# "I Didn't Know Who to Talk to": Black College Men's Sources and Descriptions of Social Support

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Young Black men face unique interpersonal challenges throughout their time on college campuses, as they are forced to navigate anticipated developmental stressors (e.g., academic adjustment), coupled with race-specific microaggressions and structural forms of harm. Still, members of this group remain underrepresented in higher education, and their lived experiences have been neglected within existing men's studies research. Therefore, carefully examining Black college men's forms of social support is necessary when working to identify specific factors that either impede or promote their academic success and psychological wellbeing. Two research questions guided this analysis: (a) from whom do Black college men receive social support? and (b) for what circumstances or events do Black college men describe receiving or needing support? Interviews were conducted with 27 Black men enrolled at a large public Predominately White Institution (PWI) in the United States. Applied thematic analysis was used to analyze the data. Study findings reveal that Black college men rely upon their peers, campus student groups, fraternities, and family members for social support. In a departure from existing research, participants also described the importance of women in their lives and showed great appreciation for the support provided by their mothers, grandmothers, sisters, and female friends. Additionally, participants also described receiving support from others when faced with challenging circumstances like adjusting to college, encountering discrimination, working through conflict with family, and experiencing depression. Study findings offer new insights by highlighting both the circumstances and specific people young Black men turn to when they are in need.

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**Public Significance Statement**
Young Black men receive support from various sources when faced with challenges throughout their time in college. However, findings from this study offer additional insight into the specific people and circumstances that drive young Black men seek social support—which will ultimately aid researchers, faculty, staff, and administrators in designing culturally tailored programs meant to improve academic and mental health outcomes for Black college men.

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Recent data from the National Center for Education Statistics report that only 34% of Black men who begin a bachelor's degree at a 4-year university actually go on to complete the degree within 6 years (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019). This rate of undergraduate degree completion is lower than every other race and gender group in the United States (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019), and signals a need for greater focus on the academic, environmental, and interpersonal factors that may contribute to student well-being. These estimates, however, are not new, as scholars have long raised concern over both the retention rates and campus experiences of Black men in postsecondary education (Harper, 2006; Palmer et al., 2014).

A growing body of literature has developed over the past 20 years that focuses specifically on the experiences of Black collegiate men (Harper & Newman, 2016). Researchers have critically examined the roles of peers (Jackson & Hui, 2017; Strayhorn, 2008), faculty (Brooms & Davis, 2017), and on-campus student organizations

(Brooms, 2018a, 2018b; Jackson, 2012) as key sources of support for Black male students. Findings from these queries indicate that each of the aforementioned sources positively contribute to students' sense of belonging and connection with others. However, despite these laudable contributions— it remains unclear if other sources of support also offer viable benefits that may help improve Black college men's mental health and academic achievements. Similarly, the circumstances and events in which Black college men describe needing social support is not well understood. Thus, the present study aims to rectify these concerns by analyzing interview responses collected from 27 Black men enrolled at a Predominately White Institution (PWI) in the Midwest. The primary research questions assessed in this study focus first on Black college men's sources of social support, followed by their descriptions of the circumstances and events in which they report receiving or needing help from others. Suggestions for intervention and future research with Black collegiate men are provided.

## Existing Research on Social Support Among Black College Men

Much of the existing research acknowledges peers to be among the most influential sources of social support for Black college men (Brooms & Davis, 2017; Druery & Brooms, 2019; Harper, 2007; Jackson, 2012; Jackson & Hui, 2017; Strayhorn, 2008). Whether it be through fraternity membership or joining an on-campus student organization, peers—and in particular other Black male peers— appear to be notable figures in the lives of Black male students. Indeed, "brotherhood"—or emotional connections made with Black male peers—is paramount to Black undergraduate men's well-being and success (Druery & Brooms, 2019). Druery and Brooms' findings align with ethnographic work that also centers the role of brotherhood as a key source of social support for Black college men (see Jackson, 2012). Through prolonged field engagement, Jackson (2012) found that creating a sense of brotherhood was a vital force that allowed Black male members of a student organization to feel connected to one another. Moreover, establishing meaningful relationships and strong ties with other Black male students across campus served as the primary focus of this student organization (Jackson, 2012; Jackson & Hui, 2017). As such, groups like the one described by (Jackson, 2012; Jackson & Hui, 2017) create spaces for Black college men to bond and express vulnerability in ways that defy traditional race and gender norms (Brooms & Davis, 2017; Druery & Brooms, 2019).

Other studies describe Black Greek Letter Organizations as groups that have historically offered Black male students opportunities for support, connection, community, and accountability (Harper, 2007; Harper & Quaye, 2007). Though fraternities are largely considered beneficial spaces where Black college men go to receive support, some scholars have critiqued Black fraternities as spaces that either promote harmful and antiquated ideas surrounding manhood and masculinities or that hinder the deconstruction of such ideas (Dancy, 2011; Dancy & Hotchkins, 2015; McClure, 2006). Nevertheless, studies show that student group or fraternity membership helps students feel more connected to campus and increases their feelings of self-efficacy and esteem (Harper, 2007; Harper & Quaye, 2007; McClure, 2006). Further, being involved in a campus group can help ease the transition from high school to college (Brooms, 2018a; Strayhorn, 2008). Matters tied to the transition to

college are particularly important to consider within the context of first-year Black collegiate men who may struggle to navigate the new demands and requirements of life in college (Harper & Newman, 2016). As such, a deeper examination of the Black college men's sources of social support is required.

