Does Race Matter?:
Perceptions of Masculinity among Black Males at a Predominantly White Institution

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> In addition to stagnant enrollment rates, Black male college student completion rates are low compared to other racial/ethnic groups in the United States.

College enrollment rates are becoming more diverse with increases in students of color pursuing higher education (Carter, Locks, & Winkle-Wagner, 2013). Despite these increases, Black male representation in higher education is disproportionately low (Harper, 2012). Specifically, in 2002, Black males encompass 4.3% of all students enrolled in college, the same percentage as in 1976 (Harper, 2006). An overwhelming majority of these Black males students attended Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), less selective regional state institutions, or community colleges (Harper & Griffin, 2011). In addition to stagnant enrollment rates, Black male college student completion rates are low compared to other racial/ethnic groups in the United States. Specifically, across four cohorts of undergraduate students in college, the six-year graduation rate for Black male undergraduate students attending public institutions was 33.3% compared to 48.1% for students overall (Harper & Harris, 2012). These trends have heightened the need to understand the experiences of Black male college students including their conceptualizations of masculinity.

Recent empirical studies focusing on Black undergraduate college men have explored issues of gender and masculinities in higher education (Dancy, 2012; Harper, 2004; Harris, Palmer, & Struve, 2011; Martin & Harris, 2006). These studies are critically important in addressing gendered achievement and outcomes that permeate many higher education institutions (Harris, Palmer, & Struve, 2011). Harris (1995) stated that Black men face pressures to adhere to Eurocentric and Afrocentric standards of manhood. Bonner (2011) posits:

> The African American male serves as the understudy in the performance of masculinity. The White male serves as the lead character, and the script is structured around his actions and proclivities. This essentialist, hegemonic, heterosexist, White model serves as the benchmark from which all notions of masculinity are based. For the African American male who falls outside of this rigid template, he faces potential ostracism, isolation, and invisibility (p. 147).

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Pressures to conform to Eurocentric standards of masculinity can result in misinterpretations of traditional gender expectations of Black men.
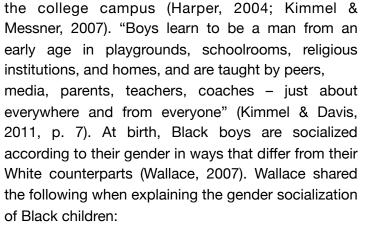
Black men enter college campuses having been socialized to adhere to traditional expectations of masculinity that are learned and reinforced in multiple social institutions (Dancy, 2012). These socially constructed expectations influence the manner in which Black men conceptualize and express their masculinities during college (Harris, Palmer, & Struve, 2011). Despite the various ways Black males are socialized, scholars tend to treat them as a monolithic group (Harper & Nichols, 2008). Thus, scholars advocate for studies that explore within-group differences in the expression of masculinities among Black college men (Dancy, 2012; Harris, Palmer, & Struve, 2011). The purpose of this study was to explore how race influenced perceptions of masculinity among 17 Black undergraduate men attending a PWI. Prior to discussing this study's findings, a review of the literature, theoretical frameworks, and methodology will be discussed.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The behavioral experiences of young Black boys are critical when understanding the development of masculine identity (Dancy, 2012). The importance of understanding how Black undergraduate college men conceptualize masculinity is reinforced in two broad areas of the literature: (a) influences that shape Black masculine identity, and (b) literature examining masculinities among Black men in college.

Influences Shaping Black Masculine Identity

Parental and familial influences, male peer groups, schooling, and participation and excellence in sports shape masculine identity prior to entering the college campus (Harper, 2004; Kimmel & Messner, 2007). "Boys learn to be a man from an early age in playgrounds, schoolrooms, religious institutions, and homes, and are taught by peers, media, parents, teachers, coaches – just about everywhere and from everyone" (Kimmel & Davis, 2011, p. 7). At birth, Black boys are socialized according to their gender in ways that differ from their White counterparts (Wallace, 2007). Wallace shared the following when explaining the gender socialization of Black children:

Black children are taught that womanhood is something that one must grow into while manhood is something that is both natural and automatic…Black boys are regarded as adult men from young ages and therefore are expected not to participate in behaviors associated with girls or childhood (p. 15).

