

Black Masculinity: An Examination of the Strategies used by Black Men to Deal with
Pressure to Conform to Masculinity

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ABSTRACT

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(Under the direction of Jacqueline Hagan)

Few sociologists have examined whether the support systems that stigmatized people use to deal with intolerance also serve as sources of strain. I address this by studying how Black heterosexual and gay men handle pressures to conform to traditional masculine behaviors and how sources of support simultaneously serve as sources of strain. The sample consisted of 29 Black men (8 gay, 3 bisexual, 19 heterosexual) at two major universities in the South, ages 18 to 23. I used a snowball sample of Black gay and heterosexual students involved in student-led campus organizations and their friends. Through participant observation at the student organizations and open-ended interviews, I examined their strategies for dealing with pressure to conform to masculine norms and/or combat the stigma of homosexuality. This exploratory study examines the relationships between stigmatized identities, perceived social attitudes toward masculinity, and strategies to deal with pressures to conform to masculinity. The data showed a pattern of Black men creating boundaries between themselves and stigmatized others to combat heterosexual and racist discrimination. However, the men's boundary making and "defensive othering" served to reproduce the inequality they opposed.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

HBC: Historically Black College

HBCU: Historically Black College or University; They are are institutions of higher education in the United States that were established before 1964 with the intention of serving the black community.

PWI: Predominantly White Institution.

INTRODUCTION

At young ages, many boys learn to act in a “manly” manner to assume the responsibilities of their family, protect themselves against other boys and men, and prove to other men and women that they are strong. This phenomenon is especially true in the Black community because many young men are expected to financially provide for their family (especially in single-mother and poor households), adopt the role as head of the household, protect their image and reputation as masculine, or “man up” in emotionally vulnerable situations (Roberts 1994). The expectations of adopting the role of head of the household are complex and can mean different things for different men, depending on their age and socioeconomic status; however, many civil rights activists, such as Louis Farrakan from the Nation of Islam, have endorsed Black men as the “rightful” financial providers and decision-makers for the Black family and criticized female-headed households for not raising young boys to be “real men” (Carbado 1999). Although there are several expectations of masculine performance in the Black community, none of these roles explicitly include representation of the gay man or homosexuality. Often, gay men are portrayed as rejecting masculine roles and behaviors by performing behaviors associated with women, thereby threatening Black masculinity (Clarke 2000).

Leaders from the Nation of Islam and members of the Black Panther Party endorsed a patriarchal ideology that emphasized the need for Black men to assume the leadership role in the Black community to fight against racism and homosexuality

(a tool used by White people to undermine Black leadership and procreation). Women were relegated to the house, subordinate positions, and portrayed as needing to be “protected and revered” (similar to how White males treated White women) rather than incorporated into the leadership positions of the movement. Thus, female liberation in the Black community took a back seat to Black liberation, and Blackness was portrayed as heterosexual and male. Females and gays were invisible. Black gay men, especially in the context of the Million Man March, were put in the position to choose between sublimating their homosexual identity to their racial identity to participate in a “racial uplift” movement, or protesting and not participating at all. Both acts of protests were oppositional to the messages of the Nation of Islam, but perpetuated the inequality and oppression of homosexuals in the Black community by maintaining their invisibility (Carbado 1999). The pressures to perform traditional masculinity as a way to support anti-racist movements ultimately undermined the struggle to fight against oppression and discrimination because it supported the ideals of masculinity that members of the White, middle class, dominant male culture have projected as the standard (Kimmel 2004).

The Nation of Islam and the Black Panther Party’s rejections of homosexual representations of Blackness in the struggle to fight against racism stemmed from a larger pattern of excluding women from leadership positions and condemning homosexuality in Black Christian communities (Lincoln & Mamiya 1990). The topics of sex, sexuality, and sexual orientation were taboo subjects in religious settings in the Black community. Many religious members only discussed sex in the context of heterosexual marriage (Timberlake & Carpenter 1990; Ward 2005). Consequently, a

Black man raised and socialized in a sexually mute environment was likely to have negative perceptions of his masculinity, sexuality, or gender performance, especially if he did not conform to the norms of the environment. He might have used different strategies to deal with such identity conflicts, such as seeking social support from significant others in his family or friendship networks, local or campus organizations, religion, or separating himself from other stigmatized people in his group.

Thoits (1986) defines social support as aid provided by significant others, such as “family members, friends, coworkers, relatives, and neighbors” (417). Aid can be instrumental, socioemotional, or informational, such that another person provides actions or materials that allow a man to fulfill his role responsibilities; messages of love, sympathy, care, and group belonging; and advice, personal feedback, and information to make his “life circumstances easier” (417). Families and religious organizations have historically provided three types of aid in dealing with racial discrimination for Black people. For example, Black pastors used liberation theology, a teaching that God wants His people to be free and not suffer, therefore, Christians should fight against systems of oppression and racial discrimination. Additionally, many Black churches encouraged congregants to participate in civil rights demonstrations, boycotts, and protests for racial equality (Lincoln & Mamiya 1990). But, little is known about the role of the family and religious institutions as support systems for men dealing with pressure to conform to masculine norms or deal with the stigma of homosexuality. A Black man may seek support from his family members and church members to reinforce his connection with the Black community yet deny or hide his gay identity. Alternately, he may attempt to

normalize his gay identity by attending a gay-accepting church, or justify his gay identity by conceptualizing God as an all-loving or all-forgiving being. But what happens when he does not conform to masculine norms in his family or religious environments and those environments are not accepting of his stigmatized identity?

If the sources of support, such as the family and religious environments, do not accept a man's gender performance, he may seek other strategies to deal with the strain of not being accepted. As a strategy to deflect some of the negative treatment he may receive due to the stigma associated with nonconformity, he may create boundaries between himself and other stigmatized individuals by denigrating and labeling them as an "other." This is "defensive othering" (Schwalbe et al., 2000: 425) and often occurs in response to experiences of marginalization and oppression. It is a strategy for an individual or group of people to resist such negative forces. However, this strategy also reproduces inequality because the people who use it adopt many of the same ideals of the dominant group and separate themselves from others in their group who do not conform to those dominant ideals. In my study, I will examine the problems of identity conflict, gender role strain, and support system strain by addressing the following research questions:

- How do the dominant ideals of masculinity influence Black heterosexual and gay men's understanding of self, their role in relationships, and their interactions with others?
- How do sources of support also serve as sources of strain when Black men respond to pressures to conform to dominant ideals of masculinity?
- What strategies do Black men use to deal with pressure to conform to dominant ideals of masculinity?

BACKGROUND AND SIGNIFICANCE

Young Black men who do not fit the mold of masculine norms are ostracized and discriminated against by their family members, friends, church communities, academic communities, and the media because they either are gay or do not fit the norms of masculinity. Results from the 1993 National Black Politics Study show that more educated, less religious, and more affluent Blacks, who participated in the 1993 National Black Politics Study, held more positive attitudes toward White gays and lesbians and Black lesbians, but not Black gay men (Hutchinson 2000).

Ironically, the participants held stronger antigay attitudes against Black gays than they did against White gays. Why is this so? One reason for this particular type of racialized homophobia may be due to a reactionary attempt by Black nationalists and civil rights activists to promote hyper-masculine ideals to circumvent images of emasculated Black male figures in the community (e.g., men being taken care of by the single Black woman and mother). Some members of the Black community, especially Black men, oppose gayness because it contradicts their moral and religious beliefs about heterosexual marriage and relationships (Constantine-Simms 2000; Griffin 2006; Lemelle & Battle 2004). Consequently, the devaluation of gay men in the Black community and the celebration of strong masculine traits as representative of “Blackness” lead to conflicting racial and sexual identities and a lower ascribed status for Black gay men relative to all heterosexual men and White gay men (Riggs 1999; Johnson 1981).

Definitions of masculinity can vary among different societies, groups, people, and time periods (Addis & Mahalik 2003). In religious contexts, definitions of masculinity may vary by denomination, racial composition, sex ratios, or social class, and this in turn, may influence the level of comfort and congruence Black men may feel with their personal definitions of masculinity. Traditionally, masculine norms of behavior and emotion embody characteristics that are accepted in mainstream society as being attributed to men, such as being aggressive, physical, confident, sexually active, heterosexual, unemotional, unwilling to display vulnerable emotions, unaffectionate toward other men, etc. (Roberts 1994). Hyper-masculine behaviors are behaviors that are extremes of the examples cited above, i.e., extremely aggressive, violent, conceited and condescending, hyper-sexual, emotionally detached, etc. (Scheff 2006; Ward 2005; Riggs 1991). For Black men, the conflict between conforming to traditional ideas of masculinity or accepting their stigmatized identity and challenging the status quo becomes a decision between rejecting membership in the Black community or denying their stigmatized identities identity and accepting the dominant ideals of masculinity.

The pressure to conform to masculine norms in the Black community may lead some Black men to experience sexual orientation or gender discrimination, feelings of isolation, rejection, depression, and social marginalization. Additionally, racial discrimination may compound the pressure to perform masculinity because Black men are taught that masculinity can be used as a tool to fight racism. These pressures may negatively affect mental health and behavioral outcomes in Black men. Because of heterosexist attitudes toward male homosexuality, some Black gay

men suppress their feelings, sexual identities, and conflicting values to conform to the traditionally masculine roles and norms of the larger Black community (Gonerly 2000). In contrast, studies have shown that the experiences of White men with masculinity, sexual orientation, and gender performance are starkly different. Frable, Wartman, and Joseph (1997) found that although the majority of the sample of White gay men experienced stigma associated with being gay, they did not show signs of significantly different psychological distress than the non-stigmatized comparison group (610). The majority of men in the sample were open about their sexual orientation and gay identity, participated in the gay community, and felt they had more in common with the gay community (Frable et al. 1997). These characteristics and experiences with being gay contrast with the experiences of many Black gay-identified men, who often are not connected to a larger gay community, do not feel they have more in common with the White gay community, and are encouraged not to display or disclose their sexual orientation in the Black community (Crawford et al. 2002). Additionally, gay-identified Black men experience higher rates of depression and anxiety than White gay or heterosexual Black men (Richardson et al. 1997).

As a consequence, some Black men engage in brief, high-risk, unprotected, and often anonymous, sex with other men, contributing to the spread of STDs and HIV/AIDS (Lichtenstein 2000; Wolitski et al. 2006). Wolitski et al. (2006) conducted a study on whether men who have sex with men (MSM) identified as being on the “down low” (DL) or not. The term “down low” refers to MSM who do not openly tell their female sexual partners about their sexual encounters with men. Those who identified as being on the DL were significantly more likely to be Black or Latino,

have less education, have seven or more male sexual partners in the last 30 days, have unprotected vaginal sex with female partners in the last 30 days, and not identify as gay (Wolitski et al. 2006). Although Wolitski et al. emphasize the point that bisexual behavior and non-gay identity exist in many racial/ethnic groups, the findings from his study show that this phenomenon is more pronounced in the Black community (even more so than in Latino communities). As such, the stigma associated with identifying as gay and having sex with men led many Black and Hispanic men to hide their sexual activities with men, continue sexual relationships with women, and not openly identify as gay.

These differences in experiences with identifying as gay extend into many realms of Black and White men's lives. Some Black men display excessive aggression toward authority figures, family members, peers, and women (Roberts 1994)—presumably to assert their masculinity in response to threats to their roles as men (i.e., compensatory masculinity (Babl 1979). Still, others may retreat from Black communities and affiliate with White gay men instead (Gonerly 2000). Green (2009) conducted a study of the stress process model in a diverse sample of gay men in an “urban gay enclave.” He found that White gay men, especially those who were masculine, physically fit, and young, received many privileges in the gay community because they were able to easily choose sexual partners and negotiate safe sex. In contrast, Black and Asian men, those who were older or out of shape, and those who were poor were not able to negotiate safe sex, were marginalized as stigmatized and rejected individuals, and experienced lower self-esteem, social support, and sense of self-control as compared to their White gay male counterparts

(Green 2009). Green's study highlights the prevalence of a hierarchy of race, class, physical characteristics, and age within the gay community that perpetuates inequality. Although most gay men experience stigma associated with being gay, experiences with intolerance, pressures to conform to masculinity, and ability to participate in a larger gay community without marginalization are different for White men and men of color because of privileges afforded from racist hierarchy and oppression.

In this proposal, I will provide a summary of relevant scholarship on three areas that shape my research questions: symbolic interactionism, stigmatized identity formation, and the reproduction of inequality. I will also look at the literature on experiences with stigmatized identity formation and gender nonconformity among White men as a comparison to the experiences of Black men. The second section will outline the research design and methodology, which include participant observation and in-depth interviews with college-aged Black gay and heterosexual men in a snowball convenience sample. In the last section, I will present the data and analyses, and conclude with a summary, discussion of the themes that emerged from the data, and discussion of future research directions I plan to follow.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The review will provide a comprehensive summary of three bodies of scholarship that are relevant to my research topic, including symbolic interactionism, stigmatized identity formation, and the reproduction of inequality. I will also look at the literature on White men and their experiences with stigmatized identity formation and gender nonconformity to gain a better understanding of how the experiences of Black men are similar and different. The relationships and experiences I would like to explore in my research are complex and intersect with several different areas of a person's life; therefore, a summary of different theoretical perspectives is necessary.

