"We're Still Here . . . We're Not Giving Up": Black and Latino Men's Narratives of Transition to Community College

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Abstract

Objective: This study examines masculinity in a manner commensurate with established feminist frameworks to deconstruct a patriarchal system that ill-serves both men and women. **Method:** We utilized standpoint theory and narrative analysis to examine longitudinal, qualitative data from first-year Black and Latino males as they transition into community college through their second semester. **Findings:** Positionality is critical to understanding the success of Black and Latino males and their response to institutional structures. In many instances, men leveraged normative constructions of masculinity as aids to their success, and their resilience and confidence were filtered through their perceived development into adults. **Conclusion:** Implications for practice include the creation of spaces for men to talk about what it means to be a man in college and ways to influence men to make the most of resources when proffered, even if they tend to avoid seeking them out on their own. Further research should seek to understand how men develop and evolve their concepts of masculinity as well as how and to what extent spaces for men actually work to dismantle hegemonic masculinity.

Keywords

African American males, Latino males, narrative, masculinity, race, gender, positionality

The disappearance of men of color from the higher education landscape (Hall & Rowan, 2000; Sáenz & Ponjuan, 2009) has had profound consequences for the future of postsecondary attainment in the United States, given rapidly growing racial/ethnic

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minority populations across the nation[1] (Humes, Jones, & Ramirez, 2010; Lee & Ransom, 2011). College participation and achievement among men of color are fundamental to realizing higher educational attainment goals and addressing pervasive social injustices (Harper, 2008; Perna, 2005). From 1976 to 2008, African American postsecondary enrollment increased from 10% to 14%; however, that increase is largely due to the success of African American women, who represented 5% of total undergraduate enrollment in 1976 and 9% in 2008 (Harper, 2006a).[2] Concerning Latino males, although there has been a steady increase in Latina/os in postsecondary education, the representation of Latino males relative to their female counterparts has not kept pace (Castellanos, Gloria, & Kamimura, 2006; Sáenz, Perez, & Cerna, 2007; Sáenz & Ponjuan, 2009, 2011). The continued gender shift in college participation and completion disproportionately impacts historically underrepresented minority communities (Buchmann, DiPrete, & McDaniel, 2008). It is estimated that for every two Black women who attain a postsecondary degree, only one man does, and that for every three Hispanic women earning a degree, two men do (Aud, Fox, & Kewal Ramani, 2010).

Despite the gendered education gap in higher education, a pervasive "either/or bent" to the educational gender equity discussion as well as "flawed assumptions regarding the universality of male privilege in college" remain (Harper & Harris, 2010, p. 2). For example, there is limited focus on the way identities can intersect in unique ways to privilege and disprivilege men simultaneously (Kaufman, 1999). Men of color, for instance, are privileged by their maleness but often cannot find spaces or validation for their experiences in White male-dominated spaces (e.g., campus, work, governance, etc.). In addition, limited research examines men in a manner commensurate with methods that have been utilized to examine and facilitate women's equity gains in society (cf. Connell, 2005; Hearn & Collinson, 1994). For example, women have traditionally been studied in ways privileging their gender as an organizing construct because they have been historically *othered* by patriarchal systems. Men, however, are frequently discussed and studied in ways that assume the non-salience of gender, given that maleness as a privileged construct is typically presupposed and unquestioned. To fail to recognize that men, too, are gendered is a limitation in equity and social justice work.

Early development theories were based on students who happened to be men, but they included no explicit interrogation of gender. In recent years, additional theories (e.g., Torres, Howard-Hamilton, & Cooper, 2003) have been developed to help describe the development of students from minority groups; however, still lacking is a student development theory for men. In response, there have been several recent calls to examine men from critical feminist perspectives to unearth assumptions about masculinity, identify systemic mechanisms of male privilege, and understand men as socially situated and multidimensional beings (see Kimmel & Davis, 2011; Sáenz & Bukoski, 2014; Wagner, 2011). In addition, scholars (e.g., Kimmel, 2008; Kimmel & Davis, 2011) have provided eloquent justification for examining men as men and for interrogating masculinity to deconstruct a patriarchal system serving neither men nor women well. Interrogating men as men requires researchers to forefront how gendered

ways of being, gendered norms (e.g., cultural, institutional, etc.), and hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 2005) influence college men. This rationale has fueled an emerging body of research on college men (e.g., Harris & Harper, 2008), but more is needed.

