

Masculine Socialization and Sexual Risk Behaviors among Black Men Who Have Sex with Men

A Qualitative Exploration

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Aspects of masculine socialization among Black men who have sex with men (MSM) and potential corresponding influences on high-risk sexual behaviors are explored in this study. Individual interviews were conducted with 29 Black MSM in Atlanta, Georgia. Findings included (1) formative masculine socialization experiences marked by an absence of biological fathers and Black male role models, (2) negative perceptions of “gay” identities and communities, (3) race and racial identification as intersecting influences on masculine and sexual identities, (4) the influences of masculine socialization and beliefs on partner selection and sexual behaviors, and (5) general themes of trust, control, “heat of the moment” sex, and low self-love as primary factors influencing condom use. Implications for future research and HIV prevention efforts targeting Black MSM are discussed.

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Black men who have sex with men (MSM) are disproportionately impacted by HIV in the United States. Specifically, 49 percent of all Black men living with

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HIV/AIDS are MSM (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 2006), and a recent study reported an HIV prevalence of 46 percent among Black MSM in five major U.S. cities, much higher than for MSM of other ethnicities (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 2005). However, rates of unprotected anal intercourse (UAI) among Black MSM vary between 32 percent and more than 50 percent, comparable to UAI rates among MSM of other ethnicities (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 2003; Hart and Peterson 2004; Lemp et al. 1994; Solorio, Swendeman, and Rotheram-Borus 2003; Valleroy et al. 2000). This racial disparity in HIV rates despite equal rates of UAI may be partially explained by a higher co-prevalence of sexually transmitted infections and late HIV testing practices among Black MSM (Millett et al. 2006), but the unique social context driving the sexual risk behavior of Black MSM remains relatively unexplored.

Public discussions of the social forces contributing to the current HIV epidemic among Black MSM have recently focused on the “down low,” often characterized as Black MSM who publicly identify as heterosexual but secretly have sex with other men (Denizet-Lewis 2003; Wright 2001). Much of this dialogue ensued after the publication of J. L. King’s (2004) book, *On the Down Low: A Journey into the Lives of “Straight” Black Men Who Sleep with Men*. Though not based on empirical evidence, the popularity of King’s book ignited fear and concern as many readers could erroneously conclude that Black MSM on the “down low” were chiefly responsible for HIV transmission in Black communities (Boykin 2005), an assertion not fully supported by the current HIV research literature (Ford et al. 2007; Millett et al. 2005).

Utilizing the term “down low” as a public health variable is problematic due to its anecdotal interpretations and the difficulties associated with recruiting MSM research participants who do not disclose their sexual behaviors. Furthermore, the complex convergence of race, masculinities, and sexualities from which this term emerges, and its potential link to risky sexual behaviors, is a topic that has not been adequately explored. Bowleg (2004) noted that “sociocultural factors such as racism, poverty, and gender ideologies are not peripheral to HIV risk in Black communities—they are central to it” (p. 168). Black masculine socialization, primarily a concept theoretically applied to heterosexual men, may be relevant to the context of sexual risk behaviors among Black MSM, and not just for those considered “down low.” The role of masculinities and masculine socialization in the HIV epidemic among Black MSM is an extremely complex topic—one that has primarily received theoretical attention in the social science literature, superficial attention in the public health literature, and sensational attention in the media. Thus, the purpose of this study is to explore aspects of masculine socialization among Black MSM and potential corresponding influences on the high-risk sexual behaviors fueling these alarming rates of HIV transmission.

Background

Black communities have specific perceptions, ideals, and expectations of masculinities that are often coupled with familial, communal, and peer acceptance

(Harris 1992; Hunter and Davis 1994; Whitehead 1997). The media and the Black Church have been cited as influential in perpetuating negative attitudes toward homosexuality in the Black community (Fullilove and Fullilove 1999; Johnson 2003; Woodyard, Peterson, and Stokes 2000). Ward (2005) contended that a culture of homophobia in many Black churches actually drives and defines “hypermasculine” behaviors among both heterosexual and homosexual Black men. Moreover, he argued that homophobia is the main factor “crippling the willingness” of the church to positively respond to the HIV/AIDS epidemic in the Black community. One potential reason for this is that perceived gay identities may carry stigmas that contradict images and expectations of how Black men are socialized to act as men, which is taught to boys at an early age (Davis 1999).

Direct contradictions between stereotypically masculine gender role expectations for Black men and stereotypes regarding effeminate homosexual men have been noted in the literature (Ward 2005; Wright 1993). Images of what it means to be a “Black man” often reflect “hyper” heterosexual athletes, thugs, criminals, and entertainers, while the term “gay” conjures up stereotypical notions of hypersexual public displays of affection, effeminate behavior, colorful parades, and cultural norms manufactured in White gay enclaves. Perhaps as a result of these conflicting social stereotypes, Black MSM may equate gay identities to femininity and flamboyant behaviors (Fields, Fullilove, and Fullilove 2001; Malebranche et al. 2004). The apparent misalignment between perceivably White versions of being gay and normative brands of Black masculinity suggests that masculine socialization may be a potential influence on the disclosure patterns and sexual behaviors of Black MSM.

