

## **Abstract**

Ongoing anti-Black racism impacts daily life for many Black people across the globe. The Association of Black Psychologists developed the Sawubona Healing Circles for Black people to have a space to process and heal from anti-Black racism. The objective of this study was to understand the impact of the SHCs on attendees. Ten adults who self-identified as Black (age range: 19-65 years; seven cisgender women, two cisgender men, and one non-binary person) completed qualitative interviews on their experiences participating in the SHCs. The data were analyzed using a narrative phenomenological approach with a racially diverse research team. Emerging themes included: (a) Affirmation Through Cultural Grounding, (Reconnecting with Afro-Centric Practices) (b) Reimagining/Reawakening a Pan-African Kinship, (Rediscovery/Connection in/of Community) (c) Freedom through Self-Definition/Recognition, (Freedom through Authenticity) and (d) Collective Responsibility/Consciousness (Restoration of Black Communities). Although we intended to interview those who attended only one group to learn how the groups could be improved, we had difficulty identifying participants who attended a single group. Almost all participants reported attending more than one group and all expressed interest in continuing to attend SHCs. The findings reiterate the need for easily accessible spaces for Black people across the diaspora to address the impact of anti-Black racism. Further, the findings suggest that when the groups are offered regularly, Black people utilize the space. In conclusion, this study provides qualitative evidence that the SHCs strengthen Black identity, resilience, authenticity, and community connection.

## Introduction

Anti-Black racism continues to shape the realities of people racialized as Black in the Americas and around the globe in the wake of enslavement and colonialism (Sharpe, 2016). Indeed, following the conception of African peoples as suitable for slave labor, people racialized as Black have endured economies of oppression that have resulted in generations of psychological, cultural, and communal harm in exchange for significant financial and institutional gains for the state and those racialized as white. Within the context of the United States, ethnically African-American people, or American descendants of enslaved people, have borne the brunt of how anti-Blackness profoundly shapes culture, economics, politics, and daily experiences. From 1619 to the present, America's political system entrenched slavery, Jim Crow, and a complex cascade of carceral systems supported by reduced social safety nets, further entrenching America's racial caste system, with Black people at the bottom. As a result, not only have the tangible disparities entrenched in enslavement and Jim Crow been maintained, but divergent outcomes are also guaranteed as racism continues to function as a fundamental cause of disparities through social determinants of health, limitations on freedom, and social capital, and disparate access to and quality of treatment (Phelan & Link, 2015). Moreover, “colorblind” racial ideology and racial capitalism mobilize anti-Black logic to disregard the effects of racism on one hand and to justify the creation, maintenance of, and disinvestment in a disposable group of people that can be blamed for their own poverty in the name of continued accumulation of power and profit on the other (Yi et al., 2023; Zeira, 2022).

Facing this reality, many community-based and professional healers are turning more towards indigenous and decolonial healing modalities to meet community needs (Atallah & Duttah, 2023). African-centered healing circles have become one of the fastest growing

mechanisms of therapeutic support through African-centered psychology for Black people (Grills et al., in press).

### *Psychological Consequences of Anti-Black Racism*

The psychological and psychospiritual consequences of historical and contemporary anti-Blackness are manifold and have been popularly conceptualized through frameworks of racial trauma and race-related stress (Harrell, 2000). These concepts were developed to capture the clinically significant distress and prolonged reactions that occur in response to racism (Bryant-Davis, 2007). Racial trauma defines real or perceived experiences of racial discrimination as traumatic, noting that these experiences can result in symptom patterns equivalent to those of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD; Carter, 2007; Comas-Diaz, 2016; Williams et al., 2018; 2022). In line with the trauma literature, researchers have noted that posttraumatic stress (PTS) symptoms may occur in response to single racist acts and also through repeated experiences of racism (Helms et al., 2010). Further, complex racial trauma was conceptualized to consider the psychological consequences of pervasive and ubiquitous harm from interpersonal (e.g. microaggressions, overt racial violence, and racial slurs) and systemic (e.g. redlining, school-to-prison pipelines, disproportionate and inequitable sentencing laws) racism which fosters a consistently hostile environment that may serve to traumatize Black, Indigenous, and other people of color within the context of the United States (Jones, 2000; Cenat 2023). In this way, the continued communication and expression of racism reinvigorates the torturous history of anti-Blackness in ways that range from seemingly innocuous to blatantly lethal.