In light of the need to delve into men of color's college experiences, especially in community colleges where students of color are more likely to enroll than their White peers (Carnevale & Strohl, 2013; Lee & Ransom, 2011), this study examined the narratives of Black and Latino men as they transitioned to 2-year colleges. Utilizing longitudinal, qualitative data collected by the Center for Community College Student Engagement (CCCSE) in Houston, Texas area community colleges, three research questions drove this study:

> **Research Question 1:** How do the standpoints of first-year Black and Latino males inform their educational experiences as they transition from work/school to a postsecondary environment?
>
> **Research Question 2:** How do masculinity constructs/scripts emerge in the participants' narratives?
>
> **Research Question 3:** What practice-relevant themes emerged from the transition experiences of men of color?

Literature and Conceptual Frameworks Informing the Study

Masculinity

Masculinity refers to ideas ascribed to or appertaining to men, including normative notions that men are physically stronger, more aggressive, silent in the face of adversity, sexually appealing to heterosexual women, and emotionless (Kimmel, 2008; Mahalik, Good, & Englar-Carlson, 2010). Hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 2005), however, while producing positive effects such as men feeling empowered through competition, also can be quite detrimental to men, manifesting in psychological distress, trouble with the law, and/or violence against women or men who do not comply with hegemonic masculinity (Mahalik et al., 2010). There is a growing body of research examining how boys become men and experience male gender role conflict, or MGRC (O'Neil, 1981, 1990), the healthy and harmful effects of boys' internalization of normative notions of masculinity (Pollack, 1999), and the way men are (dis) privileged in unique, intersectional ways (Kaufman, 1999).

Although research on men has been ongoing since the 1970s, it has gained more traction only recently. Brannon's (1976) four fundamental rules of masculinity are corroborated by Pollack (1999) and Pollack and Shuster (2001), who developed the *boy code*, and by Kimmel (2008), who mapped *guyland*. These concepts articulate and explain, among other things, how boys are socially compelled to act tough, not admit emotionality, and dismiss the pain of others and themselves. Both of these are in accordance with Brannon's four fundamentals: masculinity entails consistent rejection of femininity; measuring self-worth on power, status, and wealth; being stoic and highly

rational in crises; and taking risks through daring and aggressive behavior. In addition, Kimmel and Davis (2011) posited that mainstream Western cultures no longer use overt rituals to demarcate manhood[3]; therefore, hegemonic notions of masculinity, including pop culture and media, become socializing forces ushering young men into adulthood.

College Men as Men

In recent years, college men have garnered some attention in the literature in an explicitly gendered manner. They have been studied regarding areas such as identity development, gender socialization, sexuality and sexual orientation, destructive behaviors, wellness issues, spirituality, and sports (Harper, 2004; Harper & Harris, 2010; Martin & Harris, 2006). Davis (2010) explored college men's identity development using methods adapted directly from women's identity development (Josselson, 1987). Studies generally focus on 4-year college settings, with very little research focusing on community colleges explicitly. In fact, as of the writing of this article, the authors have found only three peer-reviewed journal articles on the topic of the role of masculinity for men of color in community college: Harris and Harper (2008); Sáenz, Bukoski, Lu, and Rodriguez (2013); and Sáenz, Mayo, Miller, and Rodriguez (2015). All three studies found that experiences of MGRC are prominent in the overall college experience of men of color. Such lived experiences are crucial for the research because, as Harris and Harper point out, the predominant discussion in the literature about men in community college focuses on two areas: (a) how many enroll and actualize their aspirations and (b) their level of engagement in educationally purposeful activities. Aspirations and engagement are not enough, however; social context must also be considered because

> engagement data, absent of social context to explain gender differences, are hardly useful for educators who endeavor to enhance male student outcomes, increase their participation in enriching educational experiences, and ultimately improve their persistence toward associate degree attainment and transfer rates to four-year institutions. (Harris & Harper, 2008, p. 26)

All students experience challenges as they transition to college; however, given the low degree attainment and high dropout rates of men of color, especially in the 2-year sector (Harris & Wood, 2013), in addition to emerging evidence of qualitative differences in the structural diversity and racial campus climate across college sectors (Hotchkins & Franklin, 2014), a fine-grained analysis of their view of the college experience is needed to understand how they navigate these challenges.

Theoretical Framework and Epistemological Positionality

To privilege the perspectives and situated knowledge of our participants, we employ standpoint theory as a way to understand dynamics of power by examining how dominant groups maintain privilege and how oppressed groups may gain leverage to change

dominant systems (J. T. Wood, 2011). Standpoint theory recognizes that an individual may claim membership to multiple groups—in accordance with an epistemology of intersectionality (Berger & Guidroz, 2009; Cole, 2009; McCall, 2005)—and that these memberships shape individualized perspectives (J. T. Wood, 2011). Standpoint theory asserts that power dynamics are perceived quite differently depending on a person's social location, that no single *right* perspective exists, what people do influences their perspective (e.g., knowledge, consciousness, identity), and every standpoint is partial and limited in some way.

