“Cool posing” on campus: A qualitative study of masculinities and gender expression among Black men at a private research institution.

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“Cool Posing” on Campus: A Qualitative Study of Masculinities and Gender Expression among Black Men at a Private Research Institution

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Using theories and concepts relating to the social construction of Black masculinity and male gender role conflict, the authors explored contextualized meanings of masculinities and corresponding behavioral expressions among 22 Black men enrolled at a private research university. The concepts of toughness, aggressiveness, material wealth, restrictive emotionality, and responsibility underscored the meanings the participants ascribed to masculinities. Participants expressed these concepts behaviorally through their pursuit of leadership and academic success, homophobia, and the fear of femininity, and through the sexist and constrained relationships they experienced with women. Based on the findings, practical implications for supporting the gender identity development and success of Black men during their undergraduate years are offered, as are recommendations for future research on the gender-related experiences of Black male undergraduates.

Keywords: Black men, college, gender, masculinity

Over the past four decades, much has been written about the experiences of Black college students (e.g., Allen, 1992; Feagin, Vera, & Imani, 1996; Fleming, 1984; Fries-Britt & Griffin, 2007; Fries-Britt & Turner, 2001; Guiffrida, 2003; Love, 1993; Nettles, 1987; Patton, 2006; Sedlacek, 1987; Thompson & Fretz, 1991). However, only recently have scholars begun to disaggregate the experiences and challenges of male students from the larger Black college student population. For example, recent inquiries have considered Black men’s academic achievement and outcomes (Cuyjet, 1997; Dancy & Brown, 2008; Flowers, 2006; Hagedorn, Maxwell, & Hampton, 2001; Harper, 2006a; Palmer & Gasman, 2008; Palmer & Young, 2009; Strayhorn, 2008a), involvement in educationally purposeful programs and activities (Cuyjet, 2006; Harper, 2005; Harper, 2008; Harper & Harris III, 2006a), participation in college sports (Beamon, 2008; Comeaux & Harrison, 2007; Donnor, 2005; Gaston-Gayles, 2004), racial/ethnic identity expression (Harper & Quaye, 2007; Howard-Hamilton, 1997), and peer interactions (Harper, 2006b; Harper & Nichols, 2008; Strayhorn, 2008b).

While the aforementioned research has offered significant insight into the experiences of Black men on college campuses, there is a dearth of published research that focuses specifically on Black masculinities and gender performance. Davis (1999), who made a similar claim more than a decade ago, noted: “Very little work has focused on the role of gender in the higher education experience of Black students and specifically how gender informs the experiences of African American males on campus” (p. 137). In fact, much of what we know about the intersection between gender and education as it relates to Black men is based on studies that have been situated in K-12 contexts (e.g., Davis, 2003; Davis & Jordan, 1994; Fashola, 2003; Ferguson, 2000; Irving & Hudley, 2005; Noguera, 2003; Roderick, 2003). Moreover, most studies that focus on Black male students in higher education say little about their experiences, challenges, and development with respect to masculinities. In other words, studies about Black
men are not necessarily synonymous with studies that seek to understand them as gendered beings.

Cuyjet’s edited volumes, Black Men in College (2006) and Helping Black Men Succeed in College: New Directions for Student Services (1997) were ground-breaking considerations of the experiences of Black undergraduate men. But the purpose of these volumes was to offer critical analyses of trends and challenges in Black male student enrollment, persistence, graduation, and out-of-class engagement on college campuses. In addition, programmatic interventions that have been enacted nationally to support the success of Black men in college are detailed in Cuyjet’s (2006) volume. Therefore, while issues related to masculinities and Black men’s gender identity development were appropriately highlighted, comprehensive discussions of these issues were largely absent from both volumes. Kellom’s (2004) edited monograph, Developing Effective Programs and Services for College Men: New Directions for Student Services, did focus on masculinities and offered a much-needed discussion of the gender-related challenges and experiences of college men. However, as Harper and Harris III (2006b) noted in their review of the volume, the treatment of the gender-related issues that are specific to men of color in general and Black men in particular is marginal.

Two studies, Harper (2004) and Martin and Harris III (2006), have explored masculinities and gender performance among Black college men. Harper’s (2004) research investigated the experiences of 32 “high achieving” Black men enrolled at six predominantly White campuses who earned “cumulative grade point averages above 3.0 [and] established lengthy records of leadership and involvement in multiple campus organizations” (p. 95). Among the key findings from Harper’s study was that the participants had developed conceptualizations of masculinities that differed significantly from those of their same-race uninvolved male peers who expressed masculinities by pursuing short-term sexual relationships with women, competing in male-dominated activities, and accumulating and displaying material possessions. In contrast, the high achievers conceptualized and expressed masculinities by pursuing academic excellence, assuming leadership in campus organizations, and serving Black communities.