In addition to receiving support from peers and student organizations, some scholars have also considered the role of family support in the lives of Black college men (Palmer, Davis, & Maramba, 2011; Simmons, 2019). In one example Palmer, Davis, and Maramba (2011) interviewed Black males enrolled at one of the Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) and found that participants described relying on their mothers and on extended family members for emotional support and guidance. Similar patterns of receiving social support from families were detected among other samples that focused on students of color (Palmer, Maramba, & Holmes, 2011) and Black college students more broadly (Guiffrida & Douthit, 2010). Nevertheless, the number of investigations that assess the role of family support among PWI-enrolled Black men are scant (Palmer, Maramba, & Holmes, 2011; Simmons, 2019), particularly when compared to the number of investigations that assess the roles of peer and student organization-affiliated forms of social support. Thus, the present study builds upon previous work by exploring specific sources of social support among Black college men, while also considering the circumstances and events in which Black college men describe needing help from the people within their social networks. Particular attention is also given to assessing social support within the context of gendered help-seeking norms for Black men during this developmentally specific time period of emerging adulthood.

## Black Masculinities During Emerging Adulthood

Emerging adulthood is recognized as a specific developmental time period between adolescence and adulthood where young people ages 18–29 are tasked with managing competing demands and new challenges shaped by those around them (Arnett, 2000). Financial responsibilities, identity development, and uncertainties regarding education, career expectations and employment represent just some of the challenges young people often face as they transition to this new stage of development. This time period is often marked by instability and opportunities for change in one's personal views and beliefs about both themselves and the world around them (Arnett, 2000). Therefore, it may be particularly beneficial to explore the salience of concepts like masculinities among young Black men, as this specific developmental stage will require them to navigate different structures, systems, and environmental contexts (e.g., university/campus life, workplaces, interactions with police) that may influence their understanding of what it means to be a young Black man in the United States today (Allen, 2020; Watkins et al., 2017; Watkins & Neighbors, 2007).

Black men's performance and embodiment of masculinities has been well documented by scholars whose work has been indispensable when rejecting racist tropes about Black manhood, and instead promotes a more holistic, humanizing, and accurate portrayal of Black men's lived experiences (see Hammond & Mattis, 2005; Harris et al., 2011; Hunter & Davis, 1992, 1994; Majors & Billison, 1992; Wade & Rochlen, 2013; Watkins et al., 2017; Watkins, 2019). Recent studies exploring masculinities development among emerging adult Black college men affirm that ideas about

manhood are largely influenced by friends, family members, and popular culture figures (Goodwill et al., 2019; Mincey et al., 2014). Less, however, is known about the ways in which masculinities influence Black college men's perceptions of social support. One key pattern presented in Gender Role Conflict theory—*restrictive emotionality*—is especially pertinent within the context of social support and help-seeking, as Gender Role Conflict theory contends that men not only experience difficulty when sharing their own emotions with others (Hammond, 2012; Levant & Powell, 2017), but also that men's beliefs about emotionality may lead them to prevent the people around them from sharing their emotions as well (Levant & Powell, 2017; O'Neil et al., 1986, 1995). These restrictive and rigid ideas about the expression of emotions are rooted in men's fear of femininity and their concerns about being perceived by others as less than a man (O'Neil et al., 1986). Therefore, the presence of *restrictive emotionality* may inhibit Black college men from seeking or receiving support from others, even if they are in need. The present study aims to explore the interplay between social support, masculinities, and emotions among young Black men by assessing their descriptions of needing support throughout their time in college. These experiences ultimately have direct implications for young Black men's well-being and interpersonal relationships that extend far beyond their time on campus.

## Present Study

While existing work has identified social support as a key component of both psychological well-being and academic success, we still do not know exactly which sources of social support are most salient to Black college men—nor do we understand how concepts like restrictive emotionality may inform Black emerging adult men's perceptions and experiences with social support. Therefore, this investigation builds upon previous research by examining the specific sources of social support described by Black males enrolled at a PWI in the Midwest. The following research questions were used to guide the analyses: (a) From whom do Black college men receive social support? and (b) For what circumstances or events do Black college men describe receiving or needing support?

Identifying who Black college men recognize as key sources of support will be helpful in creating spaces and resources that are more inclusive and sensitive to the unique needs of this population. These efforts could be helpful in improving services and clinical practice with young Black men that is both culturally relevant and gender-specific. Further, recognizing both the sources of support and circumstances and events when Black college men need social support will offer additional insight into areas for intervention that have direct implications for young Black men's relationships with others before, during, and after college.

## Method

### Sample and Procedure

Data for this study were collected from 27 men who participated in the 2017 cohort of a larger intervention—the Young Black Men, Masculinities, and Mental Health (YBMen) Project. The YBMen project delivers psychosocial education material to participants within the confines of a private Facebook group. In doing so, the intervention aims to foster opportunities for mental wellness and social support while also promoting less rigid ideas surrounding manhood and masculinities. All participants in the 2017 cohort were enrolled as students at a large public university in the Midwest. Recruitment occurred through working with the campus multicultural center, attending campus events geared toward Black college students, and sending emails through the university registrar. Snowballing techniques were also used, as some participants would encourage their friends and classmates to consider enrolling in the study. The University of Michigan University human subjects IRB approved data collection for this project.

The following criteria were required to be met in order to be considered eligible for participation: (a) be 18–30-years-old; (b) identify as a Black/African American man; (c) be currently enrolled as either an undergraduate or graduate student at a participating institution; and (d) never have been diagnosed with a mental health disorder. The fourth criterion should be considered within context, as this project does not offer online psychotherapy, nor does the intervention function as a clinical trial. Instead, the YBMen project is designed to reach those whose symptoms have not yet reached clinical severity, yet could still benefit from being connected with others. Twelve interviews were conducted in-person and captured using an audio recorder, while the remaining 15 interviews were conducted using videoconferencing software. Interviews last on average 30 min and all participants received $15 as compensation for their willingness to participate in the study. Importantly, this study interrogates pretest interview responses only and does not focus on any aspect of the intervention, though details describing the intervention are provided elsewhere (Watkins et al., 2017).