Our selection of standpoint theory was also informed by the fact that the researchers, as members of a majority culture, want to avoid essentializing the experiences of the participants (Richmond, Levant, & Ladhani, 2012). While one researcher is male, both are White. And, although our visible positionalities may be problematic, our commitment to gender equity and increasing the educational attainment of people of color remains a core value in our work. Thus, while "cross-cultural research is, at its heart, a deeply risky venture," cultural uncertainty can also allow for creativity and challenges the researchers to understand what are sometimes uncomfortable stories and experiences (Andrews, 2007, p. 507). In pragmatic terms, we decided to conduct the research despite these limitations due to a unique opportunity to access a rich but restricted data source. We ultimately cannot know exactly how our identities shaped the interpretations. To guard against our privileged perspectives, we engaged in reflection and discussion throughout research design and data analysis, posited multiple and rival interpretations, and consistently drew ourselves back to the data to substantiate our claims and ground the findings in participants' own words (Creswell, 2013; Maxwell, 2013). We also engaged in peer de-briefing, discussing, and sharing the constructed narratives and findings with a researcher from CCCSE who was involved in the data collection and other scholars who study men of color. These peers provided valuable feedback about our work and enhanced the trustworthiness of the study (Creswell, 2013; Maxwell, 2013; Seidman, 1998).

Method

This study employed narrative analysis, a method well suited to understanding participants' lived experience of college (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Squire, 2008) and which takes advantage of the longitudinal nature of the data. Narrative methods aim to reconstruct experience through stories, a "valorizing of individual experience but also an exploration of the social, cultural, and institutional narratives within which individuals' experiences were constituted, shaped, expressed, and enacted" (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007, p. 42). Narrative recognizes that interpersonal, social, and cultural contexts are critical to reconstituting experiences across times and spaces (Riessman, 2008; Squire, 2008).

Data

This study used secondary data (video recordings, verbatim transcripts, and student records of courses and grades) furnished by CCCSE resulting from the Initiative on

Student Success, conducted at Houston, Texas area community colleges. Data use was in accordance with the Institutional Review Board at the University of Texas at Austin, where CCCSE is housed. The key objectives for the data gathering by CCCSE were to listen systematically and longitudinally to first-time students as they transitioned into college, paying close attention to interactions shaped by institutional environments. College employees, acting as research affiliates, recruited participants from among students passing through the common areas of administrative offices during registration at the beginning of the fall 2009 academic term. Using data from a screening questionnaire, CCCSE sought maximum variation of participants across demographics, background, enrollment patterns, employment, and financial aid status. However, the project did have an emphasis on understanding the experiences of men of color; individuals identifying as such were oversampled in the follow-up invitations. Selected individuals at three community colleges were invited to focus groups and individual interviews conducted at regular intervals from the beginning of the 2009 fall semester through the participants' second semester in 2010. There were three college campuses in our data set, and each site had four focus groups that met at least 4 times; additional transcripts included individual follow-up interviews with participants who missed one of the scheduled focus groups.

To understand their experiences in light of different academic paths, we further narrowed the data by identifying Black and Latino men and grouping them according to academic outcomes indicated in their college transcript data. Participants fell into four general categories based on enrollment pathways and academic success; we grouped them longitudinally and according to whether or not the student earned at least some grade credit (see Table 1).

Certainly this is a blunt definition of success, and in fact students are successful inasmuch as they actively seek the opportunities that 2-year institutions offer (Hagedorn, 2010). However, getting passing or failing grades played a central role in

Table 1. Participants According to Their Race/Ethnicity and Academic Trajectories.

Participants	Fall 2009 start	Fall 2009 outcome	Spring 2010 start	Spring 2010 outcome
Group 1 (*n* = 16) Black (*n* = 4) Latino (*n* = 12)	Enrolled	Earned credit	Re-enrolled	Earned credit
Group 2 (*n* = 4) Black (*n* = 2) Latino (*n* = 2)	Enrolled	Earned credit	Re-enrolled	No credit
Group 3 (*n* = 3) Black (*n* = 2) Latino (*n* = 1)	Enrolled	No credit	Re-enrolled	Earned credit
Group 4 (*n* = 8) Black (*n* = 2) Latino (*n* = 6)	Enrolled	No credit	Did not re-enroll	—

the stories the men told, and so these trajectory schemes are useful to broadly contextualize their individual stories. Although we intend the narratives to stand on their own as illustrations of these specific men's experiences, the categories helped us to identify and locate narratives that would provide rich and contextualized stories from across the spectrum of our participants' experiences.