Symbolic Interactionism as a Perspective for Understanding Masculine Identity Formation

Mead (1913) argued that people's identities are formulated through social interaction and the meanings they derive from such interactions. Similarly, Schwalbe and Mason-Schrock (1996) and Becker (1964) analyze the formulation of an individual's identity in the context of groups and social structure. Schwalbe et al. (2000) argue that individuals create their identities in the process of interaction with others, and while in groups, create boundaries and definitions to help distinguish themselves from others. For example, Blacks in the United States have endured economic and sexual exploitation, and cultural and racial discrimination. As a response to the oppressive forces that limited their opportunities and relegated them

to a second-class status, Blacks fought external racist definitions by defining themselves as strong, resilient, masculine (Carbado 1999), children of God (McQueeney 2009). Despite these redefinitions, there was a void in considering the different experiences that heterosexual women and gay men and women. Later scholars attempted to address this void by exploring how multiple identities intersect to create different experiences among people within the same racial, gender, class, or sexual orientation group.

Collins (2005), hooks (1981, 2004), and other scholars have stressed the importance of an analysis of Black identity that includes the intersection of race, class, gender, and sexual orientation. Collins (2005) argues that a “new racism” is plaguing the Black community because racism, sexism, and sexuality-based oppression all contribute to the subordination and exploitation of Black people. Similarly, hooks (2004) argues that sexism and heterosexism oppress and exploit the sexuality of Black men and women, perpetuate stereotypes of Black men as sexual aggressors and Black women as submissive and promiscuous, and leave Black gays and lesbians invisible. Lastly, Carbado (1999) argues that experiencing discrimination based on sexual orientation creates a “double stigma” that influences Black gay and lesbian experiences in a different way than heterosexually identified Black people. Scholars must avoid analyzing racial groups as monolithic and examine the differences within the group.

In addition to understanding the structural factors that influence Black male identity formation, we must pay attention to the interpersonal interactions that influence individual identity formation. I use symbolic interactionism as an analytical

tool to better understand how Black men. Mead's discussion of the "I" and "me" provides insight into understanding how a man can understand himself as an object and subject. The "I" is the self that a person sees himself as and the "me" is what he thinks other people perceive him to be. A man formulates his identity based on understandings and feelings, and his understanding of those feelings through the perceptions of others. This is similar to the idea of the "generalized other," which is an individual's internalized beliefs about social norms and expectations. For example, a person does not understand himself to be a man until he interacts with another person who defines and treats him as a man and expects him to perform masculine behaviors. Similarly, a man does not understand himself to be Black until he interacts with another person who defines and treats him as a Black person and expects him to understand the cultural and historical implications of being Black. As such, he can choose to either conform to these expectations or not, but with risks. Either way, the "generalized other" places pressure on him to make that decision.

Fields et al. (2006) argue "symbolic interactionism thus highlights individual accountability and agency and addresses structural, cultural, and material conditions as people experience and reproduce them in their day-to-day lives." The strategies that an individual uses to navigate their identity under conditions of strain in support systems may lead them to separate themselves from the stigma in order to maintain acceptance. Symbolic interactionism allows me as the researcher to understand how social interactions can simultaneously oppose and perpetuate inequality through a person's use of verbal and body language and other symbolic communication. When thinking about inequality, one can understand how a person

without agency to address the conditions in her or his life is oppressed and placed on an unequal playing field. Many oppressed people attempt to maintain agency and autonomy through their interactions with others. They either seek to engage with another person in a mutually respectful manner, or in a condescending and oppressive manner. Sometimes, they do not even realize that they are interacting with someone in a way that allows them to exert their power over another. The ideas produced from the symbolic interactionist perspective provide insight into understanding how Black men attempt to protect themselves from discrimination experienced because of their stigmatized identity by creating boundaries and hierarchies within their stigmatized group(s).

Stigma and Identity Formation among Black Men Dealing with Pressures to be Masculine

A stigmatized individual is a person who experiences social discrimination and intolerance because they hold membership in a social category “vulnerable to being labeled as deviant,” and “are targets of prejudice or victims of discrimination, or have negative economic or interpersonal outcomes” (Crocker & Major 1989: 609). A stigmatized individual may search for normality in many different ways, which may have different effects on their self-esteem and self-perception. In a search for normality, a Black man may be more likely to attribute negative responses from others to prejudice, compare him or herself to others in the support group rather than advantaged others, and learn to appreciate support group characteristics and devalue out-group dimensions (Crocker & Major 1989). These potentially self-protective behaviors are critical to understanding how a Black male may come to

understand himself in the context of the Black community or another, more supportive community.

Eliason (1996) argues that identities are fluid and dynamic, and not stagnant; thus, a person who identifies with a particular sexual orientation also experiences other salient identities, such as those associated with one's race, class, and sex. Although Eliason's article is helpful in understanding the "coming out" literature, she does not extensively explore identity formation in an adverse environment or among those who have not decided whether to "come out." She argues in her article on heterosexual identity formation that heterosexual individuals do not have to think about their sexual identities on a daily basis; however, they form a heterosexual identity from religious, societal, familial, or biological influences (Eliason 1995). These findings are helpful in understanding how Black men understand themselves in an adverse or friendly situation, define others with whom they are interacting, and define their roles and identities in that situation and in their lives.

Another important aspect of identity formation is racial identity formation, especially in relation to gender, class, and sexual identities. Although gender identity formation has a strong tie with one's biological sex, it is also influenced by "environmental inputs (parents), gender labeling, gender knowledge, and gender behaviors" (Frale 1997: 143). Frale asserts that Cross (1971) has the most influential racial identity model because he argues that as an individual's identity is challenged, he searches for and immerses himself in a culture reflecting his race, and becomes more prideful after gaining knowledge of self. This may be true in many situations, but a larger question to consider is what happens to an individual

who, in the process of searching for positive reassurance of his racial identity, experiences conflicts with other aspects of his identity.

This leads me to analyze an individual's identity formation, not only in the context of one salient identity, but in the presence of multiple salient identities, such as race, sex, and sexual orientation. Crawford, Allison, Zamboni, & Soto (2002) examine the dual-identity development on the psychosocial functioning of African American Gay and Bisexual Men and argue that there are four avenues by which they may choose to manage their racial and sexual identities: assimilation (rejecting homosexuality to live in the heterosexual Black community); integration (maintaining both identities in congruence with one another); separation (detaching oneself from the Black heterosexual community to maintain the gay identity); or marginalization (not accepting either identity as salient). They found that those who integrated both identities had the highest levels of life satisfaction, self-esteem, stronger support networks, and lower levels of male gender role stress and psychological distress than those who marginalized themselves (Crawford et al. 2002: 186). Similar research has found that gay men who do not perform gender conformity have higher levels of psychological distress than those who conform (Skidmore, Linsenmeier, & Bailey 2006) and these experiences seem to be mediated by experiences of discrimination and homophobia (Sandfort, Melendez, & Diaz 2007). These findings speak to the identity conflicts Black gay men experience when they are not able to integrate both their racial and sexual identities, and when they do not conform to masculine gender roles.

Definitions of masculinity can differ according to the environment, institution, or

actors (Levant & Richmond 2007). Black men receive messages from various sources, and one of the most salient sources is that of religion, religious leaders, and the members of their church congregation. Religion provides spiritual and Biblical constructs of masculinity that the pastor and other church members reinforce through interactions and sermons. Black men are more likely than Black women to hold less favorable attitudes toward gay men when they attend church regularly (Lemelle & Battle 2004). It is likely that Black men who attend church regularly, and specifically Black gay men who attend church regularly, internalize the messages of homophobia and masculinity they receive from participating in religious activities. I will examine how the Black men in this study experienced pressure to conform to traditional masculinity in their religious environments and how they use strategies of “defensive othering” to reject those pressures.

Most research points to the positive effect of religion on health, but I will add to this literature by showing the conditions under which it can serve to reproduce inequality for oppressed groups. Many argue that religion serves as an avenue for people to deal with adverse life situations, and has benefits for mental and physical health (Ellison et al. 2000; Ellison et al. 1998; Chatters 2000; Krause 2002; Krause & Ellison 2003). However, there is support that religion may provide negative experiences, such as intolerance from religious peers, or negative theological teachings that emphasize guilt and self-deprecation as punishment for sinful acts (Ellison & Levin 1998). As such, religion serves as both a source of support and source of oppression for individuals who consider themselves to be religious but have a stigmatized identity. Little research has been conducted on the influence of

stigma on the physical and mental health benefits of religious participation. However, McQueeney (2003) explored the symbols and rituals a Black lesbian couple chose to include and exclude in their marriage/commitment ceremony. The women were attempting to simultaneously resist the heterosexist structure, yet reinforced certain aspects of it, such as the institution of marriage, the idea of monogamy as the ideal relationship, the commercialization of weddings, by choosing to participate in a ceremony that included symbols readily present in heterosexual marriages. Additionally, McQueeney (2009) found that Black gays and lesbians in a Protestant Christian church in the South used “oppositional identity work,” which transforms stigmatized identities into normalized ones by redefining them as noble rather than flawed (Schwalbe and Mason-Schrock 1996: 141). They provided social support to other gay men and women in the Black community and attempted to reduce the stigma of homosexuality by rationalizing that they were in monogamous, Christian relationships, minimizing their homosexual identity to their Christian identity, or arguing that they were more Christian than “condemning” Christians (McQueeney 2009: 157). Despite this unique support system, most Black gay men and women do not have the luxury of attending a gay-accepting church.

Stigmatized individuals who participate in religious communities may not receive the same benefits from their participation as those without such an identity. Thus, I will attempt to explore how those with stigmatized identities navigate their place in a religious community that may not provide the support they need for rejecting oppression and discrimination. I will investigate how Black men's experiences with pressure to conform to masculine norms influence their identity,

and how the Black church may serve as both a source of support and reinforcement of dominant norms.

It is important to understand how experiences of oppression and discrimination due to a stigmatized identity can lead Black men to manipulate, redefine, or conform to the norms of masculinity. As a Black man feels that his status is threatened, he may re-conceptualize who he is or reevaluate others in the situation as either good or bad to reach a sort of internal equilibrium or identity congruence. For example, if a Black gay man feels discriminated against or uncomfortable in a situation because of another person's homophobic treatment, then he may re-conceptualize the person as a bad or ignorant person, leave the environment all together, try to hide his identity to minimize discrimination, try to suppress his feelings and identification with the stigmatized identity, or re-conceptualize his beliefs in some other way. These strategies affect how the man identifies himself with a particular identity and may, in turn, change his behavior, primary reference groups, emotions, etc. (Heise 2007; Smith-Lovin 2002). As a member of an oppressed and stigmatized group, he may attempt to separate his identity from other stigmatized individuals in his group or dissociate himself with that group altogether to join the dominant group. The next section will examine this process and how it reproduces inequality.

Reproduction of Inequality through “defensive othering”

Kimmel et al. (2004) argue that not all definitions of masculinity are equally valued in American society. For example, “within dominant culture, the masculinity that defines white, middle class, middle-aged, heterosexual men is the masculinity

that sets the standards for other men, against which other men are measured, and more often than not, found wanting” (85). Often, Black men are held to this standard, yet are not allowed to fulfill the expectations of masculinity due to the oppressive nature of systematic racism in the United States. Historically, White men and women exploited the sexuality of Black men by using them as breeders during slavery, establishing stereotypes of Black men as “bucks” or having sexual prowess, separating them from their Black spouses and families, and beating or killing them if they exerted any type of advance at a White woman, whether it be sexual or not (hooks 1981, 2004; Collins 2005). Ironically, for White men, having sexual prowess is portrayed as a positive and desirable trait (Kimmel et al. 2004). Additionally, slave masters, and later, politicians and government officials, designed racist policies designed to separate Black men from their spouses and families, limit their economic mobility, and hinder their political power. According to many scholars of Black gender politics, these tactics emasculated Black men by denying them the same privileges as White men (Kimmel et al. 2004; hooks 2004).

The tactics used to deny Black men the privileges afforded White men also have been used to subordinate women. Ezzell (2009) studied a team of female rugby players who used “defensive othering” as a strategy to gain acceptance from the dominant group (White men) and maintain their identity as feminine women despite playing a traditionally male and masculine sport. The women on the rugby team argued that other members of their team were “‘mannish lesbians,’ but not me” (115). Ezzell argues that “defensive othering” occurs under conditions of oppression and pressure to gain acceptance from members of the dominant group. I

go a step further by arguing that stigmatized individuals seek support when dealing with pressure to conform to dominant norms, yet experience strain and intolerance if those sources of support endorse the dominant norms. In such instances, the stigmatized individual may use “defensive othering” to appease the dominant group and maintain membership in the group.

