructions documenting how to implement such curricula and the ensuing lack of replication that would be needed to establish evidence-based

practices (Gilbert et al., 2009; Whaley and McQueen, 2010). Others blame the variable structures of these types of initiatives (Gavazzi et al., 1996; Pinckney et al., 2011). In addition, many of these types of programs are provided in communities and schools. Considering the conditions to which many students of African descent are subjected in their communities and schools, it is not hard to understand the lack of resources to support rigorous investigations suitable for academic publication (Banks et al., 1996). This type of environment is not conducive to the consistency called for in empirical studies and, instead, sometimes requires a level of spontaneity by program implementers to meet the needs of students that vary from moment to moment (Gilbert et al., 2009; Whaley and McQueen, 2004). Researchers also note the difficulty they experienced with instrumentality (Banks et al., 1996; Washington et al., 2008). Though Washington's team did note a slightly significant increase in the spirituality orientation of participants in an Afrocentric mentoring program located in Memphis, the source of that difference was not conclusive. The authors note that if there had been a measure to indicate other factors like Afrocentricity, their conclusions would have been more robust. Though there are over 40 extant instruments measuring some aspect of Black identity, few are normed on adolescents and fit the criteria for studies done with an Afrocentric lens (DeCuir-Gunby, 2009).

#### Cognitive-Cultural Model of African American Identity for Black Youth

Despite these difficulties, Whaley and McQueen have managed to publish a body of work about one Afrocentric program based in Queens, New York that has evolved into a promising Black identity model for adolescents called the Cognitive-Cultural Model of African American Identity for Black Youth (CMAI). This is the model that frames this case study and is, therefore, discussed clearly and robustly as the final set of empirical studies on a traditionally Afrocentric program.

In 2004, Whaley and McQueen discussed the need to establish new frameworks and evidence-based practices conducive to empirical research with these constructs, especially with male participants. Their vast contributions to this body of literature propel its progress toward establishing an empirical foundation of the effectiveness of the Afrocentric paradigm in programs and education. Their four consecutive publications continue the trend toward delineating the complex nature of these constructs and their utility across disciplines, research designs, and variables. McQueen first started the Imani Rights of Passage program for African descended adolescent males in Brooklyn, NY. Whaley was brought in to identify the effects of the program and transform it into an evidence-based intervention with a manual for replication. He went on to develop the Cognitive-Cultural Model of African American Identity for Black Youth (CMAI; 2010, 2017, and 2020) to facilitate this process.

The CMAI offers a framework by which to understand how Africentric programs change behavior in youth of African descent. The authors specifically incorporate behavioral science literature with common practices of implementing community based programs.

Utilizing a multiple selves concept (McAdoo, 1985; Whaley, 1993), the CMAI posits that young people have an individual and a cultural self. The individual self allows one to function in a Western society that follows an individualistic value system. The cultural self anchors one to their African, collectivist identity. The final component of this model, social roles, refers to the scripts and system of behaviors that allow one to achieve individual accomplishments while simultaneously attending to the collective needs of one's larger community. Youth integrate the individual and cultural self through social roles or struggle to find a balance, which leads to negative psychosocial outcomes. AE links individual academic achievement (Western value) to the betterment of the Black community (African value) and to integrate the selves.

In their publications, Whaley and McQueen test the CMAI by investigating the effects of participation in the Imani Rites of Passage program on different variables including academic performance, the risk for violence, ethnic/racial identity development, cultural socialization, social competence, and self-esteem. They define ethnic/racial identity as “cognitive schemata consisting of beliefs, attitudes, values, and behaviors that reflect a positive association with people of African descent” (Whaley and McQueen, 2010, p. 437). These variables are measured using instruments including the Scale of Racial Socialization of Adolescents (SORS-A; Stevenson, 1994), the Teenagers Experiences of Racial Socialization (TERS; Stevenson et al., 2002), the Adolescent Survey of Black Life (ASBL; Resnicow et al., 1999), the Multidimensional Inventory of Black Identity-Teen (MIBI Teen, Sellers et al., 2008), the Rosenberg Self Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1989), and a violence risk assessment inventory adapted for their studies. Their thorough evaluations led to many insights about the relationship between variables, gender effects, mediating roles, and even subconscious phenomena that were affected differently. Each of Whaley and McQueen’s four studies are discussed in chronological order below.

### **CMAI Pilot Study.**

Their first 2004 study is a pilot study and program evaluation using a mixed-methods approach to test the applicability of Whaley’s (2003) CMAI by evaluating program effects on social behavior and academic outcomes. Quantitative data included grade point averages (GPA) and the number of “unsatisfactory” ratings given by a public school teacher on a given report card. Qualitative data came from a focus group with past participants during which they discussed the impact of the program.

***Descriptive Information.***

This research team conducted a post hoc quantitative analysis of prior program data from 15 male participants who ranged in age from 11 to 15 years. They also conducted a qualitative analysis from a focus group of three, 17-year-old male graduates of the program.

***Outcomes.***

Results indicate that participation improves both academic and social behavior. Qualitative data evidence the development of the cultural self and individual self in accordance with their model. Whaley and McQueen establish that ROP programs have the potential to enhance cultural identity and promote academic competence, which reduces the risk of problem behaviors in youth of African descent.

**CMAI Pilot Study #2.**

The success of this pilot study set the stage for deeper probes into the structure and function of the CMAI. Their next pilot study in 2010 is a more sophisticated version of their 2004 study using Imani Rites of Passage program data. The goal of this quantitative program evaluation was to investigate the explicit and implicit effects of participation in the Imani Rites of Passage program on ethnic-racial identity using the CMAI (Whaley, 2003).

The curriculum includes cultural knowledge/identity development, communal relations building, self-control/social skills acquisition, and academic excellence. They administered three instruments (previously listed in detail) for their quantitative analyses: (1) the ASBL, which asks about attitudes toward being Black and Black things, attitudes toward Whites, and perceptions of racism in Black youth; (2) the SORS-A, which measures beliefs about racial socialization, adoption of ethnic-racial socialization attitudes or messages related to race in child-rearing; and (3) the TERS, which measures the frequency of ethnic/racial socialization about racism,

spirituality, and cultural pride.

Self-constructs are networks of cognitive schemas that we accumulate over the course of our lives (Berk, 2018). Therefore, multidimensional scaling (MDS) analysis was used on ASBL responses to investigate if the resulting dimensions from the collected data correspond with ASBL subscales. MDS analyses show hidden dimensions that underlie constructs of interest (Whaley and McQueen, 2010). These hidden dimensions look like subconscious schemas that elude surveys measuring explicit aspects of constructs like ethnic-racial identity. Once identified, the effects of the treatment on these implicit dimensions of racial-ethnic identity were also measured.

### ***Descriptive Information.***

The control group data consisted of pre-test data from 13 participants in a previous cohort. Treatment group data came from the 2008 Imani Rites of Passage cohort of 13, 11–18-year-old males with a mean age of 14.31 years. The treatment group met for 2-hour weekly sessions for 15 weeks (30 hours).

### ***Outcomes.***

The most notable outcome was that implicit cognitions are even more sensitive to intervention effects than self-reported measures. This result brings up a new and relevant point that adolescent development is a complicated process often occurring beyond the individual's capacity to process consciously. This subconscious phenomenon can occur at any age but may be more salient in younger people whose brains are still developing and building their self-constructs. A process of identifying, measuring, and comparing these phenomena gives researchers access to a deeper layer of adolescent ethnic-racial identity relevant to empirical Africentric research.

### **CMAI Study 3: Female Participants.**

In their third study, Whaley and McQueen (2017) again replicate their previous studies (2004, 2010) but focus on female participants of the Imani Rites of Passage program. In addition, they added instruments including the Self Perception Profile for Adolescents (SPPA) and a violent behavior index developed for their research. The goal was to test the CMAI by evaluating the impact of Africentric socialization (Imani Rights of Passage program) on ethnic-racial identity; the effects of ethnic-racial identity on perceived academic competence and self-esteem; and the effects of perceived academic competence and self-esteem on violent behavior. The curriculum covered cultural knowledge/identity development, communal relations building, self-control/social skills acquisition, and academic excellence. Pre and post-measurements were taken with the instruments listed previously.

In addition to examining mean differences on pre and post-tests, a path analysis was conducted for the MIBI pre/post scores. Path analyses allow researchers to generate a model of the relationships between variables of interest. (McQueen and Whaley, 2010). This team also conducted individual MDS analyses of MIBI scores to investigate program effects on implicit social cognitions related to racial identity.

#### ***Descriptive Information.***

The treatment group was composed of 10 female program participants with a mean age of 12.4 years, and the comparison group was composed of 11 male adolescents with a mean age of 12.08 years. The treatment lasted 15 weeks.

#### ***Outcomes.***

The authors found an increase in measurement means for racial socialization and self-esteem for the treatment group. No significant differences occurred among means of other

measurements. Individual MDS analysis resulted in three implicit dimensions related to ethnic and racial identity. The researchers labeled these dimensions Black Self Rejection, Black Pride, and Racial Ambivalence. Surprisingly, the treatment group had higher weights for Black Self Rejection than the control group and their own pretest measurements. Path analysis revealed an indirect effect of Africentric socialization experiences on ethnic/racial identity that occurs through changing socialization attitudes. Self-esteem was also found to act as a mediator between academic competence and violent behavior. A more detailed discussion of what this means is included below.

This study contributes several crucial insights. Though Africentric socialization does affect ethnic/racial identity, this effect occurs when participants change their socialization attitudes. Also, academic competence is related to decreased violent behavior, but significantly so when participants have higher self-esteem. Further, and unexpectedly, girls experience a drastically lowered effect on racial pride after participation than male participants. Their implicit measure outcomes reflect a greater anti-Black identity after participation in the treatment. These results point to a gender difference when implementing Afrocentric interventions and education. Other researchers have also reported lower cultural pride measurements for girls after receiving Afrocentric socialization messages (Brown et al., 2009). Though this gender effect does not support the assertion that Afrocentric ROP programming is effective with female participants, McQueen and Whaley establish a replicable series of study designs that future researchers can use to investigate this phenomenon more deeply. The rigor of their investigation and study design is a notable contribution to this literature review because it offers academics a clear transition to situate their work in the landscape of relevant empirical knowledge. This contribution directly addresses the need for continuity in this body of work.

#### **CMAI Study #4.**

In their most recent 2020 study, Whaley and McQueen conducted their first nonpilot program evaluation of the Imani Rites of Passage Program using the CMAI. The goal was to evaluate the effects of the program on Africentric socialization, racial identity, and violence risk in a low-income, public school setting. The curriculum includes cultural identity, communal relations building, self-control, coping skills, and academic excellence. Pre and post-tests measure the identified variables using the SORS-A, TERS, MIBI Teen, Rosenberg Self-Esteem, an abridged version of the SPPA, and a violence risk assessment inventory.

#### ***Descriptive Information.***

Twenty male adolescents with a mean age of 16.04 years participated in the treatment. Another 20 with a mean age of 15.42 years made up the control group. The treatment group met for weekly 2-hour sessions over the course of 15 weeks.

#### ***Outcomes.***

The study has a unique method of analysis more complex than any other study in this review and reports several outcomes. First, the treatment group scored significantly higher on SPPA subscales of academic competence and social acceptance by peers and racial identity at the end of the program. Higher intervention group scores were also identified on the MIBI Teen responses.

MDS analysis revealed four implicit profiles that emerged at the pretest including (1) Cultural Socialization, (2) Anger as Coping, (3) Balanced Self, and (4) Social Acceptance. In the posttest, the emergent profiles included (1) Cultural Socialization, (2) Anger as Coping, (3) Black Collectivism, and (4) Violence Risk. Profile 3, Black Collectivism, negatively predicted pre/posttest differences.

This study design illuminates the detailed relationship between variables. Specifically, social acceptance by peers contains protective effects against the risk of violence, poor anger management, and substance abuse risk— even before intervention. The intervention produces a Black Collectivism profile, describing a positive association with racial identity and social acceptance by peers in addition to a negative association with poor anger management and substance abuse risk that already exists. In other words, though social acceptance by peers already contains protective effects, this study links this variable to racial identity by way of the intervention.

The results across all four studies by Whaley and McQueen confirm that the program does increase racial/ethnic/cultural identity and that these variables are positively correlated with psychosocial functioning. Participants experienced a particularly robust effect on academic competence. Their research is also important because of the gender differences they discover in relation to racial pride and anti-Black identity. Their studies offer useful instrumentation options in future research with adolescent youth. Their unique methodology highlights the complex nature of cognitions occurring outside of the awareness of participants who are more susceptible to intervention effects. Most importantly, they develop a model that helps explain how an Afrocentric ROP program affects the cultural and racial identity of adolescents, particularly males, expanding the available frameworks for future research.

#### Strengths and Limitations of Traditionally Afrocentric Program Investigations

The studies with the most promising results in favor of Afrocentric programs and education are intentional, meticulously planned, and executed to minimize limitations. The quantitative studies that utilize instruments use those that are normed on adolescent populations, are reliable, and contain good validity. Qualitative methods of collecting data allow researchers

to better understand how Afrocentric interventions and education affect variables.

Further, studies that utilize well-developed theoretical frameworks in tandem with the Afrocentric paradigm capture and contextualize specific information about variables such as learning outcomes, especially those related to racial and ethnic identity development and academic outcomes. Whaley and McQueen are the only ones who develop a new model from a series of mixed methods studies that reveal the variables most affected by Afrocentric intervention and their relationships with each other.

The body of work included here also demonstrates the relationship between Afrocentric programs and education. One could easily conduct a separate literature review on AE alone. However, when investigated with Afrocentric programs, AE clearly plays an important role in the curriculum and pedagogy. AE is effective at delivering curricula in a way that is culturally relevant to students of African descent, increasing their engagement and success, and supporting the goals of Afrocentric programs. In addition, it provides an avenue to deliver content about African and African American culture and values. It aligns this instruction and curriculum with the principles of the Afrocentric paradigm and adds a means for active social justice. Some of the interventions discussed address social justice through the dissemination of information about the history of Africa, Africans, and African Americans and actively connect students' lives to this history. Though not all Afrocentric interventions use AE in the implementation of their programs, many find that this tool offers benefits aligned with the aims and values of their work.

Some limitations of these studies and this review should be noted. Most of these studies are program evaluations, and one uses grounded theory as methodology. Due to the designs of these studies, results are not generalizable beyond the sample and causal interpretations are

limited. The other limitations stem from the inherent difficulty in launching empirical investigations of community programs and the inconsistent terminology used in research about Afrocentric interventions and education.

### **Conclusion**

This literature review offers insight into the history of American (U.S.) education as it relates to the melanated student, highlighting the power struggle over control of Black education between African American communities and larger systems. Using the Afrocentric paradigm to make a case for the need for supplemental learning spaces affirming African American identity, it discusses community based international service learning as an avenue to accomplish this task. This review identifies a gap in research by highlighting the limited empirical conclusions on this framework with African American students, especially considering the potential of place based pedagogy in tandem with this approach. Including a detailed review of the limited studies of Afrocentric community program for adolescents, it concludes the review of empirical literature with an in-depth discussion of the CMAI and the studies that led to its development, naming this model as the one to frame this case-study.

The complex nature of Afrocentric programs in empirical research is undeniable. Though the literature on these subjects is growing in sophistication, it requires further clarification of and agreement on construct definitions. Overall, studies from this review support the claim that Afrocentric education and interventions have utility in cultural, ethnic, and racial identity for students of African descent. They also show a consistent correlation with academic, psychosocial, and behavioral outcomes. Thanks to Whaley and McQueen there now exists growing documentation about the relationship between these variables and a better understanding of the role of these tools in affecting these variables. With increased intentionality

in defining constructs of interest, empirical literature about Afrocentric programs and education can unite this promising body of work.

King (2016) calls for a shift from research that merely documents disparities to research that actively challenges systemic inequities and builds liberatory educational models. She highlights a need for future studies on Afrocentric programs that not only measure outcomes but also explore how these programs can be scaled to dismantle structural barriers in education. By centering African epistemologies and culturally relevant pedagogies, scholars and practitioners can contribute to a more just and affirming educational landscape for Black students.

This chapter has outlined the theoretical and empirical foundations of Afrocentric education and its impact on African American identity development. Through the integration of King's framework, this study situates itself within a larger movement toward transformative Black education, one that prioritizes cultural self-determination and social justice.

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## 2 WE'RE HELPING THEM, BUT WE'RE ALSO HELPING OURSELVES: TRANSFORMATIONAL PROCESSING OF AFRICAN AMERICAN BOYS IN AN AFROCENTRIC SERVICE LEARNING JOURNEY TO ETHIOPIA

I was one of 11 Black high school graduates in my class of 460. The school bus stop was half a mile from my house. My White neighbor and her Black boyfriend were my classmates. He would drive her home after school and make sure to drop her off at the same time as the bus. They would give me a lift in his car with a bench seat in the front. I'd hop in relieved that I didn't have to carry my overloaded backpack in the 90+ degrees. One day, he pulled up like he always did, but my neighbor looked annoyed and told him I wasn't allowed to ride with them anymore. After I pressed them, he eventually pulled me to the side at school and said some of the construction workers building the new houses in our neighborhood told her mom she was riding with two Blacks and looked like an Oreo. She was offended. The same neighbor told me her mom was making fun of my dad's name when they accidentally got our mail one day. Why? I asked. Because it's a silly name. His name, Dinku, means God's Awe in our native language of Amharic. His first name is Endale, meaning as the Lord proclaimed. Together it makes a sentence loosely translated to: The Lord proclaims you are His awe. I asked my neighbor what her mom's name was. Barbie.

I know my language, the only one left on the continent of Africa with its original written system. The pride I have in where I come from buffered me from internalizing incessant messages as these- that I am, by default, the subordinate. If our cultures clash, the White one sets the standard and the Black one is the one that is different to the point of calling my clothes costumes and grouping all melanated Americans into the category of "African-American." I continue to be told that as an African, I'm not Black. I continue to be told that if I don't consider myself Black, I'm delusional. My racial identity shifts with the context in which it is understood.

Some will never consider me Ethiopian, American, Dutch, Black, or African American. These ontological and epistemological questions of who gets to decide who I am have sent me into identity crises. But even as this life strips away one identity after another, I eventually remember what I know. I know where I came from. My sense of identity validates that knowing enough to sturdy my chin. There is value in that.

Many African Americans I meet know that I am Ethiopian immediately upon seeing me. At some point in their lives, they immersed themselves in a version of Ethiopia enough to recognize the physical features of its descendants. They have gained something from their interactions. Often, they reference how the culture taught them to never let their chins drop. At times, the food made of teff, the number one super grain in the world and a staple of the diet, taught them how to eat clean without sacrificing savory. More commonly, it's the history, both anthropological as the origin of mankind and local as the only African nation to definitively defeat the colonizers who attempted to take it for Italy. For decades I have witnessed this place serve as an anchor for the beleaguered melinated identity across this planet.

These observations had not fully matured when I started a non-profit with the loose goal of addressing global education from our site location in rural Ethiopia. Our partner school there, situated in the mountains of the Great Rift Valley, is one my grandfather helped start when he was a newlywed. After he passed away, our team along with my extended family helped turn the property into a resource center for the students at the school.

A few years later, an associate in the U.S. approached me with a request to take him and the participants of his Black chess team to Ethiopia. He is the CEO of a nonprofit that teaches youth in the U.S. the game of chess as a metaphor for life as communicated through their motto, "Think before you move." He was one who shared with me how learning about Ethiopia's

history helped him reinvision what it means to be a Black man in North America. He wanted to offer this same opportunity to his cohort of boys aged 11-17 and requested that I write and teach an Afrocentric curriculum including African and Ethiopian history and culture. Challenging our cohort of youth in Ethiopia to a chess tournament, the fundraising began and the case for this study was born.

The interpretive nature of this study necessitates addressing the common critique of bias in qualitative research at the outset. Ezzy (2002) argues that all research carries inherent bias and that making claims of unbiased interpretation is not only unattainable but ethically problematic. Rather than striving for the impossible or falsely asserting objectivity, ethical interpretive research requires transparency about the researcher's positionality. As the program coordinator for this case, I situate my "personal experiences and inquiry worldview" (DeCuir-Gunby, 2020, p. 244) as a critical foundation, much like a contractor using a level to ensure a sound base before construction begins (Endale, 2018). This alignment guides my approach and moves beyond merely highlighting racial injustices, instead proposing more just frameworks for examining them (DeCuir-Gunby & Schutz, 2014, 2017). Rather than disentangling my perspective from my conclusions, I will contextualize my work within this framework.

The need for such contextualization becomes evident when examining the history of educational inequality in the U.S., which has been extensively documented. Scholars have highlighted the harmful consequences of a Eurocentric educational system for students of African descent (Boutte & Strickland, 2008; Johnson, 2000; King & Swartz, 2014; Perry et al., 2003; Watkins et al., 2001). Conversely, research shows the health and developmental benefits of integrating an Afrocentric worldview (Burbanks et al., 2020; Chipungu et al., 2002; Dixon et al., 2000). Asante (2007) contends that Western education excludes Afrocentric perspectives,

perpetuating a dislocated sense of self for students of African descent. Within Eurocentric learning environments, these students encounter persistent messages of inferiority to people of European descent, resulting in academic disengagement, miseducation, negative identity formation, and self-destructive behavior. Asante (2007) argues that the integration of Afrocentric worldviews, then, is not just an academic recommendation but a necessary intervention for identity affirmation and holistic development.

Outcomes from empirical research help us understand how educational inequalities negatively affect ethnic and racial identity development of Black and African American students (Buras, 2011; Ewing, 2018; Hilliard, 1988, 1999; Okonofua and Eberhardt, 2015; Peterson et al., 2016; Scott, et al., 2018). African-centered schools address many of these concerns but face challenges and criticisms, again pointing to the systemic issues that will continue to affect schools until the system changes (Davis, 2016; Lee, 1992; Teicher, 2006). There is also evidence suggesting community based programs aimed at fostering ethnic and racial identity have positive and protective outcomes for African American participants. International service-learning is one potential method for positive impacts on Black and African American participants (Cleveland-Innes and Campbell, 2009; Ertmer and Simmons, 2002; Kim and Mao, 2012; Torney-Purta et al., 2001).

### **Guiding Questions**

This study asks how eight African American male participants in a two week place-based, Afrocentric, critical service learning program in Ethiopia processed their experiences. To provide the landscape for the discussion of the results, the following literature review discusses empirical and theoretical claims about international and place based education using critical service-learning, especially for African American participants. It closely examines such studies

investigating how participants process their experiences.

The term process has been defined as the sequence of cognitive events beginning with a sensory stimulus and ending with applied meaning as observed through attention, perception, memory, and reasoning (Stanovich & West, 2008). This definition is expanded here to ways participants apply meaning and integrate that meaning into existing knowledge. Specifically, it refers to identifying, describing, observing, defining, exploring, contrasting, determining, and examining aspects of one's experiences including thoughts, inspirations, hopes, feelings, expectations, intentions, perceptions, perspectives, assumptions, motivations and prior knowledge. Focusing on how participants process their experiences helps capture what they pay attention to, perceive, remember; how they reason with these perceptions and memories; how they apply meaning to and integrate them; and what meaning they apply. Process focused analysis provides insight into the mechanisms through which individuals make sense of and derive meaning from their interactions with the educational context.

Understanding the cognitive processes underlying participants' engagement with the international service-learning trip and the Afrocentric curriculum used in this case can also uncover the nuances of their learning experiences. This exploration enables a deeper comprehension of how individuals navigate complex cultural and racial dynamics, confront challenges, and integrate new knowledge and perspectives into their existing cognitive frameworks. Moreover, by examining the attention, perception, memory, reasoning, and meaning-making processes of participants, researchers can identify patterns, discrepancies, and transformative moments that contribute to overall development across domains like race, ethnicity, and culture.

The following literature review also includes a theoretical discussion on critical service-learning and a theoretical/empirical review of studies investigating place-based international education before presenting the analysis and conclusions from an exploratory single case-study that utilizes the Cognitive Cultural Model of African American Identity (CMAI) as its framing model. The case is a 2017 Afrocentric international, critical, place based service-learning program for eight African American adolescent males who spent two weeks traveling through Ethiopia. This paper discusses my role as the program director and researcher, and outlines an abductive thematic analysis before discussing results.

## **Literature Review**

### **International Service-Learning**

Community based international service-learning integrates the components of study abroad programs with components of service-learning and occurs outside the home country of the participants (Tonkin and Quiroga, 2004; Bringle and Hatcher, 2011). Study abroad is an umbrella term that encompasses any academic experiences outside of the United States (Chenault and Kreisel, 2020). Both study abroad and international service-learning are considered high-impact practices by the Association of American Colleges and Universities (2017). International service-learning specifically incorporates the study abroad components of traveling to another country where participants “learn from direct interaction and cross-cultural dialogue with others” (Bringle and Hatcher, 2011). Service-learning becomes international when it “involves the conducting of service activities beyond the national boundary, often in developing countries or regions with a different culture” (Chan et al., 2018, p. 8) and when the goals are international or global.

International service-learning can provide additional benefits for academic outcomes beyond what is typically seen with domestic service-learning. Examples include intercultural awareness and competency, understanding of international/global issues, and global citizenship development (Hurlbut, 2015). A more global mindset then enhances the ability to work effectively with diverse people, intercultural communication, and adaptability (Deardorff, 2006; Jackson, 20015). In addition, an increased sense of self efficacy, problem solving skills, and confidence results in improved academic performance (Pekmezi and Manca, 2015). Some have argued that service-learning and study abroad have increased benefits for African American students like high engagement, academic outcomes, and persistence (Brownwell and Swaner, 2010; Kinzie, et al., 2008; Kuh, 2008). The specific benefits of any type of international service-learning may vary depending on factors such as the type of service, the student population, and the implementation context.

Studies investigating the cognitive processes involved in the transformational utility of international service-learning have yielded conclusions worth mentioning. Mezirow's seminal theory of transformative learning posits that some types of education expand the constructs students use to define their identities and make meaning of their experiences during and after the educational experience (2000). This theory lays out defining trajectories of transformational educational experiences including a disorienting dilemma, emotional self-examination, and exploration for new roles. Taylor et al. argue that the disorienting nature of international service-learning in new and unfamiliar cultures make it a transformational educational experience. Researchers have identified the cognitive responses of participating students. Those with an orientation to learning may aim to resolve dissonance between expectations and reality by seeking additional information that addresses this cognitive dilemma (Giles, 2014 and Taylor,

2017). Evidence for the metacognitive impact of transformative education through service-learning includes broadening approaches to meaning-making mediated by “sustained engagement with and processing of substantive questions” (Taylor et al., 2017, p. 239) during (Baxter et al., 2012 ) and two to four years after participation (Jones and Abes, 2004). This type of impact sometimes results in an exploration of students’ assumptions about themselves, the larger world, and the relationships holding these assumptions together (Eyler & Giles, 1999; Holsapple, 2012). This response is even more common in critical service-learning experiences (Butin, 2005; Rhoads, 1997; Taylor, 2017).

### **Critical Service-Learning**

Traditional service-learning has received criticism in academic spaces including that they reify inequalities unless they aim to dismantle systems creating the need for service (Cooks et al., 2004; Cooks, McBride et al., 2006; Pompa, 2002; Scharrer and Paredes, 2004; Sleeter, 2000). Critical service-learning is distinguished by its deconstruction of hegemonic systems (Mitchell, 2008) and social justice orientation (Rice and Pollack, 2000; Rosenberger, 2000) and increases the complexity of participants’ thinking and reasoning skills (Wang and Rogers, 2006).

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inherently an asset-based approach to education, critical service-learning calls for participants to transform communities through their skills, knowledge, and experiences (Boyle-Baise, 2007; Marullo, 1999; and Wade, 2000). It includes community issues as well as their historical antecedents and builds on participant strengths to increase their confidence and agency in reflecting on and changing their complacent maintenance of problematic structures (Mitchell,

2008). In this manner, students can build deeper and more meaningful relationships with the communities they serve.