> " **Black boys are socialized according to their gender in ways that differ from their White counterparts.**

Schools also serve as sites for socialization and the development of Black masculine identity (Davis, 2003; Ferguson, 2000). Davis (2003) suggested that Black boys tend to underachieve academically as a result of their perception of schooling being incongruent with masculinity. Ferguson (2000) investigated how Black boys interpret masculinity by exploring the experiences of twenty fifth and sixth grade Black boys at an urban school over a three and a half year period. She explored the ways that racial inequities influenced the school environment and found that school environments marginalized Black boys in a "covert and informal manner" (Ferguson,

2000, p. 19). Furthermore, Ferguson stated, "race continues to be a ready-made filter for interpreting events, informing social interactions, and grounding identities, and identification in school" (Ferguson, 2000, p. 17).
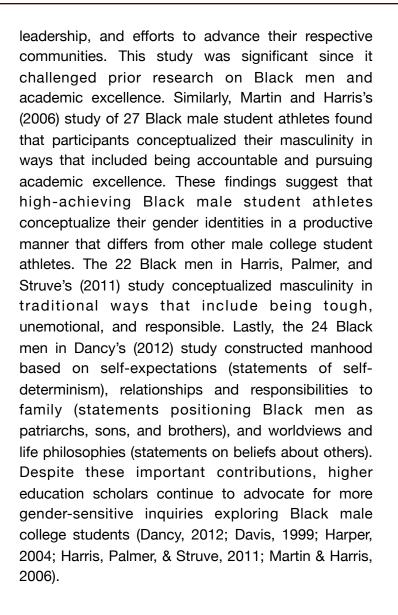
Participation in sports influences the development of masculine identity in school settings and is salient in boys gaining peer acceptance (Harper, 2004; Kimmel, 2008). Sporting activities provide boys opportunities to become socialized with hegemonic masculine attitudes (Martin & Harris, 2006). As a result, many boys rely on sports as a way to demonstrate and perform their masculinity. Kimmel (2008) noted that participation in sports validates manhood and cements the bonds among men. Sports not only cement bonds among men but it marginalizes other men in the process. hooks (2004) described the prevalence of sports in Black culture by linking excellence to respect:

> This need to prove their value through performance is one of the reasons so many Black boys look to sports as a site of redemption and affirmation. Given the history of Black male success in the arena of sports, an arena deemed "manly" by patriarchal standards, Black boys learn early on in their lives that by excelling in sports they can gain both visibility and a measure of respect (p. 89).

Kunjufu (1988) further noted that some Black boys must decide between being accepted by peers or achieving academic success resulting in them identifying as athletes instead of academic leaders.

Conceptualization of Masculinity among Black College Men

Recently, studies have explored masculinities and gender performance among Black college men. Harper's (2004) study of 32 high-achieving Black college men discovered that participants expressed their masculinity via their academic achievement,

leadership, and efforts to advance their respective communities. This study was significant since it challenged prior research on Black men and academic excellence. Similarly, Martin and Harris's (2006) study of 27 Black male student athletes found that participants conceptualized their masculinity in ways that included being accountable and pursuing academic excellence. These findings suggest that high-achieving Black male student athletes conceptualize their gender identities in a productive manner that differs from other male college student athletes. The 22 Black men in Harris, Palmer, and Struve's (2011) study conceptualized masculinity in traditional ways that include being tough, unemotional, and responsible. Lastly, the 24 Black men in Dancy's (2012) study constructed manhood based on self-expectations (statements of self-determinism), relationships and responsibilities to family (statements positioning Black men as patriarchs, sons, and brothers), and worldviews and life philosophies (statements on beliefs about others). Despite these important contributions, higher education scholars continue to advocate for more gender-sensitive inquiries exploring Black male college students (Dancy, 2012; Davis, 1999; Harper, 2004; Harris, Palmer, & Struve, 2011; Martin & Harris, 2006).

> " These findings suggest that high-achieving Black male student athletes conceptualize their gender identities in a productive manner that differs from other male college student athletes.

The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine perceptions of masculinity among a sample of Black males at a PWI. The following questions guided this inquiry: (a) What definitions of masculinity do Black men ascribe to their masculinities, (b) how does race influence these definitions of masculinity, and (c) how do these definitions of masculinity evolve during the college experience?