Martin and Harris III (2006) explored conceptualizations of masculinities among “academically-driven” student-athletes. Specifically, they sought to understand “what productive attitudes and beliefs about masculinities are held by academically-driven Black male student-athletes, and what roles do these productive conceptualizations play in the postsecondary experiences and outcomes of these students?” (p. 364). Much like Harper’s (2004) participants, the men in Martin and Harris III’s study expressed masculine conceptualizations that were inconsistent with established gendered norms for Black men. The participants associated masculinities with being accountable, displaying character, serving communities, and pursuing academic excellence. These findings are noteworthy particularly within the context of competitive Division I athletics where conformity to narrow and socially prescribed expectations (e.g., toughness, aggressiveness, strict heterosexuality) for performing masculinities are heavily reinforced.

Wade’s (1996) quantitative study explored the relationship between male gender role conflict and race/ethnicity among Black men. Wade found that some stages of Black racial/ethnic identity were correlated with higher levels of male gender role conflict. This study, although important and insightful, is limited in understanding the gender-related experiences of Black male undergraduates in two respects. First, the participant pool included men whose age ranged from 23 to 80 years. While some college-age men were included, a significant proportion of the participants were well beyond their college years. Second, Wade was not specifically concerned with the impact of campus environments on Black male gender identity and expression.

Harper (2004), Martin and Harris III (2006), and other studies cited helped to expand the published discourse on Black college men by focusing their analyses on issues of gender and masculinities. However, questions remain about how Black men who are not highly visible campus leaders or student-athletes conceptualize and express masculinities. In addition, the recent scholarship on Black men and masculinities in college has been overwhelmingly
conceptual rather than empirical. Empirical insight into the ways in which masculinities influence the behaviors and experiences of Black men in higher education is necessary to address gendered achievement and outcome disparities that persist on most campuses. This claim is echoed by Harper (2004) who asserted:

If colleges and universities are to improve retention and graduation rates for African American male undergraduates, faculty and administrators must implement effective programs that will assist these students in resolving identity conflicts and developing masculinities with which they are comfortable. (p. 103)

The purpose of this study was to explore the gender identities and experiences of Black men who were enrolled at a private research institution. Based on this purpose and the aforementioned gaps in the published literature on Black men and masculinities in college, the following research questions were pursued in this study:

- What meanings and conceptualizations do Black men enrolled at a private research institution ascribe to masculinities? and
- What behavioral expressions manifest as a result of these meanings and conceptualizations?

Before presenting the findings, the conceptual framework and research methodology will be briefly discussed that informed the design and execution of the study. Following these findings are the discussion and implications for practice and future research that emerged from the study.

**CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK**

Given the research questions that were pursued in this study, three theoretical constructs relating to gender and the expression of masculinities comprised the conceptual framework of this study: (a) the social construction of masculinities, (b) male gender role conflict, and, (c) expressions of masculinities among Black men.

**The Social Construction of Masculinities**

Kimmel and Messner (2007) and other men’s studies scholars (e.g., Connell, 1995; Pleck, 1981) approach the study of masculinities from a social constructionist perspective. This perspective is useful for examining gender expression as learned social behavior rather than “natural” or biologically determined behavior. Accordingly, scholars who subscribe to this perspective assume that men’s aggressiveness, toughness, competitiveness, and other stereotypically masculine behaviors are learned and reinforced through social interactions. The social construction of masculinities perspective also acknowledges that gender performance is fluid, contextual, and collectively created in social structures—families, schools, sports, media (West & Zimmerman, 1987). Related to this latter assumption, social constructionists also maintain that no one dominant masculine form persists across all social settings but rather multiple masculinities (e.g., Black, White, gay, heterosexual) that are situated in sociocultural contexts. Kimmel and Messner (2007) declared that some masculinities (e.g., White, heterosexual, able-bodied) are prioritized and situated as dominant above others (e.g., gay, feminine, racial/ethnic minority, physically disabled, working class). Similarly, Connell’s (1995) concept of “hegemonic masculinity” emphasizes the integration of a number of traditional beliefs, attitudes, and behavioral expressions that prioritize White, heterosexual, able-bodied, and other normative constructions of masculinities. Hegemonic masculinities are usually so internalized by men that rarely are they recognized or critically examined. Finally, Kimmel and Messner (2007) noted that although gender is a socially constructed identity, individuals are held accountable for performing gender according to culturally dominant expectations by way of rewards and
consequences that are enacted when individuals successfully meet or violate gendered norms, respectively.

