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## Racial identity, masculinities, and violence exposure: perspectives from male adolescents in marginalized neighborhoods

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### Abstract

**Purpose**—Male youths living in neighborhoods with concentrated disadvantage are exposed to high levels of violence, which increases risk for violence victimization and perpetration, and shapes identity formation. We explored male youths' conceptions of manhood, influences on manhood, and intersections with interpersonal violence in the context of a community-partnered sexual violence prevention study.

**Methods**—We conducted semi-structured interviews with predominantly African American males, ages 14 to 19, participating in a gender-transformative sexual violence prevention study. We used an iterative coding process to identify developing themes around youths' definitions of manhood, influences on manhood, and intersections with racial identity and racism.

**Results**—Participants outlined visions of manhood that included many traditionally masculine attributes, and also offered nuance and subversion of traditional masculinity. Participants' definitions of manhood centered on themes of responsibility, while also acknowledging the importance of emotional expression. Many participants described growing into manhood as a journey towards becoming a moral agent. Participants identified three predominant influences on their conceptions and experiences of manhood: 1) family and community connections, 2)

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#### Implications and Contribution:

Elucidating how youths describe intersections between masculinity, racism, and their use of and exposure to violence may inform youth violence prevention efforts. Gender-transformative programming should consider incorporating the perspectives of young men of color to appropriately honor their experiences and address the complex socio-cultural environments that shape gender identity.

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interpersonal and structural racism, and 3) racial pride. Family, particularly fathers and other father figures, emerged as invaluable in understanding manhood and navigating racial identities.

**Conclusions**—These stories suggest that the process of entering manhood comes with unique challenges for adolescents who do so in the context of community violence and racism. Being mindful of intersections between masculinity and racial injustice can inform violence prevention programs that address the lived experiences of minority male youths in neighborhoods with concentrated disadvantage.

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## INTRODUCTION

Black youth living in neighborhoods made vulnerable by racism and structural inequities disproportionately witness and directly experience violence.<sup>1-4</sup> Exposure to pervasive violence can negatively impact physical and mental health, shape behaviors harmful to health such as substance use, increase risks for injury and incarceration, and increase perpetration of interpersonal violence, including sexual and partner violence.<sup>5-7</sup>

Personal, interpersonal, institutional, and societal factors influence adolescent identity formation.<sup>8,9</sup> For male youths, the process of identity formation is shaped by gender norms that define masculinity and manhood.<sup>10</sup> Adherence to rigid masculine norms is associated with multiple poor outcomes for men themselves as well as their interpersonal relationships and persistence of gender inequity.<sup>11</sup> The global public health literature has underscored the extent to which gender inequitable attitudes contribute to use of violence, unhealthy risk taking, and adverse coping behaviors, which in turn are associated with poor health outcomes and interpersonal violence perpetration.<sup>12,13</sup>

Gender-transformative programming, supported by the World Health Organization, seeks to address gender inequitable attitudes and practices, and has been proven to be effective in addressing gender-based violence in varied settings.<sup>14</sup> Emerging work in the U.S. to implement such gender-transformative programming has demonstrated that gender inequitable attitudes are associated not only with sexual and partner violence, but also with other forms of violence perpetration including weapon-related violence, bullying, and homophobic teasing.<sup>13-15</sup>

Adapting gender-transformative programming in the U.S. has required added focus on the impact of structural inequalities and racism on youths' identity and behavior. The construct of masculinity among Black youths is additionally complex, as Black male youths develop masculine identity amidst the influences of structural racism, class expectation, and heterosexist ideology.<sup>16,17</sup> As a result of their marginalized social status, Black youths perform a complex masculinity with traits reinforcing hegemonic masculinity's sexist, homophobic, and violent attitudes but also a psychological flexibility to identify alternative ways of gendering.<sup>18,19</sup> An intersectional framework for working with Black youths recognizes these complex interpersonal and structural influences and addresses how varied masculine identities and behaviors are intertwined with gender inequitable attitudes and practices.<sup>20</sup>

The purpose of this study was to explore male youths' conceptions of manhood, influences on manhood, and challenges in navigating the pressure of becoming men in the context of neighborhood disadvantage and structural racism among young men participating in a gender-transformative sexual violence prevention intervention. Elucidating how youths describe intersections between masculinity, racism, and their use of and exposure to violence may inform youth violence prevention efforts.