Ultimately, external definitions of Black masculinity coming from general society, religious teachings, the Black community in general, and the media may have an impact on how Black MSM negotiate same-sex desires, sexual roles, and condom use. Black MSM may not see same-sex behaviors as “homosexual” as long as one maintains the insertive role during anal and oral sex (Fields, Fullilove, and Fullilove 2001; Wright 1993). In this context, engaging in behaviors that are consistent with the masculine role in heterosexual relationships (penis insertion) ensures that despite having sex with other men, one’s manhood is maintained. Additionally, Black MSM may employ compensatory sexual behaviors that are similar to those described among Black heterosexual men (e.g., having unprotected sex with multiple partners) in an effort to define their masculinities (Whitehead 1997). A Black masculine socialization process focused on traditional heterosexual prowess may also influence decisions about what kind of man to sleep with and whether to be the insertive or receptive partner in anal sex and may encourage unprotected sexual behavior even when condom education and access is not an issue (Fields, Fullilove, and Fullilove 2001; Peterson et al. 2003). These behaviors may ultimately be an effort to distance oneself from stereotypical perceptions of homosexuality as being effeminate or “less of a man” and make for a potentially complicated matrix of sexual decision making in this population.

Beeker et al. (1998) found sexual risk taking to be a “test of one’s manhood” among the Black men they studied. In this scenario, sexual role-playing influenced

behaviors and whether one used a condom or not: “real men” are considered the insertive partners in same-sex interactions and are thought by many to be at lower risk for HIV than receptive partners. Hence, a receptive partner may forgo condom use because of an assumed risk reduction with a primarily insertive (and perceivably more masculine) partner. Kippax and Smith (2001) discussed the relationship between anal sex and power through interviews with gay male couples. They found that the expression of masculinity is often manifested through dynamics of domination and submission between two men when having anal intercourse. Although none of the participants in this study were Black, the issues related to masculinities may be present in many sexual interactions between Black MSM.

Conceptual Framework

Perspectives on the social construction of masculinities and male gender role conflict were converged for conceptual sense making in this study. Based largely on the work of Vygotsky (1978), social constructivism provides an appropriate lens for understanding the cultural nature of learning. Accordingly, interactions with others (either direct or observed) provide context and stimuli for the replication of learned behaviors, including sexual risk taking and role-playing. Thus, social constructivists argue that masculine behaviors and attitudes are *learned*, reinforced in social institutions, and recycled in various cultural contexts (Connell 1993; Kimmel, Hearn, and Connell 2005; Pollack 2000). Harper (2004) asserted that parents are among the agents of masculine socialization: “no father wants his son to grow up being a ‘pussy,’ ‘sissy,’ ‘punk,’ or ‘softy’—terms commonly associated with boys and men who fail to live up to the traditional standards of masculinity” (p. 92).

Social constructivists argue that gender is “an active process of construction, occurring in a field of power relations that are often tense and contradictory, and often involving negotiation of alternative ways of being masculine” (Connell 1993, 193). Male gender role conflict characterizes the consequences associated with men’s tendencies to conform to narrow, socially constructed masculine roles (O’Neil and Nadeau 2004). According to O’Neil (1990), conflict typically ensues when prescriptive gender roles that are learned and socially reinforced result in personal restraint. *Fear of femininity* is central to male gender role conflict, which is described as “a strong, negative emotion associated with stereotypic feminine values, attitudes, and behaviors . . . learned primarily in early childhood when gender identity is being formed by parents, peers, and societal values” (O’Neil et al. 1986, 337).

Black masculine socialization has traditionally emphasized physical and heterosexual prowess, reflecting the historical context of slavery and focus on the expectations of Black men to “work and breed” (Harris 1992; Jackson 1997; Whitehead 1997). This is different from the more Eurocentric masculine attributes of competition, individualism, aggression, and paternalism, which may be denied to Black

men by racist and classist structural institutions (Bush 1999; Harris 1992; Hunter and Davis 1994; Jackson 1997; Staples 1978; Whitehead 1997).

In an effort to reconcile the cultural conflict between denied privileges of White masculinities and traditionally African masculine values of family, community, and cooperation, Black men may resort to the one masculine trait they can fully control: their sexual lives (Jackson 1997). Some scholars have suggested that this may be expressed through having multiple female sexual partners and having sex without a condom as sexual indicators of power, potentially creating a subtext for HIV transmission (Whitehead 1997; Wolfe 2003). Moreover, others have argued that Black communities have become matriarchal, which disempowers Black men and shapes the way Black men are socialized (Bush 1999; Levant and Majors 1997; Staples 1978). In this interpretation, the physical absence of Black fathers leaves young Black boys without available male role models, thus leaving Black women as the primary influence in their masculine socialization. These influences may be contributing to a context in which Black men are subject to competing and divergent definitions of masculinity, and high-risk sexual behaviors may be a reaction to these external forces.

Cool pose. Majors and Billson (1992) proposed “cool pose,” a concept that describes a Black masculine strategy embraced by Black males to cope with and survive amidst racism, oppression, and marginality: “cool pose is a ritualized form of masculinity that entails behaviors, scripts, physical posturing, impression management, and carefully crafted performances that deliver a single, critical message: pride, strength, and control” (p. 4). In their interpretation, being “cool” for Black men can be reflected in expressive styles of dress, speech, and projected outward behaviors, represented by athletes, entertainers, or stereotypical representations of ostentatious “pimps.” Conversely, being “cool” may also mean being restrained at times, embodied by emotionless, stoic, and unflinching behavior. Regardless of whether it is expressive or restrained, the primary goal of cool pose, according to Majors and Billson, is to remain calm, detached, and together in the face of social chaos, discrimination, and trauma. Cool pose can serve as an initial positive coping strategy in dealing with social stressors but may ultimately encourage self-destructive behaviors that adversely influence physical and mental health.

