# Real Men (Don't)…Progressive Black Masculinity at The Pennsylvania State University

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## Abstract

Black masculinity is often dichotomized and oversimplified in American media and popular culture. These portrayals create stereotypes of how black men are expected to behave. Addressing these stereotypes and their implications at higher education institutions may aid university administration in better serving black male students. Through a qualitative analysis of four black college men at a large research university, this project explores how black male collegians conceptualize and express their manhood and masculinity, as well as how this identity is impacted by the social and academic environments of the institution.

_Keywords:_ Black men, college, masculinity

Historically, black men and their masculinity have been defined by American media and popular culture (Ferguson, 2000; Ford, 2011; hooks, 2004). Consequently, black men have not been able to be the authors of their own manhood and masculinity, black masculinity has been grossly oversimplified (Pelzer, 2016). Since masculinity is complex and varied due to diverse experiences (Connell, 1995; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Lynch, 2009), generalizations cannot be made. Black men experience masculinity differently because of various group identities such as age, sexuality, spirituality, physical ability, and socioeconomic status (Cooper, 2006; Pelzer, 2016). Cooper (2006) also asserts there is a dichotomization of masculinity for heterosexual black men who are forced to fit either the "Bad Black Man" stereotype, in which they are characterized as sexually and criminally deviant, or the "Good Black Man" stereotype, which is represented by the black man who distances himself from his heritage, and black people while assimilating into white mainstream culture. American society has socialized and racialized black men in many ways; black youth may internalize or rationalize these limited images of themselves. The manifestations of said internalization can be seen when youth reach emerging adulthood and higher education institutions (Ferguson, 2000; Harper, 2004).

The black male experience is also oversimplified as it relates to higher education. The black male collegiate experience is stained with deficit narratives about the academic achievement and pursuit of leadership opportunities (Dancy, 2011; Harper, 2004). Though there are troubling statistics concerning black male collegians (BMC), understanding the propensity for expelling such narratives, and their implications for black male students is important.

Additionally, these are the experiences of some black male collegians, it is not the story for all. When it is the case for a black collegian's experience, the impetus could be, in part, the endless adverse stereotypes pushed by media and popular culture, coupled with deficit narratives proffered by researchers, creating the low expectations of black male students on college and university campuses. As the majority of colleges and universities are predominantly white institutions (PWI), they do not foster the healthy environments needed for the academic, social, and psychological achievement of black male students; these environments reinforce stereotypes detrimental to black men (Boyd, 2017). At PWIs, the negative stereotypes provided by American society permeate the experiences BMC have with their peers, faculty, and staff (Harper, 2006a, 2006b) These stereotypes create marginalization and curb the development of black male students on campus. As a result, these environments impede BMC's sense of belonging, academic accomplishment, co-curricular engagement, pursuit of faculty and staff relations, and self-esteem, which are all determinates of success for students (Boyd, 2017; Harper, 2015).

Black men are often aware of the stereotypes about them, and they either succumb to unproductive and self-destructive definitions of masculinity or find ways to combat and cope with those stereotypes (Davis, 1994; Harper, 2004; Harris, Palmer & Struve, 2011; Pelzer, 2016; Boyd, 2017). How black male students interpret perceptions of black maleness, in and outside campus contexts, and how they express these notions has implications for how they navigate the university environment, which in-turn impacts how the institutions engage with them; in essence, black men may experience university through their masculinity (Pelzer, 2016). Similarly, black male collegians internalizations of 'acceptable' masculine behavior may be able to aid in explanation of their classroom performance, disposition towards campus involvement, and aspirations towards graduation (Harper & Davis, 2012; Harris, Palmer & Struve, 201; Pelzer, 2016). Examining the experiences of black male students on college campuses provides multiple potential benefits. Given student engagement, adjustment, and identity development have been identified as determinants of success in college (Dancy, 2011; Harper, 2004), exploring how black male students negotiate their gendered and racial identities is important, as it relates to their experiences on campus. Understanding their experiences may help university administration and private organizations boost completion rates for BMC. Also, affording black male collegians with the opportunity to discuss their identities, and how they are perceived on campus may aid them in believing academic and professional success are acceptable expressions of their masculinity, thus aiding their achievement at higher education institutions. Lastly, providing black male collegians with a platform to narrate their own experiences will add to the work being done to balance the plethora of deficit narratives about them.

## Review of the Literature
### Conceptualizing Masculinity

Understanding gender, manhood, and masculinity is important. These terms are different from sex, which describes the biological characteristics of bodies, namely "male" and "female" (Shrock, 2009). Unlike biological sex, gender is a set of socially constructed relationships, teachings, and interactions reminding one of the appropriate behaviors of expression (Courtenay, 2000; Dancy, 2011). Manhood and masculinity are often used interchangeably, but it is important to highlight the difference between them. Manhood is characterized by the ideas shaped through social interaction, or how one defines a man; whereas masculinity describes the

behavioral expressions and performances of manhood constructions (Dancy 2011; Shrock, 2009). Essentially, manhood is the definition of man, and the practices employed to demonstrate those definitions is masculinity.