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical frameworks employed in this study combine the social construction of masculinities perspective (Kimmel & Messner, 2007) and racial identity development (Cross & Vandiver, 2001). The social construction of masculinities perspective treats gender as a performed socially constructed identity which encompasses meanings that are culturally defined as masculine and retreats from research that suggests biological differences as explanation for men's behaviors (Harris & Struve, 2009). Embedded in this perspective is that certain masculinities are hegemonic and prioritized over others. Davis (1999) argued that Black men face hegemonic masculinity in college on a daily basis in complex ways.

Cross and Vandiver's (2001) expanded nigrescence model also provided context to this study. This model consists of three thematic categories: pre-encounter, immersion-emersion, and internalization. The pre-encounter theme describes individuals with attitudes or low racial identity salience attributed to being Black. The immersion-emersion theme describes individuals with an identity in a state of transition and internalization occurs when individuals are comfortable being Black and views race as being positive. Cross and Vandiver's (2001) thematic categories illustrate the racial attitudes some Black men bring to college which influences how they negotiate the campus. Together, these theories allow for the exploration of how race influences perceptions of masculinity among Black undergraduate college men at a PWI.

METHODOLOGY

This article is based on findings from a larger qualitative study exploring how Black men developed interpersonal relationships with other men on a college campus. Specifically, the larger exploratory qualitative study sought to understand how Black men developed interpersonal relationships with other men, how identity influences these relationships, and the sociocultural influences on these relationships. For this present study, data were extracted from the larger data set and analyzed based on the abovementioned research questions and theoretical frameworks.

Site and Participants

The context for this sample is a large, public, flagship research institution in the Midwestern region of the United States. Men comprised 50.1% of the undergraduate student body and Blacks accounted for 4.2% of the overall population. Participants for this study were obtained through a purposive snowball sampling procedure (Patton, 2002). Four gatekeepers, administrators with extensive contact with Black males on campus, were sought to identify study participants. The criteria were full-time Black male undergraduate students of at least sophomore status. First-year students were not considered as a result of their lack of exposure to the campus.

This sampling technique yielded 17 traditional age students ranging from 19 to 23 including seven seniors, five juniors, and five sophomores. Nine participants came from two parent homes and the remaining eight were raised primarily in a single parent (mother) home. Seven participants in the study self-identified their socioeconomic status as working class, seven from middle class, and three from a poor/low-income environment. Further, eleven participants were first-generation meaning they were the first person in their immediate family to attend college. Given the exploratory nature of this study and the small population of Black males at the institution, this number reached data saturation.

Data Collection and Analysis

This article relied on data collected during an in-depth semi-structured interview. The protocol used during the semi-structured interview included questions derived from the literature on college men and masculinity, racial identity development, and college interpersonal relationships. Each interview was audiotaped, transcribed, and analyzed. Using the interview transcripts, data was analyzed using three levels of coding: open, axial, and selective (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). During the open coding process, words were assigned to blocks of data based on initial interpretations. After assigning open codes, these codes were applied across class levels in the sample. Next, axial coding occurred where categories were formed and given specific properties and dimensions. Properties are the characteristics of a specific category that gives it meaning and dimensions provide context to how each property vary along a continuum (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). During this process, codes related to the same phenomenon were combined and given another code. Finally, selective coding occurred to explore the relationships between each of the categories.

Trustworthiness

Lincoln and Guba's (1985) trustworthiness techniques were employed in this study. First, a peer debriefer, a Black male higher education professional with expertise in qualitative research and college student development was selected to offer perspectives on the data. Second, a member checking, an opportunity for participants to validate interpretation of data, was conducted with each participant (Creswell, 2009; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Summaries were written and shared with participants to verify interpretation of the conversation after the interviews. Third, a researcher journal was established, as part of the data collection process and as a running self-commentary during data analysis (Torres, 2003). Lastly, a researcher

positionality reflection was created to articulate how biases and perspectives influenced the research process (Jones, Torres, Arminio, 2013).

FINDINGS

Participants' conceptualizations of masculinity served as the focus of this study. Three themes emerged during data analysis: (a) definitions of masculinity, (b) influence of race on conceptualization of masculinity, and (c) evolving definitions of masculinity. Responses to these themes are explored with illustrative quotes from participants.