## METHODS

### Participants and Data Collection

We conducted semi-structured interviews among a purposive subsample of predominantly African American male youths, ages 14 to 19, participating in a community-partnered sexual violence prevention trial (NCT 02427061, PI: Miller), across 20 neighborhoods with concentrated disadvantage in Pittsburgh, PA from 2015–2017 (n=52). Youths participated in an 18-hour group-based, gender-transformative sexual violence prevention program delivered by neighborhood facilitators at community-based sites (e.g. YMCAs, Black churches, community centers), typically delivered in 6 weekly sessions. The curriculum included conversations about gender, power, violence, and sexual health, as well as role playing which allowed participants to practice bystander intervention skills. The study was intentionally situated in community-based settings with programming delivered jointly with community facilitators to foster opportunities for meaningful discussion about how youths' experiences with violence shape their identities. Participants who completed the curriculum, three post-intervention surveys (program completion, 3-month and 9-month follow-up), and indicated that they were interested in participating in interviews were invited to do so until content saturation was reached. Interviews were generally conducted between 9 months and 1 year after program completion.

### Interview protocol

Interviews explored youths' definitions of manhood, influences on manhood, and intersections with racial identity, racism, and violence alongside other topics related to youths' lives. Trained interviewers used open-ended, narrative interviewing techniques to encourage participants to discuss manhood and their lives in whatever order and manner they felt was most meaningful. Interviewers were also trained to be sensitive to the needs and safety of participants as they discussed difficult experiences. Interviews were conducted at research offices or mutually agreed-upon community-based sites per participant preference. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim by the research team. Interviews lasted between 20 minutes and 1.5 hours. The University of Pittsburgh Institutional Review Board approved the study with a waiver of parental permission and a waiver of written documentation of consent. All study data were collected anonymously. Participants received \$30 for interview completion. Further details of the parent study have been described in detail.<sup>14</sup>

### Data Analysis

We used thematic content analysis and an iterative coding process to identify developing themes drawing upon the definitions and experiences provided by participants.<sup>21,22</sup> The lead

analyst reviewed all transcripts to define initial conceptual codes and applied these initial codes to blocks of text in all transcripts using NVivo (v12.5.0.815). The lead analyst and a research assistant dual-coded 14 interviews to reassess and refine themes and develop the final codebook. The lead analyst then revisited each transcript and applied the revised codebook. Throughout the coding process other research team members were consulted to ensure the coherence of the codebook and to discuss identified themes.

## RESULTS

### Participants

Fifty-two youths completed semi-structured interviews. Mean participant age was 16.4 years (range 14–19 years). 86% of youths identified as Black/African American, and 7% as Multiracial (Table 1). 81% of participants reported ever dating and 84% had ever had sex (defined as vaginal, oral, or anal sex). Thirteen youths (30%) reported a history of involvement in the juvenile justice system. 79% reported losing a friend or family member to murder.

### Structure of Results

From the thematic content analysis, three overarching themes emerged, which we used to structure the results: 1) definitions of manhood, 2) influences on manhood, and 3) manhood in the context of violence prevention. When asked to define manhood, participants shared positive and prosocial definitions focused on “Responsibility” and “Provider.” Participants described manhood as a process akin to a moral journey often tied to developing emotional expression. These definitions were heavily influenced by family, community, and societal factors, including racism. Consistent with data collection, quotations are presented anonymously.

### Definitions of Manhood

**Responsibility and a Provider Role**—The most common definition of manhood focused on responsibility. This type of responsibility was variably understood within a classic leadership framework, “[a man is] somebody who works hard and takes charge and believes in what they think and takes care of the people around him. And takes responsibility” [Participant 5] as well as a process of holding each other accountable, “Being a man is owning up to what you do and accept[ing] the responsibility and consequences for your actions [...] so other people know how to be a man” [Participant 34]. Many participants saw manhood as action-oriented growth into an adult provider role “[being a man means] taking care of your family, paying, paying your bills, having a decent job, your life clean, straight” [Participant 10].