Ideas about gender performance perpetuate gender inequality because they relegate the woman or the feminized “other” to a lower status and idealize masculinity. Kimmel et al. describe the idealization of White, middle class masculinity as “hegemonic masculinity,” and the hegemonic definition of manhood as “a man in power, a man with power, and a man of power” (emphasis from the author, 85). Many Black men attempt to perform masculinity to oppose racism against Black men. To challenge the stereotypes that Black men are powerless in their communities, some men strip Black gay men of their status as men and labeling them as effeminate. Similarly, many Black gay men attempt to elevate their status by reasserting their masculinity and relegating those who perform behaviors deemed to be feminine to a lower status. Schwalbe et al. describe this process of relegating others to a lower status to elevate one’s own as “defensive othering” (2000). “Defensive othering” serves as an oppressed group’s “reaction to an oppressive identity code already imposed by a dominant group” (Schwalbe et al, 2000: 425). Through this process, men continue to perpetuate inequalities by marginalizing those who do not conform to the ideals of hegemonic masculinity. It also keeps Black people divided along lines of sex, sexual orientation, and gender presentation. I examine a sample of Black gay and straight men to gain a better

understanding of the nuanced ways in which Black men deal with pressure to be masculine, the stigma of Blackness, and the stigma of gayness.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

I conducted an exploratory and comparative study that examined what strategies Black straight and gay men use to navigate their identities as men under the contexts of racist and heterosexist oppression. The following section will outline the setting, research design, methodological techniques, and analytical strategies for completing my research. The research design includes 10 observations and 29 open-ended interviews.

Description of Sample

The study took place on the campus of a historically Black college/university (HBCU) and a predominantly White university, also known as a predominantly White institution (PWI), in the southern United States between the months of January and May 2009. From the population of Black male students on these campuses, I drew a convenience sample of several student-led organizations of homosexual and heterosexual Black male students and their friends to conduct open-ended interviews. The sample included 30 students, age 18 to 24, and individuals from several different settings, such as campus organizations and friendship networks to diversify the sample, and gain different perspectives on the same issue. Ten of the men attended a historically Black college and nineteen men attended predominantly White university. The sample contained nineteen men who identified as

heterosexual, eight who identified as homosexual, and three who identified as bisexual. Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics of the sample.

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of participants N=29		
	n	%
Education		
First Year (Freshman)	3	10%
Second Year (Sophomore)	3	10%
Third Year (Junior)	15	51%
Fourth Year (Senior)	4	14%
College Graduate	5	17%
University or College Type		
Predominantly White Institution (PWI)	20	69%
Historically Black College or University (HBCU)	10	34%
Sexual Orientation		
Heterosexual	19	66%
Homosexual	8	28%
Bisexual	3	10%
Approximated Socioeconomic Status (SES)		
Working Class	10	34%
Middle Class	17	59%
Upper Class	3	10%
Religious Affiliation		
Roman Catholic	3	10%
Protestant	27	93%
Religious Self-Identification		
Religious	18	62%

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of participants N=29		
Spiritual	7	24%
Neither	5	17%
Family Type		
Two Parent Household	14	48%
Single Mother	14	48%
Parents Divorced	8	28%
Absent Biological Father	10	34%
Stepfather	6	21%
Stepmother	2	7%
Grandparent as Co-Parent	3	10%
Traumatic Experiences		
Domestic Abuse	8	28%
Sexual Molestation	2	7%
Other (i.e., family death, divorce)	9	30%

These descriptive statistics indicate that the sample is heterogeneous and attempts to address concerns with underrepresentation of groups or characteristics of Black men in the sample.

Although I did not ask for the participants' family income or socioeconomic status, experiences, cultural references, and explanations of their family life that were described in the interviews allowed me to estimate the socioeconomic statuses of the participants. For example, if the young man described aspects of his life that aligned with the characteristics and capital of many working class families, such as describing living in a "bad" neighborhood that had illegal activity regularly occurring

in the neighborhood, being a first generation college student, having parent(s) who worked in a blue collar job, and/or having parent(s) who struggled to pay bills or provide extracurricular opportunities for their children, I coded the participant as “1=working class” (Bourdieu & Nice 1984). If the young man described aspects of his life that aligned with the characteristics and capital of many middle class families, such as being able to travel within the United States, live in the suburbs, have college educated parent(s), and/or have a white collar job, then I coded the participant as “2=middle class” (Bourdieu & Nice 1984). If the young man described aspects of his life that aligned with the characteristics and capital of many upper class families, such as being able to send their children to private school, travel outside the United States, live in the suburbs or expensive urban areas, and/or have highly paid white collar jobs, then I coded the participant as “3=upper class” (Bourdieu & Nice 1984).

Recruitment

Part of the target population is hidden because the sample included gay men, who are not readily identifiable by physical characteristics; thus, I relied on snowball and convenience sampling to recruit the study participants who identified as gay. Meter (1990) explains the advantages and disadvantages of various methods of snowball sampling. He outlines one of the preferred methods of selecting respondents from hidden populations: “select respondents according to a quota system of sampling, thus assuring an unbiased coverage of a hidden population according to the structure of the parent or general population” (Meter 1990: 46).” However, it is nearly impossible to quantify or characterize the typical gay or straight

Black male in the United States because performances of masculinity and femininity do not necessarily equate sexual orientation (Clarkson 2006; Hill 2006). Thus, I selected respondents from various settings to reduce selection bias. It is difficult to randomly select identified Black gay men due to the stigma associated with homosexuality in Black communities (Constantine-Simms 2000; Griffin 2006; Lemelle & Battle 2004), so I chose to conduct the first interviews with individuals from the student-led campus organizations. From these interviews, I asked for referrals and contacted other respondents. I did not restrict my sample to those who do or do not desire to adhere to traditional masculine norms because I assume in my research that sexuality and gendered behaviors work on a spectrum (Clarkson 2006; Hill 2006). Thus, I did not specifically restrict my sample to individuals who possess stereotypical behavioral characteristics associated with heterosexuality or homosexuality.

During the recruitment process, I met a few setbacks. Many men who did not speak to me directly and relied on the information provided by the initial recruit were averse to participating. The snowball sampling method did not allow me to gain rapport with the participants; thus, many did not trust me enough to participate or tell their stories. To encourage members of the target population at the predominantly White university to participate in the study, I began attending meetings of several organizations who had a majority of Black members, ranging from community service organizations to political groups and choirs. I had each person who was interested sign their name on a sign-up sheet and indicate the best times for me to contact them and schedule a one to two hour interview. I briefly explained what the

study was about, and had several young Black men volunteer to participate. I had a total of 40 Black men and one Black lesbian woman volunteer to participate, but had 29 men and one woman respond to my initial contacts through e-mail and show up for interviews. The interviews ranged in length from 45 minutes to 2 hours, and were conducted in closed library meeting rooms, offices, cafes, and the lounge areas of office lobbies. I ensured that each interviewee could stop the interview at any time and choose not to answer any question they did not want to answer. During recruitment and again at the beginning of the interviews, I informed them of their protection under a confidentiality and informed consent agreement. Many indicated after the interview concluded that the confidentiality agreement made them feel more comfortable and open to talk.

In contrast to the recruitment at the predominantly White university, I used snowball sampling to recruit the interviewees at a historically Black college/university (HBCU), and it was successful because I used a personal contact who helped me schedule the interviews and encourage Black men to participate. I also ensured them of their confidentiality in this study and their rights as participants in the study. Interestingly, the majority of men from the HBCU indicated that they would not have participated in this study if I did not have ties to my personal contact and if they did not trust the personal contact I used to recruit them into the study. This suggests that snowball sampling at the HBCU was more successful than the convenience sampling method used at the predominantly White university.

Participant Observation and Interviews

Originally, I planned to observe two student-led organizations on the predominantly White campus; however, one of the two organizations I contacted did not respond to my inquiries for observation, so I conducted ten participant observations of a student led organization that focuses on advocating for queer students of color. This organization contains approximately 10 members, meets weekly on campus, and discusses topics, such as being queer in communities of faith, how to maintain and sustain queer communities, and how to maintain and sustain healthy relationships. The other organization I originally intended to observe was a Black male empowerment group that plans events to highlight positive masculinity and discusses topics, such as Black manhood, stresses associated with school work, and stresses from their personal lives. The organization I observed was coeducational, yet provided valuable data on how gay people of color understood their gender roles, racial identities, and how they deal with conflicts associated with gender nonconformity, academic pressures, discrimination, and traumatic life experiences.

Within hours after each observation or the next day, I typed field notes reflecting the events and conversation that transpired. I also wrote notes-on-notes that included my thoughts, personal reactions, and reflections to the field notes and events from the field observations (Kleinman and Copp 1993).

In addition to participant observation, I conducted 30 open-ended interviews that were digitally recorded and transcribed. Each interview followed an open-ended semi-structured format, with an interview guide prepared to focus on interpersonal

relationships, strategies on how to deal with difficult experiences, identity formation, and religion and mental health (See Appendix A). I allowed the interviewees to openly discuss experiences in their lives relevant to the questions and probed for specific examples of their experiences or to clarify the meaning of their explanations, ideas, or slang I did not fully understand. For example, I asked one man if he knew people who were selling drugs or doing illegal activity, and I asked him to clarify what he meant when he said, "One of my cousins, he tried selling drugs, but he wasn't good at it (he laughs), so he...he's actually in jail right now for...for doing that." I asked him to clarify and he responded, "He got caught a couple of times. So, it was like, he tried it. So, he was one of my cousins...he was really, really smart. He just wasn't a good sales person (he laughs)." The interviews and field notes provided a wealth of information on the participants' relationships with family members, influences on their understanding of masculinity, strategies for dealing with stressful situations and traumatic experiences, religious identity, and understandings of themselves as men and masculine.

As an African American female who was close in age to the participants and/or had a personal connection to them, I realize that I had an advantage in gaining the trust of the participants because we shared many characteristics. At the end of the interview, many participants admitted to me that they do not tell people in their personal lives many of the things they told me in the interview. They said that I made them comfortable because I seemed nonjudgmental and they felt as though they had an obligation to be honest to maintain the integrity of the study. Some even admitted that they enjoyed having someone to talk to about their beliefs and

experiences. I believe my identity as a Black, college educated, female graduate student from the South provided entry into the participants' experiences and benefited the process of data collection.

In the analysis section, I will discuss how I used grounded theory and the Symbolic Interactionist perspective to understand and analyze the data collected from the interviews and field notes.

Data Analysis

Avoiding assumptions about the experiences and identities of the participants is important, so I chose to draw insights from grounded theory and the Symbolic Interactionist perspective to do ethnographic research that allows Black gay and straight men to explain in their words what strategies they used to oppose discrimination and intolerance of their stigmatized identities. Thus, participants were encouraged to explain how they personally experience pressure to conform to traditional masculine norms, understand their identity as a Black man and/or as a gay man, and how they navigate possibly contradictory feelings of support and inequality in religious settings. There are several ways in which one can collect qualitative data, but I chose two conventional techniques, open-ended interviews and participant observation, both of which enabled me to understand the problem from several different angles.

Patton (2002) explains that open-ended interviews allow the respondents to explain their experiences in their own words and enables the researcher to understand the respondents' perspectives independent of constrained and

preselected questionnaire categories (21). However, there are limitations to this method because the researcher cannot fully understand the circumstances behind what people say without observing them in their context or interacting with others. I pulled participants from the field who could provide further insight into my research questions and they suggested friends who were interested in participating. I interviewed friends in network associations until I collected sufficient data for analysis.

To address the limitations of open-ended interviews, I conducted participant observation. This method enabled me to learn more about the individuals in the minority gay organization on the campus of the predominantly White university, see how they interacted in a group setting with other students who had similar characteristics, and gain a close and intimate familiarity with the group. Participant observation encompasses the advantages of open-ended interviews because I am able to informally interview and have conversations with participants. It also provides data on the respondents in their natural settings (Patton 2002).

The data collected during fieldwork and interviews were analyzed to explore the following research questions:

- How do the dominant ideals of masculinity influence Black heterosexual and gay men's understanding of self, their role in relationships, and their interactions with others?
- How do sources of support also serve as sources of strain when Black men try to deal with pressure to conform to dominant ideals of masculinity?
- What strategies do Black men use to deal with pressures to conform to traditional masculinity?

The interview transcripts and field notes were analyzed using the qualitative data analysis software Atlas.ti. All ethnographic field notes and interview transcripts were digitally recorded and transcribed, and I managed the data through thematic coding using Atlas.ti. I used the comparative, inductive method of coding to identify themes and exploratory relationships in the notes. Pulling from Glaser and Strauss' (1967) grounded theory, I developed theories and hypotheses from information I gathered in the field, and used those to ask more informed and guided questions to gain more insight into the processes by which identity formation and "defensive othering" occur for Black gay and straight men.

Interview Questions

Many of the questions used are adapted from a study conducted by Crawford et al. (2002), who use the Coopersmith Self-Esteem Inventory to assess "evaluative attitudes toward the self in social, academic, family, and personal areas of experience," the Minority Multi-Group Ethnic Identity Measure to assess aspects of ethnic identity including, "positive ethnic attitudes and sense of belonging, ethnic behaviors and practices, ethnic identity achievement, and other group orientation," and the Male Gender Role Stress Scale to assess male gender role stress in everyday experiences (Crawford et al. 2002: 183-194). To capture the more nuanced experiences of my participants, I altered the questions to reflect a qualitative, open-ended inquiry. I inquired about possible gender role conflicts through questions such as:

Can you give me an example(s) of when you ever feel pressure to act manly or more aggressive or stoic than you would have liked to?

What role do you see yourself playing in your romantic relationships?

Additionally, I attempted to capture possible experiences of discrimination by asking open-ended questions including:

Have you ever experienced discrimination? Can you explain the situation, how you dealt with it, and how it made you feel?

I also received comments from key informants on the usefulness and validity of the questions I used in the personal interviews and the insights I gain from the field observations. In the next section, I will present my findings from the data collected and analyzed for this study.

