

## Thug Life as Framework for Stages of Consciousness: Examining How Black Male MOB Youth Navigate Processes of Alienation

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### ABSTRACT

This study examines the impact that My Other Brother (MOB) has on K-12 Black male youth in the MOB community organization within Oakland Unified School District (OUSD). In critically examining the narratives of 10 low-income K-12 Black male students in MOB: This study utilizes Tupac Shakur's construct of Thug Life as a theoretical and analytical lens in assessing how Black males in the MOB program navigate processes of alienation. Navigating processes of alienation was placed in context with four critical stages in alignment with Thug Life: These stages emphasized, 1) MOB students' recognition of racism/inequality on an individual level; 2) a recognition of structural level inequality of which they are members of a community of oppressed; 3) a recognition of pride and solidarity in communal struggle; and 4) a political praxis to resist structural racism/dehumanization through education as a function of Black male success. The 4th stage of Thug Life, - MOB youth's political praxis to resist structural dehumanization, is most important given that this stage of Thug Life is a stage of justice. Justice is grounded in addressing real world issues that youth in this study experience, such as poverty. How can we re-imagine education policy and practice to support Black male youth in receiving access to tangible financial opportunities as part of their education experience while being intentional about understanding that Black solidarity and community is key to this process? Education leaders and Policy makers must support those that are already grounded in community that can do the necessary work to achieve Black male success outcomes as defined by students.

### KEYWORDS

Brotherhood, Black youth; racial identity; resistance; social justice, solidarity, Tupac Shakur.

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## INTRODUCTION

Black males in America are being systematically oppressed with respect to health, education, employment, income, and overall well-being. The most reliable data consistently indicate that Black males constitute a segment of the population that is distinguished by hardships, disadvantages, and vulnerability (Noguera, 2008). This especially connects to how Black males are treated in schools. Black people represent five percent of California's K-12 student population, yet account for 18% of all the state's K-12 suspensions (Harris III & Wood, 2013). Moreover, Black males still have the highest suspension rate, are at the bottom of academic achievement, and are disproportionately to this day, still pushed out of school at alarming rates (Duncan, 2002; Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008; Noguera, 2003, 2012). To be clear, the problem is anti-Black racism and structural racialization and how it impacts young Black males in and outside of educational experiences.

The findings presented in this article are drawn from a program evaluation of the My Other Brother (MOB) program, which serves as an intervention to the Black male deficits that are highlighted in the above data surrounding Black male experiences in K-12 and the larger society. MOB aims to reverse this trend by improving educational and cultural content knowledge while fostering Black male student agency to resist oppression. In connection to MOB, Tupac Shakur was a Black revolutionary, a community organizer, Hip Hop artist/rapper, actor and poet that became a voice for the urban Black masses during the 1990s and remains so even in present day. Given that Tupac Shakur's life work highlights resistance, agency, and political contestation against structural racialization: We used Tupac as a theoretical and analytical tool to illuminate MOB youth narratives found in this study.

## PURPOSE OF RESEARCH

### **My Other Brother (MOB)**

The purpose of My Other Brother (MOB) is to empower Black men and provide them with a counter space and sense of community that will allow students to utilize each other as systems of support to aid in on their success. The core values of MOB are unity, Black culture, culturally validating identity development and K-12 outreach in urban, low-income communities. Rooted in these core values, MOB objective is to develop students into scholars/leaders and to establish a sense of belonging for urban Black youth rooted in mentorship, culture, and identity.

In accomplishing this goal, MOB partners with the Oakland Unified School District, with Castlemont High School as MOB's main headquarters for collective wrap around support services and mentorship of the Castlemont Football program. In addition, working with non-student athletes, MOB contracts with Dewey High School, Mt Diablo Unified School District (MDUSD) Riverview Middle School and works with youth on an individual basis at McClymonds High School.

As part of this work, K-12 MOB youth partake in community-based research projects where students analyze the existing issues and strengths that they see in their surrounding

Oakland community to impact practice based on how they construct knowledge. Most critically, MOB has a youth peer mentor program of which mentors are paid to develop close connections with K-12 mentees and their families to support students along their experiences in school, and their life experiences outside of school to impact the holistic development of the student. These grassroots, community-oriented approaches to our MOB work sets the foundation for conducting this study. Furthermore, this study is grounded in the experiences of myself, student participants, and the larger inner-city Black community that we are members of.

