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Ideal and Stereotypical Masculinity and Issues of Adjustment to College Life for Men of Color

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Introduction

Researchers in a variety of fields have noted the links among masculinity, the health disparities of African-American men, the difficulty retaining African-American men in educational institutions, and the rate of incarceration of these men.¹ However, recognition of the role of masculine beliefs and behaviors in social issues affecting minorities has been slow to emerge in large measure due to contemporary discourse about discrimination, or uncritical presumptions about the behavior of men. Popular discourse about affirmative action, for example, has tended to conceal the lived experiences of African-American men, or to elevate those experiences to stereotypes, such as “male dominance.” This creates social ignorance about the lives of African-American men.

Whitehead (1992) offers a useful framework for understanding masculine ideology among African-American men. He describes the “Big Man/Little Man Complex” (hereafter, BM/LMC) observed in African-American and Caribbean populations. The framework has two categories of attributes, respectability and reputation. Whitehead argues that both low-income and high-income men value respectability attributes, such as being a strong family man or good provider. However, respectability attributes in American culture depend upon economic capacity, and low-income men do not achieve this capacity.

Masculine respectability attributes contribute to the maintenance of social order and healthy family functioning, while attributes of reputation may be interpreted as potentially contributing to social disorder and unhealthy family functioning. P. J. Wilson (1973), who first identified the respectability-reputation dialectic in the West Indies, defined respectability attributes as expressions developed by the colonial powers and maintained by the West Indian middle classes—the two groups with the most to gain from prioritizing such attributes. Wilson argues that the West Indian lower classes created various ideologies as a way of rebelling against colonial

and class oppression. These ideologies emphasize attributes of reputation. These are sexual prowess, toughness, defiance of legal and other authority, and use of material goods (eye catching jewelry, clothes and cars) in an effort to achieve a stronger sense of the masculine self. Reliance upon reputation places low-income men at greater risk for fathering out-of-wedlock babies, involvement in illegal activities, violence, incarceration, and death (Whitehead 2000). According to Whitehead, men expressing reputation attributes experience “fragmented” gender identities (Whitehead 1997) that overlap with social stereotypes of African-American men. The gender identities of these men are fragmented because (1) access to resources that would support respectability attributes are not open to them, and (2) reputation attributes often reinforce social stereotypes of African-American men.

Unlike P. J. Wilson, Whitehead associates reputation and respectability attributes with bicultural ability among well-adjusted African-American men, regardless of economic class. As a consequence of experiencing two forces of socialization, African-American men experience cultural beliefs and values embedded in both notions of masculine behavior. With reputation as one extreme, the measure of a man relates to his being “anti-social” in his interpersonal relations, particularly evident in weak conjugal ties, and yet community reaffirming when his anti-social behavior rejects dominant cultural characteristics, particularly those based in patriarchy and racism. The other measure of a man, respectability, reaffirms dominant cultural characteristics in his interpersonal relations, in patriarchy, but doing so inevitably overlooks the “racial sexism” within which patriarchy also functions. Either extreme type of man may be seen as “good” for the survival of African-American communities. However, bicultural men are likely to be healthier men (Brown 1997; Franklin 1984). Whitehead has called for male-based intervention programs that have goals of “gender” or masculinity transformation (Aronson et al. 2003), and that offer strategies of empowerment that move men away from a restrictive core of reputation attributes to respectability ones.

This paper examines the experiences of African-American men on a college campus in an effort to understand how they relate masculinity to difficulties faced in adjusting to contemporary American society and culture. Our goal was to explore BM/LMC as a model of African-American masculinity. The sample included African-American male college students attending a southern state university with 70% whites and 30% minorities, among the latter 14% African Americans. The sample included members of Brother-2-Brother, a network of “students-of-color” organized in 1993, but other students who were not members of this organization were included as well. Ethnographic interviews, focus groups, and pile-sort techniques were used to examine the experiences of these men, and the ways in which participants described themselves in relation to reputation and respectability attributes. While the majority of these men participated in Brother-2-Brother, the hometowns of these men ranged from rural and urban areas of North Carolina to urban New York and Washington, D.C., and there was one individual from the Ivory Coast.