DeCuir-Gunby argues that a critical lens is not just defined by the components of the program but also by the lens of the researcher and method of inquiry (DeCuir-Gunby, 2020). This study contributes to ongoing critiques of the limited and often problematic ways race-related issues are addressed in academia, aligning with efforts to challenge dominant narratives about race in history, science, and culture. In doing so, it racializes my positionality as a researcher (Milner, 2007) and aligns the intention to critique and transform power structures with a critical lens that enhances rigor in the research process (Ezzy, 20020; DeCuir-Gunby, 2020).

#### Community Based International Service-Learning

One promising avenue for applying such a critical lens is Afrocentric community based international service-learning programs. These initiatives not only foster academic and personal development but also provide opportunities to center marginalized perspectives and affirm cultural identities. This next section discusses the definition, history, and empirical evidence for community based international service-learning, highlighting its potential to create meaningful educational and cultural exchanges.

Service-learning is a pedagogical tool that allows students to “develop through active participation in thoughtfully organized and collaborative (school and community) service experience which addresses community problems” (Jones et al., 2005, p. 29). It combines community service with an academic curriculum (Fiske, 2002). Participation can enhance academic and personal development, including critical thinking, problem-solving, and leadership skills, as well as civic engagement, empathy, and sense of purpose. Additionally, service-learning can also improve motivation and academic engagement and achievement (Cleveland-

Innes and Campbell, 2009; Ertmer and Simmons, 2002; Kim and Mao, 2012; Torney-Purta et al., 2001).

The Commission on National and Community Service (1997) established two types of service-learning, school based and community based. They each have a set of standards with some overlap. Both require the service to meet community needs. Participants must have structured time to think, talk, and write about what they did and saw during the service activity. Finally, the program should develop a sense of caring for others. However, while school based service-learning should integrate into an academic curriculum, community based service-learning should support the learning goals of the organization. School based service-learning should apply to school lessons while community based programs bring learning out of the classroom and into the broader community.

### **Place-Based International Education**

Place-based learning emphasizes the learning potential of relationships not only among people but also with the physical and cultural environments in which learning takes place. Researchers have explored how specific locations of educational programs influence participants' experiences, highlighting the concept of place as pedagogy. This approach, as Piptone (2018) describes, involves "ways of teaching and learning in study abroad that embrace the pedagogical power of place to foster awareness of the self in relation to other, cultivate relationality, and deconstruct the exotic" (p. 55). The idea of place as pedagogy is an age-old concept rooted in traditions such as the oral history of the Apache nation, which conveys that "wisdom sits in places" (Basso, 1996, p. 59).

Environmental psychologists have similarly examined the concept of place identity, defined as "those dimensions of self that define the individual's personal identity in relation to

the physical environment” (Proshansky, 1978, p. 147). In this context, place encompasses the sociocultural and historical meanings embedded in landscapes (Pipitone and Raghavan, 2017). Participants engage with place in ways informed by cultural, geophysical, and corporeal realities (Wattchow and Brown, 2011). This research suggests that incorporating these contextual realities into the curriculum can facilitate personal growth, intercultural competence, and a greater sense of global citizenship (Pipitone, 2018; Pipitone and Raghavan, 2017).

Situating this body of work within Lefebvre’s (1991) spatial theory illuminates how reciprocal engagement with place creates the renegotiation of meanings and identity. Spatial theory describes how social space is produced through the interaction of how space is perceived, conceived, and lived. The perception of space is captured by what is seen. The conception of space is that which is thought. Lived space is mediated by the sensing body to embody space through appropriation (Beyers and Michels, 2011; Lefebvre, 1974/1991; Pipitone, 2017). The renegotiation of meanings and identity occurs through what Lefebvre referred to as generative moments when the meanings and identities brought into a space contradict the realities of that space.

A growing body of research investigates participants with personal connections to place during study abroad or international service-learning. Most of this research looks at traditional study abroad models and focuses on White students visiting Europe (Comp, 2008; Kline, 2015; Kriz and Gasevic; Mason and McMillan, 2016; Morgan et al., 2002; Landau and Chioni Moore, 2001; Russel and Weaver, 2017; and Tsantir and Titus, 2006). Few explore what Day-Vines et al. refer to as African diasporic travel or “students, bound to Africa by heritage and culture, returning to their ancestral culture of origin for a finite period of time” (1998, p.2). These researchers conducted an exploratory study and found that participant experiences facilitated the

dispelling of negative myths about African Americans, liberated and inspired, allowed for critical examination of contrasting values, aided in psychosocial development, and improved achievement and motivation. Ferdinand (2015) published portions of her dissertation, an auto ethnography of her experiences in Burkina Faso. She concludes that her understanding of African American identity expanded to be fluid and spilling over the constraints of Western definitions. Though results of these studies were not generalizable outside the mostly female participants, these promising outcomes justify further inquiry.

Both of these studies (Day-Vines et al., 1998; Ferdinand, 2015) were located in West Africa, from where it is believed most enslaved peoples descended through the transatlantic slave trade. East and West Africa play different roles in the freedom narrative of the larger diaspora. Specifically, Ethiopia is the only African nation-state to definitively defeat colonization in the traditional sense. No literature was found examining the experiences of participants of programs in Ethiopia or how this history interacts with their experiences.

### **The Case**

This study explores a two-week place based Afrocentric and critical service-learning program in Ethiopia. Participants were eight African American adolescent males who participated in Afrocentric education while traveling to significant historical locations and establishing a service-learning project with local high school students. Exploration focuses on participant processing of their experiences through three data sources: their journals, interviews, and questionnaires.

Ethiopia and its place based potential for Afrocentric programs has yet to be explored in empirical literature. It is a country with an integral role in the freedom narrative of the African diaspora. Conclusions will offer insights into how empowering spaces and histories of Black

people affect the experiences of participants. They will fill gaps in our knowledge of how African American adolescent male participants process their experiences with an Afrocentric curriculum that teaches them about the history of Ethiopia within the context of a larger Africa and the world.

Afrocentric curricula often incorporate identity exploration (Harvey and Hill, 2004; Mather et al., 2012; Pinckney et al., 2020; Yang et al., 2016). In these cases, it is helpful to follow an identity model that aligns with the philosophy of the program. The Cognitive-Cultural Model of African American Identity for Black Youth (CMAI) is used to frame this study. In addition to the clear and robust conversation about this model in chapter one, this section delineates its close alignment with the aims of the program and this study.

### **Cognitive-Cultural Model of African American Identity for Black Youth**

To review, Whaley and McQueen's recently developed Cognitive-Cultural Model of African American Identity for Black Youth (CMAI; 2010, 2017, 2020) describes two "selves," an individual self and a cultural self. The individual self serves to function in a Western value system consisting of individualistic values such as self-promotion, self-sustaining acts, and personal success. The cultural self serves to function in a collectivist African system of values such as community orientation, relationships, and responsibility to the collective. The third component of this model is social roles. Social roles are the scripts and systems of behaviors that yield individual and collective accomplishments. In other words, individual accomplishments are linked to the collective accomplishments of one's community through relationships, shared goals, and strong support networks.

Adolescents either integrate the two selves through social roles or have an unbalanced identity, which manifests in negative psychosocial outcomes. For example, the cultural faux pas

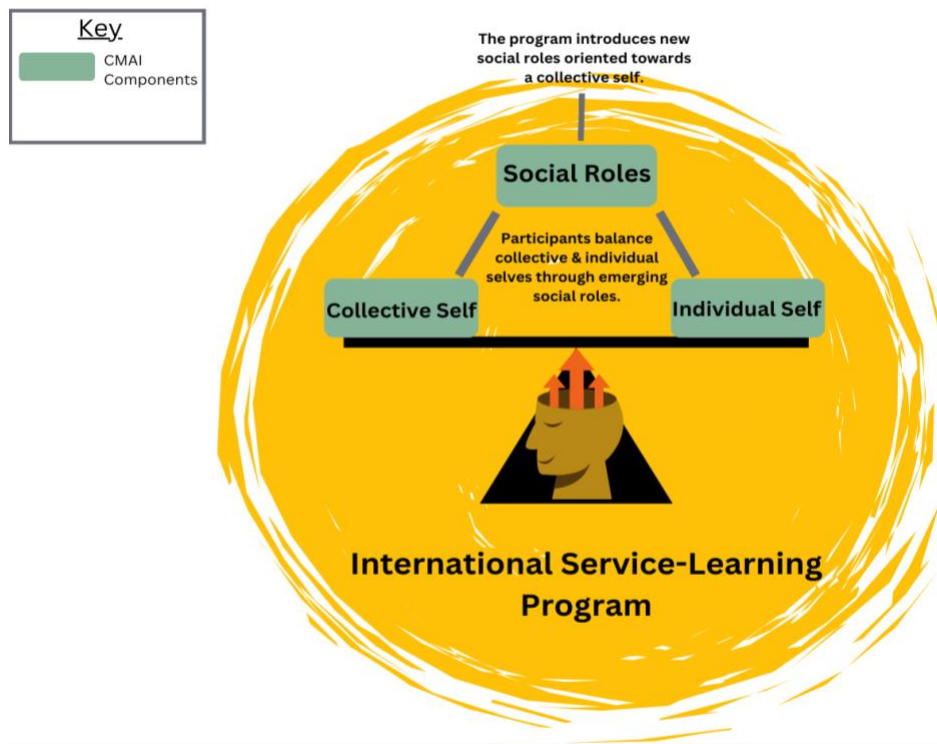
of “snitching” in African American culture likely stems from a collective mistrust of authority throughout African American history. The individual self may desire to seek help from an authority to escape a dangerous situation at home like a parent who is selling drugs to make ends meet, while the cultural self may seek to find alternate ways to stay safe while preserving the family and community structure. Integration may look like social roles obtained at home and school that allow the adolescent to survive “on the streets” and in school to gain access to legal employment, helping make ends meet at home. In this way, when adolescents understand that the social roles and scripts expected at home are different than those at school, they can learn to differentiate when and where to apply each to accomplish their individual and collective goals. According to this theory, adolescents who do not have this expanded self-construct will struggle in each environment, resulting in negative psychosocial outcomes.

### **CMAI’s Alignment with this Case Study**

CMAI is aligned in several ways with the philosophy of the program studied here. An Afrocentric curriculum can help adolescents integrate their individual and cultural selves through a process of differentiation, or creating new aspects of the self-construct. As shown in Figure 1, the program introduces new social roles that balance the collective and individual selves. Participants negotiate these roles, orienting towards a collective self while maintaining aspects of their individuality.

**Figure 1**

*Graphic Showing Relationship Between CMAI Framework and the Service-Learning Program*



*Note.* Fig. 1 connects CMAI components to the service-learning program. The figurehead represents participants negotiating their collective and individual selves through the social roles emerging through program participation.

The instruments used to establish this model have shown high validity and reliability with African American adolescent males, the demographic in this study. This demographic has been identified as especially vulnerable in the realm of research because of the lack of frameworks that place them at the heart of inquiry. Empirical research has historically centered on the experiences, perspectives, and priorities of White people, often at the expense of other racial and ethnic groups (Gobo, 2011; Mertens, 2005; Smith, 2021, Sue et al., 2007). Instead of challenging existing power imbalances, these studies perpetuate harmful stereotypes. This kind of

discrimination occurs in the types of questions that are asked, the methods of collecting and analyzing data, and ways of interpreting and disseminating results (Collins, 2000, Ladson-Billings, 1995). For example, researchers may frame questions in ways that assume a White perspective or use research methods that are biased toward certain groups or that exclude important perspectives and experiences. Research may also interpret findings in ways that reinforce stereotypes and biases, or neglect ways in which racism and other forms of systemic oppression shape the experiences of marginalized communities (Bonilla-Silva, 2013; Cokley, 2007).

The neglect of the Black experience in empirical research has several negative impacts on African American youth. Neglectful research can reinforce systemic inequalities instead of dismantling them (Bonilla-Silva, 2019; Jones, C.P., 2000). It also limits our understanding of social issues, making it difficult to identify effective solutions and impacts access to effective resources for populations excluded from research establishing those resources (Crenshaw, 1991). The CMAI, therefore, acts as a protective measure against this pervasive risk in interpretive data analysis.

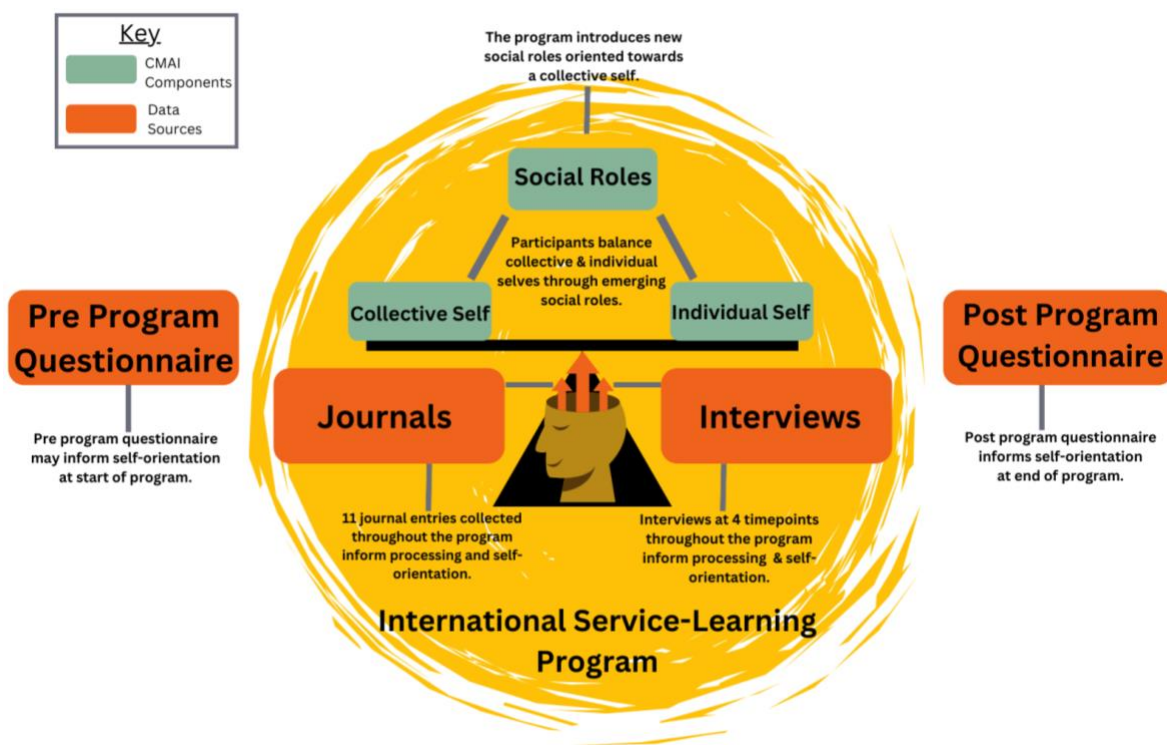
The CMAI helps to frame this data within our understanding of how African American adolescent racial/ethnic identity functions. It addresses what W.E.B Duboise described as a double consciousness experienced by African Americans burdened with the expectations and dangers of the White gaze. Its description of the individual and cultural selves aligns with the data collection methods in the present study which prompts participants to evaluate their identity in multiple contexts. Youth participated in interviews, wrote journal entries, and filled out a pre-departure questionnaire that asked them to evaluate who they are in the United States and the present moment. They answered one prompt about their identity from the questionnaire again at

the end of the intervention. The program facilitated deep and meaningful connections with Ethiopian culture and people who debunked myths and stereotypes participants held about Africans and themselves.

By introducing new empowering social roles that foster a collective identity, participants negotiate their individual and collectivist selves in new ways. Figure 2 shows how each data source informs aspects of the CMAI for a well-integrated framework that acts as a guidepost for data interpretation.

**Figure 2**

*Graphic Showing Relationship Between CMAI, Data, and the Program*

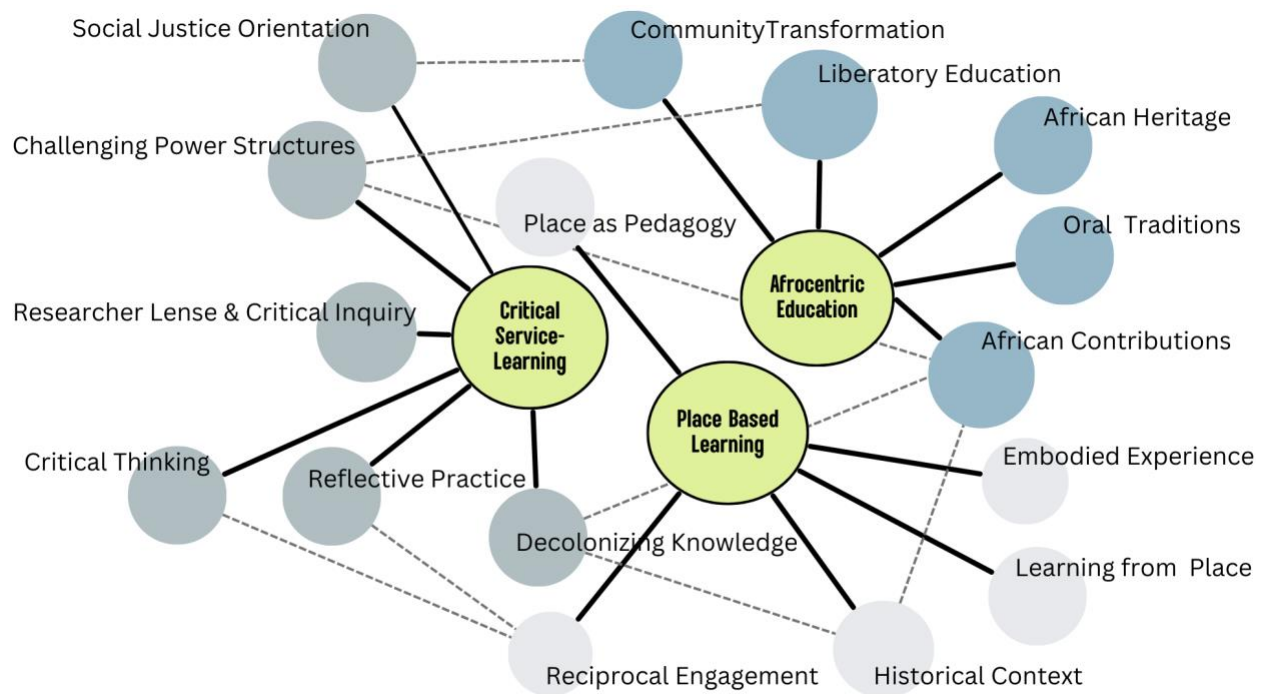


*Note.* Questionnaires reflect self-orientation (alignment with the collective and/or the individual self) at both the start and end of the program. Journals and Interviews also reveal internal processing throughout the experience.

This study situates itself at the intersection of Critical Service-Learning, Place-Based Learning, and Afrocentric Education, each of which contributes to the program's structure. Critical Service-Learning emphasizes social justice, reciprocity, and dismantling systemic inequities in service contexts. Place-Based Learning highlights the role of environment, cultural immersion, and historical context in shaping educational experiences. Afrocentric Education centers on identity development, diasporic connections, and the decolonization of knowledge systems. Figure 3 illustrates how the program in Ethiopia integrates these three approaches. By introducing new social roles that mediate the individual and collective self, this program created a unique context for African American adolescent males to process their experiences through multiple lenses.

**Figure 3**

*Intersection of Critical Service-Learning, Place Based, and Afrocentric Education in this Case*



*Note.* This graphic illustrates how the program in this case study operates at the intersection of critical service learning, place based learning, and Afrocentric education, demonstrating the

relationships between components of each contributing framework. Solid lines represent components of respective frameworks, while dotted lines represent the relationships between the components.

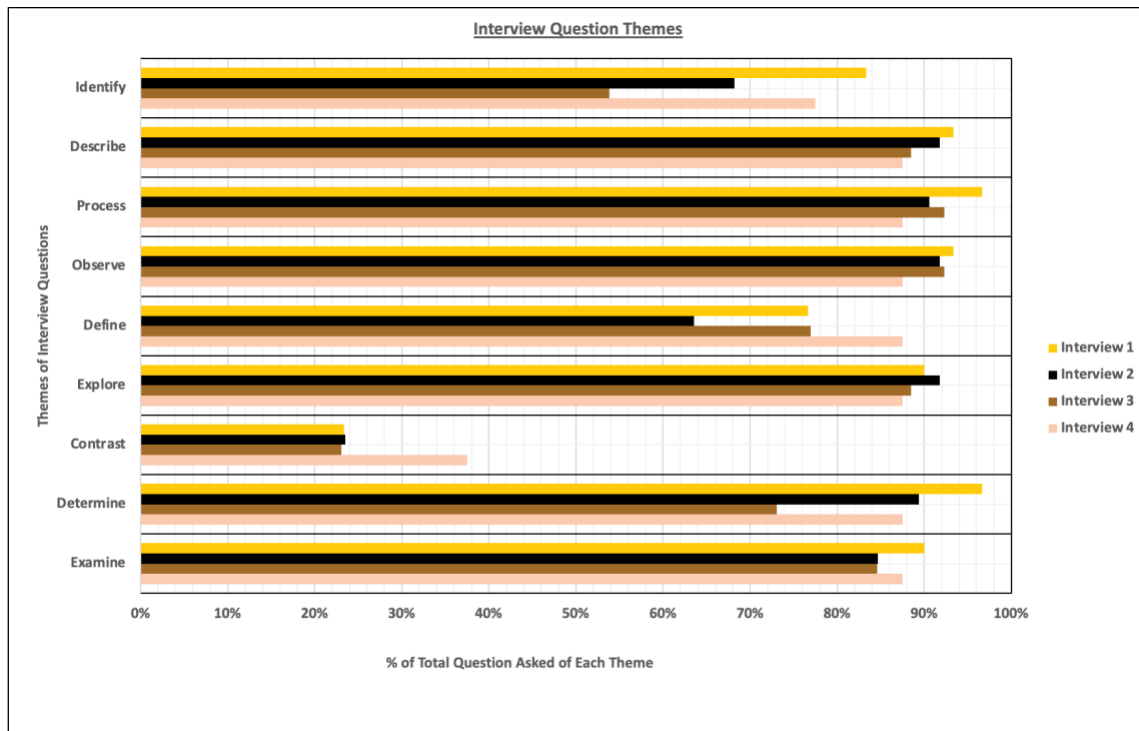
Given this layered structure, the research question naturally emerged from an examination of how participants processed their experiences as communicated across different data sources. The following section outlines the methodology used to analyze these processing mechanisms, detailing how interview questions, journal prompts, and pre/post-program questionnaires captured shifts in self-concept, orientation, and meaning-making.

### **Research Question**

The retrospective nature of this study allowed the research question to develop from the existing data. The interview questions are the source of the bulk of the data. Through a system of organizing their core content, it was determined that they would yield data about how participants processed their experiences. This system began by dividing interview questions into four separate Excel sheets, one for each time point. Each question was coded to determine *what* it was asking participants to do. These verb codes are referred to as the interview question themes. In addition, the subjects of each verb were coded and referred to as the interview question subjects. For example, one question from interview timepoint 1 (T1) asked, “When you first heard of Ethiopia, what did you think about it?” This question asks participants to *identify* (verb code) their *thoughts* (subject code). Most questions had multiple verb/subject codes. The following verb codes had over an 80% prevalence rate: describe, process, observe, explore, and examine. The most common subject codes were thoughts, inspirations, perceptions, and perspectives. Figures 4 and 5 show themes, subjects and their prevalence in each interview time.

**Figure 4**

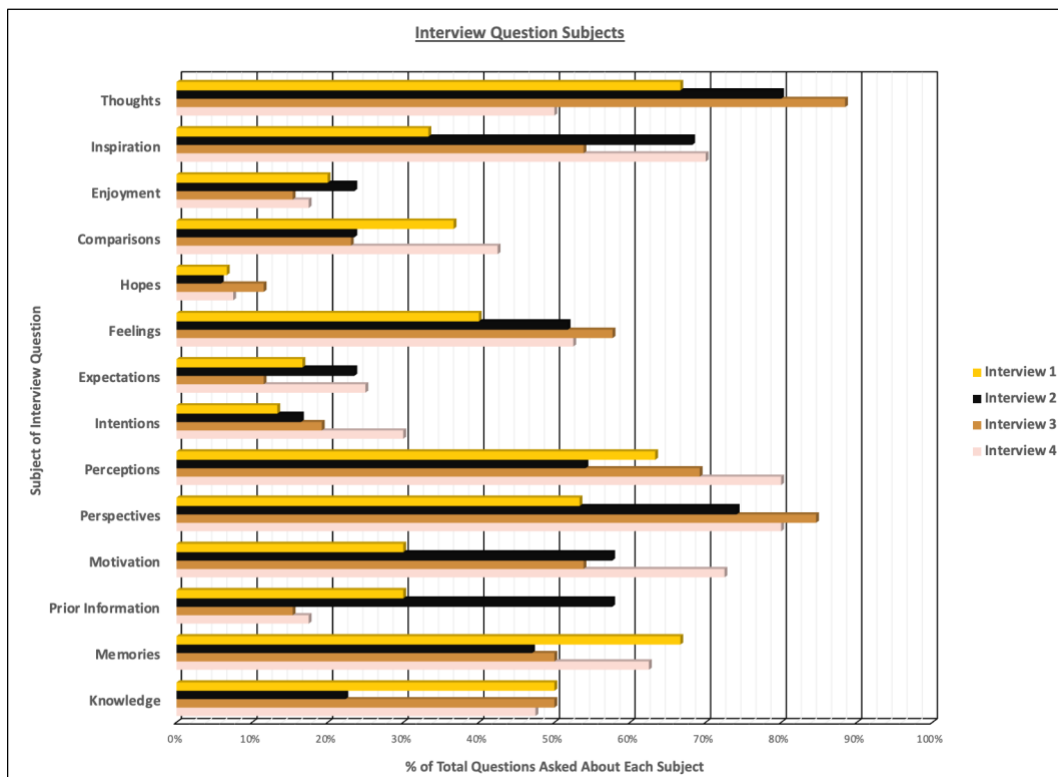
*Interview Question Themes and Prevalence at Each Interview Timepoint*



*Note.* Fig. 4 contains a comprehensive list of themes found in interview questions. The prevalence of each theme is expressed as a percent of total questions asked at interview timepoint 1 (T1), interview timepoint 2 (T2), interview timepoint 3 (T3), and interview timepoint 4 (T4).

**Figure 5**

*Interview Question Subjects and Prevalence at Each Interview Timepoint*



*Note.* Fig. 5 contains a comprehensive list of subjects found in interview questions. The prevalence of each subject is expressed as a percent of total questions asked at T1, T2, T3, and T4.

Based on this method, qualitative examination of data aims to answer the following research question.

How do participants process their experiences throughout a two-week place based critical Afrocentric international service-learning program in Ethiopia?

### **Positionality**

The research question in this study places the program participants at the heart of inquiry by exploring their experiences through their processing. My presence in this study is two-fold. I was the program coordinator during a time when I was not yet a researcher. Nor was I a PhD

student. Now, I am a PhD student retroactively investigating the experiences of the participants of this program. My identity as an adult female researcher and an African-born, Black, naturalized American citizen is part of this story. My own racial trauma in the United States led me to study racial and ethnic identity development in adolescents to help this nation process its sordid history with melanin. I spent my teen and college years in a community adjacent to the one from which the participants in this study live. When I was seven months pregnant and in my final year of my master's program, my husband landed his first job out of school. We slowly moved in and were driving back and forth from our rented house in this community and our newly purchased home an hour away. These back country roads are known for unpleasant encounters with the police for the Black community, so my heart stopped when the blue lights came on behind our classic Camaro. There was no reason for the stop. The officer immediately asked my husband to step out of the car and interrogated us separately. Eventually, he credulously asked, "So, you're just a young guy trying to take care of your family?" When we got home, I saw my husband cry for the first time.