Men who agreed to participate in the study ranged from 18- to 26-years-old (though persons up to age 30 were eligible to participate). Three participants were graduate students, while the remaining men reported being enrolled as undergraduate students. Ten men reported being first generation college students. Five participants reported a family annual household income less than $20,000; three students noted that their families earned between $20,000 and $34,999; six students reported that their families earned between $50,000 and $74,999; one student reported that their family earned between $75 and $99,999; four students reported a family annual household income greater than $100,000. Seven students chose not to answer this question.

### Researcher Stance and Reflexivity

This study was guided by the ontological worldview and epistemological stance that most closely align with the constructivist paradigm, which asserts that "knowledge is constructed through lived experiences" (Lincoln et al., 2011, p. 102). Interactions between researchers and participants are rich, knowledge-generating encounters where study findings are interpreted through participant perceptions of subjective realities (Charmaz, 2008; Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Lincoln et al., 2011). Researcher's worldview informs the ways in which one understands, designs, and analyzes both qualitative and quantitative research questions (Staller, 2013). Further, we attended to power dynamics when working with community partners and study participants (Creswell & Miller, 2000; Guba & Lincoln, 1994). As such, our research team intentionally sought feedback and recommendation from our campus partners for feedback on the questionnaire, along with guidance regarding recruitment strategies and techniques.

Matters tied to power were addressed with participants by first sharing at the beginning of each interview that we as the research team view them as the experts of their own stories and experiences. In doing so, the interview process was framed as an opportunity for members of the research to learn from the participants. Further, we ended each interview by asking participants if there were any other topics or issues that we did not cover, but were still important to young Black men's experiences with mental health, masculinity, and social support. Directly asking participants what we missed in the interview invited them to give us feedback about areas that we should be sure to include in future iterations of the study. It also created opportunities for us to hear what topics they view as central to our understanding of their lived experiences. In that same vein, we also asked participants during the posttest interview to share which aspects of the study they found to be most or least helpful.

At the time of data collection, the first author served as the project manager for data collection at this site and conducted 10 of the 27 interviews analyzed for this study. The last author is principal investigator for this project. All interviewers identified as Black or African American men and women who were between 26- and 30-years-old at the time of data collection. Four interviewers were doctoral students, while the two other interviewers were project staff members. We did not conduct gender-concordant interviews, as three of the interviewers were women and three were men.

## Data Analysis

Twenty-seven interviews were analyzed using the Rigorous and Accelerated Data Reduction (RADaR) technique (Watkins, 2017). This analysis technique has been used in previous studies with Black college men, and calls for a team-based approach when analyzing qualitative data (Fernald & Duclos, 2005; Guest & MacQueen, 2008). As such, two undergraduate research assistants joined the first author in analyzing the data.

Step 1 of the RADaR technique requires that all transcripts be formatted in uniform fashion so that relevant information is organized and easy to interpret. This includes making sure that the interview date, time, length, and participant ID number are all readily available and accessible in the header of each transcript. All interviews were transcribed by an outside professional transcription company and checked by an internal member of the team for consistency. In Step 2, data from the transcripts were moved to an "all-inclusive" table created using Microsoft Excel. This all-inclusive table is considered as the Phase 1 data reduction table and includes relevant column titles that describe the participant ID number, data collection time point, text chunk, notes, and open codes. It is also during Step 2 where the overarching research question is placed as a header at the top of the page.

During Step 3, any data that did not align with the overarching research questions were removed, thus producing the Phase 2 data reduction table. At this point an inductive coding process was employed to associate meaning and assign labels to text chunks (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Charmaz, 2006, 2008). Here, concepts outlined in applied thematic analysis (Guest et al., 2012) were used to develop open codes, meaning that all codes were derived from text in the data and were not decided upon a priori (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). While generating open codes from the dataset, a codebook was also developed in order to help systematically guide the team-based coding process. We developed the codebook using guidelines proposed by Guest et al. (2006), who suggest that the codebook include the following details: code, definition, when the code should be applied, when the code should not be applied, and an example quotation from the text. From there, a systematic coding scheme was used where inter-rater agreement of codes was determined by dividing the number of coding agreements by the number of agreements + disagreements (Miles & Huberman, 1994). This iterative process of analyzing text chunks and assigning corresponding codes occurred throughout Step 4 until the table only included information that directly answered the overarching research questions. In Step 5, a review of the final data reduction table was used to develop themes based on codes that were identified beginning in Step 3. Here, open codes were grouped and organized into larger related categories, or themes (Guest et al., 2012). These themes were then used to explicate the sources of social support for Black college men in this sample. At that point, exemplar quotations were selected and are herein represented in this report. Following the constructivist paradigmatic traditions, reliability, credibility, transferability, and trustworthiness of data were considered using techniques like peer-debriefing procedures (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Lincoln et al., 2011). In total, six themes and 28 codes were extracted for the first research question, while another seven themes and 25 codes were extracted for the second research question.