Analysis of the Data

In this study, I examine the ways in which Black men deal with pressure to conform to norms of masculinity. The men in the study reported many different ways of dealing with masculine pressures, including seeking social support from family members and through religious activities, such as prayer, going to church, and participating in the choir. In the process of seeking support from these sources to deal with masculine pressures, the men received conflicting messages of acceptance and intolerance of their masculine performances. The support systems they sought out to deal with pressures to be masculine also served to reinforce dominant ideals of masculinity and create strain in the men's lives. My analysis will demonstrate how Black men have strategies of dealing with pressures to conform to masculinity, combating negative treatment due to having a stigmatized identity, and dealing with the strains they experience from their sources of support. The interviews and field observations also revealed how some men used "defensive

othering” to avoid stigma by separating themselves from other stigmatized people in their group.

The analysis section will present this data in three thematic sections. The first section will examine how relationships with fathers and mothers influence the socialization and expectations of young men to fulfill masculine gender roles, and how they serve as both sources of support and strain when dealing with pressure to be masculine. The second section will explore the participants’ experiences with stigma and discrimination associated with gender non-conformity to better understand the strategies they use to deal with such experiences. Lastly, the third section will explore how religion provides support and strain because of messages and expectations with the church to be masculine.

Each section will demonstrate how ideas of masculinity influence the study participant’s perceptions of themselves, their interactions with others, and how their sources of support also serve as sources of strain. The data will show how the strategies they use to navigate their identity in conflicting environments of support and strain lead them to separate themselves from their stigmatized identities and inadvertently reproduce the inequality they attempt to oppose.

RESULTS

Familial Relationships and Their Influence on Masculine Gender Identity

There is a stereotype commonly associated with the Black family: it is mainly composed of a single mother and an absent father, supported by the welfare system, and living in inner-city neighborhoods (Staples 1971). Many scholarly works based their analysis of Black family life and the socialization of Black children on this premise, which leads to biased interpretations and results (Staples 1971). I believe it is important to represent all forms of the Black family so one can better understand the ways in which young Black men are socialized into gender roles. In this study, I included men between the ages of 18-24 who came from households that had single-mothers, split families (mother and father are in separate households and one or both are married to another spouse), stepfamilies, co-parenting with grandparents, adopted children, mixed race, and extended families. They also came from households that were on government assistance, in the working, middle, or upper classes, had multiple siblings or none at all, and were involved in religious activities or not at all. These different characteristics helped to form the participants' identities, interactions with others, understandings of masculinity, and sexual orientation. As such, I will discuss how relationships with family members and messages received from familial interactions helped shape the participants' understandings of self.

Many studies have found that parents reinforce gendered boundaries, traditional notions of masculinity, and manhood acts at the early stages of their child's life (Schrock & Schwalbe 2009). Manhood acts are dramaturgical practices or performances that a man uses in interpersonal interactions to establish and maintain his identity as a "man" (Schrock & Schwalbe 2009, Schwalbe 2005). I go a step farther in understanding socialization of young boys into men by probing the participants on their self-perceptions and emotional reactions to such parental teachings. The participants described their relationships with their mothers and fathers as complex because of experiences with parental conflict and communication problems, yet still holding unconditional love for each other. In the following examples from the data, we will see how familial relationships, especially those with the mother and father, can serve to reinforce ideas and behaviors that reinforce hegemonic masculinity and influence the participants' self-perception and self-esteem.

Relationships with Fathers Reinforce Masculine Gender Role Expectations

Messages from family members on masculinity and how to be a man often begin at an early age and create pressure to fulfill gender roles in family, work, and romantic relationships. A man is defined as a biological male who performs masculine behaviors and accepts the privilege of membership in the dominant gender group (Schrock & Schwalbe 2009). The participants' relationships with their fathers influenced their understanding of masculinity, how to perform those behaviors, and accept the privileged position of manhood. These relationships were complex and varied. Some young men lived with their fathers, could talk to them

about their academic successes and problems, their career aspirations, and their experiences with romantic relationships and/or dating. For example, Ryan, a heterosexual junior at PWI, described his relationship with his father as positive, despite him not being affectionate.

And so, my mom's very...very affectionate, very loving, and my dad is not as affectionate just because, you know, the way he was raised. That just wasn't something that the males in the family did. You know, me, I believe that you should hug and tell people you love them just 'cause you never know what's gonna happen to anyone, but my dad hasn't been comfortable with that. But I realize that it's not 'cause he doesn't care, it's just not the way that he relates to people, but he takes every opportunity to tell me that he's proud of me and that I'm doing a great job and making him proud. So, they do a really good job relating with me. I feel really close to them.

Ryan explained that he chose not to imitate his father's behavior by showing more affection to those he loved; however, he felt close to him because his father gave him encouragement. Another young man named Jacob, a self-identified gay graduate student from an HBCU, described his relationship with his father as mostly positive, despite previous conflicts while "becoming a man."

I think it has grown since I've left (to go to college) in a way. Because you know how they say, "When you're growing up..." Well, OK I think it was strong as a little boy, then it kinda got rocky when I was going through puberty and high school and stuff 'cause they say that's when your relationship with your father...with boys specifically, it gets a little tense because the boy is trying to grow up and be a man, and I don't know. It's a little...so I think in high school, it was a little rough because of that. But when I left, it was like I had more respect for him and things he was trying to show me and tell me.

Jacob rationalized that the conflict he experienced with his father was typical of what many other young men go through when attempting to establish themselves as men in their homes. This example shows how some young men normalize conflict in father-son relationships as a process that boys go through to establish themselves as men.

The young men with mostly positive relationships with their fathers typically came from middle to upper-middle class, two parent households. Many scholars argue that a person will learn more about himself as he interacts with others and learns to understand his emotional responses to social interaction (Mead 1913; Becker 1964; Hochschild 1983). The young men's relationships with their fathers served to teach them more about their emotional responses, identities as male, and relationships with others.

Not all men from middle to upper-middle class households experienced the same types of relationship with their fathers. For example, George, a young man from the Midwest who attended an Historically Black College/University, identified as gay. On the day of the interview, he wore tight dark-wash jeans and tight white t-shirt with a gold design on the front. He spoke with a lisp, had arched eyebrows, and was tall and skinny. He described his father as being emotionally distant and "hyper-masculine" because he would chastise him if he performed behaviors associated with women. He eventually learned how to mask his effeminate behavior to perform the masculine behavior that was acceptable to his father:

Well, with my lifestyle [being gay], growing up in Detroit, people always said I had feminine tendencies. Like, I used to walk around with my hand like this

[relaxes his wrist and allows his hand to hang limp], and my dad would smack my hand [he smacks his hand hard and there is a loud smacking noise], and people always said I had those tendencies when I was little, but as you get older, you learn how to hide, mask the stuff.

George's father taught him that feminine behavior or "feminine tendencies" were not acceptable and that he should change how he acted to be more masculine. George learned to mask and hide his stigmatized, unacceptable behaviors so his father would accept him; thus, he learned self-protective measures to avoid stigmatization.

I soon learned how to differentiate the down-low people from the real heterosexual people because the...like, I was on the "D. L." [down-low] quote unquote, but I would always talk about openly gay people. Like, "Oh them faggots." Stuff like that to make it seem like I'm heterosexual and I'm putting them down and that's how I...even now, in school today, when people are like, "Oh, faggots" and stuff like that, sometimes it's offensive. Sometimes it's not.

He internalized the negative beliefs about stereotypical gay behavior, calling gay men who dressed in women's clothing, performed behaviors associated with women, or were perceived to be gay as "faggots." His antigay performance was done to appear heterosexual and be accepted by his peers and family members. Even when he decided not to stop lying to himself or others anymore about being attracted to men, he still tried to distance himself from stigmatized gay men on his college campus who were perceived to not to perform masculine behaviors.

I feel like there's a difference between being a gay man and being a faggot or being a gay man and just doing the most. Like, some people do the most.

Like, you'll never catch me in heels, eyeshadow, make-up. All that it's...it's unnecessary to me.

In his narrative, he described "some people [who] do the most" as those who wear high heeled shoes, eyeshadow, make-up and perform behaviors commonly associated with women. To him, those who performed behaviors associated with women or those who dressed in women's clothing were "unnecessary" because he felt as though gay men should not to perform feminine behaviors so they could avoid stigma, discrimination, and antigay violence, especially in cities thought to have high incidence of intolerance against gays.

Women's clothing, all that stuff, I feel is unnecessary. So, I mean, that's just my stance on it. I know when I moved here to the city, I was like, yo, even this city's like the number two gay city and people are like, "Well, in the South, if you go down there being gay, you're gonna have a hard time because that's where people aren't accepted. Like, it's not accepted." To be quite honest, I feel people not accepted it more in the Midwest than it is down here. If you were gay in the Midwest, and you were walking down the street, and you were openly gay...but some of the stuff that these people wear around this campus, you're...you're liable to get your ass beat. Like a car driving past would pull over and just whoop [whip] your ass.

By distinguishing between masculine and feminine gay men, he created a boundary between himself and other gay men and reduce his association with the stigma of effeminate gayness. Additionally, his reasoning for masking his gayness showed that he performed masculine, antigay behavior by calling other gay people "faggots." This strategy may help him avoid the stigma, intolerance, and violence against gay men in his hometown and college towns, which were both cities with a high

concentration of Black people. He also expressed that if he simply dressed in the current styles and did not act too feminine, he could “get away with it.”

I would wear this [referring to the clothes he’s wearing] now, tight jeans or a fitted [hat], not so much tight jeans, but fitted clothes. Like, heterosexual, gay, whatever, bi [bisexual], it’s just what’s in [style], so you can’t necessarily judge a person by the kind of clothes that they wear or whatever. So, I would wear...I could wear this and get away with it. But it’s other stuff...it’s other stuff I just wouldn’t do, and I tried to hide it a lot when I first got down here. I was going to heterosexual clubs and I would always be around the guys who were always going to the women’s college to meet girls and it got to a certain point where I was like, “You know, I’m not ‘bout [about] to keep lyin’ and stuff.”

As a consequence, he learned to lie about his sexual orientation, and experienced feelings of inauthenticity associated with hiding feminine behaviors. He finally came to a point where he did not want to continue being inauthentic with his friends, the women he was dating, or himself. Hochschild (1983) describes the stress associated with inauthenticity in the context of alienation in the workplace. She argues through the case of women working as flight attendants with an airline that workers experience a sense of inauthenticity when their bosses ask them to perform the subservient, happy female host role in front of customers. George’s example shows how one can experience an identity conflict associated with inauthenticity when attempting to avoid discrimination and intolerance of one’s stigmatized identity. Eventually, he learned that individuals in his life, like his father, older family members, and peers expected him to conceal behaviors associated with women to appear masculine. He distanced himself from the effeminate “other” by using

“defensive othering” and attempting to elevate his status by asserting his membership in the group of masculine men.

Another young man named Scott, who was a junior, self-identified as bisexual, and attended an HBCU, described how he felt when his parents divorced.

It was...I was happy. My dad didn't treat my mom right, so... I've seen him hit her, so it was always like...it was never a good thing when they were together, so I was happy 'cause I was...even though I was young, I hated it. I hated him. I hated the man he represented. So, it was...I was excited (he softly claps, I laugh). Yeah.

Scott's relationship with his father was negative because of his experiences with domestic abuse. He rejected the image of manhood that his father portrayed.

I hated him. I hated the idea of a man that I would call my father do something like that. Largely, because he...he's a lawyer, and so he would be good by day. You know, he's representing some of the same type of cases that would eventually become him and my mom. You know, he's supposed to be this guy that's respectable and everybody loves that...the Harvard grad type. Yeah, so. It was like, “Ok.” And we just continued to live this lie forever. Like, my mom and I got sick of it. That's when he hit her with a frozen pack of bologna and knocked her unconscious. I guess there's only so much that you can deal with.

Scott's experiences with domestic abuse at an early age showed him negative examples of a violent, aggressive man; thus, he chose to reject those images of masculinity. Another young man named Timothy, who was a sophomore at PWI and self-identified as heterosexual, explained that his relationship with his biological father was non-existent.

Do you have a relationship with your father?

He's alive.

Do you ever talk to him?

Honestly, that's not my responsibility, but I mean, we've had a couple conversations. But yeah.

So, how do you feel about not having a relationship with him?

I really don't care 'cause he left early on. So, it's like, I don't remember what it was like when he was there. Nah mean (Do you know what I mean?). And even when he was, he wasn't there full time 'cause he and my mother weren't together. So, I mean, it's pretty much like an adjustment, so it's like he's just like a regular person. The only tie I have to him is my birth. So, yeah.

Did your sisters ever have a relationship with him, or are they the same...?

I mean...it's pretty much the same with all of us, really. My older sister has been here longer than I have and my second older sister has been here longer than I have, but he's pretty much had the same relationship across the board. "Hey. (snickering type laugh) Bye." Yeah. It's really...I get...it's not even really a relationship. That's like saying, seeing some random person on the street and like, "What's your relationship with them."

Because his father was not involved in his family life and did not contribute financially to the household, Timothy felt an obligation to earn money and take care of his family at an early age. Adopting this role of financial contributor influenced his desire to become a father in the future:

I ain't thinkin' 'bout kids right now, so I mean, I can't really say if I do or I don't 'cause right now, I'm just tryin' to focus on taking care of my moms and stuff. Like, (I'm) not really trying to be like, (said in whisper, excited voice) "Oh! I

want to be a father. I can do this with my kids.” It’s like, I need to make it first, so I don’t know.

