SECRET VOWS: CULTIC UNDERPINNINGS OF PERFORMATIVE MASCULINITY AMONG ADOLESCENT BLACK AMERICAN CHRISTIAN MALES

by

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I dedicate this dissertation to the memory of the late Gloria Jean Watkins, better known as bell hooks (1952–2021). I would have no doctoral dissertation without you. Thank you for being the "giant" you were and for your enormous contributions to this world. I hope my work advances your legacy and mission of bringing forth healing and transformation.

Also, I dedicate this to all those who have devotedly supported my evolution and growth through the years. Without your loving energy, I may not have had the tenacity to persevere through the rigors of this process.

Finally, I dedicate this to all the men who so willingly participated in this study; also, to all men and boys across the world—cisgender, transgender, or otherwise—who may not be aware, always know this… You matter. You are enough. You are worthy.

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This study intended to provide a comprehensive investigation of belief systems regarding masculinity that emerge among males who identify as black, American, and currently or formerly Christian. I hypothesized that many black American Christian males have been conditioned out of awareness, in cultic ways, of their innate power to choose how to define masculinity for themselves as they transition into adulthood. This phenomenon perpetuates the further belief that the authentic essence of who they are is somehow not enough. Mainly, I focused on how belief systems, emotions, and performative behaviors considered "masculine" emerge in the adolescent phase of human development. The following research questions guided this study:

1. Are there links between cults and masculinity forcing performative behavior among black American Christian males? If so, what are they?
2. Does race play a role in shaping how black American males viewed themselves as men or behaved as men? If so, how?
3. Does Christian-based religion play a role in shaping how black American males viewed themselves as men or behaved as men? If so, how?

4. How do black American Christian males define masculinity as adults when allowed access to their power to choose?
5. What might be possible for black American males if this power is awakened and nurtured in adulthood by life coaching?

This study compared this childhood, potentially cultic, version of performative masculinity with an adult one. The research conducted in this study also provided insight into a coaching framework that may catalyze paradigm shifts within black American Christian males. The findings contribute to the profession of coaching and human development by bringing forth an elevated approach to address the conversation of masculinity within this specific community.

For this study, I selected a mixed method approach integrating phenomenological, grounded theory, and case study research design. The primary data collection methods included: survey questionnaires, standardized and semi-structured interviewing, and coaching. Twenty-seven black American males with Christian-based backgrounds formed the survey sampling pool. Eight of them were interviewed, providing information-rich accounts of their experiences. From the grounded theory analysis, three main categories emerged: (1) the intersection of cultic dynamics and the black American Christian male—the core category; (2) the essence of the adult black American male experience; and (3) the emergence of performative masculinity in black male adolescence. Within the core category are the following properties that address all research questions: (1) contradistinguishing power and force; (2) replacing conformity and compliance with agency; (3) reducing the impact of imperialist white-supremacist

capitalist patriarchy; (4) reimagining depictions and demonstrations of the masculine spectrum; and (5) reclaiming imagination and intimacy eroded in black boyhood.

The findings confirmed that the construct of masculinity among black American Christian males in this study is riddled with potentially cultic underpinnings. Most of these identified cultic dynamics trace back to the core cultic underpinning of imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy. Findings from research data revealed, for black American males, their power comes from within, not externally. Despite any cultic underpinnings, these men demonstrated they can choose their definitions of masculinity. Some black males found this power through their spiritual quests. Others discovered it through self-development, mentoring, or life coaching.

Implications for further investigative research include exploring the impacts of performative masculinity among: (1) less educated adolescent black American males; (2) non-Christian black American males; (3) black American male substance abusers; and (4) males within other cultures, ethnicities, nationalities, and communities. Recommendations for the advancement of professional coaching and human development include: (1) a diverse curriculum within coach training and certification programs; (2) the diversity of professional life coaches; (3) an expansion of existing coaching frameworks and coaching-specific literature; and (4) the integration of human development programs in American educational systems.

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CHAPTER 1

PROBLEM FORMULATION

Introduction

"I used to be a performer, and I really don't consider myself a performer so much anymore . . . I'm sharing . . . " (Hill, 2002, 1:39).

Exactly two decades ago, I heard this declaration from one of my favorite recording artists, Lauryn Hill. This sentiment resonates with me much more deeply today. I, too, used to be a performer. Growing up as a black male American citizen, who once identified as Christian, I have spent most of my adult life overcoming my childhood conditioning. My "secret vow"—the promise to myself formed by conclusive childish beliefs—subconsciously emerged through childhood. I actively lived according to this vow as an adult. Historically, black boys in America are taught, trained, and groomed as small children to bifurcate themselves emotionally to survive. To bifurcate something is to cause the division of that unified thing into two separate parts. Therefore, *emotional bifurcation* is the disconnection of the mind and heart, so thoughts and emotions no longer work in unison. Either the mind or the heart is favored over the other. Generally, with men, the mind is preferred above the heart. That certainly was the case with me. This grooming began shaping my personal identity in adolescence.

My adolescence was a process of choosing different experiences from my childhood. As I transitioned into adulthood, my choices had consequences to which most young adults are oblivious. Lack of awareness of those choices has its own set of consequences. These outcomes occurred to me as "just how it is," rather than one of

many possibilities. Until recently, I had not accepted that I had spent most of my adult life saddled with unhealed childhood wounds. I also had not fully grasped that, as an adult, I am the sole authority and architect of my life. Through life coaching and my deep inner-work journey of becoming a practicing life coach, I have reclaimed ownership of my life. I create it and live it how I choose. I define my character as a human and as a man. I construct my definition of masculinity. My earnest mission is to awaken other men like myself to their authoritative, thriving power. Within this study, I explored elements of my experience with the construct of performative masculinity. I utilized this heuristic inquiry as the reference point for further examination.

It is imperative to note my acute recognition of the sensitive and controversial themes explored in this research—specifically regarding usage of the terms "cult," "toxic masculinity," and "white supremacy." In some instances, this language has been misused and weaponized. In this study, I chose to address these potent terms head-on. However, my intention was not to misuse or weaponize any of these terms to offend, attack, blame, shame, castigate, or asperse any groups of people as cults or any specific individuals as white supremacists. My intention was neither to vilify anyone who exhibits "masculine" traits as intrinsically evil, wrong, or toxic. My intention was to evoke awareness concerning these societal matters. Furthermore, I sought to juxtapose these concerns with the lived experiences of this study's participants. If you feel guilt, shame, anger, or become defensive while reading this dissertation, I invite you to consider leaning into the discomfort and interrogating the root of these emotions. (Frankie, n.d.)

Background of the Study

Why Focus on the Black American Christian Male?

In Liz Plank's (2019) book, *For the Love of Men*, Nico Juárez, a Mexican American man with Tzotzil ancestry, shared as a part of his story, "Race fundamentally changes masculinity. We need to think about masculinity as a deeply racial issue" (as cited in Baldoni, 2021, p. 144). Author and scholar bell hooks (2004b) further engaged these compelling arguments:

> Sadly, the real truth, which is a taboo to speak, is that this is a culture that does not love black males, that they are not loved by white men, white women, black women, or girls and boys. And that especially most black men do not love themselves. How could they, how could they be expected to love surrounded by so much envy, desire, hate? Black males in the culture of imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy are feared but they are not loved.
>
> 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. Black males often exist in a prison of the mind unable to find their way out. In patriarchal culture, all males learn a role that restricts and confines. When race and class enter the picture, along with patriarchy, then black males endure the worst impositions of gendered masculine patriarchal identity. (p. 9)

These arguments present an opportunity for further inquiry and research into the nuances of this phenomenon of masculinity within black American Christian males.

Why the Adolescent Phase of Human Development?

Between birth and age six, most humans belong to familial constructs they are unable to leave in which they follow an authoritative figure—such as a parent. Therefore, family dynamics are very akin to cult dynamics. Williams and Thomas (2005) present the case, "When your clients were children, they formed a child's view of themselves based on adult input. That childhood self-concept was formed with immature cognitive conclusions, early emotional experiences, and the feedback they perceptually received from their primary caretakers" (p. 17). The point at which adolescents typically question or rebel against parental values is not allowed in cults. A cult, instead, encourages obedience. Loving families often promote independence. Destructive cults neither encourage nor permit such freedom.

Statement of the Problem

The argument for examination was that there might be a contextual link between common cults and performative masculinity. Furthermore, black American males with Christian backgrounds are a specific group who may feel uniquely pressured to conform and comply with this construct of masculinity. This force could often lead to boorish, even destructive behavior.

Purpose of the Study

This study aimed to create an awareness of forced belief systems that may inhibit black American Christian males from thriving in power. Additionally, this study educated and equipped human development professionals to serve this group better through life coaching. As Williams and Thomas (2005) stated, "Life coaching is really filling the void in our formal education" (p. 10). It identified what coaching skills might be required to

catalyze a coaching client's chosen adult definition of masculinity rather than their childhood adaptation of the phenomenon. Within this framework, the coach serves as the catalyst. The client, however, is solely responsible for this paradigm shift. This study was executed by surveying and interviewing to collect experiential data from men who identify as black, American, and either currently or formerly as Christian.

Research Questions

In the adolescent phase of human development, many black American Christian males have been conditioned out of awareness, in cultic ways, of their innate power to choose how to define masculinity for themselves. This phenomenon perpetuates the belief that the authentic essence of who they are is somehow not enough. Instead, they rely on familial, cultural, societal, and religious constructs to dictate how they behave and perform as men. According to bell hooks (2004b):

> Black males who refuse categorization are rare, for the price of visibility in the contemporary world of white supremacy is that black male identity be defined in relation to the stereotype whether by embodying it or seeking to be other than it. At the center of the way black male selfhood is constructed in white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy is the image of the brute–untamed, uncivilized, unthinking, and unfeeling. (p. 9)

This study further investigated these concepts to contribute valuable ideas and ways of being to the black American male group.

In this research study, I intended to explore the following inquiries:

1. Are there links between cults and masculinity forcing performative behavior among black American Christian males? If so, what are they?

2. Does race play a role in shaping how black American males viewed themselves as men or behaved as men? If so, how?
3. Does Christian-based religion play a role in shaping how black American males viewed themselves as men or behaved as men? If so, how?
4. How do black American Christian males define masculinity as adults when allowed access to their power to choose?
5. What might be possible for black American males if this power is awakened and nurtured in adulthood by life coaching?

Importance of the Study

There needed to be more information in the literature that juxtaposes cultic beliefs and behaviors with traditional views of masculinity. The importance of this study was that it compared and contrasted childhood interpretations of masculinity versus adult ones, both within the black American Christian male demographic. It examined how to coach the transition from an obsolete interpretation of masculinity to a more mature, empowering one. Finally, it acknowledged the distinctions between a cultic group and a healthy black American Christian community.

Limitations of the Study

Geographical/Regional Differences

How men experience masculinity may differ regionally. For example, a black male who grew up in New York, NY, could have a more aggressive view of masculinity than a black male who grew up in Baton Rouge, LA.

Socio-Economic Differences

A black male who grew up in an upper-middle-class family may have a different perception of maleness than a black male who grew up in poverty. Impoverished black males might have experienced certain living conditions that shaped their view of masculinity distinctly from that of more privileged black males.

Educational Background

A black male with more education and training may have different interpretations of masculinity. He might possess a broader range of expressing the corresponding masculine behavior than a black male who lacks access to a sufficient education.

Household Differences

A black male who grew up in a two-parent home may have a different worldview than a black male who grew up in a single-mother home. Young boys taking on the role of "man of the house" at an early age could profoundly alter the trajectory of their perspective of masculinity.

Cultural Exposure

Black males with significant exposure to and access to experiences with other cultures, nationalities, and ethnic backgrounds may have a more comprehensive worldview of masculinity. Black males who have only been exposed to black culture might have a narrower perspective.

Christian Denominational Differences

Numerous denominations within Christianity have distinct nuances in their theological and ideological faith. For example, in some more traditional independent black Baptist churches, women are forbidden to wear pants in the sanctuary. The full-

gospel, non-denominational Christian beliefs tend to be more progressive in those domains. Such contrasting rules attached to faith could influence the black male gaze regarding manhood.

Definitions of Key Terminology

The following are definitions of key terms used throughout this study. Additional vital terms were defined within the study where appropriate.

Agency

Agency is a sociological and psychological term defining an individual's capability to act as an effective agent for oneself. One who navigates the world with a sense of agency defines their success, makes creative choices, and constructs a purposeful, values-driven life. (Napper & Rao, 2019)

Cultic Underpinnings

According to Janja Lalich, PhD, author and professor of sociology who focuses on cult groups, cults seek to break a member down and learn their pain points to reframe their identity emotionally and psychologically. Cults are about conformity and compliance. The idea is to take people apart and rebuild them into the cult's image, which is part of the indoctrination process—desensitizing people to impending abuse. (Holzman & Saidman, 2018, 13:55) Ultimately, cults function by keeping their adult members in line and under control. These functions are dynamics that can be observed in other non-cultic groups.

Otherism/Othering

Othering is viewing or treating (a person or group of people) as intrinsically different from, less than, and alien to oneself. Otherism is "the process of unconsciously

planned and contradictory ‘preparation’ to ‘push’ an individual(s) ‘out’ of a group to ‘defend’ against the entry of a person into a group or arrange ‘downward’ in rank the person in the group” (Snell, 2018, para. 1).

Paradigm Shift

According to Williams and Thomas (2005),

> Many people experience a fundamental paradigm shift when they face a life-threatening crisis. They suddenly see their priorities in a different order, their values change, their thinking about themselves shifts, and their feelings are modified. They may assume a new and different role. Everything changes. (p. 30)

Performative Masculinity

A monolithic perception or worldview of the “correct” uniform behavior of an individual born biologically of the male gender. It is traditionally determined by accepted norms of societies and cultures. The focus is mainly on

> a definition of masculinity, about being a man, that rests on being X enough. Now, “X” can mean anything. For many men—for me—it’s meant being enough of all those traditionally alpha male traits: strong, sexy, brave, powerful, smart, successful, and also good enough as a father and as a husband. (Baldoni, 2021, p. 2)

This performativity often tends to be violent or sexual in nature—or both. Generally, it is rooted in fear of not being validated as a man. In chapter two, I examine the phenomenon comprehensively.

Race

Delgado & Stefancic (2001) define race as a "notion of a distinct biological type of human being, usually based on skin color or other physical characteristics" (p. 153, as cited in Johnson, 2013).

Racism

Delgado & Stefancic (2001) define racism as "any program or practice of discrimination, segregation, persecution, or mistreatment based on membership in a race or ethnic group" (p. 154, as cited in Johnson, 2013).

Systemic Racism

Also referred to as *institutional* racism, systemic racism is "a form of racism that is embedded in the laws and regulations of a society or an organization. It manifests as discrimination in areas such as criminal justice, employment, housing, health care, education, and political representation" (Goodman, 2021, para. 6).

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

In this dissertation, I investigated current literature that examined the possible interconnection of common cults and masculinity among black American Christian males. Mainly, I focused on how belief systems, emotions, and behaviors considered "masculine" emerge in the adolescent phase of human development. This chapter reviewed: (1) an examination of performative masculinity; (2) a historical synopsis of cults; (3) a historical context of the black male experience in America, especially in adolescence; (4) the effects of imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy among black males; (5) the influences of Christianity on the consciousness of black males; and (6) insights for addressing disempowering boyhood beliefs in adulthood through life coaching. The literature presented in this dissertation provided a broad context of these focus areas.

Evaluation of the Sufficiency of Studies and Other Literature

This research covered areas quantitative literature needs to address more sufficiently on performative masculinity and its cultic implications. It will serve as an additional contribution to what I have studied. All the literature I have studied presented compelling points. Yet this study more contextually examined how race, Christian faith, and Americanism shape black males' beliefs, emotions, and behaviors, particularly during adolescence.

Identification of Methodological or Other Problems in the Existing Literature

Within the existing literature I studied, I noticed the absence of discussions addressing the plausible connection between cults and performative masculinity. This was the primary focus of investigation in this study. Also, I believe this offered unique insight into the importance of developing an updated framework to coach black American Christian males who may struggle with conforming to traditional masculinity. No existing methodologies in the literature I encountered addressed these specific issues.

Performative Masculinity

During the 2022 Academy Awards live telecast, an altercation occurred on stage between Will Smith and Chris Rock. For context, before this event, Jada Pinkett-Smith, Will's partner, had been public about her battle with the disease alopecia. The effects of this disease resulted in Jada shaving her head. She publicly embraced her shaven head. During the telecast, Chris told a joke alluding to Jada's shaven head by referencing the film, *G.I. Jane*. Seconds later, Will walked up to Chris and open-handedly slapped him across the face. Will then, twice, yells at Chris, "Keep my wife's name out your fucking mouth!" Chris, visibly shaken, maintained his composure and kept the show moving.

Later that night, Will Smith won the Best Actor Academy Award for his portrayal of Richard Williams in the film *King Richard*. He gave an emotionally charged acceptance speech in which he juxtaposed his real life with this character. Will cited Williams as being a "fierce defender of his family." He apologized to the Academy, the other nominees, and the Williams family in the same speech. He did not apologize to Chris publicly that night. He later apologized to Chris via social media.

Witnessing this incident solidified the importance and impeccable timing of this study. Will Smith's behavior was the quintessential example of performative masculinity. There were numerous layers to this event. For this study, I only focused on two layers: patriarchy and trauma.

First, Will and Jada had been public about their marriage for years. In an early episode of Jada's Facebook Watch talk show, *Red Table Talk*, both she and Will discussed how, at a certain point, "[We] decided to throw away the concept of marriage. We don't even call ourselves 'married' anymore. It's a life partnership…" (Wilson, 2018, 15:17). In the heat of the moment, it is essential to highlight that Will's expletive mentioned above towards Chris referenced Jada as "my wife." The patriarchal construct of marriage that Jada publicly denounced previously reemerged in Will's language.

Also, though many were appalled by Will's actions, others applauded. In a post-show interview, a famous actress shared a common sentiment among black women praising Will for "protecting his wife." This further perpetuated the patriarchal narrative of masculinity that men are supposed to provide and protect by any means necessary. Justin Baldoni (2021) spoke on this narrative when he admitted, "We don't stop to check in with ourselves emotionally and see what's coming up for us. Instead, we bury ourselves into what we've been socialized to do: provide and protect" (p. 303). The same actress, a black female, even suggested that she would reward her partner in the bedroom for such behavior. According to Majors & Billson (1992), while black females may argue the contrary, they are often attracted to black males who display their "cool" masculinity and are also known to reward their coolness (p. 43). This underscored the complicity of women in perpetuating these patriarchal constructs of masculinity.

Secondly, Will had also been public about his childhood trauma of witnessing his father physically abuse his mother. He previously stated that this traumatic experience shifted the trajectory of his life. I observed on Oscars night a 9-year-old boy who could not protect his mother from his father reacting from a primal state of rage. Even as he shouted expletives at Chris, the expression on Will's face read quite childlike. In the previously mentioned episode of *Red Table Talk*, Will reflected, "Will Smith is a character, but deep down inside, I was an insecure little boy that wanted Jada to say I was great. And if she didn't say I was great, the dragon came out" (Wilson, 2018, 12:18). That dragon revealed itself again on Oscars night. Wounded people, unhealed, wound others.

The now infamous Oscars slap clearly illustrated performative masculinity in action. Performative masculinity is male bravado for proof showing what is perceived as manhood or manliness. It is rooted in a traditional societal construct of social acceptance for how men are supposed to think, feel, and behave. It is not authentic to the full essence of manhood. It is a performance that is often rooted in fear of not being externally validated as a man. It can be a dehumanizing construct. This ideology does not seem to engender alignment to one's sense of integrity or oneness with the highest essence of self.

Performative Masculinity Emerging in Adolescence

In my literary research, much insight emerged linking performative masculinity to the adolescent phase of human development. One pillar in this literature was the perspective found in bell hooks' work. In her 2004 book, *The Will to Change: Men, Masculinity and Love,* she wrote:

> The confusion boys experience about their identity is heightened during adolescence. In many ways the fact that today's boy often has a wider range of emotional expression in early childhood but is forced to suppress emotional awareness later on makes adolescence all the more stressful for boys. Tragically, were it not for the extreme violence that has erupted among teenage boys throughout our nation, the emotional life of boys would still be ignored. (hooks, 2004a, "Being a Boy" section, para. 12)

Black boys, specifically, are taught to suppress emotions early in childhood. For instance, a common admonition from black parents exclaims, "Stop crying before I give you something to cry about!" Young black males are disciplined into a belief that their emotions inherently have no value. Thus, emotional neglect follows. This lays the groundwork for adolescent males to develop the practice of emotional numbing. They bottle-up feelings until those feelings erupt in rage. The pathology of these eruptions over time gets written off as normal. It is often justified by the adage, "boys will be boys." Performative masculinity results from patriarchy, thus manufacturing the rage and then harboring it for subsequent use. As adolescent males transition into manhood, this becomes a recourse for their exploitation (hooks, 2004a).

In Jennifer Siebel Newsom's 2015 film *The Mask You Live In,* educator Tony Porter posed:

> From the beginning, we're taught, as boys, to lock down our emotions. We can't talk about being afraid. We can't talk about being hurt. We could talk about being pissed off. We could talk about being angry. We can't talk about being sad. (6:02)

This traditional, patriarchal view of masculinity does not allow freedom of authentic expression of emotion and feelings.

When does this construct of masculinity versus femininity begin taking shape in human development? One assertion is that it starts in the womb. Much emphasis has been placed on gender even before birth. Today, gender reveal celebrations are more popular than ever. What is really being celebrated? Human genitalia? What typically happens after many parents learn of the child's sex? The process of gender socialization immediately begins. This is how individuals learn how to "perform" a gender. They are indoctrinated with ideas of socially accepted behavioral roles, beliefs, and values that based on their sex assigned at birth. According to neuroscientist Lise Eliot, PhD:

> Throughout most of history, there's been this belief that men and women are fundamentally different creatures, and it probably begins with the Bible. Sex is a biological term. It refers to which chromosomes you have. XX is female. XY is male. Gender is a social construct. These are expressions of masculinity or femininity, and both of these are spectrums, and they overlap. (Newsom, 2015, 12:43)

It is significant to distinguish sex and gender. Sexual assignments of "male and female" are distinct from gender identifications of "man and woman" or "boy and girl." Therefore, the roles and behavioral patterns commonly associated with gender identities were manufactured over time. Today, the lines of masculinity and femininity are more blurred as the gender spectrum emerges less "binary" and more inclusive.

Common traits of performative masculinity include hiding or repressing emotions, foreboding vulnerability, the fear of appearance or perception of weakness, the

association of femininity to weakness, homophobia, and fear of intimacy—especially with other males. It contains reductive ideas of males as emotionless, primal "animals" who only care about violence, sex, and money. Sometimes, they are suppressed through alcohol and drug abuse. Notwithstanding, inherent in performative masculinity is a constant need to prove one's manhood. Ironically, this is often done through behaviors based on ideological narratives that have little or nothing to do with manhood in any way. Hence, it is a gender performance. Sociologist Michael Kimmel, PhD suggested:

> That idea of being seen as weak—as a sissy—in the eyes of other guys starts in our earliest moments of boyhood. It follows us all the way through our lives, proving to other guys that we're not girls, that we're not women, that we're not gay. We've constructed an idea of masculinity in the United States that doesn't give young boys a way to feel secure in their masculinity. So, we make them go prove it all the time. (Newsom, 2015, 5:15)

Political scientist Caroline Heldman, PhD reinforced this, stating, "Masculinity is not organic. It's reactive. It's not something that just develops. It's a rejection of everything that is feminine" (Newsom, 2015, 5:48). I deduced that this construct of performative masculinity is rooted in patriarchal thinking. In hooks' (2004a) words:

> We must dare to face the way in which patriarchal thinking blinds everyone so that we cannot see that the emotional lives of boys cannot be fully honored as long as notions of patriarchal masculinity prevail. We cannot teach boys that "real men" either do not feel or do not express feelings, then expect boys to feel comfortable getting in touch with their feelings. ("Being a Boy" section, para. 2)

"Toxic" Masculinity

Frequently, the term "toxic masculinity" is wielded to depict reactive male behavior perceived as unfavorable. Masculinity is not toxic. Masculinity is a manufactured construct. It is not "real." Toxic thinking catalyzing skewed, narrow views of masculinity and primal behavior may be the core issue. Masculinity is distinct from and often collapsed with "machismo." Heldman added:

> We put [boys] on that trajectory through our popular culture, through our parenting styles, through our educational styles, and through assumptions about natural manhood and maleness, that we pass along, that are incredibly insulting and damaging. And then, there's a whole social system that polices them through this low level of threat from other men if they're not man enough. (Newsom, 2015, 6:21)

To then qualify the behavior these systems usher in as toxic masculinity places males into a dilemma. Not only is their gender identity called into question, but it is also classified as nefarious.

In early conversations with other coaches on this matter, I was encouraged to rethink the term "toxic masculinity" and explore another adjective to give voice to this phenomenon—a more accurate descriptor. I propose that "performative," rather than toxic, allows room for further investigation and inquiry into the behavior. What exactly is being performed? Who is the intended audience for this performance? What is the underlying purpose of this performance? What is the fear fueling the feeling of this need to perform? Modifying a made-up construct as toxic does not answer these critical

questions. Instead, it is reductive and ineffective. Writing off any behavior as toxic does not consider any pertinent information that led to the behavior in the first place.

Fixed-Performance Frame vs. Dynamic-Learning Frame

Peter H. Johnston, in his 2012 book *Opening Minds: Using Language to Change Lives*, drew a vital distinction regarding how children are educated. When a boy latches on to a fixed theory and fixates on performance goals, Johnston calls this the *fixed-performance frame*. Conversely, when a boy embraces dynamic theory, he is equipped to face challenges and difficulties with an openness to learn. Johnston calls this the *dynamic-learning frame*. He wrote:

> Children who adopt a fixed-performance frame tend to become helpless when they run into trouble. They cease being strategic—except when it comes to ego-defense.… Having taken up the fixed-performance narrative, [they] tend to live into it, becoming the character with the fatal flaw.… It is their adoption of the fixed frame and their diminished sense of agency that lie at the heart of the problem. (Johnston, 2012, p. 25)

This fixed-performance narrative frames most educational systems in the United States. Emphasis placed on standardized tests from elementary through collegiate-level education is the perfect setup for endless comparisons and competitions. Students, teachers, and even entire schools battle for the best performance (Johnston, 2012, p. 29). Combining the fixed-performance framework with white supremacy and patriarchy sets the stage perfectly to catalyze performative masculinity among young black males. Within this frame, adolescent black boys may likely be ill-equipped to navigate adult challenges. Furthermore, the inherent joy of learning is appropriated.

According to Johnston (2012), within the dynamic-learning frame, challenges are more feasible to conquer because errors and mistakes are not viewed as conclusive inadequacies (p. 22). Obstacles are circumvented. Failures are reinterpreted. Difficulties in a dynamic world make the life experience more interesting rather than threatening or anxiety-inducing. Everything, at worst, is a learning opportunity.

Nurturing a dynamic-learning environment for the black man through life coaching could shift his entire perceptual world. It may also catalyze new language and a renewed sense of agency to author his definition of masculinity and, subsequently, a more vision-driven life.

Erosion of Intimacy & Empathy

> Psychologist and educator Niobe Way, PhD explored this concept:
>
> Starting when they're about fifteen, sixteen, seventeen, the language shifts. You hear boys talking about their struggles and friendships, being hurt by other boys, feeling betrayed by other boys, wanting to have intimate friendships, and not knowing how to find those friendships.
>
> They really buy into a culture that doesn't value what we feminized. So, we've made feminine: relationships, emotions, all these critical things, empathy. And so, boys begin to devalue their relational parts to themselves, their relational needs, their relational desires. So, the loss of the intimacy in their friendships, feeling oftentimes for many of our boys very lonely, very isolated, they really enter into a culture of masculinity that makes these bizarre equations that male intimacy has to be about sexuality. They'll start saying things like, "I feel close to him. No homo." "He's cool. No homo." So, with the constant illusion that any

> sign of intimacy will be perceived as potentially gay, they understand that if you're straight, you have no desire for male intimacy. We don't do that with women. We do that with men. (Newsom, 2015, 28:24)

Intimacy is an interpersonal state of extreme emotional closeness such that any of the other parties can enter each party's personal space without causing discomfort to that person (American Psychological Association, n.d.). Often expressed in the form of affection, intimacy is frequently collapsed into sexual connotations. Intimacy is not inherently sexual. It is a human's way of being deeply connected to another. It is independent of sex and sexuality.

Justin Baldoni (2021) spoke further about:

> the arousal of intimacy, of partnership, vulnerability, and connection. And in case you might be thinking that I am the only man who desires emotional intimacy as well as physical intimacy, let me assure you that so do the thousands of men I've spoken to across the country and world. Even high-school boys—the ones who are quick to be misrepresented as walking erections—desire emotional intimacy. They reported to Andrew Smiler, a psychologist who specializes in adolescent male behavior, that their greatest motivator for pursuing sex was not physical but emotional. (p. 230)

The collapsing of intimacy with sexuality, coupled with men not being allowed to feel, may have induced the erosion of intimacy among men over time. I deem the narrative that men only think about and want sex an egregious misrepresentation of male desires. Men desire as much, if not more, deep emotional connection as women do. The difference is that men tend to be conditioned out of expressing that desire. Thus, men's

intimacy with themselves is cauterized. How can they connect with others if their connection with self is not nurtured? This can be widely observed with black males in America:

> As Zukav and Francis boldly state in *The Heart of the Soul*, "Intimacy and the pursuit of external power—the ability to manipulate and control—are incompatible." Before most men can be intimate with others, they have to be intimate with themselves. They have to learn to feel and to be aware of their feelings.… Learning how to be intimate is a relational skill that teaches us the value of self-knowledge. (hooks, 2004a, "Healing Male Spirit" section, para. 19)

When intimacy is eroded in young boys, their sense of empathy often follows. According to psychologist and educator William Pollack, PhD:

> The way boys are brought up makes them hide all of their natural, vulnerable, and empathic feelings behind a mask of masculinity. And also, when they're most in pain, they can't reach out and ask for help because they're not allowed to, or they won't be a real boy. They're shamed into this, and they're very ashamed to break out of it. (Newsom, 2015, 37:27)

Intimacy is interlinked with vulnerability and empathy. Vulnerability is one of the primary forms of intimacy men seem to avoid most. Many men have never experienced true intimacy due to this avoidance. Sadly, patriarchal masculinity leads both men and women to fake intimacy and closeness with the avoidant men. "We tell men we love them when we feel we have absolutely no clue as to who they really are" (hooks, 2004a, "Healing Male Spirit" section, para. 18).

In my experience as a life coach, intimacy lies at the heart of coaching. A coaching framework that addresses performative masculinity among black American Christian men must be grounded in deep intimacy. The coach and client co-create a coaching partnership based on openness, trust, vulnerability, and empathy that was possibly absent or lacking during the client's childhood experience. Without this, the coaching experience would most likely remain on the surface, with minimal paradigm shifts occurring with the client.

Performative Masculinity Emerging in Adulthood

Success, Status, & Money

One standard barometer of masculinity is the measure of a man's success, usually by class or financial net worth. Baldoni (2021) expressed:

> For generations, we have been in a place where success is the figurative indicator of the size of a man's penis, the visible scope of his worth as a man. The more successful a man becomes, the more of a man he becomes. Inversely, a lack of success or ability to provide can equate with a lack of manliness, or equally as bad, a lack of direction or purpose, mostly among other men. (p. 175)

A man tends to wrap his sense of male identity and worth in the shroud of his ability to perform at work, his ability to perform in the bedroom, and his ability to provide for and protect his family. This is commonly projected externally with the collection and showcasing of material possessions as trophies signifying his status to the world. Baldoni (2021) continued:

> Often, in Western contemporary culture, success is used synonymously with wealth, status, and/or fame. Americans tend to perceive that if a person has money

> and social status, they are successful. But because Americans don't have access to other people's bank accounts, we assess using variables like what kind of car a person drives, what size house they live in, the kind of clothes they wear, their job title, and their social media following, as measuring sticks to determine, in our minds, what kind of money and status they must have and therefore how successful they are. (p. 176)

Subsequently, many men often fall into the trap of comparison to other men. Upon deeper exploration, some men may decipher

> the burden we are carrying isn't just about supporting our families. It is also about supporting the image, and oftentimes subconsciously comparing ourselves with other men in our circle, our community, or around the world. This comparison creates a sense of shame that often is not talked about, especially among men. It's this shame, exacerbated by the belief that we must figure it out ourselves and the emotional isolation that comes from being told we aren't allowed to feel, that can lead to depression and ultimately suicide. (Baldoni, 2021, p. 176)

Sex & Pornography

> Sex is the thing men are told we must be the most confident about. Yet for many men, this is not true. While the nuances within these messages vary based on factors such as age, race, religion, and culture, each of them effectively creates a box that I felt—and to a degree, still feel—I need to fit within if I want to be a "real man," because being a sexual man is synonymous with being a "real" one. (Baldoni, 2021, p. 196)

Another familiar view of performative masculinity equates manhood to being overtly sexual and celebrated for sexual prowess. This tends to be the standard, especially among heterosexual men. Young men develop unhealthy ideas about sex, sexuality, and women as early as their adolescent years. Heterosexual men are conditioned to view women as objects and possessions to be conquered. Some men subscribe to and lean into that view of manhood. Others are more traumatized by it, as it may not align with the essence of whom they believe themselves to be. Baldoni (2021) shared his own experience:

> I actually have a fair amount of undealt with trauma around sex that I honestly didn't even realize I had. As a man, I have been socialized to not give myself permission to feel any feelings or have emotions around sex. All I was allowed to feel around it was that I wanted it and that my social status and worth as a man depended in some part on whether I was having it. (p. 213)

Here, I observe the comparison pathology come into play again. Males of all ages sometimes find themselves trapped in feelings of inadequacy due to endless comparisons of perceived sex appeal, sexual performance, and even penis size. This often leads to performative behavior from males who feel the need to "flex"—or project—their perceived masculinity, mainly to gain approval from other men. This performative behavior may be rooted in insecurity and an eroded sense of worthiness.

This also commonly leads to unhealthy relationships and even addictions to sex and pornography. Many males become trapped by these constructs they hold as law regarding how they are expected to show up and behave as men. Excessive porn usage can also lead to skewed beliefs about how men are supposed to perform sexually and what their sexual partners expect. In that respect, it becomes a more performative act

rather than a shared expression of emotional and physical intimacy. Insecurity fuels the performance and eclipses any form of intimacy. Baldoni (2021) continued:

> In 2017, NYU sociologist Jessie Ford published a study in which she interviewed college men on their experiences of unwanted sex. She saw that scholars were giving greater attention to sexual assault against women, while not taking into account that men were reporting unwanted sex as well, so she set out to research their experiences. During interviews men revealed that the gender expectations of how men were expected to act, what men were expected to want, and what actions might make them lose face with their partner or others were the reasons they had unwanted sex. (p. 214)

The societal narrative that men are not masculine or "real" men if they do not insatiably crave sex, fulfill those cravings, or view sex as only an emotionless, animalistic, physical act, leads to many unwanted sexual encounters. If women also subscribe to this narrative, in whole or part, it adds to the pressure men feel to project their masculinity. Suppose men felt safe enough to check in with themselves and explore their emotions more. In that case, they might discover that whatever physical urge they may be experiencing is a natural, biological occurrence that does not necessarily require an immediate reaction. Ultimately, there is a choice. If they choose not to respond to the urge, it is not an encapsulation of their entire masculine identity. Imagine a man's confidence when the pressure to perform is removed. He may accept that sex may not be a physical need but rather the physical manifestation of a more profound, emotional desire for intimacy.

