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“Putting My Man Face On”: A Grounded Theory of College Men’s Gender Identity Development

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The theory that emerged from this constructivist grounded theory study of 10 college men’s experiences depicts their gender identity as developed through constant interaction with society’s expectations of them as men. In order to try to meet these perceived expectations, participants described putting on a performance that was like wearing a mask or “putting my man face on.” They described a process of learning societal expectations, putting on a mask to conform to these expectations, wearing the mask, and struggling to begin taking off the mask.

Despite a history of privilege and success in higher education, troubling trends for student affairs and academic leaders have emerged with regard to college men’s recruitment, retention, and academic success (Kellom, 2004). These concerns also have extended to college men’s emotional, mental, and physical well-being (Davis & Laker, 2004); increased likelihood to be the victims and perpetrators of most forms of violence, including suicide (Pollack, 1999); and higher rates of violations of campus policies (Harper, Harris, & Mmeje, 2005; Ludeman, 2004).

Unfortunately, student affairs professionals have not generally been trained to view issues affecting men through a gendered lens, or perhaps mistakenly believe that they already understand men and therefore do not need to further seek such a perspective (Davis & Laker). Because student affairs educators have recognized that many student development

theories were developed by looking primarily, and at times exclusively, at White men, they often wrongly assume that student affairs professionals understand men (Davis & Laker). As Laker (2003) argued,

The early research did not study “men.” Rather, it studied “students” who were men. There was no gender lens in the research and thus the resulting theory cannot capture the gendered nature of identity development, for men or for women. (p. 1)

For example, the early psychological work examining men’s development (Jung, 1969; Levinson, Darrow, Klein, Levinson, & McKee, 1978; Vaillant, 1977) examined the development of male participants but did not view the participants’ gender as a relevant consideration (Clipson, 1981). Davis and Laker explained that this gender neutral perspective not only does a disservice to men, but also perpetuates patriarchy, sexism, and privilege in that it

leads to either reliance on stereotypical gender scripts or failure to consider men as gendered beings. . . . In disturbing irony, ignoring the salience of gender or race in White male students reifies the privilege of those agent groups to the extent that invisibility perpetuates privilege. (p. 49)

The student development literature informing student affairs practice is just beginning to offer a gendered perspective on college men’s identity development (Davis & Laker, 2004).

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Reflecting the failure of many early student development perspectives that dismissed or ignored the experience of individuals from marginalized social identity groups, scholarship on identity development with regard to marginalized social identity groups grew (McEwen, 2003). Having recognized the value of understanding the experiences of individuals from marginalized groups, scholars also sought to examine the experience of individuals from dominant social groups through a social justice lens as a way of addressing privilege (Brod, 1987). Two prominent scholars of men and masculinity called for qualitative inquiry through a social justice framework to develop an empirically based theory of college men's gender identity development in an effort to move toward liberating both men and women from the consequences of patriarchal masculinity (Capraro, 2004a; O'Neil, 2004).

Gender, like race, class, and sexual orientation, is socially constructed (Weber, 2001). For decades feminist scholarship has explored the social constructions of gender and how it has contributed to women's subordination and men's domination (hooks, 2000). This body of feminist scholarship offers a model for scholars of men and masculinity to explore what it means to be a man from a social justice perspective, which has the potential not only to further feminist aims at gender equity but also help to liberate men from rigid and restrictive gender role norms (Brod, 1987).

The traditional definition of masculinity refers to the dominant culture's normative definition of masculinity (Brannon, 1976). Many other versions of individual and cultural masculinities are forged in reaction to or interaction with a traditional definition of masculinity (Connell, 2005). The traditional definition of masculinity is reinforced by and reinforces misogyny and homophobia (O'Neil, Helms, Gable, David, & Wrightsman, 1986). This version of masculinity is hegemonic in that the

subordination of women is a central organizing principle and is accomplished in part by placing some men above other men (Connell). Men who do not fit the traditional hegemonic definition of masculinity because of their race, class, sexual orientation, religion, age, or ability are often marginalized as a result, as are the various versions of masculinities that these cultures and social groups develop. A traditional hegemonic conception of masculinity fosters a patriarchal social system, including how individual men's identity perpetuates, contributes to, and reinforces patriarchy. In these ways, the hegemonic traditional definition of masculinity serves to oppress women, marginalize some men, and limit all men.