## Hegemonic Masculinity

As manhood and masculinity are social constructs subject to change through time and across societies, there are different ways to conceptualize and perform them; in other words, a structure of multiple masculinities has been proposed by Connell (1995), and noted by other scholars (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Jackson & Balaji, 2011). This structure suggests there is a hierarchy of the numerous ways to perform masculinity, in which some masculinities are more accepted by society (Connell, 1995; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Masculinity most honored by society has been dubbed hegemonic masculinity, theorized by Connell (1995) as the practice allowing men's social dominance over women. Hegemonic masculinity is the current most honored performance of being a man and requires all men to position their masculinity in relation to it as well (i.e. black men, poor men, and gay men). Lynch (2009) adds to this when describing the hegemony as:

> "[involving] physical strength; economic success; control; exclusive
> heterosexuality and the search for sexual conquests even if by force;
> athletic prowess; stoicism and suppression of emotions that convey
> vulnerability such as empathy, sadness, and the like; and the patrolling of
> other men's masculinities (as well as women's femininities). Hegemonic
> masculinity is also exemplified in the white, Christian, and "able-bodied"
> male body." (p. 412)

As hegemonic masculinity is the benchmark by which all men must measure their masculinity, fulfilling these expressions may prove difficult for some men. For instance, Male Gender Role Conflict as described in O'Neil's (1981) research describes this difficulty; it is characterized as the emotional and psychological angst stemming from fear of femininity and an inability to live up to socially constructed ideals of masculinity.

## Black Masculinity

Black men are often unable to perform their masculinity in ways deemed socially acceptable when compared to hegemonic masculinity. This inability to perform their masculinity in those ways, along with the need to address the internalized stereotypes about their masculinity, means black men renegotiate their definitions of manhood and masculinity (Ford, 2011; Harper, 2004; Pelzer, 2016). Some of these renegotiations are similar to the accepted performances, which are often seen as unhealthy or toxic, such as aggression, restrictive emotionality, or homophobia. Other renegotiations are considered as healthy and positive. These performances of black masculinity, both positive and negative, include: competition, material success, restrictive emotionality, homophobia, leadership, resiliency, responsibility, and community and family involvement (Dancy, 2010; Harper, 2004; Harris, Palmer, and Struve 2011; Ikard, 2013; Maguire & Harper, 2014;). One method of reframing masculinity prevalent among black men is "cool pose" (Harris, Palmer, and Struve 2011; Major & Billson, 1992). Cool pose is used as a tool to cope with the daily systemic oppression black males face. It is comprised of a unique way to carry oneself, including dress, speech, gait, sexual promiscuity.

Though some of the performances of cool pose may be perceived as unhealthy, this coping mechanism is a way for black men to project confidence in a society in which they are consistently ostracized. Cool pose is prevalent among some black men, but not all employ this strategy of renegotiation.

**Black Masculinity and the Campus Environment**

Attending university is a critical moment in the lives of young men and woman; besides academic stressors, students learn to negotiate their identities, bodies, relationships, and sexualities in new ways (Ford, 2011). Research has also shown the benefits a healthy, conflict free masculine identity has for male students, including positive outcomes in areas such as academics or self-concept (Harris, 2004). Therefore, as with all students, it is of the utmost importance for black male collegians to understand their identities to excel in higher education.

Black men should resolve internalized oppression about their maleness (Collins, 2004; hooks, 2004), and some of the issues they face at higher education institutions are based in the manifestations of the internalized oppression (Pelzer, 2016). This internalization manifests by way of beliefs black men have about themselves, for instance they do not see themselves as congruent with academic and professional success; they see these accomplishments as reserved for Whiteness, which causes them to disassociate those themes with themselves (Collins, 2004; Harper, 2004;). Black youth reject academic success because of these internalizations about themselves and their cognitive abilities; they associate black male professionals and academic success in the White man's systems with an effeminate less masculine black man (Collins, 2004). Collins (2004) also proposes the terms "intellectual punks" and "academic sidekicks" who to black youth are the black men who assimilate and are subordinate to white culture and society.

As black youth reach emerging adulthood and university campuses, they must address the stereotypes, the source of their internalized oppression, both within themselves, and from the institutions they attend (Boyd, 2017; Harper, 2015). Addressing these stereotypes can unfold in different expressions of masculinity. As aforementioned, cool pose is one way in which men address their positioning in American society. They use cool pose as a coping mechanism to project confidence, in a system that consistently marginalizes them. Nevertheless, cool pose is not the only one-way black men can renegotiate their masculinity.

There are some black male collegians on university campuses who reframe their masculinity in other ways including: being leaders of their families and communities, academic success and being responsible (Harper 2004; Harris, Palmer, & Struve 2011; Henfield 2012; Ikard 2013). Interestingly, these differing renegotiations of black masculinity are generally held by different types of students; high achieving BMC have more positive renegotiations and those of lower-achieving BMC are unhealthier. For instance, high-achieving BMC do not see material success and being a "baller" as important to their manhood and masculinity, and critique their peers who do (Harper, 2004).