### *Inadequate Infrastructure*

The most recent data shows that Black mental health professionals are underrepresented in psychology, psychiatry, social work, licensed professional counseling and therapy. Though

some reports suggest that the mental health workforce is diversifying, some mental health professional areas continue to experience massive shortages (American Psychological Association [APA], 2018). The APA reports that as of 2020, only 4% of licensed psychologists identify as Black or African American, despite Black individuals making up approximately 13% of the U.S. population. This disparity is problematic for a host of reasons. One of the most pernicious reasons being is that Black individuals often do not receive culturally-grounded care from non-Black therapists, which can lead to misdiagnosis, mistreatment, and a lack of trust in the mental health system (Cabral & Smith, 2011). Further, 62% of even Black clinicians reported receiving little to no training in diagnosing and assessing Black clients, pointing to systemic inadequacy among clinicians to address the unique mental health challenges of Black peoples (Barnett et al., 2022).

### *Growth of African-Centered Psychology*

The field of Black Psychology was conceptualized in response to the urgent psychological, political, and spiritual needs of Black and African populations (White, 1977). Nobles (2023) has outlined a structured intellectual timeline with roots in what he calls the “Vindicationist-Redemptionist Black Scholar/Activist” genealogy which included the works of Baron de Vastey, David Walker, Carter G. Woodson, and W.E.B. Dubois, as well as the French Negritude Movement, in which he included Aime Cesaire and Frantz Fanon. However, as Nobles (2023) articulates the true roots of this philosophy of being exists beyond the academic contours of the discipline and lies in the very question of when Black beingness, culture, or consciousness began to interrogate the world.

According to Myers (1987), Bynum (1999), and Hilliard (1998), among others, Black psychology has its roots in the early Kemetic and Kushite civilizations. Kemet, which translates

to Black Land, held a sophisticated culture of structured thought that understood the universe as essentially spirit, emphasized the balance between all living things, organized life through a series of virtues (termed Ma'at), and co-created a way of being in the world guided by the Egyptian Mystery System (Ani, 1994). This asili, or the underlying cultural logic of a people, came to represent the *deep structure* of culture of many African peoples, according to Myers (1987). What many have termed African consciousness, is theorized to have spread through the continent via the Bantu-Kongo migrations that covered much of western, eastern, and southern Africa (Fu-Kiau, 2001). According to Nobles (2013; 2015), the philosophical connecting thread through the Bantu-Kongo migrations represents the underlying psychological link, cohering the idea of African and Black consciousness. Black psychology, then, becomes about a return, restoration, and reinvigoration of this thread. Indeed, according to Robinson (1983) the memory of those African ways of being represented the collective cultural superstructure that African peoples honored in their process of rebellion and revolution amidst the era of genocidal European human trafficking and enslavement termed the Maafa (Ani, 1994). It should also be noted that according to Ratele (2019), African psychology also represents the full diversity of approaches emanating from African people to understand the mind in resistance to historic and contemporary systems of oppression.

Rooted in this theoretical paradigm, a number of therapeutic modalities have been created, including Ntu Psychotherapy, Belief Systems Analysis, and Psychohairapy. Perhaps the largest outgrowth of African-centered psychology has been the African-centered healing circle as a method of intervention (Grills et al., in press).

### *African-Centered Healing Circles*

According to Grills and colleagues (in press, p. 6),

“African-centered healing circles are trustworthy spaces in which Black people come together to share stories, process their experiences, and heal from the historical and contemporary impact of anti-Blackness in our lives. The overarching aim is to create a culture of wellness in which Black people across generations can thrive. Healing circles help strengthen commitments to resistance and self-determination, both of which are essential for us to flourish as a people.”

African-centered healing circles are among the primary tools used to introduce indigenous African and African diasporic practices of healing as a decolonial therapeutic intervention. According to Grills and colleagues (in press), the common core tenets of African-centered healing circles are that they: are grounded in African values, are designed for Black peoples experiencing anti-Blackness, are guided by grassroots collective work and community building, harness the importance of storytelling, and share skills for emotional wellness.

While healing circles have consistently been used throughout history by African and other indigenous peoples, healing circles organized specifically through African-centered psychology were birthed through the Community Healing Network and the Association of Black Psychologists collaboration to create the Emotional Emancipation Circles (EECs; Grills et al., 2016). The EECs are the first African-centered healing circle modality, leveraging Community-Defined Evidence Based Practice, that have been shown to consistently support healing for Black people from racial trauma and cultural misorientation. From the success of this intervention, multiple African-centered healing circle modalities followed, including the Safe Black Space Circles, BEAM Heart Space Circles, South LA Healing Circles, and the Sawubona Healing Circles (SHCs).