Men's gender socialization in the context of this traditional hegemonic definition of masculinity has implications throughout the lifespan for boys and college men (Pollack, 1999). This rigid male gender role has fostered what Kindlon and Thompson (2000) called "emotional illiteracy" (p. 5) and a culture of cruelty among young boys. Teenage boys who more closely agreed with traditional gender roles for men were more likely "to drink beer, smoke pot, have unprotected sex, get suspended from school, and 'trick' or force someone into having sex" (Kindlon & Thompson, p. 16). Scholarship on the experience of college men has found connections between these traditional expectations of men and alcohol use (Capraro, 2004b), depression (Good & Wood, 1995), perpetration of sexual assault (Kilmartin, 2001), homophobia (Rhoads, 1995), and men's overrepresentation as college judicial offenders (Harper et al., 2005).

This study on college men's gender identity development was informed by several conceptual and empirically based identity development models exploring the identity process for a variety of social group identities (Wijeyesinghe & Jackson, 2001). Scholarly attention regarding gender identity from a

social justice perspective has recently been suggested as a way to begin to understand and address the gender issues facing men and women. A theoretical understanding of college men's gender identity development, grounded in the participants' experience, may equip student affairs educators with a theoretical perspective informing more educationally effective and developmentally appropriate interventions with college men (Davis & Laker, 2004). More effective educational interventions for college men will not only benefit college men, but also college women and the entire campus environment (Davis & Laker).

METHODOLOGY

This study on college men's gender identity development was approached through a social justice theoretical perspective using grounded theory methodology (Charmaz, 2006; hooks, 2000; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). A social justice theoretical perspective frames gender identity, for both men and women, as socially constructed in a patriarchal context (hooks) and intersects with other social systems that advantage some and disadvantage others on the basis of social group identity such as race, class, and sexual orientation (Bell, 1997). By examining college men's gender identity development from a social justice theoretical perspective, this study was conducted to gain a better understanding of how internalized patriarchy is learned, reinforced, and perhaps transcended by individual men (hooks).

Grounded theory is a qualitative methodology used to develop theory grounded in the experience of the participants (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Grounded theory conducted from a constructivist epistemological paradigm is particularly suited for examining processes, structure, and context, all of which are key tools in broadening rather than narrowing the inquiry and exploring identity as socially

constructed phenomenon in the context of hierarchical social structures such as patriarchy (Charmaz, 2006). This constructivist approach employs methods in a more flexible and less rigid way than more objectivist approaches to grounded theory. Constructivist grounded theorists do not attempt to be objective in their data collection or analysis, but instead seek to clarify and problematize their assumptions and make those assumptions clear to others.

The purpose of this constructivist grounded theory study was to understand the process of college men's gender identity development. The following research questions guided this study: (a) how do college men come to understand themselves as men; (b) how does this understanding of what it means to be a man change over time, if at all; and (c) what are the critical influences on this process? The outcome of this study was a theoretical perspective on college men's gender identity development grounded in the experience of the participants.

Methods

In order to effectively implement this social justice focused constructivist grounded theory appropriately, several sampling strategies, a series of three in-depth open interviews to collect data, and grounded theory data analysis methods were employed. In addition, various strategies including member checks, peer debriefers, and an inquiry auditor were used in an effort aimed at establishing trustworthiness.

Participants. Using a combination of intensity, maximum variation, and theoretical sampling, we sought college men from a large research university on the East Coast. Employing intensity sampling strategy, we initially sought college men as participants who had been noticed by key informants and expert nominators as having spent time thinking about what it means to be a

man but without looking for any particular conclusions. Of the 102 potential participants identified by nominators, 35 expressed interest in participating by submitting a completed information sheet with contact information and demographic information related to their social group identities and college experiences. From these 35 interested participants, 5 initial participants were selected using maximum variation sampling to explore college men's gender identity development from different social group identities and college experiences. After these initial 5 participants were selected, additional participants were added using theoretical sampling based on their potential to add contradictions, variation, depth, and breadth to the categories and themes emerging from the data until theoretical saturation was reached (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). A final sample of 10 college men served as participants in the study (Table 1). Each participant selected his own pseudonym, which are used here to protect the participants' anonymity.