Definitions of Masculinity

All of the participants entered college adhering to stereotypical definitions of masculinity. These definitions of masculinity derived from multiple influences including parents, hometown environments, schools, sports, media, and religious institutions. Most participants cited accepting responsibility as an essential part of being a man and discussed the importance of "being a provider, "accepting faults," "keeping your word," "being on your grind" or described tasks such as paying bills or taking care of family. For example, one participant shared, "A man is someone who takes responsibilities for their actions, no matter whether they're good or bad." Some participants mentioned respectfulness as an expression of masculinity. One participant illustrated this by stating, "Being a man is someone that is respected and respects people as well." Another definition most participants subscribed to masculinity was toughness. One participant stated, "A man has to be strong, aggressive, assertive, you have to be a leader, be at the forefront."

Some of the participants also provided examples of how advancing the Black community shaped their definitions of masculinity. One participant shared, "I would say manhood, perseverance, scholarship, and uplift, and by uplift, I mean helping out your community and always being there for other people." Some participants also

mentioned not displaying vulnerable emotion as a component of masculinity. For example, one participant shared, "You're taught to be strong and you're taught to be in control of your emotions, to not cry." These concepts consistently emerged as definitions of masculinity that influenced how participants negotiated the predominantly White campus.

Influence of Race on Conceptualizations of Masculinity

When asked if there was a difference between what it means to be a man versus being a Black man, eight participants mentioned that race did not influence their definitions of masculinity. These participants made statements such as "all men are the same," "race doesn't define who I am or change my definition," and "race has nothing to do with it." Conversely, nine participants indicated race as salient in their definitions of masculinity. Some participants emphasized how negative stereotypes influenced their definitions. For example, one senior participant linked his definitions of Black masculinity to the academic classroom.

> Being a Black man in America definitely adds stereotypes and at times negative connotations to who you are as a person, especially being a Black student in the science field. It's definitely a struggle in itself because it's very rare you find professors who look like you, teaching assistants who look like you. It's even harder sometimes to find students who look like you…it's not always comfortable to go outside of your comfort zone and ask people who you don't know for help.

As evidenced in this quote, he described the challenges associated with being a Black man and the lack of same race peers at the PWI. Another senior participant offered a similar experience.

> There's a lot of adversity being a Black man. When you are walking and leaving the library late at night, automatically you are criminal number one. You cannot deviate from that. In criminal justice classes, we always talk about crime. On the first day of class the professor states that the jails are overpopulated with Black males and if you are a Black male, there is a high chance that you will be incarcerated. I'm tired of hearing that. It seems like everywhere I go; I am the elephant in the room. I can't escape it. You are like a representative for the whole race in class because you are the only person there.

This quote illustrates the discrimination he had experienced in the academic classroom, which is further complicated by feeling like he had to represent the entire Black population. Another participant mentioned that stereotypical definitions of masculinity are even more intense for Black men.

> Some of the same things that I've said as far as being assertive, aggressive and all that stuff goes, but in a Black community it's even more. You have to be even more powerful. These are really the only options. You have to be powerful and by doing that you have to either be a basketball player, or a football player, or some type of athlete.

His quote suggests that certain Black men are privileged more than others on the campus. One of the other participants in the sample offered his perspective on the influence of race on his conceptualization of masculinity:

> I feel like when you say a Black man, I feel like there's so many different things that can be brought up in that identity just because there's so much stigma in our country around Black men and what that means…I feel like being a Black man is something that kind of

disenfranchises you, something that makes you have to prove yourself more.

Evolving Definitions of Masculinity

Differences emerged between class groups when asked about definitions of masculinity changing over time. One notable finding is that sophomore participants' definitions of masculinity did not change which could be attributed to their limited exposure to the campus setting. Conversely, junior and seniors discussed the evolution of these definitions based upon campus experiences, interactions with others, and the awareness of multiple masculinities. For example, when asked if definitions of masculinity changed over time, one junior participant stated, "I feel like I'm starting to learn more about different viewpoints of what masculinity is versus this generalized sense of it." Similarly, one of the senior participants described transcending traditional definitions of masculinity by sharing:

> As I progress, I think that my understanding of a man is someone that's secure within themselves, someone that takes responsibility and I'd kind of use that more as analogy or a comparison between a child and an adult or a boy and a man.