The Association of Black Psychologists' SHCs are a virtual African-centered healing circle intervention that were designed to meet the crisis needs of Black people following racial trauma. Augustine and colleagues (2024) conducted a pilot investigation of the interventions, first year, and found that attendees typically reported racial trauma, racial battle fatigue, systemic

injustice, political uncertainty, and desire for care tools as the reasons for attending the circles. Of those 99 who completed feedback surveys, 100% indicated the circles were a helpful experience and that they broadly reported experiencing healing and affirmation (Auguste et al., 2024). Another consistent response from the attendees, however, was to attend more circles and to have more time with the circles. Typically, the SHCs are offered in response to current events and often consist of a unique set of facilitators and attendees each time a group is offered; however, our team received funding to offer the SHCs weekly. To date, there has been no examination of the psychological impact of how African-centered healing circles are experienced as a consistent mode of support for Black people.

### **The Current Study**

The purpose of this study was to understand the impact of the SHCs when offered weekly.. The primary method used to investigate, analyze, and describe the attendees' realities was Davidson's approach to narrative phenomenological analysis (Creswell & Poth, 2016), a qualitative research method, designed to narratively examine the experiences of participants. In particular, the research team sought to gain a more thorough understanding of the transformation that occurs for Black people when they are given a consistent space to ground themselves, process their experiences, and develop intentional relationships with their culture.

## **Methods**

### **Participants**

Eligible participants were those who self-identified as Black, were 18 years of age or older, and reported attending a SHC. An invitation to participate in the qualitative interviews was sent to the SHC program and ABPsi listservs. The goal was to recruit a total of 10 participants.

Given our interest in understanding what may keep some from attending multiple circles, our goal was to recruit at least 5 people who participated in only one SHC.

### **Interview Guide**

The research team collaborated to design the general interview guide for high and low attendance participants (Appendix A). Participants who attended more than one circle were asked what made them continue to attend and participants who reported attending only a single circle were asked what kept them from attending again. The interview questions were designed to assess subjective shifts in general wellness, consciousness, and community as informed by early pilot investigations (Auguste et al., 2024). All interviews were conducted over Zoom by a trained research assistant and were audio recorded. Independent transcriptionists transcribed the interviews and a research assistant reviewed the transcripts while listening to the audio to correct any errors. The interviews lasted roughly 30 minutes, and participants were compensated with a \$25 gift card.

### **Analytic Procedures**

All data collection procedures were approved by the XXXX Institutional Review Board (#200031082). To reduce investigator bias, a multi-ethnic team of trained coders qualitatively analyzed the data. Following the narrative phenomenological qualitative analytic approach outlined by Cosgrove & Davidson (1991; 2022), each investigator independently read the transcripts and wrote a first-person summary ( $\leq 1$  page) in temporal order featuring verbatim data that best captured each participants' narrative. Each coder read the 1-page narrative and highlighted themes. The research team shared their summaries and justification for the themes identified while noting differences between the summaries. Themes were discussed through a culturalist lens (Grills et al., 2023) to consider both standard psychophysiological and African-



centered psychospiritual phenomena as emergent from participant experiences. The final themes were refined until a consensus was achieved.

### **Positionality**

Given the nature of the Sawubona Healing Circles as an intervention for those of African ancestry navigating anti-Black racial trauma, the research team and authors were mindful of how their positionalities shaped interpretation. The research team was diverse in gender and ethnicity with people of African-American, Jamaican, Haitian, Cape Verdean, and South Indian ancestry, as well as racially inclusive of Black and Asian researchers. To respect the nature of the circles, only those who identified racially as Black engaged in the interview protocol. Authors discussed how their own experiences shaped their interpretation of the interview data.

### **Results**

A total of 10 self-identified Black participants (age range: 19-65 years; seven cisgender women, two cisgender men, and one non-binary person) completed the interviews. Regarding education, two participants attended some college and eight had an associates degree or higher. Regarding Black ethnic identity, six identified as African American, two as African, and two as Afro-Latine. Five participants endorsed they were spiritual but not religious, three identified as Christian, and two identified as agnostic. In terms of sexual identity, seven identified as heterosexual, two reported a sexual minoritized identity, and one preferred not to share. Participants reported that at the time of the interview they lived in the South, Northeast, or Pacific Northwest of the United States, and Western Europe. Seven participants identified as part of the essential workforce or as a healthcare worker. Two participants reported they have only attended a single SHC whereas all other participants reported attending between two and over 10 circles.

## **Participants' Emerging Themes**

The main themes as reported by participants, are organized and summarized below: (a) Affirmation Through Cultural Grounding, (Reconnecting with Afro-Centric Practices) (b) Reimagining/Reawakening a Pan-African Kinship, (Rediscovery/Connection in/of Community) (c) Freedom through Self-Definition/Recognition, (Freedom through Authenticity) and (d) Collective Responsibility/Consciousness (Restoration of Black Communities). It should be noted that tethering these themes together were articulations of spiritual growth even as participants explained navigating stories of immense racial trauma. The themes emerged as the core explanations for resultant spiritual growth and cultural purpose.

