

# Introduction to the Special Issue on the Intersections of Race, Gender, and Class in the Wake of a National Crisis: The State of Black Boys and Men Post-Ferguson

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## Abstract

This introduction to the special issue will ground our understanding of the current state of Black boys and men in America, nearly 2 years after the killing of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri. Each of these articles represents the voices of scholars whose influences add clarity to the experiences and aftermath of traumatic events that threaten the safety and well-being of Black boys and men. Collectively, these articles showcase various research methods; address individual, family, and community issues; and demonstrate how race, gender, and class influence how the assorted levels of society interact with Black males. This special issue is an important contribution to raising awareness of and enacting social change for Black boys and men in our nation.

## Keywords

Black boys and men, class, gender, race, safety, well-being

Each week, we, like the rest of the nation, watched the unceremonious killing of unarmed Black boys and men by police officers patrolling the nation's racially segregated cities, towns, and suburbs (Dow, 2016; Moore, Robinson, & Christson Adedoyina, 2016; Miller, Williams Miller, Djoric, & Patton, 2015; Reid, 2015). The

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judicial process in each case was as predictable as it was tragic: carnivalesque media coverage, prosecutorial grand standing, a failure to indict the responsible officers, protests, a forceful police response, and cities that burned well into the night. In some ways, the night of November 24, 2014, followed this pattern. In other ways, it did not: (a) the peculiar statement from Robert McCulloch, then state prosecutor, on the merits of the case which carefully laid out why no indictment was rendered against the police in the shooting of unarmed teenager Michael Brown; (b) the media simultaneously releasing video reels capturing Michael Brown ostensibly stealing cigars from a convenience store and manhandling its manager; (c) cries from a mother in pain captured in real time after the reading of the non-verdict; (d) a stepfather in paralyzing grief calling for the burning down of the city; (e) protestors taking to the streets; (f) militarized police responses with officers employing rubber bullets and tear gas and arresting reporters and protestors; and (g) the launch of a movement, with #Blacklivesmatter trending on Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook, capturing the pulse of that very moment.

We had seen this before, most notably in Sanford, Florida, a year earlier. We have seen it since, most recently in the Baltimore uprisings where the streets burned in response to the killing of Freddie Gray. But the hundreds of police killings in between these two instances, very few of which were accompanied by protests, raised important questions about the value of Black life and the toll these egregious, yet routine events have on the safety and well-being of Black boys and men, particularly at the intersections of race, gender, and class.

On the mornings after each killing, we found ourselves gravitating toward each others' offices, standing in the doorways, with solemn yet perplexed expressions on our faces: "What could be done? What would we do? How might we help address such a senseless, but seemingly intractable social problem as this?" As Black faculty members,<sup>1</sup> we felt compelled to act, or at least to let our voices be heard, and bring to the forefront the voices of others whose pain ran as deeply as our own. We reached out to the editors of academic journals and inquired about their interests in publishing a special issue on the state of Black boys and men in the United States. Dr. James Doyle, Editor-in-Chief of the *Journal of Men's Studies*, was among the first to respond. This special issue would not have happened without his support. We are also grateful for the ad hoc reviewers, whose enthusiasm and time helped secure an amazing body of work from our contributors.

## **Why Do We Need a Special Issue on the State of Black Boys and Men Post-Ferguson?**

At the time we decided to coedit this special issue on the intersections of race, gender, and class, the nation's most disadvantaged neighborhoods were under intense media scrutiny. These predominantly low-income Black neighborhoods were the very places where Black boys and men were the victims and perpetrators of violent crimes, and simultaneously the victims of police brutality. At the same time, the #sayhername movement gained momentum on social media, and alternative media coverage of

police brutality was directed toward Black women, Black trans men and women, and queer Black people and brought to light the disproportionately violent police response to the multiple kinds of intersections and identities that exist in our country. While issues involving other marginalized groups are in dire need of attention, this special issue focuses on the issues surrounding the current state of Black boys and men because the killing of Michael Brown opened old wounds while shedding light on new ones.

