The measure of a man: Conceptualizations of masculinity among high-achieving African American male college students

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The Measure of a Man: Conceptualizations of Masculinity among High-Achieving African American Male College Students

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Abstract:

This study examines within-group alternative conceptualizations of masculinity among African American men on university campuses. Individual interviews were conducted with 32 high-achieving African American male undergraduates at six predominantly White research universities in the Midwest. Findings indicate that unconventional definitions of masculinity, when coupled with active campus involvement and leadership in minority student organizations, are deemed acceptable by uninvolved undergraduate men and help promote healthy masculine identities for African American male student leaders. Implications and recommendations for university administrators are offered at the end of the article.

Previous inquiry confirms that a healthy, conflict-free masculine identity leads to a strong self-concept and positive outcomes in a wide array of areas, including academics (Gilbert and Gilbert 1998; Price 2000). Despite this, little attention has been given to exploring identity development and conceptualizations of masculinity among male students on college and university campuses. Research regarding within-group variations among 18-24 year-old African American male collegians is virtually nonexistent, and the intersection between race and gender among this population remains particularly understudied. The proverbial saying, “Boys will be boys,” has not been adequately disaggregated by race and ethnicity within various age groups in much of the mainstream literature on masculinity. Theoretical perspectives on masculine identity development in schools have been largely based on data collected from White male students, thus offering limited applicability to men of color. Consequently, structured efforts to assist African American male students in developing strong masculine identities that lead to academic, social, and long-term post-undergraduate success have not been implemented at most postsecondary educational institutions. Given that two-thirds of all African American men who start college never graduate (Mortenson 2001), it is essential to explore the nexus between identity development, definitions of self, and outcomes, including academic achievement and retention.
African American college students have received considerable attention in the social-science literature over the past 30 years (Sedlacek 1987). However, few studies focus exclusively on African American men, and even fewer examine the needs and experiences of high-achieving African American male undergraduates (Bonner 2001; Fries-Britt 1997, 1998). As a result, current scholarship contains limited insight into the gender politics and peer interactions of African American male college students. To help address the paucity of research on this population, this article explores definitions of masculinity among African American male college students, and perceptions of those definitions by high-achievers within this group.

Literature Review

Previous research on masculinity and its role in identity development has almost exclusively been based on data collected from young boys, adolescents, and male adults who were not enrolled in college during the time at which the studies were conducted. Therefore, the majority of the literature reviewed in this section is not specific to traditional-aged college students.

Social Context and Masculine Identity Formation

Many foundational studies on masculinity suggest that identity development among boys is primarily characterized by autonomy, achievement concerns, competence, mastery, supremacy, and competitiveness (Gilligan 1993). This body of literature provides many of the generally accepted theories regarding masculine identity development, and consistently confirms that same-sex peers are largely influential in the development of masculine identities among young boys, which help shape long-lasting definitions of what it means to be a man (Blos 1962, 1979; Chodorow 1978; LaVoire 1976; Stoller 1964; Wainrib 1992). Connell (1993) suggests that men of all ages and ethnicities are often forced to negotiate their masculinities with other males—meaning that their manhood must be approved and validated by their peers. Morrison and Eardley’s (1985) assertions fully capture and describe what most of the published literature reports about the impact of peers on identity development in young boys:

Boys grow up to be wary of each other. We are taught to compete with one another at school, and to struggle to prove ourselves outside it, on the street, the playground and the sports field. Later we fight for status over sexual prowess, or money, or physical strength or technical know-how…the pressure is on to act tough. We fear humiliation or exclusion, or ultimately the violence of other boys if we fail to conform (19).
These claims are supported by Gilligan (1993) and Head (1999), who also suggest that men are more competitive, less apt to collaborate with one another, and far more rule- and authority-bound than women. Accordingly, male peer group interactions typically result in some sort of contest to see who can outpace, outrun, and overpower the others.