**Male Gender Role Conflict**

Based on the concept of hegemonic masculinities, scholars have exposed the harmful effects of typical practices of male gender socialization. For example, in O’Neil’s (1981) concept of male gender role conflict (MGRC), he described the psychological and emotional anxiety arising from men’s fear of femininity and inability to live up to socially constructed masculinities. O’Neil theorized that when men are unable to express themselves as men by way of traditional or hegemonic expectations, they are likely to view themselves as less masculine and assume others will do the same. “When a man fears his feminine side he really fears that others will see him as stereotypically and negatively feminine (e.g., weak, dependent, submissive)” (O’Neil, 1981, p. 206). In discussing the consequences of displaying femininity, O’Neil noted: “The cost of showing feminine qualities could be disrespect, failure, and emasculation. These are high costs to a man who wants to fulfill the masculine mystique” (p. 206).

O’Neil (1981) linked the following six behavioral patterns to MGRC: (a) restrictive emotionality; (b) socialized control, power, and competition; (c) homophobia; (d) restrictive sexual and affectionate behavior; (e) obsession with achievement and success; and (f) health care problems. Scholars (e.g., Capraro, 2000; Davis, 2002; Good & Mintz, 1990; Good & Wood, 1995; Harper, Harris III, & Mmeje, 2005; Harris III, 2008; Harris III & Edwards, 2010; Harris III & Harper, 2008) have offered MGRC as an explanatory factor for the negative trends and issues among men on college and university campuses (e.g., sexual assault, violence, academic underachievement, alcohol abuse, poor coping, poor help-seeking, and rule-breaking).

**Expressions of Masculinities among Black Men**

Although the efficacy of MGRC as an explanatory concept for making sense of the challenges and experiences of college men is noteworthy, O’Neil (1981) did not consider behavioral patterns that emerge as a result of men’s experiences with racial/ethnic discrimination. Therefore, Majors and Billson’s (1992) “cool pose” concept was also used in this study to explore Black masculinities on a college campus.

Majors and Billson (1992) proposed cool pose as a concept to describe patterns of masculine expression among Black men. Central to this concept is the argument that cool pose is a strategy to cope with oppression and social alienation, which characterize the daily lives of many Black men. “Being cool is an ego booster for Black males comparable to the kind White males more easily find through attending good schools, landing prestigious jobs, and bringing home decent wages” (Majors & Billson, p. 5). Similarly, Wade (1996) noted:

> Racism, in particular, has been emphasized as having particularly psychological consequences for the masculine identity of African American men . . . . [Because] norms set for White masculinity are also held out as gender ideals for African American men, a double bind is created for some African American men who, due to poverty and racism, are blocked from achieving certain aspects of the mainstream culture’s masculine ideal. (p. 18)

Cool pose is expressed through unique styles of speaking, gesturing, dressing, wearing hair, walking, standing, and shaking hands (Majors, 2001; Majors & Billson). These ritualized acts are directed at the dominant culture and other Black men to manifest pride, strength, and control in opposition to White male masculine norms (Majors, 2001). Similarly, Harris (1995) characterized Black masculine expression as emphasizing sexual promiscuity, toughness, and physical manifestations like styles of dress, physical posture, walking style, and overall demeanor. Although enacting oppositional conceptualizations of masculinities mediates some racial stressors for Black men, many of these behaviors have significant social consequences,
particularly within the domain of education. For example, Jackson and Moore (2008) maintained that cool pose and its associated social rewards “encourage behaviors that devalue academic achievement and depress educational aspirations while condoning activities and relationships that rebuff traditional standards of academic success” (p. 849). Likewise, Corbin and Pruitt (1999) declared that some Black males associate academic achievement with White and feminine values and, as a result, place a greater priority on being successful in other pursuits, such as music, athletics, and entertainment.

Akin to Majors and Billson (1992) and Harris (1995), Oliver (1989) characterized Black masculine expression as emphasizing sexual promiscuity, toughness, and deliberate physical expressions. Additionally, Oliver stated that access to educational and employment opportunities are related to successful enactment of traditional masculine roles. Because of gross racial disparities in American culture, Black men have been denied access to the resources to be able to embody these traditional roles. Oliver identified two orientations of Black masculine expression: the “tough guy” and “the player of women,” (p. 18). The tough guy is characterized by violence, hyper-masculinity, and condemnation of expressing emotions. Oliver asserted that the “tough guy” personification may be the root of high rates of interpersonal violence among Black men. The “player of women” orientation is expressed by exploitation of women, often using women for sexual encounters without the intention to have serious commitments to any of them.

Overall, the social construction of masculinities describes the social norms and expectations that govern masculine expression. The MGRC phenomenon captures the fears, anxieties, and behavioral responses that often occur when men are not able to meet these expectations. The cool pose concept describes expressions of masculinities that are unique to Black men, which reflect their marginalized status in American society. Collectively, these theoretical constructs provided a heuristic conceptual framework for examining gender expression among Black men in a college setting.