Majors and Billson (1992) also described cool pose as a potential negative influence on the relationships and sexual behaviors between Black men and women. The emotionless, aloof, and fearless attributes of this strategy may attract some Black women but may ultimately discourage establishing strong, lasting relationships. Moreover, in this framework, children are an important statement for declaring manhood, and some Black males may make that statement through multiple sexual partners and having sex without condoms. Consequently, this aspect of Black masculine socialization has been implicated as being partially responsible for the high rates of HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted infections in the Black community (Wolfe 2003).

Despite its popular utility in post-1992 research on Black masculinities, cool pose as a concept has not been adequately applied to Black MSM, their sexual behaviors, and approaches to condom use. Most empirical explorations of Black masculine socialization assume that Black men are exclusively heterosexual. While this is not always the case, recent studies have yet to adequately address this diversity in sexual behaviors and identification. Given this and the themes noted above in the literature review, the following research questions were explored in the present study: (1) What are some formative experiences that shape the masculinities of Black MSM? (2) How do race, masculinities, sexual identification, and labeling intersect for Black MSM? and (3) How do masculine socialization and beliefs influence partner selection, sexual behaviors, and condom use among Black MSM?

Method

This study was conducted as part of the Collaborative HIV Prevention Research in Minority Communities Program at the Center for AIDS Prevention Studies in San Francisco. We received oversight approval from the committee on human research at the University of California, San Francisco, in addition to approval from the Emory University Institutional Review Board.

Sampling and Participants

We conducted semistructured, one-on-one interviews with 29 self-identified Black MSM in Atlanta, Georgia, between May 2003 and September 2003. Participants were recruited through the Internet, intercept method at a local park, and snowball methods. Inclusion criteria were (1) self-identification as Black or African American, (2) residence in the Atlanta metropolitan area, (3) age older than 18, and (4) having engaged in oral or anal sex with another man in the past three months.

For the Internet recruitment, we utilized America On-Line chat rooms to recruit participants. We created a screen name (BlkmensStudy) and included a profile briefly describing the nature of the study. Participants were then prompted to access a Web page that included an Institutional Review Board–approved information sheet with more detailed information on the study and contact information. Participants could express interest in the study by (1) sending an instant message, (2) sending an e-mail, or (3) leaving a voicemail message at the lead researcher’s office. On initial contact, the inclusion criteria were reviewed to determine participation eligibility. If the potential participant met the criteria, he was then enrolled in the study, and a date, time, and place were set for the interview.

For the intercept method participants, one member of the research team recruited individuals from Piedmont Park, a local venue popular among Black MSM in Atlanta. The researcher approached potential participants arbitrarily, described the

study, and reviewed inclusion criteria. If eligible, the participant was interviewed on the spot or scheduled for a later time at a mutually agreeable location. We conducted snowball recruitment by giving participants business cards with information on the study and contact information for the research team members. In addition, after completion of the interview, participants recruited from both Internet and intercept methodologies were given business card-size flyers to pass on to other men in their social and/or sexual networks whom they felt would be eligible for the study.

The 29 participants identified their sexualities in the following ways: gay or homosexual (72.4 percent), bisexual (13.8 percent), and other (13.8 percent). Only 2 reported being HIV positive. The mean age of the participants was 28.8 years old, and 79.3 percent indicated that they were either spiritual or religious. Thirteen were college graduates, and only 1 participant earned more than \$60,000 annually. Nearly half (48.3 percent) earned annual incomes less than \$30,000. Each participant self-identified as Black or African American and reported having either oral or anal sex with another man within three months prior to the interview.

Interview Instrument

The interview instrument was developed by the lead researcher using information obtained from the current literature on masculinity and previous work with Black MSM. Domains incorporated into the guide for exploration included: (1) formative experiences and upbringing, (2) racial identification and experiences, (3) perceptions and development of sexuality and being “gay,” (4) masculine socialization and beliefs, (5) sexual scripts and behaviors, and (6) barriers and facilitators to condom use.

Data Collection and Analysis

Interviews were conducted in the lead researcher’s office, on location at Piedmont Park, or at a quiet venue conducive to privacy and at the discretion of the participant and interviewer (such as a café, school library, or inside a car). Interview length varied from one to two hours, with two members of the research team independently conducting all 29 interviews. Participants were given a short demographic questionnaire to complete before starting the interview, an Institutional Review Board-approved study information sheet, and \$25 compensation for time and effort. Each interview was audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim using a professional transcription service. Transcripts were cross-checked for accuracy with the audio recordings as they were completed.

Transcripts were uploaded into Atlas.ti, a qualitative software package that aids in the organization, coding, and analysis of qualitative data. The data were sorted and coded in three phases. The first phase utilized a coding workbook developed in accordance with the domains described above in the interview guide. Two members of the research team coded the same three interviews and compared coding patterns

to ensure at least 85 percent agreement, otherwise known as interrater reliability (Miles and Huberman 1994). When this level of agreement was reached, the remaining interviews were divided between the authors and coded in a similar fashion.