Regardless of whether the participants identified as heterosexual or gay, twenty-five out of twenty-nine men described experiences with pressure to conform to masculine emotion norms and behaviors. In the next section, I will discuss the interviewees’ relationships with their mothers and how their expectations of masculinity, such as being aggressive, stoic, and powerful, and manhood, such as being responsible and fulfilling the role as provider and/or breadwinner, pressured many to feel obligated to fulfill gendered roles of son, brother, husband, and father simultaneously.

Relationships with Mothers Reinforce Masculine Roles

The interviewees’ relationships with their parents are important to understand because they provide insight into their identity formation and understandings of masculinity. The relationships with their mothers are enlightening because the interviewees discussed their mother’s expectations for their sons to fulfill the traditional gender roles as head of the household. In all the cases, the mothers were described as nurturing, caring, and supportive, yet I found the relationships to be more complex when I continued to listen. Sixteen participants indicated that they would not talk in detail with their mothers about their romantic and sexual relationships. Some emphasized the fact that they did not want to have their mothers worry, or “be in their business” because they were independent and “grown” in college. However, nine of the men in the study talked about how watching their

mothers interact with the men in their lives, talk about how they wanted to be treated by men, how they acted in their everyday lives were important influences in the young men's understanding of masculinity, manhood, and how to be a responsible adult and overall good person. For example, Paul, who attended PWI, grew up in a family of lawyers and politicians, and identified as heterosexual, described his relationship with his mother as complicated because he had unconditional love for her, but wanted to exert his independence by not listening to her advice:

Me and my mom, it's interesting because when I was a lot younger, me and my mom were really close, and we're still close now...I used to not listen to her and just be wrong and wouldn't say anything. I didn't want her to say, "I told you so," 'cause she's really the "I told you so" type.

In this case, Paul describes closeness as relating to his mother on personality traits, such as being "sensitive," and both being affiliated with a Greek organization. However, he was not able to talk to her about his problems in school or relationships.

We're really close and I think college, especially going Greek made us closer 'cause it's something we had a common bond. But I could definitely sense before that, in high school, us kinda drifting a little bit. Again, not sure. I guess, maybe it's a little adolescent rebellion stage. It's probably what it was. Nothing serious. But yeah, we're definitely...definitely close though.

Can you describe how you felt when y'all were drifting apart?

Just like, I didn't want to tell her stuff. I didn't feel the need to tell her stuff. And I still don't...I mean, I tell her stuff now. I tell both my parents stuff now, but I

still don't feel obligated to. She's always open, like, "Talk to me if you need anything. Talk to me if you need anything." And I'm kind of inde...I would say I'm independent 'cause that means I'm independent everywhere, but I feel like a lot of stuff, I keep to myself for whatever reason. So, I guess it was me not talking to her or having as open a relationship as she would've liked for us to have. I guess, that's kind of...I didn't feel like it was necessary.

The theme of actions deemed to be feminine, such as relying on parents for advice and support, were deemed "unnecessary." Similar to George, Paul attempted to assert his independence, a masculine trait, by detaching himself from his parents, especially his mother.

In other interviews, young men associated dependence on their mothers for advice and decision-making as not masculine. They described detachment from their mothers as a means of demonstrating their manhood and independence from their mothers, and they often castigated those young men who continued to call their mothers for advice on seemingly small decisions. For example, Mark, a young man from a small town outside of a southern city, attended the predominantly White institution in the study, and identified as heterosexual and biracial (Black and White), described his feelings of needing to be independent from his mother once he went to college:

So to me, the stepping stone was coming to college 'cause now my life is in a snowball, so there's no getting out of this, this snowball effect now that I'm startin' to grow up and stuff, so. My mom needs to know...it's not like she wants to know less and less [about his social life in college]. It's just, I think that's natural for, there has to be a separation or else I'mma [I'm going to] be askin' her for everything. My – some of my friends who call home, four or five

times a day, I'm like, "What are you talking about? Like, she's not here at college with, you know, for you. You need to make some decisions by yourself." Yeah I have no problem when it has to do with, a lot of stuff with financial garbage that goes on with some kinda check coming in or filling out W2s. I still need to, you know, "Well, where does this go?" So, a lot of that stuff I'll call home to figure out, but I don't need, "Well this was my day at college. I learned this today." I call 'em [them] maybe, once every week, a week and a half, two weeks, somethin' like that. But it's nothing every day. Nothin' like that.

In many cases, the close and dependent relationship the young men had with their mothers became more distant as they got older, and they described this as a way of avoiding seeming weak in front of peers. According to the interviewees, if a young man continued to depend on his parents, he was not independent and responsible for himself; thus, the interviewees detached themselves from their mothers to avoid the stigma. The relationships with parents and family members can potentially be a source of stigma if others perceive it to be too dependent. In both narratives, Paul and Mark distanced themselves from characteristics associated with being dependent.

One of the main characteristics associated with masculinity is independence. Black men are often depicted as being dependent on Black women and their mothers for their survival and livelihood. Black scholars and activists, such as those in the Nation of Islam and the Black Power Movement emphasized the urgency for men to detach themselves from their dependence on women so they could fight against the racist system of oppression that has denied them their position as head of the household and breadwinner (Constantine-Simms 2000; Griffin 2006; Lemelle

& Battle 2004). The respondents spoke about the pressures for them as Black men to take care of their future families and responsibilities, and how they did not want to contribute to the stereotype of the Black male being lazy, stupid, and irresponsible. Mark described the pressures he felt as a Black man to take care of his family and not perpetuate negative stereotypes about Black men:

I think the media kind of portrays a certain standard for Black men to kind of step it up in their households just because of...just, the kind of numbers that are always thrown around with the most Black men in jail and the most committing crime. All this kind of stuff. I think there is a universal pressure for, targeted towards Black men just to kind of step it up as far as... 'Cause I think even, I think I read one statistic where I think it was, like, there were more... Like, I think the percentages of how Hispanics were kind of increasing 'cause they were at the lowest as far as scoring with, I think it was education, and then I think now, I think it was Black males were...it was either in the next few years or were already being the lowest scoring categories.

These expectations led many of the young men in the study to feel pressure to fulfill characteristics of masculinity, such as being independent, responsible, successful, intelligent, and the breadwinner. However, due to the stigma associated with being Black, many of the men expressed how they felt added pressure to fulfill those characteristics. For example, Scott explained the pressure he felt as a Black gay man trying to be successful in college and in the workforce.

'Cause I think the Black male is doubly marginalized. Not only does he have to worry about being a Black man, but he has to worry about not fitting the Black male image. So, like a White man, he's...you know, you're not fitting the...the gender role that's been placed upon you, but you're still, nonetheless, a White guy who ultimately can...can gain and receive power.

Whereas, if you're a Black male, especially in a collegiate environment, looking beyond...you're going into an interview and you're (slight laugh)...you talk, you're not talking with a deep voice and you're already Black, so it's like, "We can't have a Black gay guy, you know, tryin' to run our company." Or, "We can't have a Black gay guy running our HBCU-SA (student association)." So, it's like, you...because you're in a collegiate environment, you're trying to, you know, to gain and seek the same power that the other brothers are, but it's like, so you're...you're...like, we're already critical of each other because we're in an all-male environment, so...and we're Black, so it's like "Ahh! You already have this strike against you if you're this way. Nah, we can't have you 'cause you don't fit this mold. We can't have this, or..." whereas that White guy...Ultimately, if he knows the right people, he can get...he can get to where he wants to be, whereas the Black guy, he just being Black, you know, we already gotta step our game up and then you gotta be...To be openly gay, ah you might as well just hang it up. I mean, it can happen, but the chances of an openly gay guy being accepted, I guess, in a work environment or even like a school environment, it's...nah, it's not cool. So...

There is a "double stigma" against Black gay men to become successful and be accepted in professional or leadership positions because of the stereotypes associated with Black men being unintelligent and lazy, and gay men as effeminate and not representative of heterosexual Black men or the Black race generally.

These stereotypes often prohibit many Black men from participating in leadership positions or advancing in their careers. The structure of racial oppression in the United States, which prevents Black men from graduating from high school and college at the same rate of White men, incarcerates Black men at a higher rate than any other racial group in the country, prohibits opportunities for advancement,

and holds many Black men back from achieving their aspirations of hegemonic masculinity. Unfortunately, the stigma of homosexuality further prohibits Black gay men from acceptance in their communities and advancement in their family, school or work environments.

Masculine Gender Role Expectations Influencing Identity Conflict

A young man's relationship with his mother can be complicated in other ways. For example, Chris, a young man from a midwestern city, attended a predominantly White university, identified as heterosexual, and grew up in a household with his mother, older sister, and stepfather. He described how he did not get along with the men in his mother's life, often fought with his mother, and escaped to his room so he would not have to fight with his family members.

We have an interesting relationship. We get along, but then we don't. It's one of those relationships where we fight a lot. I fight with my mom about the stupidest stuff. Like, she'll yell at me because she wants me to get something done in the house, like take out the trash, and I won't do it because I don't feel like it. I don't really feel like I know my mother. Like, I know her, but I don't know her. All we really do is yell at each other and then go back to our rooms. The same goes with my sister. My sister, my mom, and I will just yell at each other about stupid stuff and then just go back into our rooms.

He described how his mother dumped her emotional baggage associated with the other men in her life on him (she dated before marrying his stepfather).

It's like, she yells at me because of all the stupid stuff that men have done to her and she sees me the same way. My mom has always been a strong woman, but she always yells at me about getting hurt by some random dude.

It's funny because she'll try to hurt me and then I'll try to hurt her back because she hurt me, but we still love each other because we're family. Does that make sense?

Additionally, he described how she would hold him to the same standard of manhood as she did the other men in her life, and sometimes expected him to assume the role as head of the household. Chris' mother displaced her anger on her son because he had less power and status than the men in her life. Additionally, when he was the only male in the household, she assumed that he should take on the role of man and head of the household, yet at the same time, she treated him like a child by expecting him to do chores and protecting him. Chris explained:

I was the only boy growing up, so I was in my own world most of the time. My mother spoiled me and was always protective of me and didn't want me to get hurt. She never really disciplined me and I could do whatever I wanted. I mostly just sat and played video games all the time.

In addition, he said he did not have many positive male figures in his life, and indicated that he would rather be like the women in his life than the men because he believed he has learned positive morals, values, responsibility, and how to be a generally good person from women.

I guess seeing all those negative images of masculinity just made me not want to be like them. I don't want to be like the men in my life, like my grandfather, or my step-dad because they didn't have anything to say for themselves and my grandfather was an asshole. I remember having random niggas around my house and they would try to pick fights with me, and I would just go along with it because I didn't know what was going on. I didn't understand that they were trying to make me tough because I used to cry all

the time. They were trying to get me used to being in fights and being tough. They used to tell me that I needed to get a lot of girls and have a lot of sex, and I thought they were full of bullshit because I knew that none of them had ever done that, but they wanted me to do it. I was like, “Nigga, you don’t know shit. Why should I listen to you?” They also tried to get me to play sports and talk about basketball and football, and I just didn’t care. I didn’t play sports as a kid because my mom didn’t want me to get hurt, so I just never really cared about it. I would only play video games. I was lazy as shit! I think I learned how to be a man from learning how to not be like the men in my life. I know I want to be like the women in my life because they are strong and they were actually doing things with their lives.

In his description of his familial and extra-familial influences on how to be a man, he indicates the aspects of masculinity stressed by the men, such as being tough, strong, aggressive, unemotional, and having sexual prowess. He learned to separate himself from those negative male influences because he did not have respect for them, saw himself as different from them, and valued his mother’s opinion and rules more than those men with whom he did not identify. He exercised agency in rejecting those masculine influences and not imitating their behaviors. He created a boundary between himself by labeling them as “niggas” and relegating them to a lower status as ignorant. Thus, he placed himself in an elevated status that reflected the group he saw to be successful, such as the working, independent women (i.e., his mother) in his life. The female role models in his life taught him that working, being independent, and taking care of one’s family were important to being an adult. This was a consistent pattern among the participants, with nine men describing their relationships with their mothers as influential on their understandings

of how to be an adult, and 100% describing outside influences from non-familial role models who influenced their understandings of manhood.

For example, Kenneth, a junior at PWI who self-identified as heterosexual, described his internal conflict with what role to play with his mother once his stepfather passed away.

I would say it's...it's definitely growing. And that's kinda obvious, but my father passed away...my stepfather passed away my freshman year in the Spring, so I feel like kinda my role has changed, especially with my sister. She's nine years old, her not having her dad there anymore. I feel like I kinda have to be the dad and the brother, the husband and the son. So, it's kinda like, "What am I supposed to do in this situation? What am I supposed to do now? Am I supposed to call my mom every night?" 'Cause freshman year, I used to call my mom every other day, and I still do, but I still think, "Am I supposed to call her every night and talk?" And then, Christmas and birthdays, like, the gifts from him to her, who's gonna do that now? I didn't want her to feel lonely, or whatever, so I try to give her gifts that I think that a husband would give a wife, or whatever. And I don't know, I would say it's growing, definitely, in that sense. I'm trying to figure out where I should stand and (beats fingers on table) we're...I guess, I don't know, just because I'm growing up, we're talking about different things like life, especially with him passing away. We talked about that. It's like, the bigger things in life 'cause he just liked to travel and everything and just have fun.