**METHOD AND DATA SOURCES**

The data on which this article is based came from a larger qualitative study of college men and masculinities involving 68 undergraduate men who represented diverse backgrounds, experiences, and social group identities. The purposes of the larger study were threefold: (a) to examine shared masculine conceptualizations among college men who represented a range of identities and experiences, (b) to understand how contextual factors (e.g., socialization, campus culture, peer group interactions) shape and reinforce college men’s gender identity development and performance, and (c) to propose a conceptual model of the meanings college men make of masculinities (see Harris III, 2010 for a complete description of this study). Twenty-two of the 68 participants from the larger study were Black men. For the present study these data were extracted from the larger data set and analyzed based on the research questions and conceptual framework discussed earlier in this article.

**Setting and Context**

The study took place at Western University (a pseudonym)—an ethnically diverse private research institution situated in a large urban city in the western region of the United States. Western offered a rich context for examining college masculinities, given its diverse student population, culture of “big-time” NCAA Division I athletic programs, and highly visible fraternity system. The published literature (e.g., Harper & Harris III, 2010; Harris III & Struve, 2009) on college men and masculinities suggest that these factors may have observable effects on male behavioral norms and the ways in which college men perform masculinities.

During the time at which data were collected for this study, men comprised nearly half (49%) of the undergraduates at Western. The racial/ethnic composition among undergraduate
men was as follows: 49% White, 21% Asian American/Pacific Islander, 12% Latino, 5% Black, and less than 1% Native American. International students and men who did not report their race/ethnicities comprised nearly 10% and 3% of Western’s undergraduate men, respectively. Sixty-one percent of all undergraduates at Western were 21 years old or younger.

Participants

Participants in this study were selected purposefully to ensure a participant pool comprised of information-rich cases—that is, individuals who are likely to have experience with the phenomenon being studied (Patton, 2002). To identify information-rich cases, campus administrators in student affairs, religious life, and athletics at Western were asked to nominate Black male undergraduates with whom they worked to participate in this study. Each nominated student was contacted to explain the goals and purposes of the study and confirm his willingness to participate. Students were informed that their participation in the study was strictly voluntary.

Twenty-two Black men who were enrolled at Western University during the time of data collection participated in this study. Six of the participants were members of a Black fraternity. Seven were student-athletes. All 22 of the participants described their sexual orientation as “heterosexual.” However, it is important to note that identifying as heterosexual was not a condition for participation in this study. Sixteen of the 22 men reported being raised in “two-parent” homes. The remaining six grew up in single-parent homes that were headed by their mothers. Nineteen of the 22 men described their socioeconomic backgrounds as “affluent” or “middle class.” The remaining three participants described their backgrounds as “low-income.” There were eight first-year students, two sophomores, two juniors, and ten seniors in the participant pool. A range of majors and academic programs were represented among the men in the sample, including: American Studies, Business, Engineering, and Public Policy. The self-reported undergraduate grade point averages for the participants ranged from 1.94 to 3.80, with the average for the group being 2.91.

Data Collection

Data for this study were collected by the lead author in two phases. During the first phase, four of the 22 participants were engaged in semi-structured individual interviews. The duration of the interviews ranged from 60 to 90 minutes. Each interview was audio taped, fully transcribed, and analyzed using the Atlas.Ti qualitative data analysis program (Scientific Software Development Company, 2011). Initial analyses of the interview data resulted in a set of preliminary concepts and categories relating to the participants’ masculine conceptualizations and male behavioral expressions. These concepts and categories were used to develop a focus group protocol that guided data collection into phase two where the remaining 18 men participated in three separate focus groups. Two of the focus groups had five participants. The third had eight participants. The focus groups lasted 45 to 60 minutes. The focus groups were also audio taped, fully transcribed, and analyzed using the Atlas.Ti qualitative data analysis program.

Data Analysis

Data analysis for this study followed the techniques and procedures proposed by Charmaz (2006). Specifically, initial, focused, and axial coding techniques were used to deconstruct, interpret, and reassemble the data in ways that provided insight into the participants’ masculine conceptualizations. During the initial coding phase, we identified significant concepts and incidents that emerged, and assigned a word or phrase to capture our initial interpretations of the data. After all of the transcripts had been initially coded, focused coding was used to group incidents and concepts into categories based on their shared properties and relationships to participants’ masculine conceptualizations. Finally, we used axial coding to understand the relationships between the categories that emerged during the focused coding phase. During the
later stages of the data analysis process, we wrote research memos to capture the essence or main storyline for each fully coded interview and focus group transcript. These memos allowed us to cross-check emerging themes, challenge and confirm each other’s interpretations and constantly compare the data across the interviews and focus groups. Data were constantly compared throughout data collection and analysis until data saturation was reached. We knew we had reached data saturation when no new relevant concepts were discovered in the data.