Based on 4 years of MOB programming, the basis of this study was to determine what all this work means to Black students that are part of this organization. In what ways, if any, has the program's focus on racial justice, solidarity and pride assisted students as they attempted to navigate spaces and practices of alienation? Before we can answer this question, it is first necessary to further contextualize Tupac's relevance to this study. Tupac utilized the term "nigga" as an acronym meaning: Never Ignorant Getting Goals Accomplished. There are two key inferences that must be made here. First, Tupac is articulating a political project not simply in solidarity *with*, but as originating *in* and entrenched *with* the oppressed Black masses. Secondly, with the acronym that's objective is to *accomplish*, he is proclaiming a political praxis that is on the terms of the Black masses. Now it should be abundantly clear how and why Tupac is so crucial to this study. He is articulating a particular understanding of racial pride. It is a racial pride and identity development that is defined by, and in the terms of the oppressed Black masses from predominately working class and low-income communities. And with his conceptualization of "getting goals accomplished," Tupac is defining a notion of success that counters many advertised by academics. In other words, success is defined by the people. In these ways, Tupac enables us to analyze some aspects of Black cultural practices that others may deem pathological.

Accordingly, this article explores how students in the MOB program are impacted by the practices within the MOB program and why these practices are important. The objective is to make meaning of 10 low-income Black male students' experiences in the MOB program and contextualize the outcomes based on their experiences. Further, this research connects student experiences in the MOB program to tenants-' of racial pride, community, and solidarity that are embedded in Tupac's construct of Thug Life as a function of Black male success.

### **Eurocentrism, Knowledge Production and The Myth of Objectivity**

This work is rooted in the critical ethnic studies tradition. As such, it questions the underlying and foundational assumption that knowledge is produced independent of geopolitical contexts. Critical Ethnic studies scholars call for a recognition and critique of Eurocentrism. For these scholars, the historical processes of colonialism affirmed Europe and its forms of knowledge as the center of the world while simultaneously 'subalternizing' the forms of knowledge found in its periphery (Brown and Barganier, 2018). For these scholars, the social sciences are founded on the Eurocentric myth that knowledge can be produced objectively. Instead, Ethnic Studies

scholars argue for an acknowledgement of the social, political context of the researcher and for a critique from the perspective of the oppressed (Tuhiwai-Smith 1999). This study is guided by these principles. By acknowledging the relationship of the production of knowledge to relations of power, I decentered traditional methods of research and engaged the research subjects as active participants in the construction of knowledge. In this sense, this research was a collaborative effort between myself and other MOB members.

Given that this work follows this tradition, my study differs from traditional works in several key ways: (1). Conceptually: I take a fundamentally different approach to concepts such as “success.” I understand success by means of students gaining a sense of pride and confidence to resist and interrupt forms of coloniality (which may show up differently from student to student.) (2). Methodologically: To meet these stated ends, we utilized a Black Emancipatory Action Research Approach (BEAR) to allow both myself and students to make meaning of their interviews and data in a Black cultural way experienced by people of African descent (Akom, 2011). (3). In other words, I have attempted to construct a methodology that privileges the knowledge production of my participants. Therefore, Tupac Shakur serves as a theoretician that can illuminate the experiences of my subjects with more clarity than traditional education research. (4). Analytically: My data analysis is grounded in the experience of my research participants and how the participants and I constructed meaning making of data together in connection to how we analyzed certain Tupac Shakur lyrics in connection to the data. (5). Accessibility: This work is intended to serve as a lens that is for the community and by the community. This work is for Blacks of the community overall to tap into their very own community cultural power to liberate themselves.

### **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: T.H.U.G. L.I.F.E.**

Because MOB is rooted in the experiences of urban Black males, the program aligns itself with many of the principles espoused by Tupac Shakur. These principles are central to the work of the program itself. In order to adequately measure how the program utilizes these principles in helping students navigate processes of racialization, this study uses a new set of concepts related to Tupac Shakur’s development of T.H.U.G. L.I.F.E. These concepts allow me to explore and make sense of the experiences of MOB students.

The Hate U Gave Little Infants Fucks Everyone (T.H.U.G. L.I.F.E or Thug Life) framework of Tupac Shakur within Hip Hop in particular, is a new type of Black cultural capital that instills confidence, racial pride, and resiliency in Black people to utilize their struggles as a source of empowerment that allows them to navigate life against all odds (Shakur, T., & Shakur, M, 1992). Black males identify with Thug Life because the hate that has been bestowed upon Black men as young children is seeds of oppression and will eventually blow up in the faces of colonial systems (Shakur, 1993). Shakur further conveys that a thug is a person who comes from rough conditions and who is oppressed, that still rises above to empower themselves (Shakur, 1993). In connection to community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005), Thug Life is embedded in forms of

communal, familial, cultural, and resistant capital nurtured through the code of Thug Life for Black men and women.

There are four key concepts that I have developed related to Thug Life. These provide an opportunity to understand the experiences of MOB students with nuance and depth. Following the table below, I provide a conceptualization of each of these concepts. In this study, I use these concepts as a framework to do a discourse analysis in which I am looking for these themes in the data.