He expressed confusion in how to interact with his mother because of an obligation he felt to take care of his mother and simultaneously perform the roles as "the dad and the brother, the husband and the son."

These examples of role conflict and gendered expectations provide insight into the pressure young men experience to assume the role of husband, son, brother,

and father when the adult male-figure is absent in the household. This phenomenon may not be exclusive to Black men, but definitely occurs in higher concentration due to the high proportion of female-headed and single-mother households in the Black community. In the next section, I will discuss the non-familial role model's influence on the young men's gender role perceptions and understandings of masculinity.

Masculine Gender Role Perceptions in Romantic Relationships

When I asked the participants what role they saw themselves serving in their romantic relationships (either hypothetical or real), many of the heterosexual participants indicated that they did not want to be domineering men who expected their spouses or girlfriends to “cook and clean” for them, but they did want to be the provider for the family and responsible for taking care of the family and its financial needs. Gary, a Jamaican-American young man from the southeastern United States who identified as heterosexual, grew up in a two-parent household. He described what role he felt he would perform in a romantic relationship:

I'm not the biggest proponent of gender roles. I would be fine being a stay-at-home dad with, like, an Oprah marriage, where she's making all the money. I'd be perfectly fine with that. My clothing is a little bit tighter than you might find people wearing in the area and that's just a [southeastern city] culture thing. That's how we dress now, but yeah. You know, you find a lot of males who say, “I have to be the man in this relationship. I have to be the dominant one. I have to be the one that dictates the rules to her.” I personally feel like in any relationship, you guys are together because you choose to be together. So, for you to tell her to do something, I feel is disrespectful. And so, rather a relationship should be built on, “I want to be with you” rather than “You're gonna be with me.” So in that respect, I feel like when you're kinda...kinda

playing the dominant role, that's when you're being hyper-masculine.

He emphasized his desire to enter into a relationship that upheld mutual respect and care for both individuals, and said that he did not want to be in a dominant role dictating his partner's feelings or behaviors. However, he attempted to show his lack of belief in gender roles by explaining his willingness to fulfill a gender role traditionally associated with women: the caretaker and dependent spouse. The association of the female partner with being the caretaker and dependent perpetuates those stereotypes and reinforces his privilege as a male to choose to enact those roles or not.

Another interviewee, Jacob, a self-identified gay graduate student who attended an HBCU, recounted his experience with dating a young woman in high school and how that helped him gain acceptance as "one of the guys."

Well, I knew that I liked this girl. She was very pretty...very popular. Her name was K. Um she was nice. It wasn't anything wrong with her. Um we went on a couple dates. I think we went to the movies, and went to the Homecoming dance together, and when we first got together, it was sort of like...when I told people at school...well, they found out, and they were like, "Oh! You talkin' to K!" and they were like, "Oh! You're one of us now." They actually said that. Like, T said that. "Now you can hang...be part of the clique..." or something. And I felt real good...sort of, but then I was like, "Oh I wasn't part of it before?"

In high school, Jacob expressed that he felt pressure to enter into the relationship with the young woman as a way to gain acceptance from his male friends. The romantic relationship with the young woman served as a tool for asserting his

masculinity and gaining acceptance among his friends.

When I asked the gay and bisexual men in the sample what role they saw themselves playing in a romantic relationship, they talked about how many men in the gay community assume one partner should be dominant/masculine and the other should be submissive/feminine. Brian, a young man who recently graduated from an HBCU and identified as bisexual, described how he approached his role in relationships differently depending on whether he was with a woman or a man.

What role do I see myself playing? You know, and the funny thing about it is, I don't have a clear answer for this one because it all depends on what type of relationship I'm in. A heterosexual relationship, I'm always more dominant. I make sure things are in order and I always want to take care. In a gay relationship, I'm more so of a balance and lesser. So, I'm either dominant...I'm either dominant...or I'm less dominant, excuse me. In a gay one, I'm less dominant and prefer to be partnered with...[I] prefer to partner on objective stuff about me. And some days, yeah, I feel lazy, and I feel like being taken care of. It's more uncomfortable for me as a man in a relationship with a woman to be taken care of by a woman. That is probably one of the most uncomfortable things...I cannot relate to men who are. That's just weird to me, so I'm definitely more dominant in that capacity. But when it comes to men, I just feel like, I shouldn't have to do it. If I have to do it all myself, I don't need you. You know what I mean? I don't need to be in a same sex relationship with someone who's acting like a woman. I can be...you know, I can be in a heterosexual (laughs) relationship, if that's what I desired.

His distinction in role performance depending on whether he was in a heterosexual or gay relationship reflected the larger inequalities and stereotypes associated with male-female and male-male relationships. In both, there is an expectation that the

feminine partner is submissive, nurturing and taken care of by the dominant, masculine partner. He equated being taken care of with being “lazy,” and expressed discomfort with being taken care of by a woman. However, in the gay relationship, he allowed himself to assume the submissive role often associated with the feminine partner. These ideas about the dominant and submissive roles in a relationship perpetuate the stereotype that women and feminine partners should be submissive and dependent, and heterosexual men who allow themselves to assume that role are not fulfilling their role as masculine, dominant, controlling partners. It also presupposes that gay men are allowed to be more submissive and dependent on their partners because another male, masculine partner assumes the dominant role. Brian distinguished between the roles of men and women to separate himself from the association of gay men with feminine characteristics and behaviors. He conformed to the ideas of masculinity to legitimate himself as a masculine, dominant partner in heterosexual relationships, and legitimate the status of a man as dominant in gay relationships.

Similarly, every participant expressed the belief that a man should financially provide for his family or significant other and assume a leadership role in making decisions that affect the family or his partner. For example, Charles, a freshman at an HBCU who self-identified as heterosexual, explained that he preferred to take the dominant role in a relationship by controlling when he and the woman had conversations, yet he also liked it when she “took charge.”

I see myself kinda playing the dominant one when I have to. Sometimes, I remember, I had to rely on my best friend sometimes. I’d be like, “Dude, ok. When should I call this girl?” He was like, “Ok. Don’t call her today. Wait a

couple days, then call her.” I was like, “Alright cool.” And I’d follow...and just his advice and he’s like, “Most of this stuff you know. I’m just telling you so you can re-certify yourself.” And I was like, “Ok. Cool.” And I just see myself more...I don’t mind being the dominant one, but occasionally, I would like to sit back, relax, and not really do anything. So, I guess you can say I kinda played the opposing, the oscillating...I’ll go...I’ll be like, “Oh yeah, I’ll take you out.” But every now and then, I wouldn’t mind, “Hey, I’m coming to pick you up. We can go chill.” And I’m like, “Alright cool.” So, it’s kinda...I don’t want to be in charge all the time, I should say.

Under conditions of oppression and stigmatization, individuals will use strategies, such as conforming to the ideas of the dominant group, such as White heterosexual men, to elevate their status. Many of the participants differentiated themselves from dependent men who rely on women or the feminine partner. As Black men, there is added pressure to fulfill the dominant, masculine gender role to avoid the stigma of being a dependent, feminine partner. Albert, a junior at a PWI who self-identified as heterosexual, explained how being dependent on girlfriends or females is an example of not being a man:

I feel like the husband needs to be strong for his wife and for his family and not necessarily be the dictator and dominate the relationship, or whatever, but stand beside his wife and...and I don’t know, take care of her. I want to take care of my wife. I want my wife to be independent and a strong woman, but I want to...I want to be able to do anything for her. That’s what I want...

What are some of the things that would make someone not a man?

(pauses 3 secs) Um let’s think about that one. (pauses 3 secs) Not being independent. Still being attached to your parents or your girlfriend or (clears

throat) friends, for that matter. Just not taking responsibility of your actions and yourself. I feel like that's not the role of a man... You're still attached financially, you're still attached emotionally... Well, not really emotionally because you can be attached to someone and still not be... But I feel like the biggest one is financially being attached to someone... Like, boyfriends are attached to girls who have money and they're with them and they're not looking for a job, they're not fulfilling the role of a man, I think.

Although many men expressed the desire to maintain gendered roles, many others explained that they believed that men and women, or two partners in a gay relationship, should have equal roles in the relationship. Malcolm, a young man from New York City who attended an HBCU, explained that in his relationship with his partner, they did not adhere to the masculine-feminine dichotomous roles.

My relationship, we don't...we just don't define ourselves as tops or bottoms because we...we satisfy each other through whatever. We don't have labels. We don't...I can't just define myself as a top because I just don't do *that* with him. You know, I just don't *give it* to him or whatever, or with um him, he just doesn't receive, or he just doesn't give. Like, we just find multiple ways to please each other, basically, um through our personal type of sexual relationship...

Similarly, Patrick, a junior at a PWI who self-identified as heterosexual, described the role he felt he and his partner should play in a romantic relationship.

I definitely feel like...I try to be Mr. Everything in the relationship. I would cook, I would clean her room. If she needed something, if she was sick, I would go get it. I just tried to be like the overall, stereotypical, *good* boyfriend. Just be a provider, be that outlet for her to talk to, I don't know. I don't know. I just felt

like it was the *role* of the guy to *be* there...always be there in any way the girl needs you. Like, be able to provide for her.

What about her role. What was her role in the relationship?

I guess do the same, but not to the same extent. Be...more so, she was supportive of anything I told her I was planning on doing or wanted to do, she was very supportive of me. And that's good to have. You need someone to boost your confidence and to say that it's possible that you can do something.

Despite their desire to have “equal” relationships, many men still distinguished between masculine and feminine gender roles within the relationship. They felt an obligation to financially provide for the family and uphold their “responsibilities” by taking care of the family. Although one can see the influence of egalitarian ideals influencing their perceptions of their role in relationships, they still expressed gendered expectations of what role they were to play in their romantic relationships.

In some cases, the pressure to conform to hegemonic masculinity has severe consequences, such as sexual abuse, domestic violence, or violence from homophobic strangers. When traumatic events occurred within the family, some men in the study were not able to turn to family members for help. Some family members ostracized them because of behaviors or characteristics that were not accepted, such as not going to church, not enacting masculine behavior, identifying as gay, or even refusing to play sports. In the following sections, I will discuss how religious affiliation and participation usually served as a source of support, but also could serve as a source of conflict and strain due to their stigmatized identities. As

many young men in the study experienced conflict based on their sexual orientation, they used “defensive othering” as a strategy to elevate their status; however, it also served to reproduce the inequality they attempted to oppose.

Sources of Support Serving as Source of Strain

Individuals, regardless of whether they are gay or heterosexual, male or female, experience pressures to conform to social norms. When the young Black men in the study violated the social norms of masculinity, they found ways to elevate their status by separating themselves from those in their group who did not fit the norms of dominant masculinity. In some cases, family members, romantic partners, or strangers rejected the stigmatized identities of the gay men in the sample through forms of domestic violence, emotional abuse, labeling, homophobic violence, or sexual abuse. In the study, ten men described experiencing some form of domestic violence or abuse from family members, and two described experiences of sexual molestation. As a strategy to regain the power stripped of them during these experiences of severe castigation, the stigmatized men attempted to denigrate the perpetrators and others who were members of their group who did not conform to the norms of hegemonic masculinity.

The young men’s experiences with accepting the label of gay or bisexual were difficult and sometimes traumatic. The majority of the men, both gay and bisexual, admitted that they were not “out,” or openly gay or bisexual, to everyone they knew, especially to members of their family and close friends. Charles described confusion in even labeling himself as heterosexual as a response to dealing with his two older male cousins molesting him for several years:

A couple years ago, it was down to the point... 'cause after dealing with that [molestation by his two older cousins], it was kinda hard. At one point, I was questioning was I heterosexual, or gay, or whatever. And I kinda... 'cause I was still... I was still... at one point, I was having feelings for guys and I was like, "This doesn't feel right." [I was] just kinda reevaluating it 'cause I had to deal with all that. I'm like, "I mean, I did it for all these years. Why stop now?" So, I reevaluated myself and I thought about it, and I was like, "Nah. [No.] That's not me. I was forced into that." So, that's... so that's what it did. Nowadays, I'm perfectly fine. Heterosexual all the way (slightly laughs). I've been called a ho now... I don't know if that's for re-compensation for what happened, but it's just like I've... after reevaluating my life, now I just focus on what I need to do in life and not dwell on that stuff."

His experience with sexual molestation as a child by his two older, male cousins left him in a state of confusion and self-doubt. He rejected the stigmatized label of "gay" and attempted to elevate his status by performing masculine behaviors, such as having sex with a lot of women and calling himself a "ho," which ironically, is a label used to denigrate women who are accused of having sex with a lot of men. The new label allowed him to escape the shame of being molested and identifying as gay.

In another case, Malcolm explained how being called derogatory names taught him to "become numb" to emotions as a form of self-protection.