### **Affirmation through Cultural Grounding**

A central theme among participants was Affirmation through Cultural Grounding. Attendees reported learning and embracing distinct African-centered cultural concepts and practices that anchored them emotionally and spiritually. The integration of these cultural affirmations provided a critical counterbalance to the invalidation and othering that many experienced in their daily lives. For example, Participant 101 described how engaging with affirmations rooted in Black experiences became a meaningful part of their healing process:

“I try to listen to [Black affirmations] in the mornings when I am doing physical therapy exercises.... And even across the world as Black folks, we deal with the gaslighting and the othering. And it has impacted me positively to be able to have a space to not feel gaslit and feel validated by the experiences that I've gone through.”

Similarly, Participant 109 reflected on how engaging with Black psychological teachings within the circles reinforced their sense of cultural and spiritual grounding:

“Knowing that our researchers, scientists, and teachers have done this work and we can access it and come together in a space to discuss it is invaluable. That has been very supportive, and it's really a relief for me. The concept of Sawubona is wonderful when I first found out about it, I thought, “This is exactly what I want and what I want to show my children so that they can seek out these kinds of spaces

when they are older.””

These reflections illustrate how the SHCs provided participants with new, emotionally-grounded techniques—such as affirmations and cultural teachings—that became integrated into their daily lives. For Participant 101, engaging in affirmations specifically tailored to the Black experience became a tool for navigating racial stressors, and also highlighted how African philosophical concepts like Ubuntu and Zola, which are intentionally incorporated into SHC discussions, offered both cultural and spiritual sustenance.

Expanding on this theme, Participant 104 shared how the SHCs deepened their connection to African ancestry:

“This connection with Africa, although I knew my ancestors, they came from Africa. It's not something that I deny, but I never felt so connected with this. I always try to fit myself with my nationality or to think, ‘Okay, I know my ancestors from Africa, but I'm not really connected with them.’ And it's not true.”

This reflection illustrates how engagement in the SHCs reshaped participants’ self-concept, allowing them to experience African ancestry not as an abstract historical fact but as a living, tangible identity that informed their self-understanding and sense of belonging.

Beyond personal transformation, the SHCs also encouraged participants to examine the ways in which societal pressures influenced their self-presentation. Participant 105 spoke to the internalized need to conform in predominantly White spaces and how the healing circles offered a liberatory contrast:

“I feel like subconsciously, you kind of mask your identity so that maybe I may not wear my hair a specific way or I may not talk as ‘aggressive.’ So, I may use a different—I may code switch in my workplace, or I may not wear something that is Afrocentric or whatever have you. And I think, coming out of these healing circles is very freeing and eye-opening to know that you don't have to mask yourself. And unfortunately, that is a societal thing.”

This reflection underscores how societal norms often pressure Black individuals to suppress aspects of their identity in order to navigate predominantly White environments. The SHCs provided a space where participants could unlearn this masking, embracing their full selves without fear of judgment or reprisal.

### **Reimagining/Reawakening a Pan-African Kinship**

A central theme that emerged was the reawakening of a Pan-African kinship—a profound sense of connection and collective identity cultivated through the SHCs. Participants reflected on how these spaces fostered an expanded understanding of community, transcending borders and historical divides to form a global kinship rooted in shared African heritage. Through dialogues on Black identity, cultural traditions, and socio-political struggles, participants not only deepened their sense of belonging but also reimagined familial ties beyond geographic constraints.

Participant 109 articulated this expanded sense of community, emphasizing how the SHCs bridged geographical gaps and created a shared space for healing:

“That we have a larger community and that we can use tools like Zoom in the Healing Circle to connect. We have our close-knit communities as African-Americans, but that we can have a more expansive or extended community for different reasons. And for this one specifically to just work on healing, to acknowledge that we have not only the historical trauma and generational trauma, but just the everyday. And to have that extended place to go to and share and support other people.”

This reflection underscores how the SHCs extend beyond local or national boundaries, offering a collective space where participants process both historical and present-day traumas together. The virtual and in-person gatherings facilitated connections that made healing a communal rather than individual endeavor.

Similarly, Participant 107 described how the circles reinforced a sense of solidarity among individuals of African descent, uniting them beyond national and cultural distinctions:

“So it definitely expanded my sense of community... because I saw a lot of other just Black people who were by my side, not because they knew me, not because this or that, and not because they were Nigerian or anything, but just because they were Black. They were descended from Africa. They were like, ‘We got your back.’... It expanded my sense of community and reinforced that I have a very large community that will have my back no matter, I guess, the circumstance.”