Violence

The objectification of women by men manifests in yet another common trait of performative masculinity. Psychiatrist James Gilligan, MD shared:

> I worked for ten years in the jails of San Francisco in a program that included a project to deconstruct and reconstruct what we call the male role belief system, to which I think virtually all men in our society are exposed. Men are defined as superior and women as inferior; and to be a real man, you also dominate other men. This is a recipe for violence. (Newsom, 2015, 1:07:32)

According to the societal narrative of masculinity, respect is linked to violence. Furthermore, there is an entitlement to respect. To gain respect, a man is supposed to accomplish this goal by demanding it. The most "masculine" way to do that is through violence. They must fight for it. Film, television, and media imagery reinforce this narrative daily. "It seems like we understand love only through the media images of it that we've consumed. And we define love using the terms set out by and for women. It's almost as if 'love' itself is feminine" (Baldoni, 2021, p. 236).

Furthermore, bell hooks (2004a) digs layers deeper. She wrote:

> The first act of violence that patriarchy demands of males is not violence toward women. Instead patriarchy demands of all males that they engage in acts of psychic self-mutilation, that they kill off the emotional parts of themselves. If an individual is not successful in emotionally crippling himself, he can count on patriarchal men to enact rituals of power that will assault his self-esteem. ("Stopping Male Violence," section, para. 22)

Will Smith, unfortunately, succumbed to the pressure of this demand at the Oscars. He placed his performative masculinity on full display. Imagine the possibility if men, like Smith, had a more holistic view of manhood and maleness to look to growing up. What if more men demonstrated how to navigate the world more powerfully and effectively? I believe such male models exist. They are not as visible nor marketable in American society. Also, more male role models could be created through professional life coaching.

In this study, I explored additional nuances of the social systems society has constructed that make such performative behavior both possible and probable. I also continued probing elements of a holistic coaching framework that could evoke insights and paradigm shifts among black American males more effectively. They may then be empowered to construct a more solid foundation for defining their masculinity and navigating through the world authentically.

> Men need to hear that their souls matter and that the care of their souls is the primary task of their being. Were all men seeking to uncover greater soulfulness in their lives rather than seeking power through a dominator model, then the world as we know it would be transformed for the better. (hooks, 2004a, "Healing Male Spirit" section, para. 24)

Cults

"A cult doesn't have to be large; it can be as small as a family unit" (Lalich & McLaren, 2018, p. 5). My intention for exploring cults in this study was to examine their traits. I then linked any connections between those traits and how many of the constructs we revere—such as families, religions, nations, and masculinity—sometimes operate.

In my studies of cults, I encountered nuances too numerous to cover in this study. Therefore, I only highlighted information regarding cults that are most relevant to the overall theme of this study. I believed it was imperative to understand how cults function systemically to draw clear distinctions of the cultic underpinnings inherent within many traditional constructs, namely performative masculinity. Subsequently, I could examine how life coaching could address these constructs. The purpose of connecting this analysis to coaching was not to "fix" the client or change the systems themselves. Instead, it was designed to create awareness among coaches and clients of these systems and to catalyze effective functioning within them.

What Is a Cult?

According to author and cult expert Janja Lalich:

> A cult is a group or a relationship that stifles individuality and critical thinking, requires intense commitment and obedience to a person and/or an ideology, and restricts or eliminates personal autonomy in favor of the cult's worldview and the leader's wants and needs. (Lalich & McLaren, 2018, p. 5)

There is often much controversy and confusion surrounding the term cult and labeling specific groups with it. Lalich and McLaren (2018) continued to reflect:

> Some people think that the word itself is insulting and should never be used, but as cult survivors, we strongly disagree. The two of us spent many years in cults, and we would have been spared many years of trouble and loss if we and/or our families had only known what a cult was and how cults work. If we had known what to look for, and if we had been able to identify specific cultic behaviors, we might have avoided a great deal of unnecessary pain and suffering.

> The fact remains that a cult is a very specific kind of social group that uses similar methods to entice supporters, transmit its ideology, control its members, and put its worldview into practice. Once you know what to look for, you will see that all cults are very similar to one another, even though their stated goals, actions, and worldviews may be completely different. Identifying cults is not something we should shy away from; we need to understand them so that we can protect ourselves against cult indoctrination and manipulation. (p. 3)

In this study, I sought to expand this conversion to create a broader awareness of cults. Secondly, I sought to distinguish specific characteristics of cults that often underpin and camouflage themselves in everyday society—specifically within the context of black males and masculinity.

Another cult expert Steven Hassan (2018), defined "any group that uses unethical mind control to pursue its ends—whether religious, political, or commercial—as a destructive cult" ("Cults: A Nightmare Reality" section, para. 4). Henceforth, when referring to cults in this study, one should assume I am speaking of destructive cults unless distinguished otherwise.

Mind Control

Brainwashing is only one of many distinct forms of mind control. Hassan (2018) continued explaining:

> Mind control is any system of influence that disrupts an individual's authentic identity and replaces it with a false, new one.
>
> In most cases, that new identity is one the person would strongly reject, if they had been asked for their informed consent. That's why I also use the term

> undue influence—"undue" because these practices violate personal boundaries and human integrity, as well as ethics and, often, the law.
>
> That said, not all of the techniques used in mind control are inherently bad or unethical. The intent, the methods used, and the end result need to be part of the evaluation. They span a continuum from entirely ethical to grossly unethical. It is fine to use hypnosis to stop smoking, for example—but it must be used ethically, to empower the person, not for manipulative, exploitive ends. The locus of control of one's mind and body should always remain within the adult individual, never with an external authority. ("What Is Mind Control" section, para. 1)

In destructive cults, the success of the group is contingent upon keeping its members in line and under control, much like parents rearing children within a familial construct. Lalich theorizes that cognitive dissonance causes people to remain in cults. When reality does not meet one's belief system, they are more than likely to retain the thinking aligned with that belief system rather than shift the reality. It feels like the safer, easier option to stick with what you think you know (Holzman & Saidman, 2018, 29:40). As clarified further in a 2020 documentary series on the Heaven's Gate cult, cognitive dissonance occurs when a person holds two or more contradictory beliefs simultaneously. Religious scholar Rena Aslan reinforced the concept of cognitive dissonance as "the moment in which an event occurs that seems to undermine your very theology, your very doctrine . . . your *fake system* [emphasis added] shifts to make room for the event" (Tweel, 2020, 38:05). Thus, the new event and any new information are either deluded or wholly denied. This is referred to as confirmation bias. Defined as "the tendency to

gather evidence that confirms preexisting expectations, typically by emphasizing or pursuing supporting evidence while dismissing or failing to seek contradictory evidence" (American Psychological Association, n.d.), confirmation bias is a near enemy of cognitive dissonance.

Two distinct responses to reduce cognitive dissonance are embracing the new belief system or modifying the earlier belief system. Both cause a paradigm shift in the individual's perceptual world. In life coaching, the latter response may be more plausible than the former. The individual is encouraged to explore and create their own perceptual reframes that better serve them—noting they may also likely experience anxiety at first with this shift. For instance, Will Smith may have created a childhood belief system about his masculinity being questioned if he doesn't protect women he deeply cares for. Later as an adult, an event occurred that challenged that belief. It may be more difficult to adopt a radically new belief system than to modify that original belief system using the updated information from said event. Hence, the Oscars slap transpired. When working with coaching clients, invoking perceptual paradigm shifts is one of the most important and impactful roles a life coach can play.

BITE Model of Mind Control

BITE is one model to illustrate cultic operations using mind control. For this study, this model was sufficient to begin providing insight into how to coach adult black males in modifying childhood beliefs and perceptions centered around their masculinity. Created by Hassan (2018), the BITE model dissects mind control into behavior, information, thought, and emotional control as follows:

- **behavior control:** Behavior control regulates a person's physical reality, including detailed aspects of their environment—where they live, what they wear and eat, the amount of sleep they get, and any jobs, rituals, and other actions they perform. Obeying the cult authority is of utmost importance. While the leader cannot command another's thoughts, they know that if they control the members' behaviors, their hearts and minds will soon follow suit.
- **information control:** Information is the data we use to process reality. If the information we receive is inaccurate, skewed, and/or outdated, we are more prone to be manipulated and controlled. Denial and deception are critical components of information control. It robs people of the precise data required to make sound judgments and informed decisions, thus becoming impaired.
- **thought control:** This component is where thorough member indoctrination occurs. As a result, members adopt all aspects of the group doctrine as their own "truth," including new language and thought-stopping techniques to "center" their minds. They develop the practice of manipulating their thought processes for approval and good member standing from the authority. This indoctrination process filters incoming information and regulates how members think about that controlled information.
- **emotional control:** Emotional control intends to alter and narrow the range of a person's emotions and feelings to a more binary, all-or-nothing, worldview. The person is either made to feel beloved and unique as an elite, chosen member of the group, or made to feel like a broken, sinful reprobate in need of repentance. Guilt and fear are the essential tools used to keep people in line—which members

cannot see. Ultimately, the most desired outcome is loyalty and devotion to the cult and the cult's authority.

Each component of this model could be a potential cultic underpinning identified in many of the traits and characteristics of gender roles. Additionally, it may be pinpointed in other deeply rooted human constructs such as religion, race, nationality, etc.

Though perhaps not as extreme as destructive cults, some Christian-based religions may sometimes exhibit elements of the BITE model. Many Christian doctrines harness language from Biblical stories to manipulate and control members' behaviors, thoughts, and emotions. This could be done by interpreting these stories in ways that align with the worldview of the church and the elected clergy. Sometimes, the information presented to church members might be inaccurate and obsolete. This can cripple members from making their own decisions and choices. Any challenging or questioning of the doctrine is often discouraged. This entire process could be justified by framing the belief system in the name of God.

Within familial constructs, children are indoctrinated at a young age to be loyal and devoted to their families—especially the domestic authority—to be kept in line. This can be beneficial if utilized properly. It teaches children how to adapt to social groups and create awareness of their sense of belonging. However, misused or abused, it can be destructive. Children are easy to indoctrinate because they have not yet developed the faculties to process information fully on their own. They need proper guidance to learn how to think critically and make decisions. Children are taught what's "right and wrong" based on a familial worldview created by and passed down from prior generations. They are trained to revere the values of authoritative domestic figures, even if the authority's

values do not align with their own. Many little boys are taught by their families and faith that there is only one right way to be a man. In such a case, how can he choose to be the man *he* desires to be once the authoritative power of his life is transitioned over to him as an adult?

I assert that the belief systems that guide a man's human development are molded, in part, by the access he has to accurate information. If his exposure to information is limited as a child, his worldview may likely be narrow as an adult. Thus, his ability to think, feel, behave, and create his life with self-aligned purpose and intention is hindered. A man can not know who he is if he is ill-equipped with the data needed to make such distinctions. Through professional life coaching, men can be adequately equipped with new, distinct information that was not accessible in their childhoods. This work could help them develop more holistically. The coach can cultivate the coach-client relationship in such a way that men to feel safe and supported. The clients can respond to new information and distinctions regarding how they think, behave, and feel within that trusted partnership. They may have never been allowed to feel this way in any of their prior relationships. Therefore, it is always acceptable and encourageable for the coach to regularly monitor the client's progress resulting from their responses.

Why Is Mind Control Successful?

Hassan (1988/2018) highlighted why cults are successful. Also, he pointed to why there is complacency surrounding the threat of these high-control groups:

> First, accepting that mind control can be effectively used on almost anybody challenges the age-old notion that human beings are rational, and responsible for (and in control of) all their actions. Such a worldview does not allow for any

> concept of mind control. Second, we all have a belief in our own invulnerability. It is too scary to think that someone could take control of our minds. We all want to have a belief in our own ability to completely control our lives. Third, the processes of influence start from the moment we are born…. ("Why Do Cults Have So Much Success" section, para. 2)

Thinking about these three ideas, the questions arise: what thoughts, beliefs, and values that I hold as truth are my authentic truths? How have all the indoctrinations of family, religion, patriotism, and race shaped all of the choices I have or have not made in my life? As a life coach, asking these types of self-questions is essential. Coaches' influence on their clients' lives can be either helpful or harmful if they are not consciously aware. Hassan (2018) shared:

> If mind control techniques are used to empower an individual to have integrity and more choice, and the authority for his life remains within himself, the effects can be very beneficial. However, if mind control is used to change a person's belief system without informed consent and make him dependent on outside authority figures, the effects can be devastating. The more a group [or leader] seeks to control any or all of these aspects of its members lives, the closer to the extreme end of the influence continuum it falls—and the more likely it is to be a cult. ("Why Do Cults Have So Much Success" section, para. 16)

Developing more awareness of these potential cultic underpinnings is essential for coaches to foster a sense of autonomy and agency within their clients.

Exiting Cults

Exiting a destructive cult is not allowed or encouraged. Instead, it is prohibited and punished. Hassan (2018) explained:

> In a destructive cult, there is never a legitimate reason for leaving. Unlike healthy organizations, which recognize a person's inherent right to choose to move on, mind control groups make it very clear that there is no legitimate way to leave. Members are told that the only reasons that people leave are weakness, insanity, temptation, brainwashing (by deprogrammers), pride, sin, and so on. Members are thoroughly indoctrinated with the belief that if they ever do leave, terrible consequences will befall them, their family and/or humanity. ("No Way Out" section, para. 1)

Lalich further contextualized:

> Having that kind of discipline and struggling through it, and knowing that you are all struggling through it together, creates a sense of family which is what binds people to these groups. And when you think about years and years and years of that, that's what makes it so difficult for people to leave. This is the only world they know. (Tweel, 2020, 17:09)

In essence, all family members between birth and adolescence are in a cultic construct—whether constructive or destructive—that they are unable to exit. There is a head of household or an authoritative figure, a parent or guardian, that the young family member must follow and obey. Such obedience begins being challenged as early as age two when the child first uses the word "No!" Parents use positive or negative reinforcements to manipulate the child's behavior. Subsequently, the behavior becomes

stronger or weaker and is more or less likely to be repeated according to the parent's desired compliance. Often, like in a destructive cult, the parental figure may use fear tactics as that form of manipulation. This sometimes results in the child living much of his childhood indoctrinated with belief systems rooted in guilt and shame if he does not comply and conform to meet the "right" standards. These belief systems could be based on religion, culture, politics, and past traumatic experiences. The primary motivator is often fear. Hence, familial and cultic dynamics are pretty similar. In healthy families, that link breaks at the adolescent stage of human development. Yet, the indoctrinated beliefs may remain. This is a cycle passed down generations—commonly seen within black communities. If that is the only experience an adult black man knows, it may be difficult to escape from it physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually.

Systems of Cults

It is also vital for professional coaches to be aware of specific systems of cults to get a distinct understanding of potential cultic underpinnings that may be at play. Lalich & McLaren (2018) described these "dimensions of bounded choice" as follows:

- **transcendent belief system:** A system in which purity and perfection of group members based on the group ideology are imperatively enforced and intensely focused. As a result, those outside the group are viewed with such extreme distrust and hatred that it increases the polarizing, us-versus-them sense of unity and devotion within the group.
- **charismatic authority:** This dimension is arguably the most difficult of the four to escape. It involves cult leaders and leadership teams utilizing tactics to keep members engaged, enamored, and exhilarated by their heroic charisma. As a

result, members become physically, psychologically, and emotionally addicted to all the relationships they develop with the cult authority, including the harmful ones. This makes it even more difficult to leave.

- **systems of control:** This system creates a tightly controlled ecosystem by coercing group members to abide by stringent rules, structures, and behavioral norms that define the group. As a result, members' individual identities collapse into the group's identity. A false sense of agency and freedom emerges with members declaring their devout willingness to stay committed to the group.
- **systems of influence:** This system is based on the innate human need for connection, bonding, and belonging to something special. High control groups exploit this need. In destructive cults, the bonding experience diminishes members' autonomy and independence. It creates a highly judgmental dynamic among group members in which highly devoted members shame those who show diminishing devotion. As a result, what began as a sense of trust and belonging morphs into extreme distrust and self-policing among group members.

These cultic systems were important to highlight as there are potential underpinnings of these systems in regular, less extreme entities. In American politics, examples of all four have been demonstrated throughout history. The us-versus-them dynamic of the transcendent belief system is a daily practice in the American two-party government system. Americans observed charismatic authority during the entire Trump presidential campaign and administration. The whole country witnessed systems of control and influence in the form of white supremacist groups who stormed the U.S. Capitol during the January 6, 2021 insurrection in the name of American patriotism.

Types of Cults

To paint a fuller picture, Hassan updated five distinct types of cults: religious cults, political cults, psychotherapy/educational cults, commercial groups, and cults of personality. I also discussed other variations, including constructive cults, to provide a balanced counterview.

Religious Cults

Religious cult groups tend to be the most numerous and most infamous. They utilize dogmatic religious ideology to rationalize their objectives. Commonly, leaders of religious cults relish luxurious lifestyles. The groups often own real estate and business ventures to generate wealth. (Hassan, 2019)

One of the most notorious and historic religious cults was The Peoples Temple, created and operated by Reverend Jim Jones. This destructive cult began as a Christian-based church in 1954 and ended on November 18, 1978, the infamous day in Jonestown, Guyana, when 918 people were killed in a mass murder-suicide. Most of the deceased were members of Jones' congregation, whom he ordered to either drink cyanide-laced, grape-flavored Flavor Aid or forcibly squirt into the mouths of babies and children with syringes. Later known as the Jonestown Massacre, this incident would also be the most significant loss of American life in one deliberate act until September 11, 2001. ("Peoples Temple," 2022)

Political Cults

Political cult groups establish around a particular political dogma. They are often dubbed with the expression "fringe" or "extremist." (Hassan, 1988/2018) The Nazi Party is arguably one of the most infamous political cults. Political cults are brutal, oppressive,

and often violent dictatorships. Much like Adolf Hitler, political cult leaders spread propagandistic messages to rally members and keep them in line. They tend to utilize similar language and tactics to procure control and power. (Hassan, 2019)

Psychotherapy/Educational Cults

Psychotherapeutic or educational cults enroll individuals in expensive workshops and seminars to deliver "enlightenment" or "insight." These events typically provide participants with hypnotic or euphoric experiences, often through mind control techniques. Many participants are coerced into more advanced, more expensive programs. Loyal participants and graduates become more immersed in and committed to these groups. They are encouraged to invite family members, friends, and colleagues to group events. Some groups even compel members to cut off contact with those who disapprove of their involvement. Leaders of this group type often have questionable backgrounds and little or no credentials (Hassan, 2019).

Commercial Cults

Commercial cults, often dubbed "pyramid schemes," are marketing companies built upon deceptive recruitment. Members are charged to recruit new members who generate income for the recruiter. Companies like Amway prey upon people's desire for wealth and status by promising get-rich-quick ventures, often through selling products. Other organizations sell services, such as personal or professional development seminars. Keith Raniere's company NXIVM (pronounced NEX-ee-um) is one of the more recent and prominent of these cult groups at the time of this writing. Raniere was arrested in 2018 and convicted in 2019 for sex trafficking, conspiracy to commit forced labor, and numerous other charges. His notoriety following his arrest was largely due to NXIVM's

celebrity members. Further, NXIVM housed a subsidiary organization, DOS, where women were forced to brand their bodies using cauterizing irons with a logo containing Raneire's initials (Hassan, 2019). In 2020, he was sentenced to 120 years in prison.

Personality Cults

Personality cults are "microcults" consisting of only a few members. It can also simply be an abuser and their victim. The cultic personality or leader becomes alluring to a person or group by their perceived charm, charisma, wealth, and status. Hassan (2019) explains:

> In such cases, a person controls or dominates another person to such an extreme that they cannot think for themselves, rendering them dependent and obedient. The abuser can be a spouse, a parent, a therapist, or someone completely unrelated. Many domestic abusers are adept in BITE model techniques, and use them to control their victims. Most abusers are male but there are a percentage of women who fit the profile. Personality cults can also exist on a massive scale, especially in political cults.
>
> Trump is an interesting and unique case. He ran the Trump Organization as a business that used his personality to sell products, especially real estate, but he has also branded product lines from casinos to steaks, vodka, and an airline—all failures. When he became a reality TV star, a persona of savvy businessman was constructed through careful editing and information management. I would describe his presidency as a personality cult that uses politics and religious right-wing ideology—anti-abortion, antiscience, antidiversity, white power, if not outright racism—to sell himself and, by association, the Republican Party. But the

> influence goes two ways. Organizations holding those right-wing ideologies use Trump to sell their own political and religious agendas. Former FBI director James Comey likened Trump to a mafia kingpin, another nod to the cult of personality surrounding him. ("The Five Main Types of Cults: Personality Cults" section, para. 1)

Other Variations

Religious cults may historically be the most popular, numerous, and documented type of cult. However, it is crucial to distinguish all different strains of cults. Cults can be categorized into one—or more—of the five types above. Additionally, other variations exist, like science fiction and UFO cults. For instance, Heaven's Gate is a hybrid UFO and religious cult. NXIVM was a combination sex cult, commercial cult, and psychotherapy/educational cult. Donald Trump and his MAGA (Make America Great Again) movement exemplify a hybrid political and personality cult. Other political cults may use religion as their shroud. Cults can be large, with millions of followers. Others may constitute only two people. (Hassan, 2019)

Lalich and McLaren (2018) underscored the importance of cult distinctions:

> When you understand modern-day cults clearly, you'll realize that a cult is not simply a new religion, nor is any religion necessarily an old cult. In fact, the two may have nothing to do with one another. This mistaken connection between religions and cults is one of the reasons that so many cults are able to gather followers even today. Why? Because if people mistakenly believe that cults are always based on religious beliefs, then they'll be on alert for and possibly

> protected from only one kind of cult—and they'll be dangerously unaware of all the rest. (p. 4)

Constructive Cults

For a balanced argument, it was also essential to bring constructive cults into the foreground. They are often referred to as *healthy groups* or *healthy organizations*. The primary distinction between a destructive cult and a healthy organization is that the latter recognizes, either implicitly or explicitly, an individual's human right to choose. These groups tend to be more relaxed and less rigid in their need for conformity or purity. Members of healthy groups choose whether or not to participate in group activities. They are allowed and even encouraged to question or challenge the group's ideologies. Ultimately, the common goal that unites healthy groups takes precedence over their leader or the maintenance of the group ideology as the "only" truth.

Many healthy organizations—such as the 1960s civil rights movement, the LGBTQ+ liberation movement, the #metoo movement, or black lives matter—are examples of what could be considered constructive cult groups. Although these groups were birthed out of strong conviction for systemic change, the ideology was neither rigid nor forced. While radical in their ideas, they are not extreme in beliefs. Radical ideas are what bring about systemic change. They work not only for the individual group members but for all.

Ultimately, the tie that binds these groups is the desire for sovereignty, peace, and unity. It does not include the imprisonment, discord, or uniformity associated with destructive cults. Healthy groups do not seek to sequester themselves from society. The

underlying premise of accepting all unique, differing values and integrating all as one collective humanity bonds them.

Understanding Cultic Underpinnings

Most destructive cults start as constructive cults with a positive intention and morph into destruction. Familial, societal, and cultural dynamics may tend not to be extremist. However, the groundwork could be laid for extremism down the road as evidence of the BITE model gradually emerges. The one common denominator among people who join cults is idealism. According to Dr. Suzanne Newcombe, senior lecturer in religious studies at The Open University (UK):

> Everyone could be vulnerable if the 'right' message comes at the right or the very wrong time in their lives. No one ever joins a cult. No one ever says, "Oh, I'm going to go in and give up my critical thinking and sell my soul to someone who's obviously trying to manipulate me." (Powers, 2022, 20:30)

Generally, people end up in cults because of a deep desire to belong to something purposeful and meaningful. The cult leaders themselves create these groups because they believe, often in warped ways, they are doing something good—primarily for themselves. This engages the presupposition that everyone's intention is inherently good. The dilemma is that what one perceives as "good" for self might not necessarily be for the good of all.

Understanding the implications of potentially cultic underpinnings is paramount for professional coaches for the sake of their clients. Also, the ethical integrity of their practices could be at stake. The primary intention of life coaching is to serve as a benefit to and betterment of the coaching client. Cultic groups only benefit and better the

leadership of the cult. Like pharmaceuticals, the same powerful medications that heal can also harm. Any form of extremism is destructive. Coaches who become extreme, controlling, and proselytizing in their methods can quickly turn cultic. When the power transmutes to force, from creation to control, the intention becomes cultic.

A successful coaching partnership focuses on evoking paradigm shifts within the client's worldview. Instead of trying to manipulate or "fix" the client, coaches are free to inform coaching clients what perceptual paradigm shifts are. Furthermore, coaches can share their paradigm-shifting experiences with their clients, cultivating trust and safety within the partnership. (Williams & Thomas, 2005) Coaching is a powerful tool and should be respected and revered as such.

Reverence

One critical potential cultic dynamic to underscore is reverence. It is a crucial component extreme cult groups rely on to ensure their success. Reverence is the cornerstone of the indoctrination process. For indoctrination to take hold, members must revere the group's doctrine and the authority that constructed it above all else. Members, especially children and young adults, are taught to mold themselves in the leader's image. Thus, they are bound to complete dependence on and obedience to the group and its leader. (Hassan, 2019)

> Children who are born into or brought into cults are usually taught that the leader's needs are more important than their own needs, family ties, friendships, health, schooling, comfort, stability, or even sleep. It's important to state here that we're not blaming the children's parents for the abuse and neglect their children endured. After all, the parents became enthralled by the cult and believed deeply

> in the rightness and omnipotence of the leader. We must acknowledge that parents in cults, like all other members, are indoctrinated to believe that their sole loyalty must be to the leader. As part of this loyalty, parents are expected to teach their children reverence for the leader and the belief system. Their children's devotion and conformity reflect on the parents' own worth as cult members. (Lalich & McLaren, 2018, p. 47)

A similar paradigm is evident in familial constructs, especially in black American families. Black American family structures grounded in Christian-based values tend to revere God, the family's belief systems, and the authoritative figures who pass these beliefs down generations. These value systems are often presented as the right and only way of life, often to the detriment of family members who feel less aligned with such beliefs. A young black boy who grows up revering Christian and familial doctrines that teach homosexuality is wrong, blasphemous, and forbidden might experience tremendous internal conflict if same-gender feelings begin emerging within him. This could create a chain of events rooted in fear, including homophobia and self-hatred. If the indoctrination is deep enough, it gets passed down to the next generation.

Unveiled here was an apparent dichotomy of reverence with a thin line bifurcating it. In her 2022 HBOMax special, *Atlas of the Heart,* Brené Brown, PhD defined, "Reverence, sometimes called adoration, worship, or veneration, is a deeper form of admiration or respect and is often combined with a sense of meaningful connection with something greater than ourselves" (37:01). She then reinforced a statement made by a viewer stating that reverence is "a human institution that brings in the sacred which will inevitably cause problems" (38:00). Brown continues:

> Anything that demands reverence, that it's not open to being challenged or questioned, is problematic. There are things like white supremacy that depend on reverence. Reverence is coin of the realm in some of those systems. And so I think they're dangerous words. (41:33) . . . Sometimes reverence is performative admiration. (43:01)

One emerging assertion was that the core cultic ideology in America that underpins most behavioral demonstrations of performative masculinity is imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy. Reverence lies at the heart of it. In this study, I further unraveled this cultic paradigm to sharpen the lens exposing performative masculinity in the human development of many black American Christian males.

> Our behavior and values are so much shaped by perceptions that lack reverence that we do not know what it is like to be reverent. When we curse a competitor or strive to disempower another person, we absent ourselves from reverence. When we work to take instead of to give, we labor without reverence. When we strive for safety at the expense of another person's safety, we deprive ourselves of the protection of reverence. When we judge one person as superior and another as inferior, we depart from reverence. When we judge ourselves, we do the same thing. Business, politics, education, sex, raising families, and personal interactions without reverence all produce the same result: human beings using other human beings. (Zukav, 2014, p. 46)

Blackness & Americana

Gary Zukav (2014), in his book *The Seat of the Soul,* debated that

white and black are not colors, like blue, green, and red. White is a combination of all the colors of the visible spectrum of light, and black is the absence of that spectrum. In other words, white is an integration of all the visible forms of radiance, and black is an absence of radiance.

What nonphysical dynamics does this discovery illuminate?

In European literature, white is associated with purity, goodness, and rightness. It is the symbol of positive and protective energy. Heroes and heroines dress in white. God's messengers and Heaven are associated with white. Angels are painted in robes of white. Black is associated with evil. Villains wear black. Black is the symbol of destruction. The day that catastrophe strikes is called a black day. Black represents despair, anger, and rage, which are absences of love, compassion, and forgiveness. A person who feels these things is said to be in a black mood.

"Dark Ages" are said to be a time when the "light of reason" was absent. The suffering of a splintered psyche, a psyche without radiance, is called the "dark night of the soul." The Devil is called the Prince of Darkness, and Hell is said to be a place where the Light of God does not reach. . .

A personality that is not whole lives in a state of splinteredness, as represented by individual colors, or combinations of them. A personality that is not splintered lives in a state of wholeness, as represented by white light. A personality that loses touch with its soul, that loses the source of its Light, is a personality that has become capable of what we call evil, as represented by blackness. (Zukav, 2014, p. 59)

When exploring American patriarchy and masculinity, I could not do so while separating the element of race and blackness. America, as it is known today, would not exist without blackness. Whiteness cannot live without blackness. They are interconnected. In her 2015 book *Physics of Blackness: Beyond the Middle Passage Epistemology,* Michelle Wright analyzed how most discussions link the full essence of blackness to the history of American slavery and the subsequent struggle for sovereignty. Yet, these are more epistemological narratives that linearly contextualize blackness. They may not offer a broader scope of black progress following colonialism nor the governmental systems set forth by whiteness to keep blacks subordinated (pp. 7–8). She wrote:

> When we ask, "What is Blackness?" we already have a set of answers: it is a collective identity that intersects with many other collective identities that in turn intersect with one another, such as gender, sexuality, or socioeconomic class; spiritual and other performative subcultures, professions, trades, ethnicities, or religious denominations; lifestyles or dietary choices—the list is endless. What we really want when we seek to define Blackness is a common denominator that links the Black presence in all these categories. At the same time, Blackness is simply too many things to be anything but everything. . . .
>
> Pursuing this question requires focusing on the phenomenology of Blackness—that is, when and where it is being imagined, defined, and performed and in what locations, both figurative and literal. Blackness cannot be located on the body because of the diversity of bodies that claim Blackness as an identity. Blackness, then, is largely a matter of perception or—as performance studies

> theorist E. Patrick Johnson observes—made up of moments of performance in which performers understand their bodies as Black. Furthermore, because it is not necessary for the audience to understand such performances as Black (except in the matter of ticket sales and perhaps favorable reviews), this further suggests that Blackness is in the mind of the performers. (Wright, 2015, p. 3)

Wright's comprehensive analysis delineated a fuller spectrum of blackness. Blackness is not monolithic. Consequently, describing what it means to be black in America cannot be collapsed into one experience—or even a color. Not all black-identifying people look the same, sound the same, behave the same, think the same, have the same values, etc. American society historically correlates blackness with skin pigmentation. However, it is a false equivalence.

Jose V. Pimiento-Bey, PhD, African American studies professor at Berea College, amplified this intellection:

> I don't understand why people are so wedded to the term *black.* And the justification for it is, "Well, it's because the European made it negative." It's the European's word! It was negative before it was applied to African people. It's like they're getting it backwards. It isn't that Europeans said, "We're going to make this word 'black' negative in order to accommodate our desire to devalue African people or dark-complexioned Asian people or dark-complexioned Native Americans." That's not how it worked. The word *black*, absence of light, if you will, was supposed to be understood by any English speaker as largely negative before it was applied to people of African or Asian ancestry. (Amexem, 2019, 00:26)

In the 2021 documentary film *Black Art: In the Absence of Light*, artist Kerry James Marshall described his process of creating "black art" with a counterargument of the color black. He expressed:

> One of the things I was trying to do was to embody in a picture the concept that Ralph Ellison had laid out in his novel *Invisible Man*. He describes the condition of invisibility as it relates to black people in America—this condition of being seen and not seen simultaneously. And that's what I think a black figure [does] against the black [background], where if you change the color temperature of the black, it creates enough separation so that you can alternately see and then sometimes not see the figure that's present there. . . .
>
> Black is not the absence of color. Black is particular kinds of color. If I went to the paint store as I did and I bought black paint, I could see I could buy three different variations of black paint. I could buy an ivory black, I could buy a carbon black, and I can buy an iron oxide black or something that's called Mars black. If you look at each one of those colors they are not the same thing. (Pollard, 2021, 11:51)

Therefore, what was once interpreted as a derogatory, reductive representation of a people based on skin color, was then harnessed to create a more holistic interpretation. Marshall presented a full spectrum of beauty based on visibility rather than invisibility. His interpretation of blackness appeared to align more with Wright's work.

While an intriguing debate, this study was not meant to unpack the historical nomenclature of the word *black*. However, it was intended to distinguish the contextual linguistic significance of its usage. In today's usage, *blackness* is not about color; it is

about culture. Conversely, neither is whiteness about color. *Whiteness* references the historic Eurocentric worldview of white supremacy—not the whole of people who identify as white.

Wright brought to the foreground that blackness also cannot be collapsed into its connection with slavery—while slavery is a significant portion of the spectrum. In this study, I spotlighted the Middle Passage narrative of blackness concerning white supremacy and patriarchy. In his essay "The Creation of the Negro," Anthony T. Browder (2000) explained that the Portuguese were the first Europeans to enslave African people. They were also the first to label the enslaved as *negroes*. The Spanish followed suit. In Portuguese and Spanish, both languages derived from Latin with classical Greek origins, the adjective negro means black. "But since 1444, and the beginning of the slave trade, the adjective *negro* became a noun and the *legitimate* name of a newly enslaved people" (p. 1). Browder continues, "In most European languages, the word for black was typically associated with aspects of death. The word *death* is derived from the Greek word *necro*, which means dead" (p. 1). Amidst European history, both negro and necro commonly referenced "the physical, spiritual, or mental death of a person, place, or thing." (p. 1).

In his 2013 doctoral dissertation, Jonathan L. Johnson addresses the effects of European influence on the black narrative due to slavery.