Data Collection and Analysis. Three open interviews were conducted with each

participant. Multiple interviews gave the participants' opportunities to think about and explore the research questions in greater depth and to reflect on earlier interviews, revise comments, and ask their own questions. The first interview generally consisted of broad open-ended questions. The second interview was used to examine in more detail the themes that had already emerged and to examine new themes. The third interview explored in more detail topics from the participant's earlier interviews and discussed emerging themes from other participants.

Using the transcripts of the interviews as data, data were analyzed using initial, focused, axial, and theoretical coding procedures consistent with constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006). Using the constant comparative method, characteristic of grounded theory, initial data analysis informed later data collection in a cyclical process until saturation or redundancy was reached. More than 1,100 individual line-by-line codes were generated in this initial coding process, keeping as close as possible to the words of the participants.

TABLE 1.
Participants' Social Group Identities

Participants	Race-ethnicity	Sexual Orientation	SES/Class	Age	College Experience
Kumar	Asian Indian	Heterosexual	Upper-middle	20	Pre-med, service
Noah	White	Heterosexual	Upper-middle	21	Football
Frank	White	Heterosexual	Upper-middle	21	Fraternity, leadership
Jason	African American	Heterosexual	Upper-middle	18	Member of Black orgs.
Nicholas	Latino	Heterosexual	Working	21	Pre-law, Latino orgs.
Chet	White	Heterosexual	Middle	21	Fraternity president
Daniel	White	Gay	Middle	21	Resident assistant
Robert	White	Gay (trans)	Middle	21	LGBT leadership
Sean	White	Heterosexual	Middle	23	Sexual assault prevention
Chauncey	African American	Heterosexual	Lower-middle	22	Black leadership

Focused coding resulted in the 1,100 initial codes, such as “being in control,” “trying not to cry,” “not preparing,” and “proving masculinity as insecurity.” The initial codes were organized into 27 categories, such as “falling into society’s expectations,” “proving manhood,” “crying,” “traditional definition of masculinity,” and “being socialized.” Axial coding involved exploring the processual relationships between the 26 major categories and their many subcategories and how they related, influenced, or contradicted each other, using diagrams, maps, and visuals throughout the research process. The summary memo, summarizing the themes and describing the emerging theory, was shared with peer debriefers and each of the participants as individuals and in an optional focus group. Theoretical coding was then used to reorganize the data and tell the story of the participants’ experiences from an analytical perspective (Charmaz, 2006; Strauss & Corbin, 1998), using the metaphor of a mask which originated in several of the individual participant interviews and resonated with the participants in the focus group.

Trustworthiness. The strategies employed in this study to establish trustworthiness follow the lead of others who have adjusted Lincoln and Guba’s (1985) trustworthiness criteria of credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability for other emancipatory research such as critical ethnography (Talbot, 2004) and feminist grounded theory (Fassinger, 2005). Credibility was established through member checking by asking each participant to review a summary essay of his story and asking a focus group to respond to the group story. Three peer debriefers were used to offer additional perspectives for the data analysis and suggest further avenues to investigate. A reflexive journal was also used throughout the data collection process to help address dependability by monitoring and making clear the interviewers’ own experiences, biases,

and assumptions. An inquiry auditor also examined a detailed audit trail including audio recordings, notes, transcripts, and memos to verify that the data collection, procedures, and coding all were done appropriately to constructivist grounded theory methods.

RESULTS

The focus of this study was to develop a theory of college men’s gender identity development grounded in the experiences of participants and which described the process by which they came to understand themselves as men. The participants in this study developed their gender identity through constant interaction with society’s expectations of them as men. In order to try to meet these expectations and be seen as men, the participants in the study put on a performance that was like wearing a mask. One of the participants described the way he performed to meet these expectations as “putting my man face on.” These findings provide the foundation for the outcome of this study which is an empirically based theoretical perspective of college men’s gender identity development (Figure 1) grounded in the experience of the participants. The men’s gender identity development is described as a process of interacting with society’s expectations by learning these expectations, putting on a mask to conform with these expectations, wearing the mask, and struggling to begin to take off the mask.

Expectations of Men

The participants all experienced society’s expectations of them as men to be a set of very narrow, rigid, and limiting ways of being a man that were initially relatively straightforward and then increased in complexity and became applicable to greater aspects of their lives over time. Major components of these overall expectations included being competitive,

in control of emotions or unemotional, aggressive, responsible, the breadwinner, in a position of authority, rational, strong, successful, tough, and breaking the rules. These expectations were not just about who men were supposed to be but also about who they couldn't be, such as gay, feminine, or vulnerable and shedding tears.