**Table 1.** Thug Life as a Conceptual Framework

<b>Thug Life as a Conceptual Framework</b>	<b>Stages of Consciousness</b>
<b>They don't give a fuck about us</b>	Recognition of inequality/individualized racism and dehumanization
<b>I Guess It's Cause We Black That We Targets</b>	Recognition of a community of the oppressed
<b>Conquer the Enemy Armed With Education</b>	Recognition of communal struggle/solidarity
<b>Never Ignorant Getting Goals Accomplished</b>	Political praxis rooted in poverty/racial alienation: MOBISM *Note, Tupac expressed many militant frameworks via taking up arms to resist the police/government in this praxis. Our MOB youth, in contrast, focused more on resisting poverty by means of economic community building as part of this fourth stage

### **“They Don't Give a Fuck About Us”: Recognition of Inequality/Individualized Racism and Dehumanization**

One theme that emerged from the data was student recognition of racism. Several students expressed frustration over feelings that they were frequently subjected to racial discrimination. These sentiments are captured in the Tupac song, “they don't give a fuck about us.” In this song, Tupac describes the racial oppression that Blacks are confronted with on a global scale. I use this concept to describe a beginning stage in the development of consciousness when students realize the discrimination that they face based on their Blackness. Students describe a process of understanding the reality of what they must face as Black people. This experience with racism often follows them to campus. Although during this stage, students speak of individualized

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experiences of racism, such as “I” and “me,” they begin to make connections between individual and collective experiences with racism. This understanding is captured in the Tupac phrase “they don’t give a fuck about us.”

**“I Guess It’s Cause We Black That We Targets”: Recognition of A Community of the Oppressed**

In this stage, students make clear connections with their personal experiences with racism to structural forms of domination. For example, students begin to realize that they are part of a community of others that share a common experience with racism. In this stage students often use words like “we,” “our,” and “us” when speaking about racism. These sentiments are captured in the Tupac song, “letter to the president;” in particular, the line from the song “I guess it’s cause we Black that we targets.” In this line, Tupac describes the racial oppression that Blacks face on a systematic level as a community that experiences this shared struggle. I use this concept to describe another stage in the development of consciousness when students realize the discrimination that they face based on their Blackness on the individual level (personal experiences with discrimination on campus and in the real world outside of campus), are experiences that Black men face as a collective. This experience with racism often extends beyond the K-12 campus. Although this is a stage where students speak of experiences of racism as a community, such as “our” and “us,” they also begin to develop a sense of pride in this collective struggle and begin to gain a consciousness, - a Black identity, that is grounded in their community struggle. This understanding is captured in the Tupac phrase “I guess it’s cause we Black that we targets.”

**“Conquer the Enemy Armed with Education”: Recognition of Communal Struggle/Solidarity**

In the “conquer the enemy armed with education” stage, students begin to identify the need to resist collectively against the forms of racism that they have identified. Students begin to develop a collective sense of pride in the same cultural attributes that they are often chastised for. In other words, students see their Blackness as both tying them to a community of the oppressed and as an archive for resistance. During this stage, students begin to identify the need to educate themselves in order to resist the racism and poverty that they are facing. These sentiments are captured in the Tupac song, “words of wisdom;” in particular, the line from the song “conquer the enemy armed with education.” In this line, Tupac defines education as knowledge of self/culture and the historical struggle that Blacks face as a collective. Tupac uses education as a political praxis to establish collective Black pride, grounded in collective Black struggle, to resist oppression. I use this concept to describe a stage where students develop a consciousness to use their education to resist aspects of discrimination by constructing solutions to their collective Black struggles via seeking out opportunities to better themselves and their communities.

**“Never Ignorant Getting Goals Accomplished: N.I.G.G.A.”: Political praxis rooted in poverty and racial alienation (MOBISM)**

In this stage of development students begin to engage in political praxis rooted in their sense of pride in being Black. Students have recognized their shared experiences with racism, have expressed a collective affirmation in their Blackness and have made a commitment to resist the structures that they have identified. These sentiments are captured in the Tupac phrase, “N.I.G.G.A: Never Ignorant Getting Goals Accomplished.” In this phrase, Tupac has expressed a political praxis that is grounded in pride in collective Black struggle-producing an individual and collective commitment to resist poverty and discrimination in a way that is for the Black community and by the Black community. I use this concept to describe a stage where students develop a consciousness, an eternal commitment to resistance and justice by the means of whatever justice looks like to the collective Black community and themselves as individual members of that community.