Manhood was understood as an active process—it involves doing things with confidence, demonstrating responsibility, and taking care of others. These actions were viewed as important in the dual process of becoming an adult and a man, and engaging in them differentiated men from boys, “You have more responsibilities as a man than you do as a boy” [Participant 49]. Participants described norms around how men have to have jobs, make money, engage the material world—but they also have to shoulder its burdens in a way

that boys do not, “I am starting to realize that life has its ups and downs sadly. Uh I am starting to realize everything ain’t how it all prepped up to be. But as a kid it’s basically in the boy stage you don’t have nothing to worry about. It’s like you don’t even have to protect yourself. Your parents protect you for real. It’s like you’re just cool like nothing to worry about” [Participant 6].

**Moral journey**—Growing into manhood was often viewed as a process of becoming a moral agent. One participant reflected, “My opinion of being a man is, take care of your business. Do what’s right” [Participant 31]. The moral journey differentiated manhood from boyhood, “you gotta have morals. You got, you gotta be mature. You can’t be no little boy” [Participant 35]. This participant goes on to describe the *active* nature of gaining increasing moral agency, and the role that others play in this process, “You have to have guidance to be a man [...] good guidance. Not no negative [...] Good guidance is somebody that like try [to] guide you in the right path like. Have you doing the right things. Bad guidance is like people trying a push negative stuff on you, basically. That’s how I think about it” [Participant 35]. The active language (“*have* to have guidance,” “*doing*,” “*push*”) highlights how kinetic this process is—choices and actions are constantly occurring, and these lead to more active engagement with the world.

**Emotional Expression**—Expressions of emotion were viewed as both antithetical to and bolstering masculinity. Participants described the tension between emotional expression and perceived masculine invincibility: “well to be a man is to not show no, well, I’m not gonna show no signs of weakness because there is gonna be some weak moments but to be a man you have to be strong” [Participant 9]. Others pushed back against hegemonic masculinity and discussed how thinking about manhood increased their emotional intelligence and compassion for others’ experiences: “Like at first I was thinking like, no, you shouldn’t cry [...] you should man up. But after talking with them, yeah, that made me change my mind. Like, I never saw it that way [...] I think about it more like. I probably don’t know what happened to you. You don’t feel like I feel. Or, I probably wouldn’t know what would happen if I was in that situation” [Participant 2]. Another participant defined the ability to show emotion and vulnerability as a strength of manhood, “Uh, to be a man, is to be respectful first [...] most stereotypical guys say, ‘Don’t show your emotion that shows weakness’ [...] I think showing emotion shows actual strength ‘cuz most guys don’t show their emotions and showing emotions give people the respect that you actually open up to them. That you can actually talk to them. And there are times where sometimes I don’t mean to cry but it happens anyway and that’s pretty much my emotions coming out. And I’m not really afraid to [...] one of my exes, actually, saw me cry [...] And she said that they would respect me for showing my emotion and not being afraid to show how I really feel” [Participant 15].

### Influences on Manhood

Participants gave voice to the unique influences of relationships, social pressures, and larger socio-structural factors, particularly racism, in shaping their experiences of manhood.

**Family and Community Connections Promote Identify Formation**—Family and community were the most frequently described resources that participants cited as aids in navigating manhood. Participants described learning from the examples of others: “[Interviewer]: where do you get messages about being a man? [Participant]: just by older people I see how they treat people [...] seeing the older men seeing how they treated females, younger people. That kind of gave me the idea like that’s how I am suppose to be when I get older” [Participant 6]. Participants were influenced by their fathers in their development of manhood, a finding in opposition to the stereotype of the absentee Black father: “Well my dad is an influence. He’s a hard worker. He makes sure we always have stuff we really need not stuff we actually want. Just to make sure we always have clothes on our backs and a roof over our head, food in our stomachs” [Participant 30]. Women were also seen as mentors for participants: “first, it was my mom. Because you know I mean a woman can really teach you everything that a man can. But she did her best so knowing that, that she always told me how to be a man” [Participant 9].