For boys at almost all levels of schooling, peer promotion of sports and athleticism play an influential role in the shaping of their masculine identities (Morrison & Eardley 1985). Quite often, interests beyond football and active outdoor play for young boys are seen as abnormal and unacceptable by peers (Harris 1995). Alternative expressions of manliness, such as doing well in school or participating in non-sports related school activities, must be approved by other male peer group members. Gilbert and Gilbert (1998: 63) contend that rule-based sports both afford boys the opportunity to rehearse their masculinities and also factor into what it means to be deemed “cool” by peers: “Unfortunately, this image of the cool sociable sportsman is constantly set against the picture of the boy whose interests might be to read a book, a practice most often associated with girls.” They posit that sports are chief among the masculine endeavors that conflict with a commitment to school achievement.

Through the adolescence and young adulthood periods, being good at sports becomes more important than simple participation. Usually, the “coolest guys” on campus are those who are standouts on the athletic field or court (Askew & Ross 1988; Gilbert & Gilbert 1998). By contrast, rarely, if ever, is the class president or smartest student in the class considered the most “manly” by his peers—unless of course he also participates in sports. Furthermore, those who can overpower opponents in athletic competition are also usually more sought after for romantic relationships by young women than male students who demonstrate leadership in other areas on campus and make good grades. Kunjufu (1988) asserts that African American boys must make a choice between school achievement and peer acceptance. The title of his book, To Be Popular or Smart: The Black Peer Group, captures the essence of this struggle. To this end, young men generally prefer to identify themselves as standout athletes instead of academic achievers or campus leaders.

This fascination with sports, accumulating points, beating out opponents, and demonstrating masculinity and superiority through competitive exercises has an enduring effect on the male identity, which extends into the college years. For example, the accumulation of points to surpass others in childhood games usually turns into a motivation to accumulate wealth, power, and monetary status during adulthood (Wainrib 1992). Likewise, most boys who strive for autonomy and
superiority during the childhood years develop identities characterized by a desire to compete with and outperform others through the mastery of non-collaborative tasks. The peer influences discussed herein are largely shaped by perceptively rigid societal standards regarding male-appropriate behaviors (Askew & Ross 1988; Gilbert & Gilbert 1998; Harris 1995; Head 1999; Martino & Meyenn 2001).

Westwood (1990: 58) argues that society has provided “the insistence of ‘the male role’ against which all men must be measured.” Society has historically suggested that boys should play sports, suppress outward displays of emotion, and compete rigorously against each other. Parents have also been influenced by these societal indices of masculinity, as many communicate messages of power, toughness, and competitiveness to their young sons. 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 in America. Masculine identity is largely impacted by societal messages that say men should be the breadwinners for and protectors of their families; should be legends in college and professional sports; and should be leaders and executives in the organizations by which they are employed.

*Expressions of Masculinity among African American Males*

Harris (1995) argues that the traditional pathway to masculine identity development is limited in its applicability to African American men, and offers the following:

Pressures to meet European American standards of manhood as provider, protector, and disciplinarian are representative of such a dilemma for African American men… Inequities in earning potential and employment and limited access to educational opportunities prevent the expression of these behaviors... To compensate for feelings of powerlessness, guilt, and shame that result from the inability to enact traditional masculine roles, some African American male youth have redefined masculinity to emphasize sexual promiscuity, toughness, thrill seeking, and the use of violence in interpersonal interactions (279-280).

Harris suggests that traditionally White masculine ideals are often unattainable for African American men due to the material constraints of race, and that expectations for African American men to assume these seemingly unachievable masculine roles exacerbate identity conflicts. In turn, these perceptions and experiences force them to find alternative ways to prove their manliness. Instead of the mainstream definitions of masculinity—accumulation of wealth, status, and power—Oliver (1988, 1989) asserts that masculinity for African American men is often
characterized by two primary orientations: “tough guy” and “player of women.”