> The Atlantic Slave Trade and its aftermath brought with it, as W.E.B. Du Bois (1903/2003) put, "the sum of all villainies, the cause of all sorrow, the root of all prejudice" (p. 7). What also came forward was the dilemma of confronting themselves as the estranged "problem" of society: being torn into at least two

> struggles of making meaning of their own identity and a "white humanity" (Du Bois, 1903/2003; Gilroy, 1993). Both Gilroy and Du Bois argued the modernity of Black people have been ignored and, essentially, lumped into the fabric of a dominant European worldview. (p. 20)

European male colonizers commandeered "American" land from its indigenous peoples. Then, for 300+ years, they enslaved African people for their talent to build what would become the United States of America. Seeking maximum capitalization on African people's unremunerated contributions, they designated themselves as the supreme "white" race. They then labeled the enslaved Africans as "negro" or "black" and further dehumanized them—primarily by violent means. Thus, the symbolism described earlier by Zukav, Pimienta-Bey, and Browder was brought into humanity as racism. In their assigning whiteness or blackness to a people, "white people" are codified as everything. Conversely, "black people" are codified as nothing. Browder (2000) continued:

> With the birth of the slave trade and the creation of the negro, it became necessary to dehumanize Africans and devalue their historical worth as a people in order to ensure their value as slaves. What was once referred to as a color and a physical condition is now regarded as an appropriate state of mind for millions of Africans now residing in America. (p. 2)

This ethnocentric European worldview of white versus black regarding humanity in America gave rise to the us-versus-them, *othering* dynamic commonly seen in the transcendent belief system of cult groups. As a result, emerging is what bell hooks famously coins the imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy that exists in full effect today. She asserted:

> I often use the phrase "imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy" to describe the interlocking political systems that are the foundation of our nation's politics. Of these systems the one that we all learn the most about growing up is the system of patriarchy, even if we never know the word, because patriarchal gender roles are assigned to us as children and we are given continual guidance about the ways we can best fulfill these roles.
>
> Patriarchy is a political-social system that insists that males are inherently dominating, superior to everything and everyone deemed weak, especially females, and endowed with the right to dominate and rule over the weak and to maintain that dominance through various forms of psychological terrorism and violence. (hooks, 2004a, "Understanding Patriarchy" section, para. 2)

This system is the foundation upon which America was constructed. Not only does patriarchy deem the female weak, but also anything interpreted as feminine as weak and primed for domination. Citing psychotherapist John Bradshaw's (1994) work *Creating Love*, bell hooks (2004a) further deconstructed the patriarchy:

> "Patriarchy is characterized by male domination and power." He states further that "patriarchal rules still govern most of the world's religious, school systems, and family systems." Describing the most damaging of these rules, Bradshaw lists "blind obedience—the foundation upon which patriarchy stands; the repression of all emotions except fear; the destruction of individual willpower; and the repression of thinking whenever it departs from the authority figure's way of thinking." Patriarchal thinking shapes the values of our culture. We are socialized into this system, females as well as males. Most of us learned patriarchal attitudes

> in our family of origin, and they were usually taught to us by our mothers. These attitudes were reinforced in schools and religious institutions. ("Understanding Patriarchy" section, para. 12)

She described how, as a girl, she was groomed for the gender role of being subservient, weak, nurturing, and "free from the burden of thinking." She was taught that expressions of anger, rage, or violence by a female were inappropriate and unnatural. Conversely, her brother was groomed for the gender role of being served, a provider, strong, analytical, and non-nurturing. He was taught that boys were prohibited from expressing emotions, yet male aggression and violence were accepted and encouraged (hooks, 2004a).

These are cultic narratives cultivated by white males shaping a shared experience of blackness in America. These are rules deeply indoctrinated into black American boys that underpin performative masculinity. When black boys are groomed with these rigid patriarchal rules, they are often forced to feel pain and perform in a manner that denies their feelings. (hooks, 2004a)

> Patriarchy demands of men that they become and remain emotional cripples. Since it is a system that denies men full access to their freedom of will, it is difficult for any man of any class to rebel against patriarchy, to be disloyal to the patriarchal parent, be that parent female or male. (hooks, 2004a, "Stopping Male Violence" section, para. 22)

For the patriarchal system to take hold, males and females must subscribe to the ideology. Both must conform to their assigned roles, much like destructive cults. Furthermore, the doctrine must permeate every domain of the person's worldview. This can be a

challenging paradigm for any life coach and the client to shift together. Effective life coaching evokes awareness within the client that the significance of any life event is determined by the meanings and interpretations they ascribe to them (Williams & Thomas, 2005). With that awareness, a paradigm shift can commence.

The Influence of Americana on Black Masculinity

It is critical to note that the imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchal system is not only perpetuated by white males but also by other races and genders. This is the system the collective of society has adopted and adapted as the "American way." However, the spirit of black people, especially the black male, tends to be most adversely impacted. According to hooks (2004b):

> Imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy reinforces the pathological narcissism that keeps many black men trapped by their identification with being a victim. Excessive focus on the ways racism wounds black male spirits is often evoked to deflect attention away from all other sources of emotional pain. That deflection is disempowering because it sends the message that there is nothing black males can do to create positive change since they are "powerless" to end white supremacy. Racism does damage black males, but so does sexism, so does class elitism with its hedonistic materialism, and so does abandonment and abuse in family relationships. All the sources of black male pain and powerlessness must be named if healing is to take place, if black males are to reclaim their agency. (p. 95)

Savior (Superman) Complex

American folklore idolizes its superheroes. For scores of years, Americans have been infatuated with heroic, superhuman story-tales. The most common are comic book superheroes, like Superman. Superman, a fictional, historically white-cisgender-male-presenting character with "hyper-masculine" superpowers, travels to Earth from another planet to fight for "truth, justice, and the American way." He is arguably the most popular of many mythological heroes. With classic patriarchal traits, Superman is the one hero American males tend to look up to as boys and often model their masculinity after as men. In his book *Superman in Myth and Folklore*, Daniel Peretti (2017) affirms, "Superman's story has become one with which people work through the vital issues of their lives. It dramatizes questions of identity, morality, and politics" ("Superman and the Folkloristic Perspective" section, para. 2)

While entertaining and inspiring, these whimsical fantasies of morality, hope, and triumph over adversity can simultaneously create their own sets of unrealistic, unhealthy, and sometimes cultic implications. According to Eduard Ezeanu (2010):

> The savior complex is a psychological construct which makes a person feel the need to save other people. This person has a strong tendency to seek people who desperately need help and to assist them, often sacrificing their own needs for these people. ("What Is the Savior Complex?" section, para. 1)

Also known as "Superman complex," this complex can be prevalent with both women and men. It is commonly seen in personal identities, corporations, religions, and politics. Viewing one end of the spectrum, some seek to be the hero. On the other end, some look to the hero to be saved. Donald Trump even touted himself as a "political savior who will

help rescue America" (Hassan 2019). Consequently, enough Americans subscribed to the narrative of a nation in need of saving; they elected him President of the United States in 2016.

Concerning black masculinity, the Superman complex may be another cultic underpinning of patriarchal ideology that the black man's sole duty is to provide and protect. Historically, this ideology is the way of his white male counterpart. Conversely, it further perpetuates crippling feelings of powerlessness among black males who believe in a hero outside of themselves—commonly a deity—who will save them if they are incapable of fulfilling these duties.

Another distinction was the juxtaposition of heroes with courage. Justin Baldoni (2021) recalled the words of author Brené Brown, PhD:

> In one of its earliest forms, the word courage had a very different definition than it does today. Courage originally meant "To speak one's mind by telling all one's heart." Over time, this definition has changed, and, today, courage is more synonymous with being heroic. Heroics are important and we certainly need heroes, but I think we've lost touch with the idea that speaking honestly and openly about who we are, about what we're feeling, and about our experiences (good and bad) is the definition of courage. (p. 22)

The interpretation of courage only through the lens of heroics can be reductive. It also reinforces patriarchal constructs can that entrap males into a one-dimensional view of masculinity. Furthermore, these heroic icons could heavily influence black American males—typically portrayed as white males. They may pressure themselves to shrink into narratives that neither fully align with nor address their unique experiences. How can a

black male save others if he is ill-equipped with, or worse, stripped of, the tools he needs to serve himself? How can a black male embrace a more holistic definition of courage if his deepest feelings and emotions are denied or shamed? How can a black male practice and embody this courage if he does not regularly see it illustrated, demonstrated, or celebrated?

How can black boys embody the courage to dream bigger and explore all the same possibilities afforded to white boys if the black boy's imagination has been exploited and eroded? Regarding black males specifically, "it's the boy [white-supremacist patriarchy] is after. They already have the man on lock. It is the imagination of the boy that needs to be protected. The imagination lives in 'boyness'" (W. G. Tolan, personal communication, July 11, 2022). In my observations and experiences, white boys are historically allowed to be more freely imaginative in their life experiences than black boys. The imaginations of whiteness are not encumbered by images that limit possibilities for their race. If black boyhood's imagination is subverted, black manhood's experience is likely to be subjugated.

Freedom & Unity

Freedom is the core principle upon which America was built. Unity is an ideal inherent in the nation's full name, the *United* States of America. Yet the historical execution of these virtues seemingly begets more subjugation and uniformity. Regarding freedom, Hassan (2019) explains:

> Freedom of religion is called the "first freedom" for several reasons. It is the first part of the First Amendment to the Constitution—it precedes freedom of speech and freedom of the press. In order for people to be able to speak and publish

> freely, they must be able to think freely—to believe differently from the government and powerful religious institutions. Freedom of religion is not just about religion—it's about the right to think for ourselves, to change our minds in a way that is neither an advantage nor a disadvantage to our status as citizens. While the Constitution protects beliefs, it does not necessarily protect all actions and behaviors stemming from those beliefs. ("Religious Freedom" section, para. 1)

As a collective, black male American citizens have been direct targets of status disadvantages. Law enforcement brutality and disproportionate incarceration rates in this nation are only two glaring demonstrations of this. These cultic patriarchal systems groom black males. They are taught what religions to believe in. They are taught what to think and how to think. They are taught what to feel and how they should—or should not—feel it. As a result, black males in America often feel disadvantaged and unfree.

Unity is an ideal the United States of America has yet to realize. Arguably, this country has always been divided. America is a tribal nation. The more tribes exist, the more social pressure exists. Studies have shown that most people will bend and contour themselves to fit in when pressured socially. "When a person is unsure, they do what the tribe is doing—they conform. We unconsciously look to someone who promises security and safety. In short, we are unconsciously wired to adapt, conform, and follow to promote our survival" (Hassan, 2019, "Social Psychology Research" section, para. 4).

This way, America is a nation wired seemingly for mind control and manipulation. The American political and legislative system is laced with both such that the goal of unity manifests as uniformity. Policies enacted by white-majority lawmakers

often suggest their desire for all races, especially blacks, to be more like them. However, much like blackness, being American is not monolithic. Black people desire the same freedom to be themselves afforded to whites.

Instead, black males are taught to conform to social pressures every day of their lives. Ironically, white males can also be adversely affected by the patriarchal constructs established by whiteness. They are also pressured to conform to patriarchy, but not to the degree or frequency that black males are. White males can walk down the street proud to be American in a way that black males cannot. White males created the system for white males. Blackness did not factor into it. Hence, whether consciously or subconsciously, pressure to conform is always present in the black male body. Within the imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy system, his very survival often depends on it.

Capitalism & Violence

Capitalism is the soul of America. It is one of the primary reasons foreigners migrate here. It is the root of the "American dream." There is enough wealth for all Americans to thrive. Yet only a tiny percentage of American citizens have access to it. By design, most of that percentage are white men. David T. Mollenkamp (2022) wrote:

> Although the term "racial wealth gap" technically refers to the difference in assets owned by different racial or ethnic groups, this gap results from a range of economic factors that affect the overall economic well-being of these different groups. The term reflects disparities in access to opportunities, means of support, and resources. ("What Is the Racial Wealth Gap?" section, para. 1)

He later continued supporting his findings with the following statistics:

- Data from the Federal Reserve Board's 2019 Survey of Consumer Finances shows that White families have greater wealth than other racial groups, with Black families and Latinx/Hispanic families having the least. For example, at middle and older ages, the median wealth of White families is four to six times greater than the median wealth of Black families. ("Understanding the Racial Wealth Gap" section, para. 1)
- White families with an unemployed head of household had almost double the wealth of Black families with a fully employed head of household, according to a 2017 article in the Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis Review. ("Understanding the Racial Wealth Gap" section, para. 1)
- In 2017, more than one in four Black households had a nonexistent or negative net worth. That compares to fewer than one in 10 for White families, according to the Economic Policy Institute. ("Understanding the Racial Wealth Gap" section, para. 1)

Historical factors that have caused this racial wealth chasm include income inequality, housing policies, political representation, and education (Mollenkamp, 2022). This capitalistic system was invented to advantage white males and their beneficiaries.

Within black communities, many social and religious beliefs around money and wealth have materialized due to capitalism. Commonly used language among black families includes such sayings as, "Money doesn't grow on trees," or the Biblical interpretation, "For the love of money is the root of all evil . . ." (*King James Bible*, 1769/2017, 1 Timothy 6:10). So long as the black collective conscience believes that financial wealth is a benefit only afforded to the "evil whites," the chasm of wealth may

only continue to widen. Hence, the difficulty and often desperation for black males to fulfill their patriarchal duty to provide increases. This makes the probability of creating generational wealth virtually nil for black men. Granted, there are exceptions like billionaires Andre "Dr. Dre" Young, Tyler Perry, and most recently, LeBron James. However, the few exceptions only demonstrate that black males *can* generate wealth. It does not substantiate the probability of such occurrences being comparable to white males.

If capitalism is the soul of America, violence is its heartbeat. One may be hard-pressed not to find the two interconnected. In a 2022 essay, Kellie Carter Jackson wrote:

> In America, the relationship between Black people and White supremacy is the story of violence. Violence was committed against Black people's ability to accumulate wealth. Violence was enacted against Black neighborhoods and environments. The attempt to perfect women's reproductive health was developed in violence. The attempt to integrate schools was met with violence. In Black America, we measure our oppression and even our progress with violence. Indeed, violence has become the fluid that propels us along from moments to movements, from funerals to fury. (para. 3)

Violence lies at the root of imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy. After all, it is the *Second* Amendment to the Constitution that secures all citizens the right to keep and bear arms. It is no coincidence that this security is the one many white men cling to most and defend at all costs. Hence, it is no surprise that a core pillar of traditional masculinity is aggrandizing violence. In this country,

> white supremacy and violence are their form of patriotism. We can wax poetic about football, baseball, and apple pie, but these are superficial aspects of our nationalism. When our founding fathers fought for independence, violence was the clarion call. Phrases such as "live free or die," "give me liberty or give me death," and "he who would be free must strike the blow" echoed throughout the nation. Force and violence have always been weapons to defend liberty. (Jackson, 2022, para. 4)

Violence seems so interwoven in the fabric of Americana it has emerged as a primary method for how law enforcement polices—especially with black males. Black male American citizens are commonly advised to "dial down" their blackness publicly for fear of being racially profiled, harassed, incarcerated, injured, or worse, murdered.

Assassination of George Floyd

"Here is what I would like for you to know: In America, it is traditional to destroy the black body. It is heritage" (Coates, 2015, "Chapter II" section, 43:15).

Among the numerous historical occurrences validating Coates' affirmation, none was more blatant and egregious than the 2020 assassination of George Floyd. On May 25, 2020, George Perry Floyd Jr., an unarmed black man aged forty-six, was murdered in Minneapolis, Minnesota by Derek Chauvin, a white male police officer. Following Floyd's arrest on suspicion of using a counterfeit $20 bill, Chauvin knelt on Floyd's neck for nine minutes, twenty-nine seconds while Floyd lay handcuffed face-down in the street. Two other police officers assisted Chauvin in restraining Floyd. A fourth police officer prevented bystanders from intervening, despite their pleas. Notwithstanding pleas for his own life, including calling out for his mother, Floyd died in the last moments of

the nearly ten-minute apprehension. Floyd's murder incited worldwide protests against systemic racism, police brutality, and lack of police accountability.

This was not an isolated incident of an unarmed black man's life being senselessly taken by law enforcement, whose job is to serve and protect. However, it was arguably the most blatant act of police brutality caught on video. On April 20, 2021, in an atypical fashion, Chauvin was found guilty of his crimes, a rightful consequence for an act of injustice. However, to be clear, *justice* would be reinventing a system in which such injustices are not allowed to occur in the first place. I believe there is still much work to be done in America to realize the creed of its pledge of allegiance, "one nation… indivisible with liberty and justice for *all*."

The violent, criminal actions of Derek Chauvin and his three accomplices were quintessential illustrations of the fate the imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy system makes possible for the black male citizen. This incident also illustrates the extreme cultic belief commonly perpetuated by whiteness that blackness is a menacing danger to society—or to whiteness itself—and must be stopped. Ergo, not only are black males not allowed to express their feelings, but also pleas for mercy on their lives fall on deaf ears. Unfortunately, this is one of many fatal realities inherent in the black male experience in America.

Blackness & Masculinity in America

Death or Imprisonment Narrative

One recurring sentiment within the black community regarding males is, "If he keeps up this behavior, he's either going to end up dead or in jail." This leads to the "death or imprisonment" narrative: Black males must "get their act together," otherwise

death or prison is the only alternative. This narrative is baked into systemic imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy. Further, it has successfully conditioned and controlled black males' mindsets. Subsequently, young black males frequently believe their only value to offer the world lies in their bodies. They must become a performer—mostly in some form of athletics or entertainment—to stay out of trouble and to avoid death or imprisonment.

In Sonia Lowman's 2020 documentary film *Black Boys*, author and ESPN journalist Howard Bryant passionately expressed:

> The black athlete is the most visible, most important, most influential black employee this country's ever produced. (7:41) . . . Then you look at the few that reached the NBA or the NFL. . . [They say] "Man if it wasn't for sports, I'd be dead or in jail." I think about that every time I read those stories and my heart breaks. Because I'm thinking at this late date, if "dead or in jail" is all there is, we have failed. We have failed miserably. And yet, people look at that dead or in jail narrative as progress because this one person makes $20 million a year. And there are graves all around him. (16:34)

He later continued:

> There has to be a collective belief system shift. It's okay to envision something else. What is that something else going to look like? I don't know. But this can't be all there is, because this doesn't work. This isn't working for anybody. (18:34)

Underpinning this narrative, wealthy white men, literally and figuratively, often bank on black men assessing and believing their value in society as subpar. The black male needs to "know his place within" patriarchal whiteness. Thus, the black male

subconsciously reduces his masculinity to believing his only place is to perform and entertain. Historically, black males have not had the same access as their white counterparts to compete in other arenas, such as white-collar careers. A system rooted in white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy is designed for black men to be less educated. During slavery, enslaved black people were punished or even murdered if their white masters learned they were educating themselves. As hooks (2004b) stated:

> When slavery ended in 1865 and four million black folks were free, most of them could not read or write. According to the census of 1900, 57 percent of black males were illiterate. Now. . . . black males make up a huge percentage of those who are illiterate. Being unable to read and write or possessing rudimentary skill sets, poorly educated black males are unprepared to either enter the ranks of the unemployed or to stay there. Even before black boys encounter a genocidal street culture, they have been assaulted by the cultural genocide taking place in early childhood educational institutions where they are simply not taught. (p. 46)

Today, learning institutions in predominantly black communities are grossly underfunded compared to predominantly white ones—yet another manifestation of systemic racism.

Capitalism is set up as an illusion of free enterprise and competition, with systems created and controlled by wealthy white men. For instance, at the time of this writing, there are no black NFL franchise owners; yet 70% of NFL players are men of color. White-supremacist capitalist patriarchy is a system in which white men maintain a competitive advantage and are unwilling to give it up to any "others." Consequently, viable competition for power is eliminated, much like in destructive cult groups.

Competition does not exist in cults. Cults function through control by the authority and compliance by the member.

Although this form of implicit emasculation of the black male was manufactured by patriarchal whiteness, it has been wholly corroborated by American society. Black families often see no other recourse than to train black men that patriarchal masculinity is *the* American way of life. Bryant poignantly captures this sentiment by quoting James Baldwin, "The most insidious piece of racism is believing what they say about you" (Lowman, 2020, 30:42).

Every life coach must be aware of the dynamics of systemic racism when working with a black male. Moreover, the coach's challenge is exploring the black male client's perceptual world to evoke awareness and disrupt the indoctrinated belief systems that keep him mentally, emotionally, and spiritually incarcerated. Ultimately, he can free himself to explore a new world of possibilities, desires, and choices beyond those that only value his body—a new world beyond sports, entertainment, prison, or death.

Fatherhood & Parental Wounds

In America, the two-parent family is touted as the only stable and ideal structure for children to thrive. I argue that may not necessarily be true. I did not live in a traditional household where both biological parents lived under the same roof. I still had two caring, loving parents with the support of our entire family. I always felt surrounded by love. Yet, I still experienced "parental wounds," as most black children do. These wounds did not result from the household structure. They resulted from unhealed emotional wounds passed down through generations. Justin Baldoni (2021) validated this idea, specifically regarding male parents:

> Unfortunately, the vast majority of men are raised by fathers who come from generations and generations of wounded and emotionally unavailable men who then pass on that same woundedness to their kids. Expressing love and saying "I love you" to many men, especially baby boomer men, is like speaking a foreign language. They may feel it, but unfortunately, they often don't have the tools or emotional capacity to express it. So, they show it the only way they know how, by working hard, by not complaining, by providing for their families and keeping them safe, as that's how they were taught to show their love. (p. 291)

Within the black community, a common wound portrayed in media is the "deadbeat dad" or the "fatherless son." While absentee fathers are an issue, these ideals are not exclusive to physically absent fathers. Some fathers who are physically present could potentially do just as much, if not more, damage to black boys. Conversely, fathers who are not always physically present can be just as, if not more, loving and nurturing. The physical presence of the biological father arguably matters less than the emotional presence of a loving black male caregiver. Such father figures can profoundly impact how black boys envision themselves as black men. (hooks, 2004b)

According to hooks (2004b):

> Since patriarchal culture overvalues the two-parent family, representing it as the ideal, all children in the nation who are raised in families that do not resemble this ideal have to be taught that their families are not defective. Children in homes where fathers are not present need to be taught that there is no "lack" that renders them flawed. This does not negate the reality that every child needs to experience connection with loving adult women and men, that children (even those created

> from sperm donations) want to know who their fathers are, and if the father can be known they want to encounter him. This will always be the case as long as the two-parent family is presented to children as the ideal. (p. 100)

While my father was not physically present in my primary childhood household, I knew he was always present in my life. He was available to me whenever I needed access to him. As such, I never yearned for my parents to reunite. I never accepted the two-parent family dynamic as the most ideal for me. Both sides of my family made sure I knew I was loved. My parents forcing themselves to stay together unhappily, for my sake, would not have served anyone—especially me.

This two-parent family construct is also based on patriarchal norms that teach men that childcare and nurturing are solely the mother's role. Research has shown that children are healthier when emotionally nurtured by both mother and father. Boys and girls, boys especially, need loving, adult males as models to demonstrate how to "negotiate the patriarchy" and navigate the system "in ways that are not soul damaging" (hooks, 2004b, p. 101):

> Since so many black males uncritically accept patriarchal thinking, they continue to believe that children do not need a father's care as much as they need mothers. This faulty logic, reinforced by patriarchal norms, persists even though it is more than apparent that children need to be nurtured by fathers, long for father love, and without it suffer. (hooks, 2004b, p. 101)

Female-specific Wounds

The patriarchal norms also sometimes obscure women's ability to unwittingly wound boys emotionally. In February 2020, I conducted a social experiment within a

popular Facebook group comprised mostly of women. I asked, “How do you help keep the men in your life emotionally connected?” Of the hundreds of responses, the majority were negative. Only a handful was positive. Common sentiments shared included:

- “You don’t! . . . They are grown men and if they are not capable of being responsible for their own connection . . . well . . . I say move over and allow someone deserving to connect with me!!!”
- “You can't, that's their job.”
- “Not my job to do that. He will either stay emotionally connected or not.”
- “Do men even emotionally connect?”
- “Y’all black men need to start working on your mommy issues. Y’all lazy.”

Initially mortified by the vitriol and fury within these responses, I was also saddened by the pain, fear, and suppressed anger projected by these women—primarily women of color. I was astounded that this wounded energy may be raising our young black boys. I experienced similar energy quite often from my mother. I recognized my well-intentioned question included some assumptions resulting in a broad and ambiguous context. Nonetheless, this experiment revealed to me how many mothers, specifically black females, have been so heart-hardened by the pain caused by their male partners that they may take on patriarchal norms of masculinity themselves to protect their boys from being “soft” or weak. They appear to demonstrate a more masculine side of their innate nurturing and empathetic spectrum. In bell hooks’ (2004a) exploration of poet Robert Bly’s work, she agreed:

> [he] is right to demand that we all look at the role mothers play in deadening the spirits of boy children, but he fails to acknowledge that such mothers in their acts

> of maternal sadism are really doing the work of patriarchal caretaking, doing what they were taught a good mother should do.
>
> It is highly ironic that we are now living in a time when we are told to question whether mothers can raise sons, when so many patriarchal men have been taught the beliefs and values of patriarchy by mothers, firsthand. Many mothers in patriarchal culture silence the wild spirit in their sons, the spirit of wonder and playful tenderness, for fear their sons will be weak, will not be prepared to be macho men, real men, men other men will envy and look up to. ("Healing Male Spirit" section, para. 3)

Education, Intellect, & Learning

One of the primary experiences of childhood and adolescence is education. Education is where individuals at that stage of human development spend the most time and energy. When I reflect on my educational experience, the emphasis was not so much on learning. It was more about getting "good grades." It was about achieving. It was about seeking accolades and approval. It was about being the best so others would also think I am the best. I resonated with Ta-Nehisi Coates in his 2015 work *Between the World and Me*:

> What did it mean to, as our elders told us, grow up and be somebody? And what precisely did this have to do with an education rendered as root discipline? The world had no time for the childhoods of black boys and girls. How could the schools? Algebra, biology, and English were not subjects so much as opportunities to better discipline the body to practice writing between the lines, copying the directions legibly, memorizing theorems extracted from the world

> they were created to represent. All of it felt so distant to me. I remember sitting in my seventh-grade French class and not having any idea why I was there. I did not know any French people, and nothing around me suggested I ever would. France was a rock rotating in another Galaxy, around another sun, and another sky that I would never cross. Why precisely was I sitting in this classroom? The question was never answered. I was a curious boy, but the schools were not concerned with curiosity. They were concerned with compliance. . . Schools did not reveal truths. They concealed them. ("Chapter 1" section, 32:11)

Coates' strong language makes schools even sound potentially cultic.

In my experience, I would debate that schools partially devitalized my curiosity. "The curiosity that may be deemed a sign of genius in a white male child is viewed as trouble making when expressed by black boys," said hooks (2004b, p. 44). In my world, there was little time to explore my dreams or to learn about subjects that interested me the most. I had to study, get good grades, get into a good college, get an excellent job with good benefits, etc. I was a prisoner of the fixed-performance frame.

I also recall encountering a phenomenon bell hooks (2004b) describes whereby intellect in black boys

> is perceived as suspect, as on the road to being a "sissy." Certainly as long as black people buy into the notion of patriarchal manhood, which says that real men are all body and no mind, black boys who are cerebral, who want to read, and who love books will risk being ridiculed as not manly. Certainly television representations of the studious black male in comedic sitcoms (for example, Urkel on Family Matters) suggest that the studious black male is a freak, a monster.

> Parents allow black boys to consume this negative image then wonder why they do not want to be serious learners and engaged readers. (p. 48)

I remember being teased and called "Steve Urkel"—from the television show *Family Matters*—countless times in grade school for being smart. I was called "nerd," "geek," "dork," and numerous other names. Yet somehow, I figured out how to excel as a performer in education, despite all the systems working against me. Through the pain, I held my head high. Unfortunately, not all black boys possess the self-esteem or the access to education that I had to explore beyond their physical bodies:

> Black boys, disproportionately numbered among the poor, have been socialized to believe that physical strength and stamina are all that really matter. That socialization is as much in place in today's world as it was during slavery. Groomed to remain permanent members of an underclass, groomed to be without choice and therefore ready to kill for the state in wars whenever needed, black males without class privilege have always been targeted for miseducation. They have been and are taught that "thinking" is not valuable labor, that "thinking" will not help them to survive. (hooks, 2004b, p. 43)

The imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchal society historically perceives the black male as unintelligent, dumb, or slow. Racism and sexism stereotype him as more valuable for his physicality than his intellect. In the racist world, the thinking black man is codified more as a threat than a valuable contribution to his community (hooks, 2004b). How does the black male navigate the world if he is discouraged from thinking or feeling?

"Cool Pose" & Black Adolescence

"Baby, take off your cool. I want to see you. I want to see you. Baby, don't you be so cool. I want to see you. I want to see you" (Outkast, 2003, 00:37).

One essence of performative masculinity among black American males can be encapsulated in the invention and integration of the *cool pose*. Cool pose is a strategic construct used by black males to survive and navigate the struggles of daily life being black in America. This persona of coolness is multi-faceted. It is believed to be a strength commonly interconnected with pride, respect, and masculinity. Simultaneously, coolness also serves as a mask covering pain that effectuates typical troubles among black males, such as failing in school, substance abuse, or street gangs (Majors & Billson, 1992, p. xi).

Majors and Billson (1992) offered that for many black males, "life is a relentless performance for the mainstream audience and often for each other. Creating the right image—the most impressive persona—is part of acting in a theater that is seldom dark" (p. 4). This persona often entails behaving with a stern demeanor, devoid of emotions, to prove to society that he is a strong and proud survivor in the face of centuries of systemic oppression (p. 5).

As the young black male develops from boyhood into adolescence, he learns how to brand himself with a suaveness in which he is considered among peers as

> 'down' instead of 'square'; one of the 'ins' not of the the 'outs.' If [he] does not conform to certain subcultural expectations for behavior, he risks not being in. On the streets he learns that being cool is the key to being in—his developing sense of dignity, confidence, and worth depend on it. (Majors & Billson, 1992, p. 4)

Jonathan L. Johnson (2013) supported the importance of black male youth peer groups:

> In adolescence and early adulthood, a Black male peer group is particularly influential in the lives of these individuals. This is a transformative time for young African American men, especially as they begin to shift away from the influences of their primary group. During this stage of development of their lives, Black male peer groups open the door of opportunity for African American men to deeply explore, alter, and define their own identities based on collective or individual experiences. Within this peer group, African American men develop a sense of comfort and security because they create their own space to fit in, with shared experiences of adversity and adaptation, challenger and supporter, each serving as both protégé and mentor. (Johnson, 2013, p. 38)

Yet, Majors & Billson (1992) continued to break down the emergence of the performative cool pose within these adolescent peer groups:

> Being cool is often the pivotal criterion for acceptance. Adolescents place onerous pressure on each other to conform to various kinds of cool behaviors. This pressure is amplified by the fact that adolescence is typically a period of confusion, ambivalence, emotional instability, identity confusion, and doubtful self-esteem. (p. 46)

Another expression of cool pose, contrasting the suave demeanor, can also be a "'restrained masculinity': emotionless, stoic, and unflinching" (Majors & Billson, 1992, p. 4–5). He builds and wears an armor suit to protect himself, mainly his heart, from potential harm. His strategy for avoiding pain is to avoid feelings. If he allows himself to experience joy, he must also be open to experiencing hurt. He perceives all emotions as unproductive.

> The iron clad façade of cool pose is a signature of "true" [emphasis added] masculinity, but it is one-dimensional. If it fails, masculinity fails. Coolness and manhood are so intricately intertwined that letting the cool mask fall, even briefly, feels threatening. This is the façade that provides security in an insecure world. This is the mask that provides outer calm in the midst of inner turmoil. (p. 28)

In many cases, the cool pose becomes its own cultic construct whereby black males hold other black males to the standard of coolness. If a black male perceives another as lacking the strict bylaws of the cool pose through strength and toughness, the male being judged is not respected as "man enough" or even "black enough." Majors and Billson (1992) reinforced this, stating, "Many black men have learned to live up to a harsh standard: real men are not involved with anyone or anything that is not cool" (p. 45). They further chronicled this dilemma:

> If a black man does not act in these prescribed ways, others are quick to ostracize and label him as corny, lame, or square. Coolness has become such an obsession with some black males that they may reject their brothers who do [perceived] uncool things, such as camping, visiting a museum, or attending a concert, simply because such activities are seen as a sign of softness or hypersensitivity. (Fordham and Ogbu include them among activities that young blacks may see as "acting white.") Avoiding such activities—just to keep friends or to escape cruel labels—becomes essential to the cool pose. It also has the same potential to thwart the enrichment and growth of a black youth because he avoids exposure to experiences that could help expand his personal, social, and political consciousness. (p. 45)

> Distancing themselves from uncool activities can have negative implications for how black males fare in the formal structures of school. Activities that are perceived as uncool are likely to include studying, going on field trips to museums, and relating positively to teachers. . . . (p. 46) If he does not conform, he is labeled as lazy, slow, or difficult by adults who have significant reward power over him. (p. 47)

The cool pose is such a deeply entrenched commitment for black men that it becomes him. It engulfs his chosen identity. "For those whose masculinity is defined so uniquely by the cool pose, unmasking is equivalent to being stripped of identity and being defenseless in a hostile environment" (Majors & Billson, 1992, p. 29). This tenacious quest for gender identity inherent among all males referred to as *masculine attainment* is quite the serpentine accomplishment for black males. Channels for attuning this deep sense of masculinity are "more fully available to white males than to black males" (pp. 30–31).

It can be argued that the effects of imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy have placed the black male into such a quandary that the cool pose may be his only stream of consciousness through which to filter all his interactions and interrelations with others:

> Unfortunately, many black males are unable—because of anger, bitterness, and distrust toward whites—to mainstream or evolve other forms of consciousness . . . His cool defense makes it extremely difficult for him to selectively let his guard down. He is impeded from showing affection for people he may really care about

> or people who may really care about him (including, ironically, non discriminating whites). (Majors & Billson, 1992, p. 42)

Ultimately, the cool pose is a survival mechanism that dissects the black male from his authentic self. He opts to wear the cool mask while repressing the vulnerable feelings that would allow him to connect with the world with his sense of dignity and integrity. He would rather perform his masculinity, perhaps the only perception of it he knows. This potentially steers others' misunderstandings of him. For example, the white male often negatively misinterprets the black male's common behaviors of being aloof, fearless, or emotionless as being irresponsible, lazy, or having an attitude problem. However, the black male may interpret those same behaviors as expressing his coolness (Majors & Billson, 1992, pp. 42–43). Additionally, hooks (2004b) offered a rarely discussed instance of cool pose whereby black boys feel pressure from white people to validate their blackness:

> Often in predominantly white educational settings, black males put on their ghetto minstrel show as a way of protecting themselves from white racialized rage. They want to appear harmless, not a threat, and to do so they have to entertain unenlightened folks by letting them know "I don't think I'm equal to you. I know my place. Even though I am educated I know you think I am still an animal at heart." (p. 48)

Paradoxically, white males have historically been allowed more freedom to express their masculinity, such as male anger, in ways that black males have not. Whites may widely consider a white-identifying male who expresses intense emotions to be strong and passionate. A black-identifying male expressing the same intensity is more

likely to be automatically rendered by whites as aggressive and threatening with little or no further inquiry. This is also congruent in the context of intense, loving emotions. White males commonly express their love to others more openly, especially toward other males. Black males expressing similar feelings are often perceived as uncool or weak. It is not uncommon for the black male's masculinity or even his sexuality to be called into question, typically by black males who have rendered themselves as cool. "Even as young children, blacks learn that they are unlikely to be treated like white Americans, despite the claims of a democratic society, regardless of how hard they work or how bright they are" (Majors & Billson, 1992, p. 46–47).

Consequently, within the context of the cool pose, intimacy is lost. This includes intimacy within interpersonal relationships with females as well as other men. The struggle to maintain the performative behavior associated with coolness is a disruption of any intimate relationship the black male could have with a friend, a sibling, a romantic partner, a parent, a mentor, or even a coach. Confronting tightly held beliefs created in childhood and solidified in adolescence can often be difficult for black men who have been conditioned to repress the very experiences that birthed those beliefs.