Sixteen students, including Angel whose narrative is included below, were in Group 1, having earned at least some credit in both terms. Eight were in Group 4, who failed to earn any credit and subsequently did not re-enroll. The four students in Group 2 earned no credit in their second terms after initial success. Four students, including Jamal whose story is also included here, failed their first terms but returned to earn credit.

Analytical Method

Using ATLAS.ti, we isolated all passages for each participant and re-constructed participants' transition narratives into a narrative sequence. In re-ordering and analyzing student narratives, we used the three-dimensional inquiry space (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000), which is a metaphorical space composed of interaction (personal and social), continuity (temporality), and situation (place). In other words, as we re-constructed the isolated text from the focus groups, we used organizing constructs of interaction (i.e., when participants described interacting with people; for example, family, faculty, staff, etc.), time (i.e., we used temporal indicators, such as "halfway through the semester" to re-sequence events chronologically for each participant), and situation/ place (i.e., we used participant-identified contexts, for instance a McDonalds restaurant or a math class, to both sequence and make sense of the narratives). In this study, we found this metaphoric space particularly helpful as it drew our attention to sequencing and re-sequencing, interactions among participants that aided in contextualizing participant utterances, and the internal conditions students were expressing through words. After we re-sequenced the narratives, we discussed the ways participants expressed their ideas as well as how their words constituted stances and group membership and illustrated power relations and concepts of masculinity. Standpoint theory and concepts from our literature review (e.g., masculinity) guided us to discern which segments of text were most meaningful to answer our research questions. In other words, the re-sequencing and use of our theoretical framework occurred recursively and with an emphasis on the researchers' shared understanding of the transcript data and theoretical constructs.

After re-sequencing narratives and identifying relevant passages, we engaged in emic coding to derive themes that were relevant across transcripts, and then reduced data for publication by narrowing in on key informant narratives from each subgroup and comparing their individual stories with the themes derived from each subgroup and across the entire data set (Maxwell, 2013). Due to space limitations and value for depth rather than breadth, we only include two narratives in this article. By offering two specific, contextual, and nuanced narratives, we invite the reader to come closer to an understanding of the unique positionalities of these two particular participants.

Although their experiences cannot be generalized, they help to bring voice to the individual positionality of these men and illustrate ways in which gender and race play out in students' lives.

Limitations

This research has limitations, as all research does. In addition to the limitations noted above in the researchers' positionality, an additional limitation is that we were not involved in the original data collection or transcription. The limitation of analyzing secondary data is ameliorated in at least two ways. The researchers had access to videotapes of the original interviews. In addition, the interview setting served to provide an audience for the participants—a context from which their narratives could emerge (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Riessman, 2008). Thus, although the researchers did not engage in data collection, the space created by the interviewers is a strength of the study as it allowed for rich narratives to emerge.

Findings: Student Narratives

Narrative research can focus on *big* (i.e., master or meta-) narratives or *small* (i.e., individual, specific) narratives (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Riessman, 2008). Here, we focus on two narratives situated in the broad context of barriers to the success of men of color. These narratives bring to life the worlds of two participants who found success in their studies. They were chosen because they resonated with core themes of mind-set and skill set, which emerged across the data, but their individual stories should not be read as representative of the groups to which these participants claim membership. In our presentation of findings, we compare and contrast how these narratives interacted with themes from the larger data set. The first narrative is Angel, from Group 1, and the second student, Jamal, is from Group 3 of the academic pathways mapped in Table 1.

Angel

> Help us because we're trying. Because with all that we said, we're still here, we're still waking up and going to school, we're not giving up . . . we didn't let that defeat us.
>
> —Angel, study participant

Angel was a full-time Latino student majoring in philosophy, working part-time. He achieved a 2.00 GPA in the fall and a 3.00 grade point average (GPA) in the spring. Comments made in August revealed that, unlike many other participants, Angel had specific strategies in mind for accomplishing his goals, including holding himself accountable by waking up and walking in the door, becoming known to his professors, and motivating himself to learn. These kinds of specific strategies were missing, sometimes entirely, from the narratives of many of the participants who did not persist.

Indeed, even when it came to managing his busy schedule, Angel's opinion is quite straightforward, linking both his mind-set and his actions: "If you have the time to do it, do it, 'cause you never know if you'll get that time again."

By November, Angel was navigating college well, finishing the fall semester with a 2.00 GPA, and he maintained an emphasis on having an independent mind-set for college success. He positioned his inward state as the most important aspect of preparing for college, but, again, unlike some of our less successful participants, had specific skills and strategies attached to this mind-set to help him succeed. For example, Angel focused on action and being a self-advocate:

> You gotta be strong enough to fix it. You can't just sit back and let 'em [professors] walk over you. You'll never learn anything . . . There's always a way to do it with law behind you and being polite and generous. You don't have to stoop to no one's level. There's always a way out. There's no trap in life, there's always a way out. So, you just gotta find it . . . You gotta be strong enough to just fix it. You can't be quiet all the time.