This sentiment highlights how participation in the SHCs reawakened a Pan-African consciousness, reinforcing the idea that Black people across the diaspora are deeply connected through shared histories and struggles. The affirmation and support provided within these spaces strengthened participants’ sense of belonging and commitment to collective empowerment.

Beyond emotional and ideological solidarity, participants also described how these connections translated into tangible relationships and collaborations. Participant 104 reflected on how the Healing Circles facilitated real-world engagements and strengthened practical dimensions of kinship:

“Oh, my connection is much better. I see as a part of a global family. I started a lot of contacts through internet Zoom and I could meet these people personally. We are building things, investing together, yes. Exchanging our experience. And I go to visit friends through these circles direct to, yes. They come to me when they want to go to Brazil. I'm able to guide them because otherwise they will be in a structure. It seems to be different, but it's the same. Yes, this is for me the best because I feel part of a global family through this shared history.”

This reflection illustrates how the SHCs facilitated more than emotional and spiritual connections—they laid the groundwork for tangible, mutually supportive relationships. Participants forged networks that extended into collaborative efforts, economic partnerships, and direct acts of care and guidance, further solidifying the notion of a Pan-African family.

### **Freedom through Self-Definition/Recognition**

A recurring theme in participants’ experiences was the sense of Freedom through Self-Definition and Recognition. The SHCs provided a rare and affirming space where participants could express themselves authentically, free from judgment or external constraints. Within these

circles, they found opportunities to process racial trauma, redefine their identities on their own terms, and articulate their emotions in a way that felt both liberating and healing. The ability to exist in a space where Black identities, beliefs, and lived experiences were centered and celebrated was transformative for many.

Participant 101 reflected on how engaging with affirmations specifically tailored to Black experiences within the SHCs fostered a profound sense of validation:

“I try to listen to [Black affirmations] in the mornings when I am doing physical therapy exercises.... And even across the world as Black folks, we deal with the gaslighting and the othering. And it has impacted me positively to be able to have a space to not feel gaslit and feel validated by the experiences that I've gone through.”

This reflection underscores how the SHCs functioned as a sanctuary from the invalidation and isolation participants often encountered in predominantly White or racially dismissive spaces. By engaging in affirmations and shared dialogue, participants could reaffirm their experiences as real and meaningful, rather than internalizing the doubt and dismissal they frequently faced.

Similarly, Participant 104 emphasized the contrast between the healing circles and external environments where racism was often denied or minimized:

“...It's not easy to be in a white society and speak about that because they deny racism and this kind of thing. They always bring it to a personal level. And being with Black folks who experience the same, we interpret the reality in another way.”

This statement highlights how being in a space with others who shared similar racialized experiences allowed participants to collectively validate their realities, challenging dominant narratives that often minimized their struggles. The SHCs provided an essential space where participants could redefine their narratives outside of White-centered frameworks, reinforcing their agency in shaping their own stories.

For many, the ability to openly discuss racial injustice without fear of repercussion was a rare and necessary experience. Participant 105 described how the SHCs allowed for emotional processing in ways that were otherwise unavailable in their everyday lives:

“I don't really get that luxury or that privilege to truly talk and talk freely about my feelings regarding racial injustices. So, I think in that space, it just allowed me to heal in a sense. And move forward, and not in a way that I became numb or number to the experiences, but allowed me to talk about it and truly share. It's okay to not be okay, and to have these visceral reactions to things that are undoubtedly upsetting to anyone.”

This reflection illustrates how the SHCs not only provided a platform for emotional expression but also helped participants navigate their responses to racial trauma in a way that fostered healing rather than detachment. The space affirmed that emotional responses to injustice were valid and necessary, challenging the pressure to suppress or minimize those feelings.

Participant 103 further emphasized how the SHCs uniquely centered Black voices, creating a space that was otherwise absent in their daily experiences:

“It was really hard to find a place where I could freely share my feelings of what was going on politically, socially... This one was much closer to home in the sense that it was specifically targeting Black people and not feeling that there was any environment that offered an opportunity for Black people to come together and to really express how I felt about it.”

In these spaces, participants experienced a freedom to articulate their truths without fear of repercussion or misunderstanding—something they often lacked in predominantly White spaces. The ability to engage in these discussions within a community of people who inherently understood their experiences created a profound sense of belonging.

Participant 104 further emphasized the importance of an all-Black space for fostering this freedom:

“And I decide to be a part of that [Sawubona Healing Circle] because in the place where I am, I don't have a lot of places where I can express myself as a Black

person... And a place like this is important because you are free to express ourselves and to be with people who will understand what we are talking about....”