Several strategies suggested by Lincoln and Guba (1985) were used to establish trustworthiness in this study, including: the triangulation of data through multiple data collection strategies and information-rich cases, the constant comparison of data, member checking, and peer debriefing. Transferability—another component of trustworthiness—was reached through thick description about the setting and context of the study, which allows readers to assess the extent to which the research findings would likely transfer to similar settings and populations (Patton, 2002).

Based on the analytical process described previously, two thematic categories, (a) “conceptualizations of masculinities,” and (b) “behavioral expressions” emerged from the data. These categories are the focus of the findings that are presented in this article.

**FINDINGS**

Data collected from the 22 Black men who participated in the study provide insights into their conceptualizations of masculinities and the behavioral expressions that emerged as outcomes of these conceptualizations. Each thematic category and its corresponding concepts is discussed and supported with quotes and reflections from the participants.

**Conceptualizations of Masculinities**

Throughout the interviews and focus groups, the participants were asked to share some “defining characteristics” of men and masculinities and to describe what “being a man” meant to them. During these discussions, the men in the study also recalled the people in their lives who influenced the ways in which they defined masculinities and reflected on the experiences that shaped their ideas and concepts as men. By and large, the participants’ conceptualizations of masculinities were consistent with culturally defined norms and expectations of men. Concepts like “toughness,” “strength,” and “aggressiveness” were consistently offered as requisite characteristics of masculinities. With respect to the latter, one participant passionately declared: “If you want something, you gotta be a like a lion. You go get it, you hunt your prey, you hunt it down, it’s a wrap. You have it for dinner.” Another participant shared a series of questions that came to mind as he reflected on the connections he made between masculinities and toughness: “Are you going to be a monster yourself or are you going to be timid? Are you going to be a [man] or are you going to be a coward?”

Many of the participants also embraced the “breadwinner” concept of masculinities and assumed it was necessary for a man to “be responsible and take care of his family.” As such, for these participants it was important that a man had “a good paying job” to meet this expectation. “A man is supposed to be responsible for his household” and “I have to have a good paying job to take care of my family” are examples of reflections supporting the concept of “man as breadwinner,” which was offered in nearly every interview and focus group.

The men in the study also associated masculinities with the accumulation of wealth and material possessions. Several of the participants described this as “balling.” For these men, earning a generous income not only allowed a man to fulfill the role of breadwinner in the home, but was also an indicator of the extent to which he was successful in his chosen profession. Interestingly, several of the men in the study noted that they would define their success after college by this standard. For example, one of the first-year participants noted:
“When I come out of here [college], I’m going to have a nice car, I’m going to have money, I’ll probably have a nice house, kind of like balling.”

The participants also deemed it necessary for men to be unemotional and handle pressure with calmness and resolve. “To hold yourself as a man, you shouldn’t be like super emotional and I don’t know, you’d just be able to handle thing with a degree of coolness” noted one of the men in the study. Another participant shared: “A big part of being a man is getting over stuff. You’re not supposed to let something faze you and continuously get hurt by it.” The men in the study believed it was especially important that men behaved this way particularly during challenging times or in the midst of crisis. Because of this assumption, some participants believed men were more capable than women to serve in leadership roles.

Finally, the concept of responsibility also underscored the participants’ ideas about masculinities. The participants believed it was important for men to “handle business,” “step up,” and take ownership for completing difficult tasks, especially when others are afraid to do so. Responsibility also entailed “being decisive.” As one participant described, “Men are supposed to handle business [and] not supposed to be finicky or indecisive. [If] a decision needs to be made [or] something needs to be done, you’re supposed to step up and do it.”

To summarize, the concepts of toughness, aggressiveness, material success, restrictive emotionality, and responsibility underscored the meanings the participants ascribed to masculinities. According to the participants, these were some requisite characteristics of being a man and the criteria by which one’s status as a man is measured. These conceptualizations of masculinities informed the ways in which the participants behaved, interacted, and expressed themselves as men while in college.

**Behavioral Expressions of Masculinities**

Three expressions were revealed as behavioral outcomes of the aforementioned conceptualizations of masculinities that were held by the participants: (a) leadership and student success in college, (b) homophobia and fear of femininity, and (c) engaging in sexist and constrained relationships with women. To highlight the participants’ voices, we describe these expressions as: “I’m a 3.0 student!”, “You can’t be suspect!”, and “Having that ‘Playboy’ experience,” respectively.

“I’m a 3.0 student!” Nearly all of the participants reported arriving to Western having learned to value and prioritize academic success. Given Western’s status as a selective institution with very rigorous admission standards, the participants entered the institution with strong academic records. Many were also highly engaged student leaders in high school. These same values were reflected in the participants’ undergraduate profiles and experiences. The participants credited their parents for instilling the values of leadership and academic success. The men openly pursued academic success and were not concerned that others, particularly other men, would perceive their academic engagement as feminine behavior. For example, one of the student-athletes in the study declared: “I’m going to pursue academic excellence and I know that I’m not a nerd because I can still kick it [hang out] with the athletes.”