Whether it be students’ commitment to engaging and building with the urban Black youth as Peer Mentors, seeking out paid opportunities, trade schools and college applications, or utilize their Black pride to resist discrimination in their personal encounters in school/life: Their justice aspirations are completely grounded in their own meaning making systems in alignment with the collective oppressed Black masses. Dyson conveyed the term nigga in connection with Thug Life as a praxis to judge and critique the anti-Black society that constructed the term nigger in the first place (Dyson, 2006). The term “Nigger,”- is used to insult Blacks and push a subservient identity that is under White coloniality. “Nigga,” in contrast, is the Black counter term to Nigger that is embedded in Black pride and empowerment in a collective struggle to overthrow the very institution that created the term Nigger (Dyson, 2006).

**Racism and Black Male Educational Experiences**

Existing literature discusses the impact that racism in education has on Black male student attitudes, experiences, and retention in education (Harper, 2006). Moreover, the literature highlights the importance of affirming Black males’ racialized and cultural/community realities to impact Black male success in schooling (Emdin, 2011). The problem with much of the literature (even the literature that incorporates student culture and race in schooling), is that it focuses on academic success and not on students’ process of racialization as the primary focus. Therefore, much of the literature is not sufficient for understanding how students develop a critical consciousness. In other words, a student could say “fuck school.” Much of the literature would understand that as academic failure. However, there is something more nuanced happening and in order to see what is happening we need to develop a new framework. That framework is provided by Tupac Shakur. When we analyze phenomena through a Tupac Shakur THUG LIFE lens, we can see that the key factor is that the knowledge and practices of Black youth should be first and foremost understood through their own experiences. Below, I provide discourse analysis of Tupac lyrics in order to demonstrate his conceptual utility.

I see no changes, wake up in the morning and I ask myself,  
 Is life worth livin'? Should I blast myself? [*Recognition of racism at the individual level*]  
 I'm tired of bein' poor and, even worse, I'm black  
 My stomach hurts so I'm lookin' for a purse to snatch [*Recognition of racism at the individual level*]  
 Cops give a damn about a negro  
 Pull the trigger, kill a nigga, he's a hero [*Recognition of Community of Oppressed*]  
 We gotta make a change. It's time for us as a people to start makin' some changes  
 [*Recognition of Communal Struggle/Solidarity*]  
 Let's change the way we eat  
 Let's change the way we live  
 And let's change the way we treat each other  
 You see, the old way wasn't workin'  
 So it's on us to do what we gotta do to survive [*Political Praxis Rooted in Poverty and Racial alienation*]. (Shakur, 1998)

While school success and the achievement gap solely, is important, primarily focusing on the achievement gap for Black males does not speak to the overall historical experiences and realities that shape Black male students outside of school regarding systematic racism and poverty. Furthermore, achievement gap politics is not praxis for taking up forms of resistance and justice against the institution. Instead, respectability politics via the academic achievement gap, privileges the institution. Tupac helps us understand that a sense of solidarity amongst Blacks, pride in culture and identity, and affirmation of racialized experiences as a lifestyle of resistance against oppression/poverty, - privileges Black males, thus, creating success by their own values and standards.

## METHODOLOGY AND DATA ANALYSIS

This research aimed to explore the racialized experiences of young Black males. In particular, my interests lay in the ways in which young Black males experience schooling as a process of alienation, the ways in which they navigate these processes, and what role programs that embody the solidarity, racial justice, community/solidarity and racial pride identity, philosophy and practices of Tupac (can) play on helping students navigate these experiences. Undergirding this interest is a deep concern for how these students live their Blackness and how these spaces of alienation can be mitigated in a manner that leaves this Blackness intact.

In essence, this work simply asks: What does MOB mean to Black male students in the MOB program?

### Research Design

To examine how Black males are impacted by community, solidarity, racial pride, and racial justice in navigating processes of alienation, this study featured 10 High School male students within the MOB program- who self-identified as Black and from a low-income community. At



the start of the study, I sought to interview all High School student members of the MOB community organization, which serves as full wrap-around support service program to impact student success. However, I ultimately decided to focus on the graduating senior class of MOB youth given that I had been building a relationship with these youths for two to three years and had seen their overall development. All MOB students interviewed in this study were 12th grade students at Castlemont High School, McClymonds High School, and Dewey High School during the time of the interviews. All students are recognized as official student members within the MOB community organization.

The students represented a mixture of lower-performing, middle performing, and high achieving Black males as measured by GPA. Lower performing are students that have below a 2.3 GPA, middle performing students have between a 2.31 and 2.99 GPA, and high achieving students were identified as having a 3.0 or higher GPA. This study was designed as a program evaluation, in which we utilized an approach of student self-reflection testimonial narrative to measure the effectiveness of the MOB organization and the impact that MOB has on Black male student participants. To examine student experiences in the MOB program and MOB's impact on students, I used a video recorded and written narrative interview method in which student participants responded to the open-ended question: What Does MOB Mean to You? Interview questions were used to explore student experiences within the MOB program, assessing what MOB means to students in connection to identity, community, culture, and student development

Data was collected in the form of video recordings and interviews: Each semi-structured interview that took place for approximately 15-30 minutes. Video recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim. Out of the 10 participants in the interviews, 2 participants in this study did not respond to the interview questions on camera; these 2 participants chose to have their interview response in a written narrative format on paper.