Tough guys are those who are good at fighting, are not afraid to defend themselves, and incite fear in others. Although most boys attempt to exude toughness and are generally “naughty by nature,” displays of hyperactivity and roughness among African American males of all ages are perceived as dangerous and disproportionately lead to a harsher set of penalties in schools and society (Ferguson 2000). In a national study of more than 25 million public school students, Gregory (1997) found that African American males were more likely to be punished at school, suspended, or expelled than any other racial/ethnic group. In fact, they were 16 times more likely than their White female counterparts to experience disciplinary actions or school expulsion. Davis and Jordan (1994) found a nexus between school discipline, suspensions, grade retention, and academic failure. Despite these negative outcomes, African American males often set the standards for popularity, hip-hop culture, and athleticism at school (Davis 2003). Those who are perceived as tough, rough, and athletically talented enjoy peer admiration and respect, but usually garner negative reactions from teachers and school administrators.

The “player of women” concept is usually more prevalent in the teenage and young adulthood years, and is often linked to the “tough guy” orientation. Having multiple girlfriends and sexual partners typifies the “player.” Those who are unsuccessful at these aims are generally made fun of, have their heterosexuality questioned, or are considered less masculine than their peers. Again, this characteristic also applies to men of different races and ethnicities, but it is extremely common among African Americans. Media and commercial images overwhelmingly depict, popularize, and celebrate certain types of African American men—namely pimps, rappers, and athletes, who are surrounded by attractive women (usually more than one at a time) and appear to be financially prosperous. In turn, young African American boys are socialized to believe that these behaviors are in fact indicative of Black masculinity and success. Those who are glorified usually share a certain communication and self-presentation style and approach to interacting with women. Majors and Billson (1992) introduced the term “cool pose,” which is displayed by many African American men of all ages. Trendy and baggy clothing (usually urban wear), an overall relaxed look and informal presence, and a “pimp-style” strut are characteristic of this pose.

The African American male middle school students in Davis’ (2001) study had developed a strict masculine code of conduct in their school that was characterized by various elements of the aforementioned
“player of women” and “cool pose” concepts. He offers the following analysis:

Boys who do not adhere to the prescribed rigid masculine orthodoxy are victimized... Black boys who dare to verbalize alternative views on masculinity and any aspect of the code in effect violate the masculine code. These actions conflict with the notions of what is appropriately male, and thus he is usually expelled from the confines and benefits of boy networks at the school (177-178).

These findings are consistent with Connell’s (1993: 193) assertion that masculinity “must be seen as an active process of construction, occurring in a field of power relations that is often tense and contradictory, and often involving negotiation of alternative ways of being masculine.” Connell calls for more inquiry that examines the masculine identities of African American men who assume roles other than the cool posing tough guys, players of women, and athletes.

As previously mentioned, insight into within-group masculine negotiations among African American men in college is scarce, as most research has been conducted either with young African American boys or with White male students. How do those who choose to excel in postsecondary education resolve the conflicts noted above? How do African American men on college and university campuses define masculinity? Do high-achieving African American male undergraduates ignore societal and peer messages regarding what is masculine, or are their identities in conflict? The paucity of research regarding masculine variability among this population makes the investigation of these questions especially interesting and important. The present study seeks to fill this void. Exploring and understanding the ways in which masculine identities are conceptualized and negotiated among African American male undergraduates could offer practical implications that lead to more positive academic and psychosocial outcomes.

**Methodology**

This article is based on a larger qualitative data set regarding the experiences of high-achieving African American undergraduate men. The phenomenological study sought to understand what it is like to be a high-achieving African American male college student at a large, predominantly White university, and included questions regarding the ways in which the participants deemed themselves different from other African American male undergraduates on their campuses. The phenomenology tradition in qualitative research focuses on understanding and describing the “lived experiences” of the participants involved in the study (Moustakas 1994). This type of qualitative study usually provides full, detailed descriptions of the phenomenon under
study (Denzin & Lincoln 2000; Miles & Huberman 1994). The aim of the present study was to capture, in the students’ words, what they had experienced and observed within their same-race male peer groups at their respective institutions.