None of the participants could remember a time when they weren't conscious of how men were supposed to be. They had learned these expectations so early in life that they couldn't remember not knowing them, nor could they identify when they had first learned them. Rather, it seemed that they had been aware of these expectations throughout their entire memory or consciousness.

As the men in the study grew older, the expectations of men simultaneously expanded and became more restrictive. For example, in early elementary school the expectations were as basic as "be tough" and "don't cry." Later in elementary school breaking the rules was added to the expectations of boys. By junior high these expectations also included playing sports; fitting in with the right peer group; competing for girls' attention and access to girls bodies; and breaking the rules by swearing, being disruptive, or fighting. By high school, society also expected men to be competitive, not be gay, and break the rules. Men could comply with these expectations in high school by playing sports, having sex with girls, and drinking. Chet described how these external

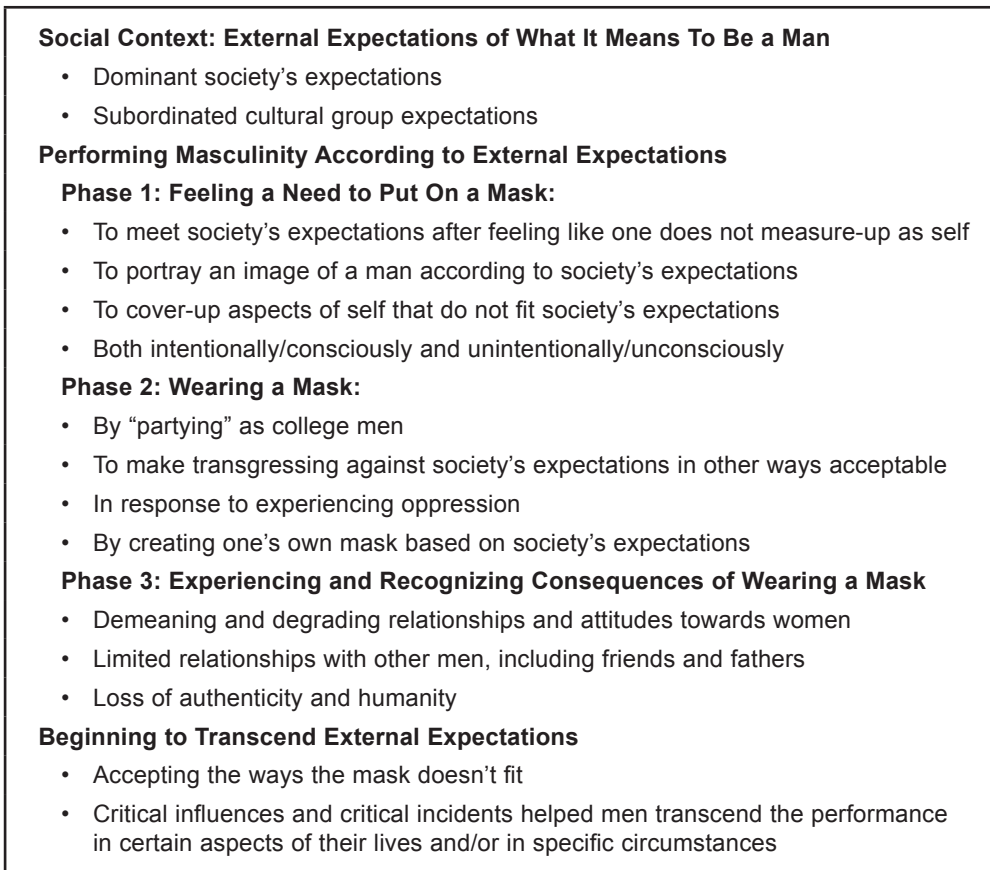


Figure 1. Grounded Theory of College Men's Gender Identity Development

expectations influenced him in high school in this way: “You want to be the kid who beats your rival team in lacrosse and drinks that night to celebrate and has sex with a girl.” For college men the expectations also included treating college as “four years of freedom” and “partying.” For college men expectations to party included drinking to excess, doing drugs, having meaningless or competitive heterosexual sex with many women, not studying or pretending not to study or care about academics, and breaking the rules.