## Results

The first research question (RQ 1) in this study examined who Black college men look to for social support. Responses to this research question were organized into six themes; (a) on-campus faculty, staff, and mentors; (b) teachers and coaches from high school; (c) community and campus student organizations; (d) peers; (e) the women in their lives; and (f) family members. The second guiding research question (RQ 2) focuses on the circumstances and events during which Black college men describe receiving and needing support. These responses were organized into seven themes: (a) material support; (b) academic achievement in high school and preparing for college; (c) navigating relationships with family and friends; (d) experiences of discrimination; (e) manhood, emotions, and identity development; (f) adjusting to college life; and (g) depression and other mental health concerns. *Due to journal space requirements, select participant responses are reported hereafter for brevity. All other remaining participant responses for both research questions are presented in Table 1.*

## Select Themes for RQ 1: From Whom Do Black College Receive Social Support?

### Peers

Beyond the influence of student groups or campus organizations, some participants also identified specific peers when describing their sources of social support. Here, Elijah shared that one of his childhood friends who is now his college roommate supported him when he was experiencing a bout of depression. Elijah

**Table 1**

*Additional Participant Responses for Research Questions 1 and 2*[a]

| Theme | Pseudonym and age | Excerpt |
|---|---|---|
| **Research Question 1: From whom do Black college men receive social support** | | |
| On-campus faculty, staff, and mentors | Nick, 18 | I always had a strong support system with my family. But, you know, on campus I have friends and I've acquired mentors . . . and some professors actually |
| On-campus faculty, staff, and mentors | Micah, 23 | "[I received social support from] just older black students, also just some black faculty too." |
| On-campus faculty, staff, and mentors | Lucas, 19 | So, of course, my parents. They're the number one people . . . but besides that, I would say . . . the other minority students here, as well as well as some of the professors and some of the extracurricular activities you can join here. They really reach out and, like, provide all types of aid that helps us better ourselves . . . |
| Teachers and coaches from high school | Zion, 20 | When I first got into high school I needed some support . . . because I went to a big high school. It was like, huge [with] a lot of people. I've always been in small circles . . . so that was kind of an adjustment. But, for that I actually talked to my different teachers. I became friends with my teachers first before I made actual friends. And, that kind of helped because they were just like, "We see it all the time. We understand. You know, take your time. You don't have to take it all in at once. Just take it piece by piece." And I feel like that also helped me once I got here [to college] to an even bigger space. |
| Teachers and coaches from high school | Jaden, 18 | I've had a lot of social support. I'm a state champ in [specific sport removed]. I won my sophomore year. So, my coach, he was a White man, but he's always been around black people. He always told me, "Let me know if you ever need anything. I can always help you out." |
| Community and campus student organizations | Zion, 20 | The main [group] I'm part of is NSBE, the National Society of Black Engineers. That sense of family that we have, it's just awesome, especially when you're in engineering classes, and you're the only Black person that you really see . . . and then you go outside of the class into this big space where there's a lot of Black people who are also studying engineering, and . . . it really helps. Plus, with NSBE it's not just [at this university]. It's literally a national organization . . . so when we go to conferences and stuff, seeing other people who look just like me, in the same field as me, understanding [the] struggle . . . it really helps. |
| Community and campus student organizations | Micah, 23 | I can definitely say for me, most of my social support would be from talking with my mom, or talking to the fraternity. When I was talking to older [guys in the fraternity], it's kind of, they've kind of already been through college, been through the whole thing so they can just talk about their experience and they can help you along the way. |
| Community and campus student organizations | Andre, 26 | I think for me, um, we have this organization here [for Black graduate students]. And from there, I was able to meet, like, a really good, sort of, like, strong, core group of friends . . . We go out together or we watch games together, things like that. So, I think, I found [support] mostly through that organization and just made connections with people who were similar to me. And that kind of just blossomed from there. |
| Family members | Ryan, 20 | The only help I've been receiving is through my mother who I live at home with . . . and just calling up my grandma and my dad, asking them when I was ever in a stump, and they would just tell me "It's gonna be okay." So, they would really support me. |
| Family members | Michael, 19 | The social support I received growing up was from my grandmother . . . she talked to me when I was having a hard time . . . She gave me advice on how to deal with things . . . How to handle racism . . . How to deal with responsibilities, like as far as a man goes. She was widowed and she basically taught me what she seen my grandfather do . . . |
| **Research Question 2: For what circumstances or events do Black college men describe receiving or needing support?** | | |
| Material support | Devin | When I was buying my first car, my parents like paid half. That's what I'm saying, I mean like money like, is a small thing . . . but like that's definitely support, you feel me? I feel like it would've took me longer to get [the car] . . . but like, that's support, you feel me? . . . You can do it by yourself, but it's just easier when you get support. |
| Material support | Derrick, 19 | I know I've had like hard times up here [in college], and I would tell my friends about it, [and] they would help me out. Like if I needed like money or something, to get laundry detergent or just different things like that, I would go to them . . . |
| Academic challenges and needs | Hakeem, 19 | I had this English teacher, and she helped me out on all my college applications. I had her for three years and she helped me out a ton lowkey. Like she gave me a lot of help outside class. I'm not very good at grammar, like writing papers and stuff . . . and she helped, she corrected all my college applications [and] essays. |

[a] Participant responses presented in this table were removed from the manuscript for brevity and to adhere to the journal's word limit.

(*age 20*) mentions that his experience with depression got better because of the support he received from his friend. He explains,

> I would probably say it is because of my friends. My best friend . . . I've known since seventh grade. In middle school, I started realizing that I was getting bullied, and so I only really had one friend for real . . . and that was him. And due to the bullying and stuff, I just closed up. That's,

where the sadness really came from . . . and then he was there to have my back . . . so, he, knows when I'm down or something. He also goes here [to the same college], and he knows when I'm down. He can hear it in my voice, or he can sense the demeanor.

The level of intimacy developed throughout years of friendship is evident, as Elijah notes that his friend simply "knows" when

something is wrong. This act of "knowing" and receiving tangible and emotional forms of social support is reflected in Derrick's (*age 19*) response where he says,

> I'm trying to think of types of social support actually because I always go to my friends for anything that I need. Whether its help on homework, just need a hug or something like that, I always go to my friends . . . While some students reflected on the strong ties they have with close friends in their networks, other students discussed the potential consequences of not having friends. Justin (*age 21*) spoke only about his experiences when explaining,

> So, in my freshman year of high school I felt like I didn't really have friends who cared about me, and I felt like I was alone in the world. And I kind of didn't care that much about myself or my life . . . so I kind of spiraled downward. Yeah, it was just all bad.