All 10 student interviews in this study were conducted at Castlemont High School campus in East Oakland, California, in the media center on campus. The 3-part coding and data analysis process involving myself and students took place in this same classroom the following week after completion of student recorded interviews.

I had known each of the participants since the start of the MOB organization partnerships with Castlemont High School, McClymonds and Dewey (since 2019 and 2021-current). Some of these students had been familiar with me since their freshmen, sophomore, and junior years in high school. By the time of this study, these same MOB students that began with me in 2019-2021 had progressed through the program and grew to take up leadership roles as our first class of Peer Mentors in the 2021/2022 academic year. I was able to witness the youth transition to their senior year in high school, developing leadership roles within the MOB in overseeing caseloads of younger MOB youth by serving as their Peer Mentors. I established and continue to maintain close relationships and connections with these students that extend beyond this study.

## Data Analysis

To measure community/solidarity, racial pride, and racial justice (tenants of Thug Life) and how Black male MOB students navigate processes of alienation through their MOB experiences, we conducted our study in the same room on Castlemont High School campus where we held our weekly MOB meetings. The two MOB students that chose to write their narratives down on paper instead of being video recorded were also in this room to write their narrative response to the interview question once their names were called. All students knew ahead of time that once they were called, to go to the location of the room where they would respond to the open-ended question, "What does MOB mean to you?" This allowed MOB student participants the opportunity to still be present in solidarity with their fellow brothers in the MOB program and freely express what MOB represented to them based on their experiences in the program. Most critically, students were able to ground their responses with the knowledge that they created along their journeys as members of the MOB program over 2 to 3 years. In connection to this approach, we utilized a BEAR framework to analyze and construct data based on student narratives.

Black Emancipatory Action Research (BEAR) is a research orientation aimed at creating strategies of liberation from intersecting forms of oppression experienced by people of African descent across the Diaspora (Akom, 2011). Since BEAR has roots in critical Afrocentricity and Africana womanist scholarship, it deals with the question of race, gender and other forms of identity from the perspective of Black cultures being centered, located and grounded (Akom, 2011). In this MOB study, Black male student participants coded their own narratives and made meaning of their data around their racialized identities. MOB research study participants took part in a community based, 3-part coding process in transcribing and analyzing their own interviews. This process included the following after each student interview was conducted:

- All student participants first listened to/watched each student interview on screen together in the Castlemont classroom/media center (same room where weekly MOB meetings take place during academic year). Then, they wrote down on the white board what they felt, heard, and saw from each interview as the interviews continued to play.
- Students listened to/watched all of their interviews for a second round on screen and went back to the whiteboard to write stars next to the most salient ideas and concepts that they felt and heard in the interviews.
- Next, each student picked /circled the three most salient concepts from the interviews that had stars next to them and defined what those concepts meant to them in written narrative.
- Finally, both students and I then came together with our most salient concepts that we had wrote stars next to and further defined. Then, together, we came up with the most salient concepts from student interviews that we felt represented what MOB represented to student participants in study based on their interviews. Several

concepts were used interchangeably and combined given that students used the same or similar definitions for those concepts.

- Findings/Salient concepts from interviews were color coordinated and highlighted with various colors to represent each concept/theme from the interview findings.

## FINDINGS

### What MOB Means to Black Male Students

The collective analysis produced four primary themes found in student data: 1) Black male students' recognition of individualized racism-dehumanization (racialized experiences/Blackness). 2) Black male students' recognition that they are part of a community of oppressed (sense of family and community among each other). 3) A recognition of communal struggle/solidarity (a sense of pride in collective racial struggle). 4) A political praxis rooted in their racial alienation to seek out justice and be the change that they want to see in their educational journeys and life-MOBISM. It is important to state that the stages of consciousness are not linear, rather, they are a continuum. The consciousness stages could happen simultaneous to one another depending upon the participant and how they made meaning of their racialized experiences as a function of the MOB program. The below narratives are examples of how the consciousness/praxis process works.

### Most Salient MOB Concepts from Above Student Data

***Recognition of inequality/individualized racism-dehumanization (racialized experiences/Blackness):*** The experiences of discrimination or discussion of racial alienation that Black male MOB members experienced at the individual level. These racialized experiences serve as focal point for the historical and contemporary lived experiences of Blacks male students in the MOB program. Ex, "Being a young Black man in Oakland makes me anxious already"-MOB Member narrative

***Recognition of community of the oppressed (sense of family and community):*** Students recognize that they are part of a community of peers that share the same struggle. Being part of a community that navigates racial discrimination together: Ex, "They took a lot of wealth away from African-American's and stripping out this school structure fell into our homes because a lot of our fathers now didn't have jobs and our mothers couldn't provide with food and other things"-MOB Member Narrative.