Even though there have been divergent expressions among black male collegians, some concepts were still present across both student types: homophobia, to be a player of women, and a restrictive emotionality. Though, as society becomes more progressive, some black male collegians may have begun to express their masculinity in congruence with Mutua's (2006) concept of progressive black masculinity: which she defines.

"Progressive [Black] masculinities, on the one hand, personally eschew and actively stands against social structures of domination and, on the other, value, validate, and

empower [Black] humanity . . . and multicultural humanity of others in the global family. More specifically . . . at a minimum, [they are] pro-[Black] and antiracist as well as profeminist and anti-sexist . . . They are decidedly not dependent and or not predicated on the subordination of others." (p.7)

There seems to be a correlation between the negotiation of masculinity amongst black male students and their experiences on campus. High achieving BMC who have shown resiliency to stereotypes and have shown the ability not only to persevere, but to succeed in college. The students who have been able to understand how their identities function on campus have been able to flourish academically and professionally. However, it is understood these students are not the majority. Assisting all black male students in their understanding of their experiences as black men on campus, and how to cope with stereotypes about their identities in beneficial ways may be a key to helping these students reach higher rates of retention and gradation. Examining the masculine identity development and expressions of BMC may be one approach to aid these students and boost their degree attainment.

## Research Procedures

This exploratory research seeks to explore how black male collegians at The Pennsylvania State University conceptualize and express masculinity, as well as if the institution has impacted those conceptualizations and/or the expression of their masculine identities. The research questions under investigation include: What do black male students at Penn State believe about manhood and masculinity? How do these students come to these beliefs? Has Penn State influenced the development of their beliefs?

**Overall Approach and Rationale**

The research study is a qualitative study based in a focus group and two individual interviews to examine how BMC at Penn State have come to define and perform their identities on campus. The study benefitted from the style of the focus group and the individual interviews as they imitate an individual and group social settings. The information gathered from these contrasting contexts had the potential to provide insight into how participants behave in various situations.

This allowed for more accurate analysis how a different context may influence their expressions of masculinity, allowing for a, though not an all-encompassing, more precise conclusion.

**Site and Sample Selection**

Four undergraduate students at the Pennsylvania State University who were present on campus were the participants of this study. Participants represented a wide range of majors from Energy Engineering, Psychology, Economics, and Information Systems Technology; they have an average GPA of 3.0. All participants identify as heterosexual; Two identify as African-American, one as African-American and Turkish, and the last as Ghanaian. The students in this study frequent a host of organizations of campus, some are dedicated to supporting multicultural students while others are not.

The site of this study is Penn State primarily because it is the site most readily available to the research, however this is also a suitable site because there have been intra-communal attempts to address the problems black male students face on campus. Penn State's population of black male collegians is small. Including women, about six percent of the 41,000 students are

black or African-American, which means the percentage of men alone is even lower. Though the population of BMC is small, there have been efforts to support these students. The Black and Latino Male Empowerment Group holds regular meetings to support black men on campus by encouraging them to seek academic and social opportunities, to aid them in navigating their undergraduate experiences efficiently and effectively. Additionally, the Black Men on the RISE award ceremony aims to celebrate the achievement and leadership of black male students. Programs like these could potentially impact how BMC see themselves, and their ability to achieve academic success. The efforts made to support black males at this institution may change their conceptualizations and expressions of masculinity on campus; which could provide insight into how issues these students encounter may be addressed.

**Data Collection Methods**
    Audio and video recordings, field notes, individual interviews, and the focus group were the main data collection instruments. The study began with an in-take interview, with the aim of gaining basic demographic information about the participants such as: age, hometown, religion, sexual orientation, major(s), minor(s), and number of co-curricular activities. This was also used as a moment to begin building rapport with participants. I answered any questions regarding the study or its purpose. To begin this interview, I used a demographic survey, but allowed for open ended responses, if they arose. The interview was guided by my questions and statements about masculinity, manliness, and manhood; the participants provided their answers. The students were asked how *real* men carry themselves, treat other people, and other characteristics of an ideal *real* man. Participants were then asked to respond to statements or questions with terms including *real* man. I asked the subjects to identify men on campus and/or in the media who embody their ideals of masculinity, and why. In addition to their beliefs about masculinity, they were encouraged to share members of their family, community, or others who have had an impact on their understanding of masculinity and manhood. The purpose of this interview was to start a positive relationship with the participants and to begin a working understanding of how they conceptualize manhood and masculinity. I took brief notes, if necessary, which were helpful in constructing useful questions about their experiences on campus during the focus group. The individual intake interviews lasted from 30 to 75 minutes.
        After each of the four participants had an in-take interview, the next phase of this study was a semi-structured focus group. The participants reflected on their experiences as black men on campus, why they had those experiences because of their identities as black men, and how they are perceived by others. I used a set of fixed questions but allowed room for digression related to their experiences as black men in other spaces. The purpose of the focus group was to gain a shared, collective understanding of the experiences and beliefs of the participants at the site. The focus group lasted 90 minutes.
        The individual interview, post focus group, was used to conclude the data collection for the study. These interviews were guided by findings --from the previous interviews-- on which I sought elaboration. The main question of this interview prompted the students to reflect on ways in which the university could improve upon the experiences of black male students on campus. The participants were encouraged to share last thoughts on black masculinity at the site, or in general. The purpose of this part of the study is to be a 'wrap-up' to the students' beliefs and obtain their final thoughts on their experiences. These interviews lasted from 15-30 minutes.