A pattern emerged in interviews in which participants were able to leverage their relationships with older adult males to learn about manhood when biological fathers were not present. The examples provided by other father figures were seen by some as offering a more real vision of manhood than what was projected on the streets, “any dude can go around the street and say, ‘I’m a man,’ but we all know what a man looks like, and me for one, I know I’ve—I’ve been around, I grew up around dudes like my uncles and all them so I know what an actual like man is” [Participant 5]. Another participant reflected, “I have a big influence from my grandfather. He’s been through a lot in his life and it takes a man to go through that and keep pushing” [Participant 28].

Other father figures, including extended family and community mentors, were able to help participants gain a sense of manhood and emotional connectedness. One participant reflected on his stepfather’s influence, “my stepfather [...] told me how to become a man, how I should carry myself and how um, I need to get an education [...] and how I should grow and help others” [Participant 25]. The Manhood 2.0 program was able to supplement the work of these other father figures, fostering connections with community facilitators to enrich participants’ understanding of masculinity: “[My uncle is] basically my hero. He’s who I look up to. ‘Cause most of the males in my family have criminal backgrounds [...] another way the program helped me was for most of my life, my father was in jail for a crime he didn’t commit [...] so I literally had no guidance for like, you know, becoming a man, so that’s another way this program helped me a lot” [Participant 31].

**Racism**—Many participants gave voice to the chronic stress and at times despair that they felt due to the violence of racism. Black participants at times felt that in the process of becoming men, and moral agents, they were viewed as inherent failures: “he’s Black, he’s gonna try and hurt us” [Participant 45]. Stereotypes from the media contributed to this process, “I mean the media can play a lot of views [...] you can view a Black man as a hypocrite, criminal, anything they can describe anybody with anything flip your words around on you feel like the media is corrupt” [Participant 21]. For Black participants, exploring the process of becoming men was uniquely dangerous because mistakes may not be tolerated, “we don’t get away because we’re Black and people are racist” [Participant 45].

The stakes of the process were often viewed as extremely high, “as a man you have to know the right from wrong. If you don’t you’re gonna be in and out of jail you gonna be dead. And as a man you basically been through life for real. You know life has its ups and downs. You know you gonna lose people” [Participant 6]. Encounters with police were viewed by some as especially risky, with the sense that the police may be perceived as more of a risk than a protective force for Black youths, “Yeah, how, well, I’ve, I’ve also lost someone to... I’ve also lost someone to, uh, to police violence. It was a good friend of my brother’s, he was often around. One day he was walking down, [the street] from his mom’s house. That’s who his, he got pulled over. He refused to cooperate with the cop, so he was beat to death and shot, or beat and shot. And that officer is currently still, what he calls, “protecting the city,” now. Still, no charges” [Participant 31].

**Racial pride**—In the face of this, some participants found the necessity of combating racism as motivation for them to shape their manhood, “I feel like I got to stand out for people, cause I can’t let society shape me [...] They see us as products, they can make so much money off of us. I feel like I don’t want to be a product to society. I want to be me [...] it just makes me just want to work, work harder, and sometimes it is harder for us” [Participant 28]. For some, attempting to challenge the foundations of racism and gain individual moral autonomy was tied to a positive sense of self identity, “I am Black but I am a proud Black African American. I am proud of my skin tone and ain’t nobody ever gonna take that from me” [Participant 6]. Another participant expressed, “to stand tall with pride and not not say not care about what other people think, but, to take your own approach on how you feel, how you should feel and how, I guess, how you feel about yourself” [Participant 25].