Life Coaching & Black American Males

The life coach must understand the effects of patriarchy when working with a black American male client who struggles with defining and expressing his masculinity. First, the coach must be able to identify any signs of cool pose within the client. They must be fearless in digging deeply into what lies beneath the cool façade. They should ask provocative questions to get to the root of what he is masking. The coach must approach the black male client with deep empathy and care for how he perceives his

world—his pain, his fears, and his desires. First and foremost, the wholeness of his person—his humanness—must be seen and acknowledged. Only then might he be willing to "take off his cool" and, perhaps for the first time, see himself:

> To end male pain, to respond effectively to male crisis, we have to name the problem. We have to both acknowledge that the problem is patriarchy and work to end patriarchy. Terrence Real offers this valuable insight: "The reclamation of wholeness is a process even more fraught for men than it has been for women, more difficult and more profoundly threatening to the culture at large." If men are to reclaim the essential goodness of male being, if they are to regain the space of openheartedness and emotional expressiveness that is the foundation of well-being, we must envision alternatives to patriarchal masculinity. We must all change. (hooks, 2004a, "Understanding Patriarchy" section, para. 28)

Christianity

In his three-book series *Conversations with God,* Neale Donald Walsch (2005/2018) professed:

> Everywhere religion has gone it has created disunity—which is the opposite of God. Religion has separated man from God, man from man, man from woman—some religions actually telling man that he is above woman, even as it claims God is above man—thus setting the stage for the greatest travesties ever foisted upon half the human race.
>
> I tell you this: God is not above man, and man is not above woman—that is not the "natural order of things"—but it is the way everyone who had power (namely, men) wished it was when they formed their male-worship religions,

> systematically editing out half the material from their final version of the "holy scriptures" and twisting the rest to fit the mold of their male model of the world. (Chapter 204, 04:39)

Americans, especially black Americans, are groomed into patriarchal thinking. This occurs most commonly through religion, specifically Christianity. Christian doctrines are rooted in patriarchal narratives. As bell hooks (2004a) expounded about her experience with her brothers:

> At church they had learned that God created man to rule the world and everything in it and that it was the work of women to help men perform these tasks, to obey, and to always assume a subordinate role in relation to a powerful man. They were taught that God was male. These teachings were reinforced in every institution they encountered—schools, courthouses, clubs, sports arenas, as well as churches. Embracing patriarchal thinking, like everyone else around them, they taught it to their children because it seemed like a "natural" way to organize life. ("Understanding Patriarchy" section, para. 4)

Black families have built entire belief systems around the narratives described above. These systems could be the potential cultic underpinnings that trap the black male within tiny boxes of whom he believes he should be. These are familiar narratives I have observed in black maleness, myself included. For years, my entire life encompassed proving my faith—and my worth as a man—to my family, church, and myself. I lived in a perpetual state of judgment where I felt I was never enough.

Walsch (2005/2018) further interpreted that one's faith in self must be diminished to believe in religion fully.

> Understand that in order for organized religion to succeed, it has to make people believe they need it. In order for people to put faith in something else, they must first lose faith in themselves. So the first task of organized religion is to make you lose faith in yourself. The second task is to make you see that it has the answers you do not. And the third and most important task is to make you accept its answers without question. (Chapter 204 section, 01:57)

I recall many Christian spirituals with such lyrical phrasings as "who saved a wretch like me" or "welcome into this broken vessel." These songs may subtly condition black people to believe they are less than whole; they are incomplete. Based on Walsch's interpretation, I believe this Christian ideology is the antithesis of spirituality. There are many ways one might define spirituality. Nicholas Grier (2020) shares one definition of spirituality as a "connection with something greater than oneself . . . " (p. 97). I would amend that definition to include self rather than exclude. I argue that a "greater" spirit also resides and manifests internally. Disintegrating self from spirituality also removes man's responsibility for his own life. It removes his ability to connect with himself or with others intimately. It could ultimately cripple him.

For context, most Christian-based religions are centered around the life of Jesus Christ—one-third of the Holy Trinity: God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Jay Haley (1986) unpacked the narrative of Jesus in biblical stories:

> Jesus was the first leader to lay down a program for building a following among the poor and the powerless. His basic tactic was to define the poor as more deserving of power than anyone else and so to curry their favor. With the first statements of his public life he pointed out that the poor were blessed. Speaking to

> an audience of the poor and discontented, he called them the salt of the earth, the light of the world, and he announced that the meek would inherit the earth. . . . The promises of Jesus to the poor have been used as a model by later mass movement leaders. He promised a paradise in some ill-defined future if only they followed him. (pp. 34–35)

In my observation, this narrative fits perfectly into frameworks used by leaders of common movements, including constructive and destructive cults. Haley continued:

> The basic strategy of leaders of communist, fascist, black power and other mass movements, consists of seeking power outside the establishment by cultivating the people who have been neglected and powerless. This populace is the majority in the countries where mass movements have succeeded. The leader defines the poor workers and peasants as more deserving of power than any other class, and he publicly attacks the wealthy and established. If the poor are sufficiently desperate . . . the odds increase for the success of the movement. (pp. 51–52)

This narrative of Jesus as the leader of "the poor and the powerless" underpins the popularity of Christian-based religions within black communities. Upon accepting Jesus Christ as "Lord and Savior," black people may unwittingly accept their status as poor and powerless, especially compared to those with wealth and power. They subscribe to this status being their only ticket to an inheritance of riches in the afterlife.

Grier (2020) describes how some black Christians have reduced their spiritual faith to the common saying, "as long as I got king Jesus, I don't need nobody else" Such rhetoric can be destructive to the community's well-being. It further promotes an egocentric worldview with little regard for its impact on any other relationships. If all one

ever needs is Jesus—or any other deity—without nurturing relationships with others, his faith fragments life. (p. 95) If a man only needs faith in an external God, totally devoid of faith in himself, how can he genuinely develop a deeper connection with himself? How is he equipped to check in with his mental and emotional well-being if he constantly seeks answers outside himself?

Often, black men neglect or even shun seeking health and wellness support because they interpret doing so as a contradiction to their faith. The challenge of a life coach working with a black Christian male client might be breaking through the rigid walls of religious belief systems such that the client can explore answers within himself. The coach must ask direct, provocative questions to unearth the more profound issues he may use his faith to repress. Grier (2020) assessed:

> While religious scholars and theologians have explored the nuances of religion and spirituality, more attention needs to be given by mental health professionals (and all persons caring for the mental health of black men) to the spirituality of black men, so that it can function as an effective resource for improving black men's mental health. (p. 96)

Though intentions may be honorable, Christian beliefs that relegate God to a male gender are commonly appropriated, weaponized, and used to target men. This occurs not only from other men but also from women. Specifically in American society, there is a "guy code"—a rigid, standardized system society uses to grade manhood and masculinity by comparing one male to another. I have observed this as quite common, especially among black males. If black males are perceived as being weak, effeminate, gay, a virgin, or physically less-endowed even, they tend to be severely emasculated. They are

dehumanized. He is not permitted room by society to explore and be his authentic self without harsh scrutiny and persecution. This persecution is commonly a prevalent modus operandi within the black Christian church. Historically, Christians deem those who do not fit the Christian rubric as unworthy:

> While spirituality, as a moral compass, can function as a positive resource for the mental wellbeing of Black men, it can also function destructively when it perpetuates homophobic, heteronormative, and sexist worldviews. . . . If spirituality is to be used to cultivate the survival, liberation, healing, and flourishing of Black men and the most vulnerable and marginalized people in the world, it must proceed without embracing oppressive sentiments. (Grier, 2020, p. 110)

I have often observed and experienced Christianity, veiled as spirituality, wielded as a purity test that traps believers into the prison of perfectionism. Much like the BITE model in cults, rigid rules of Christian-based religions are commonly used to control believers into a uniform way of life in which their freedom of expression is abated. Historically, many of the most popular destructive cults—People's Temple, Heaven's Gate—spawned from Christian-based roots. Also, like those cults, these rules are indoctrinated into people who genuinely believe this uniformity is of their own volition. These narrow interpretations do not always account for one's innate human right to choose for themselves. The Christian doctrine determines for them. They then do not need to think critically for themselves or trust their intuition.

In my experience, this is especially true for many black American Christian males. They have been so influenced by purity tests, perfectionism, and uniform

ideologies of religion that they box themselves into a world filled with limits. Ironically, the very religious faiths they have been granted the freedom to believe in by the First Amendment are also the constructs that crush the most authentic essence of his human spirit. They often deny their ability to define their authentic identity or masculinity. This could also be a potential cultic underpinning. For if the black male falls short of the glory of the Christian God narrative, he is likely not taken seriously by his community. Therefore, the black male has two options: he either conforms or puts on the mask and performs for survival. Either way, he holds his spirit hostage—the opposite of spirituality. The essence of black male spirituality integrates all his life experiences. His "being chronically disrespected, disregarded, discredited, feared, and devalued," as well as his "joy, gratitude, and celebration," must be seriously considered when exploring the spirit of the black male (Grier, 2020, p. 112).

Historical Context of Christianity in Black Culture

In her 2003 book, *Rock My Soul: Black People and Self-esteem*, bell hooks drew several profound distinctions regarding the critical role of Christianity in shaping blackness in America:

> [Christianity] served as a vital source of empowerment for both the small number of free Africans who came to these shores as immigrants or explorers and the large body of enslaved Africans. Fusing Christian traditions with the diverse spiritual traditions from Africa, black folks created ways to worship that were celebrating and life-sustaining. Significantly, enslaved Africans, like their free counterparts, did not uncritically embrace Christianity. They interpreted scriptures and chose texts that reinforced their humanity, their quest for liberation. . . .

> Through their religious and spiritual experience enslaved Africans not only kept hope alive, they developed a liberation theology, designed to serve as a constant reminder of their right to freedom, to citizenship, to divine love. . . .
>
> In the world beyond slavery the radical religion of the slave began to change. As the black church became in time an organized corporate institution the religion of African Americans shifted from the liberation theology that had been so necessary for survival and settled in a conservative faith, one that relied on more fundamentalist interpretations of the Bible. . . . ("Spiritual Redemption" section, para. 5)
>
> Black people who embraced a more fundamentalist Christian doctrine, with its binary focus on good and evil, dark and light, chosen and unchosen, could no longer look to religion to provide a healthy basis for self-esteem. By investing in a belief system that not only deemed some folks worthy and others unworthy, but suggests it is natural for the strong to rule over the weak, that those who do not obey authority should be punished, black folk were essentially internalizing the Western metaphysical dualism that was already used to affirm and uphold domination. (para. 7)

The above "binary focus" is the essence of the *mechanistic worldview*. The mechanistic worldview is rooted in dualism. There are only two options in this worldview: either this or that—right or wrong, good or bad, strong or weak, powerful or powerless, black or white. There is no gray. There is no in-between.

Bettie Spruill and Vic Gioscia (2010) depicted the mechanistic worldview as, "I am in here and everything else is out there. That which is real (i.e., exists) is determined

by a set of laws that are fixed and immutable" (p. 1). The number one rule of this worldview is the "Rule of Single Fixed Reality," which states, "There is one version of reality that is reasonable. There can be other versions, but they are unreasonable" (p. 3). The outcome of this rule is "the notion that there is only one ultimate perception of reality that is right, and that all others are wrong. . . . This breeds intolerance" (p. 3).

Countering the mechanistic worldview is the *ecological worldview*. The number one rule of this worldview is the "Principle of Multiple Evolving Realities," which states, "There can be more than one worldview" (Spruill & Gioscia, 2010, p. 9). The outcome of this rule is "acceptance of diversity and difference" (p. 9).

In my assertion, intolerance within the mechanistic worldview is the centerpiece of the Western European gaze. It is the nucleus of many Christian doctrines. It is the foundation upon which an imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchal America was built. It is the cement that has concretized beliefs among black people that they lack worthiness, power, and authority; thus, they must be "saved." Ultimately, Christianity teaches believers that they must seek this salvation outside of themselves. They are only powerful when they have proclaimed an externalized Savior as their power.

Life Coaching & Christianity

> Most men in our society believe in higher powers, and yet they have learned to devalue spiritual life, to violate their own sense of the sacred. Hence the work of spiritual restoration—of seeing the souls of men as sacred—is essential if we are to create a culture in which men can love. When the hearts of men are full of compassion and open to love, then, as the Dalai Lama states, "there is no need for temple or church, for mosque or synagogue, no need for complicated philosophy,

> doctrine or dogma, for our own heart, our own mind, is the temple and the doctrine is compassion." (hooks, 2004a, Healing Male Spirit, p. 24)

A life coach may encounter challenges cutting through rigid, deeply indoctrinated Christian beliefs when working with black American male clients. For instance, one common trait is resignation. Instead of accepting responsibility and ownership of his life choices, he might often say he is "giving it up to God." The coach may choose to dig more into what that means. The objective is not to attempt to force a change or shift the belief. It is neither to match binary thinking with more of the same by making him wrong. Instead, explore the coaching client's feelings, thoughts, and core values to get underneath the belief at the level of his perceptual identity.

Humans are not born with beliefs. In childhood, humans form a sense of self-concept. They identify with values often forced upon them by their parental figures, thus believing they are like them (Williams & Thomas, 2005). Ultimately, a belief is a decision. Humans decide to believe in something based on a set of experiences—their own or otherwise—that match their self-concept. Therefore, instead of focusing on the beliefs, effective coaching focuses on the human. The human is being developed, not the beliefs. The coach must first see the black male as human. Allow the black male client to navigate his thoughts and feelings in a way that his Christian faith may never have allowed. The coach is always aware that all answers and truths lie within the client. What I believe is missing from Christianity—and often from coaching—is allowing humans to "fall apart" with dignity, grace, and skill (Primitivo Rojas-Cheatham, MPH, personal communication, March 2021). The coach must be fearless in navigating difficult

conversations, truths, and challenges with their black male clients. Life coaching for black males is the journey of remembering their wholeness:

> Wounded black men can heal. The healing process requires that they break through denial, feel what they feel, and tell the truth. In recovery work the often-evoked phrase "you are only as sick as your secrets" is insightful. A culture of domination is always one that prefers lies over truth. Black males who lie—to themselves, to everyone in their lives—are unable to experience the integrity that is essential to emotional wellbeing, that is the core of healthy self-esteem. Lies do not work. Telling the truth is the way to heal. Nothing stands in the way of any black male taking this step in the direction of wellbeing. He simply needs to seek salvation. The root meaning of salvation is "wholeness." As black males courageously confront the pain in their lives, facing reality, they can take the broken bits and pieces and make themselves whole again. (hooks, 2004b, p. 95)

Summary

In this chapter, I presented a comprehensive review of the literature examining several categories identified as essential to the lived experience of black American Christian males. These categories included performative masculinity, cults, blackness and Americana, and Christianity. I also begin introducing elements of a life coaching model to address these properties. Whom any human thinks they are currently "is at best incomplete, and probably inaccurate" (Williams & Thomas, 2005, p. 41). This is no less true for black males. Impactful life coaching addresses the whole being of the black male. This is made possible, in significant part, by both coach and client being more aware of his dismembering thoughts and beliefs. Williams and Thomas (2005) reinforced this idea:

> The reality outside your skin can never force you to change your mind or modify your beliefs. You do however have the capacity to change your mind. You can change your own belief systems by making new choices, taking new actions, and experimenting with new responses. (p. 18)

The black American Christian male paradigm shift may begin when he begins sensing and feeling his power.

CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH METHODS

Phenomenological Research Approach

Several research approaches were considered for this study, including quantitative, various qualitative methods, and mixed methods. A mixed-method approach was selected for this study, integrating phenomenological, grounded theory, and case study research design. In his 2015 book, *A Concise Introduction to Mixed Methods Research*, John W. Creswell defined mixed methods research as

> an approach to research in the social, behavioral, and health sciences in which the investigator gathers both quantitative (closed-ended) and qualitative (open-ended) data, integrates the two and then draws interpretations based on the combined strengths of both sets of data to understand research problems. (p. 2)

Merriam & Tisdell (2016) further encapsulated why this mixed method approach was adopted:

> A central characteristic of all qualitative research is that individuals construct reality in interaction with their social worlds. Constructivism thus underlies what we are calling a basic qualitative study. Here the researcher is interested in understanding the meaning a phenomenon has for those involved. Meaning, however, "is not discovered but constructed. Meaning does not inhere in the object, merely waiting for someone to come upon it. . . . Meanings are constructed by human beings as they engage with the world they are interpreting" (Crotty, 1998, pp. 42–43). Thus, qualitative researchers conducting a basic qualitative

> study would be interested in (1) how people interpret their experiences, (2) how they construct their worlds, and (3) what meaning they attribute to their experiences. The overall purpose is to understand how people make sense of their lives and their experiences.
>
> Although this understanding characterizes all of qualitative research, other types of qualitative studies have an additional dimension. For example, a phenomenological study seeks understanding about the essence and the underlying structure of the phenomenon. . . . A grounded theory study seeks not just to *understand*, but also to build a substantive theory about the phenomenon of interest. (p. 24)

In this study, I was curious to unearth insight into how black American Christian males interpret, construct, and give meaning to their lived experiences. I also sought to research my theory of possible cultic underpinnings and professional coaching solutions to address this phenomenon.

This chapter described the phenomenological and grounded theory approach that was used. This mixed approach examined the essence of performative masculinity concerning the shared experiences of black American Christian males. Heuristic inquiry, a version of phenomenological analysis in which the investigator integrates analyses of their experiences of the phenomenon, was utilized as a reference point for further data collection (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 227). Included in this chapter are descriptions of the following: (a) research design, (b) subjects, (c) instrumentation, (d) data collection procedures, and (e) data analysis procedures.

Research Design

The research design of this study stemmed from my interests, lived experiences, and natural curiosity regarding the phenomenon of performative masculinity. My commitment to creating a valuable contribution to the coaching field also drove this research (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 74). I intended to approach this research methodology as organically and authentically as possible. My research design allowed the data and my curiosity to guide the process openly and unbiasedly.

To best explore cultic underpinnings of performative masculinity among black American Christian males, I chose the research design approach Creswell (2015) refers to as the *explanatory sequential design*. In this mixed method research type, "the quantitative data are collected first; the collection of the qualitative data follows, generally with the purpose of *explaining* the results or a particular part of the findings more in depth" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 47). First, I intended to spend ample time learning about the phenomenon in question. Next, I leveraged the gathered information for the most effective phenomenological study. I wanted to explore other voices, primarily on masculinity and cults, to amplify the voices of black American males and their experiences. A similar qualitative approach was used in the research of Jonathan L. Johnson in his 2013 study on *The Social Construction of Ethnicity and Masculinity of African American College Men*. I chose a less structured process.

Heuristic inquiry. I began qualitative research with a series of self-interviews conducted by an outside investigator regarding my experience and worldview of the performative masculinity phenomenon. I then reviewed the interview recordings to

identify common themes as primary elements of the study—blackness, Americana, Christianity, etc. These themes were used to construct the survey questionnaire.

Survey questionnaire. I constructed a standard forty-question survey (Appendix C) to observe and identify emerging patterns in selected subjects' worldviews, thoughts, feelings, and experiences.

Interviews. Interviewees were selected from the pool of surveyors solely based on their survey responses, following an initial analysis of the survey data. I conducted one-on-one interviews (Appendix E) with these subjects to gather information about how they recall their lived experiences as children and adolescents and how they interpret and experience the world now.

Coaching case study. I invited one qualified coaching client to participate in the study. Our professional life coaching partnership consisted of multiple coaching sessions (not exceeding ten sessions) at a bi-weekly cadence. The purpose of this coaching partnership was for the coach and client to deeply explore his worldview, experiences, and feelings in a new way. I also observed and explored new possibilities for the expansion of coaching methodology. The client completed a post-coaching interview following the final session with the coach. For the case study, I analyzed the client's survey data, session recordings, session notes, and post-interview data (Appendix G).

Research Questions

I hypothesized that many black American Christian males are not taught how to access their power to choose how to define masculinity for themselves as they transition from adolescence into adulthood. They are forced into a perception of masculinity they did not choose in cultic ways. They perform what they are taught.

Further pondering this theory, the research questions were as follows:

1. Are there links between cults and masculinity forcing performative behavior among black American Christian males? If so, what are they?
2. Does race play a role in shaping how black American males viewed themselves as men or behaved as men? If so, how?
3. Does Christian-based religion play a role in shaping how black American males viewed themselves as men or behaved as men? If so, how?
4. How do black American Christian males define masculinity as adults when allowed access to their power to choose?
5. What might be possible for black American males if this power is awakened and nurtured in adulthood by life coaching?

Subjects

For this study, subjects were recruited using purposeful sampling. This form of selection was "based on the assumption that the investigator wants to discover, understand, and gain insight and therefore must select a sample from which the most can be learned" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 96). Patton (2015) emphasized how the term purposeful sampling was derived from the *information-rich cases* that drive it. Understanding these cases is core to the purpose of the inquiry. (p. 53, as cited in Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 96). Based on this reasoning, I selected black American male subjects who contributed meaningful accounts of their information-rich experiences.

In addition to *criterion-based selection*, Johnson utilized a purposeful sampling approach in his 2013 study. In this sampling approach, the researcher determined the sample attributes most critical to the study's purpose, recruiting only those who match

those criteria (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 97). Johnson's (2013) rationale for using "this combination of purposeful sampling was directly related to the specific intent of the study" (p. 65). My intention for this study and sampling approach was to examine everyday experiences, emotions, and beliefs among black males regarding their masculinity, race, nationality, and faith. The sample criteria I chose were as follows:

- Currently 18 years of age or older
- Identify as cis-gender male
- Identify as Black or of African descent
- American citizen at least since the age of 12
- Currently identify or formerly identified as Christian (i.e., having grown up with Christian background or beliefs)

Subjects were solicited via a personal invitation to friends, family, and professional network who best fit the criteria, especially those who have previously expressed interest in masculinity. I also cast a wider net using specific social media platforms—primarily LinkedIn and Facebook.

The sample size for this study was not predetermined. Johnson (2013) highlights in his research, "Patton (2002) emphasizes that determining sample size is not absolute but depends on what the researcher wants to know and defines as the purpose of the study as well as the usefulness of information received" (p. 67). Furthermore,

> Lincoln and Guba (1985) recommend sampling until a point of saturation or redundancy is reached. "In purposeful sampling the size of the sample is determined by informational considerations. If the purpose is to maximize information, the sampling is terminated when no new information is forthcoming

> from new sampled units; thus *redundancy* is the primary criterion." (p. 202, emphasis in original, as cited in Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 101)

For this study, twenty-seven subjects participated in completing the survey. From the pool of surveyors, six subjects were selected for individual interviews based on my analyses of patterns and commonalities among subjects' responses. Two individuals were invited to participate in the coaching case study. Only one agreed and followed through.

Instrumentation

In my breadth of research, I found no existing reliable or valid assessments that directly address or pertain to this study, the phenomenon of performative masculinity, or the cultic underpinnings therein. Therefore, I cultivated a simple yet effective process for collecting data appropriate for the study.

Survey Questionnaire

Based on my quantitative research and heuristic inquiry findings, I pondered numerous scenarios I have experienced and observed, including their underlying themes. I used these pieces to create a list of over 70 experiential statements. I consolidated these statements into the final 40-inquiry questionnaire (Appendix C). I carefully curated the inquiries in this questionnaire to collect the data most significant to the intention of this study. I determined these 40 inquiries to be most effective in examining the black male experience of the masculine phenomenon.

Interview Structure

The combination of standardized and semi-structured interview types was most appropriate for this study. The attributes infused into the interview structure are outlined by Merriam and Tisdell (2016) as follows:

- Wording of some questions are predetermined while others are a mix of more and less structured questions
- Most questions used flexibly
- Part of the interview is oral form of a written survey
- Specific data required from all respondents
- Some questions are used to obtain demographic data
- No predetermined order for questions (p. 110)

Leveraging responses from the questionnaire, I customized open-ended questions contextualized to each interviewee for deeper insight into their thoughts, emotions, and behaviors relevant to this study.

Coaching Framework

I learned numerous coaching models during my coaching training and my experiences working with multiple companies. Many of these frameworks are interconnected, simply using distinct language. For this study, I fused two frameworks: the OME model and the CBC model.

The first was the ontological, mindful, ecological (OME) model taught by Ideal Coaching Global—an International Coaching Federation (ICF) accredited coach training program. *Ontology* is a philosophical study of the human experience. It is a deeper exploration of "being" in the world, presupposing that humans are beings of interpretation. Thus, it focuses on practices and linguistic habits that shape possibilities for human life. The objective of this model is to transform socially constructed paradigms. It offers a sharpened lens through which to view, invent, and shape the world through linguistic, ecological, and cultural embodiment (Ideal Coaching Global, n.d.).

The OME model also integrates the ICF core competencies as the foundation for the coaching framework. The ICF (International Coaching Federation, n.d.) core competencies are as follows:

1. Demonstrates ethical practice
2. Embodies coaching mindset
3. Establishes and maintains agreements
4. Cultivates trust and safety
5. Maintains presence
6. Listens actively
7. Evokes awareness
8. Facilitates client growth

The second framework was the cognitive-behavioral coaching (CBC) model developed by Lyra Health, Inc. This model explores the relationship between human thoughts, emotions, and behaviors. It offers coaching clients tactical tools for stress management, relationship skill development, mental/emotional wellness, and overall personal growth. The CBC model focuses on core principles such as values, thinking patterns, mindful awareness, effective communication, and acceptance.

Over the last three years, I have integrated these models to develop a life coaching framework called *divinity coaching*. Divinity coaching is flexible, not rigid. It is not a templated or scripted process. This hybrid framework fuses OME and CBC models for a more complete and enriching coaching experience. While it offers tools from the CBC model, they are not forced upon the client. It also focuses on partnering with the client for deep reflection and inquiry into their personhood (OME), not their "problems."

In this case, the connotation of "divinity" does not allude to any religious faith or deity. The term "divine" is also defined as "supremely good; superb" (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). Therefore, the divinity coaching framework is rooted in awakening an individual's inner power and authority to create their best lives, regardless of their faith. It is a journey of self-discovery, self-mastery, and self-creation. The objective of this framework is for clients to emerge from this coaching partnership with the empowerment, insight, and skills to author their lives with a greater sense of ease, grace, purpose, and freedom. Divinity coaching was the framework used for this study.

Validity, Reliability, & Ethical Considerations

Confidentiality. All subjects completed and signed informed consent forms (Appendix B) to participate in this study. The identity of all survey participants remained confidential throughout the process. Interviewees and the coaching client either selected or were assigned pseudonyms to protect their identities. All subjects, with their consent, understood (1) the purpose of the study, (2) their participation and time commitment to this study were voluntary, and (3) their right of refusal to withdraw participation from the study at any time.

All informed consent documentation was submitted to and approved to reduce possible risks by the International University of Professional Studies (IUPS). The academic committee approved all research procedures before conducting the study.

Validity and reliability. Johnson (2013) cites:

> In quantitative research, the term validity is used to describe the accuracy or credibility of an instrument that is designed to measure what it is supposed to measure, through prescribed standardized procedures (Creswell, 2003; Patton,

> 2002; Voght, 1998). In qualitative research, the researcher serves as the instrument, whereby credibility and verification of data are described in terms of the trustworthiness and authenticity of the study. Specifically, Patton (2002) suggests that the researcher must maintain a high-level of fairness, balance, as well as conscientiously reflect the multiple perspectives, interests, and realities of participants' experiences and collected data. (p. 78)

The mixed-method research design used for this study applies quantitative and qualitative criteria to assess its trustworthiness (Creswell, 2015, as cited in Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 238). As the researcher, I was keenly present to the impact of my research on the field of professional coaching and human development. Consequently, the data's validity and reliability and analysis were contingent upon the rigor of the study. Thus, I intended to conduct it so that it unveils "insights and conclusions that ring true to readers, practitioners, and other researchers" (p. 238).

Ethics. Due to the sensitivity of the masculinity discussion and potentially cultic implications, I strongly considered ethical principles regarding how I conducted the study. It was imperative that I: (1) gather meaningful and experiential data in a non-coercive manner for optimal effect and impact, and (2) handle all participants and processes of this research with the utmost care, safety, and trust. Ultimately, "it is the training, experience, and 'intellectual rigor' of the researcher, then, that determines the credibility of a qualitative research study" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 260).

Data Collection Procedures

In this section, I described how my methodology was utilized to accumulate data for this study. All data collected was used only for observing the phenomenon of

masculinity, identifying and examining essential cultic aspects of such phenomenon, and exploring a coaching framework addressing black American Christian males. This study contributes to the coaching profession by bringing forth a more holistic and elevated approach to integrating the masculinity conversation into this specific community.

Due to the sensitive nature of this topic, I anticipated challenges in collecting data sufficient for this study. However, I learned in the process that there is great interest in masculinity. Also, with enough rapport, I observed that many black males were overwhelmingly intrigued and willing to participate in this study. Rapport was established with subjects in pre-screening through private messaging via either direct message via social media inbox, SMS text messaging, or a phone call.

Phase 1: Heuristic Inquiry

I began my qualitative research with a series of interviews whereby an outside investigator conducted four interviews with me, each around one hour long. The outside investigator recommended using the platform Riverside to conduct the recorded interviews in a podcast style. We discussed my feelings and experiences regarding my journey with masculinity. I wrote numerous notes in my journal about these experiences and used these notes to curate themes. These experiences and themes were leveraged to craft the inquiries I was most curious to explore with subjects in the survey.

Phase 2: Surveying

Once I curated the 40-inquiry survey from heuristic notes, I tested several platforms to gauge which would be most effective in collecting questionnaire data. I found Google Forms to be the most effective for this study. The survey began with a nine-inquiry screening questionnaire to confirm if the subject met the desired eligibility

criteria for participating in my investigation. Including myself, twenty-nine subjects completed the survey. Two were disqualified as they did not fully meet the requirements in the screening. Thus, twenty-seven total qualified subjects participated in the survey.

Phase 3: Interviewing

"Interviewing is necessary when we cannot observe behavior feelings, or how people interpret the world around them. It is also necessary to interview when we are interested in past events that are impossible to replicate" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 108). For this study, interviews provided more profound insight into the subjects' perspectives and interpretations regarding the phenomenon of masculinity. Interviews also allowed me to explore further parallels between the themes identified in the quantitative research and the subjects' experiences.

My intention for this study was to collect meaningful, information-rich accounts of the black American Christian male experience. Thus, I determined the hybrid of standardized and semi-structured approaches most effective for this data collection phase. "Interviewing in qualitative investigations is more open-ended and less structured. Less-structured formats assume that individual respondents define the world in unique ways. . . . Questions thus need to be more open-ended. A less-structured alternative is the *semistructured* interview" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 110).

Each interview (Appendix E) infused standard, pre-determined questions for cohesiveness in the investigation with less-structured, open-ended questions customized for each subject per their survey responses. The first interview was conducted via recorded phone call. All three subsequent were conducted *asynchronously* via written

email. I chose this alternative method to allow subjects ample time for reflection and clarity in how they wish their responses to be documented.

"In general, it is helpful to build rapport with participants when conducting qualitative interviews. Rapport building can be slightly more challenging in text-only asynchronous venues" (James & Busher, 2012, as cited in Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 115). Therefore, I selected interviewees from the survey pool in which rapport was sufficiently established through text-based and verbal communication beforehand.

Following the initial individual interview, a post-interview profile questionnaire (Appendix F) was provided to collect biographical profile information for this study. In this questionnaire, subjects were invited to choose a pseudonym for anonymity and confidentiality. If the subject did not choose an alias or did not prefer one, I selected one for them. After reviewing all the collected information, I determined that no further information was necessary for this study.

Phase 4: Coaching

One unique component of this study is its contribution to the professional coaching and human development field. Among numerous ways to address the phenomenon of performative masculinity among black American Christian males, the one explored in this study is life coaching. Accordingly, I invited one of my private coaching clients to participate in this investigation by using our coaching partnership as a model case study.

We completed seven coaching sessions bi-weekly over the course of three months. Audio for each session was recorded via Zoom with the client's consent asked each time—as aligned with the ICF code of ethics. The client also completed the survey

(Appendix C) to assess his shifts in perspective following coaching. The client and I created a coaching blueprint in our first session. We defined and outlined his purpose, outcomes he wanted to accomplish during our engagement, actions and practices to get him there, and the embodiment to shape those actions and practices.

The client completed a post-coaching interview (Appendix F) after the final session via written email. Questions in this interview were customized based on the client's survey results and coaching experience. The case study generated from the data collected gave me added insight into the expansion of coaching methodology to address performative masculinity among black America Christian males.

Data Analysis Procedures

Merriam & Tisdell (2016) created numerous compelling arguments regarding data analysis. First, they offered that data "collection and analysis should be a simultaneous process in qualitative research. . . . A qualitative design is emergent" (p. 195). Prior to this research, I had no knowledge or certainty of who might be interviewed, the questions I would ask, or the next steps. Thus, I found it most effective to analyze the data as I collected it (p. 195). In narrowing the focus of the study, I chose to generate a theory about a specific aspect of masculinity within a targeted group. This prevented my data collection and analysis processes from being too broad and ambiguous (p.197).

Computer software, including Google Forms and Microsoft Excel, was used to collect and compile analytical data for the survey. Following my hunches and intuitions during the ongoing analysis of survey data, I ended the data collection at the *saturation* point. "Saturation occurs when continued data collection produces no new information or

insights into the phenomenon [being studied]" (p. 199). I then elected to conduct enough interviews to provide sufficient data to generate themes relevant to this study.

All collected data was organized and labeled systematically to manage my thoughts, ponderings, field journals, intuitions, and hunches in preparation for my analysis (p. 200). Data was stored on a secure cloud drive and backed up on a physical drive for additional protection. Furthermore, all data were analyzed in a neutral, unbiased manner. I intended to explore and learn distinctions from previous literature and add to them.

Phenomenological Analysis

The foundation of this phenomenological analysis was a phenomenological reduction. According to Merriam & Tisdell (2016),

> The purpose of phenomenological reduction is to lead the researcher back to the experience of the participants and to reflect on it, in order to try to suspend judgment, so that one can stay with the lived experience of the phenomenon in order to get at its essence. (p. 227)

Additionally, I chose a more personalized version of phenomenology, heuristic inquiry, to include my lived experiences as part of the data (p. 227). My intention with this analytical approach as the basis was to keep the experience of the phenomenon of performative masculinity in the foreground.

Grounded Theory

In the grounded theory method, the strategy constantly compared one occurrence with another. From these comparisons, the researcher formulates a theory. As the methodology name implies, the theory that emerges is grounded in the data. I identified

specific categories, properties, and one core category from my grounded theory. I then observed and inferred any links between these categories and properties to form my hypothesis (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, pp. 228–229).

"To enable the development of a grounded theory, Corbin and Strauss (2015) suggest three phases of coding—open, axial, and selective" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 229). I used open coding at the beginning of my data analysis to highlight information relevant to this study. Axial coding is where I compared categories and properties with each other. Finally, selective coding was the phase in which I formulated my hypothesis. (p. 229)

Case Study

The case study approach was utilized for this research as a "holistic description and analysis of a single, bounded unit" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, pp. 232–233). In this case, the unit was a professional life coaching partnership with an actual coaching client invited to participate in this study. Data for this case was gathered from the client's survey, session recordings and transcripts, session notes, and post-coaching interview. This case study analysis intended to gain insight into the actual experience of coaching a black America Christian male. This insight was leveraged to enrich the development of a coaching methodology that addresses the phenomenon of masculinity within this specific demographic.

CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

Summary

This research study's objective was to examine the essence of the black American Christian male experience concerning forced beliefs regarding masculinity that may inhibit them from their innate power to thrive. Additionally, this study explored how life coaching can shift these paradigms. In this chapter, I reported the information-rich data and findings from heuristic inquiry, surveys, interviews, and a case study. Findings in this chapter also addressed my research inquiries.

Research Questions

In Chapter 1, I theorized that many adolescent black American Christian males have been conditioned out of awareness, in cultic ways, of their innate power to choose how to define masculinity for themselves. This phenomenon perpetuates the belief that the authentic essence of who they are is somehow not enough. Instead, they rely on familial, cultural, societal, and religious constructs to dictate how they behave and perform as men.

The research questions steering this inquiry were as follows:

1. Are there links between cults and masculinity forcing performative behavior among black American Christian males? If so, what are they?
2. Does race play a role in shaping how black American males viewed themselves as men or behaved as men? If so, how?

3. Does Christian-based religion play a role in shaping how black American males viewed themselves as men or behaved as men? If so, how?
4. How do black American Christian males define masculinity as adults when allowed access to their power to choose?
5. What might be possible for black American males if this power is awakened and nurtured in adulthood by life coaching?