I've been called "gay faggot" before. I've been called "faggot" my whole life by my mother and my sister. (His voice get quieter and less energetic). I have been called that name so much that it is just another word to me and it sucks because that word hurts a lot of people, and it is a really bad word. It really doesn't mean anything to me because, just like I said before, when emotions become numb or you become numb to those emotions... I've become numb to that word because I've heard it ever since I was 6 years old by my sister and

my mother and everybody who called me “faggot” and “gay” when I used to jump double-dutch. So, that type of stuff, faggot and gay and stuff like that, I’ve heard all my life, but like even as a college student, I think my freshman year, I hadn’t heard it in a long time, but somebody actually called me a “faggot” when they were driving past because I was sitting with another male friend on a bench. And we were doing nothing but talking, and there would be no way (slightly laughs) they knew that I was gay (slightly laughs) unless they asked me. Because I don’t think that I’m a feminine type of guy, so they just called me a “faggot,” or me and the other boy that I was sitting with a “faggot.” (gets quiet and pauses for 3 seconds). That’s all.

Malcom’s experiences with being called “faggot” and being denigrated because he performed actions and behaviors commonly associated with women and gay men taught him that feminine behaviors and gayness were stigmatized and lower status. He described becoming “numb” to unidentified emotions or ignoring the homophobic treatment as a strategy to deal with the stigmatization; however, he also attempted to elevate his status by associating himself with masculine characteristics. He labeled himself with the characteristics associated with the dominant idea of masculinity, thereby separating him from the denigrated group of gay men who performed behaviors associated with women. Heterosexism plays a large part in the ways in which men deal with discriminatory and traumatic experiences.

The men who were not masculine or heterosexual were not the only ones who experienced discrimination, castigation, violence and/or trauma in their lives. The men and women, especially the fathers or father-figures and mothers in the young men’s lives also served as sources of support and conflict. The messages that defined masculinity for these young men began at an early age and created

pressure to fulfill gender roles in family, work, and romantic relationships. What they were not told is the more interesting piece. All of them were taught not to be emotionally vulnerable, nurturing, or dependent on others—especially on women—for their livelihood. How does this perception of being dependent on or acting like a woman reinforce some of the traditionally masculine ideals they claim not to adhere to? Even those who did not experience stigma associated with gender nonconformity still experienced pressure to perform masculinity and fulfill a standard of manhood. If they did not fulfill those standards, then they were automatically relegated to a “less than a man,” more feminine status.

In the next section, I will discuss how the majority of the young men in the study used religion and spirituality as another strategy to deal with the traumatic and negative experiences associated with pressure to conform to hegemonic masculinity. However, the same religious source also served as an oppressor and reinforcer of hegemonic masculinity.

Religion as a Strategy to Deal with Pressures to be Masculine: Strain and Support

Religion has a strong tradition in the Black community (Lincoln & Mamiya 1990). Attending church and implementing religious teachings in everyday life is the norm for many Black families. Those who violate that norm may be stigmatized. Many Black men grew up in religious traditions and continue to practice religion and prayer in their lives. It is important to understand how religion and religious teachings influence the participants’ understandings of masculinity and serve as sources of support and strain.

By their own admission, the young men in the study used religion as a source

of support. However, depending on their beliefs or stigmatized identity, they also experienced conflict associated with participating in religious activities that reinforced the dominant ideals of masculinity. For example, the gay men in the sample were stigmatized for being gay when they attended Black churches; however, they continued to attend those churches because they described feeling a sense of comfort and connection to the Black community. The eleven out of sixteen of the men who felt uncomfortable in the church at any point in their life for any reason also considered themselves to be religious or spiritual and continued to attend church regularly (either weekly or biweekly). Their choice to continue attending church and identify as religious or spiritual despite experiences of discomfort served as a strategy to maintain a support system, reduce their stigma, and maintain their status as men.

In this study, fourteen of the young men said their religious environments were positive and that church members were supportive of their decisions and endeavors. They described feeling comfortable in their home church environments. Lawrence, who attended a predominantly white university, was from a small town in the South and identified as heterosexual. He described his experiences attending church:

When I go to church, I'm maybe...expecting, anticipating actually, the sermon because I know that it's gonna be something to empower me to go through the week or to help me with situations that I may go through. So, I think I'm anxious just to receive a word that would speak into my life and give me some...some encouragement to continue attaining my goals and stuff like that.

The twenty-four participants grew up in religious homes, where they went to church

every Sunday, participated in the choir or some other church activity, or were the child of a church pastor. Six out of 29 of the men described themselves as the son of a pastor. They jokingly and affectionately called themselves a “PK,” or preacher’s kid, and gave accounts of being expected to be perfect children and be involved in most church activities. Albert, a young man from a small town in the south who identified as heterosexual and attended a predominantly White university, described his experiences growing up as the son of a preacher in a religious household:

[As a] PK, you have to have a great reputation. Usually PK’s are bad children, but I feel like my family is the only exception that I’ve seen like that. We weren’t bad kids at all, except for when we fought at home, or whatever. But you have to hold this strong reputation ‘cause that means a lot in the Christian faith community. And I felt like when we had arguments at home, sometimes the morning before a church service, I would still be angry on the inside, but we had to go to church and act like nothin’ was wrong and that...that bothered me a lot. And I don’t know, I always complained to my mom about that. “Why are you actin’ like nothin’ happened when we clearly just got out of an argument?” And, I guess, I just had to suck it up and stop poutin’. That’s what they told me to do...PK’s, or whatever, we do a lot in church. If there’s not a person holding a [leadership] position in church, your parent, or your pastor, which is my dad, will appoint you to something. So, I’ve always been in the choir. They told me to get in the choir when I was really little. So, I just picked it up from there and happened to enjoy it. So, that was good I guess... I (was) born in the church, basically. So, I haven’t really felt uncomfortable.

Although he asserted that he had a great reputation as a “preacher’s kid” in the church, he also described how his family fought at home. He used the status of preacher’s kid to avoid the stigma of being “bad.” He conformed to the norms of the “Christian faith community” by joining the choir, holding a leadership position in

church, and hiding the fact that he and his family fought at home. Albert's experience with pressure to conform to the norms of the church put him in a position where he was forced to perform an inauthentic identity to maintain his elevated status as "preacher's kid."

Although some interviewees did not consistently attend religious services in college, eighteen of the twenty-nine men still identified as religious and expressed desire in improving their relationship with God. Still, sixteen of the twenty-nine men said they were uncomfortable in the church. There were several different reasons why they did not feel comfortable, including disagreeing with the pastor's teachings, being chastised by congregants for not conforming to their norms of gender presentation and behavior, not liking the worship style, or being forced to leave because of conflicts between the pastor and the congregation. For example, Lawrence, a young man from a small town in the South who identified as heterosexual and attended a PWI, described his home church that he and his family attended while he was a child.

Wow. Very structured as far as the way you're supposed to live your life. I guess if I had to give a denomination, it would be Pentecostal Holiness because the women didn't wear pants and jewelry and make-up and all that and the other. Also...and I feel like, as a child, I really wasn't raised by my parents, but I was raised through my religion, if that makes sense. Certain things that were said, I can remember distinctly, certain things that were said in the pulpit by the preacher is how my momma raised us. So, it was a mechanism for them to raise us, I guess, in the way that they thought that we were supposed to live our life, but I think [this university]...being at [this university] has broadened my perspective on the way one can live and still maintain.

The church environment was instrumental in Lawrence's upbringing and influencing his mother's parenting style. The church congregation also served as examples of how women should dress, and how his family should be reared. Lawrence also explained the negativity and chastisement he experienced from other church members and his mother for growing his hair to wear corn row braids.

For example, OK. Back at home, I...well...if I was still...if I didn't come to [this university], I wouldn't have grew out my hair. I grew out my hair and I know they didn't actually believe in guys with braids, but I decided to do that anyway. But I just recently cut it again because my advisor, she said it wouldn't look that good if I'm on a job interview with braids. So, that's the only reason why I cut it, but I know that back at home, they didn't approve of me having braids...Well, also, ear piercings. I have a twin brother and he got his ears pierced and they didn't...they didn't take too well of that either. So, it's basically stipulations that they would put on us, but coming to college, you see it in a different perspective. And especially the style of clothing here is a lot different from where I'm from. That's about it. Yeah.

Lawrence decided to reject the social sanctions and norms of his home church in order to conform to the norms of his new collegiate environment. Although the home church environment and his mother's parenting style influenced his behavior at home, he changed his behavior and appearance to gain acceptance from those in his new environment and to avoid the potential stigma of being too conservative and coming from a rural town.

Those who lived with the stigma of being gay had the added burden of justifying why God loved them despite their "sinfulness." Malcolm explained how he

justified being religious by arguing that his identity as a gay man should be accepted just like other “sinners in the church.”

I love church. I don't feel any different because I believe that God doesn't see me for any different than they are. So, the people in the church and the people in the pulpit, they have their faults, just like I do, and...you know, I'm not too sure about the whole gay thing with church and if it's right or if it's wrong, but I know that I'm created this way and I don't think that God, for me to have so much faith in him, would condemn me to hell. So, I always ask God to look on my faith and not on my sin. I feel perfectly fine when I go to church. I love praise and worship, and I love sometimes, the sermons, if they're not boring, but I feel no different. I feel perfectly fine. The church is made up of women and gays anyway...predominantly...if you ask me! [his voice gets deeper, louder, and raspier when he says this. Joking manner]

Malcolm rationalized his identity as acceptable by attempting to equate himself with others in the church who were accepted despite their faults. Schwalbe et al. (2000) describe this process as adaptive behavior, such that he used “the same imagery that the dominant group use[d] to legitimate inequality” (427). According to Malcolm, the other people in the church have faults and equated his identity as a gay man as a “sin.”

To reconcile the negative treatment and homophobic messages gay people receive in their faith communities, many rationalize their identity as acceptable to God, regardless of the treatment and beliefs of those in the church (McQueeney 2003, 2009). Raymond, a recent graduate of an HBCU, grew up in the Midwest, and identified as gay. He said that he felt uncomfortable in some churches in the area because they regularly talked about the sin of homosexuality:

You know, it's...it's very difficult because I haven't done enough independent study to refute that it isn't. I mean, it's one of those...it's one of those constant struggles with it. You're just like, "OK. (slight laugh) Alright, God. So, this is wrong, but I don't have any control over it. So, what do I do?" I told people all the time, I can't make you understand if you have not felt this way. I can't...there's no way for me to make you understand it because people always want to understand it. "It's nasty. It's vile." I can't make you understand just like you can't make me understand. I can't make you understand. So, it's one of those things where it's something that I always wrestle with because it's like, "OK. I know that you say it's wrong, but I didn't..." If I choose to participate in the lifestyle, that is a choice. That I accept, but who I'm attracted to I don't feel like I have any choice over. I don't feel like I have any choice at all because if I did, I would just choose to be attracted to what people say is acceptable. You know what I'm saying?

Raymond accepted the stigma and others' rationalization that homosexuality was a sin and "wrong," but he continued to question their judgment of his identity. Despite expressing a desire to be accepted in his church community, Raymond rationalized his stigmatized identity as involuntary. Later, he said that he did not choose to be gay. These justifications for his identity allowed Raymond to deflect some of the negative treatment he received because of his stigmatized identity so he could continue to participate in the religious community.

I don't...for me it's always been, why would I choose a lifestyle that would put me in a position where I could be ostracized. What sense does that make? Who does that? Who chooses something that will make people look at you and say, "Oh he was really good. He's this and he's that, but he's gay." Who does that? I don't look homosexuality as being a fad. It's not for me. It's not

popular culture for me. It's something that I have been dealing with for a very long time and I probably gonna be dealing...well, not probably...I'm gonna be dealing with for the rest of my life. So, when I...when I...I'm a little desensitized to it now because I know that it's going to come up, and it doesn't matter what medical break through's they make or what...what science says, church is always gonna say what they say. So that's just a...it's a win-lose situation.

Despite the negative treatment and internal conflict Raymond described, he explained that the current church he attended was less ostracizing because they did not discuss the sin of homosexuality. He found an environment that did not blatantly reject his stigmatized identity, thereby, reducing the strain of intolerance in a setting that normally served as a source of support.

My church does not make me uncomfortable because it's not something we talk about all the time. You know, if it come up, it come up, but I count the number of times on one hand it has come up versus being some place where it always comes up. So, I don't...I don't deal with it. I don't have to.

He said his church was a comfortable place for him to attend religious services because, unlike other churches in the area, they do not talk about the sin associated with homosexuality.

Members of the gay community also impose conflicting values and judgments on young gay men and women who participate in communities of faith. In a discussion the organization for gay students of color sponsored, many students indicated their discomfort with openly identifying themselves as spiritual or religious in the gay community because of the stigma associated with intolerance in heterosexual religious communities. One White lesbian woman who attended a PWI

lamented the fact that her brother attended a Christian university that openly condemned gay people and saw gay people as “diseased,” while other gay students of color complained about the silence in the gay community about religion and spirituality.

The gay and allied student alliance pushes minorities away because we don’t talk about religion and faith in the gay community.

The co-president of the gay and allied student alliance, who was a White gay male added:

I know that a lot of gay people have had bad experiences with religion. Some were even sent to “camps” to help heal them and I never had that. Maybe that’s why a lot of people are opposed to organized religion.

The negative association of religion with intolerance seemed to have pushed many gay people away from the church, but this did not seem to be true for the gay students of color in the discussion. They expressed dissatisfaction with the silence about religion and spirituality in the gay community, yet discomfort with attending gay-affirming churches because of racism in those communities.