### Manhood in the Context of Violence Prevention

Many youths positively reflected on how the Manhood 2.0 program provided a space to explore their personal experiences and reflections about manhood integrated with discussions about gender, violence, and sexual health. Essential to this was the trust that group leaders established with participants, “I realized that I loved [the program leader]. Because she was just an awesome lady, who just actually fought for kids, and fought for their rights as humans. And I loved that. And it made me want to talk more” [Participant 18]. Program leaders engaged with participants in a manner that produced buy-in: “I mean, I thought it was just going to be a bunch of BS, for—but we actually talked about some real life situations and stuff that we actually went through [...] like having sex and like abuse—like abusive relationships. And like people that know people like that have been through that. Like we have teachers tell us about stuff they’ve been through [...] I ain’t think it was going to be as explicit as it was” [Participant 17]. The ability to have these real conversations and practice skills helped participants reflect and change their behaviors: “I think about it a lot. Especially now I’m in college now, I see some of the topics that we talked about, and it’s like wow, sometimes I’ll, sometimes I can change this, actually, sometimes it actually is changing the situation, and intervening for people. And even telling people, ‘Hey, that’s not cool’” [Participant 23].

Manhood 2.0 provided a temporary reprieve from pervasive experiences of community and interpersonal violence and offered a space where participants could grow, “In relation to this program, it means a love for oneself, and to project that image and reflect that onto others. In this case, I seen a lot of brothers who never had a chance to love themselves. They grew up in households where it was wrong for them to learn how to be in touch with their emotions, their mother would shun them, people would call them pussies and bitches because of who they wanted to be, which is why people get into that peer pressure, begin to create these egos of self-sustaining madness that creates a loop of negative thoughts. So it was, for me, love is in a sense having a place for us to be able to break the cycle for a few minutes. For a few minutes, you don’t have to be a nigga out on the streets. You can actually come in here, we can all just be people” [Participant 18].

## DISCUSSION

Participants’ stories revealed several key themes in their reflections on manhood. Manhood was predominantly seen as a process of transitioning into a role of increased interpersonal and societal responsibility. This was often connected to a traditional provider role, and many youths also reflected on growing moral agency and emotional vulnerability. Invaluable to this process was the role of family and community members, who provided youths with a vision of manhood and a potential path to get there. While constructing their own paradigm of masculinity, youths recognized the inherent constraints on identity formation secondary to broader sociocultural factors—stereotyped perceptions of hypersexuality and hypermasculinity, targeted oppression by the justice system, and misrepresentation of Black men in popular media.<sup>23–25</sup>

These themes build on the work of others which describe adolescent identity development and the social structures in which this process takes place, including how masculine identities engage with hegemonic norms. Early work on Black masculinity, centered on a “Black male crisis,” theorized that generations of oppression dismantled patriarchal family structure, producing Black men ill-equipped to function in roles of hegemonic masculinity. This paradigm has been firmly rejected, with recognition that competing expectations of manhood create a complex social environment for Black youths.<sup>26</sup> Our results are consistent with extant literature indicating involvement of fathers in Black male youths’ lives. When fathers were not available, a ‘next man up’ phenomenon occurred in which other older males or even mothers provided examples of manhood.<sup>27</sup> Similar to the role of ‘othermothers’ in Patricia Hill Collins’ work, these other father figures, whom existed alongside biofathers, and in place of them when they were not available, were an essential part of masculine identity formation.<sup>28</sup>

A network of fathers and other father figures helped participants generate a sense of manhood that prioritized community connectedness and emotional expressivity while also helping them learn how to safely navigate a minefield of societal pressures. Prior work illustrates that a sense of responsibility is central to identity formation in Black male youths, and connections to family form a core component of Black masculinity, concepts that were reaffirmed by participants in our study.<sup>20,29</sup> In keeping with a robust literature on the role of supportive familial connections, participants elucidated how positive examples of family



may be protective against unhealthy projections of manhood or unhealthy behavior.<sup>30,31</sup> Gaining moral guidance from trusted adults offered something of a map to explore manhood, tailored to youths' unique experiences of family, which included strong influences from both male and female family members.<sup>15</sup>

Contrary to the stereotyped notion that Black men must restrict emotional expression, manhood among Black males incorporates compassion, humanism, and genuineness in relationships with friends, family, and community.<sup>32</sup> Several participants reflected that to have *real* relationships where you can “actually talk” you must be authentic to yourself and others and show this through emotion. These understandings of masculine emotionality challenge more traditional, rigid masculinity and elucidate complex intersections between masculinity and vulnerability among historically marginalized populations.