As university professors who study the experiences and outcomes of Black boys and men, we feel a sense of responsibility to provide some clarity to the actions and events occurring in the communities that we study. But we must acknowledge that our decision to coedit this special issue was also fueled by our own frustrations, anger, and feelings of helplessness; not knowing what we can do, if anything, to stop the injustices that are occurring in our own neighborhoods, and to the people who look *just* like us. We asked ourselves, what can three professors do to let the voices of the people most affected by police violence be heard? How might we meaningfully contribute to the discussion around what comes next? Faced with the puzzle that is Ferguson, *What are we going to do about it?*

This special issue serves as our partial response to these questions and a glimmer of hope in the wake of our desire for change. The articles that follow underscore the aftermath of events like Ferguson on individuals and communities, paying close attention to the impact of Ferguson on the lives of Black boys and men. Specifically, the articles in this special issue describe how the individual- and community-level outcomes of men are affected by cultural, environmental, and economic factors associated with race, ethnicity, and other socially defined identities and group memberships, such as gender and class. Research suggests that the intersections of these varying identities have a long history of pouring their deleterious effects onto communities of color (Bowleg et al., 2016; Jäggi, Mezuk, Watkins, & Jackson, 2016; Lewis, Cogburn, & Williams, 2015; Reid, 2015). Therefore, one of our aims is to build positive relationships between scholars and communities, so that communities can remain informed of the latest advances in research. Ensuring that communities are aware of their health and safety statuses as well as the disparities that exist therein is a way to empower them and enhance their proficiency in areas where researchers are ill equipped to offer support. In light of Ferguson, and the events that occurred both before and after, this special issue is just one of the many things that we can do from our position as men's studies scholars who focus on the safety and well-being of Black males.

## **The Distress of Black Boys and Men Meets at the Intersection of Race, Gender, and Class**

Race, gender, and class play a role in the types of messages Black boys and men receive and to what degree those messages motivate their behaviors. Few models examine the integration of and balance between race, gender, and class, for Black boys and men. Therefore, understanding the influence of these social determinants (both

individually and collectively) is integral to improving the safety and well-being of Black males over the life course (Bowleg et al., 2016; Jefferson, Watkins, & Mitchell, in press; Watkins, 2012). Our endeavor to unpack the intersections of race, gender, and class comes at a time when Black male issues are central to discourses in popular culture, the media, and scholarship. For the past decade, we have regularly witnessed harsh occurrences in the lives of Black boys and men. Most poignantly, these events have filled our newspapers, televisions, and social media feeds with stories about neighborhood violence, homicide, and trauma at the hands of Black males; the policing of Black boys and men in urban and suburban areas; and violence by Black men in professional sports.

It is no mystery that Black boys and men experience disproportionately higher levels of psychological distress due to their exposure to a greater frequency and severity of psychosocial stressors when compared to other groups (Barbarin, McBride Murry, Tolan, & Graham, 2016; Dow, 2016; Moore et al., 2016; Otuyelu, Graham, & Kennedy, 2016; Reid, 2015; Sellers, Bonham, Neighbors, & Amell, 2009; Watkins, Hudson, Caldwell, Siefert, & Jackson, 2011). But a disconcerting fact is that the burden of distress among Black boys and men is ever increasing. The incidence and severity of psychosocial stressors are intensified by sociodemographic factors that may influence their overall safety and well-being such as age, household income, marital status, and education level (Watkins, Hawkins, & Mitchell, 2015; Watkins et al., 2011).

Black boys and men face many challenges as they transition to and through adulthood (Jefferson et al., in press; Patton & Gabarino, 2014; Watkins, 2012; Watkins et al., 2015), but unfortunately, many of their challenges are masked or difficult to monitor because of the lack of services and culturally sensitive programming (Barbarin et al., 2016; Otuyelu et al., 2016; Watkins & Jefferson, 2013). Despite this, however, researchers agree that many Black boys and men share a common bond of poverty in a society that discriminates and limits their opportunities for success. This can translate into few opportunities for obtaining a quality education, acquiring and maintaining sustainable employment, or accessing resources for home ownership or to provide for one's family (Oliver, 2006; Payne, 2011). Similarly, research suggests that the challenges experienced by Black boys and men are also largely influenced by how their socioeconomic position intersects with their experiences with discrimination (Bowleg et al., 2016; Lewis et al., 2015), the criminal justice system (Spinney et al., 2016), mental health (Watkins, 2012; Watkins et al., 2015), violence (Paxton et al., 2004; Stagers-Hakim, 2016), racial and cultural identities (Isom, 2016; Pierre & Mahalik, 2005; Wester, Vogel, Wei, & McLain, 2006), and gender norms adherence (Avery, Ward, Moss, & Uskup, 2016; Griffith, Gunter, & Watkins, 2012; Watkins, 2012). For Black males especially, these challenges are exacerbated by race, class, and gender, which often translates into them being disproportionately confronted with distress that can lead to depression, hopelessness, and low life satisfaction (Watkins et al., 2015).