Sites

This study was conducted at six large, public research universities in the Midwest—Indiana University, Michigan State University, Purdue University, The Ohio State University, the University of Illinois, and the University of Michigan. These six institutions are similar in terms of size, age, reputation, and selectivity; they are also in close geographic proximity to each other and are affiliated with the same athletic conference. On average, 6.3 percent of the students at the institutions were African American during the time at which the data were collected, with African American undergraduate enrollments ranging from 3.1 percent to 8.8 percent. Approximately 34 percent of the African American students at these universities were male.

Sample

Key administrators on the six campuses (i.e. deans, vice presidents, and directors of campus programs) were asked to identify African American male students who had made the most of their college experience. This was defined as earning cumulative grade point averages above 3.0; establishing lengthy records of leadership and involvement in multiple campus organizations; earning the admiration of their peers (as determined by peer elections to campus leadership positions); developing quality relationships with faculty and high-ranking campus administrators; participating in enriching educational experiences (e.g. study abroad programs, internships, and summer research programs); and earning numerous collegiate awards and honors. Using these criteria, 32 high-achieving African American undergraduate men were identified and selected for participation in this study.

The sample included four sophomores, 12 juniors, and 16 seniors, representing a wide variety of academic majors. The mean GPA for the sample was 3.32. All of the participants were between the ages of 18-22 years old and single with no dependents. Twelve participants grew up in single-parent homes and the remaining 20 were from homes with two parents. Collectively, they had been awarded more than $489,000 in merit-based scholarship awards. The participants expressed high educational and career aspirations, with 72 percent indicating the intent to someday earn a doctoral degree (including the J.D.). The remaining 28 percent planned to pursue master’s degrees, usually in business. None of the high-achievers were student athletes. All but two identified
themselves as heterosexual—one was openly gay and the other was privately bisexual.

Data Collection Procedures

Each of the 32 African American men was asked to participate in a 2-3 hour face-to-face interview, and at least two follow-up interviews via telephone. I visited each campus at least once to conduct the first-round individual interviews; four campuses were visited twice. A semi-structured interview technique was used in the face-to-face interview sessions, which enabled me to gather information without making the dialogue exchange inflexible and restrictive (Holstein & Gubrium 1995). Although specific questions and interview protocol were used in this study, the discussions often became conversational, thus allowing the participants to reflect upon the experiences, perceptions, and observations they deemed most important. Transcripts from all sessions were sent to each participant for confirmation within eight weeks following his interviews.

Data Analysis

Several techniques prescribed by Moustakas (1994) were used to analyze the data collected from interviews with the 32 participants. I first bracketed out my thoughts and assumptions as I read each line of the participants’ transcripts. The margins of the transcripts were marked with reflective comments regarding my own presumptions and experiences. After bracketing, the transcripts were sorted and key phases were linearly arranged under tentative headings in NVivo®. This process resulted in the identification of 36 invariant constituents, which were sub-themes that did not vary more than 84.7 percent of the time (Moustakas, 1994). The invariant constituents were helpful for understanding the participants’ experiences, and were later clustered into thematic categories. I identified seven thematic categories that captured the essence of the participants’ shared experiences.

Findings

Participants on the six campuses consistently noted that their African American male peers used a limited number of variables to describe masculinity—dating and pursuing romantic (oftentimes sexual) relationships with women; any type of athletic activity (organized sports, individual exercise and bodybuilding, etc.); competition, namely through sports and video games; and the accumulation and showing off of material possessions. Some participants added fraternity membership to the list based on the observation that fraternity members seemed to
attract and date more women. The participants were convinced that activities in which they were engaged—such as, holding multiple leadership positions; achieving top academic honors in the classroom; and maintaining a high-profile status on campus—would not have made it into the African American undergraduate male portfolio of masculinity. One University of Illinois student commented:

Playing basketball in the rec. center, lifting weights, shooting hoops, partying, and showing off… they think those are masculine activities. I can be blunt, right? How many girls they can screw and who they’ve slept with. Those are the activities that most brothas’ on this campus would use to define masculinity. You’ll find them talking about these things in a boastful way all the time. I don’t believe that holding a leadership position in student government has quite found its way onto the list of masculinity.