Methods

A total of 29 participants, ages 18-24, engaged in discussion about college life and masculinity through focus groups and individual interviews, and all except three men identified as African American. All men identified as a “person of color.” A member of the research team included a senior African-American male, anthropology major. This student was trained to do pile-sort tasks and ethnographic interviews. He was also assigned the task of attending each Brother-2-Brother meeting, with the permission of the group, and he recorded observations of each meeting.

86 pile-sort cards were developed based upon themes elicited from African-American men in another study by Aronson (2003), and based upon key constructs in Whitehead’s BM/LMC (Table 1). The interviewees from an earlier study were older men who had failed significantly as younger men, but who were participating in a program to help them become better men. These men had experiences allowing them to express both dimensions of BM/LMC, reputation and respectability. Ethnographic interviews were used to elicit from these men culturally salient language, themes, and items, including types of men, characteristics of the types, behaviors and roles of men in families, in communities or society, and characteristics of “ideal” men and fathers. The 86 pile-sort cards included descriptors that we categorized as reputation or respectability, in addition to terms deemed ambiguous and dependent upon context.

The 86 descriptive cards were used to elicit in an open pile-sort the relevant dimensions of masculinity, and then identify important characteristics or behaviors of African American men. This approach is based on ethnoscience—principles and methods of defining, eliciting and understanding the structure of cultural domains as described by Spradley (1979), Bernard (1988), D’Andrade (1995), Borgatti (1999), and Goodenough (1981).

In the open pile-sort participants were asked to place similar descriptors with each other, and to aim for between six and eight clusters (see Table 1). Participants were also asked to provide a descriptive label for each of the clusters they created. We expected participants to distinguish reputation descriptors from respectability descriptors in several different categories. Then, additional pile sorts were completed with reference to: (1) the qualities of an ideal man; (2) the top ten qualities of an ideal man; (3) the important qualities of a man on campus; and (4) the top ten qualities of a man on campus. Results from these pile-sort data indicated differences in the choice of masculine descriptors depending on whether participants were considering the qualities of an “ideal man,” in general, or of a “successful man on campus,” a specific context. Similarly, we observed differences in the choice of top ten masculine descriptors depending upon context, i.e., an ideal man compared with a successful man on campus. In addition, the interviews and focus groups supported the existence of cognitive and behavioral shifts as related to difficulties that young African American men face in adjusting their behavior and beliefs to an

appropriate situation. We will present comparison of the pile-sort data completed by a total of 24 men, and then narratives corresponding to the results of pile-sorts, addressing shifts from reputation to respectability.

Analysis

Data from the pile-sorting activities were entered into the software program Anthropac 4.0 for analysis. Multi-dimensional scaling and hierarchical cluster analyses were used to identify clusters of items that tended to be grouped together into the same piles. Reputation and respectability attributes of masculinity were pre-coded based upon the perspectives of men in a prior study, but also explored in focus groups among the participants in this study.

A total of 29 interviews were conducted with African American men enrolled in college. Three focus groups were conducted with a total of 15 of the 29 participants. Five participants in the interviews and focus groups did not participate in the pile-sort activity. Participants were selected through a convenience and snowball sample, beginning with men involved in the group called "Brother-2-Brother." An African American male conducted the interviews and focus groups, after having received the proper training. An IRB of the college approved the interview and focus group guides. All participants were given consent forms describing the purpose of the research and the policies regarding confidentiality.

The interview guide included a set of seven questions, each with possible probes that could be used as needed. Questions focused on the experiences of men-of-color in on-campus contexts, definitions and attributes of men, and behaviors of men that may increase risks for HIV infection. Focus groups further explored how participants, as well as society at large, define what it means to be a successful man, or an unsuccessful man. They also explored men's perceptions of the threat of HIV/AIDS, the impact that HIV/AIDS has had on the sexual experience of college students, and a discussion of behavioral risks for HIV. All interviews and focus groups were audio-taped and transcribed verbatim. Transcripts were then entered into the software Atlas Ti for qualitative data analysis. We have limited ourselves in this paper to how the men described masculinity in their experiences as men.