By fostering self-recognition and community validation, the SHCs became a vital source of strength and empowerment, equipping participants to navigate systemic inequities with resilience and self-assurance.

### **Collective Responsibility/Consciousness**

The theme of Collective Responsibility and Consciousness captures how participants developed a profound sense of duty to support the well-being of their communities. Through the SHCs, participants not only experienced healing for themselves but also cultivated a moral responsibility to contribute to the wellness of others, often stepping into leadership roles or actively creating spaces for healing and connection.

Participant 104 described how their experience in the SHCs motivated them to foster similar opportunities for younger generations:

“I’m much more connected with different kinds of institutions to try to build space for Black folks. And for me, the most important are the children because if I had a good education about this Black or African ancestry, but of course I was targeted the most when I was at school. Because I didn’t have the right answer sometimes. And I’m one person, I’m trying to organize a space and to introduce some kind of exercise for children because I feel stronger.”

This reflection underscores the transformative impact of the SHCs, not just in individual healing but also in inspiring participants to proactively address systemic inequities by nurturing and empowering the next generation. By strengthening their own sense of identity and resilience, participants felt compelled to create similar affirming spaces for Black children, ensuring that future generations would have access to the cultural knowledge and support that many of them lacked growing up.

Participant 103 emphasized how the shared experiences within the SHCs fostered a sense



of unity and purpose within the community:

“But to come together and with the Sawubona circles and to talk with people and not feel alone. Not to say, ‘Hey, you're not the only one feeling this way.’ This is, ‘You're not the only one seeing what we're seeing. We're all seeing this together and this is very much real.’”

The SHCs provided a collective affirmation of shared realities, reinforcing participants’ awareness of systemic challenges while strengthening their commitment to communal healing. The validation of one’s experiences through the recognition of others was a powerful reminder that personal struggles were interconnected with broader social conditions, motivating participants to support each other in navigating those challenges.

For many, the SHCs also helped them find a “tribe”—a community aligned with their values and aspirations for collective wellness. Participant 101 described this newfound sense of belonging:

“That what unites you is shared interest, shared... passion, and a desire to heal. It has improved feelings of connection and improved feelings of finding my tribe and finding people who have similar thought processes. But not only look like me, but have similar thought processes and similar ideas about healing. So I think it's super powerful to be able to share space and when it's done right...”

This sense of alignment and shared purpose galvanized participants to take active roles in fostering collective healing and empowerment. By finding community among like-minded individuals, participants were further encouraged to engage in practices of care, advocacy, and support, ensuring that the impact of the SHCs extended beyond the circles themselves.

Participant 100 reflected on the intergenerational responsibility that emerged from their experience in the SHCs, connecting it to African cultural values:

“That teaches you that that is a serious responsibility that goes back to your African roots. And I'm very serious about that. And Sawubona has helped me with that. And I've reaped the benefits from that. I mean, it's a really spiritual thing. And I reap the benefits from being that type of elder. And it's empowering, it's impactful, it's the most amazing thing I've ever experienced in my life.”

This testimony highlights how the SHCs instilled not only a sense of personal healing but also a deeply rooted cultural and spiritual obligation to serve as a resource and guide for others in the community. By embracing traditional African values of communal responsibility, participants found purpose in stepping into elder and mentorship roles, ensuring the continuity of knowledge and healing across generations.

Participant 106 elaborated on how the SHCs expanded their awareness of the diverse struggles within the Black community, further motivating their commitment to collective healing:

“And so, the healing circle impacted how I see my identity because it makes me aware of all the different experiences that people have... So, it just makes me aware that there are still a lot of things that Black and Brown people are going through that I wasn't aware of. So, it helps me be a resource.”

This expanded awareness reinforced participants' desire to actively contribute to addressing the challenges facing their communities. The SHCs not only provided a space for participants to process their own struggles but also encouraged them to recognize and respond to the needs of others.

## **Discussion**

The objective of the present study was to learn how the SHCs impacted attendees when offered regularly. A major component of the SHCs is the inclusion of African-centered content as strategies for coping with ongoing anti-Black racism (Auguste et al., 2024). The Affirmation through Cultural Grounding theme demonstrates that learning from a diverse range of African cultural traditions gave participants new ways to understand themselves and equipped them with tools to navigate racial trauma. The SHCs not only affirmed participants' lived experiences but

also helped them shed stigma associated with Black cultural expressions, allowing them to more confidently embrace ideas and philosophies rooted in various African traditions.