Justin's words here indicate that the absence of close friendships can be detrimental to Black college men's well-being and mental health. Furthermore, matters related to friendship and loneliness do not begin in college, as Elijah shared that he was bullied in middle school, but thankfully had a friend who has been a key source of social support throughout middle school and now into college. Participant responses for this theme affirm that friendship plays a crucial role in adolescence, emerging adulthood, and across the lifespan.

### Women in Their Lives

Aside from looking to peers for support, men in this sample also spoke openly about the important role women friends, mentors, and mental health professionals played in their lives. Bryce (*age 21*) mentioned,

> For me, I couldn't reach out to another male at first. I really could only connect with those in my circle who I felt were women who I could feel like I could trust and, um, let them know what I was dealing with. So obviously my mother, my sister, and then from there just kind of those close friends . . . really more so my mentor, who I felt she was able to listen and they weren't going to pass judgment . . . on me. I couldn't speak to another guy like I could now and just be open with him . . . because I just kind of had the assumption that they're automatically going to look at me and say this about me. So, I just couldn't say anything to anyone, but I could only feel like the opposite gender would respect me enough to listen and hear what I had to say. And even after that fall semester, I only felt comfortable . . . speaking with a female or woman therapist versus, you know, going to another male. Like, at that point, it wasn't even about race. I just wanted to see a woman therapist because that's who I felt comfortable enough.

Bryce eventually had a change in perspective after attending college, and his initial reluctance to seek help from men overlaps with other related concepts of self-reliance seen with the masculinities and mental health literature (Goodwill et al., 2020). Nonetheless, his experience of receiving support from women aligns with insights shared by Terrance (*age 24*) who said,

> I think women of color have been a really big form of social support for me. So, you know, first and foremost my mom, but then you know, I have countless mentors who are . . . in large part women. But women of color have been usually my biggest form of social support [and] have usually been the folks who have guided me and advocated for me in several ways., and have really put a lot of things into perspective that I just haven't been able to put into perspective myself.

While these reflections further complicate our understanding of help-seeking gender dynamics, Terrance and Bryce were not the only participants whose responses showed a deep appreciation for the women. Indeed, women and other female family members were highlighted several times across each of the interviews. Additional information is described in the next section.

### Research Question 2

A natural progression in this line of inquiry would be to further consider the reasons why Black college men need social support. As such, the second research focuses on the events and circumstances mentioned by participants when asked to talk about a time that they received or needed social support. Seven themes were extracted for RQ2, though only five themes are described in the following section for brevity.

### Experiences of Discrimination

The third theme highlights encounters of discrimination experienced by Black college men as creating contexts for their need for support. To answer this question, Terrance thought back to a time when he needed social support and explained how he went about seeking advice from different people within his network. Terrance (*age 24*) shared,

> . . . situations where I maybe felt that someone committed a micro-aggression towards me, and I needed to talk about it, because I was angry and sad that someone would think so negatively of me even though they didn't see it in their comment— because it was intended as nice. I've consulted [with] people like my mom or, again, just like, friends and those mentors that I mentioned in the earlier questions . . . Like, I've consulted [with] those people to help me think through why it is that I feel the way I do, and how can I address it so that I'm not lingering on the issue that I'm experiencing at that moment.

Terrance shared that he needed support in processing the feelings that came as a result of experiencing this discriminatory event. As such, he turned to a host of people within his network in order to receive the support he needed, which ultimately allowed him to develop strategies that helped him move forward in not focusing on the event any longer.

### Navigating Relationships With Friends and Family

Men in this sample also described needing support for other painful circumstances and life events, particularly when navigating relationships with other people. While Black college men look to for support within their families, it is important to recognize that for some students, families can also be sources of conflict and great distress. Chandler voiced this sentiment:

> Through all the things in my life . . . it came a reaching point [last week] where it just blew out. I was talking to [a female friend], and she was with her [female] friend, and I burst out crying. I've never cried in front of a girl. Never cried. So, tears just going . . . I start apologizing . . . and the dude was like, "What's going on? What's going on?" So, I told him everything— like why I'm not calling my family, why my family does [me] dirty . . . when we was homeless, they didn't give a f—about me. I'm first generation student, and they tried to talk down to me, like "You ain't shit . . . you think you're better than us." I try to be close to my family. They came up here and robbed me, and I'm telling all these

stories . . . it felt good to release. You know what I mean? And even though [my friends] can't relate to the situation of what I'm saying, just having somebody that you can vent to, and let it all out . . . that was a good way to let that shit out.

In his response Chandler describes specific circumstances of experiencing harm and rejection from his family, as his attempts to be close were not reciprocated. Chandler's family belittled and demeaned him for his desire to pursue a college degree. Chandler's vulnerability is palpable and counters many of the perspectives on family support shared by participants in earlier sections of this report. Nevertheless, it seems that the social support he received from his friends gave him a space to vent and openly discuss some of the challenges he was facing.

### Manhood, Emotions, and Identity Development

Some participants recognized a need for support when learning how to express their emotions. Quinn *(age 20)* discusses this point,

I used to bottle my emotions up, but I guess they never really went anywhere when I did that. So, as I got older I realized it wasn't healthy for me personally. So, I've become a lot more expressive . . . like, if I need to cry, I will. If I need to laugh, I will. And so, I guess that's something that I've kind of deviated from what my father taught me or even my mother taught me in terms of being a strong Black man. . . . It kind of got to a point where when I was in a stressful situation, I didn't really know who I could go to and cry to or who I could go to and express my emotions to . . .