Results

The following analysis was performed on the open pile-sort completed by 24 interviewees. They were asked to place the 86 descriptors into six to eight similar categories. Johnson's hierarchical clustering analysis produced six clusters of items with the minimum level of correlation to be included in a cluster at the .30 level. The categories noted below summarize each cluster, and they are based on the descriptive names given to each pile by the participants. The items in each cluster were labeled as either respectability or reputation based on a prior study, or not labeled. Results of the pile-sort resulted in the following categories: spirituality;

family man; hustler/pimp; extreme toughness; self-determination and goal setting; and physical strength. Our next step in analysis was to determine which of the descriptors within each cluster was most commonly represented in four subsequent open pile-sorts of (1) “ideal man,” (2) top ten qualities of ideal man, (3) “successful man” on campus, (4) top ten qualities of successful man on campus.

Table 1: Clusters from Pile Sorts Using Johnson’s Hierarchical Clustering (n=24)

Cluster Name	Descriptors
1) Spiritually Motivated, Upright Community Role Model	His friends can count on him He gives gifts to his friends He is generous with his money He will pay back any debts or favors He is good He regularly attends a place of worship He is guided by values He is only subservient to the God of his understanding He is spiritual He is respectful of his elders He is respectful of his supervisors at work He is respectful of his neighbors He is respectful of authorities He is law abiding He is true to his word He has moral integrity He is respectful toward women He is a positive role model He is a leader He stands up for what is right He is a willing participant in the struggle and cultivation of his people He is involved in bettering his community

Cluster Name	Descriptors
2) Family Man	<p> He remains faithful to his mate He shows his commitment to his mate through marriage He gives gifts to his mate He can support himself and his family through working He has fathered children He supports his children's mother He disciplines his children He teaches his children He spends time with his children He loves his children He cares about how his children will turn out He cares about his children's needs He is a good father He contributes financially to his children He gives gifts to his children He takes responsibility for birth control He protects himself and his mate from sexually transmitted diseases </p>
3) Hustler/ Pimp	<p> He can handle his liquor He can always get by He can hustle He is sexually active He is good with women Women fall for him easily He dresses well He drives a nice car He owns many things </p>
4) Extreme Toughness	<p> He does not need the help of others He demands respect He is always ready to fight if the situation warrants it He answers to no one He is feared by others He is intimidating He will not tolerate disrespect </p>

Cluster Name	Descriptors
5) Self Determination and Goal Oriented	<p>He is able to select, obtain and prepare nutritional food and drink</p> <p>He is able to take steps to protect and develop his own health</p> <p>He is self-taught</p> <p>He makes decisions quickly and easily</p> <p>He is resourceful</p> <p>He is well educated</p> <p>He has a good job</p> <p>He is wise with his money</p> <p>He knows how to budget his money</p> <p>He knows the difference between reality and the perception of reality</p> <p>He takes his time when making decisions</p> <p>He can meet his basic needs on his own</p> <p>He will sacrifice his own desires to achieve a goal</p> <p>He is able to set and work toward achieving goals he determines worthwhile</p> <p>He is able to plan his work and works his plans to completion</p> <p>He is free to change his mind about decisions</p> <p>He exercises self-control</p> <p>He is self-disciplined</p> <p>He has self-determination</p> <p>He is confident</p> <p>He knows what needs to be done without anyone telling him</p> <p>He can decide things for himself</p> <p>He will accept responsibility for his decisions actions consequences</p> <p>He takes initiative</p>
6) Physical Strength	<p>He has a powerful voice</p> <p>His behavior is not controlled by others</p> <p>He will defend himself</p> <p>He is strong</p> <p>He is a competitor - he always tries to win</p> <p>He is physically strong</p> <p>He is athletic</p>

Analysis of the “ideal man” pile-sort included simple frequencies of items selected. The number of times items from each cluster were selected enabled us to assess the importance of these dimensions (clusters) of masculinity. Clusters 1, 2 and 5 contained items that were identified as important characteristics of the “ideal man” by 75 percent or more of the men. These clusters contain easily identifiable descriptors associated with respectability, as labeled prior to the pile-sorting activity.