Participants from the other five campuses consistently reported similar ways of thinking among their fellow African American male peers.

Lenny, a senior at Purdue, was dumbfounded when asked if other African American male students would perceive leadership and out-of-class involvement as masculine. Instead of speculating, he posed the following question in return: “He’s slept with 30 girls or he’s the Vice President in an organization on campus… which would you think the majority of 18-21 year-old Black males would consider more masculine?” The participants believed their peers were seeking validation from other African American males, and had something to prove by attempting to date and have sex with as many women as possible. Reportedly, competition to see who could sleep with the most female students on campus was commonplace—extra points were awarded for interracial sexual encounters. Males who successfully conquered the most women were considered “the big men on campus.”

Because of their active pursuit of dating opportunities and attention from the opposite sex, many of their male peers spent a significant amount of time in the gym working out and enhancing their physiques. Michael, a student at Michigan State, believed women somehow occupied most African American male students’ time on campus. “Women probably take a good 80 percent of that time because when they aren’t actually spending time with women, they’re working out to look good for the ladies.” One Indiana University student noted that one of his closest male friends spent more time lifting weights and playing basketball in the campus fitness center than the combined hours he spent attending class and doing homework. “Sure, his body is on point, but his grades and resume are not,” the participant added.

Second to women, competition influenced many of their peers’ perceptions of masculinity. Specifically, defeating opponents at video
games and on the basketball court were two key ways in which “real men” could flaunt their manhood. Marshawn, another Indiana University student, observed that competition among African American males, while quite prevalent on campus, was not “cutthroat.” That is, his peers derived tremendous satisfaction from outpacing each other in intramural and recreational sports and outscoring each other on video games. Thus, they did not seek to bring about harm, injury, or widespread insult to other African American males. Instead, Marshawn noticed that competition on his campus had more to do with building masculine reputations and earning respect. An Ohio State student remembered an excerpt from a speech given by a visiting lecturer who was directly addressing the African American males in the audience:

He was like, when you’re on the basketball court and you’re about to take someone to the hole, you’re talking trash and grabbing your [genitals] like, ‘bring it on!’ Now, why is it when brothas’ are in the classroom, they act like ‘little punks?’ You can be hard out there, but then you get in here and you’re a ‘little punk!’

The participants also thought other African American male students on their campuses defined masculinity and achievement through the accumulation and exhibition of material possessions. Anyone who appeared to have a pocket full of money earned the respect of other African American males on campus. Nice cars with flashy rims were at the top of the list. One student shared the following story:

I’ve sat down with different brothas’ and asked them why they were here. This one African American guy told me something that really shocked me. He said he was here in college so he could get a good enough job to buy a Ford Excursion [sports utility vehicle]. This really shocked me. His idea of achievement was to have this truck with some rims on it. That was his sole reason for attending college.

In addition to cars, the participants’ African American male peers also relied on expensive clothing and shoes to show they were excelling and doing well, the participants claimed. Those who sported the “flyest gear” were often dubbed coolest among the African American students on campus. The participants considered their peers to be quite materialistic and disproportionately focused on showing off to impress women and other male students.

By contrast, the participants in this study offered different definitions of masculinity. Though they too enjoyed playing recreational sports and pursuing romantic relationships (time permitting), the high-achievers did not consider those activities paradigmatic examples of masculinity. Instead, their shared definition overwhelmingly included “taking care of business.” For example, many participants talked about the importance of working hard to secure their futures, and handling the
business that would protect them from dropping out or failing out of school. Failing to do well and having to return home to their mothers did not strike them as being very masculine, especially for men who called themselves adults.

They also strongly believed that leadership and community advancement had been historically associated with men. Bryant, a senior at the University of Michigan commented: “Real men assume responsibility and take the lead on making improvements; they don’t leave problems for others to solve. College is the place where you learn to be a leader.” The participants also acknowledged that most of the historical icons and celebrated figures in the African American community were male leaders. “Look at Dr. Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, Jesse Jackson, Louis Farrakhan… they’re masculine; they weren’t athletes, but they were out in the streets fighting for the rights of Black folks. To me, that’s masculine.”