Here Quinn describes needing support and guidance, as he did not know who he could go to in order to receive help with his needs for emotional expressiveness. Nonetheless, Quinn's willingness to express his emotions juxtaposed to what his parents taught him while growing up is a powerful reflection of the generational differences many Black college men are learning to navigate within their families today. Other participant responses in this theme came from Black college men who shared stories of needing social support when trying to decide what masculinity meant to them, and how those ideas either aligned or conflicted with their views on sexuality specifically for young Black men.

### Adjusting to College Life

The first year of college or graduate school can be a particularly vulnerable time where students are working to manage both new responsibilities and social relationships. For these students, the support systems that they previously relied upon may no longer be available. This idea is represented by Hakeem *(age 19)* who voiced,

I mean ya'll probably already know it but I just feel like a lot of Black boys, we just don't feel like nobody really f—- with us, unless it's us, you know . . . if you grew up with a certain group of people and that's the only people you knew that supported you . . . once you lose that support and you come out here [to college], it's just a drop off . . . [I] feel like everybody getting lost out here.

Micah (age 23), a graduate student, shared the following:

I think mostly for me it was like in my freshman [year] in college. Especially my first semester, I wasn't really as in-tune to my classes as I should've been. So, I just talked to the older, older Black [students].

At, at the time I was in NSBE . . . and things like that, and I was talking to the older people their just like, "everybody gotta get through that first year, when you get through that first year you'll be like, coasting."

Quinn also disclosed that he struggled during his freshman year of college. More specifically, he reflected:

I honestly can say that was me. I was in that same position when I was a freshman, and I didn't really know how to respond to [depression]. I didn't know who to talk to. . . . I didn't really call my parents or anything. And every time I had some emotional concern revolving my mental health or if I thought that I possibly wasn't in a good state of mental health, I really wasn't sure if I was able to call my parents and talk to them about it or call my dad, especially, and talk to him about it. Because . . . I knew it was necessary to talk to people, and I wanted to make the effort to do that, but something about it seemed a bit embarrassing, I guess . . . to talk to my parents about something like that.

Descriptions provided by Quinn, Micah, and Hakeem suggest that social support may be even more salient during times of transition for Black college men. As such, the first year of college in particular may be an opportune time to intervene and offer enhanced resources that afford students the opportunity to get acclimated to campus and college life.

### Depression and Other Mental Health Concerns

The last theme represents Black college men's mental health concerns, as many of the participants openly discussed situations in which they experienced hardship and needed support from others. Here Bryce *(age 21)* explained,

I don't remember what set me off, but something had really triggered me, and I had fell back into that state of depression . . . and I didn't know how to deal with it . . . but it wasn't until January of this year that I actually . . . was like, "Okay, this is a very serious issue, I need to go get help." And, at that time I had reached out to my really good friend and mentor and I said, you know, "What do you think I should do?" And she was like, you know, "Try a counseling center." And I did. I started out going just maybe once in January. But then after that, I was going on a biweekly or weekly basis.

Another participant, Jeremiah *(age 18)*, shared his own experience with depression. He stated:

I walked out of my room [during winter break] . . . I was in there for like almost a week. I would only leave to go to the restroom or to get a drink of water or something. And my mom said, "Are you okay?" Like she was like really trying to talk to me. And, she looked at me, I was like skin and bones, and I just didn't feel like myself— so I knew something wasn't right. She was talking to me and we were talking through it. I guess she had took some kind of classes because she knew . . . something was wrong.

At this point, the interviewer probed further and asked the participant to describe the remainder of the conversation with his mother. Here, Jeremiah reflected:

She made me feel comfortable. She was asking me questions, genuinely listening . . . not just trying to respond and tell me how I should feel . . . She made me feel comfortable and she was understanding of everything that I was saying.

These set of responses reflect the reality that some men may reach out for help like Bryce did, while others may have loved ones who

readily offer assistance in order to ensure that they are well. Further, we see that while some Black college men are clearly naming the mental health challenges they experience as depression, others might use language similar to Jeremiah where he states that "something wasn't right" and that he "didn't feel like himself." The difference in language is important to consider because even Black college men who specifically mention the term *depression* may not know how to adequately deal with or respond to what they are experiencing. Therefore, having the opportunity like Jeremiah did to connect with people who create a comfortable environment and attentively listen seems particularly beneficial in working to support Black college men.

## Discussion

This study sought to critically examine Black college men's sources of support and reasons for receiving or needing social support from others. One-on-one interviews were conducted with 27 Black college men who were enrolled at a large, public PWI in the Midwest. Findings generated from this investigation align with existing research by affirming the importance of the relationships Black college men foster with other Black male peers and members of Black-oriented student groups or organizations. Study results also offer new contributions to the literature by highlighting not only the diverse range of social support sources Black college men utilize within their daily lives, but also the range of emotions they experience when receiving or needing help from others. This rich description offered by participants reflects a deep sense of vulnerability and willingness to express emotions that have gone understudied in the literature and research surrounding Black men (see Jackson, 2012). Responses from Black college men in this study challenge much of the prevailing norms around help-seeking, emotionality, and masculinities. Considerations for future research, intervention, and practice with Black college men are discussed.

Consistent with much of the existing literature (Brooms & Davis, 2017; Druery & Brooms, 2019; Harper, 2007; Jackson, 2012; Jackson & Hui, 2017; Strayhorn, 2008), Black men in this study reported that they received social support largely from their peers. Some participants described receiving support from other Black male peers, while other participants discussed the role of receiving support from their friends who are women. Other participants reflected on their friends generally and did not specify or describe the gender composition of the key people in their support networks. For men in this sample, support from peers manifested as receiving advice when navigating relationships with others or having someone to talk to when feeling down or alone. Further aligning with findings from previous work on Black college men's supportive relationships (Jackson, 2012; Jackson & Hui, 2017), friends also offered tangible support like help with academic coursework or money for laundry. Within this same context of peer relationships, some Black college men spoke specifically about their roommates who provided support as well. Taken together, the supports made available to Black college men through their peers is indeed beneficial and should be regarded as a precious resource that not only enhances Black men's experiences on PWI campuses, but also ultimately contributes to their well-being and success.