Table 2: Items selected as important to being an “ideal man” by 75 % or more of 24 men

Cluster	Item Descriptors Selected
Spirituality	He is a positive role model He is guided by values He is law abiding He is respectful of his elders He is respectful toward women He has moral integrity He is true to his word His friends can count on him He stands up for what is right
Family man	He spends time with his children He reaches his children He cares about his children’s needs He can support himself and his family through working He loves his children He cares about how his children will turn out He is a good father
Self-determination	He knows the difference between reality and the perception of reality He is resourceful He is wise with his money He is self-disciplined He is confident He knows how to budget his money He has self determination He will accept responsibility for his decisions and actions and their consequences He exercises self control

Items rarely or never selected as important were also examined. The following clusters contained items chosen by 25% or fewer of the men as characteristics of the “ideal man.” Note here the inclusion of items from all clusters, including the reputation descriptors in clusters 3 (hustler) and 4 (extreme toughness) of the first open pile-sort, in addition to the added descriptors identifying “physical strength” as an attribute of “ideal man.” In other words, 25 percent or fewer of the men included reputation attributes (hustler and extreme toughness) that most others excluded, in addition to adding descriptors associated with physical strength. Finally, when we look at items selected by very few or none (<25%) it should be noted that only one item from each of the following clusters are included: spirituality, family man, and self determination. This is in sharp contrast with the frequency with which

these clusters were represented among the items selected by the majority of the respondents (>75%).

Table 3: Items selected as important to being an “ideal man” by 25 % or less of the 24 men

Cluster	Item Descriptors Selected
Spirituality	He gives gifts to his friends
Family Man	He has fathered children
Hustler/Pimp	He can handle his liquor He is sexually active He drives a nice car He owns many things Women fall for him easily He dresses well He can hustle He is good with women
Extreme toughness	He is intimidating He answers to no one He is feared by others He does not need the help of others
Self-determination	He makes decisions quickly and easily
Physical strength	He is athletic He is physically strong He is a competitor—he always tries to win

Increased difficulty emerged in a second open pile-sort in which the participants were asked to identify the top-ten qualities of an ideal man. There was considerable disagreement in selecting the top-ten qualities of an ideal man. No more than 50 percent of the men identified the following descriptors as top-ten among the qualities of an ideal man. The items selected represent the clusters of spirituality, family man, and self-determination.

Table 4: Items selected as being in the top ten for “ideal man” by 25-50 % of men

Cluster	Item Descriptors Selected
Spirituality	He is only subservient to the God of his understanding He is respectful toward women He is a leader He has moral integrity He is guided by values He stands up for what is right He is spiritual He is a positive role model He is true to his word*
Family man 2 item	He can support himself and his family through working He is a good father*
Self determination	He takes initiative He is self-disciplined He is confident He has self-determination He will accept responsibility for his decisions and actions and their consequences

*Selected by 50%

The following are the results of a third pile-sort in which participants were asked to select all of the qualities seen as being important to being a “successful man on campus,” as perceived by 75% of the participants. All items representing “family man” selected in the first pile-sort were excluded by 75% of the participants. The number of items in the spirituality cluster of the first open pile-sort (9) declined to four in the third pile sort. Compared to the first pile-sort, the number of items representing self-determination was reduced by one item.

Table 5: Items selected as being important qualities of a successful man on campus by 75% of men

Cluster	Item Descriptors Selected
Spirituality	He is respectful of authorities He is guided by values He is true to his word He has moral integrity
Self determination	He is able to plan his work and works his plans to completion He knows the difference between reality and the perception of reality He takes initiative He is confident He will accept responsibility for his decisions and actions and their consequences He has self-determination He is self-disciplined He exercises self-control*

*Selected by 100%

However, 25% or fewer of the men selected reputation descriptors to identify qualities of a successful man on campus, as noted below by the inclusion of hustler (five items) and extreme toughness (three items), one item related to physical strength, and 12 items in the cluster of family man.