Each interview was audio and video recorded, to reference throughout the data analysis process. Recordings allowed me to review exact quotes from the interviews, rather than relying solely on notes and memory; recording the interview sessions aided in accuracy of conclusions made in this final report.

**Data Management and Analysis**

Several themes including: Competition, Material Success and being a "Baller", Aggression, Restrictive Emotionality, Homophobia/Fear of Femininity, Womanizer/Player of Women, Leading the Family and being the "Breadwinner", Giving Back to the [Black] Community, and Resiliency were adapted, from primarily Harper (2004) and Harris (2011), and used to conduct thematic analysis. I compared participants' responses to these themes to understand their beliefs about manhood, and how they express their masculinity. I used deductive/inductive reasoning to establish connections between the developments of the participants' conceptions and expressions of manhood and masculinity and their experiences on campus, to understand the impact, the site has had on the participants.

**Role of the Researcher**

I approached the study as an interviewer and nonparticipant observer, during the individual and focus groups interviews. My identity as a 21-year-old black male student attending the same university as the participants, potentially gave me a unique positioning from the participants' point of view. This positioning may have opened an entry way to incredibly candid responses, if the participants saw me as one of them. The ability to relate to the participants' experiences proved to be beneficial to this study.

Nevertheless, as I am a part of the student population I am researching, I inevitably came to the research with my own experiences influencing my beliefs about black masculinity, and its development and expression at the research site. My experiences had the potential to affect how the data was analyzed. Those experiences may have caused me to hypothesize, conclude, and deduce about the data in ways I otherwise would not, if I were not similar to the subjects. Similarly, as the participants may have identified themselves with me, and saw me as a member of their community, this may have caused students to inhibit their vulnerability with me. Students may not have been completely open with me, because they could interact with me at the site after the research concluded. This would not happen if I were not a part of the school community, because I would leave the site after the research ended; the participants would not have to fear a member of the school community knowing intimate details about their lives and beliefs. To curb this potential barrier, I ensured at every step of the process the participants of their anonymity[1] in data collection and the final report.

Observations and conclusions made in this qualitative study depend on subjective responses and inferences by me, the researcher, and participants. To provide an accurate report and analysis of the focus group and individual interviews, participants were invited to comment on the final product before publication, ensuring misrepresentation of their responses did not occur.

Before the start of the interviews, the participants were again provided with the purpose and background of the study. They were also given an informed consent form, and asked to confirm their participation. In addition to consent considerations, any identifying information was removed from the final product. They were assured their responses will have no impact outside of the purposes of this study.

**Limitations**

The size and diversity of the study make it difficult to generalize to the larger black male student population at Penn State. This study is also limited by the students' willingness to be truthful and present, literally and figuratively, during the focus group and individual interviews, which increases the difficulty of verifying and establishing causality in this study.

## Findings

This study questioning how black male collegians conceptualize manhood and masculinity investigated 1) What do black male students at Penn State believe about manhood and masculinity; 2) Where do black male students learn those beliefs; and lastly, 3) has Penn State influenced their beliefs and/or expressions? The participants presented data not entirely congruent with the themes used to guide interviews. The themes of Competition (through sports), Material Success and being a "Baller", and Aggression (Tough Guy) were not supported by the data found in this study. Mainly, the participants expressed themes of masculinity beneficial to their success (e.g. resiliency and giving back to the black community) and strayed away from oppressive conceptions (e.g. restrictive emotionality, womanizing, and homophobia) (Connell, 1995; Lynch, 2009). When the participants did express their beliefs related to themes such as leading the family and giving back to the black community, they were elaborated on in ways not shown in the studies from which they are drawn. By and large, participants did not define manhood and masculinity by being a womanizer, homophobic, or restrictive in emotional expressions. Additionally, as related to these themes, many expressed a maturation within themselves, which has caused them to begin on a path towards progressive black masculinities as proposed by Mutua (2006).

**Conceptions and Expressions of Manhood and Masculinity**

**Restrictive Emotionality**: "It's okay to be vulnerable sometimes" –Kwadwo

Restrictive emotionality, characterized by stoicism, and the inability to show emotions other than anger, frustration, and the like, is used by hegemonic masculinities to police other masculinities and identities (Connell, 1995; Lynch, 2009). All the participants express sentiments similar to Charles when he says:

**Charles, Individual Intake Interview**
"I realize, I can't bury everything that happens to me, 'cause if you keep buryin', and buryin', eventually it's gonna come up, and you don't want it to be such a breakdown to the fact where it affects you mentally and things like that. It's one of those things I'm doing [processing emotions] to be mentally healthy, and to get myself together."