Some of the men in the study linked their pursuit of student success in college to their beliefs and assumptions about masculinities. For instance, given the participants’ views about the nexus between being breadwinners in their homes, material wealth, and masculinities, these men believed it was important that they had well-paying jobs to meet these expectations of masculinities. They also assumed that obtaining an education would afford them access to high-paying careers as physicians, lawyers, and corporate executives, which some of the participants reportedly had hoped to pursue after college. The men also saw their academic success as a strategy for combating negative stereotypes of Black men. Several reported that they enjoyed “proving people wrong,” especially those who assumed they were not capable of doing well academically or believed they were admitted to Western because they were athletes or through affirmative action. One participant reflected on this issue and shared the following:
If I’m just walking down the street, people see me with my sweats on and all of a sudden they’re like, “Oh, he’s just an athlete,” and I’m like, “I’m a 3.0 student!” And you see all of a sudden their whole attitude changes, like “Oh really?” . . . . I like that because like I said, it starts to break down stereotypes about other people.

Additionally with academic success, the participants believed it was important that they established “well-rounded” profiles in college. In other words, they should display competence and success in multiple domains—not only academics, but also, leadership and community involvement. This was especially true among the fraternity participants who viewed leadership and involvement as directly related to the principles and values that were espoused within their respective organizations. Others talked about the importance of “establishing an identity” and “having a presence on campus.” For example, one participant shared his perspective on the role that leadership plays for men during one of the focus group interviews:

[Getting involved for men] is also part of [establishing] an identity. Like you’ll see a lot of cats who come up here and they’re just chilling, they are cool, whatever, they kind of play the background, but like as a man who is also the leader, you’re going to go out and you’re going to get involved in things. So it’s about having a presence that comes along with being involved because then people can be like, “Oh, well, you’ve done this and this and this,” and that goes along with the whole leadership thing.

Finally, another student made a connection between his commitment to campus involvement and his male identity.

I get involved [because] that’s what I’m supposed to do as a responsible citizen, but that male pride keeps me from quitting. So it’s for better or worse, I stick to it because as a man, I can’t quit.

“You can’t be suspect!” The fear of femininity, specifically as it relates to homophobia, was also prevalent among the men in the study. Anxiety and discomfort regarding male peers who were openly gay came across very strongly. For instance, in response to an inquiry about the informal rules that governed peer interactions among Black men, a fraternity member in the study immediately responded: “No Black Greek [fraternity member] would be suspect!” “Being suspect” was vernacular used by some of the men to describe other Black men whose sexual orientations were deemed questionable. According to the participants, it was important that the other men with whom they associated did not express masculinities in ways that could be perceived as gay or feminine. Another participant stated, “You’re not just going to let somebody [into the fraternity] who is suspect . . . you don’t want to be associated with that. They’re representing your entire organization.” Their primary motivation for policing gender so strictly was to ensure that others did not assume they were also gay because of their associations with these men. Therefore, some participants felt they could maintain a good friendship with a gay male peer as long as he did not express his sexual orientation in an open or flamboyant way. Talking in a high-pitched voice or wearing tight-fitting clothing were offered as examples of behaviors that would make it difficult to interact publicly with these men. “Within our generation [being gay] is more accepted. I have gay friends and they’re cool people, but it’s always something in the back of your mind. You don’t want to be out with someone real, real, extra, extra feminine,” noted a first-year student. Another student from the same focus group concurred and asserted, “I have a really good friend who’s gay, but you would never know he was gay because he just acts like he’s just like everybody else, as far as his interactions. I can [hang out] with someone like that.”

Other participants attributed their homophobia and negative attitudes toward their gay male peers to the racial/ethnic norms that governed gender expression for Black men. These men suggested that they had a difficult time developing relationships with gay men because being gay was “really looked down upon in the Black community,” as noted by one of the men in the
study. The participants’ fear of femininity was also reflected in other ways, such as through their relationships and interactions with women.