In the grounded theory analysis, four main categories emerged from research as follows: (1) the intersection of cultic dynamics and the black American Christian male—the core category; (2) the essence of the adult black American male experience; (3) the emergence of performative masculinity in black male adolescence; and (4) the influence of Christianity on the black male experience. Interwoven in the core category are the following properties that address all research questions: (1) contradistinguishing power and force; (2) replacing conformity and compliance with agency; (3) reducing the impact of imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy; (4) reimagining depictions and demonstrations of the masculine spectrum; and (5) reclaiming imagination and intimacy eroded in black boyhood. Within these reported findings, I focus on the core category and its properties as the most significant. The other main categories are reported as nonsignificant.

Subjects

Including myself, twenty-seven total subjects participated in this survey. Eight subjects were interviewed. One was selected for the coaching case study. All participating subjects met the following criteria:

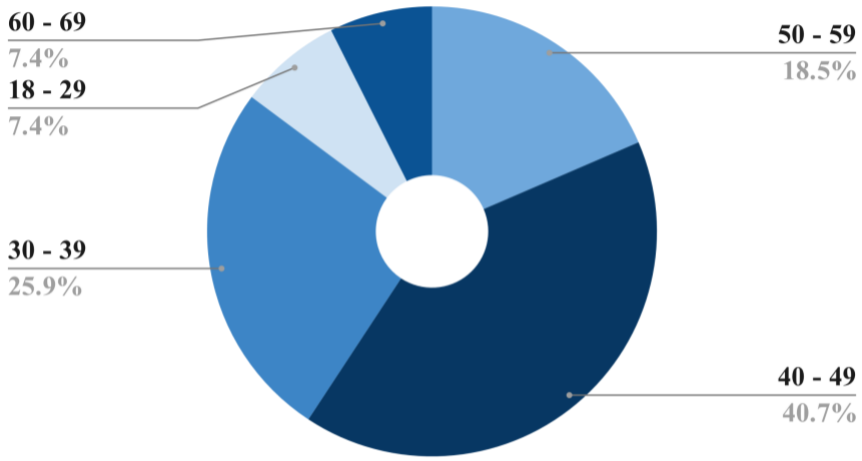
- Currently 18 years of age or older

- Identify as cis-gender male
- Identify as Black or of African descent
- American citizen at least since the age of 12
- Currently identify or formerly identified as Christian (i.e., having grown up with Christian background or beliefs)

To maintain privacy and confidentiality, interviewed subjects were encouraged to select a pseudonym. If they had no preference, I randomly selected an alias for them for anonymity. The total subjects ranged in age from 18–69, as shown in Figure 4-1. Interviewees ranged in age from 35 to 53. The case study client's age is 50.

Figure 4-1

Subjects' Age Ranges



Interviewee Profiles

Sean. Sean is a 48-year-old award-winning educator, entrepreneur, motivational speaker, and philanthropist. He earned a bachelor's degree in civil engineering and a master's degree in education. He was born and raised in Oakland, CA, where he currently resides. He is single with no children. His sexual orientation is heterosexual.

Raised by a single mother on welfare, Sean did not have a relationship with his father. He describes his experience growing up as a "hyper-sensitive" mother doing her best to raise a "sensitive boy." He did not have a male figure in his youth to teach him how to navigate his emotions. Ultimately, this experience catalyzed his passion and his life's work.

Sean has dedicated his life work to teaching and mentoring today's youth. He pivoted from engineering, discovering his passion for nurturing emotional intelligence in young men of color. His mission is to alter the relationship between students and their institutions. His vision is to "create a world of freedom by teaching youth to break their chains."

Raheem. Raheem is a 44-year-old health psychologist, spiritual scientist, human design architect, and esoteric teacher. He earned a bachelor's degree in nutrition science and a master's degree in health/medical psychology. He is currently pursuing his doctorate in health/medical psychology. He was born in Fort Knox, KY. His ethnic background is Haitian-Levi tribe descent. His sexual orientation is heterosexual.

Raheem grew up knowing his biological father, but the father-son bond was non-existent. He described his father as emotionally unavailable. Thus, they were not able to connect intimately. This ultimately shaped his relationship with his three beautiful children. He described himself as a loving and caring father. His intentions are to demonstrate emotional availability for his children that his father was not for him.

Raheem described himself as a spiritual, ambitious, compassionate, loving, expansive, curious, and evolving being. As a self-professed "military brat," he was privileged to travel and experience many cultures. One noteworthy trait was his desire to

be his best, most loving self. He embraces “all that is part of the collective whole” of the world.

Thomas. Thomas is a 40-year-old entrepreneur and men’s lifestyle magazine editor and publisher. He is currently completing his bachelor’s degree studying business management and sports management. He grew up in Harrisburg, PA. He currently resides in Atlanta, GA. His sexual orientation is homosexual. He is in a long-term relationship. He has no children.

Growing up, Thomas knew his father. However, he describes their relationship as “off and on.” At this point in his life, Thomas is resistant to maintaining any significant relationship with his father. He says this is “mainly due to years of disappointment and lack of communication.” Being raised by a busy, working mother, he grew up very independent. As a kid, he participated in numerous extracurricular activities to “stay out of trouble.”

Thomas described himself as a compassionate, empathetic, and socially aware person. He loves his family and friends, loves laughter, and loves learning. He works hard yet owns his humanness experiencing occasions of overwhelm and procrastination. He has learned to be comfortable with living the fullness of his truths. He prides himself on allowing personal growth to manifest in all domains of his life.

Michael. Michael is a 51-year-old accounting and finance professional. He earned a bachelor’s degree in economics and double master’s in accounting and healthcare administration management. He describes his ethnic background as African American and Afro-Caribbean descent. His sexual orientation is homosexual. He has no children.

Michael credited both parents, grandfathers, brothers, and neighbors as his most influential role models growing up. They helped shape and define the man he is today. He openly speaks about being a survivor of sexual abuse. He was molested from age five to fourteen to protect his baby sister. This experience was his earliest recollection of questioning his masculinity.

Michael also takes pride in both his education and life experiences. He described himself as "both book and street smart." He views himself as a blessing to anyone he interacts with. He values authenticity. He exhibits respect for all races, creeds, and cultural nuances.

Wayne. Wayne is a 35-year-old personal trainer, professional athlete, and entrepreneur. He earned a bachelor's degree in biology and education. He is originally from Dallas, TX. His sexual orientation is heterosexual. He is in a long-term relationship. He has no children.

Wayne grew up extremely poor in a single-parent household. He admitted, "to say that life was hard would be an understatement." He recalled the relationship with his father as being "sporadic." His father missed much of his childhood. Against all odds, Wayne persevered. He found the inner drive and strength to thrive.

Wayne prides himself on being caring, confident, and empathetic. He described himself as someone who puts others before himself. He credited his mother and grandmother as the most influential roles that shaped him into the man he is today.

Darren. Darren is a 53-year-old college administrator. He holds a bachelor's degree in computer science and another in theology. He also earned a master's degree in public administration. He is currently pursuing a doctorate in educational leadership. He

currently resides in Ruston, LA. His sexual orientation is heterosexual. He has been happily married for thirty-one years. He has three children.

Darren grew up in a military family. He lived with both parents until they separated when he was thirteen. Following his parent's divorce, he maintained a good relationship with his father. He believes their relationship is "predicated upon mutual respect for one another."

Darren described himself as a caring person. He prides himself on being a loving father. He openly admits his daily struggles with how to express his loving, caring nature in a balanced way. His passion is "helping others understand and reach their full potential."

Keith. Keith is a 50-year-old chaplain and management consultant. He earned a bachelor's degree in speech communications and technical journalism. He also holds three master's degrees: one in organizational design and development, one in education, and one in theological studies. He currently resides in Dallas, TX. His sexual orientation is homosexual. He has no children.

Keith's father was present and active in his life. He described his father as a "strict disciplinarian, a great provider, very present but emotionally absent." He grew up in numerous areas of the United States—including the East coast and Southwest areas. He described his childhood household as middle-class, two-parent, and Christian-based.

Keith described himself as "bi-vocational." He is a compassionate soul who stands for justice. He is continually growing and evolving. In February 2022, Keith hired me as his personal life coach for a three-month journey to further his growth, evolution,

and mastery. I invited him to participate in this study. He has permitted our coaching partnership to be used for the case study.

Presentation of Findings

In this section, I present the findings from the data analysis process. The phenomenological, grounded theory, and case study analyses were utilized to effectively contextualize the subjects' shared experiences to this study's inquiries. The main categories, core category, and properties provided insight into the essence of the black American Christian male experience and the potential cultic dynamics that underpin them. All reported findings are presented for no purpose but to address this study's research questions.

Heuristic Inquiry

From the beginning, I always sensed that my personhood was distinct. I always prided myself on being unique and exploring my uniqueness. There were moments as I matured when I felt pressure to fit in and be "normal." Simultaneously, I enjoyed being a stand-out in the crowd. Whatever fads were popular at that time, my innate instinct was to rebel against them. Growing up in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, heavy emphasis is placed on sports, especially local college sports. No matter how often I was taken to football and basketball games, these popular team sports did not resonate with me. I was not interested in events and activities more closely associated with traditional masculinity.

My father was significantly present in my life. Yet, in many ways, my mother was more influential in shaping my "masculinity" during my pre-adolescent years. My mother placed me in a tee ball league when I was five. I played tee ball for one season. I chose to discontinue playing any subsequent seasons because I did not enjoy it. When I was seven,

my mother placed me in karate classes. I distinctly remember hearing my mother admit she was doing so because I "needed to learn to be more aggressive." I stayed in karate long enough to earn a second-degree yellow belt. Like tee ball, I chose not to continue because it was not fun. I did not enjoy participating in aggressive activities. I did not enjoy being aggressive at all. I did not enjoy spending extended amounts of time outdoors. Yet, I recall my mother often forcing me to play outside "because that's what boys do."

The above are examples of a few "mother wounds" I have only unearthed as such within the last two years while pondering my performative masculinity. Another example is how I would frequently cry as a child. I did not have the language to articulate then why I cried. I do know now that I was a highly sensitive young boy. If something connected with my heart, I cried. This did not sit well with my mother. When I often cried or whined, her immediate efforts were to stop or prevent my tears. She would tease me with interjections like, "Stop being such a big titty baby!" In my childish interpretation, that command made me wrong for crying. It also taught me that my mother disapproved of emotional expression. Therefore, I learned to shut off or repress certain feelings to prevent being wrong or making her unhappy. Another common sentiment I recall hearing frequently is to "suck it up!" I did not know what that meant as a child. As an adult, I still have no clue. My interpretation of sucking it up, then and now, is that any feelings must be repressed and absorbed into my body. I know now that this energy does not disappear. It remains trapped in my body until I allow it to release. This repressive practice began the process of my head-to-heart bifurcation. My perception was that in order not to cry, I could not feel. Instead, I learned to put on a mask and perform.

Being forced to “do what boys do” and “be aggressive” as a child created more feelings of comfort with women than men. I began gravitating toward women. In my younger years, I rarely felt seen or emotionally safe in the presence of other males because I believed I must be aggressive to fit in. I remember how my mother frowned at my having so many female friends in school. She often corrected me for developing mannerisms that she perceived as effeminate. She asserted, “Don’t do that! Boys don’t do that.” Ultimately, she was correcting me for not being “masculine enough.”

Revisiting these past experiences is in no way intended to blame, bash, or vilify my mother. No parent is perfect. Thus, I would offer that every human experiences parental wounds. Today, when I think about my “mother wounds,” I have great compassion, empathy, respect, and admiration for my mother. In fact, I celebrate the superb job she did. Birthing me at age seventeen, she did the best she could with what she knew at the time. She was a black girl raising a black boy in America while navigating her own life with her wounds. I can acknowledge that her parental lens may have been fogged by fear yet underpinned by a layer of deep love. Often, the deeper the love, the deeper the wound is. This realization was a significant catalyst for my later healing.

Surrounding myself with feminine energy as a kid partially filled my spirit. When I entered adolescence, I began craving more of the masculine connection. I started befriending more males. I also began embracing more of my masculine energy by developing an interest in fitness. At age twelve, I spent two weeks summer of 1993 with relatives living in Atlanta, Georgia. One noteworthy family member, a male cousin, was a successful collegiate football star then. I remember being so enamored with his muscular physique that I expressed interest in learning to achieve such muscularity for

myself. He and another cousin took me down into the basement, rolled up my t-shirt sleeves, and taught me to bench press for the first time. This was my introduction to a lifelong commitment to fitness and bodybuilding. Also birthed was an ongoing, underlying battle with muscle dysmorphia, "a form of body dysmorphia characterized by chronic dissatisfaction with one's muscularity and the perception that one's body is inadequate and undesirable, although objective observers would disagree with such an assessment" (American Psychological Association, n.d.).

Simultaneously, another ongoing battle with perfectionism continued to evolve. From early childhood, I recall frequently hearing one ideology from my family, "Whatever you do in life, be the best at it." I received that sentiment with the best of intentions. However, my childlike interpretation of it was that I must always strive for perfection in everything I do. I must say and do the "right" things at all times. There is no room for error or mistakes. Even the most minor errors in my speech were frequently corrected growing up. My perception was that mistakes were not only not allowed but also potentially punishable. I believed that if I was not the best—smartest, coolest, most successful, most masculine—it meant I was not good enough. Thus, I believed my family and friends would withhold their love from me. If they did not love me, how could I love myself? Therefore, maybe I was unworthy of being loved. I now understand this childhood conclusion was a "personal lie" formed from birth, corroborated through adolescence, and concretized in adulthood. I am unlovable if I am not perfect. This personal lie manifested into my secret vow: I must always be perfect for approval, worthiness, and love.

Growing up in a Christian-based family further reinforced my secret vow of perfectionism. My parents divorced when I was six. My mother received full custody, and my father was awarded bi-weekly visitation on weekends. Around age fifteen, I requested more time with my dad. We amended our visitation agreement to every weekend. One main rule of my father's household was, "If you are here every Sunday, you must attend church every Sunday." I was a devout Christian at that time. So, I complied, despite underlying feelings of resistance to that rule. On occasion, I would find loopholes to avoid going to church. I enjoyed going, but I wanted to go on my terms.

The church we attended most of my childhood was a full-gospel, non-denominational church. This church's doctrines were rooted in Baptist traditions yet with more modern, progressive practices. The pastor was a trusted family friend, especially with my father, since the church's inception in the mid-1980s. My father and I were active in this church for years until cataclysmic events shifted everything. I was groomed and sexually violated by this pastor between the ages of sixteen and twenty. Subsequently, we learned that many fellow young male members had also been molested for years. The pastor would later be convicted and imprisoned for these crimes. My family and I left this "cultic" church. My entire view of religion and Christianity was shattered. As a result, I veered off into a new path of inquiry. I began questioning everything I knew to be true—my Christianity, my spirituality, my sexuality, and even my masculinity.

Notwithstanding, my engrained, rigid perfectionism remained intact into adulthood due to years of Christian-based indoctrination and influence. In fact, I doubled down on it. I wore the title of "perfectionist" like a badge of honor. Perfectionism became

my religion. This exhausting, occasionally paralyzing perfectionism would infiltrate and dominate every domain of my adult life—education, career, fitness, relationships, etc. I was ensnared in a perpetual state of judgment and "not enough-ness." In my adolescent years, I began forming characters and personas whose only missions were to honor that secret vow and disavow the personal lie. For that to happen, everything always needed to "look good." Every task was always required to be done my way. This personality profoundly shaped whom I believed myself to be. This is how I thought I should navigate the world as a grown man. Just as my parents and grandparents demonstrated, I must always do and be what is right. Therein lies the conundrum.

In the Kwan & Scheinert (2022) film, *Everything Everywhere All at Once*, one character declares, "'Right' is a tiny box invented by people who are afraid. And I know what it feels like to be trapped inside that box." I, too, know how being trapped in that tiny box feels. My tiny box included

- an educational system designed to create standardized, industrial-age robots rather than explore multiple types of human intelligence and effective forms of learning
- a religious system based on an anthropocentric narrative of a Christian God that is frequently appropriated, weaponized, and divisive
- a national system of race and class designed for only one supreme race to thrive while "the others" are only permitted to survive
- a patriarchal system that perceives anything related to males—and masculinity—as strong and superior, and anything related to females—and femininity—as weak and inferior

My personal lie and secret vow were interconnected with these larger entwining systems. They were created under the guise of what some authority outside me deemed “right or wrong.” They are based on rules constructed to force uniformity rather than create unity. They project fear disguised as freedom. I felt mentally, emotionally, and spiritually imprisoned most of my life by this box.

I know now that I was never unfree. I was conditioned into a mindset of unfreedom. I was conditioned out of trusting my own heart and taught, instead, to betray it. I was trained to dishonor and devalue my emotions, and taught, instead, to perform. I was taught to value my brain over my heart. Hence, I disconnected my heart from my head for survival. Even moments during interviews for this heuristic inquiry, I observed feelings of unease occurring within me. I still harbored thoughts that I had to give “correct” answers. I needed to perform. If I did not perform, my very identity would somehow be threatened. I battle these thoughts and feelings to this day. They were signals confirming the importance and potential impact of forging ahead with this study.

I can recall the spark that ignited my passion for this work concerning masculinity. In 2014, I encountered a video from the 2007 Women & Power conference, where actress Jane Fonda was being interviewed. In its final two minutes, the interviewer asked her to share any burning desire in her heart. She shared the following:

> A burning thing that I think about a lot is: What do we do about our sons? You read the headlines about Columbine and all the school shootings and all these things. And the headlines say: “What’s happening to our children?”; “What’s happening to America’s teenagers?” It’s [really], “What’s happening to our sons, our boys?” And it goes back to this issue of bifurcation. And how we raise our

> sons, or our grandsons, is going to make a huge difference for tomorrow…. I just want to put in a plug for us doing everything we can to keep our sons and grandsons emotionally literate, to keep them connected head to heart. And it's really hard, because I work with adolescents. And the boys who have remained "hooked up" are in a not safe place. They're called sissies and pansies and mama's boys. They don't know any more when they're sad. They don't know why they're doing a lot of what they're doing, like sex and drugs and booze and this and that. It's because they're depressed. They lose emotional literacy. … We have to raise sons who are capable of intimacy and love and compassion and empathy. (Omega Institute for Holistic Studies, 00:08, 2007)

This touched my heart deeply. Until then, I had never heard anyone speak what I had observed and experienced for so long, so powerfully. I felt a burst of energy shoot through my body. From that moment forward, I knew my service platform would be centralized around male empowerment. Little did I know then that this process would include serving myself.

On September 30, 2019, eight days after I graduated with my first coaching certification, I was involved in a car accident. Thankfully, there were no deaths or significant injuries. However, the emotional trauma for me ran deep. For weeks, the aftermath included severe depression. Car accidents occur every day, but not in my world. For decades, I prided myself on being the "perfect" driver. Now I was not. This was my first wreck. More significantly, I was at fault. My being at fault was the root of my depression. This sequence of events is significant because it was the catalyst that

radically shifted the trajectory of my life forever. It fueled the flame sparked in 2014, and the gestation of this study commenced.

Like the aftereffects of my sexual abuse experience, I was in emotional disarray. Everything I had built my life upon came crashing down in that collision. All the characters and personas I had created that I believed kept me in safety, survival, and success perished in that wreck. I grieved them. Once again, I questioned everything I thought I knew and believed as the truth about me. This time was much more profound. I was confronted with my own emotional incarceration—self-imposed imprisonment of deep feelings from the world—caused by my perfectionism (Breakfast Club Power 105.1 FM, 2021). I began unpacking and unraveling all the fear and grief I was experiencing. I challenged the childhood belief that erring is not allowed. I disputed the notion that I am unworthy and unlovable if I am imperfect and make mistakes. I contested the ideology that I am not allowed to feel pain, sadness, and hurt as a man. Eventually, I finally permitted myself to accept this one significant error—the wreck. I powerfully disrupted my lifelong, auto-pilot practice of perfectionism. My new way of processing this event metaphorically ejected me from that tiny box of "rightness" and ego-generated suffering.

With the tools I learned as a life coach and my support system behind me, I finally began relinquishing the old belief system. I started crafting a replacement construct in which I can permit myself not to be aggressive, not to do what boys do, not to be perfect, and not to perform. Moving forward, I can heal that wounded little boy. I get to grant my adult self permission to reconnect head to heart. Being a highly sensitive man is the magic that distinguishes me from many other male life coaches. I can harness

my heart to fulfill my calling of empowering men to do the same. I now have awareness and access to the agency that has always been there for me to define my masculinity.

I respect my Christian background. However, I no longer identify myself as Christian or any other religious affiliation. I recognize a higher, spiritual consciousness within that is the source of my power to create whom I desire to be. My masculinity is an evolving element of my spirituality that is undefinable until I uniquely define it.

Now, I am on my path of reframing and rewriting my secret vow into a personal truth. My worthiness is not earned. It is my human birthright. My presence alone is worthy of love. I choose to love my whole self first. I live with integrity. I move with dignity. I am enough. Within my "enough-ness" lies my power and my freedom.

The Intersection of Cultic Dynamics and the Black American Christian Male Experience

In Chapter 2, I ascertained that the core cultic ideology underpinning performative masculinity in America is imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy. The data confirmed this. The data also confirmed other cultic underpinnings within Christian-based religions and black familial systems. This core category addresses the research inquiry of identifying connections between cults and forced perceptions of masculinity among black American Christian males. It is important to note that none of the subjects used any language linking themselves or their beliefs to cults directly. To collect the most authentic and information-rich experiences, I opted to exclude any language related to cults from questioning. I anticipated the topic of cults not being widely comprehended. Thus, I sought to prevent that factor from skewing the data. Notwithstanding, the power of the black male spirit emerged more prominently from the intersection of cultic

dynamics and the black American Christian male experience. Awaking the black male spirit is paramount in coaching.

Contradistinguishing Power & Force

This emerging property addressed the research question of the role Christian-based religion plays in forcing ideas regarding performative masculinity. Findings revealed how their faith may have influenced the trajectory of their lives. For instance, in Figure 4-2, 66.6% of the sampling agreed that their Christian faith was influential in teaching them how to be a man; 25.9% disagreed. Yet, Figure 4-3 showed nearly half the sampling (48.1%) agreed they were often discouraged from questioning certain Christian doctrines they found challenging; 29.6% disagreed.

Figure 4-2

I feel my religion/faith was very influential in teaching me how to be a man.

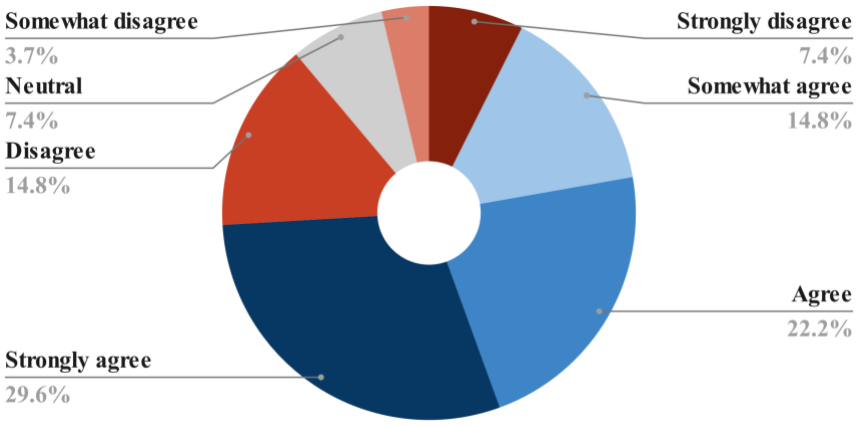
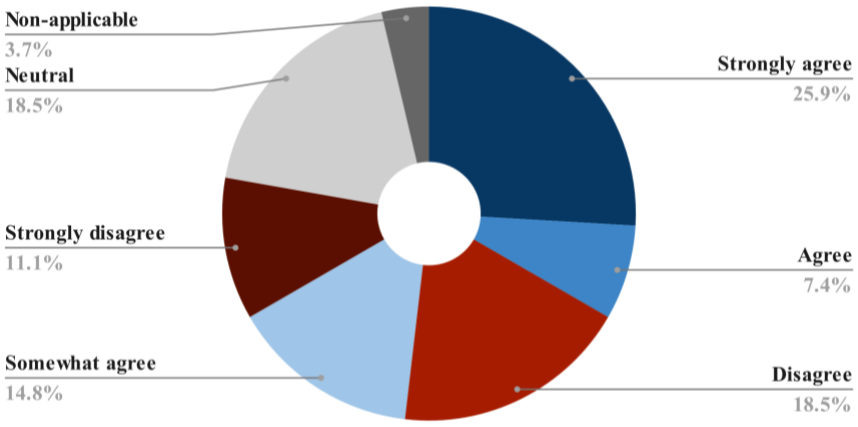


Figure 4-3

Regarding matters of religion/faith, I was often discouraged from asking questions about certain doctrines I found challenging.



However, interview findings revealed another side of the story.

Freedom of Mindset. Regarding his Christian faith, Thomas leaned into his intuitions. He saw beyond the doctrines he was being taught, allowing himself to explore a mindset of freedom. He shared:

> Religion was tricky. There is a lot of scripture that is regurgitated about what men are supposed to do and what they are not. However, when it came to the people sharing the scriptures and the people who were in my direct circle and community, I didn't see those same character traits. Therefore, I would question the church leaders and realize that they were just as flawed as everyone else, yet, hidden behind the guise of religion.

Wayne believes it is the mindset that distinguishes power from force. He shared, "It's perception that is holding most back. What you believe will always flourish into your life. Blaming others for your losses will never get you anywhere. No one is coming to save you." Despite all the challenges he faced growing up, he chose a unique life experience of embodied freedom. He continued sharing, "I've always been a speak-my-mind type of individual. I've never really allowed outside pressure to make me say something I didn't mean or wanted to say." When asked to recall experiences when he

felt “powerful,” he retorted, “Everyday . . . I get to create the life I want to live. What’s more powerful than that!”

Darren shared his take on power from a freedom mindset:

> I feel powerful when I am expressing my true inner being. I don't get much gratification from “doing” things, which is where I see most people feeling “powerful.” This is why I often expound to people I work with to not be a human doing but a human being.

Spirituality & Divinity. What also emerged from the data regarding power was the sense of spirituality and divinity from within. Subjects shared aligning sentiments of both, separate from Christian beliefs. Michael shared, “[Christian faith] really created a dichotomy in my mind until I fully undressed and addressed it in my late teens and early twenties. Now religion empowers me to address me in my fullness.”

Raheem believes masculinity is all about perspective. He declared:

> I view masculinity is being a *divine masculine*. A divine masculinity expresses masculinity as a leader with integrity, self-respect, and love. . . . It will always be redefined and evolving. What masculinity means to me today [may] not mean the same to me tomorrow because of self-progression and re-invention of Self.

Today, Raheem no longer identifies as Christian. He chooses not to categorize himself by any religion or belief. When asked how he defines spirituality, he indubitably replied, “Spirituality is Self-love.” He continued,

> Religion didn’t influence how I viewed myself as a man, or how I behaved as a man. Spiritually has had a huge impact. It has taught me to go behind the label of a man, but to love self through connection of the soul. Living from the soul has

> excelled me as a human being which translates into becoming and being a great man. . . . I find it more beneficial to go within, through meditation or journal writing, to heal my mental and emotional wellness.

Darren did not encounter Christian-based religion during early childhood. He said, "I was not fully enmeshed in religion until fourteen, but I developed a sense of spirituality through the years. This was probably an asset compared to how others are indoctrinated by religion." He continued unpacking his take on power and masculinity through the lens of his theological studies later in life. He stated:

> The most important lesson I have learned about masculinity is that it is mostly derived from man-made concepts. When looking at the spiritual text, I believe there are often too many of man's ideas entangled with our interpretation of these texts. I prefer to use my innate ability to attain the truth by which I live spiritually. As for shifting, it is constantly shifting. I believe our journey is evolving; if we are not changing, we are no longer truly living.

Resilience. Another emerging theme regarding power was overcoming adversities that could hinder black males from their power. Subjects shared their experiences of when they felt powerful. Through those life experiences, they learned how resilient they were. Michael shared the earliest moment when he recognized his power:

> The first time I felt powerful and as when I stood in front of my seventh-grade class and introduced myself to my new brave world. The world in which I was working a part-time job in a restaurant as a dish washer and earning money for school clothes and books for me and my younger sister. I articulated [myself] and expressed me in my entire truth. I faced backlash but dealt with it accordingly.

Darren shared his unique perspective on factors he is still overcoming to recognize his power. He stated:

> I don't feel I ever had any limiting factors placed on me. However, with the lack of limiting factors, there was also a lack of positive enforcement and un-limiting aspects embedded within. Therefore, I feel that too many of the societal ills were negative factors to my genuinely being able to create the life I wanted.

Wayne reflected on his childhood, recalling factors that may have forced others into performative behavior. He recognized his power to make different choices. He shared:

> My father missed a lot of my childhood. He was in and out of my life all the time. As disciplined as I kept myself, to have a father there to teach me what I needed to know would have been amazing. Do I blame him for that? No, because his absence made me the man I am today. Some would say that, in itself, is a blessing.

Case Study. Following Keith's life coaching journey, when asked how influential his Christian-based religion was in teaching him how to be a man, Keith boldly proclaimed:

> My religion taught me nothing but patriarchy and misogyny. RELIGION did not teach me how to hold the totality of the Bible in tension. RELIGION forces a "this or that, right or wrong" perspective and orthopraxy. The interpretation of the scriptures told me that men were the head of the household and that women were to be silent and have a secondary place and role. Religion taught me that men had a prominent place and that they could do many terrible things and not necessarily

> be held accountable in the moment. Religion taught me about gender and gender constructed roles, but religion never taught me how to be a man. Living a life of purpose, integrity and respect has nothing to do with gender roles and everything to do with being a loving, caring, compassionate, sensitive individual and those characteristics are not exclusive to a gender. If religion had taught me how to be a man, it would have again ascribed traits of honor, loyalty, trustworthiness, forgiveness, partnership etc. IF religion had truly done its job, it would have held up Deborah as a Judge, leading troops of men and it would have highlighted the women who Jesus first appeared to after his resurrection. It would have highlighted Phoebe as one of the leaders of the Church that Paul requested acknowledgment of in contrast to his other letters, where he gave the impression that women could not be leaders in the church. Religion has served to oppress and privilege some over others.

Furthermore, he testified about his paradigm shift from force into power during life coaching:

> No, [growing up] I did not feel that I had the choice to create the life I wanted. I felt that my responsibility was to extend, enhance and elevate the roles that I had been assigned at birth, that of being Black and male and all their associated social constructs. Additionally, knowing from the age of six or seven that I was gay presented another layer of pressure to make my family and community "proud" of me so that they would overlook my sexuality and not deem me as unworthy and an outcast. So, I over-rotated to be excellent and to take on all of the socially constructed norms of black masculinity in the attempts to garner enough points

and praises so that I might not be disavowed at some point because of my sexual orientation.

Coaching shifted this broken thinking. It presented and reinforced that I have the power and the energy to create my own narrative. I can generate the energy I need to create the life that I want. I think at some unconscious level I knew that, but coaching helped to affirm it and *own* it.

Replacing Conformity & Compliance with Agency

This property directly addressed the research inquiry of what might be possible for black American males if their power is nurtured in adulthood in coaching. Interconnected with the previous property, another emerging property linked inner divinity and spirituality to the power of agency. In Figure 4-4, 70.3% of the sampling agreed that they always knew they had a choice to create the life they wanted for themselves; 22.2% disagreed. Yet, Figure 4-5 reported that 70.3% felt pressure to conform to society's definition of manhood for most of their lives; 18.5% disagreed.

Figure 4-4

Growing up, I always knew I had the choice to create the life I wanted.

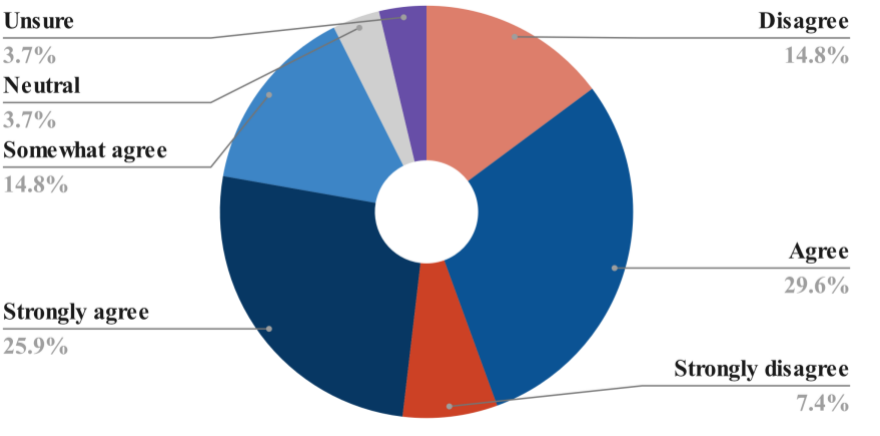
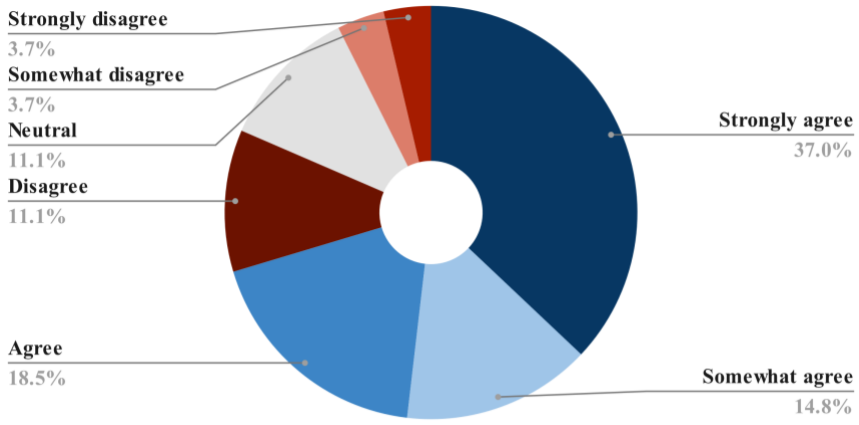


Figure 4-5

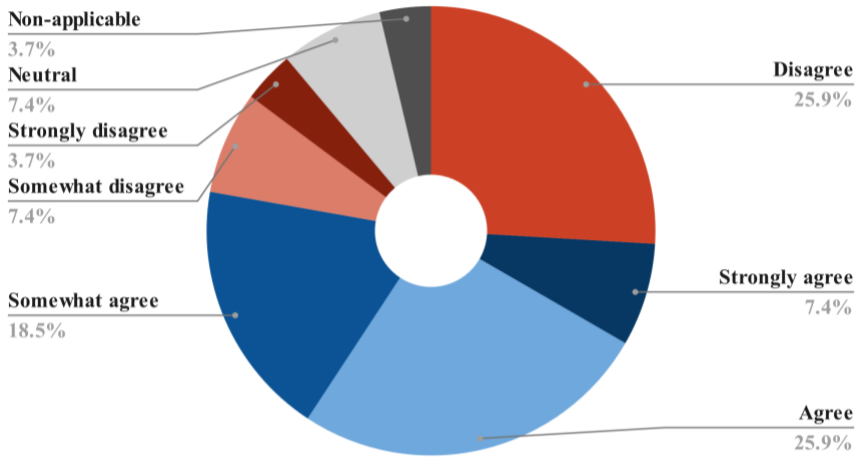
Most of my life, I've felt pressure to conform to society's definition of what it means to be a man.



In Figure 4-6 below, 51.8% of the sampling agreed they feel a sense of belonging and inclusion wherever they go; 37.0% disagreed.

Figure 4-6

Wherever I go, I feel a sense of belonging and inclusion.



Awareness & Access. Thomas was not always aware growing up that he could create the life he wanted. He elaborated:

> Growing up, my mom always told me that I could do anything I wanted if I worked hard. What I realized is that you could do anything you wanted if you had access and money. I wanted to scuba dive, take airplane lessons, and play the guitar. I didn't have access to those things so I realized that I could do anything I wanted to as long as it was within reach. I could create the life that I wanted within what was available. It took years to overcome that mindset.