When the participants in this program express a healthy suspicion of the police, I deeply understand it. We share those same fears and concerns, the same deep sadness in response to all those situations where we were not treated as equal human beings. At the same time, I do not share the same historical trauma of slavery and understand I do not share the same inflicted identity crisis that comes from the violent way African Americans have been ripped from their pre-slavery identity. The very nature of racism is so insidious that assuming anyone, but especially those who will never truly understand the complex relationship one has with their history in slavery, has put away all race-related notions is a dangerous way to study youth of African descent. I do not know if this intervention model will address the effects of racism on

African American adolescents. My audacity comes from countless interactions with members of this community who have shared how the place where I am from has helped them find pride, dignity, and a reconnection to their heritage. I have always looked at myself as that dash between African and American, a symbolic bridge between two places in space and time. I am passionate about investigating how I can serve this purpose effectively and honestly.

My positionality is not just one of experience but also an epistemological stance. Do not approach my place here as a game of hopscotch, jumping from one overlapping African and African American experience to the other, avoiding those innately unique experiences of Blackness situated outside intersecting points. My shared experiences with the participants in this study are just as valid as our unique ones. Blackness is like a protein, a strand of DNA folded in on itself. Its inner structure introduces distant genetic codes to each other in ways that change the body in which they exist. These powerful points of intersection are as much a part of this contorted strand as the parts that stand alone. Every piece is necessary for a glimpse at a larger picture.

### **Methods**

This single exploratory case study will be based on the archival dataset collected during this journey. Case studies in general are a qualitative “strategy for doing research which involves an empirical investigation of a particular contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context using multiple sources of evidence” (Robson, 1993, p. 146). The different types of case studies are distinguished by their function in relation to the data. Yin (2018) describes four distinct functions explaining, describing, illustrating, and enlightening. Exploratory case studies specifically investigate a new phenomenon to generate insights (enlightening).

This methodology supports multiple epistemological lenses and accommodates a relativist research approach, allowing for the observation and interpretation of multiple realities and meanings into findings (Boblin et al., 2013; Yazan, 2015). Seminal case study methodologists have diverse perspectives on how cases are bounded from or embedded within larger contexts, the directionality of comparisons (vertically, horizontally, or both), and whether the scope should be micro, meso, or macro (Yazan, 2015). Merriam (1998) and Stake (1995), both constructivist case study methodologists, prioritize capturing “the perspectives of different participants and focusing on how their different meanings illuminate” (Yin, 2018, p. 16) the research questions. This approach aligns well with the present study’s research question, which explores how participants processed a shared experience.

One critique often raised about case study methodology pertains to issues of rigor, particularly in addressing validity and reliability. In case study research, these concepts “take different forms than in more positivist, quantitative research” (Merriam, 1998, p. 198). Understanding the epistemological commitments of a study is critical to identifying best practices for addressing rigor, as case studies can range from positivist (Yin, 2018) to relativist (Stake, 1995) approaches based on their underlying assumptions.

For example, Yin, a seminal case study methodologist operating from a largely positivist perspective, assumes that absolute truths can be known and that cases should be bounded, meaning they exist independently of their broader contexts. Even so, Yin acknowledges that case study findings are seldom generalizable to populations and do not delineate probabilities statistically (Yin, 2018). Instead, their strength lies in their ability to generalize to theoretical tenets, expanding and refining theories rather than applying findings directly to larger populations (Lipset et al., 1956; Yin, 2018). On the other hand, more moderate and relativist

seminal case study methodologists, such as Merriam (1998) and Stake (1995), emphasize a different rhetorical approach to rigor and speak, instead, about transferability, or providing sufficient detail for readers to assess whether findings are applicable in other contexts. Their frameworks prioritize providing detailed, transparent accounts of how conclusions were reached, enabling readers to trace and evaluate the logic of the findings.

Qualitative rigor can be understood through these various frameworks, each offering distinct ways to evaluate the quality and credibility of the research. While this study aligns primarily with constructivist conceptualizations of rigor, it incorporates elements from three distinct models—the political model, the interpretive model, and the natural science model. The following sections discuss how each model contributes to the study’s approach to rigor.

### **Political Model of Rigor in Qualitative Research**

Writing myself into this study addresses several measures of rigor from the political model, which assumes that all social research is innately political and is ethically obliged to political action (Lincoln, 1995). This stance uses the following measures of rigor, positionality; community as arbitrator of quality; voice; and critical subjectivity. Positionality measures the transparency of the researcher about her subjectivity and warns against the disingenuous and futile attempt at objectivity. Including more of me in this space is a form of reflexivity transparently including the reader in how I investigate, interpret, and come to conclusions. Instead of feigning objectivity, I value the opportunity to continue the important discussion on how to maintain study quality and fidelity to the participant with the community. Denzin describes how this places the community as arbitrator of quality (1997). Voice is a measure of rigor in terms of how a study advocates for people who are underrepresented in political processes. The construct of race is political by nature. I highlight this point in my 5<sup>th</sup>-grade

discussion of the term “African American,” where ethnicity, race, and nationality are all implied when referring to the amount of melanin one has in their body. All research about African American/Black race and ethnicity is marked by a long global and political history disqualifying and fighting for Black voices. Critical subjectivity refers to a level of reflexive self-awareness described in my positionality (Ezzy, 2002).

### **Interpretive Model of Rigor in Qualitative Research**

The interpretive model highlights how rich descriptions reveal the complexity of participant/researcher meaning and interpretation. (Ezzy, 2002). Instead of validity and reliability, the interpretive model looks at trustworthiness, which includes the alignment between conclusions and the actual experiences of the participants (Mishler, 1990). Gubrium and Holstein (1997) composed alternate measures of qualitative rigor from this interpretive perspective that are addressed in this study. Close scrutiny is a concept that measures the closeness of the data to the participants’ experiences. This study analyzes transcribed interviews with participants, their written journal entries, and a questionnaire in an attempt to hone in on their written and spoken expressions. Over 90% of the interview questions, which make up the bulk of the data, are process-based questions, addressing the next measure of rigor, focus on process. Focus on process emphasizes the reciprocal nature of context and the participants’ experiences of the context in a constructivist manner. Next, Gubrium and Holstein (1997) describe an appreciation of subjectivity, a deviation from the underlying assumption of some level of objectivity in more traditional measures of quantitative research.

### **Natural Science Model of Rigor in Qualitative Research**

The natural science model parallels the foundationalist epistemology of positivism. Most studies with a positivist epistemological stance assess the generalizability of findings, which

would be weak in this study because single case studies are conducted to seek a deeper understanding of a case, not to discover what is generally true (Merriam, 1998). Instead of generalizability, Yin (2018) describes analytic generalization, findings that are generalizable to theoretical propositions. This paper concludes with a rich theoretical discussion that considers ways findings contribute to the framing theory, the CMAI.

### **Justification**

Several features of this study design support the use of exploratory case study methodology in particular. First, exploratory case studies focus on the individual participant as the primary unit of analysis, rather than the wider phenomena (Yin, 2018). The current research question and data ask how participants process their experiences as opposed to focusing on aspects of the program itself. Next, the archival nature of this data calls for a methodology that does not require predefined propositions. Instead, exploratory case studies allow for propositions to emerge from the analysis or theoretical frameworks during the study. As Yin (2018) notes, exploratory case studies are particularly valuable in situations where there is a “legitimate reason for not having any [initial] propositions, enabling researchers to remain open to unanticipated findings (p.28). Finally, the context in which data was collected—interviews conducted for a documentary rather than a study—further supports the exploratory approach. This unique data source legitimizes the absence of initial propositions and aligns with the exploratory nature of this research, which aims to provide insights into a novel phenomenon. Given that the data may not comprehensively address all dimensions of the case, the exploratory approach is especially suitable for generating preliminary insights and identifying directions for future study. In contrast, other types of case studies might focus on delivering a detailed and bounded understanding of the case itself.

## **Participants**

Eight male African American participants whose ages ranged from 11 to 17 were included in this study. They interacted with eight Ethiopian students ranging in age from 14-18, five female and three male. Only data from the eight American participants were collected.

## **Procedure**

To protect the identities of the participants, I will refer to the nonprofit organization I directed as GEF. GEF offers service-learning trips for individuals and groups seeking to travel to Ethiopia. In 2017, our team collaborated with the nonprofit of an associate of mine that I will refer to as CAC. CAC works with African American youth in one of the most impoverished counties in the United States. The organizers address African American identity development and life skills through the game of chess, though they offer a plethora of programs including coding, engineering, college visits, trips to local geographical sites, and more.

When CAC approached me, they had a specific vision: to organize an international chess tournament that would serve as the universal language to bring their youth team into dialogue with students at GEF's Ethiopian partner school, referred to here as KS. This vision grew into a broader aspiration: a two-week, place-based, international service-learning trip infused with Afrocentric education. Together, we crafted a memorandum of understanding to design a two-week program that integrated Afrocentric education, cultural immersion, and the strategic rigor of chess.

The following sections detail the people, places, and purpose behind this initiative, a collaborative effort to build connections across the diaspora while enriching participants' understanding of identity, history, and community.

### ***Preparation***

A year before the tournament, KS selected their computer teacher, referred to as Mr. W, to sponsor the school's new chess team in preparation for the proposed chess tournament. CAC and GEF sent chess boards to KS a year prior to their departure. The Ethiopian Chess Confederation then sent representatives to teach Mr. W and the Ethiopian team how to play the game in preparation for their chess tournament against the CAC chess team.

### ***Staff***

In total, this program had ten adult support staff. I served as the GEF executive director. My associate was the CAC executive director who codirected the program with me. He oversaw fundraising, passports, organizing the chess tournament, and discipline. I oversaw curriculum development and instruction, visas, itinerary, and pre/post-departure meetings. One student engagement specialist organized daily teambuilding and critical thinking exercises. CAC brought a documentarian who shot and produced a film about the trip, interviewing students at four different time points on the trip. The program had two logistics coordinators, my mother from the U.S. who was present for the trip, and my aunt, who lives fulltime in Ethiopia. Logistics coordinators also served as translators. My father was a volunteer expert on local geography, history, and culture and also served as a translator. Mr. W served as the chess team sponsor and coach at KS. Finally, a member of the local school board worked to secure facilities for the chess tournament and service-learning project.

### **Curriculum**

#### ***Predeparture Meetings***

The Afrocentric education curriculum created for this program consisted of six pre-departure meetings. My logistics coordinator and I met with the CAC director, the students going

to Ethiopia, and their parents six times before departing for Ethiopia. Our first three meetings took place at a local Ethiopian restaurant. We began with a cultural lesson, teaching them about how to order and eat Ethiopian food. The dishes are a variety of sauces and stews ladled onto a spongy flat bread called injera. I taught them about the different base ingredients in each sauce, the custom of washing your hands thoroughly before each meal, and how to tear pieces of the injera to pinch off different sauces you eat with your fingers. They learned it is customary to only eat with your right hand, the nutritional benefits of the grain, and array of spices in the sauces like fenugreek, cardamom, cinnamon, and garlic. Vegan options are always available at an Ethiopian meal, and some of the boys tried them. To my relief, they all liked their meals and looked forward to the next opportunity to eat Ethiopian food. The discussions led to organic conversations about values, defining and comparing them to the values of Ethiopian culture as made apparent through the food and eating customs.

At our next meeting, we read a four-page section in Bringle et al.'s book *International Service Learning: Conceptual Frameworks and Research* (2011) defining ethical service learning. We took turns reading aloud, highlighting and defining words the students did not know. The students were asked to put the information in their own words to collectively develop our accurate definition of international service-learning that we revisited throughout the trip. It was explained that the students would come up with a student-led service learning project in Ethiopia. The students were then asked to brainstorm questions they could ask their Ethiopian chess partners about their community needs, emphasizing what we learned about refraining from imposing our standards onto another community. We incorporated what we learned about Ethiopian culture and values into the questions and how they were asked.

At the third pre-departure meeting, my logistics coordinator and I invited an Ethiopian undergraduate student at a nearby college to meet with the boys and talk about Ethiopian culture. We covered proper greetings and handshakes, personal space and physical contact, and housing. Customarily, there is more physical contact and less personal space in Ethiopian culture in comparison to American culture (U.S.). It is normal to touch cheeks when greeting others regardless of gender. Males commonly hold hands when walking or put their arms around each other. One of the boys mentioned that he would not be participating in any physical contact with other guys. Another expressed concern about the houses in the rural areas that were made of dried cow manure. Specifically, he wanted to know if he would need to stay vigilant of falling cow dung when inside these houses. We emphasized that cow manure can be dried and turned into bricks that are odor-free and serve to control indoor climate. These discussions allowed the interrogation of natural and renewable resources, climate change, and the value of resourcefulness across cultures.

During the last three pre-departure sessions, we met with the boys and their parents at the local library to fill out visa and passport applications, for which both parent's signatures are required. However, most of the students lived in single-parent homes, requiring a concerted effort to accomplish this task. We encouraged the parents to ask any questions they may have, which mostly had to do with how we would get them to behave and cooperate on the trip. One parent had questions about safety, and a few had questions about their child's dietary restrictions. We explained how they could maintain contact with their children while we were abroad, the itinerary, and a few cultural norms they could talk about at home to adjust participant expectations. Overall, the parents were excited about this opportunity and had high hopes that their children would come back with valuable life lessons.

### *Sessions On-Site*

In addition to pre-departure sessions, the curriculum included 20 learning/reflection sessions in Ethiopia. See Table A1 for details about pre-departure and on-site sessions. Post-program meetings did not take place as planned. However, the U.S. chess team did raise funds to complete the service-learning project that was a part of the program. They also delivered presentations about what they learned on their journey to a summer camp for youth in the foster care system. Finally, a documentary viewing took place for participants and their families as a closing event to the program.

### *Afrocentric Education*

The curriculum I developed highlights the role of Ethiopia in the freedom narrative of a larger African diaspora through topics covering Africa's contributions to math, science, and language; identity (racial, ethnic, community/global citizenship); cross-cultural communication; natural resources; and the relationship between geography and Ethiopian history. Students traveled to six different cities including Addis Ababa, Bahir Dar, Lalibela, Dessie, Hyke, and Kutaber. Classes took place in various settings including hotel conference rooms, on a chartered bus, in nature, at a hospital, and in museums. See Table A2 for a full itinerary including the title, topic, and delivery method of the curriculum. The curriculum was delivered through a series of hands-on activities (pumping water at wells, touring ancient palaces, touring museums), traditional lectures, panel and group discussions, and clips from Dr. Henry Louis Gates' documentary series, *Africa's Great Civilizations*. Assignments consisted of a total of 11 journal entries, some with prompts and others where students were able to choose their topics. Some students chose to write additional reflection entries. See Table A3 in Appendix A for details on journal entries. Students also participated in interviews asking them to describe their experiences

in more detail. See Table A4 in Appendix A for details about time points and prompts for these interviews.

### ***Service-Learning & Additional Itinerary***

The service-learning portion of the program and the chess tournament took place at KS (the school). The chess team from the U.S. spent a total of three days there. After initial introductions, the two chess teams played a game of football as a way of engaging with each other. Though the students from the U.S. had experience and skill with the sport, the students from KS easily won the first match. The students decided to mix up the teams for the second match. The next day, the chess team from the U.S. won the chess tournament. The students were given the afternoon to engage in self-directed activities. During this time, the students taught each other typical children's games from their respective cultures. Students from the US taught the Ethiopian students games like rock, paper, scissors, and complex versions of tag that incorporated elements of freeze-tag, musical chairs, and I Spy. The students of KS taught the students from the U.S. how to perform an Ethiopian coffee ceremony (from splitting wood, starting a fire, roasting and grinding coffee beans, and performing blessings like elders). Students also attended a panel discussion at a nearby university and met for a formal lunch at a hotel in the city of Dessie. On the final day together, the students from the U.S. interviewed their Ethiopian chess partners. They asked questions including "What do you like about your community?" "What would you like to see changed in your community?" "How can you address the problems you've identified in your community?" After the interviews, students of both nationalities convened to share the main problems and solutions they identified. The common theme of education was identified. The students also collectively decided that technology was a viable solution. To address accessibility in the rural community, the students from the U.S.

decided to return home and fundraise to purchase tablets on which apps could be downloaded that specifically address the identified educational needs of the students in Ethiopia.

Participants from the U.S. spent the rest of their time visiting historical, cultural, and other significant sites around the country including Merho Gebi – Crown Prince – and Ayiteyef - Negus Michael Palace and Museum, Lake Hyke (volcanic crater and site of a sacred monastery in operation for over 1,000 years), churches of Lalibela, Lake Tana and Blue Niles Falls (source of the Nile river), the Children’s Cardiac Center of Ethiopia, Wollo University, and the Cultural Heritage National Museum of Ethiopia.

### **Data Sources**

The data for this research come from three sources. One source is the interviews conducted for the documentary. Each student was interviewed at least once during the trip. Two participants were interviewed once, four participants were interviewed twice, and two participants were interviewed three times. Interviews took place at four-time points/locations during the program. See Table A4 in Appendix A for a chart of time points and examples of questions. A second data source is journals. Participants kept a journal that included prompted and free-style reflections. Several interview questions and journal prompts referred directly to identity. See Tables A3 and A4 for both interview and journal prompt details. A third data source is a questionnaire. Each student completed a pre-departure questionnaire prompting them to think about their identity. See Appendix B. As one of the final journal entry prompts, participants answered question one from this questionnaire again: “At the start of this trip, you described yourself as \_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_, and \_\_\_\_\_. What are three new words that describe who you are now?”

## Analysis

Analysis was directed to answer the question of how participants processed their experiences in this case. The term *process* refers to the sequence of cognitive events beginning with a sensory stimulus and ending with applied meaning as observed through attention, perception, memory, and reasoning (Stanovich and West, 2008). This data came from participant interviews, pre-departure surveys, and journal entries to increase the likelihood that any conclusions drawn emerge from the data itself (Ezzy, 2002).

Though the analysis followed steps of various coding methods that will be discussed in detail, constant comparison and memo writing were done throughout the analysis and documented in NVivo. Table 5 shows sample memos at various stages of analysis.

**Table 2**

Memo Samples Created During Open, Axial, and Focused Coding

	Memo Title	Memo
<b>Open Coding</b>	Awkward Moments	An awkward moment is perceived differently. For example the dancing was described as fun, lame, “sudden and we didn’t know what to do.” What facilitates this processing? Relationships? Feeling comfortable?
	Comparing People vs. Things	When comparing people, comparisons seem to favor Ethiopians. When comparing infrastructure/things, comparisons seem to favor America
	Depth of Expectations	Seems like some participants had accurate expectations that were validated by their experiences, but the meaning of those expectations may have changed. Yes, there was a lack of infrastructure, but that’s not as important within the context of positive relationships with each other
<b>Axial Coding</b>	Belonging	A sense of belonging motivates transformation. Some even express a higher sense of belonging in Ethiopia than at home. “I’m not home sick. I’m sick of home.” “I can be myself here.”
	Bonding	While bonding with each other copes with overwhelm, bonding with local communities facilitates meaning making
	Discomfort	Discomfort can be processed in a way that deconstructs ideas that did not serve the participants and constructs meaning in a way that serves them better. Without the facilitation of the program, I suspect discomfort can destroy the potential of an experience like this.

<b>Focused Coding</b>	Observations Obsolete Code	Observations seem unnecessary as a code. Feelings, comparisons, obstacles, interactions, meaning making, etc. are all about observations. Seems unnecessary to have as a separate code/unit of analysis because it is inherent.
	Overlapping Data	The overlapping data, when analyzed, explains relationships between codes
	Real Time Data	Reflections at the end of the program are deeper than reflections on the day of an event. Time to process seems to make a difference.

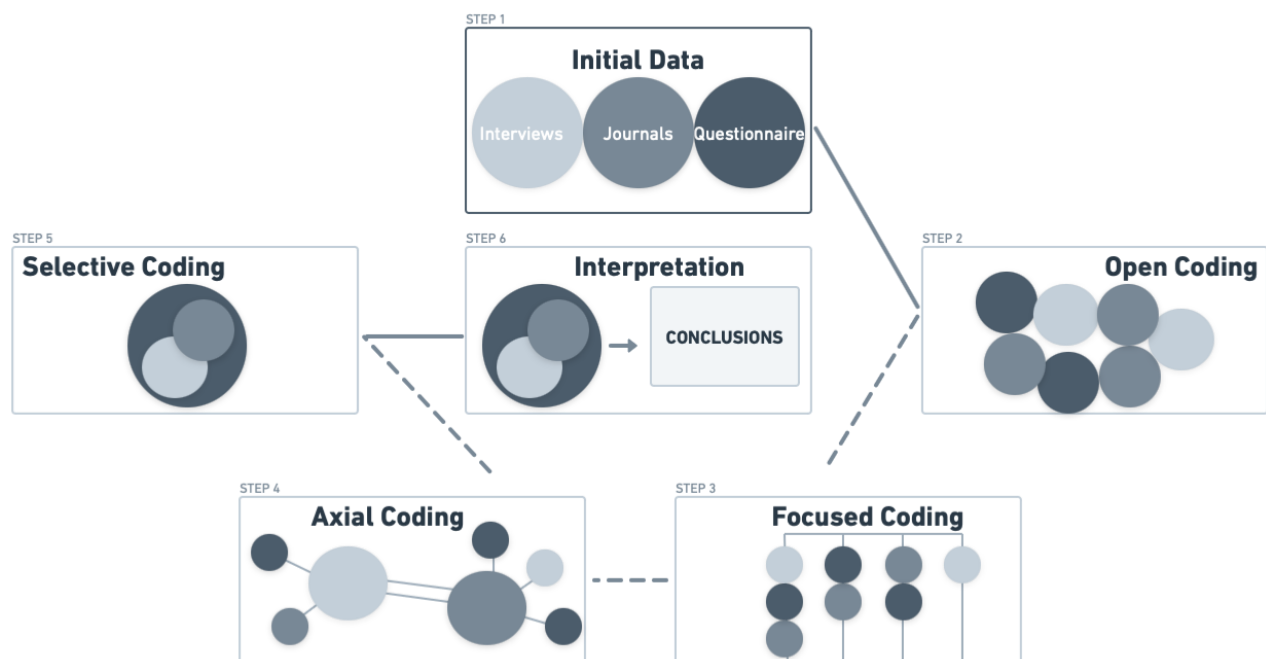
The main purpose of constant comparison and memo writing in qualitative research is to enhance the rigor and depth of the analysis process (Merriam, 1998). Both techniques were developed for use in qualitative research by Glasier and Strauss (1967). Constant comparison is the process of comparing data systematically and iteratively throughout the research process. This involves comparing new data with existing data, codes, and emerging categories. As new data is coded, it is continuously compared with previous codes across all sources. The purpose of this process is to identify patterns, relationships, and variations within the data. In this manner, categories are refined and developed to ensure that they accurately represent the data and capture the complexity of the case.

Similarly, memos serve as a tool to facilitate analysis and interpretation. Merriam (1998) emphasizes the researcher as the primary instrument of data collection and analysis. Memo writing supports this by helping the researcher reflect on their observations, interpretations, and emerging themes. Researchers jot down ideas, questions, and interpretations as they emerge, allowing them to record their thoughts, reflections, and insights during the analysis process. Memos serve to organize and make sense of findings, exploring the implications of emerging patterns and refining conceptualization. By documenting the decision-making process, memos enhance transparency in the research. Constant comparison and memo writing work together to ensure a thorough, systematic, and well-documented qualitative analysis process, contributing to the credibility and trustworthiness of the research findings.

Outside of constant comparison and memo writing, the analysis process followed specific coding procedures useful with interpretive data. The steps included open coding, focused coding, axial coding, selective coding, and interpretation. Figure 6 shows a visual of the iterative analysis process.

**Figure 6**

*Iterative Analysis Process with Thematic Coding Methods*



*Note.* Fig. 6 represents the data analysis steps. The circles represent the data shown as three sources in step one. Smaller circles represent the coded data in step two. Step three shows the circles organized into a frequency chart, representing focused coding. In step four, smaller coded data are aggregated around larger axial data circles, representing axial coding. Step five, selective coding, shows the data being aggregated into one unit. The final step six represents the interpretation of the data into study conclusions. Solid lines represent one-way directionality. Dotted lines represent two-way directionality, representing the iterative process of theme development.

## Open Coding

In the initial phase of the analysis, I created individual cases for each of the eight participants in NVivo. To ensure comprehensive data organization, I imported and attached all relevant data, including transcribed interviews, journal entries, and questionnaires, to their respective cases. This approach allowed for seamless access to the complete set of data for each participant, enabling a holistic view of their responses across different data sources.

The data were then analyzed using an open coding process, which is a systematic approach to categorizing data into groups and identifying their properties (Glaser, 1978). The data were meticulously examined to identify specific cognitive and metacognitive functions, as well as constructs articulated by participants in their interviews and writings about their experiences in the program. The use of memos throughout the open coding process facilitated early-stage analysis, helping to distill core ideas from complex and detailed narratives, thereby enabling a more concise and conceptual understanding of the data (Charmaz, 2006).

The units of analysis included lines, sentences, and paragraphs that represented complete ideas conveyed by participants. Employing varying units of analysis is a critical strategy for understanding the properties and dimensions of emerging codes (Ezzy, 2002; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Through constant comparison of participants' responses for similarities and differences, it became evident that some codes could be merged while others needed differentiation. In this iterative process, open codes were refined, and more specific nodes were developed to organize them into detailed categories where appropriate. This crucial step in the coding process deepened the analysis, allowing for a more nuanced understanding of how participants processed their experiences (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

## **Focused Coding**

As anticipated, the level of active processing reported by participants varied throughout the program, with fluctuations more closely linked to specific activities than to the duration of time spent in Ethiopia. Building on these observations, the subsequent stage of analysis employed focused coding to compare emergent codes and data across different time points and activities to “pinpoint and develop the most salient categories” (Charmaz, 2009, p. 46).

### ***Step 1: Creating Day-Cases***

The first step in the Focused Coding process was to create distinct *day-cases* within the NVivo software for each day of the program, ranging from *Day 00* through *Post Trip*. Each day-case included all relevant data from interviews, journal entries, and pre-departure questionnaires collected on or about that specific day of the program. Interviews were often reflective and included descriptions of activities that occurred earlier in the program. In these cases, the data was coded for the case in which the activity occurred. For example, if an interview recorded on Day 15 referred to activities that occurred on Day 10, that data unit was coded for Day 10. This approach allowed for an activity-centered analysis while maintaining a diachronic structure, recognizing that participants' reflections, shaped by the passage of time and subsequent experiences, may differ from their immediate responses.

Three of the day cases were unique; Day 01-02, Day 00, and Post Trip. Day 01 and Day 02 were merged to account for the unique temporal experience of traveling to Ethiopia, which defied traditional notions of time progression. This journey compressed what would normally feel like two distinct days into one long, surreal experience of perpetual transition. The merging of Day 01 and Day 02 reflects participants' lived experiences, capturing the liminality of the journey as a seamless, continuous phase of travel.

Day 00 and Post Trip were unique in that they encompassed reflections, experiences, or memories from before or after the program. Analyzing Day 00 provided insights into participants' pre-trip thoughts and memories, while the Post-Trip case captured their reflections, goals, and self-assessments. Together, these cases bookend the data, offering a comparative view of shifts in participants' perceptions and a framework for evaluating the program's impact on their personal and cultural identities.

### ***Step 2: Cross-Referencing Data in Each Day-Case***

The next stage of focused coding identified prominent codes that emerged for each day-case. By creating subsets of these codes, such as "Day 03, Identity," the analysis allowed for a detailed exploration of participants' reflections. Constant comparison led to adjustments in coding, including the collapse of overlapping codes and nodes. This approach helped identify key activities that facilitated processing.