***Recognition of communal struggle/solidarity (authenticity/racial pride in identity as foundation to seek justice):*** This is the stage where Black male MOB members build a sense pride in their shared struggle, thus building solidarity as a community to resist racism. Ex, "MOB means Black men coming together"-MOB member narrative.

***Political praxis rooted in racial alienation- MOBISM (Commitment to justice and resistance via uplifting the Black Community on an individual and systematic level and obtaining tangible outcomes such as jobs/money/access to wealth and/or exposure to college and career):*** Ex, "With the structure of the MOB, the MOB program implements in the schools...We have Job

opportunities...Building these things together creates leaders, young men who are willing to go in the world and find out what they're passionate about... inspiration so our kids they can go back to their neighborhoods and they start their own programs and businesses"-MOB Member narrative.

### **MOB Youth Reflections/Testimonial Narratives and Thug Life Concepts**

#### ***Narrative 1***

The MOB means young Black men coming together to have a positive impact on our community (MOB Member narrative).

In this above narrative, this MOB member explained that MOB represented a sense of community in the sense of "Black men coming together." In placing this narrative in proper context within my personal discussions with this student, Black men coming together, and the sense of family is a necessity in affirming this students' day to day reality as a Black man. In connection to the Thug Life concepts, "Black men come together" is a recognition of a community of the oppressed. In this stage, this MOB member makes clear recognition for a sense of community via a space where Black men come together. Within this same narrative, the student points to the impact of being within a community of individuals that share a similar struggle. Moreover, within this same narrative, there was a transition to another stage of consciousness of which this student recognized a sense of solidarity with his Black male peers to reach a common goal.

In the recognition of communal struggle/solidarity stage within the four Thug Life concepts, students begin to identify the need to educate themselves to resist the racism that they face as a collective/community. This MOB member expressed this by conveying "to have a positive impact on our community." In this case, this student expressed MOB as not just a space where Black men come together (community of oppressed), but it is a space where Black men come together to have a positive impact on our community (communal solidarity). In working with this student for two years within the MOB program, "having a positive impact on our community" is grounded in MOB members discussions of historical, systematic, and individual level discrimination and various solutions to addressing these problems as defined by the Black male MOB members. This connects to the final stage within the four Thug Life concepts in alignment with MOB: A praxis to do something about the collective struggles that MOB students experience and highlight in their work.

For this MOB member, his political praxis rooted in his experiences with racial alienation was to "have a positive impact on our community." This student contributed to this practically in serving as a Lead Peer Mentor within the MOB program in which he mentors younger Black male students within the organization. Within this short narrative, this student is expressing that MOB represents a sense of community where Black men come together, thus impacting a communal solidarity and political praxis to pay it forward by having a positive impact on the Black community. In connection, this data points to how MOB Members flow through different

stages of consciousness throughout their narratives. And most critically, students have different meaning making systems for their political praxis.

Consistent across all narratives is: 1) MOB members' political praxis was grounded in their collective racialized experiences ; 2) students have various types of discrimination that they experience;- subsequently, how they choose to resist discrimination varies from student to student; 3) Across the board, the justice/political praxis was a form of resistance/justice that was defined and implemented by the students collectively, grounded in a sense of taking matters into their own hands to impact their community. Justice was also grounded in a commitment that students have to being the change that they want to see in their community. In this MOB member's case, the commitment to "having a positive impact on his community" himself is an act of justice as he feels that he can impact his people better than the "system" can. It is his responsibility, as a Black man, to positively impact his community. These various Thug Life stages of consciousness were also expressed as a continuum in the below narrative.

### ***Narrative 2***

The mob program is a program that made me more confident in my future toward college and how I see things. My experiences with my MOB mentors and brothers have been nothing more than enjoyment and hard work. Being a young Black man in Oakland makes me anxious already, but knowing I have a goal and help from the mob program helps me be more comfortable in who I am to put in the steps to the right path. I would highly recommend this to any other young Black man in Oakland. (MOB Member Narrative).

Like the student in the first narrative, this MOB member expressed a sense of community/family via "my experiences with my MOB mentors and Brothers" -which I categorize within the theme "a recognition of community of oppressed." Furthermore, this theme was followed by the Thug Life concept of communal struggle/solidarity. "My experiences with my MOB mentors and brothers have been nothing more than enjoyment and hard work...knowing I have a goal and help from the mob program." This line from this narrative was more so an expression of communal struggle/solidarity given that the student mentioned the words "hard work, "goals," and "help" grounded in a sense of community as young Black males. This alludes to shared goals that can be used to build on during students' racialized struggles. "Being a young Black man in Oakland makes me anxious already" and "knowing I have a goal and help from the MOB program helps me be more comfortable in who I am:" his was a jump to several stages of consciousness that points to his recognition of communal struggle/solidarity grounded in his racial pride of "being comfortable of who I am" and based on his established communal solidarity with his MOB brothers via "help from the MOB program."