“Having that ‘Playboy’ experience.” Without exception, the men in the study spent a significant amount of time during the interviews and focus groups discussing their relationships and interactions with women. Women were central in the gendered experiences of the men—so much so that one participant suggested that “girls influenced pretty much everything that guys do.” The relationships with women that were described by the participants were constrained, highly conflicted, and narrowly focused on sex and sexism. One theme that resonated throughout these discussions was the challenge of finding the “right” woman or “someone who is marriage material,” as described by one participant, while also dealing with the desire to “hook up” sexually with multiple women. The men reported being open to having an exclusive dating relationship but several factors made it difficult to do so in college. For instance, some hooking up was necessary in order to have a “fun” and “fulfilling” college experience, according to the participants. These men bemoaned the idea of graduating from college, looking back on their experiences and feeling as though they did not make the most of the freedom and independence that being a college student afforded them, like this participant: “I can date this girl for awhile, but... then I’m going to be kind of locked up. There are all these girls at the school and it’s just fun to have fun.” The participants also shared that peer expectations made exclusive dating difficult. For example, one participant noted that his peers are really into “having that ‘Playboy’ experience,” which essentially meant pursuing sexual relationships with lots of different women. About peer expectations he shared: “If you’re in a serious relationship you get a little more flack [from peers] just because you’re kind of closing yourself out to the option of having the ‘Playboy’ type of thing [experience].”

Interestingly, two of the participants reported that they did not prioritize sexual intercourse in their relationships with women. Both of these men took their religious faith very seriously and believed that having sex would be a breach of their Christian values. For example, when women and sexual relationships emerged as a topic of discussion during one of the focus groups, some of the men began bragging and patting themselves on the back for the number of women with whom they “hooked up” sexually. During this discussion one of the participants exclaimed: “Just for the record, I don’t talk much about girls... I’m just coming from a Christian background, I don’t talk too much about [sex].” This was the only remark that was offered by this participant during the entire discussion about women. Similarly, a student-athlete who participated in an individual interview shared that, unlike many of his teammates, he restricted his “physical limits [with women] around the Bible” and did not engage in conversations about sex because his Christian faith does not allow him to have these types of interactions with women.

**DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS**

Black men in college are expected to project a cool and collected persona at all times, while academically proving themselves. The findings from this study and others (e.g., Harper, 2004; Martin & Harris III, 2006) underscore these seeming competing expectations. Recall that Oliver (1989), Majors and Billson (1992), and Harris (1995) argued that Black men express masculinities primarily through toughness, aggressiveness, coolness, and other behaviors that are associated with cool pose. Conversely, Harper (2004) and Martin and Harris III’s (2006) participants expressed masculinities that challenged these cultural norms. Interestingly, the men in the present study expressed masculinities that were both in opposition to and aligned with culturally defined notions of masculinities. On the one hand, similar to the participants in Harper’s study, the men in this current study sought to express masculinities through leadership and academic success—behaviors that are productive and lead to a host of positive outcomes for college men. On the other hand, the participants’ ideas regarding the accumulation of wealth, fear of femininity, and sexism resonate with hegemonic and culturally defined notions of what
men are supposed to be and contrast conceptualizations that were offered by the men in Harper’s study.

It is important to point out that behavioral responses of the Black men in the current study are congruent with the behavioral responses of Black men in larger environmental and cultural contexts in which they are marginalized and viewed as inferior (Major & Billson, 1992). For example, participants in the present study expressed that some of their peers assumed they were admitted to college not because of their intelligence, but because they were athletes or beneficiaries of affirmative action, which engendered an unwelcoming environment. In other words, the behaviors the participants in this study exhibited are strategies they rely on to maintain or re-claim some dignity and respect as men. So while some of these behaviors are very troubling and destructive, one needs to recognize them as symptoms of a larger, cultural phenomenon rooted in racist stereotypes about Black men. Therefore, the institutional response should be to challenge and support the men in expressing themselves in more appropriate, positive, and less-destructive ways and to address the larger campus and environmental issues that encourage men to rely on these strategies in the first place.

Interestingly, several of the behavioral patterns of MCRC that were identified by O’Neil (1981) were present among the men in the study. As discussed in the conceptual framework section of this article, MGRC is a psychological phenomenon experienced by men when they are unable to express masculinities in traditional and culturally defined ways. Some consequences of MGRC are sexism, homophobia, and other exaggerated behaviors that are stereotypically male. First, as described in the “conceptualizations of masculinities” theme, the participants reportedly restricted their emotions to those that conveyed a sense of “coolness” and resolve under pressure—emotions that are socially constructed as acceptable when expressed by men. Consequently, the participants avoided expressing emotions that are perceived as indicators of weakness or associated with femininity. Findings presented in the “homophobia and fear of femininity” theme of this article reflect the homophobia behavioral pattern of MGRC. Recall that the participants expressed significant anxiety and discomfort about interacting publicly with openly gay male peers. The participants’ “restrictive sexual and affective behavior” was manifested in their preoccupation with “hooking up” sexually and their disinterest in exclusive dating relationships. This pattern was captured in the “engaging in sexist and constrained relationships with women” theme. Finally, we interpret the participants’ desires to hold high-paying jobs so they could better fulfill breadwinner roles later in life as indicative of the “obsession with achievement and success” pattern of MGRC. In short, the elements of MGRC were reflected in the key findings of this study.