In the second phase, the authors met on a monthly basis in an iterative process to review findings and modify the coding workbook to include “emerging codes”—codes that were consistently found in the interview analysis but were not originally included in the coding workbook. The third phase utilized Atlas.ti software, in which the lead researcher recoded all the interviews electronically using the fully revised coding workbook developed during the earlier phases. Quotations included under each code in all the transcripts were compiled, code reports were printed from the software program, and two analysts subsequently reviewed these code reports and developed a list of subcodes based on frequencies. Finally, we verified relationships between the codes and subcodes generated in the final coding workbook.

Findings

Formative Experiences with Fathers and Black Male Role Models

Participants discussed the physical, emotional, or psychological absence of biological fathers as the most common experience in their lives growing up, whether it was death at an early age, incarceration, emotional distance, or just simply “never knowing” who they were. One participant stated that the closest male relative during his youth was his uncle, who was also absent, and described his expectations and what this absence of a male presence had on him:

Like I said, a male in your life on that consistent level is basically to learn how to act like society expects you to be as a male. It’s just passed on from one person to another. And, but like I said, my uncle, by him not really being around had some influence. So basically I was just left to be.

Another participant described how he learned to “hustle,” and what that meant to him, being the product of high school–age parents, never close to his father, and having uncles locked up in prison and a mother who died when he was ten:

Survive. To survive, get what you want, getting what you want, how to survive, making it. That’s what I learned. All the male role models around me either sold drugs or just made babies.

Several participants described their formative Black manhood teachings as emphasizing aspects of “hustling” and “making babies,” often represented by the men seen as “role models” when their biological fathers were not around. Otherwise, participants described being taught about Black manhood either through historical figures in textbooks (Martin

Luther King, Malcolm X, Marcus Garvey) or through their biological mothers' teachings, or they often learned it on their own after being "just left to be." These descriptions of hustling in its various forms and "making babies" as aspects of Black manhood mirror aspects of a cool pose framework, based on lessons they learned from grown men. Regardless of their personal ambitions to either hustle or become fathers, this aspect of Black masculinity was one that many recalled seeing during their formative years.

Current Ideations of Masculinity

Many participants expressed masculine ideologies reflected in the literature associated with Black men when asked what it meant to them to be "masculine":

It means, um, someone is more aggressive, that carries himself like a man. That, um, ideally is straight acting and, um, they're probably just more in tune to their heterosexual tendencies—they're more like a sense of being a man.

At the time it meant John Shaft. You remember the movie Shaft, he had his theme music and everything, the way that he walked, everything about him was perfect. The way his hair was combed to the way he expressed himself, he had his clothing, the women loved him, the men wanted to be him, that was masculinity, and nothing less would do.

P: For some reason I associate masculine Black men with having a lot of females, sports, etc. . . . I'm just getting all these images of the barbershop.

I: Why the barbershop?

P: I don't know, because that's just like the hub of masculinity. That's like our country club.

While participants did not always directly note from where these ideations of masculine behavior for Blacks arose, media depictions and local neighborhood enclaves like barbershops served as instructional tools and locations of manhood training for many of these participants. The analogy of a barbershop as "our country club" speaks to an awareness of the institutional and structural aspects of White masculine socialization (i.e., country clubs) that are not typically perceived as available social options for Black men. In the context of a sample of men who had little contact with their biological fathers growing up, masculine teachings were likely to be derived from these other sources where they could find images or socialize with other Black men, which could be through television or social locations like the barbershop. One of the few participants raised by both his biological father and mother was a young medical student who described masculinity in more traditional contexts that the literature often associates with European masculinity:

Masculinity to me is many different things. Um, number one, being masculine is just not about having a cut up physique or wearing thugged out clothes. It's more about to me, being able to uphold or live up to your responsibilities. Um, accountability, you

know, having a goal, a career, you know, not so much as living for now but living for the future and for now.

For him, masculinity meant responsibility and success, straying away from the images of Shaft, heterosexual promiscuity, or athleticism described by the others, which may reflect teachings from his present biological parents. While only a few participants expressed these alternative definitions of Black masculinity, most described Black masculinity through physical attributes, heterosexual prowess, and athletics. Irrespective of their personal definitions, however, all of the men in the study were keenly aware of the common stereotypical attributes often assigned to Black manhood, such as a muscular physique, baggy clothes, and “thug-like” behavior.

Participants described race as an influence on masculine definitions, noting distinct differences between perceived masculine expectations for Black men versus White men:

We [Black men] have been emasculated in so many different ways. All the way back to, you know, being enslaved and beaten and all those other things. We have been . . . we have evolved into this sort of, you know, it’s in, in the Black community it’s like this genetic code that’s now evolved in our head that we have to regain our dignity, our masculinity, our force, our presence as a man and when you’re not all about that in the Black community, it’s kind of like, what are you here for?

White men are taught to be the provider, just to get a good job, get educated. Black men have been taught, “Hey, hustle, make it any way you can.” I mean, that’s the perception we’ve been taught.

I guess it goes back to history. I guess by them [White people] having the power to do what they wanna do versus Black people or minorities having the power such as they do, or money, politics, whatever. It just seems easier for them, I don’t know.