Angel saw the importance of both having a mind-set for college and in doing the work that goes along with college, including navigating the system itself and maintaining a sense of pride and self-respect in his interactions with others. Angel also employed an interesting metaphor for the situations college thrusts upon life: traps. He linked this very physical image of traps to very intangible personal qualities: self-respect, politeness, generosity, strength, and voice. His stance is one of opposition to systems of education that he sees as attempting to trap him and thereby take away these internal, valued qualities. Navigating the system is, in part, about maintaining these core values in the face of a system seeking to strip him of his humanity.

By April, Angel had time to reflect on his fall semester and explained that, if he made any mistakes, it was having "too much confidence . . . towards the end I guess I got lazy and I thought it was like high school, but it wasn't, it was big time difference." Indeed, despite identifying that he needed help and awareness of available resources such as the computer lab, Angel did not seek out tutoring. Angel was aware of his own lack of activity and advocacy; and interestingly, he suggested that, though he experienced some classes as a "jungle," he did not deem himself "worth" seeking out help when there was "somebody right there"; he saw himself as needing to scale the "mountain" and traverse the "jungle" by himself because he was "not even doing anything about it." In many ways, this illustrates very well the way several participants did not seek help when they needed it, for Angel took on the burden of responsibility for learning by himself. However, while he posited that he must climb the mountain alone, he simultaneously acknowledged that the mountain should not be "incomprehendable" in his words.

In this instance, we saw manifestations of masculinity scripts in Angel's non-help-seeking, suffering his jungle trek in silence, and his implied pride at having scaled the mountain alone. However, we also saw Angel recognizing that help is present and that his professors play a role in his learning by making the material understandable. This suggests that these more negative manifestations of masculinity—suffering in silence

in particular—are tempered by the positive manifestations of masculinity of pride in and competition with himself.

Angel clarified what this idea of proactivity in his own life meant to him toward the end of the focus group meetings:

> Yeah, you get helped when you help yourself. It's like when you see somebody laying on the side of the road you're like, "Oh, they're just laying there, they don't want to help theirselves, I'm gonna keep going." . . . But then that person who's wiping your windows, you want to give him a quarter 'cause at least he's working. So I guess the message to the college is, despite whatever negative things or experiences we have or despite our personal issues, I feel like every person who comes to school here is here because they want to give themselves a fighting chance when they get older. We want a fighting chance not because we're lazy. Help us because we're trying. Because with all that we said, we're still here, we're still waking up and going to school, we're not giving up.

Here we see a clear picture of Angel's standpoint. His depiction of his relationship with others situates the "we/us" as the students and the other as the college, which he believed perceived him and his peers as lazy. He does not let the characterization rest, though, reframing students as "fighting" despite personal issues, even in the face of possible defeat. This excerpt is also particularly powerful as it draws on stereotypes of men of color; he believes colleges position men of color from a deficit perspective, and he wants to flip that script so colleges can see the strengths men of color bring to their educational endeavors.

Angel also demonstrates many of the normative masculine attitudes described in this article, including being tough and independent in the face of challenges. Despite his propensity for self-reflection, he did not overcome his pride in seeking help when he knew he needed it. In other words, the restrictive emotionality and drive for competition (and aversion to admitting weakness) stemming from his masculine self were stronger than his reasoned positionality. Although he acquired an appreciation for the skills he needed in addition to his tough resolve, he still relied largely on his incremental success and obvious talent to achieve that success.

Jamal

> We're all like a family and we just help each other.

> —Jamal, study participant

Jamal is an African American male and, like many community college students, must work to pay for school and home obligations. He works two jobs—one full-time another part-time—while attending college part-time, with the intention of becoming a business management major. In August, Jamal articulated that "college's always been in my head since I was little . . . I didn't realize until my senior year I wasn't going to the NBA, so that's why I ended up in a community college." Similar to other participants, Jamal's pre-college identity and aspirations were linked to athletics. Also

like many of our participants, Jamal saw college as a kind of proving ground. Although he does not explicitly link his ideas to gender, his diction suggests his concepts of being an adult are tied implicitly to normative masculine values. In particular, he saw this time in his life as necessarily "rough," a kind of ordeal he must "endure" to come out an adult on the other side, but a time about which he can be "proud" due to his hard work and potential accomplishments. Jamal's language use here ties to gendered norms of success because patriarchal standards of success often include physical struggle and ordeals to prove one's worth in comparison with those who could not endure. Indeed, Jamal's language is reminiscent of athletic competition terminology, which is normed on men's team sports.