## Black Boys and Men in the Wake of a National Crisis

The state of Black boys and men in the wake of a national crisis is best elucidated by their individual, family, and community-level experiences. At the *individual* level, the exposure to community level disadvantage, like poverty and violence, is often internalized, influencing how Black boys and men make sense of the world. For example, adhering (or not) to the masculine scripts performed by other Black males in one's social network is a very individualized experience (Cole-Lewis, Hammond, Matthews, Melvin, & Nuru-Jeter, 2013; Watkins, 2012). Moreover, in the wake of a national crisis, the ways in which Black boys and men process the negative events around them is often shaped by how they understand their own gender, racial, and cultural identities (Barbarin et al., 2016; Moore et al., 2016; Reid, 2015) and the intersections therein. Oftentimes, their thoughts and behaviors are a reflection of whether (and how) they conform as individuals and in the contexts of their family and friends.

The experiences of Black boys and men at the *family* level are the result of learned behaviors modeled after what they see and hear. Risk factors that threaten the safety and well-being of Black boys and men at the family level can include severe marital discord, social disadvantage, overcrowding or large family size, paternal criminality, maternal mental disorder, and admission to foster care (Jefferson et al., in press; Margolin & Gordis, 2000; Watkins, Pittman, & Walsh, 2013). Despite this, and in the wake of a national crisis, support by family and friends is also a strength, helping to promote resilience and preserve the lucidity of Black boys and men. There is strength in numbers; thus, when society turns a blind eye to the threatened safety and well-being of Black boys and men, their communities often unite to empower them.

On one hand, the *community* provides the kind of resources, social, psychological, material or otherwise, needed to support Black boys and men during times of crisis. Yet on the other hand, there remain challenges in the nation's racially segregated cities, towns, and suburbs that continue to threaten the safety and well-being of Black boys and men, such as violence, poverty, community disorganization, loss experienced from incarceration, inadequate schools, and racism and discrimination (Lewis et al., 2015; Margolin & Gordis, 2000; Miller & Alexander, 2016). These challenges are exacerbated by the events surrounding the policing and victimization of Black boys and men and call for the redirection of resources to improve their safety and well-being (Barbarin et al., 2016; Moore et al., 2016; Reid, 2015). Moreover, the association of disproportionate incarceration, academic underperformance, unemployment, and other socioeconomic indicators with the aforementioned risk factors provides a strong rationale for promoting research that addresses the safety and well-being of Black boys and men.

The issues that plague Black boys and men are not new. Yet in recent years, we have noticed an upsurge in the number of scholars and public intellectuals who are examining the safety concerns of Black boys and men. Or have we? In preparing the introduction to this special issue, we had to ask ourselves if the increase we see is truly an increase in the number of violent offenses against Black boys and men, or rather, if the

number of these events has remained the same and instead, what has increased are the social media platforms (e.g., Twitter, Facebook, Instagram) that seamlessly shine a spotlight on local and regional events that threaten the safety and well-being of Black males nationwide (Patton, Eshmann, & Butler, 2013; Patton et al., 2014; Reid, 2015). Certainly, we believe that social media has played an important role in raising our awareness of the injustices that occur with Black boys and men. But along those lines, inattention to how race, gender, and class effect the quality of life of Black boys and men exacerbates disparities over the course of their lives, compared with boys and men of other races. The prevalence of life-threatening decisions by various health, social service, and justice systems challenges the quality of life of Black boys and men and illustrates the importance of advancing targeted efforts for these groups. In the wake of a national crisis, these matters cannot be ignored.

### **Promoting Safety and Well-being for Black Boys and Men: The Time Is Now**

Given the documented challenges of Black boys and men in research and interventions, alternative approaches to addressing their varying health and safety needs are warranted (Reid, 2015; Watkins, 2012; Watkins & Jefferson, 2013). For example, one effort to understand the experiences and needs of boys and men of color in the United States is President Barak Obama's *My Brother's Keeper* Initiative, which was developed to combine federal, state, local government, human services, philanthropy, and business sector resources to improve the conditions of young men of color (Barbarin et al., 2016). Such efforts explore the role of community-generated resources as a necessary component to improving the safety and well-being of boys and men of color, including Black boys and men.