Reportedly, the participants’ African American male peers (though uninvolved themselves) supported, appreciated, and applauded the participants’ display of leadership on the six campuses. In fact, both their African American male and female peers elected them to serve in a variety of important leadership capacities in minority and mainstream student organizations. Keely, a junior at the University of Illinois, commented, “They don’t really know what the organization does, but because they feel this camaraderie with another African American student who’s running for a particular leadership position, they’re going to vote for that student because he or she is Black.” The participants felt a special sense of support from other African American males on campus and believed their peers would not have elected them to major leadership positions if they deemed such activities inappropriately “un-masculine.”

“When I ran for student body president, brotas’ turned out in record numbers to cast their ballots in my favor; they wouldn’t have done that if they didn’t at least respect me as an African American male peer who could be their leader,” a Purdue student added.

The participants believed their previous track records for contributing to the advancement of the minority and African American student communities on campus helped them win favor with their fellow African American male peers. Though they were involved in an array of clubs and student organizations on their campuses, the high-achievers primarily held leadership positions in African American and minority student organizations. Their involvement enabled them to programmatically address issues and communicate the concerns of the African American community to university administrators. The participants often likened their roles to leading a family. In essence, their fellow African American peers comprised a “family” that these student
leaders were providing for and protecting from social isolation, racism, and discrimination on their predominantly White campuses.

Regarding masculinity, the participants strongly believed that being a man had a lot to do with preparing to take care of a family. They often asked what good would a man who wasted his time in college and consequently ended up in dead-end jobs for the rest of his life be to his family and community. Or how useful was a man who did not stand up for his family and attempt to make their lives better. Robert’s remarks provided an excellent synopsis of the high-achievers’ shared opinion:

First of all, a real man honors God. Secondly, a real man takes care of his family and the people he is directly or indirectly responsible for… to me, anything outside of that is not very masculine. If you’re not a person who’s honoring God, you’re not a man. If you’re not doing things right now to take care of the family you’re going to have in the future because you’re so bent on self-gratification, you’re not a man. Real men know that most decisions they make today will affect the family they’re going to have in the future.

The participants believed they would be better off in the long-term by striving to become like older African American male leaders from their communities, instead of validating their manhood through their fellow African American college peers who would presumably achieve limited success later in life.

Although their definitions of masculinity were relatively unconventional and the activities in which they were most engaged were not part of the traditional African American male portfolio of manliness, the participants indicated that their masculinities were never questioned or challenged by their African American male peers or anyone else. This even held true for the gay and bisexual men in the sample. They had never been the victims of ridicule because they chose to spend their out-of-class time differently. The high-achievers received an incredible amount of support and praise from other African American male students on their campuses, including the uninvolved. “Though the things that I’m involved in wouldn’t be in their criteria for being a man, they wouldn’t look at me and say, ‘Cullen isn’t masculine.’”

The high-achievers had a different perspective on the perceived nexus between masculinity, materialism, and achievement. For instance, one participant from the University of Michigan noted:

Being “the man” isn’t about the money, the clothes, and the cars that you have right now. You’re “the man” when you’re at a company and you’re in a position to hire other African Americans; when you’re in a position to give dollars back to the Black community; when you have time to go be a mentor to young African American boys in your city, that’s masculine… to me, being an executive someday who’s
able to reach back and help other African Americans is the measure of a man.

Discussion

The 32 high-achieving African American men’s conceptualizations of masculinity, in comparison to their fellow African American male peers, offer several intriguing contrasts to previous inquiries on this topic. The participants were comfortable with themselves and had apparently developed conflict-free masculine identities, despite their unconventional views and the ways in which their out-of-class time was spent. Morrison and Eardley (1985) contend that boys who fail to live up to traditional standards of masculinity usually experience ridicule and sometimes become victims of violent acts committed by their male peers. The experiences of these 32 high-achievers contradicted that claim. Instead they felt extremely supported by other African American male students on their campuses, and were not ridiculed or deemed heterosexually-suspect because of the decisions they made regarding the allocation of their out-of-class time. This held true for the openly gay student in the sample. He believed his African American male peers fully supported and treated him with an enormous amount of respect. The sexual orientation of the one bisexual participant remained private and undisclosed among his African American male peers, and he too experienced no ridicule from other men on his campus. Reportedly, this was largely due in part to their previous track records of service, leadership, and contributions to the African American communities at their universities.

