Research Statement

My program of research is designed to uplift the voices of marginalized communities whose experiences are less heard. Community-based participatory principles guide my research. I believe that research must include the unique perspectives of the individuals and communities whom social work professionals serve. I often hear about the importance of using evidence-based practices to best serve communities in need. However, some of these practices are limited in their impact to intervene with social problems experienced by racial/ethnic communities. Social workers are in a unique position to be innovative and co-construct research that is grounded in the cultural knowledge of the communities we serve. My 15 years of experience as a social worker has shown me that interventions are more powerful and impactful when they are culturally connected to the lived experiences of racial/ethnic communities. As a Black male scholar, I believe I have a responsibility to highlight the strengths of Black American communities.

My dissertation focuses on understanding narratives of resilience by Black men from urban settings. My overall research is defined by building constructive community relationships to develop interventions grounded in the unique cultural experiences of marginalized communities. Although we tend to use deficit-minded terms, such as oppressed, marginalized, and vulnerable, my ultimate goal is to develop scholarship that changes this narrative. My research explores how Black men overcome experiences of poverty and discrimination on their road to construct their definitions of success and resilience, and how they build social and cultural capital. I think it is essential that we uncover knowledge constructed from the lived experiences of this group to identify alternative definitions of success and resilience.

Throughout my clinical career, I developed an understanding about the importance of bridging the connection between practice and research. I participated in programs of which the sole purpose was to ground interventions in historical and traditional practices of the populations being served. I had both a career and life-altering experience during my MSW internship within an American Indian community health agency. While there, I was exposed to traditional practices that were culturally connected to the community. I learned the importance of conducting research that is informed by the people in that community, and that historical traditions and values must guide the work that is being done. While doing this work, I had the opportunity to work with experienced researchers and community partners to culturally adapt evidence-based practices for Indigenous youth and communities. This experience is one reason why I chose to pursue a career as an academic researcher. It was an exemplar of how researchers and community partners come together to build understanding and produce effective interventions that are culturally connected.

While conducting research with Black boys, Ann Arnett Ferguson suggests that researchers must acknowledge and understand cultural practices of this group. In this case, she was specifically referring to hip hop culture. Prior to entering the doctoral program, I worked with several community programs that utilized hip hop and spoken word poetry to promote positive youth development. These programs are promising interventions that encourage youth to address and process trauma in order to begin their path to healing and mental wellness. I am building a program of research that is grounded in understanding the impact of hip hop culture on mental health, healing trauma, positive youth development, and resilience. There are several community programs who use elements of hip hop culture to intervene on negative youth outcomes. These

Hydeen K. Beverly, MSW
hkbeverly@utexas.edu
programs and interventions are beginning to emerge and create a scholarly and pedagogical impact. My research is framed in these cultural connections, and my overarching goal is to continue this line of research by connecting with frontline community artists and activists to highlight their work. My current work allows me to use hip hop as an intervention to understand the lived experiences of urban youth and families. As outlined in my curriculum vitae, I present on hip hop, mental health, and resilience at national and international conferences. Presenting at cross-disciplinary conferences confirms my belief that hip hop is a powerful tool that is used to understand social problems. One of my highlights was presenting at South by Southwest Education Conference (SXSW EDU). This presentation confirmed the importance of building a diverse network of community practitioners and educators to research and develop strategies to promote mental health and wellness. In my presentations, I engage in dialogue with mental health professionals, educators, and administrators to deepen our understanding and explore innovative strategies to culturally connect with urban youth and families. I use qualitative methods, specifically ethnography and narrative principles, to broaden our understanding and to emphasize the importance of cultural connections and adaptation of evidence-based practices.

Another program of research I focus on is the impact of substance use on life course outcomes of youth and young adults. Under the mentorship of Dr. Yessenia Castro, I worked with a team to enhance my skills in quantitative analysis. One of the projects culminated in a study that explored the impact of first marijuana use on future education and employment outcomes of adults (Beverly, Castro, & Opara, 2019). The results of this study highlight the importance of early intervention programs for youth exposed to substance use. Furthermore, it is important for clinicians and researchers to identify precursors to substance use; I was able to integrate my clinical experience to guide this project, specifically drawing from the importance of exploring the lived experiences of youth as they impact initiation of using substances. A conclusion from this study is that researchers must view youth substance use holistically and examine environmental factors that are associated with substance use.

Overall, my program of research bridges the connection between practice and research, and academia and community. I envision my research having a direct influence on community practitioners who are on the frontlines serving youth and families. My goal is to conduct research grounded in the cultural knowledge of racial/ethnic communities to develop culturally connected interventions.

My future plan for research is to explore grant and funding opportunities that will enable me to continue examining the impact of culturally adaptive interventions as a means of promoting positive youth and family development. I plan to apply for a K series award from the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) to further pursue my program of research to develop culturally connected interventions. The goal of my research is to develop interventions grounded in the cultural knowledge and experience of low income urban youth and families. I will continue to explore how cultural phenomena such as hip hop and other expressive arts promote and encourage resilience and community development. This research is designed to produce interventions that will (a) enhance school success, (b) develop deeper understanding of community violence and its impact, (c) intervene on the impact of substance use, and (d) provide youth and families with constructive outlets to live the best life possible.

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