By September, Jamal had to re-adjust his expectations. He tended to focus on individual agency and work, saying he must "maintain" and suggesting that "maintaining" entails both schoolwork and mind-set, or fortitude in the face of challenges. He said that it is "a lot harder than I thought it was going to be . . . you gotta maintain." This sentiment can also be interpreted as a distancing of himself from his struggles and vulnerability, a masculinity script. Indeed, in combination with his fall semester GPA of 0.00 and his conception of education as being the responsibility of the individual, this sentiment suggests Jamal was struggling but preferred to maintain a tough façade rather than verbalizing lack of success. Jamal's positionality presented a paradox. He was willing to admit some vulnerability, to admit he questioned himself, but he was not willing to talk about the mechanisms of his difficulties. When he faced challenges, he glossed over their salience and meaning for his sense of self.

Similar to many other participants, this intrinsic tie between educational success and his adulthood/manhood is potentially problematic. For many participants, when they failed at reaching their educational goals, it linked directly to a gendered sense of self. Jamal, however, quickly revised his work expectations. Jamal experienced difficulties due, in his view, to a lack of preparation and skills. He reacted at this stage by bolstering himself internally, not by seeking assistance externally. Jamal's fall semester experiences culminated in an academic warning and a 0.00 GPA; he contemplated not re-enrolling because

> I felt like I messed up so badly . . . You know, when you mess up it's like you're just better off where you're at, just leave it alone and go on with the rest of your life. But it's like, nah, this has been a plan in my life all my life, I'm just gonna go back and get restarted. There's nothing wrong with starting over.

Jamal's admission was uncommon, though, and gave us a potential clue as to why he persisted. He articulated this in April, which may have been a sign of his growing comfort with sharing in the focus group (in April he also admitted that a main difficulty in the fall was a family death), or this may also signal that he was maturing, or that his self-reflection and new-found success had bolstered his self-confidence.

Regardless, his transition to the spring semester and his "start over" also helped him reconsider his mind-set, his experiences, and what being an adult meant:

first semester, I didn't know how to go online and check my grades because we never had to do that in high school. I'd rather someone gave me a progress report or come to the computer and show me this and this and this. But we didn't have that. You go check your grades at home on some kind of passcode and . . . the teachers would never pull you to the side and like, "Hey, you're doing really bad." Something like that. So, I guess it's just not high school, I guess you have to be a grownup and do your own stuff and figure out things for yourself. So this semester I'm doing a lot better at that, knowing exactly what I have and where we're at, things like that.

By this time he could identify specific ways in which college was different from high school, found the ways in which he needed to adapt to succeed, and was able to articulate specific actions he took to succeed. His mind-set for success seems to have given him the courage to re-enroll in college, but his actions, skill, and engagement helped him to actualize his aspirations. In other words, Jamal's idea that college would be a kind of proving ground for adulthood did not waiver, but his narrative of success became less gendered. School was no longer an endurance during which he had to "maintain," it was a problem he actively had to figure out and engage with as an adult.

Jamal also made changes to how he spoke about his academic engagement. While in the fall he spoke generally about his coursework and focused more on his internal reactions and the fortitude he believed would bring success, by the spring he spoke animatedly about the size of his classes, discussions in class, his teachers, and classmates. His out-of-class involvement had also changed. Instead of seeing college as a place to "hang out" and meet people as he had in fall, he talked about college as a place to meet and mix courses and work, such that collaborating with peers became a positive hallmark of his spring experience: "it helps a lot. It really does, when you know you got people to rely on." Instead of college being a holding pattern for an intangible future, college became a present experience for Jamal, and even his "family." By opening himself up to working with others, he found a way to engage positively with the college and bolster his sense of belonging, at the specific suggestion of a course professor. This last piece is key as it highlights the role institutional agents must play in helping men of color succeed in community colleges.

By April, his positive experiences and the support he felt from institutional agents was also clear, and he was proud of his own sense of agency and transition to adulthood: "People in the school that work here to help you out, I haven't had too much help with that, I just figured stuff out myself, besides my advisors." By the end of his second semester, Jamal was by all appearances an engaged student, and he was reaping the rewards of his efforts.

All in all, Jamal began to articulate a standpoint, though it is not as politically or socially aware as Angel's. Although Jamal became an engaged student, he never discussed or unpacked why that transition took place, though his narrative suggests it may be in part due to an uncoupling of hegemonic masculinity from his definitions of success. Alternately, it may simply be a result of his change in behavior and increased engagement with the institution and its agents. Whether or not Jamal was able to dismantle how hegemonic masculinity was operating in his life, his standpoint positions himself as the motivator and driver of his future and college as the pathway to success.