Some men had additional expectations unique to their own cultural group such as Black masculinity, working class masculinity, and machismo or Latino masculinity. Although these cultural expectations were created by their communities, they were all in some way a derivative of the dominant mask, either as adaptations, amendments, or rejections of the dominant society’s expectations of men. For example, Nicholas explained that working class men are expected to go “straight into the job force. You are supposed to grow up a lot quicker.” Robert explained how gay men experienced this oppression differently as a result of homophobia and the placement of being gay in opposition to society’s expectations of men:

As far as the racism goes it kind of mitigates your ability to be fully a man kind of thing. But being gay just completely disqualifies you . . . you just have to kind of make it [gay masculinity] up on your own. And so it is kind of inter-self defined.

Performing Masculinity

In response to these external expectations, the participants in this study described putting on a performance so that they would be seen as men. This performance was like a mask that they put on in an effort to cover up the ways in which they did not meet these expectations and in order to present to others someone

who would be seen as a man. The participants described why they wore the mask, how they wore it as college men, and the consequences of wearing a mask.

Putting on a Mask: Why Men Perform Masculinity. As individual men, the participants each realized that they did not, would not, and could not ever perfectly fit into these external expectations as themselves. Because these expectations of men were so complex and limiting, the participants were each insecure about their manhood and often felt like less of a man because they didn’t fit into these expectations. Reasons for feeling like less of a man included personal characteristics (body size, lack of attention from women, and being sensitive and/or emotional) and experiencing forms of oppression such as racism, classism, and homophobia. As a result of these insecurities the participants felt a need to put on a mask.

Putting on a mask covered aspects of their true selves that did not meet society’s expectations and presented to society an image that did fit the expectations. As Noah explained, “I think people definitely put on a guise of some sort. People definitely put on a front a lot of the time, just to act tough. Just to act big or ya know.” Chauncey described why he wore his mask, “I am more of an emotional person than I was . . . I never really felt much like who I was because I felt that that maybe it was like—I guess, maybe me putting my man face on, I guess.” When participants felt insecure as men, they often responded by trying to overcompensate and prove their manhood to others and to themselves. As Kumar explained:

I think behind it all, people who try to be overly masculine are somewhat insecure with themselves. Um, and I guess you could say lost in a sense and they obviously turn towards societal norms for how they should be acting.

The men described wearing a mask both intentionally by trying to prove their manhood and unintentionally by “falling in” to society’s expectations of them in spite of themselves. For example, Jason laughingly described how he consciously put on a mask by pretending he didn’t listen to R & B music because it wasn’t seen as masculine enough. When his friends came home he put his mask back on. He said, “I like to listen to R & B music. So I will cut that on when I am in the room or whatever and then when my roommates come back or my friends come over I change the music.”

The participants had so deeply internalized society’s messages that they often acted in ways that contradicted their own values without even being aware that they were doing so. Examples of falling in to society’s expectations in spite of themselves and doing things they regretted or didn’t intend included making homophobic comments, objectifying or demeaning women, drinking to excess or competitive drinking, or suppressing their own emotions. Generally, the men didn’t realize or regret what they had done falling in until later, when they were either confused by or disappointed in their own actions. Frank recalled falling in to these external expectations and finding himself doing things that he regretted, wanted to avoid, and didn’t intend to do ahead of time:

Waking up next to a girl and having no idea or you know, “Why in the world did I do this?” or “What did I do?” Um, drinking far too much. Blacking out I still do it. I still go out too much. I still drink too much.”

Wearing a Mask: How Men Perform Masculinity. The participants described not only why they wore a mask to conform to society’s expectations but also how they wore this mask, particularly as college men. As college men they were expected to party, which meant that they needed to cover up the preparing they

felt a need to do despite society’s expectations. Men also wore a mask in an effort to make ways in which they deviated from society’s expectations acceptable. Men who experienced oppression often felt like less of a man as a result of the racism, classism, or homophobia they experienced and wore a mask as one of the ways they tried to regain or maintain their manhood. As men experienced frustration with society’s expectations they attempted to amend these expectations and develop their own personal definitions of what it means to be a man.

As college men, the participants were expected to view college as “four years of freedom” and party as a way of performing their masculinity according to society’s expectations and view. Chet described feeling this pressure to cram as much partying into his four years of freedom and observed it with his peers. He said, “They try and cram as much of this stereotypical machoness in while they can before I guess, they are snapped into reality and have to start really living as what they really think a man should be.”