### ***Step 3: Generating Daily Themes for Prominent Codes***

To generate daily themes, codes representing at least 50% of the dataset for each day-case were analyzed for their primary focus and content. Using pie graphs, I began selecting codes with the largest segments and continued until 50% of the dataset was represented. Themes were generated using this process for each day-case. Appendix C shows an example of the subsequent themes that were generated during this process for Day-case 01-02. In some of these cases, rather than treating the codes as entirely separate, I combined the overlapping data to generate more cohesive themes.

### ***Step 4: Generating Integrated Themes***

The final step involved selecting and documenting one integrated theme for each day based on prominence and relevance. Detailed records of coding decisions and thematic

development address transparency and rigor, grounding the analysis in participants' words. This iterative process allowed for the refinement of themes into cohesive representations of participant processing. For example, attempts to generate one theme per day initially proved too simplistic due to the data's complexity. By identifying multiple themes per day and integrating them into robust representations, the final themes captured the dynamic nature of participants' reflections and growth. This methodology grounded themes in the data and provided a clear and structured path from raw data to thematic analysis, contributing to the overall rigor and depth of the study.

The remainder of Step 4 in focused coding delves into how themes emerged across the program's early stages (Days 01–02 and Day 03), middle stages (Days 04–10), and late stages (Days 11–Post Trip). Each section details the most relevant activities and integrated daily themes, supported by data that traces participant processing throughout each stage. This level of detail conveys the depth and richness of the data, grounding the findings in participants' lived experiences. In qualitative research, particularly as outlined by Merriam (1998), the researcher's voice plays a key role in creating context and bringing the participants' reflections to life. Accordingly, I have included moments where my voice is pronounced to provide clarity and context, fostering an immersive understanding of the data while keeping the focus on participants' words.

### **Axial Coding**

Once daily themes were synthesized, I began axial coding by identifying the system of relationships between data categories across the 16 day-cases. While focused coding identified relationships between daily codes and themes, axial coding identified and defined the relationships between themes across the 16 day-cases in the study. This step developed

categories to begin synthesizing the data into a coherent story (Charmaz, 2009). This process involved sorting, synthesizing, and organizing the data categories to reveal a system of relationships among them (Charmaz, 2009; Creswell, 1998; Strauss, 1987). I looked for the themes' relationships with each other, identifying central themes and the smaller ones revolving around them. This process demanded a more holistic approach, considering how the data categories related not only within individual days but across the entire program. Multiple and integrated theme generation in focused coding enabled a deep analysis of daily reflections while axial coding integrated those insights across the 16 day-cases of the program, allowing the emergence of larger, cohesive categories and themes. In this manner, I was able to capture the complexity of participants' experiences over time and ground the themes in the data for a robust analysis that contributes to the overall rigor and coherence of the study.

### **Selective Coding**

Selective coding is the final stage in the coding process and involves identifying and refining the core category or central theme that represents the main focus or essence of the case study. This most significant and unifying theme explains the majority of the variation in the data. This final coding step develops a comprehensive and integrated understanding of the case being studied. Selective coding provides a focused and coherent explanation of the phenomenon under study. It represents the culmination of the coding process and sets the stage for the interpretation and presentation of the study's findings.

## **Findings**

### **Open Coding Findings**

Table 6 includes the codes developed from open and focused coding, highlighting the adjustments made during focused coding, including the combining and collapsing of nodes,

along with definitions for the final codes.

**Table 3**

Codes, Nodes, and Definitions After Open and Focused Coding

<b>Open Codes and Nodes</b>	<b>Focused Codes</b>	<b>Definitions</b>
<b>Comparisons</b>	Comparisons	Participants compare or contrast their experiences in Ethiopia with life in the U.S. or themselves with people in Ethiopia.
<b>Feelings</b> Nodes: Accomplishments, Concerns, Fears, Enjoyment	Feelings	Emotions or feelings identified during the trip, including personal achievements, concerns, fears, and moments of joy.
<b>Identity</b> Node: Self Descriptors	Identity	Statements revealing identity-related aspects such as hobbies, self-perceptions, and responses to prompts about personal identity.
<b>Obstacles</b> Node: Overcoming Obstacles	Obstacles	Challenges participants identify in achieving their goals and perspectives on overcoming these challenges.
<b>Expectations</b> Node: Preconceived Notions	Expectations	Participants' expectations for the trip, including preconceived notions, hopes for experiences, and goals.
<b>Hopes</b> Node: Goals		
<b>Reflection</b> Node: Self Reflections	Reflection	An experience that changes how the participant understands an aspect of themselves or their life in the U.S.
<b>Meaning</b> Nodes: Significance, values	Meaning	Participant applies meaning to an experience/person/place/thing during their trip.
<b>Impact</b> Node: Inspiration	Inspiration	Internal reflections that may lead to changes in perspective/actions about the self or outside world, incorporating the significance, values, and inspirational aspects of experiences.
<b>Relationships</b>	Interaction with Humans	Descriptions of participants' interactions and relationships with people
	Interaction with Place	Participants' reactions to and observations of the physical and cultural environment, capturing the sensory experience of place.

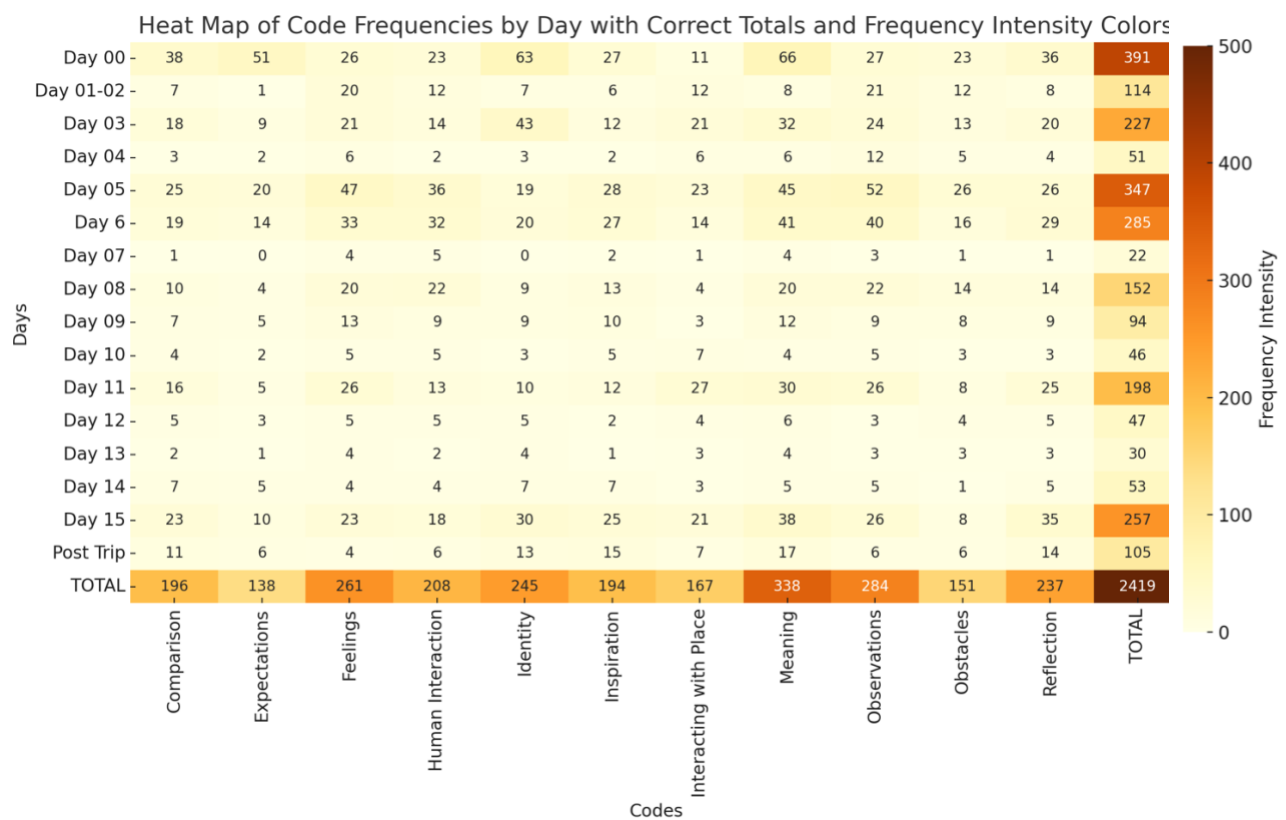
<b>Memories</b> Nodes: First impressions, observations	Observations	Observations (physical or non physical phenomena like energy, environment, other people’s emotions or reactions, etc.) including first impressions
<b>Creative Writing Prompt</b>	N/A	
<b>Physical State</b>	N/A	

**Focused Coding Findings**

Figure 7 shows the distribution of prominent codes across each day in the dataset, visually highlighting the overall trends in code frequencies throughout the program. Figure 8 shows an example pie graph of day-case 01-02.

**Figure 7**

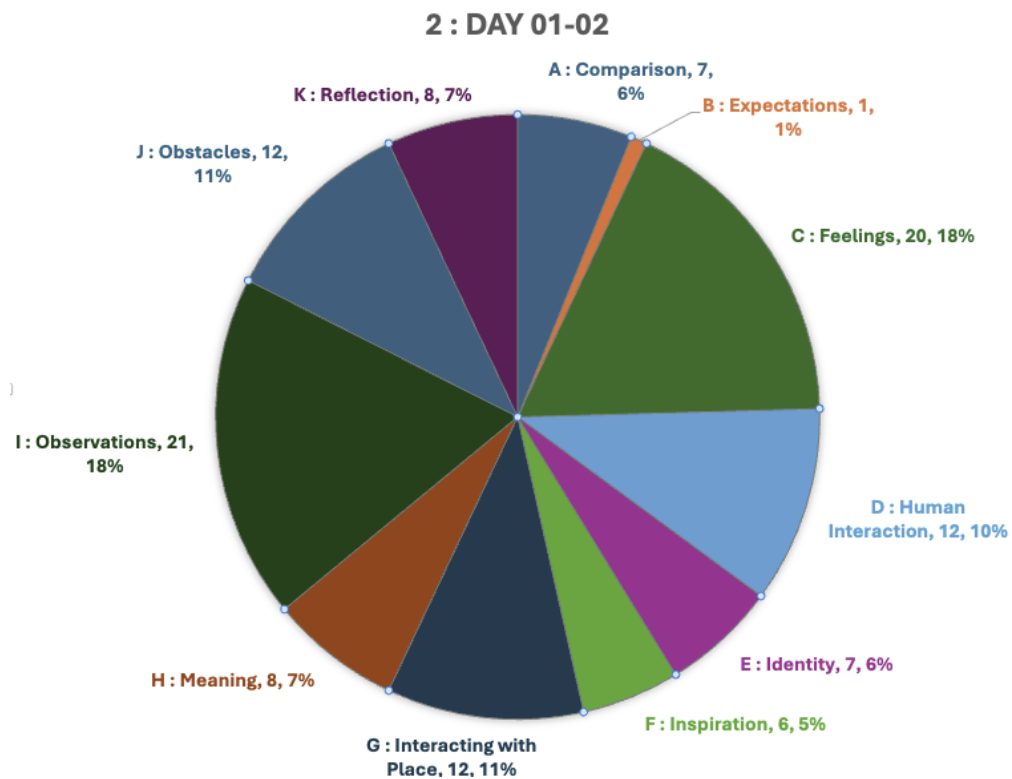
*Heat Map of Code Frequencies by Day with Totals*



*Note.* Darker shades indicate higher code frequencies. The "TOTAL" column sums daily codes, while the bottom row shows the total code frequency across days.

**Figure 8**

*Example Distribution of Code Percentages for Day-Case 01-02*

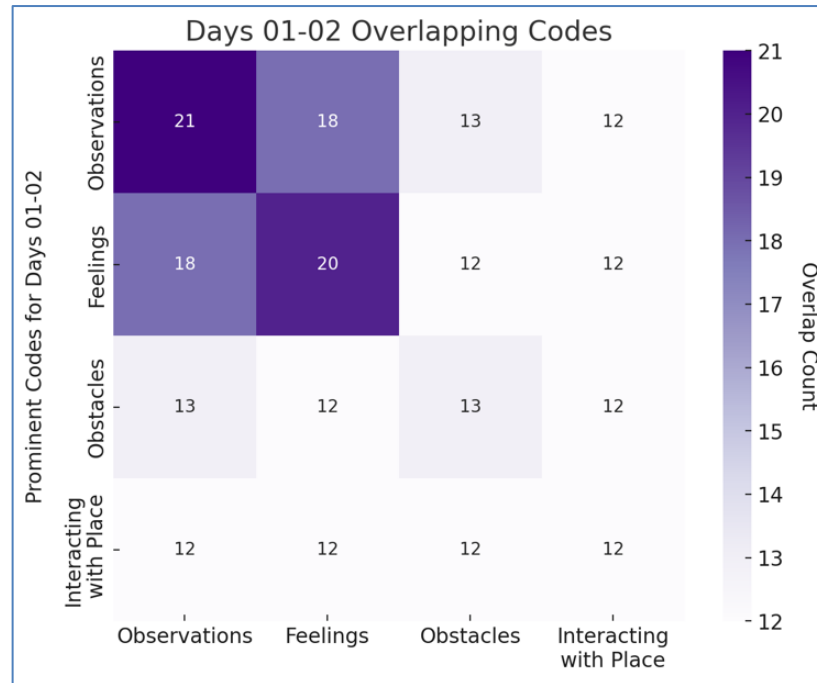


*Note.* This pie chart and subsequent themes illustrate the percentage breakdown of prominent codes on Day 01-02, with larger segments representing the most frequently coded themes.

In multiple situations, one data unit was coded under multiple categories. Day-case 01-02 is an example where this type of overlapping data occurred between the prominent codes: observations, feelings, interactions with place, and obstacles. Figure 9 presents a visual of data overlap for Day-case 01-02, showing, for example, that 18 data units were coded for both observation and feelings.

**Figure 9**

*Distribution of Overlapping Codes for Day 01-02*



*Note.* This figure provides an example visual of a day-case's overlap between the prominent codes. In this example of day-case 01-02, darker shades indicate higher levels of co-occurrence, highlighting the extent of integration. The numbers in each box represent the number of data units coded for the horizontal and vertical identifiers.

In conclusion, focused coding included four steps: generating day-cases, cross-referencing data in each case, generating themes for prominent codes, and generating integrated codes. To provide a comprehensive summary of the coding and analysis, Table 7 highlights the progression of prominent codes, their associated themes, and the integrated themes identified across each program day-case. This visual synthesis of the findings illustrates how participants' reflections changed from early emotional and sensory observations to later cultural, spiritual, and identity-based insights. By organizing the themes chronologically, the table emphasizes the holistic and iterative nature of participants' processing throughout the program.

**Table 4**

## Daily Codes and Themes

<b>Program Day</b>	<b>Prominent Codes</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>Themes for Prominent Codes</b>	<b>Integrated Daily Themes</b>
<b>Day 00</b>	Meaning	17%	<b>1.</b> The Meaning of Gratitude and Privilege <b>2.</b> The Meaning of Cultural Connection and Identity <b>3.</b> The Meaning of Hard Work and Resilience	Expectations & Contrasts Catalyze Personal Growth through a lens of Privilege
	Identity	16%	<b>1.</b> Redefining self through cultural awareness <b>2.</b> Personal Growth & Shifting Self-Perceptions <b>3.</b> Gratitude as a lens for self-awareness	
	Expectations	13%	<b>1.</b> Surprise Realizations and Unanticipated Personal Reflections <b>2.</b> Cultural Curiosity and Discovery <b>3.</b> Personal Transformation and Growth	
	Comparison	10%	<b>1.</b> Disconnected and Insular to Open and Connected <b>2.</b> Materialistic and Ungrateful to Grateful and Purposeful <b>3.</b> Apathetic to Motivated and Goal-Oriented <b>4.</b> Lack of Awareness to Cultural and Global Awareness <b>5.</b> Self-Contained to Community-Oriented <b>6.</b> Comfortable with the Status Quo to Willing to Step Outside the Comfort Zone <b>7.</b> Uncertain Leadership Identity to Emerging Sense of Leadership	
<b>Day 01-02</b>	Observations	18%	<b>1.</b> Dynamic Sensory Experience: Discomfort, Excitement, and Social Bonding <b>2.</b> Novelty of the Environment and Cultural Shock	Social Bonding as a Coping Strategy for Feeling Overwhelmed
	Feelings	18%	<b>1.</b> Excitement Transforms Observations into Meaningful Experiences <b>2.</b> Nervousness and Anxiety Add Complexity to Simple Observations <b>3.</b> Disappointment and Frustration Create Tension Between Expectations and Reality <b>4.</b> Social Connections Help Participants Cope with Negative Emotions	

	Obstacles	11%	1. Physical Discomforts and Sensory Overload 2. Social Adjustments and Interpersonal Dynamics 3. Excitement and Awe Amidst Novel Experiences	
	Interacting with Place	11%	1. Mixed Emotional Responses: Seeking Comfort in the Familiar	
Day 03	Identity/Reflections	28%	1. Self-reflection through comparison 2. Exploring personal values and aspirations 3. Constructing complex self-images to resolve identity dissonance	Meaning Making and Observations foster expectations of and Emotional Engagement towards personal growth
	Meaning/Reflections	24%	1. Nature as a space for reflecting and meaning making 2. Defining trip as an opportunity for personal growth 3. Anchoring identity in social roles and relationships	
	Observations/Reflections	11%	1. Observing Hardship and reflecting on privilege 2. Processing through familiar comforts 3. Surprise and awe in response to the unfamiliar	
Day 04	Observations	23%	1. Using Nature to Process and Make Sense of Experiences	Nature as a tool for meaning making- from observation to cognitive and emotional processing
	Meaning	12%		
	Interacting with Place	12%	1. Nature as a Cognitive Reset: Halting Overwhelm and Anxiety Nature as a Catalyst for Cognitive and Emotional Integration	
	Feelings	11%		
Day 05	Observations	15%	1. Observing hardship and applying gratitude 2. Observing culture and shifting stereotypes	Observation and Discomfort as Catalysts for Deconstructing Privilege and Personal Growth, While Bonding Elicits Joy
	Meaning	13%		
	Feelings	14%	1. Nervousness and discomfort as pathways to growth 2. Joy and connection through shared activities 3. Gratitude and reflection on privilege	
	Human Interaction	10%		
Day 06	Observations	14%	1. Challenging Stereotypes through direct observation 2. Gratitude and reflection on privilege 3. Emotional discomfort and adaptation 4. Connection through Cultural Exchange 5. Applying Meaning to personal growth and cultural lessons	Observation and Discomfort as Catalysts for Deconstructing Privilege and Personal Growth, While Bonding Elicits Joy
	Meaning	14%		
	Feelings	12%		
	Human Interaction	11%		
Day 07	Human Interaction	23%	1. Discomfort evolving into connection 2. Joy in cultural exchange and	Human interaction as a

	Feelings	18%	learning 3. Gratitude for generosity and hospitality	catalyst for emotions that inspire meaning making
	Meaning	18%	1. Resourcefulness and gratitude 2. Applying cultural lessons to personal growth 3. Reevaluating privilege through observations	
Day 08	Meaning & Observations	27%	1. Observation of resourcefulness facilitates redefining personal values 2. Service learning facilitating critical thinking and personal growth	Service learning/shared goals as a catalyst for overcoming challenges to meaningful connections, emotional processing, redefining personal values, critical thinking and personal growth
	Feelings & Human Interacting	27%	1. Overcoming challenges to form meaningful connections. 2. Human connection and shared experiences as central to emotional processing	
Day 09	Feelings & Human Interaction	23%	1. Belonging through connection 2. Emotional response to kindness 3. Sadness in saying goodbye	Meaningful Connections foster a sense of belonging, new perspectives on privilege, community values, and inspiration toward personal growth and social impact
	Observations & Meaning	22%	1. Observing cultural differences and reflecting on privilege 2. Meaning in community and simplicity	
	Inspiration	11%	1. Inspiration for leadership and social impact 2. Inspiration for personal change	
Day 10	Feelings & Human Interaction	24%	1. Emotional Bonding through Shared Experiences 2. Processing Emotions of Discomfort and Acceptance	Emotional bonds with local communities, reflections on religious and cultural practices, and appreciation of historical and spiritual significance facilitate confrontation of
	Observations & Meaning	22%	1. Observing Religious Practices & Reflecting on Freedom of Worship 2. Applying Meaning through Historical and Cultural Observations	
	Inspiration	12%	1. Inspired by Historical and Spiritual Significance 2. Personal Leadership &	

			Growth	discomfort, deepen identity, and inspire leadership and growth.
<b>Day 11</b>	Observations	14%	<b>1. Spiritual and historical reflections on Lalibela</b> <b>2. Observing and redefining perceptions of Africa</b>	Ethiopia as place dismantles preconceived notions, reshapes identity and values, and inspires personal and community responsibility
	Meaning	16%		
	Feelings	14%	<b>1. Emotional Responses to cultural immersion</b> <b>2. Learning and personal growth through social interactions</b>	
	Reflections	13%	<b>1. Reassessing cultural understanding and identity</b> <b>2. Shifting perspectives on simplicity and gratitude</b> <b>3. Reevaluating personal responsibility and community</b> <b>4. A new understanding of faith and spirituality</b>	
<b>Day 12</b>	Meaning	15%	<b>1. Reconsidering Identity within a Broader Context</b> <b>2. Expressed Contradictions indicating deep processing</b> <b>3. Differentiation of spiritual and cultural identity</b>	Critical thinking in applying meaning to spiritual identity and cultural contexts
	Reflections	13%		
	Identity	13%		
	Feelings	13%		
	Comparisons	13%		
<b>Day 13</b>	Feelings	13%	<b>1. Processing Cultural Identity through historical and mythological context</b> <b>2. Reimagining and empowering historical narratives</b> <b>3. Grappling with power, leadership, and morality</b> <b>4. Engaging with spirituality and environmental consciousness</b>	Internalizing historical/cultural complexities, cultural & leadership identity, spirituality, and environmental relationships through creative writing
	Identity	13%		
	Meaning	13%		
	Observations	10%		
<b>Day 14</b>	Reflections	13%	<b>1. Reflection turns observation into insights about identity and privilege</b> <b>2. Stories of perseverance from relatable figures inspires differentiated identity</b>	Synthesis of observations and reflections constructs meaning and produces inspiration from this integrated processing
	Observations	13%		
	Inspiration	13%		
	Meaning	13%		
<b>Day 15</b>	Observations	10%	<b>1. Strengthened identity</b> <b>2. Redefining values, privilege, Africa</b>	Comparisons dispel

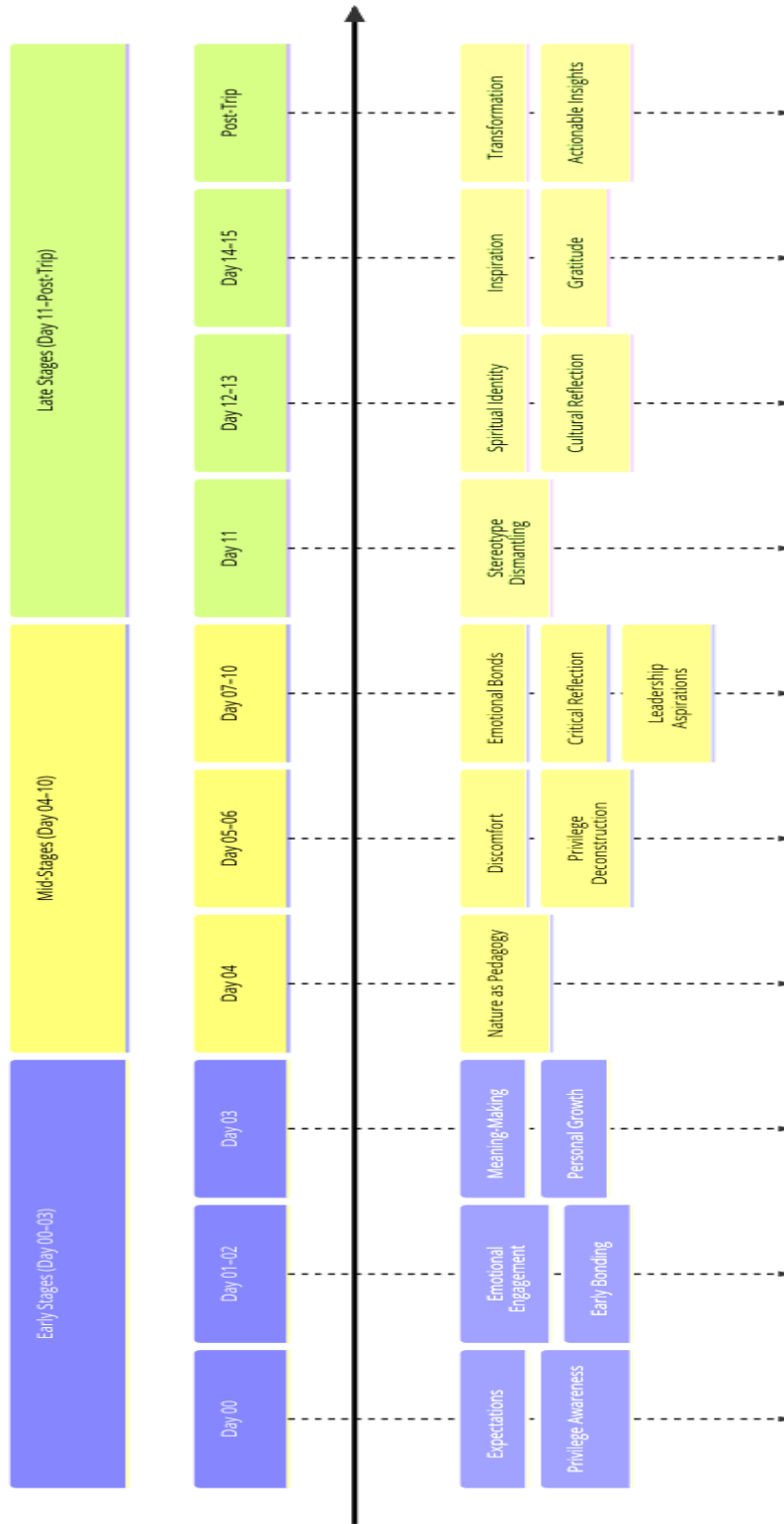
	Identity	12%	and focus on goals <b>3. Deep gratitude from comparison</b>	stereotypes and reconstruct meaning of self, privilege while eliciting focus on goals and deep gratitude
	Reflections	13%		
	Meaning	15%		
<b>Post Trip</b>	Identity	12%	<b>1. Redefining identity through reflection on privilege and personal responsibility</b> <b>2. Finding meaning in simplicity and contentment</b> <b>3. Inspiration to utilize resources better</b>	Reflections lead to meaning making which elicits inspiration to change
	Meaning	16%		
	Reflections	13%		
	Inspiration	14%		

Figure 10 illustrates the progression of integrated themes throughout the program, highlighting key milestones in processing and illustrating how their reflections evolved across different stages of the experience.

**Figure 10**

*Longitudinal Evolution of Integrated Themes from Focused Coding*

**Evolution of Integrated Themes Over Time**



This phase of analysis suggests the transformative power of the program, as participants moved from initial observations to integrated reflections, reshaping their identities and perspectives. The focused coding methodology not only offered a structured approach to analyzing participant data but also a meaningful way to connect their words to the overarching goals of the study. By organizing data diachronically and integrating prominent codes, this analysis illuminated the personal and communal growth participants experienced, highlighting the program's impact on their understanding of themselves, their communities, and the world.

The analysis of focused coding traced the evolution of participants' reflections across the program, capturing how emotional, cognitive, and relational processes interacted over time. The integrated themes provided a lens through which participants' processing could be understood holistically, from the initial excitement and discomfort of the journey (Day 01-02) to the deeper cultural and spiritual reflections at Lalibela (Days 11–13), and finally to the gratitude and actionable aspirations expressed in the Post Trip reflections.