Worthiness & Dignity. Sean shared his thoughts regarding his sense of belonging and inclusion when he walked into any room. He said:

> When I think about the worth and value I walk into a room with, I often wonder, "What do people think I am? What do *they* think I am? What do *I* think I am?" If I don't think I'm always enough, then no one else could think I'm enough. I think [my sense of belonging and inclusion] is always rooted in my sense of worthiness.

Michael offered another perspective. When asked about his sense of belonging and inclusion, he declared, "I don't go places where I don't feel accepted or included. I address issues upfront, so people know to invite me is to invite my emotions and reactions."

Wayne shared his vision through the lens of sensing his worthiness. He asserted:

> I've always viewed life under a different lens. The only limiting factor in our lives is our own personal beliefs of what we, ourselves, are capable of. I've seen the most gifted people fall to the hands of society and the hardest working people triumph in the face of adversity. Anything is truly possible if you are willing to put in the work for it and learn the lessons given along the way. Look at my life for an example. I grew up extremely poor in a single parent household. To say

> that life was hard would be an understatement. I, like many others, must choose. Do I allow myself to fall victim and believe that is my life, or do I pick myself up and know that as long as I have a breath in my body, I can become anything I set my mind to.

Relinquishing Pressure. Regarding pressure to conform to society's definition of manhood, Raheem shared, "The pressure was felt earlier in my years. The pressure was from the false idea that to become a man I had to conform to society's definition. Once I discovered spirituality and found my true self, conformation dissolved." Through his spiritual journey, he permitted himself to relinquish the pressure to conform.

Thomas spoke more in-depth regarding his observations and experiences of common black male pressures. He elaborated:

> Being a man in the black community is overly sexualized, overly aggressive, and rooted in what you can do with your hands and in sports. I was raised with my father thinking that I had to be all those things to be a man. It didn't show me that being responsible, transparent, truthful, and caring was a part of that. I wasn't shown that compassion, understanding, and communication, were important as well. I had to learn that my voice and my heart were bigger than my hands. I didn't need to have a high sexual body count to prove my manhood.

Wayne expressed his convictions about societal conformation. He described society as a "fabrication." Furthermore, he feels that holding others' belief systems as truth "means you have given in to not thinking for yourself and making your own decisions. A man holds values and stands up for what he believes is right."

Case Study. Following Keith's life coaching journey, he shared his life-long struggle with conformity and compliance. He confirmed how life coaching shifted his thinking. He testified:

> This is rooted in my story of not wanting to lose acceptance in my family system and black communal circle due to my sexual orientation. I prized membership in these two entities above all else for much of my childhood and early adult life. I thought that if I could just be as close to perfect as possible then my one "defect" and imperfection would be overlooked and forgiven. I would still be worthy of people's love and affection. So, I pressured myself to always be the top of my class, to always be the best athlete, to always present as the elite of the black elite. I punished myself for being wrong because there was no room for error. Anything that people could hold over my head and disband the notion that I was perfect did not serve the narrative that I was telling myself that I needed to be superhuman to be worthy and accepted. If I could control the things around me and in my life and lead people to believe the presentation of the narrative that I authored, then I could control all the circumstances of my life and people's responses to them. I no longer punish myself for being wrong nor do I feel the need to always be right, but I notice that I process still before I speak. I will weigh the potential moves, reactions and responses like a game of chess. I will never say the first thing that comes to mind before I think about it for fear that it could be the "wrong" thing to say or have negative consequences.
>
> Life coaching has aided me in identifying and reinforcing the things that really make me valuable and worthy. Coaching has affirmed the need to show up

authentically and with vulnerability. It has helped to take the pressure of needing to be superhuman off and to lean into my humanity. To love myself totally on the days when I am doing alright as well as on the days when there is opportunity to strive for better.

Reducing the Impact of Imperialist White-Supremacist Capitalist Patriarchy

Unfortunately, the core cultic underpinning of imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy may never be eradicated. However, the effects of it could be diminished if certain narratives perpetuated within the black community are discarded or reframed. The themes emerging within this property addressed the research question of race's role in shaping how black American males view their masculinity. In Figure 4-7 below, 66.6% of the sampling agreed that they, or someone important to them, viewed such activities as camping, skiing, or bungee jumping as “white” activities; 29.6% agreed. Also, Figure 4-8 showed 48.1% disagreed that they, or someone important to them, often viewed educated, well-spoken black people as “acting white”; 44.4% agreed.

Figure 4-7

Historically, I (or people who matter most to me) have viewed activities like camping, skiing, or bungee jumping as “white” activities.

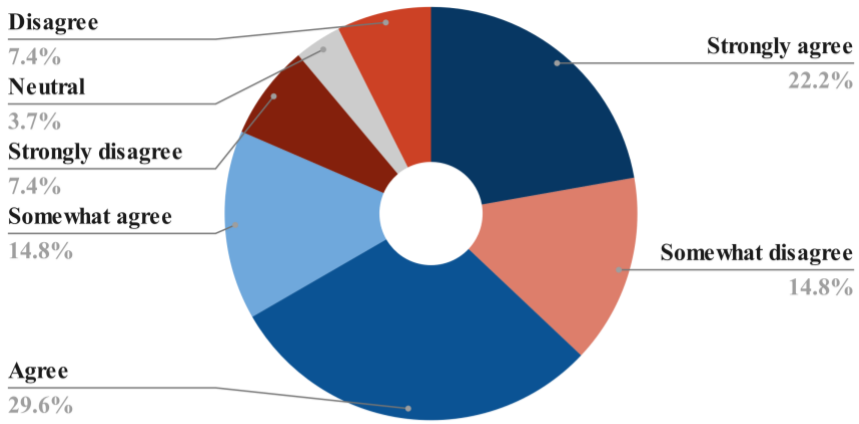
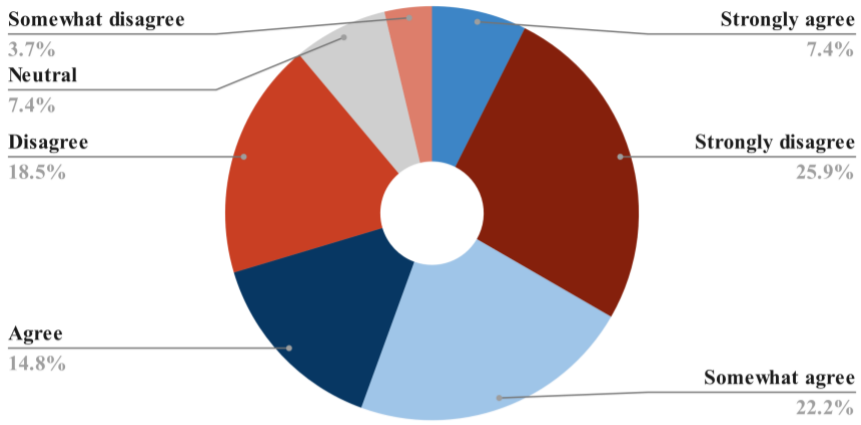


Figure 4-8

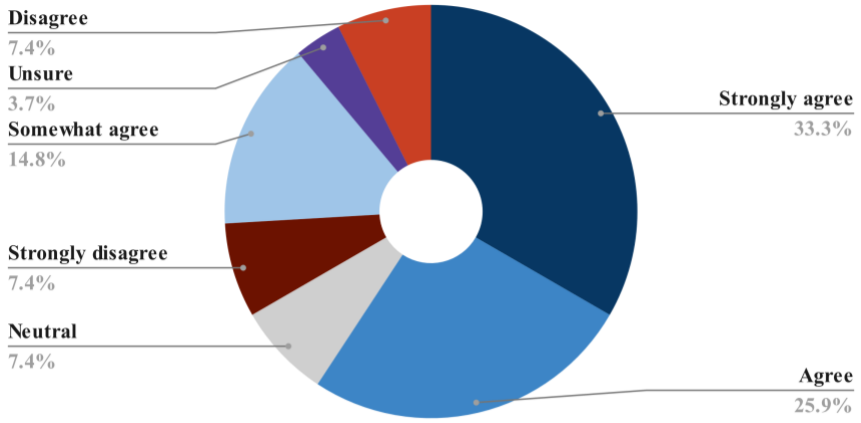
Historically, I (or people who matter most to me) have often viewed educated, well-spoken black people as "acting white."



In Figure 4-9, 73.8% of the sampling have felt less free to express themselves as fully and authentically as their white counterparts; 14.8% disagreed.

Figure 4-9

As a black man in America, I have often felt less free to fully and authentically express myself than white American men.



Interview findings showed that when black American males recognize their power, the impact of white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy is likely reduced.

Navigating the Intersection of Blackness & Whiteness. One emerging theme revealed how black males see themselves compared to white males. Subjects interviewed for this study seemed fearless in recounting interactions with their white counterparts. Ultimately, how they choose to show up held more weight than narratives of how they might be perceived.

Michael shared, “I am not one to be shy or uncomfortable with any race or color. I meet people where they are and allow them the space to feel me out as I feel them out.”

Raheem aligned with this sentiment by sharing his perspective on his own existence. He declared, “I don’t see myself as my skin color or my nationality. My existence is not a label; it’s a feeling. I can’t do a miracle an injustice by checking a box.”

Authority & Influence of Whiteness. Thomas shared his account of the impact of whiteness on the black male experience in America. He also shared why he has not always felt a sense of pride being American or black. He reflected:

> I feel that as a black American, I am rarely accepted and invited into the true American dream. It seems that we are always left out of the American experience as black men. When we are invited and accepted, it's only based on what you can provide socially and monetarily. As a teenager and young adult, it made me feel that being a proud black man was offensive to my white counterparts. So, I would refrain from talking about my culture and my experiences because they would be judged. As I grew older, I became more aware and prouder of those experiences and that culture.

Darren’s experience as an administrator at a predominantly white institution illustrated how black males navigate white authority. He stated, “Through the years, I had

to prove my expressions were valid instead of having them validated immediately. I have watched ideas, goals, and objectives be accepted based on who gives them." He later shared, "I can't recall feeling forced to do anything. However, I believe there were times I had to strategically wait until the right moment to express my thoughts on an issue thoroughly."

Purity Tests. Thomas touched on the experience of black men whereby they measure their being to the standard of "purity" set by white males:

> Being a fully authentic Black man means that you may ruffle some feathers with your truth. We are expected to be meek and non-confrontational. However, white Americans are able to be expressive and wild without being a threat. I have had moments when I was speaking to co-workers and while explaining parts of my experience, I would be told "my parents would never," "how have you never been to a beach," and "you have never left the country . . . I guess that's a Black thing."

He later continued:

> We hear the quote, "We have to do the same things as our white counterparts but 3 times better and flawless." I put a lot of pressure on myself to be that perfect person and do the perfect things based on what everyone else wanted and expected from me. What I realized is that nothing is ever "perfect." Things can be great, they could be good, and they can be bad, but things will never be perfect.

Darren offered:

> Learning to embrace oneself entirely is the most excellent tool for having a sense of belonging and inclusion. I recognize that inclusion means a fully integrated

engagement, but I refuse another person's ignorance of the value I add to change my sense of belonging.

Case Study. Following Keith's life coaching journey, he testified:

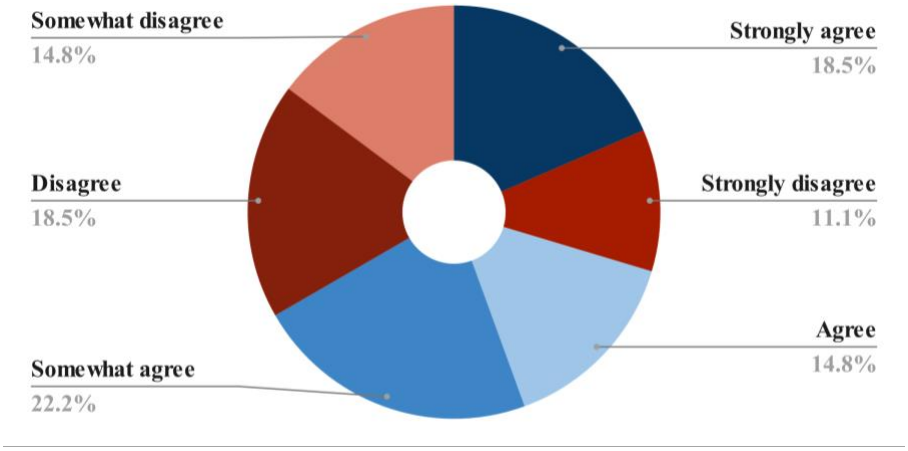
> I have grown up in very diverse urban settings. My high school and college years were in majority white environments. . . . What I have found is that it is not difficult at all in building relationships or communicating with white people when it is on their terms and in the ways that are normalized for them. White people still have very little exposure or understanding of black culture in an authentic way. They now listen to black music and consume other aspects of black culture but there is still a distance between consuming and experiencing/understanding. There is still a "cool factor" for them involved with engaging with Black culture. However, they fail holistically to see black humanity. I think times have changed dramatically though. Black culture is ubiquitous now. White people have learned from that exposure and are more open to a diversity of experiences; however, they still struggle with societal indoctrination that they are the standard and that the point of all departures begins with them.

Reimagining Depictions & Demonstrations of the Masculine Spectrum

This properly addressed the research question of how black American Christian men define masculinity as adults when allowed access to their power to choose. Survey data showed some common and contrasting views of masculinity among black males. For instance, Figure 4-10 shows that 55.5% of the sampling agreed that masculinity is typically defined as always being strong, emotionless, and never appearing weak; 44.4% disagreed.

Figure 4-10

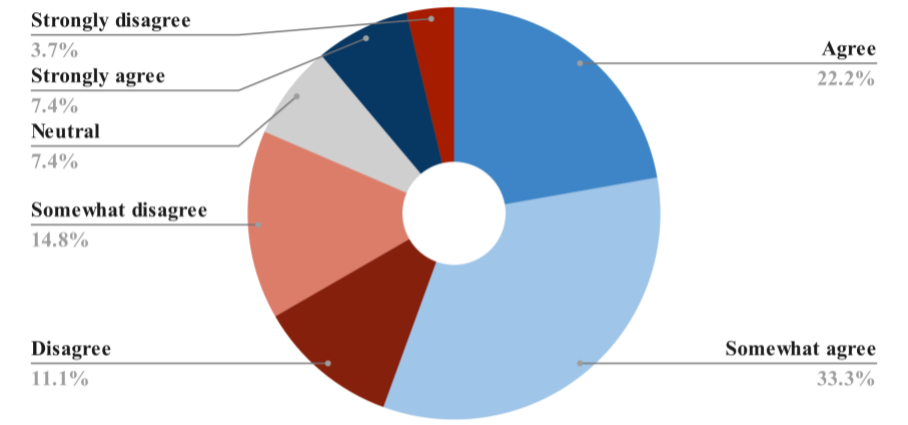
In my honest opinion, masculinity is typically defined as always being strong, never showing emotion, and never appearing or being perceived as weak.



In Figure 4-11 below, 62.9% of the sampling agreed that media imagery instrumentally shaped their perceptions of how they should behave as black men; 29.6% agreed.

Figure 4-11

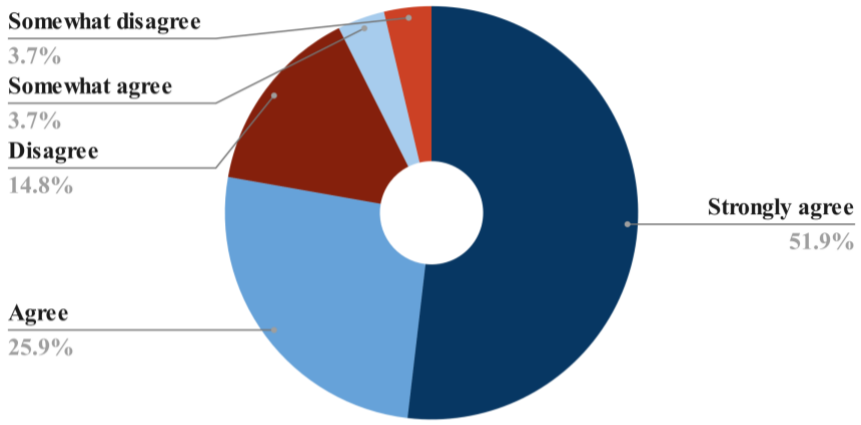
Growing up, television and media were instrumental in shaping how I thought I should behave as a man, especially as a black man.



In Figure 4-12 below, 81.5% of the sampling often heard strong expressions like “man up” and “don’t be a pussy” growing up; 18.5% agreed.

Figure 4-12

Growing up, I often heard expressions like "man up," "don't be a pussy," and "real men don't cry."



Underlying themes from subjects' interviews revealed that the most common denominators among these men's chosen depictions of masculinity were compassion, wholeness, and acceptance.

Compassion & Empathy. Thomas shared his experience with men who demonstrated compassion in their masculinity:

> My most influential role models growing up were my band directors. They showed me that hard work pays off, to follow your gut, listen to your heart, and that if you close your eyes and let what feels right happen, you will always make music that is from your heart. My stepfather taught me how to talk from my heart and listen to others with intention. He showed the importance of presentation as well as treating people with kindness. All of those things have translated into who I am as a man.
>
> What I have learned about masculinity is that it has nothing to do with physicality. It's more about what you emit to others. What kind of person you are,

> and the kind of life you lead. It's about being dependable and kind. Respectful and decisive. Being a man of your word and showing grace and gratitude as well as loving and caring. The older I get the more I realize that being a man [alone] does not create masculinity.

Wayne defined his masculinity as having compassion and empathy for those around him. He added:

> I love people. I think that this world is lacking empathy for others, so I make it a mission of mine to speak to others I come into contact with. You never know how simple “hi” will alter a person’s day, and therefore their life.

Emotional Intelligence & Regulation. Sean recalled two childhood incidents, one in kindergarten and another around fourth grade, in which he attempted relationships with girls. In both cases, interference or influence from other peers disrupted these relations, leading him to doubt himself. He asked himself such questions as

> What do I need to do differently? Do I need to be tougher? I found myself being more aggressive. In my mind, I thought what was required was I had to be tougher because I was really nice and kind and gentle.

Regarding the second incident, he recalled:

> I felt enraged in one way, but also, I felt totally humiliated. I'm pretty sure I had a fight that day. In that elementary school, I was suspended probably 20+ times for fighting because I took no smack from people.

Not having a male figure in his life helping him navigate these emotions impacted his trajectory into adolescence. He felt this affected his ability to trust himself and others. He elaborated:

> These are two situations where trust was betrayed. I think it made it hard to build relationships, even good friendships because I was always waiting for somebody to betray me. Now that I put that together, that's actually pretty interesting. I hadn't even thought about that, like how hard it is for me to trust people. Trust is a big thing. It was like I was always waiting for [relationships] to blow up.

Explorations like this would serve black American Christian males in life coaching. Sean expressed his emotional experiences in a way he felt he could not in his youth. Awareness was evoked that could potentially shift his paradigm regarding trust.

Darren weighed in with his definition:

> Masculinity is the ability to have embedded within each male person to express himself through life, including roles with family, friends, acquaintances, work life, and society, without the need to prove himself based on personal beliefs. Once personal thoughts become the driving factor in defining masculinity, unhealthy personas develop, and conflict arises based on one's convictions.

Wholeness. Sean discussed his evolving, holistic definition of masculinity. He shared:

> My view of masculinity today is a lot more encompassing. It's not as fractured. It's not a rigid definition. Even when society has its rules that say, “You can't do this. You can't do this. You must do this. You must do that.” It is possible for me to feel we should [all] have full permissions. Even in a professional setting, how do we make space for all of those ways [of being]? That's how my definition has evolved. It's still evolving.

Thomas defined masculinity as a mindset. He believes masculinity transcends predetermined gender roles. He continued:

> You can't walk into masculinity; you have to live it. You have to be more than a [gender]. People should feel your masculinity in a place of comfort, warmth, and safety. It's not in how you talk, dress, or walk. It's not in your sexual partners or your ability to play sports. It's in how you talk to people and how you treat your friends, family, and strangers. Masculinity is about how you use your full being to impact the world.

Michael shared his unique interpretation of masculinity, linking his faith and sexual orientation. He affirmed, “I learned that I can be a Christian man and still be gay and function in my fullness.” When asked how he defines masculinity today, he responded, “Masculinity today is a blend of maleness and femaleness, as God is both the masculine and the feminine!”

Raheem articulated:

> My definition of masculinity today is the ability to being a whole being. Being whole is to fully live the character traits of the feminine and masculine as one. To be okay to be vulnerable, show emotions, and to also be guarded and strong. Just be okay to feel free to express all emotions without fear of judgment.

Acceptance & Authenticity. Michael voiced the demonstration of his masculinity by integrating acceptance “I am comfortable with me, so effeminate men don’t make me feel uncomfortable I want them to be authentic around me.” He also affirmed his authenticity, exclaiming, “I am young, gifted, and black, so as an American citizen born and raised, I am proud of being me!”

Darren shared another perspective regarding the acceptance and authenticity of masculinity, contrasting more “overly effeminate” men and “excessively” masculine men. He offered:

> I don't believe my feelings towards overly effeminate men are feelings as much as they are concerns. Effeminate, or more specifically “overly effeminate,” men seem to be doing more acting out. Therefore, my [concern] is no different than a man trying to act “excessively masculine.” Being troubled or disturbed may have more to do with men not being comfortable with who they are and therefore having to use overcompensation, proving to others that they have not entirely accepted or rejected themselves.

Case Study. Following Keith’s life coaching journey, he recalled hearing expressions like “real men don’t cry.” He testified:

> These statements made me feel horrible and weak growing up because I was sensitive and did cry. It made me question why I wasn’t a “real” man and if I could ever be one. It made me wonder why I had so many emotions and felt things so deeply when it seemed that “real” men were not supposed to be in touch with their emotions. It made me think that this was even more evidence that I was too feminine. So, I learned to discount my emotions and belittle myself for them. I learned to compartmentalize and essentially distance myself from them. But the implicit message when I heard these statements was judgment. Someone else’s judgment of my masculinity. And because I didn’t trust my own judgment and had relinquished my agency to the expectations and direction of other men, I continued to lose more and more of myself. It made me overcompensate by being

> more “masculine,” by being toxic myself and by joining in the usage of this language with other men and against effeminate and gay men.

After learning distinctions in life coaching around the power of language usage, Keith has a deeper awareness of how violent and destructive language can be to a man’s personhood. He continued:

> For men to have total well-being and to honor their mental and emotional health, we have to be given and give each other permission to lean into our emotions. We need to learn to support each other as men on an emotional and experiential level. To relegate men who are emotional to a lesser status akin to what is perceived as the lesser gender is ruthless and calculatingly manipulative.

Furthermore, Keith defined:

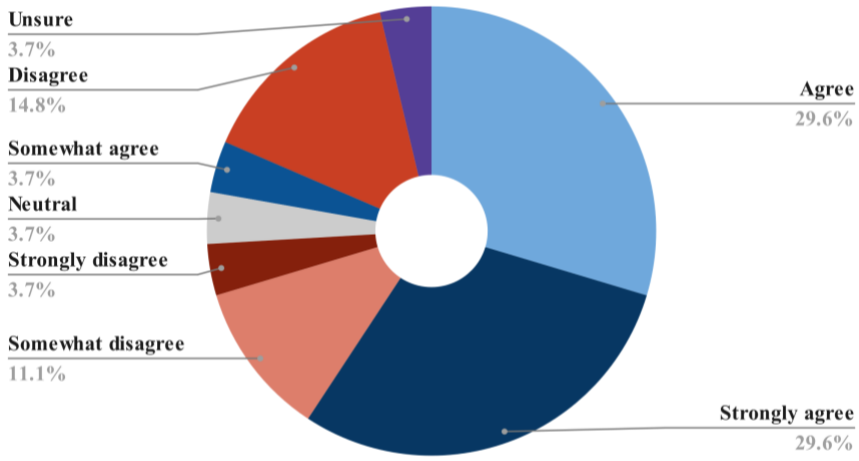
> Masculinity is rooted in my sex which is male, but the gender or societal attribution of traits associated with my maleness are definable. My masculinity is solely based on how I define it and what I am comfortable with. It is not dependent on [external] acceptance, societal constructs, or other male role models. What makes me masculine is how I view the world and show up in the world.

Reclaiming Imagination & Intimacy Eroded in Black Boyhood

This property also addressed the research inquiry of what might be possible for black American males if their power is nurtured in adulthood in coaching. Life coaching could help them reclaim the imagination and intimacy missing from their childhoods. The first theme to emerge from the findings was education related. In Figure 4-13, 62.9% of the sampling agreed they were never asked how they enjoy learning; 29.6% disagreed.

Figure 4-13

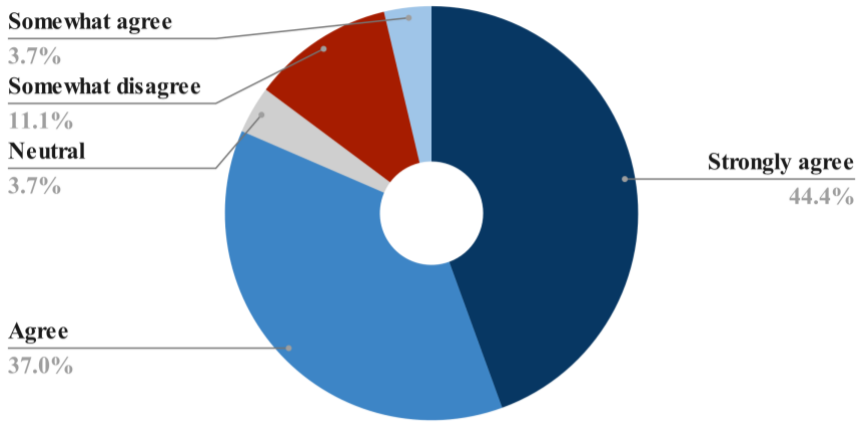
When I was in school, I was never asked how I enjoy learning things.



In Figure 4-14, 85.1% of the sampling agreed they were asked more about their grades than their learnings; 11.1% disagreed.

Figure 4-14

When I was in school, I was asked more about how good my grades were than what I had learned.



Learning, Multiple Intelligences, & Critical Thinking. Sean recounted his learning experience as being analytical. His learning experience was focused through the mechanistic lens of "right or wrong." He discussed how he would get bad grades in more

artistic subjects because his analytical mind would often impede his ability to be creative. He believes

> the classes that should have given more room for flexibility and creativity were more rigid. . . . I didn't get to work on my any creativity stuff, because there were always people judging whether it was creative or not. Why couldn't art just be for the sake of art? Why is there a “right” answer for what I draw or what I create?

In hindsight, he yearned for a more dynamic-learning environment that would offer more room to explore his creative and academic intelligence. The performance-driven frame of education he experienced groomed him for the engineering field. As he would learn later, engineering was not the field he felt passionate about pursuing. Yet, this path ultimately guided him to choose teaching and entrepreneurship as his passion.

Thomas pondered:

> If I were asked how I enjoyed learning things, I probably would have grasped things a little better. I am very much a hands-on, trial and error, and relation learner. I like to see what my decisions and learning look like in real life and what trying something looks like when the result isn't promised.
>
> I grew up in the “smart isn't cool” era. I was an A student, very curious, and liked things to be explained until they made sense. I would often challenge things that were taught and was told that it was being rude and disruptive. As an adult, it's challenged me to not just accept what is being said but to ask questions. To not accept the norm because someone says it has to be.

Darren recalled:

> Looking back, I think school was not viewed as a necessary step towards future success but rather just a necessary evil that all must endure. I don't ever remember an emphasis placed on academic achievement. Not being asked about learning is the catalyst that I believe helps set me apart as an educator today. Being discouraged by not being adequately encouraged is likely the most significant asset I use in working with African American men today. Although many do not accept this form of high expectations, I know it has shifted the paradigm for many young men.

Raheem was also not asked how he enjoyed learning in school. If he had, he shared, “It would have opened me up at an earlier age to enjoy learning to progress and grow. It came later in age through self-discovery.”

Access to Resources. Sean shared another experience from the fourth grade in which he started a business selling candy. He figured out that he could buy candy for pennies at the top of the hill and then sell to his friends at a profit in the flatlands where there was no corner store. Then, he recalled:

> They shut my business down. They called my mom to the school and the principal was all mad. Everyone was mad. I was like, “What are you mad about it?” I was having so much fun. And I'm making so much money. I couldn't understand it. Instead of them saying, “Look, let's help him figure out how to be an entrepreneur,” everyone was like, “This is not allowed on campus.” And they just shut it down. Like right away.
>
> The way I see it, they had no creativity to help somebody who wants to learn differently. I got way more excited in that business than I was in any of my

> classes in school. I wonder what if they had asked me, “What are you interested in? I'll help you build on that.” If my family was more like businesspeople, I imagine they would have helped stimulate that fire in me. They couldn't see from my perspective. So instead of trying to help nurture that perspective, they shut it down because it didn't align with their own paradigm.

Sean’s childhood business experience is common among black males. Creative ideas were crushed. The imagination was dampened. More emphasis was placed on forcing him to “follow the rules” than nurturing a different type of intelligence. He didn’t have access to resources to expand his imagination and innate gifts. As a result, he believes his mindset about money and entrepreneurship is

> deeply connected to that experience and also some old [subconscious] thought patterns. It's actually kind of ridiculous. I choose to pay myself less. It's a conscious choice, but it is a choice still. So now I'm trying to change and make a difference. I want my kids to see that you can help people and still have a full life, financially, socially, emotionally happy, at what happiness with joy with appreciation. And I think that is what I have. Now. That's the part of my leadership and my own self-worth that I'm having to like, put into practice right now.

Influence of Women on Boys. In Figure 4-15, 59.2% of the sampling feel their manhood was shaped more by their mother than their father; 22.2% disagreed. Additionally, as shown in Figure 4-16, 62.9% did not grow up with their father significantly present; 33.3% did experience their fathers as such.

Figure 4-15

In many ways, I feel like my mother shaped who I am as a man more than my father.

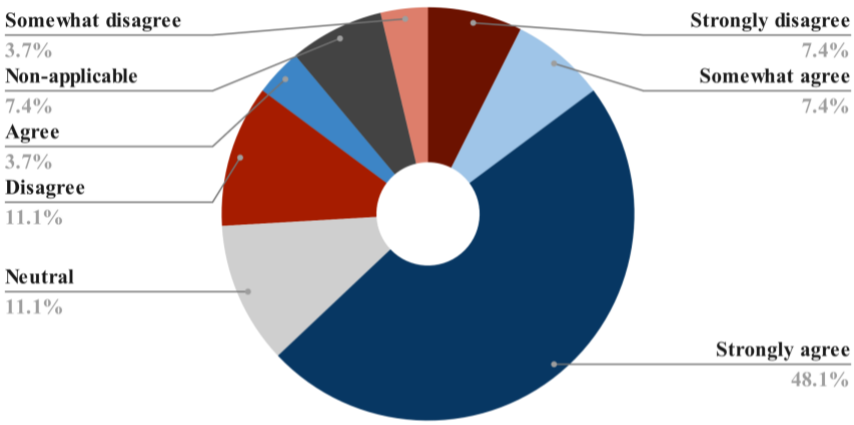
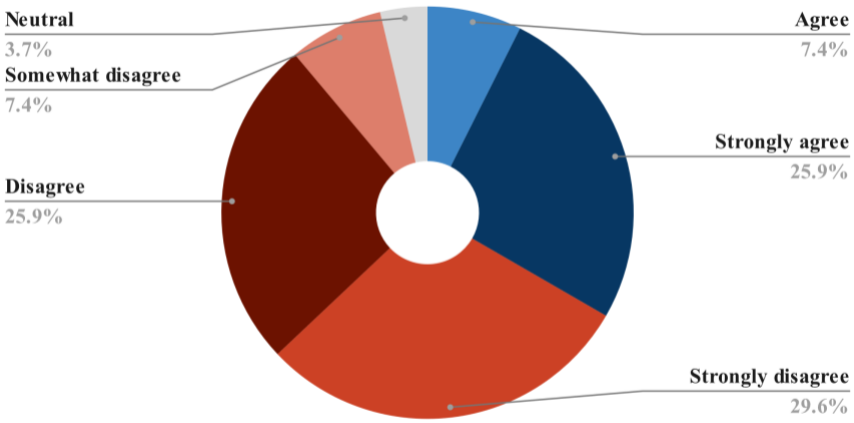


Figure 4-16

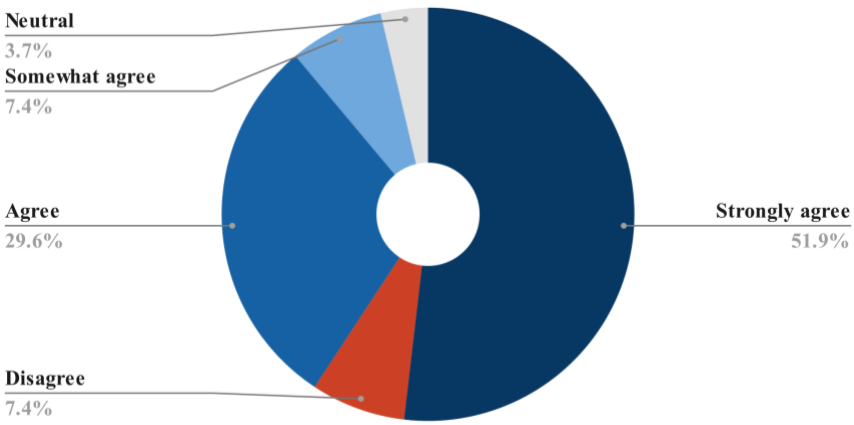
My father was a significant presence, influence, and primary male role model growing up.



In Figure 4-17, 88.9% received more affection from female figures than male figures; 7.4% disagreed.

Figure 4-17

Growing up, I recall receiving more love and affection from female figures in my life than male ones.



Sean shared his experience of being raised by a single mother and no father figure. He passionately expresses how this shaped his interpretations of masculinity as a child. He asserted:

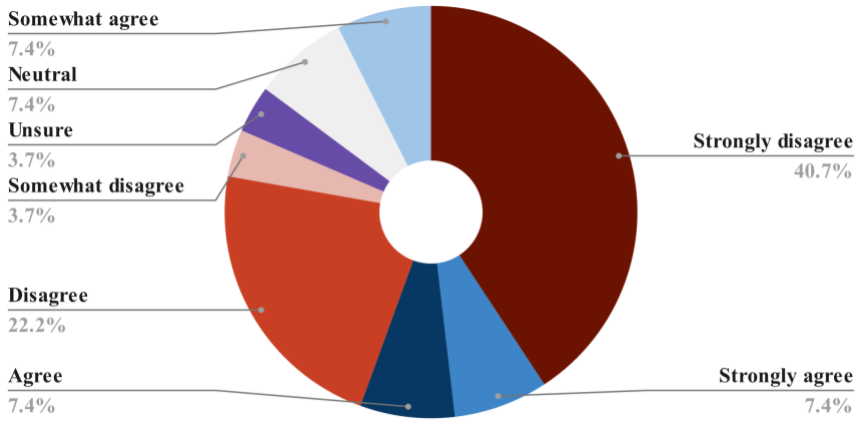
> All this programming that adults do to kids. I know it happens because it happened to me a lot in the messaging that gets passed down that you begin to internalize. I internalized that if men are feminine, there's something wrong with them. And it's not good to have anything wrong with you. You got to have everything right about you. So, I became a big rule follower. . . . I didn't have a man to learn all sides. I had a woman trying to figure out what it means to teach a boy to be a man. And she was she was not good at it because she's a woman. She's genuinely telling me a lot of scriptural things—the "whats"—but the how? When do [I] get time to be sensitive? There's no man helping me figure out the times when I can be tough and when I can be sensitive and when I can be all that. So, it was almost like [I] had to shut down every other emotion that wasn't what she considered "manly."