Development of this identity is challenged by portrayals of Black youths in the media as well as by lived experiences of young people in areas of concentrated disadvantage.<sup>33,34</sup> Our participants were acutely aware of structural factors and racial injustice. With traditional media often portraying Black men in one-dimensional, negative manners, our participants sought to wrest back control of their identity formation by consciously counteracting these negative portrayals and displaying multidimensional selves.<sup>25</sup> Pride in one's racial identity served as a powerful antidote that empowered many participants to embrace their lived experiences and express their unique identities.<sup>35</sup>

Our work supports an emerging paradigm shift in the field of gender-transformative sexual violence prevention.<sup>36</sup> Addressing participants' varied backgrounds, attitudes and even past perpetration fostered authentic conversations. Participant buy-in allowed for deep, vulnerable discussions of previous experiences with racism and violence, endorsements of normative masculinity, as well as the articulations of complex and emotional masculinity. By embracing the internal tension within youths' conceptions of masculinity, centering youths' voices, and providing safe spaces for vulnerable discussion, programming that promotes authentic self-expression and leadership by youth offers a route to decouple masculine identities from violence.

Addressing racism in tandem with hegemonic masculinity is essential to honor the lived experiences of Black youths involved in gender-transformative programming, and to challenge the violence that both ideologies promote. Our participants showed the power of this approach, especially as they discussed the impacts of their experiences of racism and violence, the capacity of family and community role models to teach manhood, the importance of male emotional vulnerability, and the benefit of authentic conversations during programming. Program facilitators rooted in the communities they serve, and who participants trust, can function as natural mentors, thereby fostering relationships protective against multiple adolescent risk behaviors, including dating and sexual violence.<sup>6,37,38</sup> This is a testament to the benefit of community-partnered work and to the necessity of providing a space where participants can address their experiences and learn from facilitators they trust.<sup>39</sup> Our work suggests that participant-facilitator trust which supports youth ownership of programming may be the most important factors for future programs' success.

## Limitations & Strengths

The study included male youths living in neighborhoods with concentrated disadvantage from a single geographic region, and results may not translate to other contexts. Interviews occurred after programming, and only with participants who completed study follow-up, thus youths may have been especially primed to discuss these concepts and may not reflect the perspectives of youths not engaged in violence prevention programming. This priming may also be a strength, as it allowed participants to grapple with difficult topics, and reflect on how collaborative programming shaped their perceptions and experiences. The study was strengthened by a large sample of young men and highly trained interviewers. Anonymity may have bolstered participant openness. Our qualitative method and ability to highlight participant voices promoted an understanding of the topics discussed that may be missed in quantitative approaches.<sup>40</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Our work supports a vision of gender-transformative programming that incorporates the varied manners in which youths are embedded in their social networks. Our participants were aware of their social embeddedness and often developed their sense of manhood in dialogue with these processes. The process was complimented by the role of other father figures who helped participants navigate manhood both alongside and in the absence of biological fathers. In addition, our work indicates the need to study interventions that leverage social connections that adolescent Black men possess to aid in healthy identity formation and navigating structural disadvantages like racism. Finally, this work occurs in a specific socio-political context which has often disadvantaged Black families and fomented structural disadvantage. Addressing and rectifying these systemic inequities is essential to bolstering the impact of anti-violence programs, like Manhood 2.0. Even absent broad societal change, our participants' voices express the value of gender-transformative programming that utilizes an intersectional approach, focusing on both gender equity and racial justice, and which centers their voices and experiences.

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**Table 1:**

## Participant Demographics

Characteristic	% (n)
Age, years	
14–15	41.9 (18)
16–17	37.2 (16)
18–19	20.9 (9)
Race	
Black/African American	86.1 (37)
American Indian/Alaska Native	4.7 (2)
Multiracial	7.0 (3)
Other	2.3 (1)
Lifetime history of juvenile justice system involvement	30.2 (13)
Lifetime history of losing a friend/family member to murder	79.1 (34)
Ever dated	81.4 (35)
Ever had sex	83.7 (36)

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