#### ***Focused Coding Pre-Trip Stage: Day 00 Narrative***

The integrated theme for Day 00, Expectations and Contrasts as Catalysts for Personal Growth through a Lens of Privilege, emerged from participants' reflections on their identity, comparisons, meaning-making, and expectations. These four codes, which showed significant overlap in data points, indicate that participants' self-perceptions and worldviews were actively reconstructed throughout their journey.

Throughout the data, participants frequently referenced their experiences and perceptions from before the trip. These reflections, collected in day-case 00, served as reference points for participants as they reconstructed meaning during their journey. Additionally, responses to the pre-departure questionnaire comprised a portion of this data subset, offering insight into

participants' self-perceptions, expectations, and initial worldviews before their trip. Due to the nature of this data set being hyperlinked in subsequent analysis and findings, below is a general summary of trends. To avoid redundancy, specific quotes and detailed theme development and findings are discussed in the later stages of the trip and the findings.

Much of the data points in day-case 00 were coded under multiple prominent codes. Specifically, most of the data coded for meaning was also coded for identity, comparisons, and/or expectations, indicating that participants' meaning-making processes were closely tied to their evolving sense of self and their reflections on pre-trip expectations and comparisons. Additionally, the high rate of overlap of data points coded for both identity and meaning (48 shared data points) suggests that participants' identity transformations were directly tied to how they processed their experiences. As they navigated new cultural contexts and personal challenges, they reflected and reshaped their sense of self and how they related to the world around them.

Further, the overlap between meaning and expectations (34 shared data points) suggests that participants may have used their pre-trip expectations, whether confronted or confirmed, as a framework for making sense of their experiences. By evaluating whether their anticipations aligned with reality, participants found opportunities to extract meaning and apply it to their developing worldview.

This complex interplay between identity, expectations, comparisons, and meaning underscores the dynamic nature of participants' meaning-making processes and the role of pre-trip reflections in shaping their transformative experiences.

### ***Focused Coding Early Stages: Day 01-02 and Day 03 Narrative***

I think of the trip to Ethiopia as time travel. You wake up to a sunrise you'll see again as you chase the twilight zone across the Atlantic Ocean. You also see the same sunset twice during this race between your plane and the spin of the Earth. When I land amidst the applause of a patriotic people, I can visualize a calendar flapping backward seven years, because Ethiopia has its own calendar that is 7 to 8 years behind the Gregorian calendar we follow in the U.S. This journey that can be over 30 hours door to door feels like one long day you relive until you land in the third highest elevated capitol city in the world. The air is thin and cool during Kiremt, the rainy season in June- not at all what one would expect from a stereo-typical Africa.

The early stages of the program (Days 01-02 and Day 03) included this journey to Addis Ababa from the U.S. and a day's drive even deeper into the mountains to the service-learning site, hanging on to the edge of a mountain in the Great Rift Valley. The integrated themes for this stage were Social Bonding as a Coping Strategy for Feeling Overwhelmed (Day 01-02) and Meaning Making and Observations Foster Expectations of and Emotional Engagement towards Personal Growth (Day 03). In the data collected about their disorienting trip to Ethiopia, 70-80 percent of the units were double coded for Feelings and Observations. Feelings provided a richer emotional context for observations in a way that revealed how participants internalized their experiences. Emotions like excitement or discomfort transformed observations into meaningful experiences. For example, in his journal, Levi<sup>1</sup> observed, "We waited, and the plane was delayed making it arrive [late]. At 1:45 the time we began boarding." In the same entry, he expresses the accompanying emotion that demonstrated how this observation was processed as a meaningful moment: "I was extremely excited. The fact that I would be on a plane and on the way to another

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<sup>1</sup> Note. All names used in this study are pseudonyms to protect the participants' privacy.

country was...a once-in-a-lifetime chance that I can remember and tell." Observing the time of his delayed plane while waiting at the airport is enhanced by the excitement felt at the prospect of international travel. This emotion transforms a routine airport experience into something that is described as a milestone.

Participants were excited and amazed by the newness of their surroundings yet often found it physically uncomfortable or overwhelming. Reuben, for example, observed in his journal that he “couldn’t watch what he wanted for free [on the plane] and the wifi was terrible so I couldn’t listen to music... Somebody was musty.” The accompanying emotions were expressed in the same journal entry when he wrote, “I was disappointed...I was glad to get off the plane.”

To balance these mixed emotions, participants anchored themselves in familiar routines—like using working technology or interacting with peers—which provided them with comfort and stability as they navigated through these new experiences. Reuben describes such a situation when he writes in his journal:

We spent the whole day on planes. There were a few very beautiful females at the airport and on the plane. Issachar wouldn’t stop talking about how good looking they were. He was scared to talk to one of them so I went and talked to her for him. I tried to get her number for Issachar but she said no. Issachar was disappointed. We joked around with him a lot after that because she was on the same plane as us.

By focusing on both the challenging and enjoyable aspects of their journey, participants processed their experiences in ways that were social, sensory, and emotionally charged, setting the tone for the rest of the program. Day 01-02’s integrated theme reflects the dynamic sensory experience of the participants, highlighting how their observed physical discomforts were balanced by excitement and social bonding.

On Day 03, which had the integrated theme of Meaning Making and Observations Foster Expectations of Emotional Engagement Towards Personal Growth, most of the data were journal entries from participants interviewing each other. During this activity, most described growth-oriented expectations on the trip like “learning to be a better person,” “to be more grateful,” “becoming a better person spiritually and being more focused,” and “being more wise.” These expectations, intentionally cultivated during pre-departure sessions, were not just about setting personal goals but specifically about framing their experiences through a lens of growth. The data demonstrates that this preparation was effective, as participants began the trip already anticipating and actively seeking personal development, setting the stage for meaningful processing throughout the program.

The rest of the data were characterized by initial observations as participants began confronting their privilege. In this way, participants began to engage in meaning-making processes, linking their observations to personal growth and identity exploration. Judah, one of the older participants, reflected on an encounter during the journey from Addis Ababa to the service-learning site that was also mentioned similarly by other participants. Here, he is referring to Menelik’s Window, a famous and dramatic cliffside lookout point along the winding mountain road. The vantage point offers sweeping views of the valleys and hills below. Children gather to sell handmade souvenirs—small carvings, beaded necklaces, and woven items—to passing travelers. Their voices carry over the sound of the wind, calling out to tourists in hopes of making a sale. For these children, this scenic overlook is not a place of leisure but a workplace, chosen for its steady flow of visitors and its potential for earning enough to support their families. With baskets or makeshift displays of their wares, they confidently approach travelers,

navigating between parked vehicles and tourists snapping photos of the view. Judah, curious about the kids, talked to some of them with the help of our translators and recalled this Day 03 experience in his Day 05 interview:

An experience that I had um that really touched me was, um, when we, um, was traveling the mountain and we took a break to view the cliff and to also meet, um, I guess see some kids selling some things? And um at that time um I saw some kids um at the age of ten and um they told me they were working many hours, countless hours, um, sometimes up to 18 hours a day and I thought that was pretty crazy. Cuz I was like wow, you're ten years old and you're working 18 hours and I'm 16 and that's how much hours I work in a week and I complain about it. And and I'm making more money in the process. So, I I kind of thought that that really touched me and when I look back I have it really good in America. Like, life, life for me is really good. And when I complain about it and take that life for advantage I feel bad now because most people, they don't have what I have and it's really touching inside and it hurts just to see that.

Judah's reflections demonstrate how participants began to process their experiences through a lens of comparative meaning-making, linking their observations in Ethiopia to their own lives in the United States and expanding their perspective of the world. His encounter at Menelik's Window was more than an external observation—it was a moment of internal reckoning with privilege and gratitude. This process reflects the early stages of confronting privilege, as participants grappled with the disparities they witnessed and considered their own positions in a global context. This phase marked the beginning of a longer journey of integrating these insights into their sense of self and their worldview—a journey directly aligned with the research question on how participants process their experiences throughout the program.

### ***Focused Coding Mid-Stages: Days 04-09 Narrative***

In the mid-stages (Days 04–09), participants engaged in a variety of activities that helped them process their experiences, moving from discomfort to a deep sense of belonging. Nature

played a pivotal role in this transition, emerging as a powerful catalyst for easing feelings of overwhelm and frustration. On Day 04, this was reflected in the integrated theme, Nature as a Tool for Meaning Making from Observation to Cognitive and Emotional Processing, which coincided with a reflective journaling activity by a serene lake nestled in a volcanic crater and surrounded by mountains.

This mindful engagement with nature—naming what they saw, heard, and felt—served as a cognitive tool to calm heightened emotional responses like anxiety and stress. By interrupting the automatic processes of an overstimulated nervous system, participants were able to shift from emotional reactivity to cognitive clarity. This reset allowed them to commit experiences to memory, make sense of their journey, and plan for future growth based on their reflections.

Benjamin, the youngest participant, described this cognitive shift in his final interview on Day 15, recalling the activity:

I had another experience where I went to this really big lake... We went on the lake for about 15 minutes of quietness and just listening to the waves and just kinda rocking around, you know?... It was really significant because it just gave me the time to listen to the waves, to listen to everything. You know we don't have phones buzzing, you know, people talking, people saying come on, come on, you know?... It reflected to me because you know I could think clearly. Usually I can have all these things around. Oy, what time is it? What happened with my mom? Is everything ok in [home state]?

Levi's reflections echo this grounding experience with nature. Through the journaling activity, he was able to explore questions of identity and purpose, processing his experiences in a way that connected the current moment to a broader understanding of who he is and what his future should look like:

As I sit in the grass facing the lake... I hear birds, monkeys, the paddle moving through the water, I hear the air moving through my ears... I picture myself as this lone wolf, peaceful and wanting to stay by myself. Quiet and isolated but yet can be trusted. I feel as if I shall forget everything and find myself. That I should find what life really has for me and how I shall think and carry myself.

In this reflection, Levi connects this observation of the peaceful environment with a metaphor for his own identity. The act of naming and observing the natural environment around him integrates emotional and cognitive processing. This integration allows him to reflect on his past experiences, understand his present emotional state, and plan for future growth.

The volcanic lake, a place that itself evolved from violent natural processes to a calm and serene body of water, mirrors the internal process participants experience. The ability to observe and make meaning of both their external environment and internal self is facilitated by the clarity that nature provides. This place-based pedagogy allows participants to connect their experiences to broader reflections on identity, emotional well-being, and future goals, making nature not just a backdrop, but an active part of how they process and integrate their journey.

The rest of this stage in the program was where participants interacted with the students of K School, comprising an explosion of processing as seen in Figure 7. This rich data is reflected in the integrated theme for both Day 05 and Day 06, Observation and Discomfort as Catalysts for Deconstructing Privilege and Personal Growth While Bonding Elicits Joy. Data includes initial feelings of discomfort that transformed into bonding described as deeply meaningful. In his last interview on Day 15, Levi referenced feeling overwhelmed when we first arrived at the school for a tour on Day 05 and hundreds of students stood outside and clapped as we walked to the entrance between the two lines they formed.

I was overcome with emotion and took a moment to gather myself. Overwhelmed, I began shaking the students' hands one at a time until my mother, our logistical coordinator, pulled me away, pointing out the absurdity of that endeavor. I remember looking at Levi when it was his turn to speak. His cheek visibly quivered from the adrenalin. He recalls this moment in his Day 15 interview.

When I first walked into the school- When I- When I first walked into the school I was so nervous. Because I didn't- I thought it was only gonna be a few kids meeting us but it was like hundreds of them. It was so many of them like, they were everywhere. So I walked in. I'm like nervous just looking around. And then we had to introduce ourselves. That was the- (laughs) That was the most nervous part because they circled around us you know and at the same time it was-it was great because I was walking into a school, like a Af- A African school in Ethiopia like that was- It was great but it was a lot of people. So I was kind of nervous... They had the animals at the school like in the field where they play soccer at and when they was getting ready to play, they moved the animals out the way but then there was a lot of like poop everywhere. (laughing) It was a lot of poop everywhere. Like, I was walking. I couldn't walk without looking down. I was looking down the whole time (laughing).

Gad additionally noted in his journal that “When we walked in, we were all greeted by the kids and had to pick a partner. In Ethiopian culture, everybody holds hands. I thought it was weird at first but it's just how they are.” Dan echoed this sentiment in his journal when he wrote, “I've been so uncomfortable with the kids surrounding me and holding my hand. I wasn't expecting to see hundreds of students. I thought there was like 20. They were chanting around us singing an African song. I was so uncomfortable.”

By day 09, Judah illustrates how his time spent interacting with the Ethiopian students was processed by deconstructing American ideas of what hand holding means within a larger cultural understanding of the expression of kindness and bonding:

The big culture difference is um, the, the, the way we treat each other. So, here I see people holding hands down, walking down the street. Like best friends. Just great overall kindness, but if you see something like that in America you'd be like, oh wow, they're gay (laughing)... You'll start saying mean things like just negative thoughts pop, pop- appear in your head more in America than here. Here, it's just more like peaceful.

Similarly, Reuben initially expressed frustration at the lack of wifi in his journal.

When we got to the hotel we were gonna be staying in we ate dinner...I was really frustrated because the wifi didn't work too well. In my room you had to hold your device against one of the walls just to get a signal. That was a hassle. I hope the wifi gets better while we're here.

However, once the interactions with the Ethiopian students began, Reuben stopped mentioning wifi. He describes the accompanying internal shift in his last interview on Day 15 when I asked him why he stopped expressing frustration about the wifi:

Well, we kind of came on this trip to try and get away from that. Just like see things and talk to each other, get to know each other better. And so I was like, I should probably leave this here at the hotel. And so, I haven't been using the wifi and getting on my tablet as much as I usually do.

Reuben's description of his internal motivation shift from focusing on WiFi accessibility to engaging more with the people around him demonstrates how he processed his experiences, gradually valuing the enriching opportunities for bonding and personal growth that the program provided.

On Day 05, on the way to meet the students of K School for the first time, we decided to stop at a local water pump located in the lush, green valley amidst the grazing animals of the communities scattered across the mountainsides above. The farmers herd their flocks up the mountains to their homes at the same time each evening, creating "6 o'clock traffic" of vehicles, camels, sheep, goats, and cows observed by Reuben in his Day 15 interview, "At first I was like, 'why are there camels in the street?' And then I was just like, 'Wow. There are camels in the street.' I didn't expect to see camels."

There were children pumping water, likely befuddled at our strange group of foreigners. My father, the expert resident scientist, took this opportunity to explain to the participants the natural process of rain runoff that creates a reservoir of water beneath the valley ground. Pumps have been installed every few miles for those without running water in their homes. Only five gallons are allotted per family, per day. It is usually young children who are sent to fill the five-gallon container in each household. The participants watched the Ethiopian children their age and younger strap the containers on their backs and begin walking in what seemed like an

endless direction, sometimes up the mountainsides. Some of the children allowed our participants to work the pump, at a much slower pace than the locals. The lever was quite large and required both arms and considerable upper body strength. Most of the students talked and wrote about this interaction in a way that generated a common integrated theme across multiple days: Observation and Discomfort as Catalysts for Deconstructing Privilege and Personal Growth. For example, Dan stated in his Day 05 interview:

“I’m lucky to live in America because I have necessities and things I want... but over here they gotta go- go pump, pump, pump the big ‘ole bucket- It’s like 3 gallons of water in that bucket and they have to carry it, like, up the hills and stuff just to get home. And here you have to work. The kids work for like a long time and like they have to carry water for miles and miles to get home. They have to share it with their family. And then I’m just- I just have to go turn on the faucet and water comes out, so it’s so easy. And they don’t complain about it. At least I don’t think they do.”

Levi echoed this sentiment on the same day, saying:

“It’s a lot of parts that was inspiring. Um, the kids when they were pumping water, that was inspiring. How they had to work for their water knowing that back in America you even have it at our fingertips but they have to walk and have to work for it and then its so much they can get and bring it back for their families so they can use it to bathe and um drink water and all that stuff and wash off... It makes me grateful for a lot of stuff that I can have easy access to. And stuff that I have knowing that other people don’t have it and want it just as bad.”

The latter part of this stage (Days 07–09) emphasized critical reflections on identity, community values, and leadership aspirations as participants deepened their bonds with locals and engaged with their surroundings more profoundly as reflected in the Day 07 integrated theme, Human Interaction as a Catalyst for Emotions that Inspire Meaning. This was the stage of the program where participants conducted the service-learning program. These activities facilitated deep connections and a sense of belonging that seemed to catalyze a lot of the processing. The *interactions* and *feelings* datasets were merged for Day 07 and reflected how

participants' emotional responses continued to be connected to their social exchanges with the Ethiopian community.

I remember what this looked like in real-time. Day 06 was a full day of panel discussions and university tours. Noticing that the students were tired, we decided to give them a free day for unstructured play with the K School chess team on Day 07. We were on the compound of the resource center, a property sitting off the only road that runs through this community, snaking up and down the endless mountains. To reach this road from the resource center, you would follow a steep path in the back of the compound, ending about twenty feet above. We saw curious faces peering down at us from up there, intermingled with the big leafy plants lining the property edge. Benjamin wandered around the compound on his own, looking for coal to make a fire. One of the Ethiopian boys followed him, wondering what he was up to. Eventually, Benjamin was able to communicate the mission. Before I knew it, everyone was working together to collect wood, chop it, and make a fire.

Then, one of the girls had the idea to roast coffee and show their American guests an Ethiopian coffee ceremony. The students broke up into smaller groups, each with a different assignment led by an Ethiopian student. Some were sent to cut down the tall grass that would be strewn on the floor, others to pick coffee beans for roasting. The school's drama teacher was with us and picked Simon to dress in traditional elder's clothing, teaching him the blessing he would bestow upon all the others, as is tradition. It was a buzz of concentrated activity and laughter.

When the coffee was ready, everyone was gathered on the grass-covered ground, eating popcorn and homemade bread. Simon came out of the resource center with a cane, wrapped in layers of white, woven cotton. He couldn't remember the words of the blessing and improvised.

“Mishka, Mushka, Mickey Mouse!” He exclaimed, waiving his hands over everyone’s heads. We all erupted in a fit of laughter.

The Ethiopian students showed us how the younger kids should respectfully kiss his hand, and he would reciprocate- a kiss that came with a blessing. I watched as he went around the circle, his friends hooting and cheering. When he reached them, they dramatically participated, kissing each other’s hands between open belly laughter.

In their interviews and journals, most of the participants reflected how they processed these experiences as deeply impactful. For example, Gad named this day as the most impactful of his journey during his Day 09 interview saying, “Meeting and interacting with the kids from K was the most impactful part of this experience for me because they taught me a lot about their culture and what they like. And what they like to do. So, it was a great experience.” Reuben confirmed he had a similarly meaningful experience in his day’s journal entry writing the following:

Today ... we went to visit the kids in K. We saw where they live. They taught us how to make coffee from the coffee beans. I really enjoyed this. Then some of us got a chance to chop up some wood for the fire. Then we had a coffee ceremony. A man dressed as an elder blessed the food. The gave us daba (bread), and popcorn. The coffee was really good. Then Simon got a chance to wear the elder king clothes. We got a chance to show the kids a few American games. We did the rock, paper, scissors challenge. It was really fun. The K kids loved it.

Levi was able to verbalize his shift from feeling like a “lone wolf” to feeling like he found a new family. In his Day 09 interview, he likened the sense of belonging he and the other participants felt to familial bonds.

[Playing together] was like positive. I felt like I was at home then. It felt like I- I belonged there. You know, like- like- everybody was family- like – The culture didn’t matter. I was sitting here- I was like, yo I’m actually playing with kids from another country. Like, we having this bond. I never thought that would actually happen. Never thought that’d happen.

The participants viewed the day of play as a way to give back to the community while sharing a piece of themselves—an offering that was both tangible and personal. For many, the experience went beyond simple acts of generosity; it became a realization of how their unique cultural identity could contribute to others' growth and joy. This was particularly significant for participants like Judah, who expressed grappling with feelings of guilt over his privilege and a desire to help out the Ethiopian community. In his Day 09 interview, he expressed how the kindness he was shown gave him the courage to be a more authentic version of himself, “The people are just kind and nice, you know, I can just be myself like, I – I wouldn’t have to try and follow a crowd, I can act weird. I can do weird things like dance randomly... without being judged or anything.” Then, through the freedom of unstructured play, he discovered that simply being himself—open, expressive, and unguarded—was not only an act of connection but also a source of value. He continues in his interview,

The ideal to play—just to let yourself be free. Like, have fun for once—not just always have to badger yourself, work, work, work, work, work... Have fun. Play around. Enjoy life. Don’t just live your life in a shell. ...They haven’t seen anything like us... They never seen people with just so free-spirited, willing to dance, embarrass themselves just for other people’s amusement... find other people in their age cap and explore their culture and – like- mix our cultures together and make something new. Um, so, we left a big impact. We made a big impact coming to Ethiopia.

Judah's reflection highlights a shift from seeing himself as an outsider attempting to "fix" a community to recognizing the power of sharing his authentic self as a way to inspire and connect. His realization that "play" could serve as a universal language—bridging cultures and enabling personal growth—reframed his understanding of privilege, shifting it from a burden to an opportunity. This act of mutual exchange allowed both groups to explore new cultural dimensions together, blending traditions and forging something entirely new.

Day 08 had the integrated theme of Service Learning/Shared Goals as a Catalyst for Overcoming Challenges to Meaningful Connections, Emotional Processing, Redefining Personal Values, Critical Thinking, and Personal Growth. On this day, Judah described the solidification of his transition from a "fix-it" mindset to a recognition of mutual value in the relationships participants built. For Judah and most of the students, this was an emotional day as the students said their goodbyes before we left for the historical site visits in other parts of the country. Most of us were crying. Judah began his Day 09 interview frustrated because he was holding back tears. He took a moment to gather himself before continuing the interview:

Judah: When we said our farewells and hope to see them again...I dugged in deep inside myself to say, like, Hey, um, uh- These kids are, um, they're doing great things and, uh, you know. (Makes a frustrated sound and rubs his eye) Oh, God.

Interviewer: It's ok. We can start over.

These sentiments contributed to the integrated themes for Day 09, Meaningful Connections Foster a Sense of Belonging, New Perspectives on Privilege and Community Values, and Inspiration toward Personal Growth and Social Impact.

Emotions again fueled participant processing of their experiences as the mutually reciprocal nature of ethical service learning—a concept introduced during the pre-departure sessions—was now understood through lived experience. After taking a moment, Judah reflected on how the interactions and observations during the service-learning experience not only benefited the Ethiopian community but also reshaped his sense of purpose and identity:

We also figured out some things to help them get tablets so they can... have a better, richer learning experience. We're also helping them to develop as people—helping them realize [they] can also help out their community... We help them and we're also helping ourselves by becoming better people. By learning from their examples. I can't wait to get back to America to -um- use the things that I learned from them... [In America], you still see a way that you need to help out in your community. There's always something that you need to help out with—just as there's stuff that you need to help out with here, too...

Levi succinctly noted in his Day 09 interview,

Seeing this it's like I can do a lot more. I can do a lot... It makes me feel like I can do something important. Like change lives. You know, help them so that it can make this whole community better. If they become great then they could change this whole community- if they have those resources... I learned a lot. You know, within myself, too.

This moment illustrated not only the emotional depth of processing but also the integrated mechanisms at play: human interaction, identity, meaning-making, and observation. Participant reflections encapsulated the reciprocal nature of ethical service learning, where both communities teach and transform one another. This deconstruction and reconstruction extended to imagining a broader impact beyond Ethiopia, a vision Judah shared during their parting moments, “Us leaving really made them sad but I told them, don’t worry guys... this is a sad day but this is also a good day because we can start a new impact in Ethiopia, the United States and even change the whole world-um- with what we did – um – in K.” Participants’ reflections demonstrate the evolving understanding of their identity as one shaped by both giving and receiving. They moved from feeling the weight of responsibility to "fix" to embracing the potential of shared humanity, collaboration, and personal growth—a significant step in his processing journey.

### ***Focused Coding Late Stages: Days 10-Post Trip Narrative***

We shifted from engaging with the people to engaging with the history of Ethiopia in this later stage of the trip (Days 10-Post Trip), which represented a culmination of the processing journey. Participants moved toward holistic reflections, continuing to dismantle stereotypes about Ethiopia (Day 10 and Day 11), and delving into deeper understandings of spiritual and cultural identity as they reflected on their experiences at the churches (Days 12–13). These experiences were synthesized into actionable inspirations during the final days of the program

(Days 14–15), culminating in gratitude and a transformative redefinition of personal and communal goals. Post-trip reflections solidified these insights into tangible aspirations for future action. This timeline underscores the interplay between emotional, cognitive, and relational processes that guided participants through stages of observation, reflection, and integration, leading to transformative personal and social insights.

On Day 10 and Day 11, we traveled to Lalibela and visited its famous rock hewn churches from the 12<sup>th</sup> century. The integrated themes for these days included Emotional Bonds with Local Communities, Reflections on Religious and Cultural Practices, and Appreciation of Historical and Spiritual Significance Facilitate Confrontation of Discomfort, Deepen Identity, and Inspire Leadership and Growth (Day 10) and Ethiopia as Place Dismantles Preconceived Notions, Reshapes Identity and Values, and Inspires Personal and Community Responsibility (Day 11).

The series of cathedral like structures in Lalibela were hewn into the ground in layers, from the top down, in an area of land composed of dense volcanic rock. The Ethiopian Orthodox Church that built and continues to operate there today is one of the oldest Christian traditions in the world, tracing its roots back to the early 4th century. Ethiopia became one of the first states to make Christianity its official religion (just a hair after the first, Armenia). Christianity reached Ethiopia through the influence of its sister Coptic (Egyptian) Church. The Coptic Church itself was founded by Mark, the author of the Gospel of Mark, who established the faith in Alexandria. Since that time, both churches have maintained a shared liturgical heritage and practice of Christianity, with enduring connections to their ancient traditions.

King Lalibela, responsible for the sculpting of the Lalibela churches, was inspired to build a “New Jerusalem” in Ethiopia, bearing its own holy temple in which the Christian God is

said to dwell- like the one built by King Solomon in the bible. It is written that King Lalibela was visited by angels who gave him the construction plans. Unknown to us, our visit coincided on the birthday of King Lalibela, which the community celebrated with rituals of drum circles and chants/prayers recited in Ge'ez, an ancient Semitic language employed only in religious practices, much like Latin in early Catholicism. Fluency in Ge'ez is required of the priests who lead these prayers wearing their formal regalia likely only used for this occasion.

Ethiopian Orthodox churches, including the iconic Lalibela churches, are modeled after the tabernacle described in the Torah, which was later emulated in the design of Solomon's temple. This sacred structure includes a Holy of Holies, a space reserved for the divine presence, underscoring the belief in the physical dwelling of God among His people. Only those chosen by God Himself may enter after ritual cleansing and consecration. All others would be consumed by the manifest presence of God.

We explained to the boys the deep importance of respect in Ethiopian Orthodox churches, emphasizing the solemnity and reverence expected within these sacred spaces. Visitors are required to remove their shoes upon entry and to speak only when necessary, maintaining a quiet and reflective atmosphere.

Ethiopian Orthodox services are renowned for their length, often lasting several hours, during which the congregation is expected to stand the entire time. Though we did not attend a service ourselves, the boys were fascinated by the discovery of "standing sticks"—tools designed to assist the elderly during these long ceremonies. These sticks, with their varying heights and distinctive chin rests, bore a striking resemblance to medieval swords, sparking curiosity. Before I could intervene, a game of sword fighting sent Issachar, a towering presence at over six feet tall—a height that made him an anomaly in Ethiopia—stumbling in what felt like slow motion

toward the thick, velvet curtains separating the Holy of Holies. My heart stopped as I watched in disbelief. The priest threw up his hands in despair, letting out a wail of alarm.

