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The Manifestation of Masculinity in Older Black Men: Implications for Adult Education

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The Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study was to determine the nature of the manifestation of masculinity among older Black men. This study reports the finding from a content analysis conducted on three popular magazine covers: *American Association for Retired Persons (AARP)*, *Ebony*, and *Men's Health*. These magazines were selected because of their circulation and to make sure that a significant number of older Black men would be included in the final sample for analysis.

There are numerous studies examining the manifestation of masculinity in men, but what makes this research unique is the fact that it targeted older Black men. Most studies that have been conducted on the manifestation of masculinity have resulted in the exclusion of how masculinity manifests in Black men. This exclusion occurs because of the erroneous assumption that race, and age does not impact the manifestation of masculinity.

Masculinity is a social construct and thus it is learned through social mediums (Courtenay, 2000). Men are not born with masculine traits and behaviors but acquire them over time because of assigned gender roles (Lindsey, 2015). Prior research has highlighted the role of print media (e.g. *Modern Maturity*, *Ebony*) in defining and portraying what it means to be masculine (Wolin, 2003). For example, research by Bailey (2006) analyzed the portrayal of Black men and the Hip Hop culture in *Source* magazine and *XXL* magazine. Bailey (2006) found that advertisements are important and influential depictions of Black masculinity. Black men idolize what they see in popular advertisements. Popular magazines provide an ideal source of data for capturing how masculinity is socially constructed and manifested in our society. Furthermore, images in popular magazines have the potential to shape social perceptions of masculinity (Wolin, 2003).

Background Information

The concept of hegemonic masculinity was first introduced over 30 years ago by Australian sociologist Raewyn Connell (Connell, 2005). Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) used the term “hegemonic” to embody certain traits and characteristics that various cultures ascribed to the so called real man. These traits distinguished real men from women and other men, but most importantly these traits justified the dominant position that men asserted over women and other men that did not measure up to these hegemonic traits requirements. Hegemonic masculinity represents the ideal male behavior in society. Hegemonic masculinity is a social ascendency that is portrayed through religious institutions, mass media, business, and even government policies and practices (Connell, 2005).

Age becomes the most relevant characteristic of hegemonic masculinity for older men. As men age, they are less likely to be portrayed as possessing hegemonic masculine traits (Calastani, 2004).

Black men report that the quest for White male hegemonic masculinity is elusive at best. Black men indicate that self-esteem is negatively related to conformity to traditional masculine norms in the dominant culture in the United States (Mahalik, Pierre, & Wan, 2006). For many Black men, the pressure to conform to dominant culture notions of masculinity can be psychologically distressful. According to Connell (2005) hegemonic masculinity embraces the notion of power and wealth as crucial elements in asserting dominance over women and all other groups in society. This type of masculinity is out of reach for most Black men. Therefore, Black men create a type of masculinity based on their lived cultural experiences. This type of alternative masculinity has been coined complicit masculinity (Connell, 2005). Nevertheless, few studies have been conducted to ascertain the nature of this alternative type of masculinity among Black men.

The Findings of the Study

The three magazines were chosen because of their large circulation in the United States based on statistical data from 2016 and based on data from the Alliance for Audited Media (Alliance for Audited Media, June 30, 2016). These magazine covers were collected across a 14-year time frame (2002 through 2016). Each magazine cover has the potential to portray masculinity as it intersects with distinct characteristics of its readership (e.g. age, race, and men’s lives).

AARP magazine is a bi-monthly publication (ranked # 1 in US circulation with 23 million). *AARP* magazine targets an audience of adults age 50 and older. In addition to its

targeted audience, the content of this magazine focuses on aging and aging issues. Therefore, cover images from this magazine may demonstrate the manifestation of masculinity in later life.

Ebony magazine is a monthly publication (ranked # 54 in the US circulation with 1.3 million). *Ebony* targets Black men and women (Black culture). *Ebony* focuses on Black celebrities and interests in a positive and affirming manner. The inclusion of this magazine provides a unique glimpse in to the manifestation of masculinity among older Black men. Furthermore, this magazine's covers will provide a large sample of images of older Black men to compare with cover images of White men.

Men's Health (MH) is a monthly publication that releases ten publications per year (ranked #32 in the US circulation with 1.9 million). *MH* targets an audience of active men of all ages. *MH* focuses on men's lifestyle issues such as fitness, nutrition, fashion, sexuality, health, relationships, travel, technology, and finance. The covers of this magazine portray men's lives and may capture or influence the manifestation of masculinity.

Only magazine covers that included a picture of a male (real and/or graphical) were included in the final sample for this study. Pictures which included multiple images were also included if one of the images were of an older male.

Over a 14-year period, *AARP magazine* published 92 issues, *Ebony* published 204 issues, and *MH* published 145 issues. The first phase of sample selection eliminated all magazine covers that did not include a male image. After this phase there were 62 magazine covers remaining from *AARP*, 62 from *Ebony*, and 145 from *MH* magazine.