Similarly, on-campus student groups appear to play an important role in offering opportunities for social connectivity and relationship building with other students (Harper, 2007; Harper & Quaye, 2007).

Here, men described groups like the National Society for Black Engineers and Black fraternities as outlets that offered much needed guidance during their transition to college and made them feel as if they belong on campus (Strayhorn, 2018). Aside from field-specific groups, Brooms (2016, 2018a, 2018b) asserts that campus Black Male Initiative programs are also critical spaces that promote connection and support for Black men in college (Zell, 2011). While participation in these groups has been linked to persistence and degree completion (Brooms, 2016), future studies would benefit from also considering how group membership influences Black college men's mental health overtime. Nevertheless, for undergraduate and graduate students alike, Black-oriented student groups and fraternities at PWIs function as coveted spaces of solace and relief that affirm their dignity while also promoting inclusion, support, and genuine care for one another. Additionally, some men mentioned receiving or needing social support when navigating encounters of discrimination. One participant specifically explained how he needed help in making sense of a discriminatory experience, and sought suggestions on how he could move forward without continuing to ruminate about the incident. He shared that he felt both anger and sadness when realizing that someone committed a microaggression against him. The expressive language used by this young man aligns with other participant responses in the manhood, emotions, and identity development theme, as one student reflected upon the ways in which he was taught to express emotions while growing up does not align with his current views or beliefs regarding Black men's emotionality. It's important to note that men's range of emotions are displayed consistently across the themes and offer insight into Black college men's emotional processes. For example, one man in the study mentioned that his male best friend could tell when something was wrong just by hearing it in his voice. The longevity of their friendship dating back to middle school allowed for an emotional depth that manifested in his friend being able to sense whenever there was a problem. Another participant opened up to a friend who is a woman in describing the pain he experienced at the hands of his family members. The participant mentioned that he had never cried in front of a girl, yet considered it to be a "release" and appreciated having someone there to listen. These participants' willingness to be vulnerable and express emotional intimacy with their male and female friends complicates our understanding of Black men's feelings and relationships with others. While work from Jackson (2012) and Brooms and Davis (2017) describes the emotional bonds and support Black collegiate men receive from one another, results generated from this query show that Black college men enrolled at PWIs are also having important emotional encounters with the women in their social networks as well.

Findings derived from this study further complicate our understanding or men's help-seeking and interpersonal relationships, particularly when situating these findings in relation to existing theoretical contributions presented in Gender Role Conflict theory (O'Neil et al., 1986, 1995). Here O'Neil et al. (1986) identify *restrictive emotionality* as one of the six primary patterns or manifestations of Gender Role Conflict that negatively shape men's views about themselves, while also asserting that Gender Role Conflict informs the way men choose to interact and engage with others. From there, *restrictive emotionality* occurs when men have trouble communicating their true feelings, or when they actively discourage those around them from openly discussing their own emotional experiences (O'Neil et al., 1986, 1995). Notably,

results generated from the current investigation do not entirely align with the *restrictive emotionality* component of Gender Role Conflict theory—and instead study findings disrupt general notions of manhood and emotional expressiveness among young Black men. Contrary to prevailing cultural norms, Black college men in this study demonstrated a profound sense of openness to discuss their feelings in great detail, as evidenced by the poignant and compelling stories shared above. Thus, the ways in which Black men in this study discussed their relationships with other men and with various women in their lives offers a counter narrative to previous theoretical and empirical contributions presented in existing research. Additional work is therefore needed to assess how Black college men's interpersonal relationships and conceptualizations of masculinities inform the ways in which they express emotion, connectivity with others, and masculine norms throughout emerging adulthood.

That being said, one of the most notable findings from the current investigation includes men's descriptions of looking specifically to the women in their lives for social support. Aside from recognizing the important role of women as their friends and mentors, several participants also focused specifically on the influence of their mothers when explaining the different circumstances and events when they needed support. Grandmothers were also mentioned as key figures in Black college men's social networks. Further, participants describe receiving social support from their mothers and grandmothers when facing academic challenges, when learning to navigate their feelings and emotions as Black men, and when experiencing depression. According to participants, the women in their lives listened to their problems and concerns without judgment, encouraged them to go to therapy, and allowed them to cry. These are powerful assertions that have direct implications for the ways in which clinicians, educators, and university administrators design interventions and programs geared towards Black college men.

One previous study examined the role of family support among Black college men enrolled at a public HBCU and found that participants also recognized their mothers and extended family members as important sources of social support (Palmer, Davis, & Maramba, 2011). Previous studies have also assessed links between support provided by family and academic achievement in Black college students broadly and report similar findings (Guiffrida, 2005, 2006; Guiffrida & Douthit, 2010), though investigations that consider the unique experiences of Black college men are limited (see Palmer, Davis, & Maramba, 2011; Simmons, 2019). Interestingly, a similar pattern of looking to women for support was captured among middle-aged and older adult Black men who rely on their wives for making decisions regarding food preparation and healthy eating (Allen et al., 2013). Along those same lines, Jefferson et al. (2016) conducted focus groups with Black women and asked them to describe their personal experiences with men who had depression. In doing so, the women shared that they believed the Black men in their lives had largely been "coddled" by the Black women who raised them (e.g., mothers, sisters). Findings generated from the current investigation offer a different perspective than that presented by Jefferson et al. (2016), as researchers in that study asked Black women to describe their perceptions and experiences with Black men who had depression, while this study directly asked Black men about their own experiences, views, and values surrounding social support and mental health. Nevertheless, the deep appreciation and respect Black college men in this study showed toward

the women in their lives, and in particular their mothers, is something that has not been fully explored in research among emerging adult Black men. Further assessment of interpersonal relationships and connections with others during this particular developmental stage is warranted.