Expressions of Vulnerability & Affection among Males. The data here showed black men's overwhelming deficiency and desire for intimacy from their fathers and/or

other significant male figures. In Figure 4-18, 66.6% of the sampling did not openly receive love and affection from their fathers; 22.2% agreed.

Figure 4-18

My father (or father figure) was always openly expressive of love and affection for me.



In Figure 4-19, 88.8% of the sampling yearned for more affection from their fathers; 7.4% disagreed. Additionally, as shown in Figure 4-20, 81.4% longed for more affection from other male figures, such as friends and family members; 11.1% disagreed.

Figure 4-19

Reflecting back, I wish my father (or father figure) was more affectionate with me growing up.

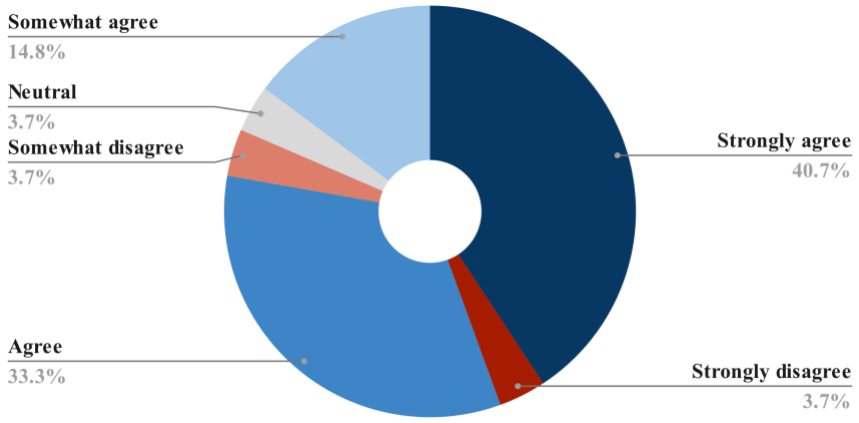
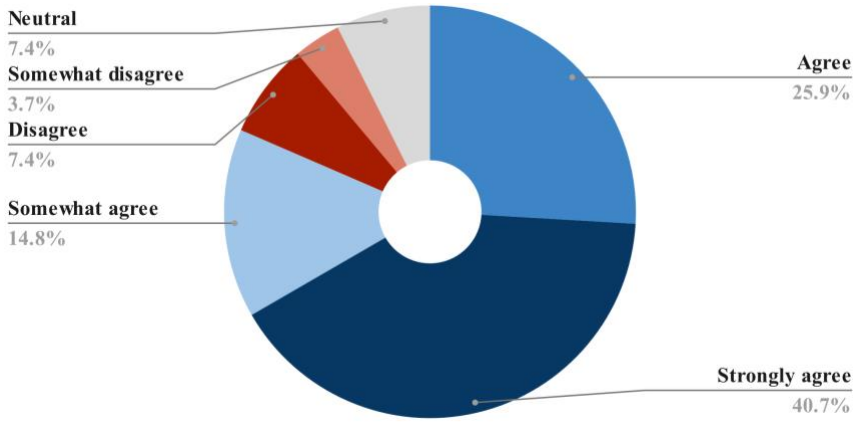


Figure 4-20

Growing up, I longed for a sense of (platonic) affection and admiration from my male friends and family members.



Raheem shared in his survey that his father was not openly expressive of love and affection with him, verbally or otherwise. He shared his feelings, “As it was back then and still is today, it lessens a heart-to-heart connection. I never felt a sense of comfort to speak to my dad about emotional or sensitive topics in my life.” Had his father been more affectionate with him, he believes, “It would have made me an emotionally available father and husband.” He continued, “I wished I would have learned from my dad through just interaction and experiences that it was healthy and acceptable to express what we consider feminine traits, such as being vulnerable and sensitive.”

Thomas voiced:

> There is nothing as rewarding as another man telling you that he is proud of you, loves you, cares for you, and will do anything to help you succeed. Those are emotions that were never really expressed in my community. It was oftentimes a struggle to get those comments. What you find yourself doing is looking for that affection in any place available. Typically, it ends up in unhealthy situations.

Darren did not long for expressions of affection from male friends and family members. He shared:

> I lived with my father until the age of thirteen when my parents separated and later divorced. My dad and I were inseparable from age eight until around thirteen. I believe this was the catalyst for these feelings. I also felt as if my friendships were pretty genuine. I see where later in life, there were issues related to not having those feelings of affection and admiration, more importantly, validation, or correction, from my father.

Case Study. Keith's journey with intimacy came up frequently during his life coaching journey. In his post-coaching interview, he testified:

> My Father did not verbally tell me he loved me until immediately after the commencement of my freshmen year of college when I happened to call home just to check in. I was caught totally off guard and honestly felt uncomfortable reciprocating. My father did not tell me he loved me my entire childhood. I honestly cannot even remember him hugging me much and he certainly never kissed me. I didn't know that I was missing it until I realized I was missing it as an adult. I remember seeing men on TV sometimes hug and kiss and tell their sons that they loved them, but I just chalked that up to it being television and the showing needing to tug on the heart strings. I wished my father was more expressive when I was growing up. I felt that his lack of affection made me feel less worthy and insecure. It made me feel like there was something wrong with me for wanting this type of affection, validation, and security. I ascribed it to one

more negative trait of being gay because society said that real men didn't show affection or need affection.

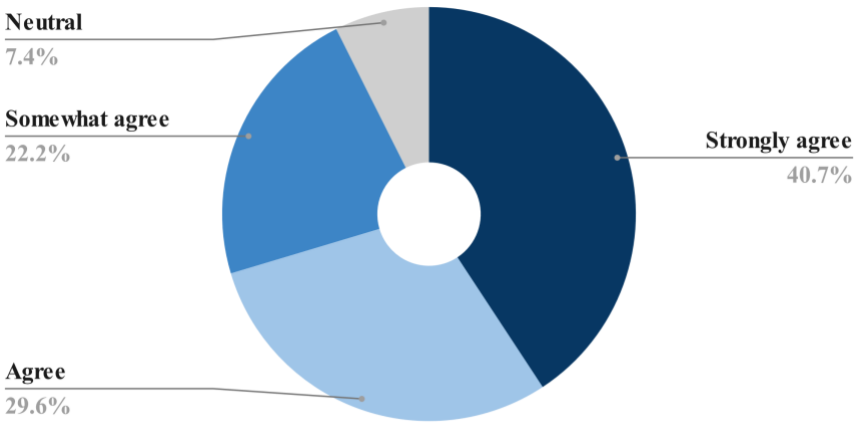
This has not had any bearing on my relationships with men as I walk through the world with them now. I tell my male friends, straight and gay, that I love them regularly. I hug them and I share my vulnerabilities with them. I have learned that letting myself be free gives them permission to be free. It bonds us at another level because we are able to certify that we are broken and in need of affirmation and confirmation when we share our emotions. I have embraced my emotions because my power resides in my vulnerability and my authenticity and truths.

The Essence of the Adult Black American Christian Male Experience

Survey and interview data presented themes less relevant to the research questions, but important to highlight, nonetheless. Findings revealed commonalities within the experience of black American Christian males. In Figure 4-21 below, 92.6% of the sampling agreed that being viewed as masculine has always been important to them.

Figure 4-21

My masculinity and being viewed as masculine have always been important to me.



In Figure 4-22, 92.5% of the sampling agreed that they pressure themselves to always strive for perfection; 3.7% somewhat disagreed. Figure 4-23 shows that 66.6% have felt ongoing pressure from family to be the best at everything; 25.9% disagreed.

Figure 4-22

I often put pressure on myself to always strive for "perfection" and to always say/do the "right" thing.

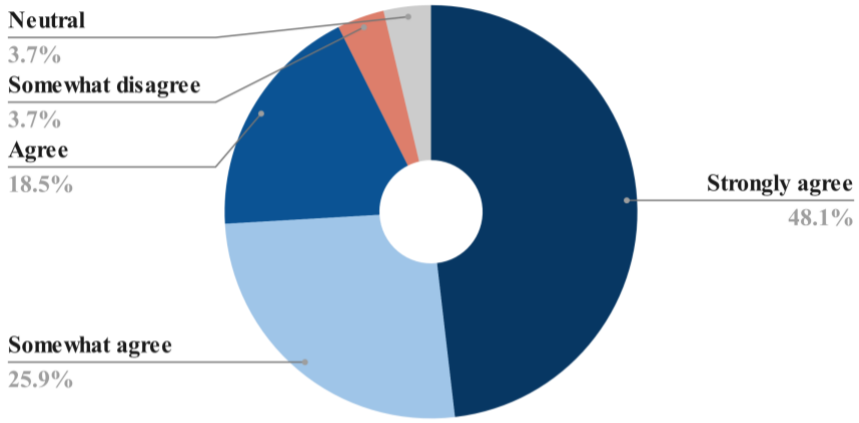
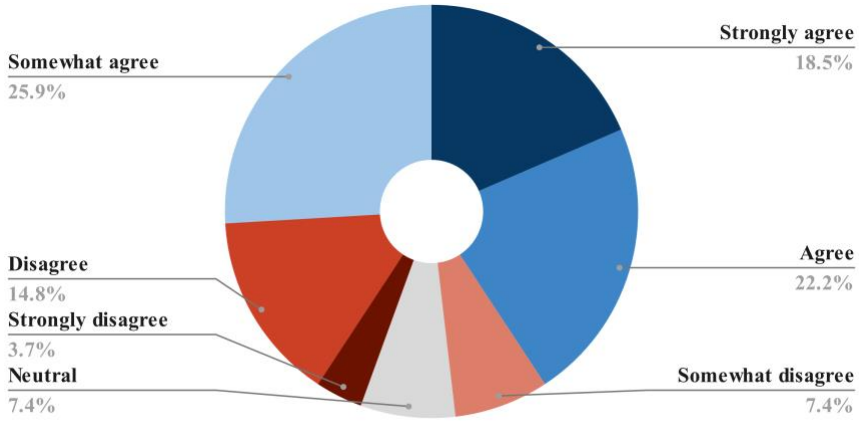


Figure 4-23

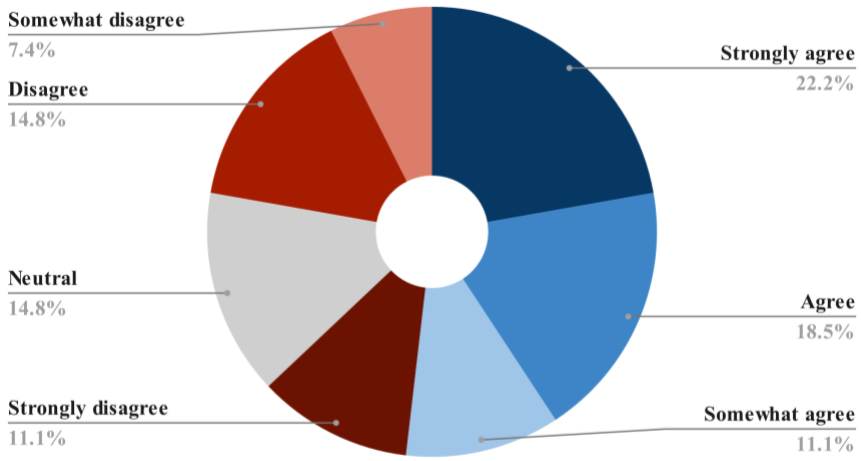
I often felt/feel pressure from my family to be the best at everything I do.



In Figure 4-24, over half the sampling (51.8%) often punish themselves for being "wrong"; 33.3% disagreed.

Figure 4-24

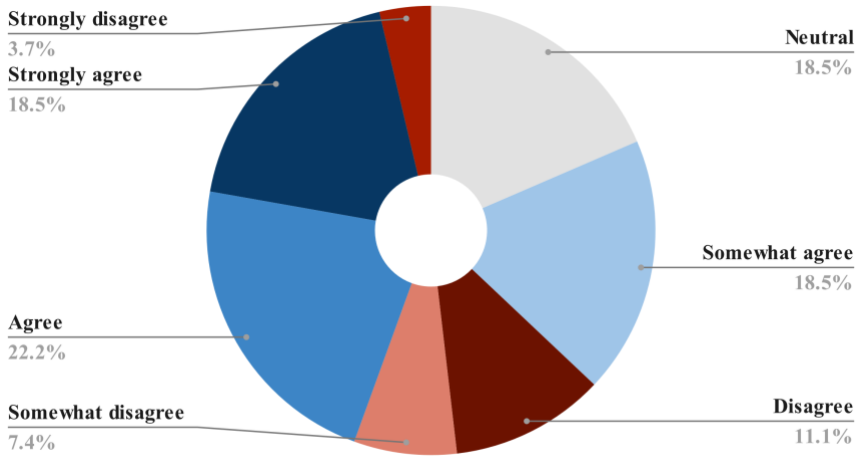
I often punish myself for being "wrong."



In Figure 4-25, 51.8% of the sampling have always felt proud to be American; 22.2% disagreed.

Figure 4-25

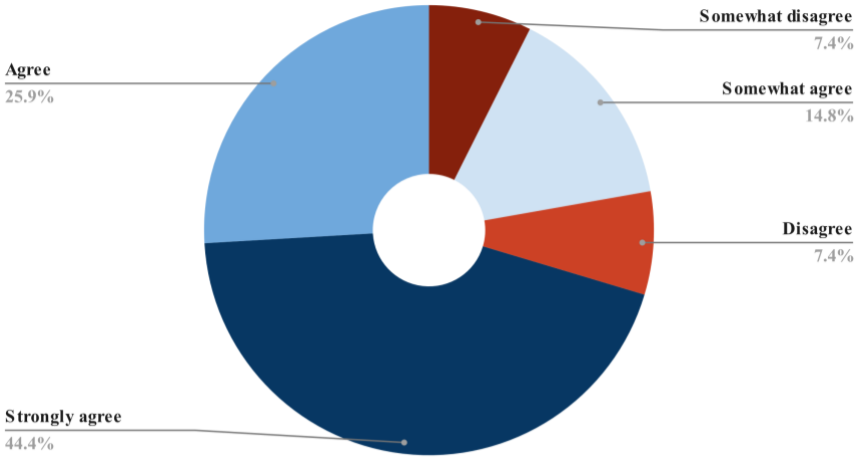
I have always felt proud to be American.



In Figure 4-26, 85.1% of the sampling have always felt proud to be black; 14.8% disagreed.

Figure 4-26

I have always felt proud to be black.



Keith described why he has not always been proud to be black:

Even though I grew up in a family that was very Black identified and very focused on Black history, I was sometimes embarrassed by the behaviors of my people when those behaviors served to reinforce stereotypes and give the majority culture fodder for why we were lesser beings. I was so tied to the notion of the collective, communal community that I thought the worst actors defined black people. So, there were times growing up that I felt Black people should have achieved more, been more educated, been more focused on the things that would make us "equal" to white people. . . .

Even though I knew and understood the fact-based part of Black history from an events perspective, I did not give as much thought to the systemic and structural oppression that pervades our society. I made the decision that since my parents were able to rise from poverty in the segregated south then ALL black people should be able to make something of themselves. But I have also felt less than proud when I witness Black people trying to be more like the majority culture and eschewing cultural mores that enhance the position of the entire

community. I am embarrassed by the Candace Owens-es and Clarence Thomas-es of the world. I think it sends the message to white people that their ignorance is justified, and they claim victory in embracing the small number of black people that hold their unenlightened and ill-informed views of Black people.

Darren shared:

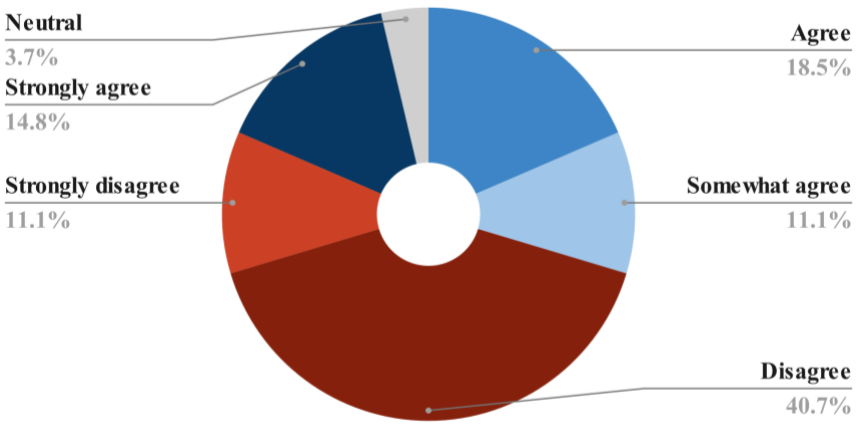
> Being American is not something I readily embrace, especially in my later years. However, the more I look at the historical nature of America, the more I realize how much of a lie we are living. We parade around as we have been around for thousands of years, yet our existence is tied to colonization by other countries. As for being proud of being black, this is something I have ever marginalized.

The Emergence of Performative Masculinity in Black Male Adolescence

Another major category less significant to the research questions presented related to how performative masculinity emerges in black adolescents. In Figure 4-27 below, 51.8% of the sampling disagreed that they, or someone important to them, viewed masculinity as being dominant, aggressive, overtly sexual, and violent; 44.4% agreed.

Figure 4-27

Historically, I (or people who matter most to me) have viewed common traits of masculinity as being physically dominant over women, aggressive, overtly sexual, and violent.



In Figure 4-28 below, 44.4% found it important to be associated with the "cool" kids growing up; 48.1% disagreed. Figure 4-29 showed that 44.4% found it challenging to fit in with the social circles that mattered growing up; 37% disagreed.

Figure 4-28

Growing up, it was important to me to be associated with the cool, popular kids.

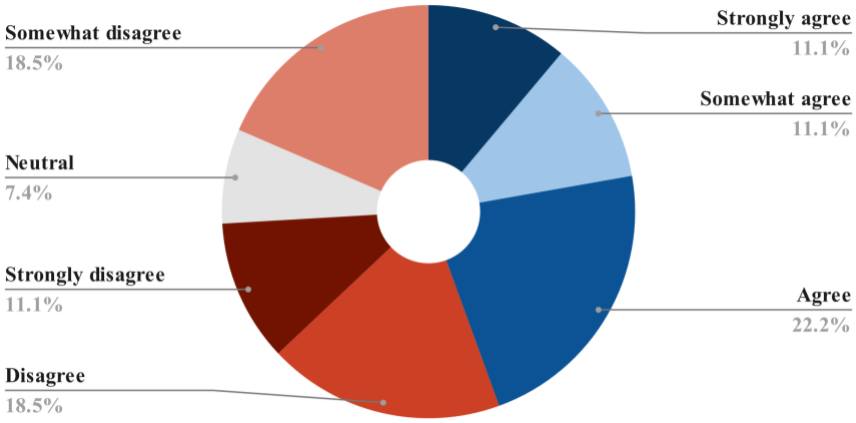
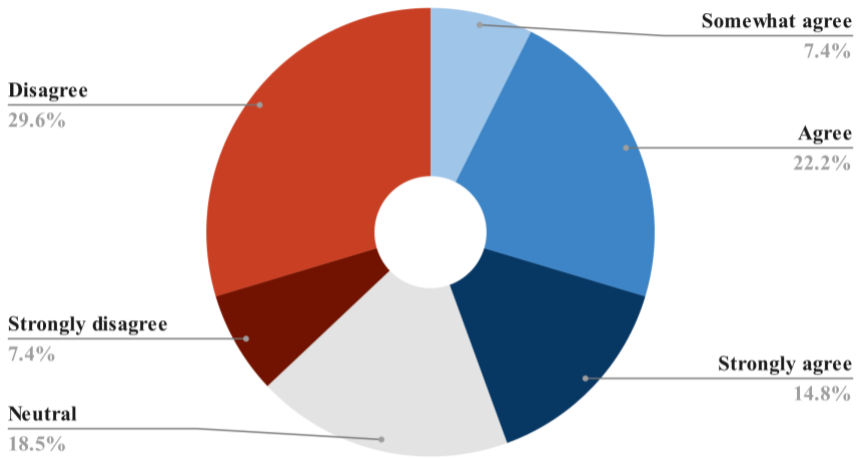


Figure 4-29

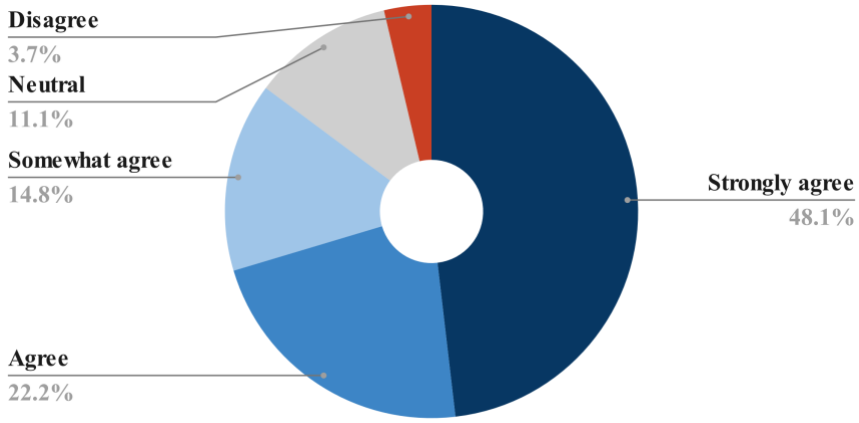
Growing up, I found it difficult to fit in with my desired social circles.



In Figure 4-30 below, 85.1% of the sampling have felt the need to prove their worth most of their lives; 3.7% disagreed.

Figure 4-30

For most of my life, I always felt a need to prove I was enough (man enough, black enough, "good" enough, etc.).



Raheem recalled eleven years old as the earliest age when he questioned his masculinity. He further shared, "Through my adolescent years transitioning into manhood, I found myself being more passive, shy, anti-social, and lost in recognizing my true self-identity."

Wayne shared a more avoidant experience:

I don’t believe I have ever questioned my masculinity or thought I wasn’t man enough. I honestly really didn’t give it much thought at all. I did know what type of man I didn’t want to become. Based off seeing how grown men conducted themselves at a young age. I knew I didn’t want to be like them and live the life they lived. So, I guess my process into manhood was a bit different because I based it off what I didn’t like about the men around me at a young age. I see both sides of that coin now as I, myself, avoid those exact same potholes in the road.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

Summary

In this chapter, I presented a review and discussion of the argument that there may be a contextual link between common cults and performative masculinity that emerge among adolescent black American Christian males. Furthermore, these potentially cultic underpinnings often force this group to conform and comply with this construct of masculinity even into adulthood. This study intended to create an awareness of these forced belief systems that may inhibit black American Christian males from thriving. Additionally, this study provided insight into educating and equipping professional coaches to serve this group better through life coaching.

This section covered a complete overview of the issue investigated, the methodology of the research, and the findings. The subsequent section presented an in-depth discussion of both significant and nonsignificant emergent themes from the research findings. I discussed the relationship between the data and the current literature reviewed in Chapter 2. In the final section, I explored my recommendations, including the implications of this research and implications for the professional coaching and human development field.

Overview of Study

In Chapter 2, I examined the interconnection of common cults and masculinity among black American Christian males. Mainly, I focused on how behaviors, belief systems, and emotions considered “masculine” emerge in the adolescent phase of human

development. The literature reviewed: (1) an examination of performative masculinity; (2) a historical synopsis of cult groups; (3) a historical context of the black male experience in America, especially in adolescence; (4) the effects of imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy among black males; (5) the influences of Christianity on the consciousness of black males; and (6) insights for addressing disempowering boyhood beliefs in adulthood through life coaching.

Performative Masculinity

I began the literature review by exploring insights linking performative masculinity to adolescence. During early childhood, black boys are often taught to suppress their emotions. This could result in performative "eruptions" in behavior often written off with the familiar adage "boys will be boys." Thus, the traditional construct of masculinity does not allow males to express emotions authentically.

Common traits associated with performative masculinity are repressed emotions, foreboding vulnerability, fear of intimacy, fear of weakness, perception of femininity as weakness, and homophobia. It reduces maleness to being emotionless, primal "animals" who only care about sex, money, and violence. Crude male behavior is commonly dubbed "toxic masculinity." However, I argued that masculinity itself is a human-manufactured construct. Therefore, it cannot be inherently toxic. Skewed interpretations of masculinity are what occur as problematic. Writing off male behavior as "toxic" does not allow room for further inquiry into the conduct. It makes the behavior wrong or bad. "Performative" masculinity incites investigation into what lies beneath the behavior.

I also learned how the American educational system might contribute to performative masculinity. Peter H. Johnston (2012) distinguished the fixed-performance

from the dynamic-learning narrative. American education tends to emphasize the former. Within the fixed-performance frame, black boys are groomed to be performers. They tend to be shunned when they do not perform up to par. This may cause them to act out. This frame sometimes shuts them down from learning how to face challenging experiences in more effective ways. Contrarily, the dynamic-learning frame could equip black males to navigate challenges more effectively. Difficulties and errors are viewed as part of the learning process. Nurturing the dynamic-learning frame in life coaching could be the foundation of catalyzing paradigm shifts with black American Christian males.

In adulthood, performative masculinity tends to show up within three domains: (1) success, status, and money; (2) sex and pornography; and (3) violence. Common denominators among these domains were a male's sense of identity and worthiness, power and respect, comparability to other men, confidence, and physical prowess. I used Will Smith's Oscars slap incident to illustrate an example of performative masculinity on display.

The combination of suppressing emotions and performance-driven education may aid in the erosion of intimacy within the black male group. Instead, they are driven to hide their vulnerability behind the mask of masculinity. Subsequently, they lose their ability to express empathy. Intimacy lies at the heart of life coaching. For life coaching to be most effective with black American Christian males, co-creating a coaching partnership grounded in openness, trust, vulnerability, and empathy is paramount.

Cults

Next, I studied cult groups to understand better how they function systemically. This was necessary to draw out any potential cultic underpinnings inherent in

performative masculinity. Ultimately, my objective was to connect this distinction to life coaching. Creating awareness of cultic systems with the coach could catalyze effective ways for the client to function within them.

A cult can be a group, a company, a family, or a relationship. For this study, my primary focus was destructive cults—or high-control groups. Destructive cults discourage individuality in favor of ideology. They require conformity and compliance to the leader and to the group's worldview (Lalich & McLaren, 2018). They use "unethical mind control to pursue its ends" (Steven Hassan, 1988/2018, "Cults: A Nightmare Reality" section, para. 4). "Mind control is any system of influence that disrupts an individual's authentic identity and replaces it with a false, new one," continues Hassan (1988/2018, "What Is Mind Control" section, para. 1). One typical result of mind control is cognitive dissonance, in which a person simultaneously holds two or more contradictory beliefs.

The BITE model, created by Hassan (1988/2018), includes behavior, information, thought, and emotion control. This mind control model makes it very difficult for cult members to exit the group. Generally, leaving cults is prohibited and often punished. Each BITE model component is a potential cultic underpinning that could be identified in human constructs like religion, race, nationality, familial dynamics, and gender roles. Through life coaching, men can adequately equip themselves with new, valuable information that may not have been accessible to them in their formative years.

Systems of cults include transcendent belief systems, charismatic authority, systems of control, and systems of influence. In a transcendent belief system, purity-based ideology is established, creating polarization within the group. In charismatic authority, the cult leader utilized heroic charisma to enamor group members into extreme

loyalty and devotion. Within systems of control, strict rules and behavioral norms are defined to create a tightly controlled ecosystem. In systems of influence, self-policing among group members results from the exploitation of the human desire to form connection and belonging.

Several distinct types of cults are explored: religious, political, commercial, psychotherapy/educational, and personality. Other variations and mixed groups are also distinguished. Constructive, healthy groups are highlighted for a balanced argument.

Understanding potential cultic underpinnings was significant because most destructive cults begin as constructive groups. The inaugural intention of positivity can sometimes morph into destruction. These possible underpinnings are also paramount for professional coaches. Coaches who become extreme in their methods risk creating a cultic relationship. Life coaching intends not to manipulate or "fix" the coaching client. Instead, the objective is to establish a coaching partnership grounded in trust, safety, and client autonomy.

Another critical cultic underpinning underscored was reverence. Reverence is the cornerstone of the indoctrination process, especially within black families. It is a primary example of an idea beginning constructive and potentially becoming destructive. An emerging assertion is that white supremacy depends on reverence. This often adversely and profoundly impacts black male lives.

Blackness & Americana

Next, I examined the interconnection of race, "blackness," and Americanism. For context, I delved into the origins of the color black, its symbolism, and its usage in

delineating a people. In today's usage, blackness is grounded in culture, not color. Conversely, "whiteness" refers to the historic Eurocentric worldview of white supremacy.

The literature pointed to what bell hooks (2004b) coins the imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy as the foundation upon which America was built. This distinction aided me in formulating a theory. The core cultic underpinning of performative masculinity among adolescent black American Christian males is imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy.

The black male spirit and psyche tend to be most adversely impacted by the influence of this systemic construct. One example is the Superman complex. The Superman complex perpetuates a dichotomy between those who seek to be the hero figure and those who look to a heroic figure to be saved. This could be a patriarchal cultic underpinning of two ideologies regarding performative masculinity concerning black American Christian males: (1) the black male's sole duty to provide and protect, and (2) the perception of powerlessness if he does not meet the standard, thus seeking an external power source. These ideologies may begin shaping within the imagination of black boys. Subsequently, confirmation bias may begin crystallizing these ideologies in adolescence.

America was built upon the ideals of freedom and unity. Yet, the influence of imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy has made these ideals more challenging to realize for black people, especially black males. Black males often feel less free and united in their own country than white males. As a result, they also often feel pressured to conform to American social norms to survive.

The heart and soul of America are violence and capitalism, respectively. They are intertwined. Both underpin imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy. Wealth

and violence are also directly linked as common traits of performative masculinity. While there are black American males who have mastered the game of capitalism to generate wealth, the wealth gap between white males and black males remains inarguably wide. Meanwhile, violence as a primary method of policing black males who do not conform is at an all-time high. The most noteworthy example of many is the 2020 assassination of George Floyd.

These distinctions painted a global picture of how blackness and masculinity entwine in America. Furthermore, these systemic constructs lay the groundwork for more nuanced constructs specific to the black American male experience to manifest. One nuance is the death or imprisonment narrative. It is the belief among black males that if they do not "get their act together," death or imprisonment will be their outcome. To avoid these outcomes, young black males often reduce their valuable offering to the world to their bodies—most commonly in the form of either athletics or entertainment. They must perform to survive.

Other nuances explored were parental wounds, education and learning, and the "cool pose." Regarding parental wounds, I dissected the common portrayal of the "deadbeat dad" and "fatherless son." I compared experiences that counter the two-parent family as the only stable structure for children to thrive. I also examined how black women, especially mothers, sometimes take on patriarchal norms that are often emotionally wounding to black boys. Educational systems grounded in white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy tend to perceive the black male as unintelligent. Thus, society values his physicality more than his intellect. Subsequently, the intellectual black male is often viewed as a threat (hooks, 2004b). Finally, I explored the performative construct of the

cool pose. The cool pose is the strategic persona invented by the black male to survive and navigate the challenges of being black and male in America. I encouraged life coaches to approach coaching black males with deep empathy and curiosity for how they perceive their world. Paradigm shifts can occur when the coach and client acknowledge and validate his humanness.

Christianity

Christian doctrines are rooted in patriarchy (hooks, 2004a). These are potential cultic underpinnings that sometimes trap black males into conforming boxes. I distinguish Christian-based ideology from spirituality. I argued that spirituality is internal. It includes self; it does not exclude.

The literature pointed to the historical context of Jesus directly linked to the "poor and powerless." The promise of Jesus leading and saving his poor and powerless followers fits a narrative often used by leaders of both constructive and destructive cults. This direct correlation to the Superman complex underpins the popularity of many Christian-based religions within black communities. Their "faith" reduces their inner power to reliance on external strength. For black Christian males, this can create conflict between this power reduction and their perceived duty to provide and protect.

Much like the BITE model of mind control in cults, rigid rules of Christian faiths often force believers to conform to one uniform way of being. Purity tests are often used to persecute or dehumanize those who do not comply. These tests can be cultic underpinnings of Christianity that potentially emasculate the black male. If he does not conform, his spirit may be crushed externally and internally.

I also explored the historical context of Christianity in black culture. Author bell hooks (2003) depicted how Christianity empowered enslaved Africans. They challenged some Christian doctrines, infusing their spiritual traditions and wisdom. These wisdoms focused on their liberation. However, post-slavery black people began to embrace more conservative and dualistic ideologies. These ideologies fall into the mechanistic worldview that gives birth to intolerance (Spruill & Gioscia, 2010).

This Western European gaze became the nucleus of many Christian doctrines. It is also the foundation upon which an imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchal America was built. It solidified beliefs among many black people that they lack worthiness and power and, thus, must be "saved." They often believe they are only powerful when they have proclaimed an externalized Savior as their power.

Life coaching black American males with deep-seated, rigid Christian beliefs may be challenging. Common challenges may include resignation and binary thinking. However, effectively coaching black American Christian males entails seeing them as human first. Coaches must coach the person, not the belief. They must be fearless in exploring the "truth" that lies within their clients. Coaching clients should be allowed room to "fall apart" with dignity.

Review of Methodology

Subjects. Including myself, twenty-seven total subjects participated in this survey. Eight subjects were interviewed. One was selected for the coaching case study. To maintain privacy and confidentiality, interviewed subjects are referenced using pseudonyms. All participating subjects met the following criteria: at least 18 years of age, identifying as cis-gender male, identifying as Black or of African descent, American

citizen at least since the age of 12, and identifying currently or formerly as Christian (i.e., having grown up with Christian background or beliefs).

Phase 1: Heuristic inquiry. I began my qualitative research whereby an outside investigator conducted four podcast-style interviews with me, each around one hour long. We discussed my feelings and experiences regarding my journey with masculinity. I wrote numerous notes in my journal about these experiences and used these notes to curate themes. These experiences and themes were leveraged to craft the inquiries I was most curious to explore with subjects in the survey.

Phase 2: Surveying. From the heuristic inquiry, I created a 40-inquiry survey using Google Forms to collect questionnaire data. The survey began with a nine-inquiry screening questionnaire to confirm if the subject met the desired eligibility criteria for participating in my investigation.

Phase 3: Interviewing. Interviews provided meaningful, information-rich insight into the subjects' perspectives and interpretations regarding the phenomenon of masculinity. I selected interviewees from the survey pool in which rapport was sufficiently established through text-based and verbal communication beforehand. Each interview (Appendix E) infused standard, pre-determined questions for cohesiveness in the investigation, along with less-structured, open-ended questions customized for each subject per their survey responses. The first interview was conducted via recorded phone call and transcribed. All subsequent interviews were conducted *asynchronously* via written email to allow the subjects ample time for reflection. A post-interview profile questionnaire (Appendix F) was provided to collect biographical profile information for this study.

Phase 4: Coaching. Considering this study's contribution to the professional coaching and human development field, I invited one of my private coaching clients to participate in this investigation by using our coaching partnership as a model case study. We completed seven recorded coaching sessions bi-weekly over three months. The client also completed the survey (Appendix C) to assess his shifts in perspective following coaching.

The client completed a post-coaching interview (Appendix F) after the final session via written email. Questions in this interview were customized based on the client's survey results and coaching experience. The case study generated from the data collected provided added insight into the expansion of a coaching framework to address performative masculinity among black America Christian males.

Data Analysis. In narrowing the focus of the study, I chose to generate a theory about a specific aspect of masculinity within a targeted group. This prevented my data collection and analysis processes from being too broad and ambiguous. (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 197) Following my hunches and intuitions during the ongoing analysis of survey data, I ended the data collection at the saturation point (p. 199). I then elected to conduct enough interviews to provide sufficient data to generate themes relevant to this study. I intended to explore and learn distinctions from previous literature and add to them in a neutral, unbiased manner.