In addition, his narrative reveals an emerging positionality connected to peers and campus staff. He considered them his family, a community that embraced and validated him through peer collaboration, advising, and targeted events. In many ways, Jamal, despite his "bumpy" fall semester, represents what institutions are doing well—creating communities where students can find success, albeit via circuitous pathways that can be challenging to navigate. Like many college men, Jamal is not yet a fully formed adult, and college provided a context through which to explore his emerging sense of self. Although his positionality is not as articulated as Angel's, both men had to navigate and—to an extent—shed the hegemonic masculinity scripts that were impeding their success.

Discussion and Implications

In these narratives and those from our entire sample, it became clear that these men of color inhabit what we called a *troubled positionality* as they transition from high school or the workforce to community college. In other words, their narratives revealed multiple and sometimes competing value systems and were tied to a variety of larger discourses, some of which the participants were not explicitly aware. We suspect this is connected to constructs of gender and race because men of color, broadly speaking, are simultaneously granted access to certain kinds of power, such as physical and sexual power, but then penalized for it as well, such as stereotypes of men of color as hyper-sexualized and hyper-violent (Kaufman, 1999). In addition, our analysis revealed evidence that the participants experienced one or more areas of conflict such as family expectations, self-perception, image, and balancing multiple responsibilities, likely complicated by their positionality as men of color. These conflicts on their own are common to community college students generally; however, more specific to these particular men is that they, with few exceptions, were unable to bridge the divide between their determined mind-set and self-awareness with a needed, complementary skill set. This was predicted by the tenets (e.g., restrictive emotionality) of MGRC and confirms the findings by Harris and Harper (2008). For men who were able to develop or internalize their need to develop these skills, there was evidence of how impactful they can be for the men to create networks of support, manage time, and negotiate multiple responsibilities in a social and institutional environment so different from high school.

The men in this study were often reluctant to share difficulties in specific terms or to admit to vulnerability. Instead, they restricted their emotions and created a façade of resilience even in the face of imminent failure and later-admitted fear, or what Majors and Billson (1992) called *cool pose* in the African American community and what Mirande (1997) called *machismo* in the Latino community (see also Sáenz et al., 2015). For men who maintained such a *cool pose* or were unable to differentiate their personal goals from notions of *machismo*, it was much more difficult to enact behaviors to support their mind-set. In addition, many men openly admitted that they avoid seeking help due to ego, pride, fear, and confusion. Kimmel's (2008) articulation of the interlocking cultures of entitlement, silence, and protection were readily apparent

in students' narratives as men were wary to admit difficulty, had professors who protected them, and readily accepted each other's constructions of non-help-seeking as prideful and/or lazy behavior. For some, however, this admission and discussing it with peers helped spur them to seek needed assistance. This agrees with prior work regarding the importance of students' non-cognitive environments (e.g., Bonner & Bailey, 2006) such as mentorship (e.g., Sáenz et al., 2013; Sutton, 2006), student involvement (e.g., Harper, 2006b), and practical competencies (e.g., Kuh, Palmer, & Kish, 2003).

Finally, we found that many men linked educational opportunity to material possessions, or what J. L. Wood and Essien-Wood (2012) called capital identity projection. Participants in this study often framed their sense of success through the gaining of a future materialistic lifestyle and focused on the future riches instead of the pathway they were on, casting themselves into a future without attending to present concerns. In this sense, many participants also linked educational success with attaining adulthood or *manning up*—a phrase that was used repeatedly, particularly by African American males. This mind-set turned negative for some men as their failure at school spiraled into them a feeling they were failures at being men. This tie between educational achievement and masculinity, in particular, is in need of further development in the literature.

In addition, the participants consistently judged themselves to be solely responsible for their educational outcomes. For example, in response to the question of what the institution can do better, students were hard-pressed to articulate a response. Likely this is linked to both gender and race as men are socialized to *stand on their own* and men of color are both told to stand on their own and disallowed from doing so by a systemically racist society, which echoes the findings of Gardenhire-Crooks, Collado, Martin, and Castro (2010). Hegemonic masculinity as described by Jamal and Angel help to illustrate the way masculinity can play out in negative ways for men of color— heightened sense of pride, framing education as a trial to be endured, and a reluctance to seek help. All of these narrative turns are substantiated by the literature (e.g., Harris & Harper, 2008; Sáenz et al., 2013, 2015). Therefore, although we can speculate about what the institutions may or may not be doing well, participants' reluctance to question the institution and readiness to blame themselves puts the onus on institutions to intervene. Future research should seek to triangulate among various sources—staff, faculty, and students to understand how to engage men in services already available and where to add services. Certainly, the findings of this study indicate that while spaces for men to discuss and air their challenges can be productive and meaningful for participants, the mind-set of many men makes it unlikely for many to opt in to such spaces (Sáenz et al., 2013). In addition, there is a danger of those spaces becoming echo chambers for a reification of hegemonic masculinity.