## Next Steps and Future Directions

Areas for future inquiry within this line of research are promising. First, it is worthwhile to continue exploring the role of bonding and connectivity among Black college men. Emotional intimacy in Black male relationships has previously been explored among adolescents (Rogers & Way, 2018; Way, 2011), college students (Clark & Brooms, 2018; Jackson, 2012, 2018), and community residing adults (Mattis et al., 2001). Scholars have also explored the utiltiy of designating online spaces to faciliate opportunities for social support among Black men (Watkins & Jefferson, 2013). Findings from these studies point to the importance of establishing strong, deeply rooted emotional ties with other Black men. Thus, it will also be important to know how Black men maintain relationships with peers after college and throughout emerging adulthood, as the relationships Black men forge during their time at the university may protect against adverse mental health outcomes later in life. Next, Strayhorn's (2008) body of work examining sense of belonging should continue to be applied across various settings and contexts. For example, some Black college men may feel that they belong on campus, but may not feel like they belong in a particular field or major (e.g., STEM; Strayhorn, 2008). Similarly, Black college men may have a strong sense of belonging amongst their families, but may have weaker ties with other students on campus. In short, sense of belonging is a powerful psychological construct that is most useful when examined within a particular context (e.g., school, family, work). Thus, future research would benefit from assessing context-specific matters of belonging for Black collegiate men.

Additionally, further consideration should be given to the role of gender dynamics within the context of Black men and women's help-seeking behaviors and interpersonal relationships.

While previous studies have already examined cross-race group relationships, few investigations have explored platonic, familial, or mentoring relationships between Black women and men. Moreover, it is unclear whether there are existing studies of gender nonconcordant relationships among Black college students. This line of research is worthwhile to consider, as participants in this study explicitly identified women who were their friends, sisters, mentors, mothers, and grandmothers as key sources of social support. However, it is necessary to discern whether Black women's experiences of social support mirror that of Black men. Do Black women look to Black men for social support in the same ways that Black men appear to receive support from Black women? If not, what implications would this potential imbalance have in both the giving and receipt of social support? It will be especially important to examine how consistently offering emotional support to others impacts Black women's own well-being and mental health. These questions and more could be answered by researchers delving deeper into the gender nonconcordant and transgenerational relationships present among Black men and women in the United States.

Lastly, recognizing the mother–son relationship as a communal strength could be a helpful consideration for future research and

intervention with Black families. Eminent scholars like McAdoo
(1988) and Billingsley (1992) offer strength-based anthologies of
the Black family in their attempts to reframe much of the deficit-
based discussions on Black families that had previously plagued the
social science literature. Thus, the focus on family strengths pro-
vided by Billingsley (1992) and McAdoo (1988, 2007), and several
others must be evoked when working to move research concerning
Black boys and men forward. Their contributions have already laid
the foundation for the necessary work that is to come by offering
more nuanced and complicated perspectives on Black families that
refute claims of inferiority and despair. Moreover, community-
based interventions like the Fathers and Sons Project (Caldwell
et al., 2004) show promising results in adapting health behaviors
among nonresidential Black fathers and their sons. It may be
beneficial future interventions to model this approach by explicating
relationships between Black mothers and their sons as they transi-
tion from adolescence into young or emerging adulthood, as this
appears to be a critical time of interpersonal growth and identity
development.

## Limitations

One of the limitations to consider when interpreting the findings
from this investigation is that the first iteration of the codebook was
developed using open codes that the first author generated, and from
there the codebook was revised and edited based on the input and
suggestions from the other two coders. While this practice is
considered commonplace when conducting qualitative analysis
(Creswell & Poth, 2018), it does mean that codes derived from
one person ultimately serve as the foundation for the analyses. In an
effort to directly address this concern, time was allocated during
team meetings to change, update, or revise the naming and definition
of codes. Again, the codebook is considered "living" and is by no
means stagnant (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Nonetheless, future
studies may consider working together to develop the first version
of the coding manual. It is also worthwhile to consider that the
contexts in which someone needs support may be different from
when they receive support. However, the term "need" was used as a
probe after the initial question that asked participants to describe the
kinds of social support they received. As such, the concepts were
kept as one research question in this study, though future investiga-
tions may consider teasing these two constructs apart.

## Conclusion

It is evident that more concerted efforts are needed to redress
disparities and barriers to Black college men's academic success
(Harper, 2006; Palmer et al., 2014). In this, it is important to assert
that Black college men are not "damaged" or in need of "fixing"
(Dumas, 2016), but instead we must recognize that these young men
already possess resources and strengths that have gone untapped and
overlooked in research. One such strength is the social support
Black college men receive from their peers, campus groups, and
families. Having a clearer understanding of the support Black
collegiate men attending PWIs rely upon gives researchers insight
into factors that contribute to esteem, well-being, and academic
persistence. Furthermore, the Black male students in this study
voiced that they needed support from others when transitioning to
college, when forming their ideas around manhood and masculinity,

and when experiencing signs and symptoms of depression, among
other concerns. These concerns are especially warranted for Black
college men attending PWIs who have oftentimes been made to feel
that they are not welcome, or that they do not belong. As such,
university administrators along with campus staff, social workers,
and counselors should consider developing programs, curricula, and
resources that directly target these needs and more in working to
ensure that the Black men on their campus achieve holistic success
and well-being in all areas of their lives.

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