At just 13 years old, Issachar was still coming to terms with the dimensions of his own body—his arms unexpectedly long and stride unexpectedly wide, often knocking things over and stumbling on steps. As if by divine intervention, he caught himself just before tumbling through the curtain and into the most sacred space of the church, narrowly avoiding what might have been his holy end at the electrifying presence of God.

The boys were new to physical interactions with the concept of “ancient.” I found Dan trying to dig a natural gem out of the tunnel wall connecting the underground churches with his spare house key. I patiently explained that that gem had been there since this land was formed. His eyes grew wide as the realization sunk in.

The participants’ experience at the Lalibela churches was a complex mix of awe, discomfort, and self-reflection. For many, the day began with a sense of frustration and disconnection, as illustrated by Levi, who wrote in his journal, “It was a high amount of flies [that] were all over me” and “the people would stop what they were doing to look at us, as if we were becoming the center of attention, once again.” These distractions, coupled with behavioral lapses among the group, exacerbated feelings of annoyance from the compounding challenges of cultural immersion and personal accountability.

Recognizing the need for recalibration, the adults made a concerted effort to address the group’s behavior, reminding them that an early departure was on the table. To help participants process their actions and emotions, I designed the day’s journaling prompt to focus on behavioral reflection. This exercise encouraged participants to slow down their overwhelming emotions, integrate cognitive and emotional processing, and place their experiences into a larger context.

The journaling prompt revealed varying levels of accountability among participants, many of whom used the opportunity to reevaluate their actions and recommit to the group's shared goals. Reuben, for example, acknowledged his role in the chaos but also advocated for fairness while expressing his determination to continue the journey:

I admit that I was dancing and getting out of hand with everyone. I feel like not everyone should get punished for certain people's actions. I can't speak for everyone else, but I want to stay and finish the trip. I'm pretty sure I can handle the responsibility and live up to the expectations. I can't make any promises, but I will try to be mature and keep everyone out of trouble.

Dan added a layer to the group's reflections, demonstrating a mix of levity and insight as he described the dynamics between the group and myself, "I felt like all the chaos happened b/c they thought Mrs. Liya was a mama they could pull a fast one on. But no she wasn't going to take it. My role was going back and forth." These comments captured a growing recognition of the leadership required to maintain respect and order during such a transformative experience.

Levi provided a broader reflection on the day, tying together themes of gratitude, learning, and cultural immersion. His entry demonstrates the emotional and cognitive complexity of processing these experiences:

Today was a frustrating but fun and learning day. We went to visit the 12 churches of Lalibea. It's a very quiet and religious place. The most important part is that the group wasn't behaving in the correct order, we all disgraced the holy place. And we disrespected Leah, and once we did that, we disrespected everyone who sacrificed a lot for us to be here, and we just complained, and wasn't grateful. We threw it in their face and hers, and she was the most important, she helped a lot to get us here, and she's one of the nicest, and did not deserve that. I feel like we are not ready for a lot of things and they do too. I can't blame them. But I feel like we should keep the trip going. It's still [good to] experience, plus I love it here. It feels like home, and I'm not trying to go home so soon yet. I'm learning a lot, and it's an experience out of the COUNTRY!!!

This reflection underscores the participants' journey of learning, as they navigated cultural clashes, group dynamics, and personal growth. By integrating emotional, cognitive, and

behavioral processing, they began to reframe challenges as opportunities for transformation, ultimately recommitting to the shared goals of the trip.

The visit to the historic Lalibela churches on was a turning point in how participants understood Ethiopia's rich spiritual and cultural heritage. Participants began dismantling preconceived notions, as illustrated by Benjamin who described the experience in his Day 15 interview as "Some of the most important." He continues saying,

I don't know how they built it... If we had only their tools it probably would take us more than 27 years... It was amazing skill and the craft was just beautiful... People prayed in it for probably their entire life. It meant to me, you know, this is a very sacred place. This was built so long ago it's very surprising how it's still standing.

Benjamin's words illustrate that after time and intentional reflection activities, participants processed the awe and reverence they felt in the presence of centuries-old history, prompting them to consider the resilience, devotion, and ingenuity of the people who created these sacred spaces. This sense of wonder set the tone for the late-stage reflections, where participants deepened their understanding of Ethiopia's cultural and spiritual legacy while reassessing their own values and identities.

Gad acknowledged the pride and empowerment that came from dispelling his misconceptions while learning more about African history:

[My perception of Africa was] typical stuff they teach you at school (laughing), uh, lions, zebras, drums. They never teach you about the stuff that's really here like the Lalibela churches, the scenery, the beautiful mountains. They don't tell you that it's beautiful...It just taught me that Africans are very intelligent people. We come from a very intelligent race. Um, we're smart and very tactical. We think a lot... It makes me happy about my history to know that my people are strong and smart.

These realizations show how participants reassess their identity, shifting away from deficit narratives to a renewed appreciation of strength and resilience within their heritage.

Participants also explored spiritual and cultural contrasts and identities, often grappling with contradictions between their own experiences and what they observed on Day 12. The integrated theme on this day was Critical Thinking in Applying Meaning to Spiritual Identity and Cultural Contexts. In this day's journaling activity, Gad reflected, "In Ethiopia, I think religion is more important in society than in America," noting the cultural differences in spiritual priorities. At the same time, participants like Judah expressed skepticism toward organized religion, stating, "Religion to me is a scam," while still reaffirming their own sense of spirituality: "I'm a child of God; therefore, I already am connected." These reflections illustrate the complexity of integrating cultural observations with personal beliefs.

By Day 13, participants were internalizing Ethiopia's historical narratives as a way to process their experiences as indicated by the integrated theme of Internalizing Historical/Cultural Complexities, Cultural and Leadership Identity, Spirituality, and Environmental Relationships through Creative Writing. Through creative writing journaling prompts, participants grappled with themes of power, leadership, and cultural identity. For example, Gad expressed pride in Ethiopia's historical resilience in a short story about the Battle of Adwa, a historical win over Italian colonizers, "We have defeated the Italians and avoided colonization. Us as Ethiopian people are strong and can stand up to the Italians."

Day 14 deepened these reflections, as participants synthesized their observations into personal insights about identity and privilege as indicated by the integrated theme, Synthesis of Observations and Reflections Constructs Meaning and Produces Inspiration from Integrated Processing.

Inspired by relatable stories of perseverance from prominent guest lecturers who graduated from K School, participants began to connect Ethiopia's cultural narratives with their

own aspirations. In his Day15 interview, Gad shared

A moment that stuck out to me was when] we went to the lecture with Dr. A... he came from that small village... that school (K School) with not a lot of stuff, not a lot of books, and um he's like one of the most successful doctors. If I try hard and I can be as successful... I just gotta focus like they did.

Benjamin shared similar inspiration from the same lecture in his Day15 interview saying, "My family started off on kinda the lower... then they just kinda started coming up more and more... until well, here I am in Ethiopia," underscoring how for some participants, reflections on Ethiopian resilience mirrored their own journey of upward mobility and empowerment.

As the program drew to a close, participants shifted their focus to gratitude and a redefinition of values, particularly around privilege, personal responsibility, and goal setting, indicated in the Day 15 integrated theme of Comparisons Dispel Stereotypes and Reconstruct Meaning of Self, Privilege while Eliciting Focus on Goals and Deep Gratitude. On this day, Benjamin remarked, "I feel like I'm really lucky... people in Ethiopia [were] asking what's it like in America? I said it's like a really nice place if you know where to stay." This comparison prompted participants to reflect on their own privilege and consider how they could use their resources more meaningfully.

### ***Focused Coding Post-Trip***

Post-trip reflections solidified these insights into actionable aspirations with the integrated theme of Reflections Lead to Meaning Making which Elicits Inspiration to Change. Participants like Judah expressed a desire to lead and give back to their communities: "I will definitely become a leader in America in my community—strive to help out in any way I can." Others, such as Simon, connected these reflections to gratitude, saying, "They have little but such a big mind... I have all these resources that I'm not using, and I can use those to help me with my career."

## Axial and Selective Coding Findings

Through axial and selective coding, three domains of participant processing emerged: cognitive, behavioral, and emotional. These domains capture both the processes participants underwent and the transformations that resulted from their experiences. Each domain followed a distinct trajectory—cognitive processing involved a shift from expectations to reconstruction of reality, emotional processing evolved from guilt to gratitude, and behavioral processing transitioned from passive observation to advocacy.

**Figure 11**

### *Cognitive Processing Stages*

Cognitive Processing Domain	Stages of Processing	Internal mental shifts experienced when stereotypes are challenged	Quotes
	1	<b>Reflection on Stereotypes</b>	"People portray it as like a really war torn country and like all destroyed, all flattened, everything, starving children everywhere you know? Snakes biting people." ( <i>Benjamin, Interview, T1</i> )
	2	<b>Cognitive Dissonance</b>	"It's, it's like a... almost... I could call it, if you're, if you're me, I would call it a paradise. A paradise. You got the nice school, school looks nice. And then you know the houses." ( <i>Benjamin, Interview, T1</i> )
	3	<b>Reconstructing Beliefs</b>	"My perception about Africa has changed because in school we're taught about Africa being so poor, and I've seen some pretty rich places and lands. And at school they're always talking about bad things in Africa." ( <i>Simon, Interview, T4</i> )
	4	<b>Reconstructing Values,</b>	"I started thinking bigger because, you, like, materialistic stuff will get in the way of a lot of things back at home. But out here, all that doesn't matter. It helps to focus more on the things that can actually help me out in the long run." ( <i>Levi, Interview, T4</i> )
	5	<b>Reconstructing Identity</b>	"It just taught me that Africans are very intelligent people. We come from a very intelligent race. Um, we're very smart and very tactical. It makes me happy about my history to know that my people are strong and smart." ( <i>Gad, Interview, T4</i> )

**Figure 12**  
*Emotional Processing Stages*

Emotional Processing Domain	Stages of Processing	Evolving feelings in response to encountered realities	Quotes
	1	Emotional Discomfort (Guilt)	"They travel miles—distances carrying like 70 pounds worth of water. It made me feel bad for complaining about things back home." ( <i>Judah, Interview, T4</i> )
	2	Connection & Belonging	"I'm not home sick. I'm sick of home. Meaning that I like this place better than in America. Everybody's so friendly... They have each other. In America, you have more opportunities, but a lot of people don't get to it 'cause there's so many people that hold you back. But here, people support you, and it's more welcoming." ( <i>Levi, Interview, T3</i> )
	3	Empathy & Gratitude	"The people here just want little stuff and they'll be so grateful about it. It makes me think about how much I've been taking for granted." ( <i>Levi, Interview, T4</i> )

**Figure 13**  
*Behavioral Processing Stages*

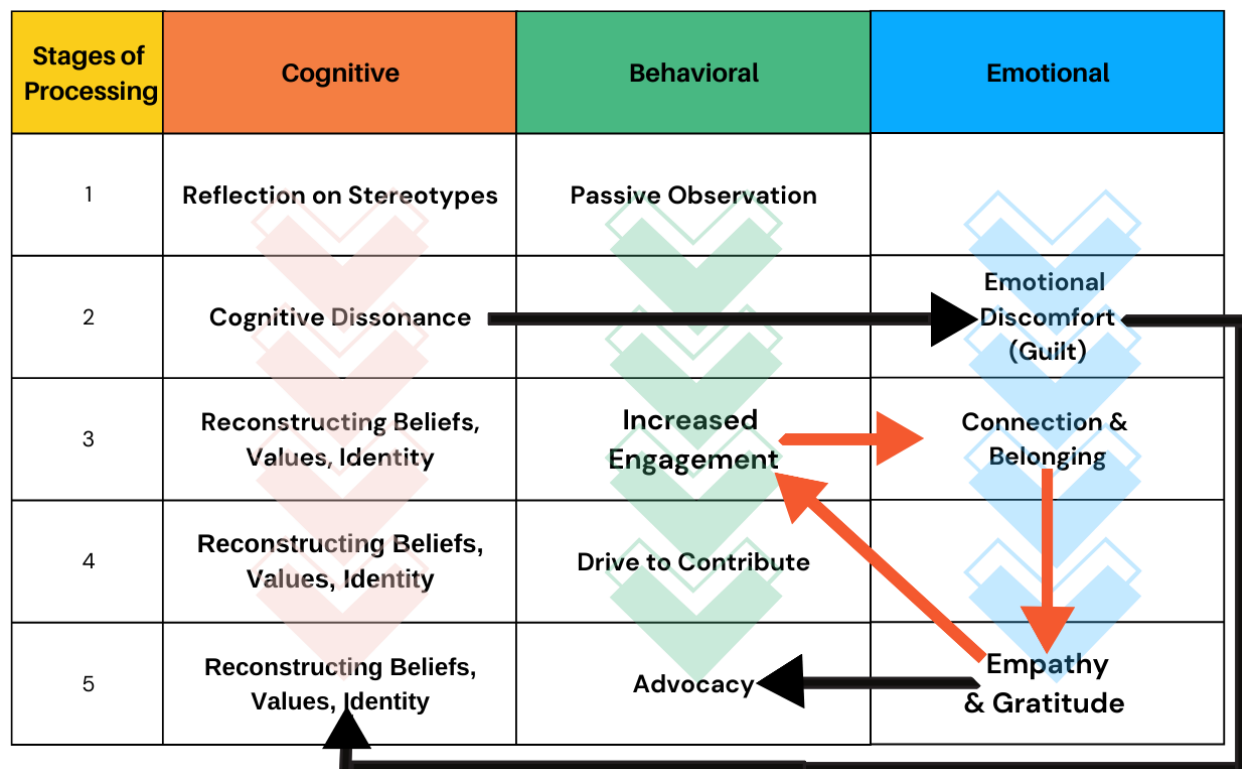
Behavioral Processing Domain	Stages of Processing	Actions accompanying adjustment of preconceived notions	Quotes
	1	Passive Observation	"I wasn't playing soccer but I was watching them. (laughing) Aw, man, they got whooped. The little kids, the little kids was so- Because that's their main sport so it was, it was great, though. It was great like watching everybody like play around like that." ( <i>Levi, Interview, T4</i> )
	2	Increased Engagement	"I thought... it wouldn't be too much interacting. But it was a lot. It makes me feel very comfortable. You know, even though it's a different culture, it's like I don't have a problem with, you know- with that at all, knowing that I can actually still communicate with them." ( <i>Levi, Interview, T4</i> )
	3	Drive to Contribute	"I would really like to help out their community any way I can, like make it better. I wanna make the Ethiopian lives easier." ( <i>Judah, Interview, T1</i> )
	4	Advocacy	"Whenever I'll be able to tell this story, I'll be able to tell people about how people live here... And things that I picked up and learned. And that I was able to help me, like, help me in the future. I will be able to share with others. Like other people in my family that'll be able to pass it down." ( <i>Levi, Interview, T4</i> )

During selective coding, transformation emerged as the core category that encapsulates how participants processed their experiences during the program. By exploring the unique shifts within each domain and their interconnections, data reveals how transformation unified these processes, explaining the entirety of the dataset while offering a comprehensive framework for

understanding participants' processing of their journey. While axial coding highlighted the stages of processing within each domain, selective coding identified transformation as the central phenomenon unifying these domains. Each will be addressed separately, while the integrated nature of these systems will be seen throughout the discussions. Figure 14 is a visual representation of the processing steps across the three identified domains of cognition, behavior, and emotions and their connections to each other.

**Figure 14**

*Axial Coding Findings*



*Note.* This figure delineates the integration of three domains of processing — cognitive, behavioral, and emotional — identified during axial coding. In addition to the stages of processing within each domain, black arrows represent relationships of stages across domains, illustrating how shifts in one domain influence transformations in another. Red arrows indicate a

cyclic pattern between increased engagement in the behavioral domain and the emotional stages of connection and belonging and empathy and gratitude, highlighting the reciprocal nature of these processes.

### ***Cognitive Processing and Transformation: From Expectations to Reconstruction***

Cognitive processing emerged in the data as the internal mental shifts that participants experienced when confronted with new information or situations that challenged their pre-trip stereotypes. These shifts occurred in three stages: reflection on stereotypes, observing contradicting realities, and reconstructing beliefs, values, and identity. Participants reconstructed their understanding of themselves and the world, aligning their internal frameworks with the realities they encountered in Ethiopia. These cognitive shifts went beyond mere acknowledgment of cultural differences, prompting participants to critically interrogate pre-trip assumptions and construct new narratives about identity, success, and privilege.

The first step in cognitive processing for many participants was reflecting and identifying the stereotypes or misconceptions about Africa they had brought with them. Participants' descriptors of these assumptions included perceptions of Africa as "impoverished," filled with "lions, zebras, and drums," "lacking infrastructure," having "contaminated food and water," and being "war-torn." Judah shared in his first interview that he "did believe into the stereotypes that Africa wasn't that rich of a country." These acknowledgments marked a cognitive shift from unconscious reliance on societal narratives to conscious awareness of these preconceived ideas.

Similarly, Simon reflected, "My perception about Africa has changed because in school we're taught about Africa being so poor, and I've seen some pretty rich places and lands. And at school, they're always talking about bad things in Africa." This critical interrogation of pre-trip assumptions served as the foundation for subsequent cognitive shifts.

Since the program aimed to facilitate Black identity development, pre-departure questionnaires included prompts probing this aspect of identity. Responses revealed varying levels of engagement with Black identity, reflecting a spectrum of awareness and priorities. When asked to describe themselves in three words, most participants focused on personal traits such as being “athletic,” “funny,” or “quiet,” rather than racial or cultural descriptors. This lack of explicit racial or ethnic identifiers aligns with what Sellers et al. (1998) describe as low racial centrality, suggesting that participants placed less emphasis on racial identity when evaluating themselves.

In the questionnaires, some participants explicitly acknowledged societal pressures tied to Black identity while others downplayed racial distinctiveness or reflected uncertainty. For example, Levi’s response to how his life is distinct as a Black person highlighted an awareness of societal challenges, “As a Black person, you have to prove yourself.” Conversely, Gad dismissed any distinctiveness by responding, “Nothing” to the same question, while Dan wrote, “IDK,” indicating a lack of reflection or connection to racial identity. These varying responses underscored the diverse starting points regarding Black identity engagement.

This variability extended to participants’ expectations for the trip. Some anticipated personal growth, like Da, who expressed a desire to affirm his connection to African heritage: “I expect to learn that I’m African.” Similarly, Simon hoped the trip would make him “more grateful” and “humble,” reflecting an openness to internal transformation despite not explicitly framing their goals around racial identity. In contrast, others approached the trip with skepticism about its potential to foster personal change. Benjamin responded humorously, predicting the trip would make him “taller from aging,” while Gad bluntly stated, “No,” when asked if he thought

the trip would teach him something new about himself. These diverse expectations shaped how participants processed their experiences.

After arriving in Ethiopia, participants observed and experienced realities that contradicted their preconceived notions. Judah expressed the cognitive dissonance he felt: "I did see poverty... but I also saw a lot of richness in the people, in their hearts." This clash between expectation and reality triggered shifts in perspective, as participants encountered evidence that Africa was more complex and nuanced than they had expected.

Reuben shared his surprise at Ethiopia's geography: "When we got to Addis, we were 8,000 feet above sea level." He also described his amazement at King Mikael's palace: "When we got to King Mikael's Palace, and I found out that's where he fed the 5,000 people, I was kinda surprised that you could fit 5,000 people in there to get food and have time to actually prepare and make food for everyone."

Benjamin described being amazed by the architecture of Lalibela churches: "The amazing skill and craft was beautiful. You could look at it for days." These firsthand accounts demonstrate how participants dismantled ingrained stereotypes and reshaped participants' cognitive frameworks.

### **Reconstruction of Beliefs, Values, and Identity.**

As participants processed these contradictions, they described reconstructing their beliefs, values, and sense of identity. Judah expressed a re-evaluation of the notion of what it means to be "rich" or "developed." He described the realization that richness was not about material wealth but about the spirit and kindness of the people in an interview: "There's a lot of richness in their spirit, their heart. They're kind, they're great people." Gad reflected on Ethiopia's resistance to colonization, saying, "It makes me feel stronger about myself and my history. And

that the people of Africa were very strong. Very knowledgeable.”

Simon articulated a shift in values: “Most of the things we’re taught in the U.S. are a bunch of lies. And I need to trust what I know and experience more things.” Levi described moving from materialistic pursuits to valuing education and resourcefulness.

I started thinking bigger because, you, like, materialistic stuff will get in the way of a lot of things back at home. But out here, all that doesn’t matter. It helps to focus more on the things that can actually help me out in the long run.

Simon echoed this sentiment, saying,

I’ve become a little more responsible... like, our chess motto. Think before you move. I think I’m starting to think more... I believe the experiences that I’ve had have also changed me... I want to be more responsible cuz I was playing with my phone too much and dropped it and broke it... I’m going to –focus, focus, focus. I’m going to treat the things and the people around me better... Instead of like playing with things I shouldn’t be playing with. I could be doing things around the house or working in my community.

He contrasted this behavior with the gratitude he observed in Ethiopia students, which made him feel “more responsible [and] grateful for things I have like my iPhone, my Xbox, and things I have in my house.” He attributed this re-evaluation of his own sense of focus and responsibility to experiences with a guest lecturer who “started from little and made it big... and came back to Ethiopia to help people here,” and his Ethiopian chess partner who “wants to be so much...he wants to go work with NASA and go to the moon. It’s been his dream since a child... They have little supplies and...such a big mind.” He described how this transformation was facilitated by experiences that challenged pre-trip stereotypes and prompted personal growth.

Levi’s describes his cognitive reconstruction:

The schools that we have [in America], we have computers and T.V.s... They don’t have that. They have books that they read out of, and that’s how they get their information. But these kids, they have to get it out the books. They actually read it.

### **Transformation of Beliefs, Values, and Identity.**

Cognitive transformation was particularly evident in how participants redefined their identities. Judah reflected, “We’re helping them, but we’re also helping ourselves by becoming better people. By learning from their examples... I’ve realized what kind of leader I want to be.” Gad expressed newfound openness: “Before coming here, I’d say I was more closed. I wasn’t as open with my feelings about my thoughts. And I know after this, I’m going to be a lot more open.”

Participants also transformed their values, shifting from externally imposed definitions of success to more nuanced, experience-driven conceptions. Levi described this shift: “I could be more appreciative about the things that I didn’t really appreciate back home that a lot of people here would think like it’s a miracle or a blessing.”

Finally, participants experienced transformations in their beliefs. Simon shared, “In Ethiopia, it’s a lot of things to do with the Bible. It made my belief stronger in Christ and be a better person.” Benjamin was struck by ancient construction techniques, reflecting, “When I walked into that place, I was thinking this is a very holy place and it’s been around for so long... It was made out of eggs and oats. That really surprised me.”

These cognitive transformations were iterative and interwoven with emotional and behavioral shifts. Participants moved from seeing themselves as passive observers to active contributors, from valuing material wealth to appreciating relational richness, and from holding deficit-based beliefs about Africa to embracing its complexity and strength. By confronting internal dissonance and constructing new narratives about themselves and the world, participants underwent cognitive transformations that redefined how they understood themselves in relation to an expanded “other” and their place in a global community.

### ***Behavioral Processing and Transformation: From Passive Observation to Advocacy***

Behavioral processing refers to the actions participants describe taking as they adjust their preconceived notions, reflecting shifts in their motivation. This processing often involved engaging more deeply with the local environment, people, and culture, as participants moved from passive observation to active participation and, ultimately, advocacy.

At the start of the program, participants often approached their experiences as passive observers, anticipating surface-level encounters with Ethiopian culture. Predeparture questionnaires revealed expectations of seeing mountains, poor people, people who talk and greet differently, and houses. Many described their initial mindset as one of detachment, expecting to remain external to the communities they were visiting. Levi admitted,

I thought... it wouldn't be too much interacting. But it was a lot. I liked interacting with them... It makes me feel very comfortable. You know, even though it's a different culture, it's like I don't have a problem with, you know- with that at all, knowing that I can actually still communicate with them.

Levi entered the trip thinking Ethiopia would be a place of poverty and hard work, expecting little interaction with local people. However, he was surprised by how much he ended up interacting and bonding with the locals. The shift from expecting minimal engagement to the motivation to actively interact with locals was a key behavioral indicator of how Levi processed his experiences. His initial passivity gave way to greater openness and engagement, reflecting his dismantling of stereotypes.

Another important behavioral motivation was the development of empathy and connection. Judah expressed how his engagement with the local students changed his perceptions and motivated him to act out a growing sense of empathy:

"I thought Ethiopia was...not well developed. So not having, um, let's say, the newest of things like new cars, um, buildings, like, new things like that...What I saw when I got here, um, I did see poverty... and I also saw a lot of kindness, people... The most inspiring, um, event I've had so far, um, was today [when] we met with the kids... When we first came in they were nervous so you know, I decided to um just pump them up just a little bit so I just started jumping around, waving, and doing stuff and they finally started getting attached and they were like, Oh cool so we can start letting our guard down... So, when we were leaving and started getting ready to head out they started jumping, chanting, and they were so happy and the smiles on their faces, um, when they were saying goodbye to us, it was just so amazing it was just a great experience. I really felt love in that environment that people really wanted us there..."

In his final interview, Judah indicated that meaningful engagement with the students helped him process these experiences through a more complex and nuanced understanding of values and culture. He described initial discomfort, which gave way to admiration and empathy:

All I see, uh, in America [about Africa] is children without water, childrens with diseases, children without barely any limbs. And here it's not that. I mean, people are living well. They're living in their inner circle and they love the life they have. That was a shock seeing that. It affected me... Like these are kids younger than me that are doing this and that was just amazing to me. I was like wow kids at this age are showing like so much responsibility. So much maturity.

As participants processed the contrast between their expectations and reality, they expressed more empathy toward the people they met, often describing a sense of responsibility or a desire to help or connect. Reuben described such a moment in his journal about the Muslim students who were fasting:

When they were fasting, it surprised me because when you usually think of fasting you're usually not eating much and you're eating healthier food. But they weren't eating for the entire day. That really shocked me... I'm just imagining how hungry they must have been because they already don't eat much and then to go a whole day without eating when they already don't get much, it's just – I couldn't do that... It was important for me to see them happy because I mean they don't really have much. I was really surprised at how happy they are.

This shift from passive observation to active empathy marked a transformative stage in behavioral processing. Participants not only engaged with the local culture but also internalized their experiences, leading to a drive to advocate for others. Benjamin expressed this sentiment clearly:

I feel like the U.S. has lied to me a lot. I feel like it's just been putting lies in the t.v. shows. You know, oh, look at this war-torn country... Yeah, there is some war in Africa... The news is only focusing on the bad side. Why can't they focus on the hospital [we visited]... the first hospital for children... They do heart surgery. Somebody [from K School] started it up and got it running.

Participants who experienced this emotional connection stated a desire to share their experiences and challenge the stereotypes that were still prevalent in their home countries. Levi expressed this motivation:

Whenever I'll be able to tell this story, I'll be able to tell people about how, how, how people live here... And things that I picked up and learned. And that I was able to help me, like, help me in the future that I picked up that amazed me that I will be able to share with others. Like other people in my family that'll be able to pass it down.

This motivational transformation into an advocacy mindset marked the final stage of behavioral processing for many participants. Having dismantled their own preconceptions and stereotypes, they reported an emotional drive to help and challenge these stereotypes more broadly, moving from personal transformation to social responsibility.

Behavioral processing exemplifies the trajectory of transformation, as participants moved from passive observation to active engagement and ultimately to advocacy. This domain of processing captures the evolution of their actions, reflecting their growing sense of connection, responsibility, and agency. By transitioning from detached observers to proactive advocates, participants demonstrated how behavioral transformation played a central role in their journey of processing and internalizing their experiences.