Participants often described the social context of slavery, race, and racism in America, and how these dynamics influenced their perceptions of opportunities for Black men. Many defined Black masculinity as lacking equal power as White masculinity and how lower social expectations of Black men become the norm of this society’s culture. Again, some described “hustling” in order to achieve success or financial gain as an assertion of an alternative form of manhood. Their descriptions of relative disempowerment and restricted masculine expectations among Black males in America were repeatedly echoed during the interviews, reflecting race-specific individual and institutional masculine socialization processes. While not necessarily a cool pose, participants’ responses to what they viewed as a racially uneven social playing field for Black men appeared to drive their “hustle” (whatever that may be) to survive.

Perceptions of “Gay” Sexual Identification and Lifestyle

Many participants voiced a consistent pejorative response when asked to describe their first impressions or images associated with the word “gay.” This included descriptions of men with “processed hair,” a “careless” lifestyle, “flamboyancy,” and only pertaining to White men. For some, it was as if the word itself had an innate meaning:

Gay is not a positive word to me. It just doesn’t ring positive when I hear, “I’m gay.” It just doesn’t.

I don’t want to be labeled as that negative word.

These associations not only influenced participants to reject this word to describe their same-sex behavior but also appeared to influence many to avoid sexual labels altogether. This rejection was likely influenced by a heightened sense of Black racial identity from personal experiences described earlier, with which being “gay” obviously clashed. Moreover, these negative associations were compounded by perceptions of what they considered a very “promiscuous” and “fast” “gay” community and lifestyle:

For the most part the White and Black gay lifestyles are the same; it’s about partying, fuckin’ who you can, drugs, whatever the case may be. Just a really, really fast-paced life.

I really don’t feel that I’m a part of the Black gay community. Because community to me has like a lot of little connotations to it, it has kind of a sense of togetherness, and I don’t necessarily feel that the Black gay community has that. I don’t think we’ve crossed that bridge and really built a community for ourselves.

Despite viewing “gay” as a negative term, several participants actually used the term “gay” to describe their same-sex attraction but would not use it as a definition of community or lifestyle. In a larger context, “gay” represented a specific lifestyle emphasizing promiscuity, drugs, and disjointedness. Participants discussed how these negative perceptions and experiences influenced both their choice to distance themselves from identifying as “gay” and associating with a “gay” community. Contrary to racial identification as “Black,” participants described themselves as displaced outside observers of the “gay” community instead of active members.

Race and Its Impact on Sexual Identification and Community

Similar to their general definitions of masculinity, participants also noted racial differences when it came to sexual identification and levels of comfort with being homosexual:

For instance, if you go to a movie theater, it will, could be nothing to see White men go to a movie theater and you see them sitting together. If African American men go to the movie theater they've got to, you know, put a seat in between them, as if it speaks to their masculinity or sexuality.

I think it's a power thing. And the Black man is afraid to, you know, because then he'll have two X's against him because he's Black and he's gay. It's much easier for a White man because he's White; he's supposed to be superior to the Black man. So it's much easier for him to step out and say, "I'm gay" because he has more power. He has more authority than the Black man.

The same racial social power disparity shaping definitions of masculinity was also seen as something that allowed White men to be more comfortable with their individual same-sex behavior in public and experience an overall increased sense of a "gay" community as a whole:

It seems that they [White men] are more willing to be more free. It seems like they wouldn't have a problem, and just being open. Dressing up in drag, and parading down the street. And brothers would be runnin' and hidin' and duckin' and stuff.

Within the White community there is a difference. They have a unity among them; they have a sexual unity of connectedness.

The larger structural context of perceived unlimited opportunity and power for White men afforded them the privilege of being more comfortable with their same-sex behavior both personally and for constructing a more cohesive "gay" community overall. Being Black, and the contrasting perceived and experienced lack of power and opportunity, was described by many as being almost an impediment to freedom with their sexual orientation.

This backdrop of race-specific beliefs and expectations of masculinity also appeared to influence how participants prioritized their sexual identities in their individual lives:

I think in Black men, we have stressed this whole thing about masculinity, being a "man." And that goes against everything that they taught us to be gay men.

When I walk into a room and no one knows me they know that I'm Black, but they don't know that I'm gay. Or, I don't tell them, "I'm gay." So I think it's more important for me to be a good Black man than it is to be a good gay. You can hide being gay, but I can't hide being Black.

One participant described his racial and sexual identities as mutually exclusive; embracing one meant detaching oneself from another: "I don't want to be separated

from being a Black man, don't want to be separated from anything because of my sexual preference." Sexuality was often described as "just who I am" or what one likes to do in their "own space," but being Black was different and carried with it additional social and political responsibilities.

Influence of Masculinity on Sexual Roles and Partner Selection

Most participants stated that perceptions of masculinity were important influences when selecting male sexual partners, possibly reflecting a desire for male bonding or connection:

I feel like if I'm to date a man and he acts very feminine then to me, why not just be with a woman?

I think because of the life of a male influenced my life, I think that's the whole bonding that I missed, I feel like I'm getting it from a guy. I always thought my mother and these guys [the men she dated] would . . . they would bond with her. It's like that whole protection and security thing, and I wanted the same thing. Girls can't give that to me 'cause girls want that. I want what girls want. And so I find that in a guy and it's not sexual; it's more of an intimate thing.