Scholars (e.g., Capraro, 2000; Courtenay, 2004; Good & Mintz, 1995; Good & Wood, 1990; Stanton & Courtenay, 2003) have concluded that college men often respond to stress in less healthy ways than women and are more likely to rely on unhealthy coping strategies, like denial and alcohol abuse. Furthermore, men who adopt traditional attitudes about masculinities are at greater risk for depression and other mental health problems that challenge their overall health and success in college. College is a time when tending to academic, familial, personal, and financial issues are priorities for most students, and men especially need to use productive coping skills and become educated to actively seek help when needed. Of all racial/ethnic groups, Black men are most likely to endorse traditional attitudes about masculinities (Courtenay, 2004), which, according to Majors and Billson (1992) and Oliver (1989), is directly-related to racial prejudice and discrimination experienced by Black men. Therefore, some proactive support and outreach to Black men to help them manage emotions in healthy ways rather than maintaining a “tough” exterior seems warranted. Having some Black male representation among staff in the counseling center, student health center, office of financial aid, academic support center, dean of student’s office, and other key student support units may increase the likelihood that Black men will seek appropriate help when they are challenged or overwhelmed. This is especially necessary at predominately White institutions (PWIs) where
Black men often experience the campus environment as racially hostile and socially alienating (Davis, 1999; Harper, 2005, 2009).

While overall, the findings may be indicative of the ways in which Black men conceptualize and express masculinities during their college years, they also reflect where the participants were developmentally at the time the data were collected, and could very likely change as these men grow and mature in life. That said there are some problematic patterns that warrant immediate attention. The fear of femininity, homophobia, and constrained sexual relationships with women that were reported by the participants are especially troubling and should be of major concern for college educators. Although not specific to Black men, previous studies have linked these attitudes and behaviors to dating violence (Murray & Kardatzke, 2007; Schwartz, Griffin, Russell, & Frontaura-Duck, 2006), hate crimes based on sexual orientation (Carr & Ward, 2006), sexual assault (Hong, 2000), and other negative trends that disproportionately involve men on college campuses. Some proactive support and intervention around issues of misogyny, sexism, and homophobia are urgently needed for some men. Educators should be creative and resourceful in developing interactive strategies and approaches to encourage discussion and reflection around these issues. For example, using popular media and peer leadership interventions to engage students may yield more desirable outcomes than dyadic approaches (see Schwartz et al., 2006, for example).

Based on the findings, we propose several recommendations that can be used to support healthy gender identity development among Black men. First, college educators should focus on developing groups for Black men directed by facilitators who are knowledgeable and insightful about issues and challenges endemic to Black men in college. Topics for discussion may center on homophobia and sexism. These discussions may foster critical reflection, which could encourage participants to rethink their views on these issues and lead to healthier gender identity development. Second, educators should link undergraduate Black men to older men who model appropriate ways of expressing masculinity, such as a faculty or staff member, a recent graduate, or a member of the local community for mentoring and role modeling. When connecting students to mentors or role models, it is important that educators screen the mentors or role models appropriately and be certain that they are approachable, willing to speak candidly about their experiences and challenges pertaining to gender and masculinities, and able to offer advice and support. Furthermore, institutions should provide opportunities for professional development on masculinities for educators who work with undergraduate men. Specifically, institutional leaders could encourage educators to read more about masculinities, provide opportunities for educators to attend seminars and conferences, and actively recruit guest speakers to visit campus and discuss issues centered on masculinities.

The findings from this study illustrate the need for further inquiry into the intersection of Black masculinities and gender performance, especially among college students. There is a substantial amount of published literature that focuses on Black boys in K-12 schools and illuminates experiences and challenges relating to gender and masculinities. However, questions remain about Black men's gender identity development during their undergraduate years. For example, the findings that were presented reveal a snapshot of the participants' masculinities at a particular time. Researchers may find it useful to consider the extent to which meanings of masculinities change over time. Longitudinal studies that involve collecting data from men throughout their enrollment in college may yield important insights about how masculine conceptualizations and expressions change. Exploring the impact of significant life events, such as becoming a parent or committing to a marriage or partnership, may also be important to consider in this regard.

Future studies of masculine expression among Black men in college should also be conducted on campuses whose institutional contexts do not reflect that of Western University. Replicating the present study at a historically Black college or university (HBCU), a community college, a single-sex institution, or a PWI with a higher concentration of Black men may help researchers make connections between campus culture and the expression of masculinities among Black men.
Finally, although the participant pool in the present study was diverse with respect to socioeconomic background, group affiliation, and year of enrollment, the absence of non-heterosexual participants is one notable limitation of this study. Therefore, future studies should include openly gay and bisexual men in the samples. Moreover, since Black men are not a monolithic group, future inquiries should also consider within-group differences in the expression of masculinities among Black men.

REFERENCES


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