The next phase of sample selection eliminated any magazine covers with male images that were not 45 years of age or older as confirmed by date of birth (DOB). This phase of sample selection also excluded any magazine covers with a male whose age could not be determined. The DOB was determined by a Google search of each image or picture as it appeared on the magazine cover. The final sample size equaled 104 magazine covers (53 *AARP*, 46 *Ebony*, and 5 *MH*). *MH* has an apparent target audience of young White men.

In this study older men were identified as those men that were at least 45 years of age and older. Age forty-five was chosen to get a significant size sample of men for this study from the three magazines that were analyzed. An additional reason supporting this age selection is that in the United States the life expectancy for men is shorter than women (US Bureau of Statistic, 2010). Further, Black men tend to have the shortest life expectancy of any group in the United States (Meara, Richards, and Cutler, 2008) and it was important for this study that a reasonable size sample of older Black men be included.

The ages of the male images ranged from 45-88. This is a wide age range, but most of the images (45%) ranged from 45-55 years, 28% ranged from 56-66 years, 18% ranged from 67-77 years, and 9% ranged from 78-88 years. The largest sample from the *AARP* magazine covers ranged in age from 56-66 years, while *Ebony* and *MH* magazine covers range in age 45-55 years.

There were 110 male images included in the final sample for this study. Of these 110 images, 54% were of Black men, 45% were of White men and 1% were labeled as "other." *AARP* Magazine samples featured 84% older White men, 14% older Black men and 2% were labeled as "other" older men. *Ebony* Magazine featured 100% older Black men. *MH* featured 60% older Black men and 40% older White men.

Whether the images were racially classified as Black or White was determined by the biography of the individual pictured on the magazine cover. The biographies of each featured man stated whether he self-identified as Black, White, or other.

There were several magazine covers examined in this study that featured multiple men on a single cover, male-female compilations, and multi-racial compilations. However, for this study each male image was analyzed and counted as an individual unit of analysis (i.e., race, age, and masculinity variables), regardless of the number of images, number of races, and number of gendered individuals featured on the magazine covers.

The data was analyzed using the elements of hegemonic masculinity that were described in Calastani's (2004) research on hegemonic masculinity. According to Calastani (2004) the characteristics of hegemonic masculinity are as follow: virility, physical strength, aggression, professional success, wealth, heterosexual prowess, and stoicism. Virility is defined as the quality of having strength, energy, and a strong sex drive; manliness. Physical strength is defined as the measure of a man's exertion of force on physical objects. Aggression is defined as forceful and sometimes overly assertive pursuit of a man's aims and interests. Professional success is defined by a man's employment achievement. Wealth is defined as an abundance of valuable possessions or money. Heterosexual prowess is defined by a man's skill or expertise in the sexual dominance of women. Stoic emotions are defined as a man's ability to display strength in the face of significant emotional and psychological challenge.

Older Black men in the three magazines all possessed the following characteristics of hegemonic masculinity: wealth and professional success. Each of the featured Black men possessed a net worth of at least one million dollars. In addition, each Black man was either an "A" list actor or a United States politician. The other characteristics of Calastani (2004) hegemonic masculinity were not presence for any of the older Black men pictured. The Black

men captured in the print media used in this study excluded Black men of low to middle socio-economic-status (SES). *Ebony* focuses on Blacks that are in a middle to high SES (Bailey, 2006).

Implications for Adult Education

In teaching Black males, the findings indicate that unless they have had access to wealth and power so that some of the elements of hegemonic masculinity fall within their grasp, most will have embraced an alternative or complicit form of masculinity that embraces violence, strength, and hypersexuality (Pringle, & Hickey, 2010). These falsehoods of masculinity project strength in a narrow way – only as physical. These negative images of Black masculinity feed Black boys and men steady diets of negative attitudes, beliefs and behaviors that ultimately strip them of their emotional intelligence and humanity (Squires, Kohn-Wood, Chavous, & Carter, 2006). The dominant images of masculinity for Black men teach them that the only real man is found on the athletic field, in the bedroom, and in the boardroom.

We posit that black male students who have embraced a complicit form of masculinity will experience themselves as silent learners in an adult education classroom where they are the minority male because they cannot identify with hegemonic masculinity. As such, Black men may experience the adult education classroom as oppressive and exclusive environment and as a result, withdraw from the learning experience. Adult educators must develop strategies to effectively connect to these Black men, and not allow their masculine identity to distract them from learning.

Limitations

There are several limitations that should be noted with this study. The magazines used in this study each target middle to upper class men. Therefore, men below middle socio-economic status (SES) are not included in this study. We cannot conclude that the manifestation of masculinity would be the same for Black men or older men below middle SES. Thus, we recommend that future research in this target men across the socio-economic strata and compare differences in the manifestation of masculinity across the social classes with race and age. Also, this study was limited to magazine covers only; thus, it cannot be concluded that the findings will hold true for television advertisements, pamphlets, and brochures. Future research should include television advertisements, pamphlets, and brochures so the nature of the masculinity projected in those media can be captured and compared to the findings here.

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