Many described femininity as a quality that was not desirable in a male sexual partner in general. Others traced it back to a formative experience, such as not having a father figure around. Traditional aspects of manhood represented by a father figure, such as security and protection, were things that some participants mentioned they were looking for as children, which translated into desiring similar qualities as an adult in a male sexual and intimate partner. For some, this desire represented longing for a masculine form of intimacy that neither their mothers nor a female or effeminate male partner could give them.

Masculinity also emerged as an important influence on attraction and intimacy when it came to seeking out other men as well as sexual roles with intercourse itself.

If someone to say, invade your body and, you know, to let someone in like that, it is a lot more intimate than you just penetrate someone else. That's part of the reason why females get so emotionally, much more emotionally attached than the male does because that's a lot more intimate for them. There's a lot more investment in that. Whereas you can just penetrate the world and not have any, and that's really what it is.

This is another reason why I can't let people screw me. Every person [laughter], when I was younger, every person that I let fuck me have all turned out to be total disappointments later in life. Like E, the first one, turned out to be a drag queen. Another one, G, turned out to be a drag queen. The bartender at

the bar turned out to be a porno star and in the pornos he gets fucked like the last woman in America.

Men commented on the negative attributes associated with the perceived feminine act of being the receptive partner in anal intercourse. Being “disappointed” that men who were once “tops” turned out to be transgendered and/or receptive partners in anal intercourse later implies that it is not “masculine” to be a “bottom” in same-sex relationships. Being a “bottom,” for many, was described as an act that was reserved for those sexual partners who were either traditionally “masculine” (i.e., muscular and/or thug-like in appearance) or for those with whom one had deep emotional and intimate feelings. The latter exception appeared to be one circumstance where it was OK to be a “bottom” and it was not perceived as a threat to one’s manhood. For many, receptive anal intercourse carried a heightened emotional investment, a role traditionally associated with females in a heterosexual context. While not always being “disappointing” or negative, descriptions of the emotional investment of being a “top” or a “bottom” were laden with gender role assumptions of the social value ascribed to certain sexual behaviors.

The Social Context of Condom Use

Participants described multiple factors influencing condom use decision making, most not associated with issues or perceptions of masculinity among their sexual partners:

I think when we didn’t use a condom, the first time, was our year anniversary. I think I felt really comfortable with him. I felt like I could trust him. I felt really close to him, so I felt like we could have sex without a condom.

Well, I feel as though like, with me fuckin’ somebody, I can see my condom and I know what’s going on, you know what I’m saying, as opposed to somebody doin’ me, so it’s like that does play a role into it. I feel as though I’m a little bit more safe that way.

“Trust” was the most commonly cited factor influencing personal decisions not to use condoms among men in our sample. Similar to the described “investment” of being the receptive partner in anal intercourse, the decision to not utilize a condom was viewed as a much more intimate act and a reason why one would forgo the use of a condom. Additionally, the traditional masculine definition ascribed to being a “top” was an issue of control for some, viewed as protective when one can see and fully know that the condom is still on, whereas it may be more difficult to see if the condom is on for the complete sexual act as the receptive partner. Even so, the choice to use condoms or not sometimes came down to “heat of the moment” sex or “fear”

of catching HIV for many. Decisions to use condoms during intercourse appeared to be personal decisions influenced by external experiences and not a reflection of education about the risks involved.

When asked why Black MSM have higher rates of HIV than MSM of other races/ethnicities, many participants suggested that UAI among the general Black and homosexual communities was related to "searching for love and acceptance," both a byproduct of external forces and an internalized reaction to these forces:

I don't know because it's enough education out here. I don't know if that relates back to history, if you have to go back to slavery or what, by us being deprived of so much in our history, in our culture. And I know people use sex as an outlet, I don't know if that's because White people don't have as many problems as Black folks or I don't know. This is my theory. And even though a scar can disappear but the hurt and the pain and the anguish are still here.

If you loved yourself you wouldn't put yourself out there [have sex without condoms], you would be careful. If you loved yourself enough to live, you'll have more respect for yourself. You wouldn't be out there, throwing yourself around there and not protecting yourself, that's crazy. There's nothin' wrong with havin' sex; there's nothin' wrong with that, if you feel like havin' sex seven days a week, as long as you protect yourself.

When discussing why other Black MSM engage in UAI, the influence of "low self-love" was brought up frequently. Unlike the reasons behind their own personal decisions to not use condoms, participants often focused on how larger racial and other social problems influenced the mental health of Black MSM, as if their own decisions were immune to these external forces. One participant specifically mentioned what he perceived as a link between formative masculine socialization experiences with UAI later in life among Black MSM:

I think it's because of that whole, because there is no more love at home. There's no more love in the household so they seek it outside, so they replace sex for love. So you got these teenagers out here sleeping with older, and always older men because I've found what they seek is that father figure image that they have in their head. They get these older men and these older men are kinda taking advantage of them. They just, they don't care, they don't . . . sleep with them with no condom, things like that.

While seemingly aware of these larger issues impacting the notion of "self-love" among the larger community of Black MSM, none of the participants ascribed their own behavioral choices to an internalization or reaction to these same forces. Overall, there appeared to be a disconnect among the men in our sample between acknowledging the larger external forces at work for all Black MSM and how these same forces may shape their own personal sexual decision making.