Phenomenological analysis. The foundation of this phenomenological analysis was a phenomenological reduction. Additionally, I chose a more personalized version of phenomenology, heuristic inquiry, to include my lived experiences as part of the data

(Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 227). My intention with this analytical approach was to keep the experience of the phenomenon of performative masculinity in the foreground.

Grounded theory. In the grounded theory method, the strategy was constantly comparing one occurrence with another. From these comparisons, I formulated a theory. As the methodology name implies, the theory that emerges is grounded in the data. I identified specific categories, a core category, and properties from my grounded theory. I then observed and inferred any links between these categories and properties to form my hypothesis (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, pp. 228–229).

Case Study. In this case, the bounded unit was a professional life coaching partnership with an actual client invited to participate in this study. Data for this case was gathered from the coaching client's survey, session recordings and transcripts, session notes, and the post-coaching interview. This insight was leveraged to enrich the development of a coaching framework that addresses the phenomenon of masculinity within this specific demographic.

Review of Findings

In Chapter 1, I hypothesized that many adolescent black American Christian males have been conditioned out of awareness, in cultic ways, of their innate power to choose how to define masculinity for themselves. This phenomenon perpetuates the belief that the authentic essence of who they are is somehow not enough. Instead, they rely on familial, cultural, societal, and religious constructs to dictate how they behave and perform as men.

The findings confirmed that the construct of masculinity among black American Christian males in this study is riddled with potentially cultic underpinnings. Most of all,

these identified cultic dynamics trace back to the core cultic underpinning of imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy. Findings from research data revealed, for black American males, their power comes from within, not from without. Despite the cultic underpinnings, these black American males demonstrated their ability to create their definitions of masculinity. Some black males found this power through their spiritual quests. Others discovered their power through self-development, mentoring, or life coaching.

Discussion

In this section, I present an in-depth discussion of both significant and nonsignificant findings. In doing so, each research inquiry is addressed. I also discuss the relationship between the results and the current literature discussed in Chapter 2. I make no conclusive claims for this study.

From the grounded theory analysis, three main categories emerged: (1) the intersection of cultic dynamics and the black American Christian male—the core category; (2) the essence of the adult black American male experience; and (3) the emergence of performative masculinity in black male adolescence. Within the core category are the following properties that address all research questions: (1) contradistinguishing power and force (2) replacing conformity and compliance with agency; (3) reducing the impact of imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy; (4) reimagining depictions and demonstrations of the masculine spectrum; and (5) reclaiming imagination and intimacy eroded in black boyhood.

Discussion of Findings in Core Category: The Intersection of Cultic Dynamics and the Black American Christian Male

This core category held properties and underlying themes among the findings. Many of them interlace through this study's research questions.

Research Question 1. *Are there links between cults and masculinity forcing performative behavior among black American Christian males? If so, what are they?*

Branching out from the core cultic dynamic of imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy, numerous potential cultic underpinnings of performative masculinity were identified through the literature in Chapter 2. They are distinct yet often intertwined. They include the following:

1. The indoctrination of males to devalue their emotions, thus eroding intimacy
2. Fixed-performance frame in American educational systems (Johnston, 2012)
3. Components of the BITE model of mind control: behavior, information, thought, and emotion control (Hassan, 1988/2018)
4. Systems of cults: transcendent belief systems, charismatic authority, systems of control, and systems of influence (Lalich & McLaren, 2018)
5. Reverence as "performative admiration" (Brown, 2022)
6. The black male narrative that his sole duty to provide and protect
7. The Superman complex
8. The Death or imprisonment narrative
9. Christian-based doctrines that diminish the black male's sense of identity, wholeness, and inner power
10. Rigid, Christian-based uniformity rules and purity tests

Emerging emphatically from findings within this inquiry was the power of the black male spirit in the face of potential cultic underpinnings. Most black American males surveyed felt pressure to conform to society's definition of masculinity. Yet, deep down, most of them always knew they had the power to choose in their own lives.

These men shared powerful stories from my in-depth interviews of how they replaced conformity and compliance with agency. Most of them shared their unique experiences with potentially cultic dynamics on various levels. They also appeared to avoid many of them. Notwithstanding, they began sensing their worthiness. They could, then, access their power and authority as adults. However, with these men, it did not appear to be done in a performative way. They chose to relinquish the pressure to conform and create their own sense of identity and masculinity.

This group's awareness of personal agency came at varying stages of adulthood. Each path was distinct, with a few commonalities. Some interviewees recognized their agency early in their lives. Others are still in the process of unearthing it. Some achieved this through independent, personal/spiritual development practices. Some had mentors. Others explored options like therapy or coaching.

Nonetheless, the data shows that new possibilities can be generated when black males sense their worthiness. They can empower themselves to be their own agents of change in their lives. Their shared experiences unveil the black male's ability to relinquish the pressure of conformity and compliance with misaligned belief systems.

These black males are examples of the male role models I spoke of in Chapter 2. They are men who demonstrate a more holistic journey of masculinity. Life coaching can

catalyze such journeys for black males who may not easily recognize their worthiness or agency left to their own devices.

Research Question 2. *Does race play a role in shaping how black American males viewed themselves as men or behaved as men? If so, how?*

Reducing the impact of imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy was the property addressing this inquiry. Although this core cultic underpinning may never be eradicated entirely, its effects could be lessened. Survey findings showed that black males often feel less free to express themselves as fully and authentically as their white counterparts. Many narratives shared among black American males historically contrast their experiences with their white counterparts. This was the case with most black males interviewed in this study. However, how they choose to navigate a white-supremacist capitalist patriarchal society ultimately holds more weight than any narratives of how that society might perceive them.

Other emerging themes within this property were navigating the influence of whiteness, white authority, and purity tests. Several subjects shared adolescent experiences when they felt the need to prove or withhold their truth in predominantly white spaces. They also described everyday pressures from family or peers to contour themselves into “normal” ways of being. That standard of normal is codified as whiteness. Yet, they still position themselves to learn how to navigate through. Some subjects rely on their spirituality to push and fight through challenges. Many seek support to develop tools to more actively and effectively deal. Life coaching, specifically the divinity coaching model, could offer both inner power and thriving means.

Research Question 3. *Does Christian-based religion play a role in shaping how black American males viewed themselves as men or behaved as men? If so, how?*

Another emerging property was contradistinguishing power and force. Survey findings showed that two-thirds of the participants felt their Christian faith was influential in teaching them how to be men. Results also showed that nearly half of these men were discouraged from questioning doctrines they found challenging. This evidence illustrates how Christian doctrines can be potentially cultic. If these doctrines force black males into rigid rules of uniformity, this could diminish their sense of identity and autonomy.

Interview data reveals another dimension. Despite such potentially cultic paradigms, these men either overcame the mind control—much like exiting a cult—or completely circumvented these systems. They found the inner power to choose and create their lives in various ways. Many of them trusted their intuitions. These black males embrace an inner reverence for life on their terms.

Over time, they developed a freedom mindset. They did not succumb to the death or imprisonment narrative. They explored perceptual worlds that aligned with them and empowered them. Many shared anecdotes of how they found the power of divinity and spirituality from within, outside the Christian church. In some cases, Christian faith was the catalyst for discovering their inner power. For others, that journey of self-discovery occurred through the rebellion of that faith. Regardless of the path, these black men learned how resilient they are. They recognize that through any adversity, the only limits are the ones they place on themselves. No one outside of them is coming to rescue or save them. They possess the power to save themselves.

Research Question 4. *How do black American Christian males define masculinity as adults when allowed access to their power to choose?*

Tony Porter exclaims, "There's freedom outside of these rigid definitions of manhood" (Newsom, 2015, 1:31:51). Reimagining depictions and demonstrations of the masculine spectrum was the emerging property addressing this research inquiry. Survey findings showed some common and some split historical views of masculinity. Subjects were split nearly evenly regarding traditional masculinity as never showing emotion and never appearing weak. The gap widened as more subjects concurred that television and media influentially shaped their perceptions of black masculinity. The majority often heard such expressions as "man up" or "real men don't cry." The findings confirmed that there are unhealthy depictions of masculinity being projected. Many young black males are conflicted by them. These manufactured narratives tell young boys who they are supposed to be rather than allowing them to choose.

However, what I found most intriguing about the interview findings is that very few of the classic traits of traditional, patriarchal, or performative masculinity surfaced in the subjects' chosen definitions of masculinity. Also interesting is the variety of experiences that led to these interpretations. Some were based on demonstrations from other men. Others were based on their lived experiences without any paternal figures. I observed an endearing openness of heart that I was unsure if I would see among all the black males who participated in the interviews.

The overarching themes in most subjects' current depictions of masculinity were compassion, wholeness, and acceptance. Many expressed compassion and empathy as crucial components of their definition. Many agreed that masculinity was more aligned

with the heart. These men advocate for connection with others and with themselves head to heart. The vulnerability these black men shared in their interviews embodied their depictions of masculinity. Childhood beliefs about masculinity did not appear to factor in.

Wholeness was another common denominator. These black men align in allowing their full humanness to be seen. They actively embrace both the masculine and the feminine in their current depictions. They allow their full spectrum of emotions. They also accept others' range of authentic expression. For these men, masculinity is taking ownership of their whole person and the divine power within. Raheem even called his definition "divine masculinity." Also, there was a shared sentiment among their depictions of masculinity as ever evolving and redefining. That openness and willingness to grow and change is one key component a life coach must assess with the client. Otherwise, the coaching process could likely be met with friction and conflict.

Research Question 5. *What might be possible for black American males if this power is awakened and nurtured in adulthood by life coaching?*

All five properties emerging from the findings address this research question in some capacity. However, the one standout property was reclaiming imagination and intimacy eroded in black boyhood. The importance of education was evident in the data. However, the breadth of education was also apparent. How black males learn is as important as what they learn, if not more so. The dynamic-learning frame discussed in Chapter 2 is paramount.

It is noteworthy to highlight that all interviewees in this study are college alumni—one soon to complete at the time of this study. Most of them have master's degrees. A few are even pursuing doctorates. Providing black male youth access to

resources allows them to explore the full spectrum of their imaginations and emotions, which is critical to their development. For the black male to thrive, both mind and heart must be nurtured for critical thinking and feeling. The combination of education and personal development, like life coaching, could support many black males who struggle to discover their authentic identity and life purpose.

Findings also unveiled an overwhelming deficiency and desire among black men for intimacy from their fathers and/or other significant male figures. The majority of subjects were more shown affection by women than men. Another majority longed for love and affection from their fathers, male friends, and other male family members. Many interviewees recalled having little to no verbal or physical expressions of affection from their fathers, including those whose fathers were physically present. They shared heart-filling stories about what having that intimacy would have made possible for them. They would be more emotionally available within their adult relationships. They would feel a greater sense of reward, pride, and community. They would be better spouses and fathers.

Findings from the case study with Keith also offered significant insight into this research question. Having completed four years of seminary, he was the perfect case for this study. The coaching partnership between him and me was one of the most impactful I have ever experienced in my years of coaching. The trust and intimacy needed for an effective partnership were unequivocally present. His post-coaching interview responses were thoughtful, thorough, passionate, authentic, and information rich. Hence, I included as much of his experiential data as possible in the case study. His accounts alone addressed all five research questions.

As a result of his coaching engagement, Keith experienced a radical paradigm shift. He now recognizes the power and divinity within himself to generate his life on his terms. He now has access to the agency that was always there. In three months, Keith learned to embrace the value in his emotions and vulnerabilities. He now gives himself full permission to show up and navigate the world with dignity. He can be his most whole, most authentic self. His love for humanity includes a deeper love for himself.

I am not claiming that every life coaching partnership will catalyze shifts comparable to Keith's. However, his case is one example of what is possible for black American Christian males who are open and trusting of the coaching process. It also provides one possible framework proven to be effective.

Discussion of Findings in Other Main Categories

Other noteworthy findings provided informative data regarding the following categories: (1) the essence of the adult black American male experience; and (2) the emergence of performative masculinity in black male adolescence. I found these categories less significant to my research questions. However, the findings within these categories revealed additional insight into the general topic of the black American Christian male experience.

The Essence of the Adult Black American Christian Male Experience. The survey findings showed a consensus among subjects who have always viewed their masculinity as vital to their person. This is significant because it validates the importance of the masculinity conversation. It also may connect to why black males could be more susceptible to potential cultic dynamics related to performative masculinity. However, the significance appeared to end there.

Additionally, the consensus among their experiences was frequent self-induced or familial pressures to strive for "perfection" or excellence. This data aligns with some concepts reviewed in the literature regarding the black male experience. However, this issue did not significantly stand out within the interview findings or the research questions.

Regarding national and ethnic pride, a much more significant percentage of the total sampling expressed unwavering pride in being black than in being American. For instance, Darren, the oldest of those interviewed, shared how pride in being American is increasingly less significant in his later years, having greater awareness of America's history. Meanwhile, he has always regulated his pride in being black. This data provided great insight into the essence of the black American Christian male experience. Even so, it did not emerge as significant in the final analysis.

I assess what made this category less significant to the research study was that it provided a broad view of the black male experience. Interesting findings were found within the grounded theory analysis. Ultimately, my instincts led me in other directions. I chose to follow the data.

The Emergence of Performative Masculinity in Black Male Adolescence.

Additional findings from the survey showed a consensus of black males who felt a perpetual need to prove their "enough-ness." Evidence of the "cool pose" also emerged in this category. However, less than half the sampling deemed it essential for them to "fit in" with the cool social circles. Nearly half expressed difficulties fitting in with the social circles they desired to belong to growing up. These are common factors often leading to performative behavior within black males.

Interestingly, I was struck more by the various ways the cool pose appeared in the interview data. Many questioned their masculinity in early adolescence, some even earlier in childhood. Thomas alluded to one nuance of the cool pose expressing how he grew up in the "smart isn't cool" era. Sean mentioned some troubles he experienced in adolescence with "fitting in" that had him get into frequent fights. Others, like Keith, were more influenced by familial and communal pressures rather than fitting in.

Distinct elements of cool pose were present in these men's experiences. Yet, many did not succumb to the pressure to "be cool." Some, like Wayne, never questioned his masculinity. He allowed his unique individuality to avoid the trap of coolness. Conceptually, the cool pose is a significant occurrence within the adolescent black male experience. For this study, however, the findings did not link the concept to the research inquiries within the grounded theory analysis as significantly.

Final Thoughts

This study illuminates one core ideal for me: auspicious possibilities. The essence of masculinity among black American Christian males is not a monolith. It is a spectrum, deep and wide. It is an experience of resilience and tenacity. It is a spectrum worthy of further exploration. Through all my research, I learned my story is not separate from any other black male I surveyed or interviewed. Our rich, distinct experiences bond us.

Results from this study also demystify for black American males, whether currently or formerly Christian, that divine superpowers can be found within us. Despite any potential cultic underpinnings, it is possible and plausible for black males to *choose* to thrive in America. We are not victims. We are victors. We can lift our voices and sing. Harriet Lerner (2009) said:

> In our rapidly changing society, we can count on only two things that will never change. What will never change is the will to change and the fear of change. It is the will to change that motivates us to seek help. It is the fear of change that motivates us to resist the very help we seek. ("To Change or Not to Change" section, para. 1)

Humans are inventors. Patriarchy and masculinity are human inventions. Christianity, race, and politics are all human inventions. My secret vow was invented. Any belief system is a manufactured invention brought forth through language and interpretation. If we constructed all this, imagine what we can invent—or reinvent—better in the future. Life coaching can be that path of invention; it is a journey of creation.

Furthermore, this study amplifies my work's impact on the professional coaching and human development field. I dream this study will be the impetus for evolution, expansion, and increased diversity within the rapidly growing coaching field. Indubitably, my coaching practice has been exponentially enriched by my learnings from this research. Author and sports coach, Joe Ehrmann, shared his sentiments about coaching from a sports context:

> I think the great myth in America today is that sports builds character, but sports does not build character unless a coach intentionally teaches it and models it.
>
> When I did start coaching, I didn't want to be a transactional coach using kids for my own identity. So, I just started with a very simple philosophy: If you're going to be a transformational coach, you've got to know what you're transforming. I coach to help boys become men of empathy and integrity who will be responsible

> and change the world for good. That's what sports ought to be about, and we've got a lot of work to do in this country. (Newsom, 2015, 50:16)

This idea could apply universally to coaching, especially for black American males. In that vein, it is only fitting that I conclude my final thoughts with the words of the late bell hooks (2004a), "The quest for integrity is the heroic journey that can heal the masculinity crisis and prepare the hearts of men to give and receive love" ("Reclaiming Male Integrity" section, para. 1).

Recommendations

This study's results offered informative insights with implications for future investigative research and the professional coaching and human development field. These insights were extrapolated from the study's research process using surveys, in-depth interviews, and professional coaching. The prospect of further, improved research on performative masculinity impassions me. I believe this topic should be investigated further—the more research studies conducted in coaching, the better for humanity. I am pleased to share my recommendations for further research and the coaching field.

Implications for Further Investigative Research

This research study revealed potentially cultic underpinnings of performative masculinity that emerge among adolescent black American Christian males. The following are my recommendations for further investigation research:

1. The study may be reinvestigated to explore the impacts of performative masculinity among less educated adolescent black American males. A phenomenological analysis is recommended to explore lived experiences of black American Christian males who may not have comparable education levels to

those in this study. This may provide additional insight into the effectiveness of the divinity coaching framework addressing the phenomenon of masculinity.

2. The research design of this study could be duplicated to examine performative masculinity among non-Christian black American males. This phenomenological analysis could contrast lived experiences of black American males with non-Christian-based backgrounds (Jewish, Islamic, atheistic, agnostic, non-affiliated, etc.). This study may provide comparisons between the impact of performative masculinity among black American males who are non-Christian versus those who are not. These findings could offer additional insight into the effectiveness of life coaching. Perhaps, a different life coaching framework could be explored.
3. One limitation of this study was an exploration of the intersection of performative masculinity and the effects of alcohol and drug abuse among black American males. Phenomenological research is recommended for future investigations of how substance abuse and masculinity are connected. Researching this issue may provide another layer to the masculinity construct. However, addressing the problem may move beyond the scope of coaching into therapy and counseling. Perhaps findings could provide coaches with insight into the signs of substance abuse and best practices in proper care referral procedures for black male addicts.
4. This study may be expanded to examine impacts of performative masculinity within other cultures, ethnicities, nationalities, and communities (LGBTQ+). This expansion could add pieces to the larger puzzle of the masculinity phenomenon. Findings from this future investigation could open more global conversations and

explorations regarding male experiences. Exploration of ancient wisdoms from other cultures is also recommended for more information-rich data.

Implications for Professional Coaching & Human Development Field

This study's findings also highlighted how life coaching could address potential cultic underpinnings of performative masculinity in black American adult males. I present the following recommendations for the advancement of the professional coaching and human development field:

1. A diverse curriculum within coach training and certification programs is recommended. With diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives on the rise in America, it is essential to include such principles within training for coaches. Ideal Coaching Global and CoachHub already incorporate DEI programs in their training. This study and future related investigations may be essential in equipping coaches with more insight into the lived experiences of diverse coaching clients.
2. The diversity of professional life coaches is highly recommended. In my work in numerous coaching and human development organizations, I have observed them being predominantly run by white males and primarily employing white females. This study and future studies may inspire more men of color to pursue careers in coaching. I hope this study and my coaching practice will generate more black male coaches.
3. An expansion of existing coaching frameworks and coaching-specific literature is recommended. Coaching is far from a "one size fits all" experience. Further investigations on niche topics, like in this study, may spark many expansions of

existing frameworks for target groups. They may also generate more nuanced coaching literature. I hope this study will catalyze further innovation of technology and insightful information within the coaching field.

4. The integration of human development programs in American educational systems is recommended. I recall the presence of "guidance counselors" as far back as elementary school. However, I did not engage with them much. Perhaps guidance counselors could become trained coaches, or life coaching could be integrated into school systems. Findings from this study reveal education and learning as a critical part of the human development process for black American males. If high school counselors—or high school life coaches—were equipped with insight from this study, the effect of performative masculinity within the adolescent phase could be reduced or circumvented.

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APPENDIX A

INVITATION LETTER

[Date]

Dear [Participant Name],

My name is Frederick C. Sanders. I am a doctoral student at the International University of Professional Studies. Upon completion of this program, I will earn combined masters and doctorate degrees in professional coaching and human development. The research study I am conducting is an exploration of performative masculinity among black American Christian males.

You are invited to participate in this study. Should you agree to participate by responding to this correspondence with a "yes," you will be required to sign an informed consent form, which will be sent in a separate email.

Qualifying participants must all fit the following criteria:

- Currently 18 years of age or older
- Identify as cis-gender male
- Identify as Black or of African descent
- American citizen at least since the age of 12
- Currently OR formerly identifying as Christian (i.e., having grown up with Christian background or beliefs)

The purpose of this study is to create an awareness of belief systems that may condition, hinder and even cripple black American Christian males from thriving and to equip mental and emotional wellness professionals to better serve this group through coaching.

When you enter into the study process, you will be invited to complete a 40-question, multiple-choice, survey. Depending on your answers, you may then be invited to participate in an online interview. One or two subjects are invited to participate in a coaching program (in which sessions would be recorded). Following the coaching program, coaching clients complete at post coaching interview. All subjects will remain anonymous for confidentiality.

Your participation is voluntary. Refusal to participate will involve no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled, and you may discontinue participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. There is no cost for participating in this study.

Please feel free to reach out if you have any question or concerns. You may contact me directly at 646-xxx-xxxx or by email at fcsandersphd@gmail.com. You may also contact my faculty advisor, Dr. Lloyd J. Thomas, by phone at 970-xxx-xxxx or by email at ljtdat@aol.com for further questions about this study.

Warmly,

Frederick C. Sanders
M.A. / Ph.D. Candidate
Professional Coaching & Human Development

APPENDIX B

INFORMED CONSENT

Dissertation Title: *Power Versus Force: Cultic Underpinnings of Performative Masculinity among Adolescent Black American Christian Males*

Name of Participant: _____

Name of Mentor: Dr. Lloyd J. Thomas • ljtdat@aol.com

Principle Investigator: Frederick C. Sanders, Jr. • fcsandersphd@gmail.com

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to create an awareness of belief systems that may condition, hinder and even cripple black American Christian males from thriving and to equip mental and emotional wellness professionals to better serve this group through coaching.

Description of the Research

When you enter into the program, you will be invited to complete a 40-question, multiple-choice, survey. Depending on their answers, they may then be invited to participate in an interview (written or audio recorded). One or two subjects are invited to participate in a coaching program (in which sessions would be recorded). Following the coaching program, coaching clients complete at post coaching interview.

Subject Participation & Time Commitment

Qualifying participants must all fit the following criteria:

- Currently 18 years of age or older
- Identify as cis-gender male
- Identify as Black or of African descent

- American citizen at least since the age of 12
- Currently OR formerly identifying as Christian (i.e. having grown up with Christian background or beliefs)

Estimated 15-25 total participants in the study. Time commitment will involve approximately 15 minutes for the surveyors, 1-2 hours for *select* interviewees, and up to ten (10) 30- to 45-minute coaching sessions with *select* coaching clients.

Potential Risks

In this study, there may be a risk of mild emotional discomfort. The principle investigator is a trained, certified mental/emotional wellness professional.

Potential Benefits

Participants in the study may gain a better understanding and insights to increase their awareness of their mental, emotional, and behavioral wellness and life authorship, as well as access to on-going support.

Disclosure

Investigator is prepared to refer to other mental health resources if necessary.

Confidentiality

Any information, data, and/or recordings will be collected only following the written consent of the participant. No names nor identifying information other than race, nationality, religious background, gender and age will be used when discussing or reporting data. The investigator(s) will safely keep all files, recording, and data collected in a secured locked cabinet in the principal investigator's office. Once the data has been fully analyzed it will be destroyed.

Your responses are completely anonymous. I will not use your name in any quotations or reports of my findings; I may use a pseudonym of your choosing; and I will omit or obscure any identifying details.

Compensation

Each participant in the interview and coaching research methods will receive a copy of the book *Man Enough* by Justin Baldoni in appreciation.

Questions and Contact Information

For answers to pertinent questions about the research and research subjects' rights, or in the event of any negative effects or research-related injury to the subject, please contact the principle investigator above.

Right to Withdraw

Your participation is voluntary. Refusal to participate will involve no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled and you may discontinue participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

Costs

There is no cost for participating in this study. Any medical expenses resulting from participation in this study will not be reimbursed by the investigators.

IUPS Approval

This research proposal has been reviewed and approved by the **Academic Committee of International University of Professional Studies,** and it has been determined that this study meets the ethical obligations required by University policies.

I voluntarily agree to participate in this research program

□ **Yes**

□ **No**

Participant Signature

My signature below formally acknowledges that I have read this document and understand the information contained herein. My questions and concerns have been answered by the researcher.

Name of Participant (print):

_____

Signature: _____ Date: _____

Person Obtaining Consent: Frederick C. Sanders, Jr.

Signature: _____ Date: _____

Note: A copy of the signed, dated consent form must be kept by the Principle Investigator(s) and a copy must be given to the participant.

APPENDIX C

SURVEY QUESTIONNAIRE

Participants in the survey will respond to the questionnaire with one of the following answers:

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Somewhat agree
- Neither agree nor disagree (Neutral)
- Somewhat disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree
- Unsure
- Non-applicable

They will respond to a series of statements regarding their experience in comparison to common experiences of black American Christian males:

1. Growing up, I always knew I had the choice to create the life I wanted.
2. My masculinity and being viewed as masculine have always been important to me.
3. I am troubled or disturbed when I encounter men who are effeminate (or not masculine).
4. In my honest opinion, masculinity is typically defined always being strong, never showing emotion, never appearing or being perceived as weak.

5. Historically, I (or people who matter most to me) have viewed a common trait of masculinity as having physical dominance over women, being overtly sexual, as being violent.
6. Historically, I (or people who matter most to me) have viewed activities like camping, skiing, or bungee jumping as “white” activities
7. Historically, I (or people who matter most to me) have often viewed educated, well-spoken black people as “acting white.”
8. Historically, I have often found it difficult communicating with or building relationships with white people.
9. Historically, I have often found it difficult communicating with or building relationships with other black people.
10. Growing up, television and media were instrumental in shaping how I thought I should behave as a man, especially as a black man.
11. Growing up, I often heard expressions like “man up,” “don’t be a pussy,” and “real men don’t cry.”
12. For most of my life, I always felt a need to prove I was enough (man enough, black enough, “good” enough, etc.).
13. I have <u>always</u> felt proud to be American.
14. I have <u>always</u> felt proud to be black.
15. As a black man in American, I have often felt less free to fully and authentically express myself than white American men.
16. In many ways, I feel like my mother shaped who I am as a man more than my father.

17. My father was a significant presence, influence, and primary male role model growing up.
18. My father (or father figure) was always openly expressive of love and affection for me.
19. My father (or father figure) verbally told me he loved me regularly.
20. Reflecting back, I wish my father (or father figure) was more affectionate with me growing up.
21. Most of my life, I've felt pressure to conform to society's definition of what it means to be a man.
22. In my teenage years, I had great mentors and/or a support system in my life who helped me transition into adulthood.
23. Growing up, I can recall fond memories of receiving genuine love and affection from other male figures (eg. uncles, neighbors, friends, etc.).
24. Growing up, I recall receiving more love and affection from female figures in my life than male ones.
25. Growing up, I longed for a sense of (platonic) affection and admiration from my male friends and family members.
26. Growing up, it was important to me to be associated with the cool, popular kids.
27. Growing up, I found it difficult to fit in with my desired social circles.
28. When I was in school, I was never asked how I enjoy learning things.
29. When I was in school, I was asked more about how good my grades were than what I had learned.

30. When I was in school, I was often ridiculed or discouraged when I asked questions.
31. I feel my religion/faith was very influential in teaching me how to be a man.
32. Regarding matters of religion or faith, I was often curious about certain doctrines I was taught.
33. Regarding matters of religion or faith, I was often discouraged from asking questions about certain doctrines I found challenging.
34. I've often felt challenged regarding my body image (body dysmorphia, weight issues, etc.).
35. I often put pressure on myself to always be "perfect" and to always say/do the "right" thing.
36. I often punish myself for being "wrong."
37. I often felt/feel pressure from my family to be the best at everything I do.
38. Regarding my mental and emotional wellness, I feel I have access to support.
39. Today, I can honestly say I am happy with who I am and where I am in my life currently.
40. Wherever I go, I feel a sense of belonging and inclusion.

APPENDIX D

INTERVIEW INVITATION LETTER

Good day [Participant Name]!

Thank you once again for participating in my study. Based on your survey responses, you have been selected for a follow up written interview. If you respond with a "yes," I will email you an online interview with few questions for you to answer and send in a reply email within the next 14 days, or shortly thereafter if you need more time.

Friendly reminders, per your signed informed consent, that your participation is voluntary. You have the right to withdraw your participation at any time. Also, data collected from this interview will ONLY be used for the purposes of my doctoral study and will be used anonymously, per your signed informed consent, unless you give permission otherwise.

Please respond with a "yes" if you would like to proceed with the interview. Please respond with a "no" if you would like to opt out of the further interviewing.

Warmly,

Frederick C. Sanders

M.A. / Ph.D. Candidate

Professional Coaching & Human Development

APPENDIX E

INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEW

Interview Guide:

- Thank you for agreeing to a more in-depth interview for my study. Some of these questions may be a bit heavy. Please give yourself time and space to ponder and any allow feelings to come up. If there is a question you don't feel comfortable answering, please feel free to express that.
- Quick reminder that data collected from this interview will ONLY be used for the purposes of my doctoral study and will be used anonymously, per your signed informed consent, unless you give permission otherwise. You may opt out of participating in this study at any time.

Pre-determined questions:

1. What is the earliest age you recall ever questioning your masculinity or being "man enough"? How did this impact your adolescent years transitioning into manhood?
2. Did religion play a role in shaping how you viewed yourself as a man, or how you behaved as a man? If so, how?
3. Who were your most influential role models growing up that shaped and defined who you are as a man?
4. As an adult, what have you learned about your own masculinity? Has your definition of it shifted at all? If so, how?

5. How do you define masculinity today?

Customized questions:

- In the survey… You [survey response] with the statement, [insert survey statement]. [Open-ended follow-up question]

APPENDIX F

INDIVIDUAL POST-INTERVIEW PROFILE

Please select (1) Code Name or Pseudonym for anonymity and confidentiality (if not chosen or no preference, one will be assigned to you to protect your identity): _____

Date: _____

Time: _____

General biographical information:

(Note: This information may be used to describe your anonymous profile in the study)

Current age: _____

How would you briefly describe yourself using general terms?

- Background (where you grew up, how you were brought up, etc.):
- Significant/noteworthy character traits:
- Today, I would describe myself as…

Education completed (Please include fields of study):

- GED
- High school diploma
- Some undergraduate
- Bachelor's degree
- Some postgraduate
- Master's degree
- Doctorate degree
- Other: _____

Current occupation(s):

Sexual orientation:

- Heterosexual
- Homosexual / Same gender loving
- Bisexual
- Queer
- Asexual
- Pansexual
- Questioning
- Other: _____

Did you grow up knowing your biological father?

- If so, how would you briefly (in 1 or 2 sentences) describe your relationship?
- If not, did you have a father figure?
    - If so, how would you briefly (in 1 or 2 sentences) describe this relationship?

Are you a father?

- If so, how many children do you have?
    - How would you briefly (in 1 or 2 sentences) describe yourself as a father?

APPENDIX G

POST-COACHING INTERVIEW

Interview Guide:

- Thank you for agreeing to a more in-depth interview for my case study. Some of these questions may be a bit heavy. Please give yourself time and space to ponder and any allow feelings to come up. If there is a question you don't feel comfortable answering, please feel free to express that.
- Quick reminder that data collected from this interview will ONLY be used for the purposes of my doctoral study and will be used anonymously, per your signed informed consent, unless you give permission otherwise. You may opt out of participating in this study at any time.

Customized interview questions:

1. In your survey… You "disagreed" with the statement… "Growing up, I always knew I had the choice to create the life I wanted."
    a. Please elaborate on any specific experiences you can think of that made you feel that way.
    b. Did your experience with life coaching shift your belief in any way? If so, how?
2. In your survey… You "somewhat agreed" with the statement… "I am troubled or disturbed when I encounter men who are effeminate (or not masculine)."

   a. Please share why you feel this way.
   b. Did your experience with life coaching shift your belief in any way? If so, how?

3. In your survey… You "somewhat agreed" with the statement… “Historically, I have often found it difficult communicating with or building relationships with white people.”
   a. Please share any thoughts, feelings, and/or experiences that made you respond this way.
   b. Did your experience with life coaching shift your belief in any way? If so, how?
4. In your survey… You "strongly agreed" with the statement… “Growing up, I often heard expressions like ‘man up‘, ‘don’t be a pussy‘, and ‘real men don’t cry.’”
   a. How did that make you feel then?
   b. How does this make you feel now, after learning distinctions in life coaching around language usage?
5. In your survey… You "somewhat disagreed" with the statement… “I have always felt proud to be black.” What made you respond the way you did?
6. In your survey… You “strongly disagreed” with the statement… “My father (or father figure) was always openly expressive of love and affection for me.” And you “disagreed” with the statement…”My father (or father figure) verbally told me he loved me regularly.”
   a. How did that make you feel then?

    b. How does this impact how you move through the world with men in your life now?

7. In your survey… You "strongly agreed" with the statement… “Reflecting back, I wish my father (or father figure) was more affectionate with me growing up.” What would this have made possible for you?
8. In your survey… You "strongly disagreed" with the statement… “I feel my religion/faith was very influential in teaching me how to be a man.” What made you respond the way you did?
9. In your survey… You "strongly agreed" with the statements… “I often put pressure on myself to always strive for ‘perfection’ and to always say/do the ‘right’ thing.” and also… “I often punish myself for being ’wrong.’”
    a. Please share why you feel this way.
    b. Did your experience with life coaching shift your belief in any way? If so, how?
10. In your survey… You "disagreed" with the statement… "Wherever I go, I feel a sense of belonging and inclusion."
    a. Please elaborate on any specific experiences you can think of that make you feel that way.
    b. Did your experience with life coaching shift your belief in any way? If so, how?
11. As an adult, what have you learned about your own masculinity? Has your definition of it shifted at all, and if so, how?
12. How do you define masculinity today?

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Born in New Orleans and raised in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, Frederick C. Sanders, affectionately known as Freddy, graduated from Louisiana Tech University in 2002, earning a Bachelor of Science degree in computer information systems. He served as a graphic designer for over seventeen years before transitioning to professional coaching.

Frederick earned two certifications in life coaching and executive coaching through Ideal Coaching Global, an ICF (International Coaching Federation) accredited coach training program specializing in ontological mindful ecological living. At the time of this writing, he holds a Professional Certified Coach (PCC) credential and has applied for the Master Certified Coach (MCC) credential. He also serves as an ICF-certified mentor coach.

Frederick served as an emotional wellness coach for two years with Lyra Health, specializing in CBC (cognitive behavioral coaching). He currently serves as an executive and leadership coach for several organizations, including BetterUp, CoachHub, Surge Institute, Vision Investment, and Black Executive Men. Additionally, Freddy is heavily involved with Ideal Coaching Global, serving as a senior staff coach and ICF mentor for rising student coaches.

Frederick is the founder and lead divinity and performance coach of his private coaching movement, Woken Warriors, specializing in supporting high-performing men of color in catalyzing self-mastery to author the "next level" of their grandest vision. Frederick’s grandest vision is a world where the highest sense of integrity, agency, and freedom fully emerges among all life on earth.