Austin furthers this by asserting restrictive emotionality makes it hard for people to deal with their problems later in life. Similarly, Kwadwo reflects on societal expectations of black masculinity in relation to restrictive emotionality, which he says hinders important connections between men in his comment:

**Kwadwo, Individual Intake Interview**
"I think a lot of people view black men being emotional as not being strong… it's really evident when we interact with each other. You can tell when compared to women, like, they are lot more comfortable, just being more open with each other. But men, you know, we always have that wall

up, we keep our distance, it's harder for us to connect with another man on
a personal level. There are a lot more hoops you have to jump over….
There's just a lot more extra hoops that we have to jump over, hoops that
don't necessarily need to be there, but the way we were raised, and the
way we came up [is why they are there]."

Participants realize societal standards of restrictive emotionality present potentially hazardous
effects and note these expressions of masculinity as archaic and traditional. The participants are
glad men are now able to express a wider range of emotions, Charles states:

**Charles, Individual Intake Interview**
"I think there are some steps in the right direction [of men being
able to process and express emotions openly] …I do think it's a
good thing that in 2018 we are definitely moving towards that right
direction."

These men want to be able to show their full range of emotions because it helps them connect
with others and preserve their mental and emotional health. Expressing emotion was integral to
other concepts related to their masculinity [e.g. Giving Back to the [Black] Community and
Leading the Family]. All participants said being connected with others is important to being a
*real* man; participants describe *real* men as being caring, compassionate, and connected with
others -- unrestrictive emotionality is essential to each of those characteristics--. Unrestricted and
open emotionality is important to their health, and their ability to accomplish their goals of being
*real* men.

**Homophobia/Fear of Femininity**: "Someone being gay doesn't take away from the
five-character traits that I would call a man, if you embody those character traits, then it is what
it is." –Charles

Fear of femininity is often shown through restrictive emotionality and distancing oneself
as much as possible from homosexual 'tendencies', often expressed through homophobic actions
actively oppressive towards the LGBTQ+ community (Connell, 1995; Lynch, 2009). It is the fear
of not being 'sus' [suspected of being homosexual] (Harper, 2004; Harris, Palmer, Struve, 2011).
Supporting the LGBTQ+ community, and not marginalizing its identities is important to these
men and their journeys towards progressive masculinity. Some of the men in this study
unknowingly spoke to the theory of multiple masculinities (Connell, 1995) in their comments on
men being different, and not always able to perform their masculinity in the most socially
accepted ways. Many of the participants again comment on the ways society influences
homophobic beliefs. Clark, candidly reflects on reconciling his spirituality with homophobia:

**Clark, Individual Intake Interview**
"In church, they say, 'Oh, homosexuality is a sin', and all this other stuff.
So, I'm like okay, I see, you read the passage, man and woman, this kind
of stuff, okay I get it, reproductively I guess it makes sense; I understand
this point of view. But I'm like, the next passage is 'love thy neighbor'
and all this other kind of stuff. So, I'm like, you can't do both, you
physically can't do both."

This excerpt stems from a question asking Clark from where he has learned his beliefs about
manhood and masculinity, as he comments on his spirituality, he opens up about apparent
contradictions of homophobia and loving all people in his faith.

Not only does Clark mention his reluctance towards homophobic tendencies, but he also adds about how as he learns more about other identities, his social justice activism for these populations has increased. He says:

**Clark, Individual Intake Interview**

"That's definitely when I started to change my perspective as to how I view social justice issues, how I view racial issues, how I view gender issues, like gender and sexuality issues. Like a lot of these things that are new, I don't wanna say new, so to speak, but definitely new to me. Since leaving high school and coming to Penn State, my activism and education have increased tremendously. It's definitely much more apparent when it comes to the LGBTQ and their struggles, and learning about the history, this has always been an apparent thing."

Other participants express views of acceptance, and appreciation of the direction society is moving regarding acceptance of the LGBTQ+ community. Kwadwo speaks on the experiences of his cousin, who he respects for the strength he showed in coming out to a family vehemently against homosexuality, when he says:

**Kwadwo, Individual Intake Interview**

"I've known him my entire life, me having that conversation with him, I was just like 'okay, it's not gonna change anything.' No matter what to me he is just [name]."

Kwadwo and other participants expressed their respect for the strength it takes to confront the struggles encountered by the LGBTQ+ community. The participants in the study do not believe being a part of this community diminishes one's masculinity, so long as they are committed to being men who treat others with respect. The participants vary in their progressiveness; Some are just beginning to be open to these perspectives, others already support this community, and one advocates on behalf this community even though he do not belong to any of its identities. The degree of progressiveness varies for these participants, but they are undoubtedly presenting progressive masculinity, or are on a journey to it.