I question churches who claim they are accepting. Are they going to say that we need to join them later on, is it still hetero-dominated, or what? Also, an ideal space [for me] is where I’m at a Black church but not run out because I’m gay.

One Black lesbian woman who was in a bi-racial relationship with a White woman expressed her confusion in choosing between a gay-affirming church and a predominantly African American church because she did not feel fully accepted in

either environment.

I go to a church in [the city], and it is mostly gay and White. I grew up in a Black church, but I like not having to worry about what people are saying. I am there to hear the message from God. I often wonder though, am I still Black enough if I go to a White church? Am I gay if I go to a Black church?

These conflicting perspectives and experiences demonstrate a lack of acceptance of religious and/or racial identity within the White gay community, and a lack of acceptance of gayness in some Black churches. The avenues that the Black gay men and women in the observations sought to deal with the stigma of being religious and Black seemed to conflict with one another. There are multiple layers of inequality within each group of oppressed people, and the experiences of discrimination and isolation that these gay men have in their racial/ethnic, religious, and gay communities show how the oppressed can also serve as the oppressor (Carbado 1999).

The conflicting experiences of having both identities as Black and gay extended to other aspects of their lives as well. In another discussion sponsored by the gay students of color organization, several gay men and women talked about the need to develop a sense of community. Ironically, the attendees expressed their disappointment with not feeling a part of a larger gay community. The interests of many White gay people did not necessarily align with those of gay students of color, which lead to conflict and segregation along racial and ethnic lines. For example, a Black lesbian woman, who looked to be in her early 50's and was a known gay rights activist in the community, expressed her discontent with not being fully accepted for

her identity as Black and gay:

I think that it's important to point out that there are several communities that don't accept certain characteristics of a person but do accept others that fit into their mission. When I am in organizations that focus on Blackness, they don't want to talk about the lesbian thing, and when I'm in organizations about being a lesbian, they don't want to talk about the Black thing.

Her description of participating in organizations that reflected and supported her connection to her racial and sexual identities also showed how those sources of support can also challenge her identity. Many of the gay people of color in the student organization described how they navigated two separate worlds that did not necessarily accept the ideals and/or characteristics of the other. These opposing environments in which many Black gay men exist can create identity conflicts.

Ironically, their attempt to create a subculture of gay people who accept their sexual orientation also created a subculture that did not accept their racial identity. The norms and ideals from the dominant culture, which support racial inequality and heterosexism, were reproduced in the gay subculture and the Black subculture.

CONCLUSION

It is often thought that to be a man means to experience privilege, independence and power because society values characteristics and behaviors commonly associated with men and masculinity. However, if one looks at masculinity through the lens of inequality, one can see the constraints men are placed under to hide their emotions and perform masculine behaviors. Ironically, these costs of masculinity also support male dominance because they are diametrically opposed to all things feminine. Hooks (2004) talks about how Black men are expected to be feared and not loved. The consequences for such expectations are dire: "Whether in an actual prison or not, practically every Black male in the United States has been forced at some point in his life to hold back the self he wants to express, to repress and contain for fear of being attacked, slaughtered, destroyed" (xii). Kimmel et al. (2005) argue that all men experience pressure to conform to dominant ideals of masculinity, and those pressures are especially hurtful for men who are not in a position of power to achieve the ideal image. Black males are socialized to perform masculine behaviors to be accepted in dominant society. Black men are under added pressure to fulfill the archetypal image of masculinity. They have historically been denied such privileges because of racist policies and systems that exploited Black male sexuality, denigrated their intelligence and self-worth, and denied them the dominant role in their families. Their family members, friends, church members and other peers send them messages that they must fulfill the masculine role to be accepted in

society and fight against stereotypes of Black men as stupid, lazy and dependent on women.

This study included a sample of Black men who voluntarily told their stories of relationships, experiences with heterosexism, discrimination, and pressure to be masculine. Their accounts revealed patterns of experiences with stigma, intolerance, pressure to be masculine, and identity conflicts. It was important to hear the men's stories because they provided insight into how the men understood themselves as masculine, heterosexual or gay, sons, brothers, boyfriends, potential fathers, and heads of the household. The symbolic interactionist perspective argues that scholars should analyze people's interactions with each other because individuals create their identities in the process of interactions with others. Additionally, groups create boundaries and definitions to help distinguish themselves from others. The men in this study understood themselves as masculine as a way to conform to the norms of their group and used "defensive othering" to create boundaries between them and gay men who were stigmatized as performing behaviors commonly associated with women.

The men's descriptions of their relationships with their family members showed how relationships commonly perceived as supportive can be straining on their self-esteem, self-image, and understanding of themselves. Some men had complicated relationships with their mothers and fathers that influenced their understanding of the roles they were expected to play and the behaviors they were expected to perform. Others were chastised and stigmatized for being gay and not conforming to the norms of masculinity. All used strategies to deal with these pressures and negative

treatments by seeking support from family members and religious environments, or separating themselves from other stigmatized individuals through a process of “defensive othering.”

Despite attempts to deal with negative treatment from others due to their stigmatized identities, the sources of support they used often served as sources of strain. Most literature focuses on the positive effects of family and religious support in dealing with negative experiences, but few have examined the way those sources of support provide messages of intolerance of stigmatized behaviors and identities. As Thoits (1986) argues, the definition of social support includes instrumental, socioemotional, and informational aid. This study highlights the conditions under which socioemotional aid may not be provided because of a person’s stigmatized identity. For example, family members supported the men’s endeavors to achieve academic success, but expected them to participate in sports, be independent, fulfill the role as head of the household or breadwinner, and perform other masculine behaviors. Additionally, they were expected not to depend on their mothers for advice or help, express emotion, or be nurturing toward others. One can see how family members placed pressure on the participants to conform to their expectations of masculinity or femininity. These expectations stem from being socialized to believe that the dominant ideals of masculinity are the norm and should be fulfilled to be successful in society.

The pressure to conform to masculinity extended to other arenas of the men’s lives, including religion. Church pastors, church members, and other people associated with religious activities supported the young men when they attended

church, agreed with the pastor's teachings, and hid their sexual orientation. When some Black gays in the sample decided to participate in a religious environment that accepted their sexual orientation and gender presentation, they experienced intolerance of and conflict with their racial identity. Either way, when the participants in the study sought solace and refuge from intolerance due to one aspect their identity, they experienced intolerance of another aspect their identity, thus, confounding their identities as racial and sexual minorities.

Messages from religious leaders and church members about masculinity and heterosexuality created conflict as well as support. To avoid feelings of isolation and discomfort, many of the Black gay men either left the churches that made them uncomfortable, ignored the negative messages, or justified their participation in the church by rationalizing that they are created by God and should not be judged any differently than others. Despite these rationalizations, the men internalized much of the homophobia and sexism they claimed to combat. Lemelle & Battle (2004) found that Black men are more likely than Black women to hold less favorable attitudes toward gay men when they attend church regularly. The data from this study suggest that gay men who attend church and use religious means of dealing with pressure to be masculine also hold less favorable attitudes toward other gay men to separate themselves from the stigma of homosexuality and stereotypically "feminine" behaviors. Ultimately, performing masculinity seemed to be important to elevating their status and maintaining a sense of membership in the Black community.

Performing masculinity allowed the Black gay men to separate themselves from the stigma of homosexuality, and equated in U.S. society with women and femininity.

As a response to the stigma of being gay, they created boundaries between themselves and other stigmatized men in their group by using “defensive othering.” As Schwalbe et al. (2000) and Ezzell (2009) point out, this strategy usually occurs among populations of people who experience marginalization, stigmatization, and oppression. Many people find ways to navigate their stigmatized identities in intolerant environments, and “defensive othering” is one of the ways in which they avoid stigma and elevate their status above other members of the stigmatized category. Although there have been a substantial number of studies conducted on stigmatized populations using “defensive othering,” few have examined Black men dealing with pressure to be masculine and their use of “defensive othering” as a strategy to reduce stigma. I have shown that the process of “defensive othering” helps us understand how oppressed and stigmatized people perpetuate inequality by adopting dominant norms and segregating themselves from stigmatized others.

Because of heterosexist attitudes, the Black gay men in this sample suppressed their inner feelings and sexual orientation to conform to the traditionally masculine roles and norms of the larger Black community. The Black heterosexual men performed masculine behaviors to dissociate themselves from being perceived as gay or fulfilling negative stereotypes. Some men in the sample engaged in brief, high-risk, unprotected, and often anonymous, sex with men and women. Others displayed aggression toward family members, peers, and women—presumably to assert their masculinity. These behaviors are consistent with the findings from Wolitski et al.’s (2006) study of Black men having sex with men on the “down low.” The data from my study contribute to an understanding of what Black men go

through to maintain membership in the Black community despite their stigmatized, gay identities. Hiding their gay identities and performing masculine behaviors dissociated the men from the stigma of gender non-conformity and homosexuality. Performing masculinity was the social currency Black men had available to maintain a less stigmatized identity in the Black community.

The stories of the young men in this study demonstrate how the larger context of heterosexist, racist, and sexism places oppressed people in positions of constraint and inner conflict. The sources of support from which they sought help to deal with pressure to perform masculine behaviors ultimately served as sources of strain. Those sources of support created confounding conflicts to their identity because they felt pressure to sacrifice one part of their identity to participate in the group. If they decided to leave the intolerant environment to join another supportive group, they experienced pressure from members to sacrifice another part of their identity.

When comparing the choices of White gay men to those of Black gay men who must deal with pressure to conform to masculinity, one sees how they may use the same strategies of “defensive othering” to conform to ideas of masculinity, but do not experience additional conflict and intolerance associated with their race if they choose to seek support from the predominantly White, gay community. Although people with stigmatized identities may use the same strategies to negotiate their identities, historical contexts of oppression influence the choices they can make in seeking support from groups, communities, and/or environments.

Limitations and Future Directions

Some limitations of the study include having a small, non-representative sample. In future research, I would include more men from different educational backgrounds, socioeconomic backgrounds, age cohorts, religious affiliations, and sexual orientations. Interviewing men with different demographic characteristics may highlight some differences in experiences with pressures to conform to masculinity, acceptance of homosexuality and different gender presentations, participation in predominantly White versus Black gay enclaves, and using different religious institutions and practices to deal with those pressures. Men with different experiences and demographic characteristics may also provide insight into understanding future research questions that may provide an understanding of the influence of masculinity and heterosexism on Black men's identities.

The study includes a sample of participants who are not often included in research studies. Also, this is one of the first studies to examine how Black men navigate their identities as stigmatized individuals, how they experience pressures to conform to masculinity, and how their sources of support may serve as sources of strain. In future research, I plan to expand on these insights by examining how contextual constraints influence Black men's ability to negotiate their stigmatized identities.

The limitations of this study did not allow me to address other issues that may influence Black men's ability to deal with pressures to be masculine. For example, experiences with racism have been found to have negative physical and mental effects on the well-being of Black men. If Black men experience intolerance and pressure to conform to masculinity, how does that affect their self-esteem, sense of

self-efficacy and sense of control in handling the situation? Do feelings of weakness and lack of control impact the way they see themselves as masculine or not? What role does power play in Black men's understanding of themselves as masculine and the strategies they use to negotiate their identities? Additionally, this study showed how Black men experienced strain and identity conflict when seeking help from sources of support, such as their families and religious environments. However, I was not able to fully address the ways in which Black men understand and negotiate their stigmatized identities while participating in religious environments and activities. How do Black men navigate membership in two conflicting environments that do not accept the characteristics and behaviors of the other? More How do they understand and negotiate their stigmatized identities in religious environments? In future research, I plan to explore these questions and gain more insight into the experiences and strategies Black men use to deal with pressure to conform to dominant ideals of masculinity.

APPENDIX: Interview Guide

Interpersonal Relationships

- Can you describe your relationship with your mother?
- What do you talk about? Describe the things you do and don't feel comfortable talking about with her.
- Can you describe your relationship with your father?
- What do you talk about? Describe the things you do and don't feel comfortable talking about with him.
- For gay men: Are you out to your parents? How did they react when you told them? Has that affected your relationship in any way? Explain.
- If you are not out to them, how do you feel about it? Why are you out with A, but not with B?
- What role do you see yourself playing in a romantic relationship?

Experiences with Discrimination

- Have you ever experienced discrimination? Explain the situation.
- How did you feel? What did you do?
- Have you ever felt like you had to change the way you acted and/or spoke around certain people (or one person) because of your race? Sexual orientation? Gender?
- Describe the people (person) and what you had to change. How did you feel? Who did you talk to?

Identity Formation:

- Can you give me an example(s) of when you ever feel pressure to act manly or more aggressive/stoic than you would have liked to?
- What is your idea of what a 'real man' is? A "strong Black man"? Is there a difference?
- How comfortable do you feel disclosing information about your personal life to the majority of people in your neighborhood? School/classes? Your family? Your friends? Your church community?
- In which situations do you feel the most comfortable? Why?

Religion and Mental Health:

- Would you say that you or your family are religious? Explain your answer. Give me an example.
- How do the other members of the congregation make you feel about the decisions you make in your life?
- Have you ever felt uncomfortable in church? Why or why not?

- Have you ever felt pressure to act a certain way at church or around people you know from church? Have you ever felt pressure to act manly or masculine at church? Or have members of the church pressured you to act manly outside of the church?
- For gay men:
 - Are you out to members of your church community? Why or why not? How does that make you feel?

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