This MOB member also expressed "being a Black man in Oakland already makes me anxious"-which illuminates the stage of consciousness that recognizes racism/dehumanization at the individual level. This was in alignment with "being confident in my future toward college"

and “taking the steps to the right path”-which is a stage of political praxis/justice for this student grounded in communal struggle/solidarity that he established with other Black male MOB members. In recognizing that the racialized experiences that he encounters are not only at the individual level, this student finished by saying, “I would highly recommend this to any other young Black man,”-which demonstrates recognition of being part of a larger community of oppressed. Thus, this student’s testimony is also a call for Black male solidarity in communal struggle to reach tangible outcomes/justice (political praxis grounded in racial alienation) of “being confident to put in steps to the right path and pursue college.” This data demonstrates that MOB members navigate these different stages of consciousness as a continuum within their MOB experiences. Yet sometimes these stages are also linear.

Data reflects that MOB members building solidarity within their communal struggle in most cases was followed by the political praxis to do something about it. “Doing something about it” is akin to, - justice or - MOBISM. In this MOB member’s case, “knowing I have a goal and help from the mob program helps me be more comfortable in who I am (recognition of communal struggle/solidarity) to “put in steps to the right path” (political praxis/justice). This is an example of how, at times, the Thug Life concepts can flow in a linear way in regards to student experiences with racism and development of resistance.

Like the first narrative, this MOB member’s political praxis for success was grounded in the youth’s meaning making for what it means to be a Black man. This speaks to MOB members meaning making systems of resistance in alignment with knowledge that is by the Black community and for the Black community. This is a form of justice that privileges MOB members’ ideas for what justice/success looks like based on their experiences with racial alienation.

### ***Narrative 3***

I feel like we lack the structure within our homes, our schools, and within our communities. I believe it started in the 1970s when they started the Industrialization of schools for inner city kids. Taking opportunities away that was given to African Americans such as jobs and plumbing, carpentry, and other handy work. They took a lot of wealth away from African American’s and stripping out this school structure fell into our homes because a lot of our fathers now didn’t have jobs and our mothers couldn’t provide with food and other things. With the structure of the MOB, the MOB program implements in the schools to where we have study hall, we have progress reports and implements in homes. We have check-ins at homes with parents, our grades and on how we’re going. We have job opportunities. Building these things together creates leaders, young men who are willing to go in the world and find out what they’re passionate about. And with those things and that inspiration to our kids they can go back to their neighborhoods, and they start their own programs. And they start their own businesses, and they start their own success that was built within the MOB program. So, building that structure within the MOB program allows a lot of guys to go through and make their own paths in

their own ways. It could be about anything, but you go in and use that structure to create whatever you want. - (MOB Member Narrative)

In the political praxis rooted in racial alienation stage within the Thug Life concepts, students begin to engage in political praxis rooted in their sense of pride in being Black. Students have recognized their shared experiences with racism (community of oppressed), have expressed a collective affirmation in their Blackness (solidarity in communal struggle) and have made a commitment to resist the structures that they have identified (justice/political praxis). In connection, the above MOB members narrative reflected two core aspects for his political praxis: 1) A dedication to community in implementing community support programs grounded in visiting Black youth in their homes with their families, providing tutoring/mentor support via progress reports and providing job opportunities for Black community members to address issues of poverty and lack of wealth in the community. 2) A sense of “each one teach one-community building” in MOB youth going back to their neighborhoods/communities and creating their own businesses, programs, and creating community leaders that are pushing for success in whatever way they want in the Black community. This is what success, justice, and resistance against racial discrimination looks like to this student as a function of his political praxis.

This MOB member’s political praxis for justice was shaped by his experiences with racism at the community level (community of oppressed). The student mentioned “taking opportunities away that was given to African-Americans such as jobs and plumbing, carpentry, and other handy work...took a lot of wealth away from African-American’s and stripping out this school structure fell into our homes because a lot of our fathers now didn’t have jobs and our mothers couldn’t provide with food and other things.” This student’s narrative demonstrates the 4 stages of consciousness in a linear format: To address the systematic racism that shaped poverty among the Black community, the student’s political praxis was a sense of community reparations. In other words, this student conveyed justice by means of the Black community and youth in the MOB program becoming leaders of their community and shaping future generation to start Black businesses, programs, and other opportunities within the community to generate empowerment and wealth.