**Womanizer/Player of Women**: "Quality of relationships with women is more important than quantity" –Clark

Sexual conquest of women, by any means necessary, even if by force, is another way in which hegemonic masculinities oppress other identities (Connell, 1995; Lynch 2009). Two of the participants did not mention pursuing multiple sexual relationships with women as essential to their masculinity. The other half were explicitly asked, and when they did speak on the "playa" stereotype, they described it plainly as immature and manipulative. They eschew oppressive expressions of masculinity in their relationships with women. The idea of treating women with respect and dignity, not as sexual prizes or pieces is emphasized by participants who spoke on this theme. Even one participant who reveals he used to believe these types of relationships with women were acceptable but has since then matured. Austin comments on these experiences:

**Austin, Individual Intake Interview**

"In my circle, all we did was glorify who can get with the most girls, it was a glorified thing, especially being how immature I was…Thinking back on it, the fact that I just did that without any remorse is terrible. That you [he] just manipulated someone's mind like that. Now two years later, yeah, I don't think I could ever go back. That's what it comes down to, you're not a real man, you're just manipulating."

Though this participant previously held such beliefs about relationships with women, he has experienced growth within himself, which has caused him to want to pursue more healthy relationships with women.

All participants did not comment on this theme, but most did comment on relationships with women. They prioritize relationships with women grounded in ethical and anti-sexist behaviors; holding other men accountable for their actions to prevent and protect women from sexual assault and harassment was emphasized. Clark comments:

**Clark, Individual Intake Interview**

"If I'm out in public, and man is talking crazy to a woman, I feel as though men in this environment should be the first ones to step up. This also goes to play as far as sexual assault on campus. I'm definitely a person that says, 'no, it's not the victim's fault'. At the end of the day, a certain person made a certain action, and, like, the first person to go to in preventing sexual assault should be men. It should be men checking other men."

Clark positions men as protectors of women, not because they cannot protect themselves, rather because it is how it should be, he believes. Rather than oppressing this identity, and its intersections, the rest of the participants expressed similar beliefs of situating men as protectors of women. The men in this study see themselves as equals, or partners, with women, they do not present themselves in oppressive or domineering positions as it related to women, thus show progressive expressions of masculinity.

**Leading the Family and being the "breadwinner"**: "Real men…provide" –Charles & Clark

Each participant situates the man as a provider and leader of the household; however, they did not situate men as neither the only leader, nor only provider of the family [again, expressing progressive masculinities positioned on equal levels as other identities]. Interestingly, these participants extended family to their friends, peers, and communities in which they are involved. These men assert leading and providing for the family goes beyond financial responsibilities; it means supporting emotionally and spiritually as well. This was not expressed in the literature from which this theme was drawn (Harper, 2004; Harris, Palmer, & Struve, 2011). Clark comments:

**Clark, Individual Intake Interview**

"When I think of provide, I think of basically serving the family, as you should, providing for those basic necessities, but being there not just financially but also emotionally. It doesn't have to be just from the father position, like from father to children. It could also be from peer to peer."

Other participants in the study echo Clark, for instance, Kwadwo articulates other ways a man can provide for those important to him:

**Kwadwo, Individual Intake Interview**

"I think that stereotype [real men providing] is more so focused on providing in a family setting, I think the expectation is that the man is the breadwinner, the man has to make the money, you gotta make sure the family is okay. None of those are necessarily bad things, but it's not the only thing that defines you to be a real man. The stereotype usually refers to providing through money, or through a job, but you can also provide in other ways: emotional support, encouraging someone to step outside of

their comfort zone, mental health, helping someone find their passion.
Those are all support, for me that's also providing."

Furthermore, as it relates to be the "breadwinner" of the family, none of the participants believe the man must be the financial leader of the household; they express the opposite. Many of the participants commented on current trends of more women in the workforce, which they see as a positive. Charles expresses his opinions on the matter of women making more money than men:

**Charles, Individual Intake Interview**
"Personally, if my wife made more money than me, I would have no
problem with that. At the end of the day, I know I'm gonna be making
money myself. The thing is, if we're both making money, it really
shouldn't be an issue of who is making more money. We have to kind of
realize, it doesn't really matter what the value is as long as you're both
putting it in together. So, I say, as long as everybody is getting what they
need and getting what they deserve, I have no problem with that."

These sentiments are furthered by the other participants; Kwadwo reflects on a partner who makes more money than him doesn't matter because it means more money for the household. The participants emphasize the importance of partnership; agreement and understanding of how financial and household responsibilities will be taken care of is important, if not the most important factor of financial responsibilities.

**Giving Back to the [Black] Community**: "I'm really big on helping others and using your time for a cause." –Kwadwo

All the participants expressed an importance for giving back to the black community, but they also emphasized giving back to others facing social injustice. Therefore, I decided to adapt this theme and place "black" inside of brackets. Giving back to various communities in need to create change and a better future for those who are historically marginalized was mentioned by the participants. In continuation of Kwadwo's quote at the start of this subsection:

**Kwadwo, Individual Intake Interview**
"For manhood, it's like when you reach that capacity in life where you can
be self-sustaining, you always wanna help someone that's behind you, you
know. You know what it's like, you know the issues black men have been
going through."

Uplifting the black community, especially other black men, is integral to his masculinity. This takes the form of critically and constructively challenging others' thought processes and actions, with the goal of helping them grow.