Another senior participant stated that his meanings of masculinity "evolve with every stage that you think about in life" while another senior participant mentioned that his conceptualizations of masculinity have "more depth" based upon his experiences on campus. Overall, these three themes provide insight into the behaviors Black undergraduate college men bring to campus and how they evolve over time.

LIMITATIONS

Some limitations are worth noting in this study. First, based on the qualitative design, these findings may not be generalizable to all Black men at PWIs. Despite the diversity present in the sample, these 17 participants may not represent the experiences of all Black men on the campus. Second, though the study gatekeepers had access to a large percentage of Black men on the campus, some students may have been overlooked. Furthermore, though the article focused on how race influenced definitions of masculinity, additional insights into the experiences of those who did not view race as being integral in their conceptualization of masculinity could have been informative. Despite these limitations, this study offered important insights into the gendered experiences of Black male college students.

Discussion and Implications

As previously mentioned, participants' definitions of masculinity derived from multiple influences including parents, hometown environments, schools, sports, media, and religious institutions. Definitions that consistently emerged were accepting responsibility, displaying toughness, showing respect, uplifting the Black community, and not displaying vulnerable emotion. These definitions mirror how Black men described these conceptualizations in prior studies. Junior and seniors were able to redefine what it meant to be a man based on their prolonged exposure to the PWI. This finding is consistent with the men in Harris, Palmer, and Struve's (2011) study emphasizing how conceptualizations and expressions of masculinities evolve during the college years as men grow and mature. Similar to the men in Dancy's (2012) study, participants' definitions were constrained by themselves, African American peers, and pressures to adhere to majority culture. The external pressures influenced how these men negotiated the PWI.

Interestingly, one significant finding is that almost half of the participants did not view race as influencing their conceptualizations of masculinity. Given the issues and challenges Black men negotiate on a continual basis, this finding is somewhat surprising. This finding could be attributed to these men growing up in a predominantly White hometown

environment where participants had limited interactions with their same race peers. Contrastingly, most participants from urban areas discussed race as salient in their conceptualizations of masculinity. These participants offered examples based on culture shock experienced at the PWI which is consistent with literature suggesting that Black men at these institutions experience challenges adjusting and persisting (Cuyjet, 2006). As a result of this culture shock, many of these men consciously combatted negative stereotypes held by faculty and peers and exemplified what Cross and Vandiver (2001) referred to as intense Black involvement in the immersion-emersion theme where they were deeply immersed in all things affiliated with Black culture. Despite the racial discrimination Black men face in society at large, participants made meaning of race in varying ways. This finding further illustrates how Black men are not a monolithic group.

As a result of this study's findings, some implications can be offered. Higher education professionals at PWIs should create a climate and culture that intentionally considers the experiences of Black men. Participants' conceptualization of being a Black man revealed a plethora of issues they constantly negotiate at the PWI which includes: racial discrimination, alienation, isolation, image concerns, lower academic expectations from faculty, and struggles to transcend traditional expectations of masculinity. Institutions should be cognizant of these findings as they develop initiatives to support the identity development and experiences of Black males on their respective campuses. For example, given the importance of peer influence among Black men (Bonner & Bailey, 2006), higher education professionals should create peer-mentoring programs where Black males can learn more authentic definitions of masculinity. These initiatives are especially important for underclassmen trying to make meaning of multiple definitions of masculinity and the predominantly White campus environment. Depending on institutional resources, mentors can expand beyond upperclassmen male peers to include

graduate and professional students, or faculty and staff. Participants serving as mentors should be knowledgeable of issues and challenges facing Black college men and identity development.

Though this article emphasized the influence of race on definitions of masculinity, future research should investigate the role multiple social identities play in conceptualization of masculinity. Exploring issues of race, class, spirituality, and sexuality could provide insight into the complex challenges Black men face negotiating these intersecting identities at the PWI. Future studies should also consider how these definitions of masculinity influence their interpersonal relationships. Doing so could provide important insights into their sense of belonging and retention. Lastly, different institutional contexts (e.g., historically Black college and university, community college) should be considered in subsequent studies.

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