In alignment with the previous two MOB member narratives, this political praxis is grounded in Strictly for my N.I.G.G.A.Z. This MOB member expressed the importance of becoming a leader and going back to the neighborhood to implement programs and businesses in the Black community. For this MOB member, “going through and making their own paths in their own ways” is grounded in the idea that Blacks must liberate themselves in their own way grounded in solidarity with the oppressed Black community to uplift the Black community. Moreover, data from this narrative reflects the student’s individual and community dedication to resist discrimination in a way that is by the community and for the community; tangible access to wealth and ownership through businesses in particular, is this MOB member’s praxis and strategy.

The concepts of justice reflected in the 3 MOB member narratives above are in alignment with the Thug Life theme consistent in all MOB members' narratives, -that is, an idea of success that is grounded in solidarity with meaning making systems of those students and their communities opposed to the institutional focus on academic achievement alone. Below are the most salient concepts found in MOB member narratives.

### DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Existing literature on Black male success is guided by what success look like when the Eurocentric institution is placed on a pedestal. For example, with literature focusing on Black male achievement; graduating, academic success, or being retained by the Eurocentric institution is the primary focus (Harper, 2012). This often comes at the expense of invalidating Black identity given that the institution (which is shaped by a history of European colonialism), - is a space that is not affirming to the lived experiences and values of urban Black males. For these reasons, the achievement gap model is problematic. Moreover, even with existing literature that does focus on Culturally Responsive Pedagogy (CRP) practices by including students' lived experiences/culture into the education: CRP is typically a means to an end to get students to succeed academically.

Data reflected in this MOBISM study builds on prior studies on cultural wealth and challenges the achievement gap literature by highlighting the racial, cultural, and community affirmation and politicization of Black males in the MOB study as most critical as praxis. Data from the MOBISM study reveals that when Black males are affirmed in their racialized experiences (the real world outside of school for Black males) through community and solidarity, they have the confidence to accomplish whatever it is that they want to accomplish in life. From an academic lens, this is the claim that these students can be Black, critical/conscious *and* demonstrate high levels of academic achievement. In fact, data from this study reveals that students critical/consciousness is the fuel to their academic achievement and community/career aspirations. The findings within this study, and how we are framing the findings, reflect the above duality within MOB student outcomes that are grounded in MOB members' development of Black consciousness as the foundation for their success. This duality reflects 1) MOB student success by means of achieving academically through community and resistance; and 2) MOB students resisting/achieving success in the form of pushing to create their own system in their communities via community service, mentoring and creating jobs and businesses.

#### **Academic Institutional Achievement Through Black Male Resistance**

As mentioned, The Black consciousness/resistance that I discuss is *not* contradictory to academic success. In fact, based on MOB student data, it *facilitates* academic success. MOB members come to this consciousness and develop attitudes of justice through their active engagement with each other and the MOB program,-and then come out on the other side as



successful, even by the traditional academic terms. This is expressed when a MOB student conveyed, “The mob program is a program that made me more confident in my future toward college.” Moreover, when a MOB student conveyed “MOB program implements in the schools to where we have study hall, we have progress reports and implements in homes where we have check-ins with parents and on our grades.” These narratives convey how students’ Black consciousness and development of resistance attitudes facilitated forms of success within the institution for students.

In this case, Thug Life is a framework that gives Black males the confidence to be their authentic selves and resist educational barriers to impact their success. In illuminating some of the above positive academic outcomes, MOB has a 100 percent retention rate and has graduated all 10 high school seniors within MOB, who served as participants in this study. High School graduations occurred in May and June 2022. Three MOB members within this study served as Peer Mentors paid to work with 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> grade Black male youth within MOB. These seniors began attending an HBCU in Fall 2022 semester on an academic/athletic scholarship; another MOB member attended a community college this Fall 2022 semester where he majored in Art/Graphic Design and continued serving as a Mentor in the community. The third MOB Peer Mentor (a student that we supported in getting released from Juvenile Hall in 2020) attended community college in the fall 2022 semester to prepare for a future in real estate. In addition, this student is an East Oakland rapper and continues to prepare for his weed/dispensary license and business for his entrepreneurial work once he is of legal age. In addition, this youth continues to serve as a Graduate Peer Mentor with MOB. His MOB mentor goals are to scale MOB to other low-income inner-city school districts to impact especially formerly incarcerated youth that faced similar struggles as he did.

All of the MOB graduates in general have landed trade program opportunities post high school and have been accepted to attend 2-year and 4-year college institutions. These success stories are important because they highlight how MOB has fostered Black male academic and professional success through forms of MOBISM. Which is a success groomed in resisting racism in their own way with their own knowledge construction, grounded in affirmation of their Black identities. Students have made a commitment to dedicating themselves to their communities as they continue to progress in life.

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