### *Emotional Processing and Transformation: From Guilt to Gratitude*

Emotional processing was integrated into both cognitive and behavioral processing, playing a significant role in how participants dismantled their preconceptions. This domain illustrates how participants' feelings evolved in response to the realities they encountered, fostering deeper empathy, connection, and ultimately a sense of appreciation. Emotional transformation was not just about internal reactions but also about how participants used these feelings to navigate and make sense of their journey.

A defining characteristic of emotional processing was the discomfort caused by encountering realities that contradicted expectations. Levi expressed feeling overwhelmed at the number of students that greeted them upon arrival at K School, stating,

Some people were uncomfortable cuz they were just looking. You know a lot of people don't like to be looked at. It just made me a little bit uneasy cuz I- I mean of course I'm uncomfortable when people look at me.

However, he processed these feelings by empathizing with the local students, reflecting, "But then I was thinking like- Oh, I am a foreigner. You know? They wanna look anyway cuz if they were to come to America, we'd try to observe them, too." This emotional discomfort prompted participants to reflect on their preconceptions about Ethiopia and its people, as well as themselves.

Similarly, Judah experienced discomfort when observing children laboring for their families: "They travel miles—distances carrying like 70 pounds worth of water. It made me feel bad for complaining about things back home." This guilt helped him reflect on his privileges and the tendency to take life for granted, marking the beginning of emotional transformation.

### *Moving from Judgment to Connection*

As participants processed their discomfort, many transitioned from feelings of judgment or detachment to feelings of admiration, empathy, and connection. Levi expressed surprise at how easily he connected with his Ethiopian chess partner, sharing, “I didn’t really think that we would have so much in common... Communicating, it-it-it amazed me. She’s just as any other person. You know, I’m a person. They’re a person, too.” Recognizing shared experiences, such as mutual nervousness during their interview activity, helped Levi feel less isolated, stating, “I’m not the only one that’s nervous.”

This connection extended beyond individual interactions to a broader sense of belonging. Levi reflected, “If I lived here, poverty wouldn’t even matter... It’s about the people. You know, cuz everybody’s family.” Initially viewing Ethiopia through a lens of poverty and hardship, Levi processed his experience through new emotional bonds, transforming the trip from a learning opportunity into one of emotional engagement.

The final stage of emotional processing was gratitude. Participants came to appreciate both the resilience of the people they encountered and their own capacity to grow through the experience. Levi insinuated that he felt more of a sense of belonging in Ethiopia than he did at home when he stated,

I’m not home sick. I’m sick of home. Meaning that I like this place better than in America. Everybody’s so friendly... They have each other. In America, you have more opportunities, but a lot of people don’t get to it ‘cause there’s so many people that hold you back. But here, people support you, and it’s more welcoming.

For Levi, true progress and fulfillment now stem not from the abundance of opportunities, but from the support and solidarity of those around us—a realization that resonated with the group and underscored the power of human connection in transcending material divides.

The sense of belonging helped shift his emotions towards gratitude as he described in his interview: “The people here just want little stuff and they’ll be so grateful about it. It makes me think about how much I’ve been taking for granted.” This realization turned his initial feelings of guilt into an appreciation for the simple joys and strengths of others.

For many, this gratitude became a foundation for rethinking their priorities and fostering a renewed sense of responsibility. Simon expressed, “looking at the other people around me, they’re like so grateful for the things they have... they inspire me to be for be a greater person. It makes me think more about the things I already have.”

Emotional processing was intertwined with cognitive and behavioral dimensions. Cognitive shifts in understanding often prompted emotional reactions, while emotional connections inspired participants to engage more deeply and act on their newfound insights. Judah reflected on this interconnectedness, stating, “When we were leaving... they were so happy and smiling. It was just amazing to see that love and energy. It made me realize how much of a difference we can make by just being there.” These bonds not only alleviated feelings of guilt but also nurtured a sense of belonging and reciprocity.

Through emotional transformation, participants developed not only a richer appreciation for others but also a renewed commitment to approach their own lives with greater intentionality and gratitude. This domain of processing illustrates how participants evolved from feelings of guilt to a profound sense of gratitude, fostering empathy, belonging, and a deeper understanding of privilege and responsibility.

### **Theoretical Discussion**

This study is grounded in the Cognitive-Cultural Model of African American Identity for Black Youth (CMAI), developed by Whaley and McQueen (2010, 2017, 2020). The CMAI

posits that African American identity development occurs through the interaction of two primary selves: the individual self and the cultural self. The integration of these selves is mediated by social roles, which provide adolescents with behavioral scripts to navigate and reconcile the expectations of both collectivist (African cultural) and individualist (Western cultural) value systems. The CMAI's emphasis on identity integration provides a robust framework for interpreting participants' experiences in this case study.

The CMAI aligns closely with the Afrocentric curriculum employed in this study, which emphasized collective values, community responsibility, and self-awareness. Through the two-week program, participants engaged with Ethiopian culture and history, providing opportunities to observe and interact with collectivist cultural systems. This environment facilitated moments of cognitive dissonance, emotional reflection, and behavioral engagement that prompted identity integration as theorized by the CMAI.

### ***Social Roles as Mediators***

Participants experienced transformative shifts in identity as they navigated and balanced new social roles introduced during the program. These roles were not static; they evolved through reflection and interaction, guiding participants from their initial roles as foreigners/observers to more integrated roles as global community members. This transition exemplifies their journey of balancing individual and collective selves within the framework of the Cognitive-Cultural Model of African American Identity (CMAI).

#### **Outside Observer/Foreigner: "Oh, I'm a Foreigner."**

Through the role of "outside observer/foreigner," participants began to balance their individual and collective selves. In his final interview on Day 15, Levi explained his realization of this new social role as he first arrived at K School to an overwhelming welcome:

Some [of us] were uncomfortable cuz they were just looking. You know a lot of people don't like to be looked at. But at the same- It just made me a little bit uneasy cuz I- I mean of course I'm uncomfortable when people look at me... But then I was thinking like- Oh, I am a foreigner. You know? They wanna look anyway... [Here] everybody's positive. But I can't say the same thing about at home... Everybody's so negative, you know? Like, um, a lot of people [in America] you know you look at somebody, you know, people be ready to fight but then people here they look. They're just curious. You know? And I had to get used to that. You know? They're just curious. Cuz if they were to come to America, we'd try to observe them, too. Cuz we send- we hear about 'em a lot. We learn about them. And when we actually see them in person it's like, yo! You gonna look so it's like how I- That's why I kept that in mind. And after a while it do get overwhelming a lot.

This role, though uncomfortable for some participants, provided an initial framework for engaging with Ethiopia's cultural and physical environment as a way to avoid feeling like a foreigner when engaging with the people. Through the program curriculum, participants were forced to confront the tension between their individualistic tendencies and opportunities for collective engagement, leading to important moments of reflection and growth. This tension is further illustrated by Levi, whose initial self-descriptors—"smart," "unique," and "positive"—reflect an individualistic orientation prior to departure.

Levi initially preferred to observe from a distance when given that option, referring to himself as a “lone wolf.” When faced with opportunities to connect socially like playing soccer or dancing, Levi said, “I’m a nervous. I’m nervous when it come to stuff like that. Like, I know I can’t play soccer. I’m not good at soccer. I didn’t want to embarrass myself. And dancing I only dance like that sometimes, so... (laughing).” This hesitation to participate in shared activities highlights his reliance on an individualistic self to navigate unfamiliar cultural contexts, opting to sideline collective engagement in favor of detached observation.

For participants like Levi, “Ethiopia as place” became an alternative entry point for engagement. Rather than forming relationships with the people, Levi found comfort in observing

the landscape and built environment. This preference aligns with the program's intentional leveraging of Ethiopia's geography and history to foster identity development. During a visit to Mikael's palace, a strategically positioned mountaintop fortress, Levi marveled at the view, stating:

The first time we went on the bus ride and we was looking at the neighborhoods and people working and all that, you know, all that restaurants and houses... When you look at the neighborhoods from a high distance... especially when we went to the ancient fortress of king um, that was amazing. That was amazing, especially the view from that distance up there. And looking at the mountains.

This reflection underscores Levi's preference for engaging with Ethiopia through observation of its physical environment. The mountaintop vantage point offered a literal and metaphorical bird's-eye view, allowing him to explore Ethiopia's cultural and historical legacy while remaining at a distance from its people.

In contrast, another participant, Benjamin, demonstrated a slightly more integrated perspective during the same visit to Mikael's palace. Benjamin's initial self-descriptors—"kind," "gaming," and "fast-paced life"—indicated a more balanced orientation between individualistic and collectivist selves. Reflecting on the palace, Benjamin remarked:

Well, when I walked into that palace I was thinking this is a very holy place and it's been around for so long... it really did look ... like a palace, like a real real palace where you've been to before. You can go down to your friends and you can ask them, like, hey, what does an Ethiopia palace looks like? And then they would say maybe like a um, Swizerland palace or something like that.

Benjamin's reflection highlights a key difference: while Levi focused on personal impressions of the palace and its surroundings, Benjamin connected his observations to a broader narrative, imagining how he might share his newfound knowledge with peers. By using existing schemas of European palaces to contextualize his experience, Benjamin not only disabused

stereotypes about African palaces but also began to express a collectivist inclination by envisioning himself as a cultural bridge.

These examples illustrate how participants initially relied on the role of observer/foreigner to navigate their experiences, balancing their individual and collective selves. For Levi, the discomfort of engaging socially led to an initial focus on Ethiopia as a place, allowing for reflection and processing from a distance. For Benjamin, a more integrated orientation enabled a deeper connection to Ethiopia's history and its implications for shared narratives about Africa. This social role provided a significant starting point for participants' identity negotiations, setting the stage for more active and integrated forms of engagement later in the program.

**Community Servant: “If they become great... they change this whole community.”**

As the program progressed, participants transitioned from the role of outside observers to active contributors as community servants. This transformation was particularly evident during the service-learning day, where participants collaborated with Ethiopian peers to identify and address local challenges. These structured interactions, which built upon interviews prepared during the predeparture sessions, provided students with a framework to navigate their new social roles. For Levi, whose earlier reluctance to engage socially reflected a strong individualistic orientation, the service-learning project became a turning point, offering a structured opportunity to step into a collective role. Reflecting on this experience, Levi said:

Yesterday... was with the African kids. Well, the Ethiopian kids – I meant to say Ethiopian... We partnered up to find out limited resources that they might need so then in the long-term we could help them. And um, we discussed that with everybody. And how we're now like discovering ways we can help that out... It makes me feel like I can do something important. Like change lives. You know, help them so that it can make this whole community better. If they become great then they could change this whole community—if they have those resources.

This quote vividly illustrates Levi's growing confidence in his role as a community servant. His self-correction—shifting from the broader “African kids” to the more specific “Ethiopian kids”—is subtle but significant, signaling an increased sense of connection and specificity in his understanding of the local community. More strikingly, his evolving language reveals a shift from individualistic thinking to a communal mindset. Levi's focus expands from simply “helping” to imagining how collective empowerment can ripple outward. This perspective echoes the cognitive transformation domain from the selective coding findings as Levi begins to see his efforts within a larger system of shared responsibility and potential.

Levi's transformation reflects the program's broader goal of fostering identity development through student-led service and collaboration that utilizes students' unique strengths. While Levi's earlier role as an outside observer emphasized his individual orientation, his experience as a community servant demonstrated a shift toward integration as he recognizes and values collective agency and his place within it. This marks a turning point where his understanding of identity extends beyond personal achievement to encompass communal uplift. This shift was not only a personal achievement but also a demonstration of how structured experiences can support participants in negotiating their individual and collective selves. This transition laid the foundation for Levi's emergence as a global community member, exemplifying the program's potential to inspire meaningful and lasting identity shifts.

The impact of this transformation extends beyond Levi's personal journey. Service-learning activities like this encouraged all participants to reflect critically on their own assumptions, challenge preconceptions, and develop a deeper understanding of themselves and their place in the world. This part of the experience marked the beginning of the participants' transition into global community members, as they moved beyond observation to embrace shared

responsibility and collaboration. This transition underscores the power of social roles in fostering identity integration, illustrating how participants can balance their individual and collective selves in meaningful and transformative ways.

**Global Community Member: “We can start a new impact in Ethiopia, the U.S. and even change the whole world with what we did.”**

By the late stages of the program, participants began to identify as global community members, integrating their roles as observers and servants into a broader identity. This shift was characterized by a redefinition of self, emphasizing shared humanity and collective impact. Levi reflected, “I felt like I was extremely important... like this is a big thing for me and them also. Like everybody is learning... Like you said, service learning means everyone is learning.” After the service learning component of the program, Judah echoed these sentiments when he proclaimed that “...we can start a new impact in Ethiopia, the United States and even change the whole world with what we did in K.”

This progression illustrates a transformation that began predeparture during sessions focused on ethical service learning. For many participants, the realization that their actions could have a tangible impact on both local and global communities solidified this new role. Levi encapsulated this transition by stating, “Seeing this... it’s like I have more to look forward to in my future. I can do a lot more... within myself, too, and other people.”

### ***Balancing Individual and Collective Selves***

“Everybody was nice to each other. You know. Good. And learning off of each other. Seeing how other people are [here] and back home, you know, balancing that... I learned a lot...within myself. You know from being in America a lot and coming to another culture.” (Levi, Interview, T4)

This section highlights how participants balanced their individual and collective selves by navigating the transformative social roles of foreigner, outside observer, community servant, and

global citizen. These roles facilitated shifts in identity, values, and purpose, mirroring the transformations that emerged as themes in the analysis. This connection underscores the layered nature of transformation, not only as a product of participant experiences but also as an interpretive lens for understanding their journey.

This study offers a new application of the Cognitive-Cultural Model of African American Identity (CMAI), suggesting that the framework holds deeper dimensions when applied in a place-based service-learning context for African American boys in Ethiopia. The social roles participants embodied reflect a dynamic interplay between individual aspirations and collective responsibility, which helped them integrate their personal and communal selves. This integration is particularly significant, as it bridges prior themes about collectivist advocacy with a new emphasis on using individual resources and focus to shape personal goals. By explicitly linking transformation to the CMAI's framing, this analysis highlights how these roles act as a mechanism for processing identity and privilege in an interconnected way. These findings point to the potential of transformative programming to deepen the theoretical understanding of identity development and global citizenship.

### **Discussion**

The themes of transformation and identity integration address the central question of how participants processed their experiences in an international, place-based service-learning context in Ethiopia. Transformation extends beyond individual shifts in identity, values, and purpose, encapsulating a layered journey through three integrated processing domains: behavioral, emotional, and cognitive. This journey suggests that programs like the one in this case not only align with the developmental processes described in the CMAI but also expand its framework to include transformational elements specific to international, culturally immersive contexts.

Continuing the analogy of how studies can ask for the renovation of a theoretical framework, this study envisions the CMAI as a blueprint adapted to the mountains of Ethiopia. Constructing a familiar structure in an unfamiliar landscape requires significant adaptation: the foundational principles remain, but the execution must account for the unique terrain. The new terraced structure represents the steps to transformation that emerged in this study through the processing of participant experiences.

Participants entered this journey through the living quarters situated at the top level. This entry point symbolizes participants' initial engagement—surface-level observations and tentative explorations of their surroundings. At this stage, the structure feels familiar, akin to the homes they know. As they explore this structure through their lived experiences, they discover the second, transitional level that represents the challenges of navigating between the familiar and the unfamiliar. This level requires deliberate leveling and stabilization, akin to the participants' navigation of emotional dissonance and cultural encounters. Here, participants faced moments of choice: to retreat into their comfort zones or engage more deeply with the unknown. These pathways of engagement reflect their processing, which often included moments of discomfort, recalibration, and growth. The deepest level bears the weight of all the other levels above it as represented by participants' integrated processing. It also has the deepest foundation, reinforced with materials like steel to anchor the structure to the mountain bedrock, representing the deep connections participants formed with Ethiopia's history, culture, and their own identities. This daunting descent into the unknown represents a grappling with privilege, responsibility, and the redefinition of values and goals. It also provides the most profound grounding, yielding an identity that was stronger, more cohesive, and deeply tied to their experiences.

## **Implications**

### ***Implications for Practice***

This study illuminates the transformative potential of Afrocentric, place-based service-learning programs in Ethiopia for African American adolescent boys. Several program components emerged as critical facilitators of these outcomes: pre-departure sessions, an Afrocentric curriculum centered on Africa's contributions to world knowledge, service-learning activities that positioned participants as community members, reflective journaling exercises, prompting critical thinking towards meaning-making, and a program structure that provided clear boundaries and guidance.

The program's framework and values, developed by adult organizers, reflected intentionality in setting goals for cultural engagement, identity development, and personal growth. However, while adults created the structural and curricular foundation, it was the adolescents themselves who carried the responsibility for the "heavy lifting" of transformation through lived experiences and reflection. This dynamic created a productive tension: adults guided participants with structured boundaries and scaffolding while deliberately leaving room for participants' biases, misconceptions, and personal journeys. The program emphasized that the experience itself, not explicit directives, would serve as the mechanism of change.

The pre-departure sessions set the foundation for growth-oriented expectations, which participants carried with them as a key processing mechanism throughout the program. These sessions facilitated the articulation of anticipatory goals, particularly around personal growth and gratitude, as evidenced by participants' predeparture questionnaires and early trip reflections. For instance, on Day 03, during a peer interview activity, many participants expressed aspirations such as becoming more grateful. These expectations shaped their cognitive frameworks and

allowed them to approach new experiences with an openness to transformation.

The Afrocentric curriculum placed Black perspectives at the center of the program, fostering deeper cultural engagement and pride. A poignant example of this is Gad's Day 15 interview when he recalled learning about the Ishango Bone. He remembered details from this lecture on Day 05 and connected Africa's ancient contributions to mathematics with his own identity remarking, "It was important for me to learn about the bone because it was marked with certain lines that were math patterns and showed that Africans were doing math like before all the people...It impacted me because I would like to know the history of my people." These curriculum components disrupted deficit narratives about Africa and empowered participants to reconstruct their cultural identities in ways that aligned with resilience, knowledge, and pride.

Reflective journaling emerged as a useful tool for processing and internalizing experiences. These activities allowed participants to slow down and move from reactionary states to integrated processing. This shift enabled participants to make sense of their emotions, connect their experiences to broader understandings of self and community, and derive meaningful insights. Whether structured into the curriculum or introduced spontaneously in response to participant behavior, these grounding activities were crucial in fostering cognitive clarity and emotional integration.

The structured entry into the role of community member through service-learning activities facilitated the integration of participants' collectivist and individual selves. In rural Ethiopia, participants critically reflected on disparities in resource access, which spurred gratitude for their own opportunities and motivated a reimagining of privilege and responsibility. This gratitude often fueled a desire to achieve personal goals, not solely for self-advancement but to advocate for the correction of misinformation about Ethiopia and its people as well as to give

purpose to the guilt that emerged from encountering their own privilege. Through these activities, participants began to see themselves not only as members of their local communities but also as global citizens with agency and purpose.

The program's emphasis on comparing lived experiences, identifying emotions, and constructing meaning was integral to participants' transformational journeys. While journals and interviews were effective tools, structured group discussions could add depth to these reflections by encouraging collaborative dialogue. Such discussions would enable participants to test new ideas, share insights, and collectively construct narratives of growth and identity.

Finally, the iterative nature of processing—oscillating between discomfort, connection, and advocacy—underscores the importance of creating environments that are both safe and challenging. Programs should incorporate intentional moments of dialogue, cultural immersion, and collaborative action to scaffold these transformative processes. By balancing adult-led structures with space for youth-driven reflection and growth, these elements not only help participants navigate their perceptions but also allow them to explore new social roles and expand their worldviews, further solidifying the transformative potential of such service-learning programs.

### ***Implications for Theory***

The findings of this study expand the application of the Cognitive-Cultural Model of African American Identity (CMAI), suggesting that the developmental processes it describes can extend beyond traditional educational or social contexts. The unexpected emergence of transformation as a key theme in theoretical application highlights the layered and dynamic nature of identity integration, particularly in the context of international experiences, where participants confronted stereotypes, processed discomfort, and redefined privilege and identity.

This study also underscores the role of place in identity development, suggesting that physical and cultural environments—like the volcanic lakes, mountains, and historical sites—act as catalysts for transformation. Participants engaged with these environments emotionally, cognitively, and behaviorally, illustrating the interconnected dimensions of processing identified in this study’s exploration of identity integration and suggesting the potential for the CMAI’s applicability to place-based contexts. The terracing model introduced in this analysis further nuances the CMAI by illustrating how participants navigate identity integration in stages. Each stage, such as observing privilege at Menelik’s Window or experiencing belonging through play at K School, presented unique challenges and opportunities for growth. This metaphor enriches the theory by framing identity integration as a process that is scaffolded and rooted in meaningful interactions and reflections.

Furthermore, the findings suggest a nuanced interplay between collective and individual aspirations within transformative settings. Participants frequently oscillated between self-focused goals like Levi’s reflections on becoming more responsible and community-oriented values, as seen in Judah’s desire to give back to the Ethiopian community. This dynamic expands CMAI by emphasizing how Afrocentric and place-based programs foster a reciprocal process of self-discovery and collective engagement.

The study also directly addresses the research question: How do participants throughout a two-week, place-based critical Afrocentric international service-learning program in Ethiopia process their experiences? Through qualitative data analysis, key verbs like “reflect,” “observe,” and “compare” emerged as processing mechanisms. For example, participants processed their emotions and observations by integrating them into broader reflections on privilege, gratitude, and identity. Moments such as Reuben’s realization of his reliance on WiFi or Levi’s evolving

understanding of belonging exemplify how emotional discomfort spurred cognitive shifts and behavioral transformation. Themes like transformation, cultural identity, and gratitude underscore the iterative, multifaceted nature of processing, where self-examination and collective understanding coexist.

By applying CMAI within an international, Afrocentric service-learning context, this study explores the potential of such programs to influence identity, worldview, and social responsibility. It also provides a framework for understanding how African American youth process transformative experiences, balancing personal aspirations with collective values through cultural and contextual interactions.

### ***Limitations and Implications for Future Research***

This exploratory case study offers valuable insights and lays a foundation for more robust studies in the future. Although its purpose was to generate exploratory findings rather than definitive conclusions, it provides a promising direction for future research. The data can be further interrogated through new methodological approaches. For example, applying a comparative model could deepen our understanding of participants' nuanced experiences and identities, enabling program coordinators to anticipate diverse participant needs and design more tailored programs that foster transformational outcomes.

A key limitation of this study is that it focuses exclusively on African American male participants. While this demographic is valid and deserving of deeper exploration to support their healthy development, extending this research to include Black female participants, for instance, would help identify both distinguishing and overlapping characteristics, offering a richer understanding of how gender intersects with identity and cultural experiences in Afrocentric service-learning programs.

Additionally, all participants in this study were believed to have been descendants of the transatlantic slave trade, with most identifying as multigenerational Americans. Benjamin, whose father was Jamaican, entered the program with a more integrated self-concept than his peers. While this study lacks sufficient data to draw conclusions about these differences, it highlights a need for future research to apply this program model to Black participants with diverse intersectional identities, including ethnic, cultural, and national variations. Such research could illuminate how these factors shape participants' experiences and identity transformations.

Another limitation is the time-limited nature of the program, which limits conclusions that can be drawn about how long the identified transformations endured or what they looked like upon return to the home environments. The long-term effects of this program were not explored and remain an empirical question. Future longitudinal studies could explore how these identity transformations evolve over time, providing insights into the sustainability of these shifts and the factors that influence their persistence or change.

The use of the Cognitive-Cultural Model of African American Identity (CMAI) to frame this study is a notable strength, as it is normed on the demographic of African American male adolescents and aligns with the Afrocentric principles of the case program. This alignment enhances the ethical rigor of the study and challenges the academic narrative that often centers White experiences as the default framework. However, future research might explore additional theoretical frameworks to complement the CMAI and provide new dimensions of understanding. For instance, Lefebvre's (1991) Spatial Theory examines how social space is produced through the interaction of perception (what is seen), conception (what is thought), and lived experience (how space is embodied through sensory engagement). This framework could enrich future research by examining how the highly sensory experiences of participants facilitated reciprocal

engagement with place, fostering the renegotiation of meanings and identities. Spatial Theory's focus on dynamic interactions between individuals and their environments aligns well with the place-based and identity-focused components of this program.

Similarly, Mezirow's Transformational Learning Theory (1991) provides valuable insights into how individuals undergo profound shifts in perspectives and beliefs through critical reflection and engagement with challenging experiences. Although originally developed to explain adult learning, its core principles—questioning assumptions, engaging in critical reflection, and integrating new perspectives—are relevant to adolescents as well. Given that these principles emerged as key themes in this study, Transformational Learning Theory could serve as a complementary framework for future research into adolescent identity transformation.

Finally, the archival nature of this study poses certain limitations. The program was not originally designed as a research initiative; data were collected for curriculum and marketing purposes, which constrained the depth and focus of analysis. Future studies should intentionally design data collection processes to align with research objectives, enabling richer, more targeted insights. Structuring the program as a formal study from the outset would allow for deeper interrogation of the research questions and more robust findings.

By addressing these limitations and pursuing these avenues for future research, scholars can build on the foundations of this study to advance both theoretical and practical understandings of identity transformation in Afrocentric, place-based service-learning contexts.

### ***Concluding Implications***

The findings of this study provide a roadmap for designing impactful service-learning programs that integrate Afrocentric perspectives and create transformative opportunities for African American youth. By expanding the application of CMAI and highlighting the layered

nature of identity integration, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of how individuals navigate the intersection of personal and collective aspirations. The insights gained here not only inform practice but also invite further exploration into the dynamic processes of transformation, ultimately advancing the fields of identity research, Afrocentric education, and service-learning pedagogy.

### **Conclusion**

Empirical research investigating community-based Afrocentric interventions remains both diverse and limited, particularly in its exploration of international service-learning and place-based components. This study contributes to the body of knowledge spanning disciplines such as psychology, sociology, education, and recreation, which address topics including identity development, academic engagement, youth delinquency prevention, and more. A common thread uniting Afrocentric interventions is their focus on identity—a theme that this study further illuminates. By integrating Afrocentric education with international service-learning in Ethiopia, this study underscores the complementary nature of these tools in addressing the needs of African American boys. The findings reaffirm the vast potential of this research area, while also emphasizing the complexity and intentionality required for successful implementation.

The results of this study reveal that Afrocentric interventions when paired with intentional service-learning and place-based frameworks, can create transformative experiences that align goals with methods. Afrocentric education, as a culturally affirming pedagogy centering Africa and the Black experience, fosters self-esteem, cultural pride, and the development of a positive racial identity. These outcomes were suggested in the participants' reflections, which demonstrated notable shifts in how they understood themselves, their histories, and their potential for future contributions.

This research adds valuable insights into how participants engaged with and processed their identities and experiences in this case. The study's use of the CMAI marks a significant step in expanding its application to new contexts. It provides evidence of the CMAI's utility in an international, place-based intervention and highlights the potential for Afrocentric education to facilitate identity development through immersive and reflective activities.

The findings also point to broader implications for theory and practice. They suggest that integrating Afrocentric education with international service and place-based learning can create powerful opportunities for African American boys to reconstruct their identities through culturally affirming experiences. This study demonstrates how engaging in discourse about identity, reflecting on lived experiences, and interacting with a heritage context can foster and integrate individual and collective growth.

While this study answers exploratory questions, it also generates new ones. Future research can build upon these findings to explore how programs like the one in this case can intersect with various intersectional identities, refine methodologies for studying identity development in global contexts, and expand the application of identity theories like the CMAI. The journey of understanding how Afrocentric, international service and place based learning in Ethiopia intersect to shape identity transformation is just beginning, and this study provides a foundational step in a promising and meaningful direction.