Another key component of the SHCs is creating a space for Black folks across the diaspora to connect and reestablish community (Auguste et al., 2024). The Reimagining/Reawakening of a Pan-African Kinship theme reveals how the SHCs cultivated a reimagined kinship that transcended physical and cultural boundaries. Participants not only reaffirmed their individual identities but also strengthened their collective sense of belonging within a vast and interconnected global network. This renewed Pan-African consciousness empowered them to navigate their lives with the assurance that they are part of a supportive, transnational family—one bound by shared struggles, histories, and aspirations for healing and liberation.

A primary goal of the SHCs is to create a space for Black people to be seen in their entirety without feeling the need to code switch or hide parts of their experience that are important to them (Auguste et al., 2024). Creating a space like this can allow for deeper self-exploration and understanding. The recurring theme of Freedom through Self-Definition and Recognition revealed the SHCs provided participants with a rare and invaluable opportunity to express their experiences, define their identities, and process their emotions in a culturally affirming and judgment-free environment. This freedom to speak, share, and heal collectively allowed participants to move forward with a deeper understanding of themselves and their role within the broader Black community. These spaces underscored the necessity of creating environments where Black individuals can unreservedly embrace their identities and be empowered through recognition and self-definition.

After participating in the SHCs, the hope is that attendees develop a sense of unity with

the Black community (Auguste et al., 2024). The findings illustrate how the SHCs moved beyond individual healing to foster a deep sense of collective responsibility. By creating a space for shared experiences and cultural affirmation, the circles empowered participants to take action within their communities—whether by organizing spaces for children, stepping into elder roles, or becoming a resource for others. Through these acts of leadership and service, participants embodied the principle of communal uplift, ensuring that the benefits of the SHCs extended far beyond the individual to strengthen and sustain the collective.

A secondary aim was to understand what prevented some from attending more than one circle. Consistent with prior research (Auguste et al., 2024), it was difficult to find those who had only attended one circle. Among the two participants who only attended a single circle, one experienced technical difficulties while the other expressed that the demands of major life transitions made it challenging for him to attend more circles. Nevertheless, both reported a desire to participate again but had not due to time constraints. All other participants, and the majority in the database, reported attending multiple circles. These findings highlight that when the SHCs are offered on a regular basis, Black people utilize the resource. This is a critical finding given research highlighting the underutilization of mental health services and challenges with treatment retention within the Black community (CITE).

This study is not without limitations. Participants were not required to attend a specified number of SHCs or to participate in the research component. Therefore, those who volunteered for the study may represent a select group of people that may differ from those less interested in research. However, we ensured the interviewer also identified as Black to increase the likelihood that participants would feel comfortable speaking freely. In addition, it is possible that those less interested in the SHCs did not stay in contact with ABPsi limiting our ability to reach them to

learn more about their experience. Finally, we recognize that the those who participated in the SHCs are more likely to have familiarity and access to technology. We are actively working to make the SHCs available to those with less familiarity and access to technology as well.

A strength of this study is that it obtains firsthand accounts of the impact of the SHCs when offered regularly. The SHCs provided a space for attendees to freely discuss and address exposure and incidents of anti-Black racism that characterize their daily lives. The racial stress endured can have long-term effects on mental and physical health, including the development of trauma symptoms and chronic diseases (cite). As such, participants indicated a sense of relief and emotional support upon vocalizing their experiences, naming the SHCs as the only space they had available to do so. This is further evidence that the SHCs meet an important need given the limited availability of easily accessible resources geared toward addressing anti-Black racism and led by Black facilitators.

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Table 1: Overarching themes and supporting quotes

| Themes  | Supporting Quote  |
|---|---|
| Reimagining/Reawakening a Pan-African Kinship | <p>“I’m Nigerian-American and an immigrant, so I don’t really have a lot of family here. So what it did is because I saw a lot of other just Black people who were by my side, not because they knew me, not because this or that, and not because they were Nigerian or anything, but just because they were Black...They were like, “We got your back.”...And not only I got your back, but we’re putting faith in you to help other Black people...It expanded my sense of community and reinforced that I have a very large community that will have my back no matter I guess the circumstance.” - Participant 107</p> <p>“And I think that comes from <u>having that sense of community</u>, even if it’s an internet community, <u>it makes me feel less isolated in my blackness</u>. And it makes me feel that there are folks out there who care about my black a**.” - Participant 101</p> <p>“For me, I would say this is the point when they use the word I see you Sawubona yes It’s to feel that they see me and they understand me as a human being. Yes, this is really important. And also I could develop what I didn’t have to miseducation and assimilation. Empathy for Black folks.” - Participant 104</p> |
| Affirmation through Cultural Grounding        | <p>“I don’t really get that luxury or that privilege to truly talk and talk freely about my feelings regarding racial injustices. So, I think in that space, it just allowed me to heal in a sense. And move forward, and not in a way that I became numb or number to the experiences, but allowed me to talk about it and truly share. It’s okay to not be okay, and to have these visceral reactions to things that are undoubtedly upsetting to anyone. So even with the space, I think moving forward, I kind of acknowledge that. Talking about it is freeing and not just bottling it up.” - Participant 105</p> <p>“And it’s not easy to be in a white society and speak about that because they deny racism and this kind of thing. They always bring to a personal level. And being with Black folks who experience the same, we interpret the reality in another way.” - Participant 104</p> <p>“come together and with the Sawubona circles and to talk with people and not feel alone. Not to say, “Hey, you’re not the only one feeling</p>   |