Table 6: Items selected as being qualities of a “successful man on campus” by 3-25% of men

Cluster	Item Descriptors Selected
Spirituality	He gives gifts to his friends He is generous with his money
Family Man	He gives gifts to his children He gives gifts to his mate He contributes financially to his children He supports his children’s mother He teaches his children He shows his commitment to his mate through marriage He disciplines his children He spends time with his children He loves his children He cares about his children’s needs He is a good father He cares about how his children will turn out
Hustler/Pimp	He drives a nice car Women fall for him easily He can handle his liquor He can hustle He is good with women
Extreme toughness	He answers to no one He does not need the help of others He is always ready to fight if the situation warrants it
Self-determination	He has a good job He makes decisions quickly and easily
Physical strength	He is physically strong

The top-ten qualities of successful man on campus, the fourth pile-sort, included items from the clusters spirituality, family man, and self-determination, as noted by 25-54% of the men. The items in spirituality decreased to four in the top-ten qualities of a successful man on campus compared to eight items in pile-sort 2, the top-ten qualities of an ideal man.

Table 7: Items selected as being in the top ten for a “successful man on campus” by 25-54% of men

Cluster	Item Descriptors Selected
Spirituality	He is spiritual He is respectful of authorities He is guided by values He is true to his word
Family Man	He protects himself and his mate from sexually transmitted diseases
Self-determination	He knows the difference between reality and the perception of reality He is able to set and work toward achieving goals he determines worthwhile He will accept responsibility for his decisions and actions and their consequences He is self disciplined He is well educated He takes initiative* He has self-determination*

*50% or more

In summary, the characteristics of an “ideal man” included descriptors representing spirituality, family man, and self-determination by 75% of the men participating in pile-sort 1, compared to 75% of men in pile-sort 3 who excluded attributes of family man from the characteristics of a successful man on campus. Items from clusters representing hustling, toughness, and physical strength were rejected as unimportant for either an ideal man, or a successful man on campus by 75% percent of the men participating in pile-sorts 1 and 3. However, items representing hustling, toughness, physical strength, and family man attributes were selected by 25% or fewer of the men in pile-sorts 1 and 3. A comparison of pile-sort 2 (top-ten qualities of an ideal man) and pile-sort 4 (top-ten qualities of a successful man on campus) indicates that the number of spiritual qualities selected decreased from eight to four. One item noted in the top-ten qualities of a man on campus was “protecting self and partner from STD’s” in the family man cluster. The following items were NOT selected by any of the men in pile-sort 2 and 4, top-ten characteristics of an ideal man or those of a successful man on campus.

Table 8: Items NOT SELECTED as being in the top ten for either an “ideal man” or a “successful man on campus”

Cluster	Item Descriptors NOT Selected
Spirituality	He gives gifts to his friends He is generous with his money He is respectful of his supervisors at work
Family Man	He has fathered children He gives gifts to his children He gives gifts to his mate He contributes financially to his children He supports his children’s mother
Hustler/Pimp	He can handle his liquor
Extreme toughness	He is intimidating He is feared by others He does not need the help of others
Physical strength	He is athletic He is physically strong

At times qualities that were considered as important for an “ideal man” were different than those seen as important for a “successful man on campus.” The following are items within clusters of top-ten qualities of a successful man on campus [50 percent of men] *NOT* found in clusters of top-ten qualities of an ideal man [50 percent of men], for pile-sorts 2 and 4, above: Respect for authority, knowing the difference between reality and perception of reality, setting and achieving goals, protection against sexually-transmitted diseases, and being well educated—were all seen as more relevant on campus compared to the characteristics of an ideal man.

The following descriptors are characteristics of an ideal man [75 percent of all men] *NOT* found among qualities of a successful man on campus [75 percent of all men], pile-sorts 1 and 3.

Table 9: Items seen as important for an “ideal man” but not for a “successful man on campus” by 75% of men

Cluster	Item Descriptors
Spirituality	He is only subservient to the God of his understanding He is respectful of women He is a leader He has moral integrity He stands up for what is right He is a positive role model
Family Man	He can support himself and his family through working He has self-determination He is a good father
Self-determination	He is confident

These descriptors were among those coded as attributes one would associate with respectable men, and these descriptors lie within the clusters of spirituality, family man, or self-determination. Men who wish to become empowered as respectable men (Aronson et al., 2003) find the above attributes socially desirable, and therefore relevant to any context in which men find themselves. We infer from this comparison of specific descriptors that the above ideal qualities of a man (Table 9) are not, in the minds of these young men, directly relevant to their perceptions of campus life, but are in their minds important aspects of an ideal man in some other context.