Giving back to the black community, and those communities who were important in helping you reach success was emphasized by some participants as well. Clark when providing examples of real men, says:

**Clark, Individual Intake Interview**
"[LeBron James] works hard, but also doesn't mind giving back to the
communities that help support him to get to that space, so that's definitely
a real man to me."

Many of the participants already engage, and are leaders in multicultural student organizations on campus, these organizations include: Black Student Union, Black Caucus, National Society of Black Engineers, Multicultural Engineering Program, Penn State Treasure Board, and various organizations dedicated to international service experiences.

These students show their dedication to giving back to those in need, helping others, and uplifting marginalized identities through their participation in these organizations.

Participants shared stories of in class encounters, interactions with police, and intracommunity happenings as catalysts in their interests in giving back to the black community on campus. In sharing about his reactions to a 'safe space', important to underrepresented communities on campus, being closed, Charles says:

**Charles, Individual Intake Interview**

"This is one of the first things I've ever did when I came on campus, 'cause I was just like 'this is crazy'. So, I remember I went and talked to a reporter for the [student run news organization], and I was talking about that. That's actually what got me started in the community, it was just one of those things that was so baffling to me."

The participants decide they need to take matters into their own hands to remedy the issues the black, and others marginalized, community encounter on campus. Many of the participants believe the black community needs to uplift itself. Amongst themselves they agree on the idea of using the negativity as motivation to push forward and make circumstances better for themselves and their communities; in other words, to be resilient.

**Resiliency**: "Be tenacious, [real men] don't take 'no' for an answer." –Austin

All of the participants expressed beliefs of being relentless, tenacious, and resilient. Clark includes being resilient in his top five defining characteristics of a *real* mean. Resiliency can be displayed in different settings. For these participants, a resilient man is someone who does not quit when encountering adversity; he takes negative experiences and uses them as positive energy to move forward. Clark states:

**Clark, Individual Intake Interview**

"A real man is resilient. I definitely say a real man is resilient, because, and that's something you see all across the board, between any person. Trials and tribulations come, and that's somethin' that you can't avoid in life. Mentally, physically, or spiritually. For me, in order to say that you are a real man, you are someone who just doesn't get hit, and then 'damn, I'm never gonna…', and never get back up kinda thing."

Expanding on this point, as he talks about how and why men should not take 'no' for answer. Austin describes how he showed his tenacity when applying for jobs:

**Austin, Individual Intake Interview**

"There's been a lot of instances where I didn't take 'no' for an answer and it helped me get to a certain place. Even the job I am going to in August, I was just relentless, and didn't take 'no' for an answer. There were certain jobs I was applying for that I wasn't necessary qualified for, I still did it, got close, didn't get it, but it's just that, you just need that go getter mentality. Especially in this day and age, especially being a person of color that doesn't get stuff handed to them."

In this excerpt, Austin raises an interesting remark about how his masculinity and racial identity intersect, and how they influence his drive to seek out opportunities. He recognizes as a person of color, who faces marginalization in society, he must work harder than others to pursue opportunities and achieve his goals, despite the adversity.

**Campus Experience**

Two of the previous themes of manhood and masculinity have been most directly impacted by the participants' experiences in social and academic environments; Resiliency and Giving back to the [Black] Community have been furthered as a result of the negative experiences students have on campus.

**Resiliency**

Participants describe some of their experiences at Penn State to be marginalizing. Clark details interactions with his peers in predominantly white engineering spaces:

**Clark & Jevon (Interviewer), Focus Group**

**Clark:** "One thing I've noticed between me and my peers… say, we are working on a project with upper classmen, and we are all new [to the concept], all the white students will be chosen. For the white students, they assume 'this will be a person that is easy to teach,' or the that the white students are easier to catch up to speed. Me being the black student, I'm like, 'well, I also know how to do this.'"

**Jevon:** "You think they assume you are not intelligent?"

**Clark:** "Yeah, or not good enough, plain and simple, but, now I kind of like it. I like it because it's like this is when I become the leader of the project, and then they work under me, and I'm like," awwwww, now you gotta do what I say. *group laughs*."

The other participants understand the feelings associated with an interaction such as this one. There was a moment of camaraderie around the mutual understanding of these feelings. This is a prime example of students being marginalized in academic settings on campus. This participant must be resilient to overcome the adversity he faces, to succeed. These are the experiences in which scholars such as Boyd (2017) and Harper (2004) have described where stereotypes permeate the experiences of students, which may hinder their sense of belonging, self-esteem, and academic accomplishment. However, these participants' campus experiences further their grit, and their understandings and expressions of being resilient.

The participants are very aware of how their experiences could affect them, but they choose to not be overwhelmed. They understand oppressive systems are in place, which make it hard to succeed, nevertheless, a certain attitude, or grit, is needed. Charles comments:

**Charles, Focus Group**

"Yeah, I definitely feel the same about that. It's kind of one of those things [negative experiences] you wanna use as an advantage, 'cause, you know, if you are down or start letting it get under your skin, it's just gonna be one of those things that consistently get to you and get to you. Use it as motivation, it's gonna be something that you can use for positive energy, and then get ya shit done. And, so, that's how I feel about it."