To suppose that masculinity is bad or wrong, however, would be a mistake. Many men used normative constructions of masculinity as aids to their success (see Martin & Harris, 2006). Those who linked becoming men with education and were able to succeed, for instance, gained confidence and self-esteem while retaining the high aspirations and resilience that brought them to college in the first place. Indeed, the

attitude of *mind over matter* that many participants shared was sometimes what kept these men coming back (in Angel's words "we're still here . . . we're not giving up"). Students' resiliency, even in the face of difficulty, both academic and personal, was a persistent theme. Furthermore, competition was a major driving force for many participants, whether it was competition in relation to a friend at the same or another college, or competition with himself to meet a goal. And finally, stereotypically male activities, such as sports and meeting girls, often provided a source of social connection for students, though our data were unable to reveal to what extent these were capitalistic scripts positioning women as objects and to what extent it was healthy psychosocial development (J. L. Wood & Essien-Wood, 2012). This finding does, however, suggest that men's involvement and peer connections are, indeed, critical for attaining success. We temper this implication with Harper's (2004) findings regarding the use of unconventional concepts of masculinity in promoting African American male success. More work regarding how men develop and evolve their concepts of masculinity is needed to understand the nuances of this finding.

Concerning practice, these narratives reveal concrete opportunities for institutional agents to better meet men where they are (Chickering & Reisser, 1993) to facilitate men's awareness of their positionality in regard to the institution and development of the skills they need to successfully navigate it. For example, the mere creation of a space for men to talk about what it means to be a man in college (through the vehicle of this study's focus groups) fostered awareness and self-reflection in many participants that likely would not have happened otherwise. This was especially seen in those focus groups comprised of only men. This alone suggests colleges could do well to find ways to raise awareness among men of color through the creation of spaces for the intentional discussion of masculinity and race; we emphasize the importance of these being critical spaces guided and fostered in ways that help to dismantle rather than reinforce hegemonic masculinity. Evidence regarding identity conflicts for faculty of color (Levin, Haberler, Walker, & Jackson-Boothby, 2014) suggests that benefits would likely extend to students, faculty, and staff alike as colleges create such spaces and integrate teaching, learning, and advising efforts.

Another sense of what we mean by meeting men where they are is to accept the reality of their masculine normative behaviors by understanding just how much and how consistently many will likely avoid seeking help (such as tutoring), but at the same time understanding how readily many of them will latch on to help when it is directly proffered. Although men in our study were often too proud to seek help, they were likewise usually too smart to reject it when it came their way. Making tutoring, group work, mentoring, and supplemental instruction inescapable would capitalize on men's masculinity by fostering their own subsequent utilization of networks of success to create their own pathways. Men are highly motivated with the right mind-set when they arrive at community college—even where they see it as a stopover on the way to their future goals—but they nearly unanimously lack the skill set to realize their goals.

Indeed, meeting men where they are is something community colleges are uniquely positioned to do. U.S. community colleges, as "centers of educational opportunity," have as part of their mission to "serve all segments of society through an open-access

admissions policy that offers equal and fair treatment to all students" (American Association of Community Colleges, 2012, paras. 2-3). Students in this study were willing and eager to embrace the opportunity community colleges offer. Furthermore, given their regional ties and smaller learning communities, community colleges have some tools already in place needed to help men succeed. Community colleges should see men of color as a community ripe for success but needing targeted services to meet their needs. Implementation of mentoring programs, male-centered spaces, and skills-based services such as mandatory tutoring and networking workshops would go far toward helping men of color reach their high aspirations (Williams, 2014).

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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Notes

1. This study focuses on Black and Latino students due to the nature of available data, not to a lack of recognition of the experiences of males of other marginalized groups.
2. These statistics are not meant to discount the struggles of African American and Latina females, who still face myriad challenges in their educational pathways.
3. Non-Western cultures, for example, are more likely to take a collective responsibility for ushering young boys into adulthood, often through rituals, rites, and ceremonies devised by elders (Kimmel & Davis, 2011). A modern example still used by those of Jewish faith is the Bar Mitzvah. In Western culture, historical demarcations of manhood (being head of household, the breadwinner for the family, even attending college, and owning property) are no longer exclusive to men.

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