Two descriptors that appear in clusters of important qualities of an ideal man [75 percent of men] that do NOT appear in clusters of qualities of a successful man on campus [75 percent of men], or top-ten qualities of a successful man on campus [50 percent of men], or top-ten characteristics of an ideal man [25-50 percent], should be noted: *He has moral integrity* and *He is confident*.

The following descriptors overlap characteristics of an ideal man [75 percent of men] and the top-ten qualities of a successful man on campus [50 percent of men].

Table 10: Items seen as important for both an “ideal man” and a “successful man on campus”

Cluster	Item Descriptors
Spirituality	He is spiritual He is guided by values He is true to his word
Self-determination	He will accept responsibility for his decisions and actions and their consequences He takes initiative

Do these findings suggest a shift in meaning between a campus context and some other contexts in which reputation attributes are arguably relevant but not as relevant on campus, or in which an ideal man is relevant but not as relevant on campus?

While our findings are preliminary and based upon a small sample of men, Whitehead’s BM/LMC does appear to reinforce reputation and respectability attributes as classified by these men. All 24 men identified reputation and respectability attributes as important. However, some reputation attributes were selected as salient by up to 25 percent of these young men. Assuming that reputation attributes are relevant in some contexts but not on campus, to what extent do these men classify and exclude reputation attributes from *expressions* of their behavior on campus? How do shifts in meaning apply to behavior? These questions led to the following analysis. We interviewed the same 24 participants who completed the pile-sorts, and we held three focus groups with a total of 15 men.

Stereotypes and “Not-to-Test”

Our interview data reinforce the pile-sort data and Whitehead’s assertion that African-American men value both types of attributes of masculinity—reputation and respectability—but vary in their perceptions of what these attributes mean. One insightful interviewee, Brian (pseudonym), demonstrated a knowledge of reputation attributes, noting that daily nuances of expression among men involve signals, “not to test, as in . . . you don’t want to be on them . . . you don’t want to make them feel like you’re trying to corner them. You can’t have anything up over them. So they try to make sure you won’t.” Projection of “not-to-test” attitudes requires knowledge and expression of reputation attributes commonly associated with extreme toughness (see Table 1). An individual’s demeanor is essential in projecting a “not-to-test” attitude in low-income contexts where men are not able to associate self-esteem and achievement with respectability attributes, also noted in Table 1. Most other people [on campus], Brian noted insightfully, are unaware

that “talking like we are gangsters” reflects a need “to be perceived as somebody not to test.”

When men spoke of extreme toughness they talked about the ability to be “respected” (not to be confused with respectability attributes) both in the classroom setting and in the streets amongst their friends. In order to build their reputation amongst friends outside the classroom, these young men must be respected in the streets, and this means exercising their competency in reputation attributes. The “streets” in the minds of some of these young men, especially as freshmen, are the same on campus as anywhere else. In the classroom the men often stated that they had to appear “academically tough” in order to become respected by their classmates. Academically tough means to be fully knowledgeable on the topic of discussion in class and have a clear understanding of the course work. Several of the participants in the pile sort made it very clear that a man of color needed to be “tough” inside the classroom.

“Not-to-test” attitudes are often confounded by clothing and other stereotypes of African-American men. Don notes that: “It’s like how most of the world is now. How they listen to the hip-hop, and want to walk around with their pants sagging. And it’s really not even like that.” Referring to his white roommate, he said, “he was using the stereotype of the African-American male to try to fit in with African-American males. It would have been a whole lot easier [. . .] for him if he would have just been himself.” African-American freshman, whether from low-income or high-income backgrounds, do not express their attitude of “not-to-test” through dress, but instead through actions and behavior. For example, the sight of a young man of color in baggy jeans and fitted hat does not mean that he has the “not-to-test” attitude, except as a stereotype related to how men dress. Although appearance can sometimes be used to identify those who have a “not-to-test” attitude, appearance alone is not the qualification for identifying such individuals.