Despite the external pressures to party, the participants also felt a need to prepare for life after graduation. They described “preparing” for life after college as taking academics seriously, going to class, studying, internships, involvement, worrying about GPA, carefully selecting a major, learning, filling out the resume, and learning about self. The men were often masking their insecurities as men by hiding, minimizing, or dismissing the things they did to prepare for life after college. Negotiating the external pressure to party and feeling an internal need to prepare was central to the participants’ experience as college men. As a result of these competing demands, several of the men in the study described having a divergent college experience. The men with more perceived privilege tended to be able to party more and the men with less perceived

privilege tended to feel a greater need to prepare, even though it was in violation of society's expectations of them as college men. These men with less relative privilege had less time, money, and opportunity and felt that they had less time to be wasted on partying, because of the additional responsibilities they had to themselves, to their families, and to their communities. Nicholas described the different pressures for men with less perceived privilege in this way:

Coming into college you still have responsibilities for home, you still have responsibilities for making sure that you are doing well . . . it is not four years of freedom for us 'cause it is four years of having to work to pay for school . . . having to do that part time job. All of these responsibilities that come with it. So it is not like, "Oh I have no ties. I can go do an internship if I want and work for free, get experience." Nah, you have got to work to pay for school.

At times men wore a mask to compensate, cover up, or make what otherwise would be seen as transgressions against society's expectations socially acceptable. The men in the study described being able to do things that contradicted society's expectations if they simultaneously made up for this by wearing a mask in other ways by being successful, making a joke or mockery of their transgressions, taking a principled stand, propping up their masculinity in other ways, or using drinking as an excuse. For example, Noah acknowledged that being interested in art was not seen as masculine, but because he was very good at painting and was recognized for his talent it actually helped establish his masculinity in high school. Chet also noticed fraternity brothers of his who would share their feelings openly or even cry and then afterwards make a joke of it. He even noticed this behavior in himself, acknowledging that it was a lot

of work just to be yourself with your close friends:

If a guy starts opening up to another guy he will joke around like, "You look like you are ready to make out with me." I don't think that that is something that I wouldn't do, because I have done it.

Men who experienced racism, classism, or homophobia often felt that they were seen as less than real men as a result of this oppression and often responded by wearing a mask to regain their manhood. One of the ways that gay men in the study responded to being seen as less than men was by distancing themselves from society's expectations of men. Daniel explained that he had distanced himself from society's expectations of men because, "it would be just too much of a performance." Those who experienced racism and felt insecure as men as a result discussed a few common responses that they had observed others using and found themselves, including believing the stereotypes, choosing the stereotypes, needing to not be the stereotype which for many results in experiencing stereotype threat, or overcompensating according to the traditional definition, which often unintentionally reinforced racist perspectives of cultural masculinities.

One way men in the study responded to feeling that they couldn't measure up to society's expectations or frustration with society's expectations was to develop their own personal definitions of what it meant for them to be a man. They then struggled to live up to these definitions in the face of the constant pressure to wear a mask and portray what society expected of them. Generally these personal definitions were in some way amended versions of society's expectations of them as men. For example, Nicholas's personal definition reflected an amalgamation of the different masks that he was expected

to wear: dominant society, Latino culture, and working class culture. He described his personal definition of masculinity as “stepping up” to his responsibilities including going to school, paying for school, and benefiting his Latino community. In this way the personal definitions were new masks that the men had created that still maintained their manhood but were, in their eyes, more acceptable versions of society’s expectations.

Consequences of Wearing a Mask. The participants were able to describe not only why and how they performed masculinity, in part as an adaptive or protective strategy given their perceptions of the environment around them, but also the consequences of their performance. The participants described the negative consequences their performances of masculinity had for women in their lives, for their relationships with other men, and for themselves.

Many aspects of society’s expectations that the participants disagreed with, observed in others, or recognized in themselves were related to women. Degrading, objectifying, or demeaning women were some of the most common ways of performing to society’s expectations that frustrated the participants when they noticed it in other men and in themselves. Kumar described how his wearing a mask had resulted in having a series of unfulfilling relationships with women. He explained, “The whole homosexuality thing is a lot more serious in high school. . . . So you do a lot of like—that stupid like hook-up things . . . you do it just to kind of prove yourself.” Noah described how some men on the football team talked about their relationships with women,

For example, they don’t even know the girl. . . . And the next morning . . . they’re just like, maybe they hook up with them again and then they never talk to them again . . . hooking up and maybe ditching the girl later or something like that.