These reports of peer approval coincide with Connell’s (1993) claim that masculinities must be negotiated within male peer groups. It appears that committing one’s time to the advancement of the African American community and assuming responsibility for bringing about changes that would improve the quality of life for minority students were the primary ways by which the high-achievers were able to negotiate with their uninvolved male peers who would ultimately benefit from the improved campus conditions.

Unlike Kunjufu’s (1988) characterization, the participants did not have to choose between being popular or smart—they were accepted as both. That they were elected to multiple campus leadership positions suggests the participants were popular and highly-regarded by their peers. Gilligan (1993) and Head (1999) found that most men were competitive and generally disinterested in collaboration. In the present study, competitiveness manifested itself vis-à-vis the participants’ reports of vying for multiple leadership positions on campus. However, collaboration is a necessary attribute of a successful undergraduate
student leader. In fact, this was one of the key skills the participants deemed important for future success.

The high-achievers devoted a sizeable portion of their out-of-class time to purposeful activities—participating in clubs and organizations, leading various student groups on campus, studying and preparing for class, interacting with university administrators, and so on. In contrast, most of their African American male peers spent their time in residence hall rooms doing nothing, pursuing romantic (oftentimes sexual) relationships with women, exercising in the campus recreation facility, and playing video games and intramural sports. This finding is consistent with previous reports of traditionally African American masculine activities (Askew & Ross 1988; Head 1999; Martino & Meyenn 2001).

It does appear, however, that the high-achievers held certain beliefs and aspired to roles that are consistent with traditional, mainstream White definitions of masculinity (i.e. provider, family man, and executive). At the same time, their motives were strikingly different. They were involved in leadership roles for selfless reasons and believed their work as student leaders was central to the advancement of the African American community on their campuses. Even in discussing their aspirations of becoming top executives and leaders in their future professions, the participants consistently emphasized the importance of being in a position to help, hire, and provide opportunities to other African Americans. There was no mention of solely personal gain or competing for the sake of simply being on top. This social commitment is inconsistent with the self-serving, ultra-competitive depiction of White men who subscribe to traditional definitions of masculinity. Moreover, the high-achievers’ views of masculinity were clearly alternative and inconsistent with those of fellow African American male peers.

Oliver (1988, 1989) found that many African American men take on the “tough guy” or “players of women” identities to compensate for their inability to meet traditional White standards of masculinity. While there was no mention of “tough guys” or violent peers, many African American men on the six campuses reportedly devoted tremendous time and energy to romantic and sexual conquests with female students (oftentimes multiple women simultaneously). Although 30 participants identified themselves as heterosexual and admittedly engaged in romantic and sexual endeavors with women, they did not deem the high priority and disproportionate emphasis that their peers placed on opposite-sex relationships healthy or productive. Moreover, instead of relying on indicators such as money, cars, and the exhibition of material possessions to define masculinity, the participants’ conceptualizations
included campus involvement, community improvement, and the indemnity of long-term career success beyond the undergraduate years.

**Implications and Recommendations**

According to data from Mortenson (2001), 67.6 percent of all African American men who started college in 1996 withdrew before completing their bachelor’s degrees in 2000, compared to 56 percent of African American women and 58.1 percent of White male undergraduates. Mortenson’s findings also indicate that African American men had the lowest retention rates among both sexes and all racial/ethnic groups in higher education in 2000. While the causes of student attrition are extensive and complex (Tinto 1993), identity conflict—confusion about who one is, challenges with fitting into a community within the college environment, and unresolved psychosocial insecurities—is largely responsible for a significant number of student departures from the college campus (Evans, Forney, & Guido-DiBrito 1998). In fact, Gilbert and Gilbert (1998) and Price (2000) suggest that a healthy, conflict-free masculine identity positively affects a variety of student outcomes, including academic achievement. 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.