“Not-to-test” expressions are exhibited through bodily demeanor, use of language, or engagement in risky or violent activities. For a man to express a “not-to-test” attitude does not necessarily mean that he will be “respected” or feared. Based upon the interviews of the participants it is evident that a “not-to-test” attitude is often used to validate hyper-masculinity. In doing so, reputation attributes become important.

Noted in the comments of two interviewees, Brian and Don, and expressed less fully in a composite of all interviewees, is the way in which behavioral expression can reflect two different meanings. One expression involves legitimate “not-to-test” signals of low-income African-American men, and the other meaning involves stereotypes about clothing in a college context. Both behaviors may imply the same “not-to-test” meaning, but clothing alone involves the projection of a stereotype. For example, Don and Brian noted in their experiences that some white male students reinforce societal stereotypes of African-American men, through clothing and hip-hop, out of a desire to interact with African-American men but are caught unaware of legitimate “not-to-test” expressions of behavior.

Brian and Don survived their freshmen years, and learned in the process that clothing can confound legitimate “not-to-test signals” with societal stereotypes. Chuck provided another example. He decided to change the way he dressed. Chuck did not express perception of a “not-to-test” attitude as noted by Brian and Don. His observations about classroom behavior reflect a clothing stereotype instead—initially to “disprove” the stereotype, and then rise above it.

[Being African American] changed the way I dressed for a while. Because I didn't want to look like the average little hood kid coming up in the classroom. And [being African American] changed the way I acted in class. Before, I never talked in class. But then, when I realized everybody was looking at me . . . like if I came to class in some baggy clothes or some jerseys or something, I would make sure that I spoke up and gave some kind of response so that people wouldn't think I was the average little hood kid. I felt like it was my mission to change some people's minds. Now I don't care.

Focus group participants noted that stereotypes surface in many domains other than clothing. For example, one interviewee commented that he called campus police to report that his car had been burglarized. In this instance the legitimate behavior and “signal” is to report a burglary. However, upon their arrival, officers tried to arrest the owner of the car who had just called them.

Joey expressed an intra-ethnic illustration of this problem of cultural interpretation and stereotypes. His African-American friend “tried to buy into the whole-America's image of the African-American male. Like how African-American males are depicted in these hip-hop videos, and in these magazines, and in these movies, and in these TV shows.” Joey's friend wanted to distance himself from a two-parent household and relative affluence so that he would be found more appealing to other African-American men, like Joey. But, Joey said, “a lot of men [from his low-income neighborhood] are not like that.” Thus we perceive again how one pattern of behavior involving hip-hop videos and the commodity production of African-American symbols may have multiple interpretations related to intra-class differences.

The interview data revealed fairly consistent rejection of reputation attributes and acceptance of respectability in an ideal type of man. Kenny noted, for example, “You have some men that think they're a man because they're tough, they say what's on their mind, they'll curse people out, be disrespectful. Then you have guys that are more—so laid back, so he gets his point across. And I feel like to be a man, you don't have to be forceful.” However, Leroy had knowledge of and respected persons who also expressed reputation attributes: “Okay, I happen to have a friend who is a drug dealer. But I don't agree with him, I don't hang with him, but I've known him since before elementary school. And I know if I needed anything from him, he'll get it. But, I mean, that's how I look at a good man . . . somebody that's got you like that . . . you know what I'm saying. And that's not gonna lie to you.” Leroy perceived reputation masculinity as functional in the attributes of his friend.

Three other men expressed aspects of hyper-masculinity. For these three men, above all, a man *must* succeed. As the first man put it, “a man should be able to stand up on his own when all chips are down.” Or as the second man asserted, the only African interviewee, “the man has to realize that he is the leader and he has to take responsibility [. . .] qualities that put him to work harder than anyone else.” He added, “in this culture I found that the [black] males are pretty much passive, they don’t take initiative, and everything is directed by females.” And the third man said, “the characteristics of a man to me are what people see as strong willed, brave, daring, intelligent, but . . . fearless. They are willing to step out of their boundaries and try things or do things they don’t want to do. They know they might have to do it to accomplish whatever goal they want to accomplish.”