Some scholars argue that the most effective approaches to improving the safety and well-being of Black boys and men are still a matter of debate; however, accessibility to psychosocial, economic, and health resources and supports is a critical consideration (Reid, 2015). Identifying and monitoring where and which social determinants cause the most problems for Black boys and men can allow policy makers and practitioners to direct resources to these subgroups more appropriately (Barbarin et al., 2016). Likewise, many of the challenges Black boys and men face can be addressed through school- and/or community-based interventions. For example, opportunities that promote increased self-esteem and mastery may be priorities for high schools and colleges that serve large numbers of Black boys and men. Therefore, resources aimed at supporting programs for these young Black men could be provided for and across institutions where disparities exist. Specifically, reviews and revisions of current state and federal policies that directly affect the safety and well-being of Black boys and men should be ongoing, particularly those that decrease opportunities for self-expression or culture and gender individuality for Black males (Barbarin et al., 2016; Moore et al., 2016; Reid, 2015).

## **Contributions of This Special Issue to Understanding the State of Black Boys and Men**

At the end of the special issue manuscript submission, review, and acceptance processes, we realized that the lead authors for all the articles in this special issue are Black men. Although this was not intentional, we believe that everything happens for a reason, and what better way to speak to the state of Black boys and men post-Ferguson, than to read scholarly contributions written by Black men.

In the first paper, Hudson, Eaton, Lewis, Grant, Sewell, and Gilbert situate their study in a city just a few miles away from Ferguson, Missouri. They present findings from focus groups with Black boys from St. Louis and the surrounding suburbs, demonstrate the extent to which their study participants experienced multiple stress-related occurrences such as racial discrimination and structural racism, and highlight their occurrence across multiple sites, ranging from the workplace, school, home, and within the criminal justice system.

Johnson, Rich, and King present their communication intervention on how to mobilize fathers, social fathers, and sons of color, as they navigate diverse neighborhood contexts post-Ferguson. The authors provide readers with ways to improve individual and community outcomes as well as how to build on the collective strengths of fathers' and sons' engagement, particularly, as it influences their families, neighborhoods, and communities.

Hawley and Flint take a theological approach, dissecting the specific occurrences in Ferguson. In particular, the authors underscore the words that society (either intentionally or unintentionally) uses to describe Black boys and men. As trauma chaplains, the authors are well positioned to educate us about the grief, suffering, sorrow, and death experienced by Black men as a result of disparate treatment. We appreciated the personal experiences shared by these two, as many of us may never witness the intimacy they experienced during their one-on-one sessions with Black men.

Brooms and Perry's article examines data drawn from qualitative interviews with 25 Black men who discuss their experiences with race, stereotyping, and profiling. They underscore the high-profile cases of unarmed Black men killed by law enforcement officials and the subsequent #BlackLivesMatter movement. The authors offer vital implications for their work, which include employing strategies that educate us about how Black men are stereotyped and profiled, and the importance of policy that help reshape our reflections and interpretations of the recent killings of Black boys and men.

Thomas, Caldwell, Jagers, Flay, and Assari use sophisticated statistical techniques to test the associations between witnessing violence, peer and parent expectations, peer behaviors, and self-efficacy to avoid violence and violent behavior as an outcome. Their results suggested that Black boys who witnessed physical violence were more likely to engage in violence themselves. Peer and parent violence expectations, peer violence, and adolescents' self-efficacy to avoid violence were the variables that mediated these relationships. Implications for their findings raise our awareness about

preventing violent behaviors through reenvisioning traditional norms of Black male adolescents at risk of violence.

## Conclusion

The articles in this special issue inform stakeholders about the importance of not just developing and delivering but also sustaining initiatives that translate current research findings on Black boys and men to policy and practice settings where they are most affected. This special issue has implications for addressing some important social determinants that influence the lives of Black boys and men, such as their socioeconomic position, their likelihood of entering the criminal justice system, seeking quality health care, and their progression through recognizing their racial identities, masculine identities, self-esteem, and mastery. Taken together, the articles in this special issue provide rich and varied accounts of the Black male experience post-Ferguson, offering an opportunity for deep introspection while delineating a clear path for action.

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## Note

1. At the time we conceptualized this special issue, Dr. Patton was an assistant professor at the University of Michigan School of Social Work. He has since joined the faculty at Columbia University.

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**Reuben J. Miller** is an Assistant Professor at the University of Michigan School of Social Work and a Faculty Associate with the University of Michigan Population Studies Center, Institute for Social Research. His research, writing and advocacy focus on the lives of prisoners and former prisoners and how carceral expansion has transformed the urban landscape. Miller's work has been published in journals of criminology, human rights, law, public health, psychology, sociology and social work.