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## Appendix A

**Table A1**

*Chronological Tabular Format of Traditionally Afrocentric Studies in Literature Review*

Author/ Year	Goal	Method- ology	Duration/ Frequency	# and Age of Participants	Gender	Curriculum	Measurements	Outcome
Chipungu et al. (2000)	Identify ways to increase participant engagement in Afrocentric Interventions	Program evaluation (of 12 programs)	From less than 20 weeks to more than 40 weeks; Half lasted 28-36 weeks; 2-7 hours a week	N: 2409; Age: 9 to 18	572 Female; 832 Male	Drug education, life and social skills, academic/vo ca-tional support	Qualitative observations, interviews, and document analysis	Africentric preventions use (1) Africentric values/beliefs to mediate application of larger theories (2) positive counter- narratives to equip participants with cognitive tools to resist risky behavior, (3) African and AA history/culture as themes, materials, and activities intended to create positive identity and differentiation.
King et. al (2001)	Evaluate effectiveness of an Afrocentric substance abuse treatment program for juvenile offenders in altering illegal behavior	Program evaluation	Unspecified	N: 321 (281 treatment and 140 control); Age: M=15	Male	Afrocentric drug and alcohol education, life skills, behavior modification , cultural regrounding, sober leisure	# of adjudged felonies, misdemeanors, and court violations, arrests and sentences to probation or prison	Modest effect on reducing criminality up to age 18, then had the same criminality measures as comparison group as adults

Author/ Year	Goal	Methodology	Duration/ Frequency	# & Age of Participants	Gender	Curriculum	Measurements	Outcome
Alford (2003)	Examine and assess the benefits of an Afrocentric ROP program vis-à-vis self-esteem & ethnic identity in youth in out-of-home care	Grounded theory	Weekly for 3-31 months (variability explained by transient nature of this population)	N: 29; 12 to 21 (M=16)	Male	Life skills, African American history, respectfulness toward women & elders	In depth interviews & field notes	Afrocentric program philosophy heightens awareness of African descended identity & strengthens self-esteem and cultural values
Harvey & Hill (2004)	Examine the effects of an Africentric youth & family rites of passage program on at-risk African American youths and their parents	Program evaluation	3 months X 3 cohorts; 8 week orientation + 3-hour sessions 3 times a week for adolescents; Caretakers met monthly	57 treatment participants, 30 control participants; Age: 11.5-14.5	Male	Youth participants: interpersonal skills, peer relationships, & self-esteem; Caregivers: parenting skills, bonding with & advocating for their children, participation in school activities, & political/social involvement	Self-esteem, academic orientation, drug knowledge, racial identity, cultural awareness, & perceived impact of the program	Increase in self-esteem & drug abuse knowledge, Non-significant increase in racial identity (more for program participants than control), no significant increases in academic orientation, no significant differences in measurements for caretakers
Gilbert et al. (2004)	Evaluated the effectiveness of a cultural intervention for increasing cultural values and beliefs	Program Evaluation	15 1.5 hour sessions for unspecified duration	N: 59 (42 treatment & 17 control); Age: 11-13, M=11.82	Female	Jamaa (family) building, Relationships, Intro to Africa and African Culture, Appearances (judging others and healing pain), hygiene, critical consciousness, creativity, leadership, education awareness, life course	Multi-Construct AA Questionnaire, Children's Sex Role Inventory & relational violence subscale of the Frequency of Violent Behaviors scale	Significant increases in ethnic identity and a marginally significant increase in androgynous gender roles for treatment group. Decreased relational aggression.

Author/ Year	GOAL	Method- ology	Duration/ Freq-uecy	# & Age of Partici-pants	Gender	Curriculum	Measurements	Outcome
Whaley & McQueen (2004)	Test the CMAI through post-hoc quant analysis of an Africen-tric prog- ram&real-time qual analysis of interviews w/ graduates	Pilot Study & Program Evaluation	Time of program: Weekly for 1- 2.5 years; InterviewsOne 1/2 hour interview each	N: Time of program 15, Interviews, 3; Age: Time of program 11- 15, Interview 17	Male	Cultural knowledge, identity development , communal relations building, self-control, social skills, and academic excellence.	Social behavior and GPA	Participants improved academic and social behavior while reducing aggressive behavior overall
Whaley & McQueen (2010)	Evaluate intervention effects on implicit &explicit aspects of ethnic-racial identity w/CMAI	Program Evaluation (quantitati ve)	2-hour, weekly sessions for 15 weeks	N: Control: 13, Treatment: 13; Age: Control: 12- 16 (M:13.93) Treatment: 11-18 (M: 14.31)	Male	Cultural knowledge/ identity development , communal relations building, self-control/ social skills acquisition, and academic excellence	The ASBL, SORS-A, TERS	Implicit cognitions were more sensitive to intervention effects than self-reported measures
Whaley et al. (2017)	Test CMAIby evaluating impact of intervention on ethnic- racial identity; Effects of ethnic-racial identity on perceived academic competence & self-esteem; Effects of perceived academic competence & self esteemon violent behavior	Pilot Study/Pro gram evaluation	15 weeks with unspecified frequency	N: Treatment: 10; Control: 11; Age: Treatment M=: 12.4, Control: 12.08	Treatment Female; Control male	Cultural knowledge, ID development , communal relations building, self control, social skills, academic excellence	SORSA, TERS, MIBI Teen, Rosenberg, violent behavior index, SPPA (w/perceived academic competence subscale)	Indirect effect of Africentric socialization on ethnic/racial id via changing socialization attitudes; self esteem as mediator between academic competence and violent behavior

<b>Author/ Year</b>	<b>GOAL</b>	<b>Method- ology</b>	<b>Duration/ Frequency</b>	<b># &amp; Age of Participants</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Curriculum</b>	<b>Measurements</b>	<b>Outcome</b>
Pinckney et al. (2020)	Understand the characteristics that were common among the ten ROP programs examined	Multiple Case Study	Daily/Weekly	N: At least 20; Age: Mostly 11-18	Male; 2  Female; 4  M/F separate; 2  M/F mixed	Substance use, family therapy, parenting, community awareness, self esteem, cultural pride, self appreciation, life/social skills, behavior, academic, African culture, relationships , appearance, media messages, AA women in leadership, faith	Site visits, director interviews, participant/staff focus groups, observations, surveys, and artifacts (curriculum, press releases, and video recordings	7 elements of ROP: (1) Foundational element, (2) 3-phase model, (3) Curricula reflects foundational goals, (4) Adult leader training, (5) Ceremony, (6) New adult member, (7) Program evaluation

**Table A2**

Titles, Topics, and Delivery Method of Curriculum

Session	Predeparture Session 1	Predeparture Session 2	Predeparture Session 3	Predeparture Session 4	Predeparture Session 5	Predeparture Session 6
<b>Title</b>	Culture	Service Learning	Culture	Logistics	Logistics	Logistics
<b>Topics</b>	Food	Ethics, methods, guidelines	Greetings, customs, housing	Visas, passports, waivers, consent forms & releases	Visas, passports, waivers, consent forms & releases	Visas, passports, waivers, consent forms & releases
<b>Delivery Method</b>	Visit Ethiopian restaurant	Interactive lesson	Interactive presentation	Presentation with parents	Presentation with parents	Presentation with parents
Session	Session 1	Session 2	Session 3	Session 4	Session 5	Session 6
<b>Title</b>	Who Am I?	Cross Cultural Communication	Independence Day	Geography and Ethiopian History	Community	Natural Resources
<b>Topics</b>	Identity (general)	Simplifying, avoiding slang, nonverbal cues, local etiquette	Independence days across cultures (4th of July, Juneteenth, Battle of Adwa), Berlin Conference, Colonization in Africa	Tour King Michael's palace in Wollo, strategic placement of government buildings	Local history, lifestyle, and culture (Hike in Ethiopia)	Water infrastructure in rural communities
<b>Delivery Method</b>	Group Discussion	Group Discussion	Lecture (with video)	Hands-on tour of palace	Lake hike with on-site monastery, creative-writing	Hands-on experience at a community water-well

Session	Session 7	Session 8	Session 9	Session 10	Session 11	Session 12
<b>Title</b>	Africa's Contributions to Science	Cross Cultural Communication	Cross-Cultural Solutions in Education	Cross-Cultural Communication	Chess Tournament	Service Learning
<b>Topics</b>	African history (Ishango bone, Timbuktu, ancient Egypt & medicine)	Chess teams practice conversing over formal lunch	Comparing education challenges in Ethiopia and African American communities	Traditional Ethiopian coffee ceremony, starting fire, children's games	"Think before you move"	Identifying community needs and cross-cultural solutions
<b>Delivery Method</b>	Guest lecturer at KS	Paired conversations with interpreters over formal lunch	Panel discussion with Q&A at local university	Student-led activities	Chess tournament	Paired interviews, group meeting

Session	Session 13	Session 14	Session 15	Session 16	Session 17	Session 18
<b>Title</b>	Religion in Ethiopia	Religion in Ethiopia	Religion in Ethiopia / Geography of the Nile	Geography of Great Rift Valley	Ethiopia in the Bible and beyond	Cultural Immersion
<b>Topics</b>	History of the Orthodox Church	History of Lalibela churches	History of Lake Tana and its monastic churches, the Blue Nile	Role of mountains in cultural preservation	History of Queen Sheba & King Solomon	Bargaining/shopping at the market
<b>Delivery Method</b>	Lecture with video	Guided tour of Lalibela churches	Lecture, visit Lake Tana	Hands-on during bus ride through Great Rift Valley	Presentation on the bus & creative writing assignment	Independent shopping in groups without a translator

<b>Session</b>	<b>Session 19</b>	<b>Session 20</b>
<b>Title</b>	Children's Cardiac Center of Ethiopia	Cultural Heritage National Museum of Ethiopia
<b>Topics</b>	Community	Ethiopian languages and history
<b>Delivery Method</b>	Hands-on guided tour of cardiac center	Hands-on guided tour of National Museum

**Table A3**

## Original Program Itinerary

<i>Day</i>	<i>Program</i>
Friday June 9 Day 1	Depart Atlanta
Saturday, June 10 Day 2	Arrive in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia
Sunday, June 11 Day 3	Discussion topic “Who Am I?” Travel to Dessie Lake Hyke Monasteries
Monday, June 12 Day 4	Discussion topic “Geographical Connection to History” Merho Gebi – Crown Prince – and Ayiteyef - Negus Michael Palace Tour
Tuesday, June 13 Day 5	Students will travel by chartered vehicle to K Visit the K School Resource Center including mountain side neighborhoods Arrive at K School for a Tour Guest Speaker (lecture on Africa’s contributions to science) Travel back to hotel in Dessie
Wednesday, June 14 Day 6	Students travel by chartered Vehicle to K All students travel to Dessie for formal lunch Tour local university Panel Discussion (Cross Cultural Solutions in Education)
Thursday, June 15 Day 7	Students travel by Chartered bus to Kutaber Free-play for all students Students travel to Dessie
Friday, June 16 Day 8	Students travel to Kutaber Chess Tournament Serve food to community and players (catered locally) Service-Learning End of program and return to hotel in Dessie
Saturday, June 17 Day 9	Travel to Lalibela by chartered bus Site seeing
Sunday, June 18 Day 10	Tour Lalibela churches and learn the history
Monday, June 19 Day 11	Travel to Bahir-Dar
Tuesday, June 20 Day 12	Lecture- history of Lake Tana and Blue Niles Falls
Monday, June 21 Day 13	Depart for Addis Arrive Addis
Tuesday, June 22 Day 14	Children’s Cardiac Center of Ethiopia Tour Dinner with cultural show
Wednesday, June 23 Day 15	Cultural Heritage National Museum of Ethiopia Students shop in the market Depart for Atlanta

**Table A4**

Journal Entry Prompts

Prompt 9	Prompt 10	Prompt 11	Prompt 12	Prompt 13	Prompt 14	Prompt 15	Prompt 16
Free Writing	What lyric from this song "Zion" stood out to you? & What did you learn from the lecture about Zion today?	Notes from Lalibela Tour & Bus Incident Reflection	Religion and Society-Importance and comparing to U.S.	Creative Writing Prompt	Questions for Children's Heart Hospital Director & Founder	Notes from History Museum	3 new Words to Describe You
Day 9	Day 10	Day 11	Day 12	Day 13	Day 14	Day 15	Day 16
Team Building	Religion in Ethiopia	Religion in Ethiopia	Religion and Society	Religious History Ethiopia	Healthcare & Culture	Ethiopian History	
Lake, Interview 3, Team Building, Free Time	Drive to Lalibela, Song Lyric Journal Prompt, Zion/Israel lecture, Christianity in Ethiopia (video)	Tour of Lalibela, Bus Incident	Travel to Bahir Dar, Free Day	Travel to Addis	Hospital Tour & Cultural Show	History Museum Tour	Arrive in U.S.
	x	x	x	x		x	
	x	x	x	x		x	x
x	x	x		x	x		x
	x	x	x	x			x
	x	x		x	x	x	x
	x	x	x			x	x
	x	x	x	x		x	x

Prompt #	Prompt 1	Prompt 2	Prompt 3	Prompt 4	Prompt 5	Prompt 6	Prompt 7	Prompt 8
Prompt Title	Describe your journey to the airport	Describe your journey to Ethiopia	Interview a Friend	Lake Reflection	Questions for Ethiopian Students	Free Writing	Free Writing	Free Writing
Day #	Day 1	Day 2	Day 3	Day 4	Day 5	Day 6	Day 7	Day 8
Day's Topic	NA	NA	Who Am I?	Community	Cross-Cultural Education	Education	Resilience/Grit	
Activities	Trip to Airport	U.S. to Ethiopia	To Dessie	Lake, Hair cuts, Mikael's Palace	School tour, Lecture on Africa's Contributions, Soccer, Dancing, Water pump, Interview T1, Dinner with university president	1 on 1 with K Kids, Lunch with K kids, University Tour & Panel, Bus Dance, Interview T2	Free day with K kids, making coffee, chopping wood, elder blessing ceremony, coffee ceremony, game exchange, some shopped	Chess Tournament, Games, Service Learning, Good-byes
S1								
S2	x	x	x		x	x		
S3	x	x	x		x	x		
S4	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
S5	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
S6								x
S7	x		x	x				
S8	x	x	x		x			x

**Table A5**

## Interview Time-points and Prompt Examples

<b>INTERVIEW</b>	<b>Interview 1</b>	<b>Interview 1</b>	<b>Interview 2</b>	<b>Interview 2 &amp; 3</b>
<b>TIME POINT</b>	Day 5	Day 6	Day 9	Day 15
<b>PARTICIPANTS</b>	Participants 1-3	Participants 4-8	Participants 1 & 2	Participants 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6
<b>EXAMPLES OF PROMPTS</b>	<p>When you first heard of Ethiopia, what did you think about it?</p> <p>When you first arrived, what moved you? What inspired you? What touched you?</p> <p>How is Ethiopia different than where you live?</p>	<p>What has been surprising about this experience?</p> <p>How are you feeling right now?</p> <p>What are some things you learned while you've been here?</p> <p>Do you think it's beneficial to travel to other countries?</p>	<p>What did we do yesterday?</p> <p>What do you think are the biggest cultural differences you've seen between here and in America?</p>	<p>What are some moments that you had that created an impact?</p> <p>What would you say that you learned from this experience? Has your perception of Africa changed since you got here?</p>

## Appendix B

NAME:



### Collective Hands Participant Pre-Survey

Please do your best to answer the following questions as thoroughly as you can. Feel free to attach additional paper if you need more space.

1. List three words that describe/define you. (Examples include smart, funny, music, tall, spiritual, etc...)
2. What makes your life distinct as a black person in the United States? (Examples include dealing with racism, where you can get a haircut, access to resources, representation in the media, job opportunities, etc...)
3. What does it mean to be Black?
4. Why is it important to visit other places specifically Ethiopia?
5. What do you expect to see when you arrive in Ethiopia?
6. Do you think this trip will teach you new things about yourself? Like what?



## Appendix C

### Focused Coding Thematic Analysis for Day 01-02

#### Day 01-02: Observations Themes

##### **1. Dynamic Sensory Experience: Discomfort, Excitement, and Social Bonding:**

The participants' early journey was marked by a rich blend of sensory overload—characterized by physical discomforts such as ear-popping, nausea, and headaches—balanced by moments of excitement and novelty. While the challenges of long flights and new environments were clear, participants also expressed enjoyment and moments when these difficulties were catalysts to forming deeper bonds with each other. The dynamic nature of their sensory experiences, where discomfort and excitement were intertwined, played a critical role in how participants processed their observations.

- **Physical Discomfort and Challenges Quotes**
  - "When we took off my ears popped. That left me with a headache." (Journal Entries Simon)
  - "Then my ears started popping a lot at the end of the ride. It gave me a headache. I was glad to get off the plane." (Journal Entries Reuben)
  - "The ride was ok; I got a little dizzy but I was alright." (Journal Entries Issachar)
- **Excitement and Novelty Quotes**
  - "This plane ride to Lome then Addis Ababa was the best plane experience. It was a long ride but so comfortable." (Journal Entries Levi)
  - "The best thing I LOVED about this flight is that they had charger pads for our phones which was a big relief for me." (Journal Entries Levi)
  - "The plane ride was fun." (Journal Entries Dan)
- **Social Bonding Through Shared Experiences Quotes**
  - "Issachar wouldn't stop talking about how good looking they were. He was scared to talk to one of them, so I went and talked to her for him." (Journal Entries Reuben)
  - "When we got to the airport, I was checked for any weapons, and as soon as we took off, my ears popped." (Journal Entries Simon)
  - "Then we went down to the lobby to gather our suitcases on the charter van. Then we ate breakfast and me, Issachar, Simon, and Reuben made a new drink called NJ." (Journal Entries Dan)

**Conclusion:** This theme reflects the dynamic sensory experience of the participants, highlighting how their physical discomforts were balanced by excitement and social bonding. The newness of the environment and the challenges of travel not only impacted them physically but also gave rise to moments of shared laughter, support, and connection. By focusing on both the challenging and enjoyable aspects of their journey, participants processed their experiences in ways that were deeply social, sensory, and emotionally charged, setting the tone for the rest of the program.

##### **2. Novelty of the Environment and Cultural Shock**

The newness of the participants' surroundings—both during travel and upon arrival—was frequently observed. Participants expressed awe and fascination with things they had only seen on TV or had not experienced before. Several participants reflected on how their experience at the airport and during the flight felt "unreal" compared to what they had seen on TV.

- "It was unreal, all of those times I've seen airplane scenes on TV. I actually seen it in person." (Journal Entries Levi)

**Conclusion:** This theme suggests that participants were in the early stages of grappling with cultural differences, which is an important step in processing their overall experiences.

### **Day 01-02: Feelings Themes**

While some quotes are duplicated, the emotional lens in the "Feelings" set adds depth to how participants processed their observations from the "Observations" set. Thus, the two sets reinforce each other, with most of the data (roughly 70-80%) overlapping. The additional data in the "Feelings" subset adds depth to the "Observations" by providing a richer emotional context that reveals how participants internalized their experiences. While the "Observations" data set focuses on what the participants saw, heard, and experienced externally, the "Feelings" subset explores their internal emotional reactions, which helps to explain how they processed these observations on a deeper, more personal level.

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#### **1. Excitement Transforms Observations into Meaningful Experiences**

In the "Observations" dataset, participants described seeing new things, such as being on a plane for the first time or traveling to a new country. In the "Feelings" subset, this external observation is paired with intense emotional reactions, which highlight the transformative impact of these moments.

- **Levi (Observations):** "As we waited and the plane was delayed making it arrive at 1:45 the time we began boarding."
- **Levi (Feelings):** "I was extremely excited. The fact that I would be on a plane and on the way to another country was...a once-in-a-lifetime chance that I can remember and tell." (Journal Entries Levi)

The observation of waiting at the airport is enhanced by the excitement felt at the prospect of international travel. This emotion transforms a routine airport experience into something that feels like a milestone.

#### **2. Nervousness and Anxiety Add Complexity to Simple Observations**

In the "Observations" data, participants report physical sensations like dizziness and discomfort, but in the "Feelings" data, these sensations are tied to deeper anxieties, giving a fuller picture of how participants were processing these unfamiliar experiences.

- **Dan (Observations):** "We got on the plane to depart to NJ. The plane ride was fun, uncomfortable, no space. We just got to the NJ Airport." (Journal Entries Dan)
- **Dan (Feelings):** "6-9-17 Leaving XXX (9:14) felt happy and nervous." (Journal Entries Dan)

Here, Dan's observation of the physical aspects of the plane ride ("fun, uncomfortable") is deepened by the emotional context of being both happy and nervous. The nervousness adds a layer of complexity, indicating that while they may have observed discomfort on the plane, there was also an internal tension as they dealt with emotional uncertainty.

#### **3. Social Connections Help Participants Cope with Negative Emotions**

While the "Observations" data often focuses on physical or external experiences, the "Feelings" subset shows how participants used social connections to navigate and manage these experiences emotionally. The feelings data adds depth to the observation of social interactions by showing their emotional importance.

- **Reuben (Observations):** "Issachar wouldn't stop talking about how good-looking she was. He was scared to talk to one of them, so I went and talked to her for him... but she didn't give us her number" (Journal Entries Reuben)
- **Reuben (Feelings):** "Issachar was disappointed. We joked around with him a lot after that because she was on the same plane as us." (Journal Entries Reuben)

The observation of helping Issachar talk to someone attractive becomes more meaningful when paired with the emotional context—Issachar's disappointment and how the group used humor to cope. This adds depth to the bond forming among participants and how humor helped mitigate disappointment.

### **Day 01-02: Interacting with Place Themes**

The themes derived from "Interacting with Place" serve to further enhance both the "Feelings" and "Observations" datasets by providing a contextual backdrop for participants' experiences. The overlap between these sets—approximately 70-80%—reveals how participants' emotional reactions are often rooted in their interactions with their surroundings. For instance, observations of new and unfamiliar environments are enriched by the excitement and awe expressed in the "Feelings" subset, illustrating how sensory encounters prompt significant emotional responses. As participants navigate these novel spaces, their feelings of excitement or discomfort deeply inform their observations, allowing for a more nuanced understanding of their environment. This interplay suggests that the way participants engage with their physical surroundings not only shapes their perceptions but also evokes strong emotional reactions, reinforcing the importance of context in shaping their overall experiences.

1. **Excitement and Amazement in Novel Environments:** Several participants were struck by how new and unfamiliar the environments felt, but this sparked excitement and wonder.
  - **Levi:** "We had to weigh the bags, show passports, and get our tickets... as if I were in a maze. I felt it was unreal, all of those times I've seen airplane scenes on TV. I actually seen it in person." (Journal Entries Levi)

Here, Levi's amazement at interacting with an airport scene reflects the excitement of being in a new space. The overwhelming sense of novelty is tempered by Levi framing it as something familiar from TV, which helps make the environment more manageable.

2. **Physical Discomfort in the New, Comfort in Familiar Routines:** Despite the excitement, participants also described moments of physical discomfort and emotional strain when dealing with the unfamiliar, particularly on long flights.
  - **Dan:** "The plane ride was fun, uncomfortable, no space. When my ears popped, I was mad, and I got a headache." (Journal Entries Dan)

Dan's interaction with the cramped environment of the plane led to frustration and discomfort, showing how new environments can challenge participants. The sense of being confined and uncomfortable highlights the difficulty of processing unfamiliar surroundings, but Dan still calls the ride "fun," indicating a complex emotional response.

3. **Seeking Comfort in Familiar Technology and Social Interactions:** Amidst the discomfort and newness, participants sought out familiar comforts, such as technology or connecting with peers. These familiar points helped participants create a sense of stability in the unfamiliar.

- **Levi:** "The best thing I LOVED about this flight is that they had charger pads for our phones which was a big relief for me." (Journal Entries Levi)

Levi finds comfort and satisfaction in something as familiar as phone charger pads, which provide a sense of control and relief during the long, challenging journey. This emphasizes how participants use technology to cope with the unknown.

- **Dan:** "Then we ate breakfast, and me, Issachar, Simon, and Reuben made a new drink called NJ. Then we started talking about feelings and emotions." (Journal Entries Dan)

In this case, Dan and their peers navigate the unfamiliar environment by engaging in familiar social rituals—sharing food and making drinks together. This interaction not only brings them comfort but also allows them to process their emotions as a group, turning an unfamiliar setting into a space for connection and bonding.

### **Conclusion:**

These themes represent mixed emotional responses and seeking comfort in the familiar while navigating the new. They highlight the dynamic way participants processed their environments. They were excited and amazed by the newness of their surroundings, yet often found it physically uncomfortable or overwhelming. To balance these mixed emotions, participants anchored themselves in familiar routines—like using technology or interacting with peers—which provided them with comfort and stability as they navigated through these new experiences. This emotional balance between excitement and discomfort allowed them to better process their experiences in a meaningful way.

### Day 01-02: Obstacles

The "Obstacles" themes encapsulate the various challenges participants faced during their journey, highlighting how these difficulties intertwine with their "Observations," "Feelings," and "Interacting with Place" themes. The data shows a significant overlap—roughly 70-80%—between these codes, emphasizing that physical discomforts and social adjustments are often experienced in tandem with the participants' observations and emotional responses. For example, while participants noted their physical discomforts in the "Observations" dataset, their emotional responses captured in the "Feelings" subset provide insight into the internal struggles accompanying these challenges. Furthermore, the "Interacting with Place" themes demonstrate how participants' navigation through unfamiliar environments was marked by both obstacles and opportunities for connection, allowing them to draw strength from social interactions amidst discomfort. This integration reveals that obstacles are not merely barriers; they are critical elements that shape participants' perceptions, emotional states, and interactions with their surroundings, fostering resilience and adaptability throughout the experience.

#### 1. Physical Discomforts and Sensory Overload

Participants frequently mentioned the physical challenges associated with travel, such as long flights, ear-popping, and turbulence, which contributed to an initial sense of discomfort and unease. Despite these discomforts, many expressed excitement about the new experiences, indicating an ongoing negotiation between physical discomfort and the emotional thrill of travel.

- **Dan (Journal Entry):** "When we got to the XXX Airport we got on the plane. I wasn't scared. My stomach was twisted."
- **Levi (Journal Entry):** "The only thing I didn't like about the flight was the turbulence and suddenly the exit alert started. It scared me but hey... it happens."

This theme highlights participants' initial physical and sensory challenges, capturing how they were processing the experience by balancing discomfort with excitement.

#### 2. Social Adjustments and Interpersonal Dynamics

Participants encountered social obstacles, including navigating group dynamics, adjusting to new travel companions, and handling unexpected changes in seating or travel arrangements. These minor frustrations were often counterbalanced by moments of bonding, laughter, and shared activities, which helped participants adjust socially and emotionally to the journey.

- **Issachar (Journal Entry):** "I was upset I didn't get to sit next to the people I wanted but I still saw them."
- **Dan (Journal Entry):** "Me, Issachar, Simon, and Reuben made a new drink called NJ. Then we started talking about feelings and emotion."

This theme reveals how participants processed their experiences by navigating both minor social challenges and bonding moments, using these interactions to establish comfort and familiarity in a new setting.

#### 3. Excitement and Awe Amidst Novel Experiences

Despite various obstacles, participants expressed a sense of awe and excitement at the novelty of international travel. For many, aspects such as the in-flight service, seeing new landscapes, and being in an unfamiliar country were thrilling experiences that often outweighed any initial discomfort.

- **Levi (Journal Entry):** "The plane ride to Lome then Addis Ababa was the best plane experience... they gave us meals, served dinner... They gave us blankets, a mask... When we landed in Lome, I believe it was beautiful."
- **Levi (Journal Entry):** "As we watched the plane, I watched the small TV in front of me... the sight was amazing."

This theme captures participants' initial excitement and fascination with their surroundings, illustrating how the newness of travel sparked awe that helped them process and mitigate their initial anxieties and challenges.

**Conclusion:** These overarching themes from **Day 01-02 Obstacles** reflect participants' varied processing of early travel experiences, showing how they negotiated physical discomforts, social adjustments, and moments of wonder as they settled into the journey.