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|  | <p>this way." This is, "You're not the only one seeing what we're seeing. We're all seeing this together and this very much real. - Participant 103</p> <p>"I think just being around, surrounded by Black folks, and specifically even in these circles, Black women specifically, it just makes you more empowered to be, and in a way that doesn't allow you to just cover up your identity. Because I think, when you are in these settings where there aren't a lot of us, or just specifically speaking for Black people in general, when there aren't a lot of us here, I feel like subconsciously, you kind of mask your identity so that maybe I may not wear my hair a specific way or I may not talk as "aggressive". So, I may use a different, I make code switch in my workplace, or I may not wear something that is Afrocentric or whatever have you. And I think, coming out of these healing circles is very freeing and eye opening to know that you don't have to mask yourself. And unfortunately, that is a societal thing." - Participant 105</p>  |
| <p>Freedom through Self-Definition/Recognition</p> | <p>"It is super powerful to have a place where I can come and discuss White supremacy without feeling like I am being judged.....and talk through these experiences with other Black people." ".....it is refreshing to see and connect with Black folks, see Black faces, Black smiles, and Black laughter. It renews me." - Participant 101</p> <p>"And I decide to be a part of that [Sawubona Healing Circle] because in the place where I am, I don't have a lot of place where I can express myself as a Black person... And a place like this is important because you are free to express ourselves and to be with people who will understand what we are talking about....But this is a platform, an opportunity where I can speak freely about my feelings without to be judged. Judged, yes, judged." - Participant 104</p> <p>"The first effect that had was on my mental health just because it was interesting because I was able to freely express myself...Because oftentimes I'm expressing myself in a Non-black space in which I have to translate my words into something other people can understand." "But just in the Sawubona Healing Circles, I'm hearing from people that I'm speaking in a way that I'm not having to... modify my thoughts for somebody else." - Participant 107</p> <p>"And a place like this is important because you are free to express ourselves and to be with people who will understand what we are talking about. This is not the case when we are with people from the mainstream society. Because of that, it is positive for me because I know I can express myself. I can speak about my feelings about the experience of what I feel when something happens and people will</p> |

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|  | <p>have this empathy. This is what I don't experience with other folks.” - Participant 104</p>  |
| <p>Collective Responsibility/Consciousness</p> | <p>“I'm much more connected with different kind of institutions to try to build space for Black folks. And for me, the most important are the children because if I had a good education about this Black or African ancestry, but of course I was target like the most when I was at school. Because I didn't have the right answer sometimes. And I'm one person, I'm trying to organize a space and to introduce some kind of exercise for children because I feel stronger.” - Participant 104</p> <p>“But to come together and with the Sawubona circles and to talk with people and not feel alone. Not to say, "Hey, you're not the only one feeling this way." This is, "You're not the only one seeing what we're seeing. We're all seeing this together and this very much real.” - Participant 103</p> <p>“That what unites you is shared interest, shared...passion, and a desire to heal.” “It has improved feelings of connection and improved feelings of finding my tribe and finding people who have similar thought processes.” “But not only look like me, but have similar thought processes and similar ideas about healing. So I think it's super powerful to be able to share space and when it's done right...” - Participant 101</p> |

## Appendix A

### Interview Guide

There were two interview guides used for participants based on their attendance. All participants were asked the following questions:

- Tell me what your experience was like with the Sawubona Healing Circle.
- How has attending the Sawubona healing group affected important areas of your life?  
Examples?
- How has attending the Sawubona Healing Circle impacted how you understand your identity?
- How has attending the Sawubona Healing Circle impacted how you understand your community?
- How has attending the Sawubona Healing Circle impacted how you understand your physical and
- mental health?
- How has attending the circle impacted how you process racial stress and racial injustice?
- How has attending the circles impacted how connected you feel with Black people in the US and across the world?
- How have you applied the healing strategies to your life?
- What suggestions do you have on how we can spread the word about future Sawubona healing circles?
- Is there anything else that you feel is important for us to know about the Sawubona Healing Circle?