The participants all agree with this position. They understand using these experiences as fuel, rather than a weight, is important to success. Three students are rising seniors, and one is a recent graduate; reaching their final years of college took for them to develop their understandings resiliency. The participants must make a choice; they could succumb to negative expressions of their masculinity --furthering themselves from academic environments because they do not feel they belong-- aligning with the deficit narratives about their success. The other option is to develop healthy coping mechanisms to aid in the successful navigation of marginalization and racism at PWIs.

**Giving Back to the [Black] Community**

Directly connected with the development of resiliency is giving back to the [black] community, which is one way these men show their resiliency. Students comment on the university's responses to their negative experiences on campus. They agree on Charles' assertion of Penn State's "front" of prioritizing diversity and inclusion. For example, Charles comments:

**Charles, Focus Group**

"It's certain things within Penn State that just baffles me, because it's just not what they say they are doing [i.e. Diversity & Inclusion Initiative]. I think recently we [The Black Community] have been doing a really good job of pressing them about it, because we are talking to them face to face like, 'look, this is not happening, what you're saying you're doing is not happening'."

Uplifting other black men, the wider black community, and other marginalized communities has become increasingly important for these men as they continue to have experiences of oppressive experiences on campus. They show their resiliency through advocacy for themselves and other communities.

As he discusses the school's reaction to various incidents on campus, such as the active operation of a white supremacist group, Charles details the first incidence on campus driving him to want to give back to the black community on campus:

**Charles, Focus Group**

"This is one of the first things I did on campus, 'cause I was just like "this is crazy" … That actually got me started into everything in the community, but it was one of those things that was like so baffling to me because I knew about [diversity and inclusion initiative], and I knew about what they said they were tryna to do. But when things come up they just, they act like [Diversity and Inclusion Initiative] is such a policy, but it's one of those things I feel like they do put of a front [i.e. an empty promise]."

These students recognize they are having negative and marginalizing experiences on campus. Because of their negative experiences, they call for effective change for their communities and others. They join and become leaders of various organizations on campus, they speak with administration, and organize programming to support their peers; demonstrating their resiliency and advocacy for positive change.

## Implications

Results from this study inform practice, policy, and research on campus in important ways. First, this study reveals the important nexus between the masculine identity development of black male collegians and their experiences on campus. Effective programing and organizations for and by black men to foster candid dialogue on the themes mentioned in this research may prove to be beneficial for these students' success. Black men may exhibit internalized oppression about their maleness (Collins, 2004; hooks, 2004). Aiding black male collegians in discussions related to their beliefs about their manhood and masculinity will help them to understand how their identities are perceived; understanding how they are perceived on campus will allow them to navigate campus environments more effectively. Helping students navigate those internalizations about their masculinity would prove beneficial in these students' journeys to succeed academically.

These discussions may also aid black male students in the pursuit of progressive masculinities, which will aid them in more positive relationships with those around them and overall mental wellness. Collaboration from black male leaders from undergraduate organizations and black male faculty, staff, and administration to create spaces, where black male collegians can discuss and identify issues specific to their race and gender will allow them to begin to address and remedy those issues.

Second, campus policy makers dedicated to improving upon the experiences of black male collegians should seriously take into consideration the opinions of black male students when creating policy targeted specifically towards them. These policy makers should also consider the impact innovative curriculum based in areas such as identity development and diversity and inclusion will have on the entire university community. Education on these matters will improve the experiences of students from all backgrounds. Core curriculum in areas of identity development would allow all students to address their beliefs about their development, which will inform how they navigate their experiences on campus as well. This curriculum may prove beneficial for male students, as understanding expressions of masculinity may relieve issues of sexual assault on campus. Curriculum on matters of diversity and inclusion addressing issues of implicit biases, stereotyping, and marginalization may teach majority students about their tendencies to marginalize other students. This will ultimately improve upon the experiences of all underrepresented students on campus.

Third, further research on the experiences of black male students' understandings of their masculinity on college campuses have the potential to assist educational researchers and practitioners in academic achievement and retention for black male collegians. How black men see themselves on campus will inform how they navigate those environments (Harris, Palmer & Struve, 2011; Harper & Davis, 2012; Pelzer, 2016). Supporting black male collegians in associating themselves with academic and professional success may counter the deficit narratives about them, which will aid those BMC who struggle to reach graduation.

## Conclusion

How black male students negotiate their identities informs how they navigate higher education institutions. These students must confront low expectations and stereotypes --and their effects, such as marginalization--, and address potential negative internalized beliefs about their own abilities. Because of their negative experiences on campus, and the deficit narratives about their achievement, black male collegians may succumb to negative expressions of their masculinity aligning with those deficit narratives about them, or they may develop coping mechanisms in order to address their negative experiences, in order to excel at higher education institutions. Aiding these students in understanding their identities as black men, and how this identity functions at PWIs may lead to more trends of success for these students.

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