Discussion and Implications

This study explored various dimensions of masculine socialization and beliefs and their possible influence on the lives, partner selection process, and sexual behaviors of Black MSM. Our findings suggest that the consistent reporting of the absence of a biological father or Black role model as a common occurrence among participants in this sample may leave many to embark on the journey to manhood on their own, with only the guidance of their mothers, or drawing from traditional constructions of “cool” masculinity manufactured by others. While the reasons why the majority of our sample did not have close relationships with their biological fathers were varied and likely the result of numerous social, institutional, and personal factors, the impact this had on their lives cannot be understated. Indeed, the masculine conceptions and behaviors of the men in this study appear to be learned, socially reinforced, and recycled in institutions and cultural contexts as social constructivists would argue. However, most telling in the process may not be the male figures with whom participants had direct contact or observed but rather the men with whom they had little direct contact or never observed.

Some principles of Majors and Billson’s (1992) “cool pose” framework of Black masculinity emerged in our analyses, in which a strong sense of Black racial identification appeared to be the major factor influencing how these Black MSM saw themselves as individuals and in a broader social context. They described being taught or seeing cool pose masculine qualities of hustling, athletics, and heterosexual prowess but also reported attributes of responsibility and career advancement. Moreover, participants noted a different set of masculine expectations for Black men versus White men and a pervasive sense of a power dynamic in this country that benefits White men. This appeared to affect not only their sense of masculinity but, more important, how they viewed available life and career opportunities for themselves as Black men. This context was very similar to earlier descriptions of masculinity as a “hustle” and “survival” among heterosexual Black men (Whitehead 1997).

While the men in this study did describe influences reminiscent of cool pose, it was apparent that their experiences of masculine socialization were more varied and nuanced than this conceptual framework alone. In fact, their reports of masculine expectations reflected larger societal male gender role pressures defined as Gender Role Conflict in the literature (O’Neil 1990; O’Neil et al. 1986; O’Neil and Nadeau 2004). Moreover, recent explorations of masculinities among heterosexual Black men (Hammond and Mattis 2005; Harper 2004) note that responsibility, accountability, and communal leadership were the most frequently endorsed themes of manhood among participants. The emphasis on positive masculine attributes contrasts with the findings of the present study and highlights the need for additional research to explore and assess the positive and affirming aspects of manhood and masculine socialization, particularly among Black MSM.

Cool pose postulates that Black men's reaction to oppressive external and institutional forces both relieves and contributes to additional stress, and this has an impact on several adverse health outcomes. The internalization of traditional Black masculine attributes as noted in cool pose appeared to influence these men's conceptions of sexual identification, visibility, and sexual behaviors. Black MSM in this study described navigating their same-sex desire while reacting within a cultural context where they already felt disempowered and displaced as Black men. Hence, a rejection of "gay" identification and community may be an extension of a rejection of anything making Black men appear soft, weak, or otherwise disempowered.

These qualitative findings help explain why Black MSM are reported to be less likely to disclose their same-sex behaviors and identify as "gay" but are more likely to behave and identify as bisexual than White MSM (Beeker et al. 1998; Heckman et al. 1999; Millett et al. 2005; Peterson and Bakeman 2001). While "coming out" or claiming a "gay" identity has been described in the literature as a reaffirming and positive experience for many White MSM, this sample of Black MSM did not share this view (Galatzer-Levy and Cohler 2002; Grov et al. 2006). The rejection of claiming a specific homosexual identity was described as a reaction to the common perception (and perhaps reality) that it is easier for White men to publicly disclose their homosexuality without fear of community displacement or repercussions because of their entitled and privileged status in society. Moreover, many perceived the word "gay" as a negative term, associated with being White, effeminate, and promiscuous and exhibiting self-destructive behaviors. Hence, non-"gay" identification and avoidance of "gay" social networks may represent a specific survival strategy employed by Black MSM to avoid additional discrimination and other culturally disaffirming experiences, not necessarily just a simple discomfort with same-sex desire. And sometimes using the term "gay" to merely describe one's same-sex behavior, but not as part of an identity or community, appeared to be a strategy to avoid communities and social behaviors they did not perceive as self-affirming.

Indeed, identification as a Black man is linked to a sense of belonging to the Black community due to common experiences with racism and may be prioritized over claiming a specific sexual identity or label in part because of that fear of displacement (Crawford et al. 2002; Wilson and Miller 2002). Claiming a specific sexual identity label or community takes a back seat to the larger racial context that drives masculine and gender norms, as sexuality is seen as a private matter and not as easily identifiable as one's gender or the color of one's skin. However, from the ways in which our sample described their conflict over what it meant to be Black versus being "gay," one could argue that viewing sexuality and sexual labels as a "private" matter is an excuse to mask a collective fear of losing one's reputation as a "Black" man if one embraces being "gay." Regardless, these descriptions of racial masculine disempowerment are consistent with the main argument posed by cool pose, but the reaction to these external oppressive forces manifests in how Black

MSM may internally negotiate their own same-sex desire, sexual identification, and level of “gay” community involvement.

The Black MSM in this study reported varying levels on which their masculine beliefs influenced their choice of sexual partners and behaviors: (1) desiring partners who were less “feminine” in their external behaviors and mannerisms, (2) choosing partners who provided protection and security, and (3) desiring partners who reflected certain sexual roles. The majority of participants expressed desiring partners whom they considered “masculine,” and many associated masculinity with being the insertive partner in anal sex, as described in previous studies (Beeker et al. 1998; Kippax and Smith 2001). Others based their selection of sexual partners on more emotional masculine attributes of security and protection. Since many men in this study described being primarily raised by their mothers as their biological fathers were absent, it is possible that the type of man they selected for adult sexual and intimate partners reflects aspects of a male connection missing during formative years.