Highly-involved African American male student leaders, such as the participants in the present study, should be used as a resource in efforts to broaden or redefine within-group conceptualizations of masculinities. Programs and structured dialogues in which students candidly share their perspectives on manhood may broaden the scope of masculine attitudes and behaviors that are deemed acceptable by and garner respect from peers.

Organizations specifically designed for African American male students are also important, as they typically attract many men who would otherwise remain completely uninvolved. Programs that focus on masculine identity issues and diversified conceptualizations of what it means to be a man would naturally complement the mission of this type of student organization. These initiatives must be student-led with some faculty and administrative guidance, as undergraduates are more likely to listen to peers who challenge them to see issues in a different light. Given that fraternity membership was occasionally deemed highly masculine among men on the six campuses, it would be advantageous for advisors and administrators to encourage the African American
fraternities to sponsor semi-structured programs that focus on explorations of masculinity.

It is also important to connect African American male undergraduates to African American mentors who can expose them to alternative definitions of what it means to be a man. These mentors could include male faculty, staff, administrators, and graduate students, as well as alumni who serve in important positions in their professions and are actively involved in their communities. These mentors could share their personal success stories, encourage mentees to spend their out-of-class time more meaningfully, deconstruct longstanding myths about masculinity and help undergraduates understand how the choices they make today will affect future success and employability. These mentoring relationships are especially critical for African American male students who come from single-parent homes or communities where they were not exposed to African American male professionals and leaders.

Campus counseling centers should also consider approaches that focus on masculinity for African American men. Private, individualized sessions and small group therapy may help these students unpack their identity issues and come to terms with their alternative conceptualizations of masculinity. Given the sexual promiscuity that the study participants described among their peers, campus health centers should expand their safe-sex campaigns to include information about masculinity. Programs and materials that emphasize to male students (African American and otherwise) that being a man is not all about sex would likely inspire some students to rethink their priorities. A “men’s only” session at new student orientation would be an appropriate venue for spreading this message. African American male student leaders could also participate in these orientation sessions and suggest to newcomers that they balance their romantic and sexual pursuits with out-of-class activities that will yield meaningful post-college outcomes. Gender-specific orientation sessions would also give advanced male student leaders the opportunity to share with new students their definitions of what it means to be a man and provide recommendations for how to survive in college despite peer pressure to live up to traditional standards of masculinity. These sessions would also confirm that it is possible to maintain intact masculine reputations without participating in sports, showing off material possessions, and constantly pursuing women.

Similar to women’s centers that exist on hundreds of college and university campuses across the country, administrators should also consider devoting financial and staff resources to the establishment of men’s centers. These centers could provide activities, resources, and support for male students. In addition to regularly sponsoring structured dialogues regarding identity and definitions of masculinity, the centers
could also offer information and programs on rape prevention, aggression, health and wellness, sexuality, and male/female relationships, and facilitate opportunities for the cultivation of friendships and male bonding. If resources are not available to start this type of center, perhaps multicultural affairs offices could expand their scope to include programming on gender, particularly men’s issues. These and other initiatives designed to address identity issues and definitions of masculinity among undergraduate men in general and African American male students specifically, would help students feel better about their definitions of self. The resolution of identity issues is necessary for retention and success in college, and is especially critical for African American male undergraduates.

Limitations

The most glaring limitation of this study is the reliance on self-reported data of peer perceptions. Interviews were only conducted with the 32 high-achieving African American undergraduate men, not their peers. Although the participants believed their African American male peers held certain views regarding masculinity or disproportionately devoted their out-of-class time to traditionally masculine activities, their peers may have reported something different. Also, the participants believed their peers perceived them to be masculine and never questioned their heterosexuality; no data were collected to confirm these speculations.

References

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