The participants described three main components of society’s expectations and how they lived up to those expectations that limit men’s friendships: homophobia, competition between men, and fear of being vulnerable or emotional. Nicholas described how much trust was necessary between two friends to overcome the obstacles that masks placed between men and their friends.

It is just basically like, being able to trust that person enough to let down your guard in terms of like showing emotion. . . . Not being afraid of homophobia. . . . You are not trying to out do each other. . . . Fear of vulnerability, which is basically a fear of showing emotions or showing weakness.

Wearing a mask that conformed to society’s expectations got in the way of their ability, despite their clear desire, to have more meaningful relationships with the men in their lives, including more meaningful relationships with friends and the father figures in their lives. The relationships the participants had with their fathers, or lack thereof, were one of the most significant influences on them and their conceptualizations of themselves as men. Gaining their father’s approval was as elusive as it was important to the men.

Not only were the participants’ relationships with women and other men in their lives damaged, but they also described losing themselves to the performance as well. They lost some of their authenticity by pretending to be someone they were not and sacrificed some of their humanity by denying aspects of who they really were. Daniel explained, “That is why it is hard to say what is your identity. ’Cause in my opinion it is a mixture of it all. ’Cause there is no figuring out which one of those it really is.” For instance, several of the participants had real difficulty crying, despite their desire to cry more often as a healthy and satisfying way of expressing their emotions.

Chauncey described his surprise at not crying recently, “Like last Friday my professor passed away . . . and that hurt me. I wanted to cry. I really felt like it was in me, but I couldn’t. . . . I don’t know why I didn’t cry.”

Struggling to Begin Taking Off the Mask

Although none of the participants had completely taken off the mask and transcended society’s expectations of them as men, each of them had begun to take off the mask, at least in specific circumstances or contexts. Some of the men were more intentional in their efforts to begin moving beyond some of the external expectations of them as men but still found themselves falling into these expectations when they weren’t paying attention, when they were feeling insecure about their manhood, or unconsciously as a result of their constant socialization and their internalization of those messages.

Most of the men had come to terms with specific aspects of their authentic selves that just didn’t fit behind the mask. In these specific ways, such as being more sensitive, choosing not to drink or have sex, or being involved, they had accepted that, as individuals, they were just different kinds of men. In doing so, they were able to take off the mask by being more emotionally available, avoiding meaningless sexual relationships with women, speaking up against sexism and homophobia, or avoiding partying aspects of the college experience altogether.

The participants identified several critical influences that helped them begin to take the mask off. These included personal influences, historical or literary influences, exposure to alternate versions of masculinity, academic courses, and critical events in their lives. Personal influences encouraged the participants’ interest, willingness, and ability to move

towards being their own man and removing the mask. These included parents, teachers, and coaches. Malcolm X was a particularly powerful role model for both of the Black men in the study. Several of the participants who struggled with society’s expectations found positive alternate versions of masculinity from what they acknowledged were pretty traditional bastions of masculinity, such as the Catholic church, the Marines, and Boy Scouts. However, for these men, their unique experiences left them with messages about being a man that either contradicted society’s expectations of what it means to be a man or emphasized aspects that were congruent with their personal definitions of masculinity. Academic courses were also powerful in both helping the men gain consciousness of some of the problems with wearing a mask and encouraging new ways of being a man.

Several of the participants experienced specific events that significantly influenced them as men and helped them begin to take the mask off and move closer to being their own man. These critical events included being raped by a male peer, having an abusive mother, being in a meaningful romantic relationship, taking a difficult principled stand, and the interviews for this study. For example, Sean explained that he and his brother were repeatedly raped by a male peer when he was 13 years old. Being raped by another man was one of the most emasculating experiences anyone could experience because of loss of control and homophobia, yet Sean still felt like a man. In this way, being victimized by another man had made it clear to Sean that his sense of manhood was not easily shaken by external forces. He explained, “I never felt like, ya know, am I gay or am I a bitch or am I weak? I felt like I could hold my own, I felt like I was still a man.” In another example, a turning point for Chet was removing five of his brothers from his fraternity after hearing from

several women that they had been raped by these men. Chet decided to run for president of his fraternity so that he could do something about the situation. This situation gave him the opportunity to stand up and be the kind of man he had always said he wanted to be.