The remaining men expressed gender comparative beliefs about masculinity. What masculinity means for them necessarily involved women, as expressed in the following examples. Seth said, “Just like a woman will stay with a man who will try, and who will fail, she will stay with him. She sees his effort. But for a man who fails and has no vision, a woman’s not going to stay very long.” David said that a successful man isn’t a quitter, but the reference for quitting wasn’t money: “To me a successful man is truly content and happy with how life turned out or how it is turning out. It is not about who has the most money, girls, and cars but it’s about a person who gets their education.” Cliff qualified the masculine role in this way: “In actuality, a female can definitely stand up and be the leader. There’s never ever any kind of problem with that. But I think you have situations where it’s a man and a female, you definitely should be able to look toward the man to be able to step up.” Bob described a man as “bold, should be decisive, should have some goals,” but also noted “it could be the same thing for a woman, though. So I don’t feel like there’s really a big difference.”

All 29 men associated African-American masculine behavior with stereotypes of African American men, as illustrated by the comparison of legitimate “not-to-test” behavior and a clothing stereotype. Focus group data indicated that African-American men face multiple interpersonal dilemmas that confound legitimate ethnic behavior and societal stereotypes.

Conclusion

Steele (1997) describes one type of response to stereotypes that sums up the views of participants in the focus groups. When negative stereotypes about a minority group are salient in a new context, individual members of minority groups may experience “stereotype threat.” How to behave in ways that are not consistent with perceived stereotypes, in a new context, may become an immediate concern. Knowing exactly how to respond in an unfamiliar situation may be confounded by skills and behaviors that are functional in low-income environments but not as functional on a college campus. In academic settings, for example, a person’s search for appropriate behavioral expression, in response to stereotypes, may result

in pressures that negatively impact an individual's academic performance. Research has supported this observation (Steele and Aronson 1995). Furthermore, minorities in a college context may develop oppositional educational identities (Fordham and Ogbu 1986), and show lowered efficacy or extreme effort in academic domains, or other domains of behavior.

Men who expressed bicultural skills appeared to have command of stereotype threat and to be less affected by it. Of the 29 African-American men in this sample four of them (one of them African) possessed bicultural skills in both on-campus and off-campus contexts, allowing each of them to avoid confounding legitimate ethnic behavior, such as “not-to-test,” with societal stereotypes. Two of these men are members of Brother-2-Brother, the goals of which include helping young men make the transition to college, a process that involves acquiring bicultural skills. Bicultural skills include the ability to separate intra- and inter-stereotypical perceptions from one's identity and behavior as an African-American.

Alan, who has improved upon his bicultural skills, understands now that dress is connected to stereotypes related to improved classroom performance but he is careful in his description not to discredit those who purposefully send “thug vibes,” or to discredit a teacher who expressed an interest in his academic success.

The teachers will work with you and do whatever they need to get you to pass the class. But if you come to class—not to discredit anybody—but if you come to class and your pants are halfway hanging down or if you come to class and give off a thug vibe then teachers will not try to work with you. I actually went through that phase when I first arrived on campus. I saw that all the other black dudes on campus did this and that and I was really into fashion, so I wore the “fitteds” and “white-tees” but it did not help me in class at all. It didn't help me in the classroom so I had to change up my style and I saw a dramatic change in how the teachers treated me.

How will young men entering as freshman learn the bicultural ability expressed by Alan? Learning bicultural ability can be a difficult process.

Unfortunately, colleges and universities focus on ideologies of “cultural diversity” without addressing bicultural learning, in students and in members of the campus community generally. In addition to classroom work, bicultural learning is an additional task for African-American men. Without teachers, many fail the test. Brother-2-Brother eases this learning process as older men provide guidance to younger ones. Brother-2-Brother participants share their experiences as ways to acquire greater bicultural skills. They learn how to reduce intra-group stereotypes, and develop strategies to help them deal with societal stereotypes as well. As one sophomore man responded: “sometimes you just have to check yourself, to know what's going on. . . . Brother-2-Brother is a place to go to do that.”

Notes

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