Moreover, some associated a deeper emotional investment with receptive anal sex than insertive sex. Not only did this perceived association influence how these men decided whom their partners may be and whom they would allow to be the insertive partner (masculine or feminine) but it also reflected their perception of receptive anal sex as an emasculated position, typically associated with the social and sexual roles of women. Similar to the described “emotionless” and “aloof” attributes posited to be influencing male-female relationships in a cool pose framework, these dynamics may be at work with regard to MSM relationships as well. Adverse reactions to institutional racism and oppression, the climate of fatherless homes, and being socialized to embrace traditional notions of Black manhood that emphasize hustling, being a “top,” and not being “feminine” may deter some Black MSM from engaging in strong and lasting relationships while simultaneously encouraging sex with multiple partners. Finally, this larger social and institutional context may foster the internalization and adopting of divisive labels and categories of “tops” and “bottoms,” reflecting who is “masculine” or not, such that the lack of cohesiveness or existence of a Black “gay” community that many described becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy based on external definitions of gender role norms and masculine definitions of sexual behavior.

Our findings on how masculine socialization influences HIV sexual risk behaviors among Black MSM emerged much differently from what we had originally anticipated. We expected that participants would view having sex with a stereotypically “masculine” Black man, (i.e., wearing baggy clothes, having a muscular physique, or identifying as “straight” or “bisexual”) as less risky than sex with a “gay”-identified man. A traditionally “masculine” Black man like this may be perceived as less likely to have HIV due to assumptions of (1) lack of contact with a “gay” community with a high prevalence of HIV, (2) more contact with heterosexual women who are not HIV positive, and (3) increased likelihood of his being an exclusive insertive partner, or “top,” during intercourse with other men (Fields, Fullilove, and Fullilove 2001). This belief, in turn, would influence the decision not to use condoms with these men

and potentially place them at higher behavioral risk for HIV transmission. This scenario, however, did not emerge from our analysis. While the men in this study described how personal definitions of masculinity influenced whom they chose to have sex with, and what roles they would play with these men (“top” or “bottom”), they did not appear to directly influence condom use practices.

The issues that did emerge as influences on personal condom use among our sample were broader themes of trust, control, fear, and “heat of the moment” sex. However, we cannot conclude that masculine socialization and expectations do not factor into condom use or sexual risk behaviors among Black MSM. In fact, expectations of masculinity appeared to influence participants’ perceptions of whom and what behaviors may be more or less “risky,” which may in turn impact these issues of control, trustworthiness, and forgoing condoms in the “heat of the moment.” When discussing UAI among other Black MSM, however, this was attributed to “low self-love” for many and appeared to be related to two concepts: (1) a general sense of disempowerment among Black men related to a history of slavery and oppression and (2) a lack of love or guidance from a biological father or Black male role model. This latter issue emerged during conversations with several of the participants, but only one articulated this factor as directly influencing Black MSM to not use condoms.

Our sample, while detailed in discussing lack of self-love as a factor influencing their condom use among the larger Black MSM population, appeared to be disconnected from viewing this as a factor in their own sexual risk behavior. This may simply be an extension of the disconnect many had with personally using the word “gay” to describe their same-sex behavior but not with regard to inclusion in the larger gay community that many perceived as promiscuous and self-destructive. Or it could be seen as the human quality of not being able to view one’s own behaviors as objectively as viewing others’. Regardless, the frequent mention of low self-love among Black MSM in this sample is important. High rates of depression and psychosocial distress among Black MSM may be part of a pathway to UAI, but how the broader context of Black masculine socialization moderates these variables has not been sufficiently addressed and should be quantitatively assessed in the future (Peterson et al. 1992; Peterson, Folkman, and Bakeman 1996; Stokes and Peterson 1998).

This study has some limitations. First, findings from this convenience sample of 29 Black MSM in Atlanta, Georgia, may not be generalizable to all Black MSM, particularly as we did not explore ethnic differences between the participants (African American, Afro-Latino, African, and Caribbean). Second, the first and third authors were involved in participant recruitment, conducted all the interviews, and were the two coders doing analysis of the data. Although interrater reliability was achieved in the initial coding phase, we did not have the additional input of an outside coder to confirm additional validity of findings. Third, these findings described aspects of masculine socialization and sexual behavioral risk among Black MSM but can only suggest a potential relationship between these two variables; they cannot confirm direct associations. Finally, this article describes the experiences of masculine socialization

among the Black MSM in this study but cannot be interpreted to describe an influence of masculine socialization on the origins of same-sex desire and behaviors in general.

This study is one of the first to qualitatively explore masculine socialization among a group of Black MSM, and much more work is needed to address this topic. A stark reality of fatherless upbringings emerged from our analysis, as did a strong sense of Black racial identity that appeared to influence perceptions of social empowerment, conflict with sexual identification labels, involvement in the “gay” community, partner selection, and sexual behaviors. Strict attention must be paid to the unique racial and cultural context of masculine socialization experiences that impact the lived experiences and mental health of Black MSM. Black masculine socialization is more than just a cool pose, and both its positive and negative attributes may hold particular relevance for the current HIV epidemic among Black MSM.

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