All of the men in the study identified the interviews for this study as one of the critical events for them as men. The interviews were a unique experience for the participants who found them both enjoyable and difficult. They found that having reflected on their masculinity, and talking about the kind of men they wanted to be and what got in their way of being that man, was helpful in holding themselves accountable and taking off the mask. The participants also expressed a desire to extend the experience to others, particularly their close friends whom they now saw as trapped behind the mask. In an analogy that resonated with other participants in later interviews, Jason described the experience as going to church, "So like, for a couple of days after church you are like, 'Ah, I got to change my life. I got to do this. I got to stop doing that.' And then it eventually [wears off]." He left the interviews and was more accountable and better about being the man that he wanted to be for a few days, and then he put the mask back on. He stated, "It made me think about drinking and smoking and stuff more so. Uh, the way I treat women. It made me think about that. I don't know. It just—it was like, like I said, like going to church." Once he came back for another interview he again got back to the man he wanted to be, but he expected that sooner or later it would wear off. Jason wanted to maintain more congruence and wondered what would help him do that.

And I think to myself, will I ever be able to go to church like that? For it not to wear off. Like, I don't like it wearing off. But, I can't help it. . . . I don't know how long it is gonna take me to get there.

Although none of the participants had completely transcended society's expectations of them as men, this was clearly the goal as they saw it. Given the opportunity to offer advice to other men after going through the interview experience Kumar responded, "Be yourself." The constant socialization they experienced served as an elastic cord around the back of their head, tethering them to the mask of society's expectations of them as men. Even if they were able to take the mask off in certain circumstances, as soon as they felt insecure, it snapped back into place and they would find themselves falling in to wearing the mask in spite of themselves.

DISCUSSION

Relationship of Grounded Theory to Existing Literature

Although the theory of college men's gender identity development that emerged from this study is not a stage-based model, it does describe a developmental process of participants' greater understanding of themselves as men (McEwen, 2003). The developmental process described here progresses towards a more complex understanding of themselves in a social context and moves from an externally defined self towards a more internally defined self.

The way the participants described society's expectations of them as men reinforces much of the literature on the traditional hegemonic definition of masculinity and makes new contributions as well, particularly related to expectations of college men (Davis, 2002; O'Neil et al., 1986). The men in this study described the traditional definition of masculinity as being in control or in charge, competitive, successful, in control of emotions, aggressive, strong, tough, and willing to break the rules. The men in the study also understood that society defined manhood by what men should not be, as well as what they should be.

They understood that men were expected to not be gay, feminine, or vulnerable and to not cry. A unique contribution of this study to the existing literature is the way participants described the traditional definition of masculinity for college men as partying. The participants all agreed that the primary expectations of college men included drinking to excess, doing drugs, having sex with many women, breaking the rules, and not caring about academics, though they didn't all fall in to these expectations. Although these behaviors by college men have been observed and have raised concern (Davis & Laker, 2004), viewing these partying behaviors as how college men are encouraged to conform to society's expectations is a contribution to the literature on issues for college men. This perspective provides empirical support for, and extends to college men's problematic behaviors, Brod's (1987) view that men's apparent transgressions are not "*nonconformists*, but *overconformists*, men who have come too much under the domination of a particular aspect of male socialization" (p. 270). Just as men partied as a way to prove their manhood, they also avoided or hid preparing as a way to maintain their status as men. A part of performing masculinity was avoiding, limiting, or hiding behaviors that colleges and universities would encourage such as taking academics seriously, putting time and energy into studying, being involved, worrying about grades, taking an internship, and engaging in self-discovery.

The participants described experiencing their gender identity as a socially constructed phenomenon. The participants in this study almost never described being a man as based in biological, hormonal, or phenotypical essence, but instead described it as a set of social behaviors including feelings, thoughts, and actions. They also revealed the social construction of gender in how they described what it meant to be a man changing over

time and depending on the social context, including different racial, socioeconomic, and sexual orientation contexts. The metaphorical description of their gender identity developmental process as wearing a mask by putting on performance also strongly relates to Goffman's (1959) metaphor of social action as a theater production and Butler's (1990) notion of identity as performativity. As Goffman described, the participants in the study were clearly not only acting, but also an audience constantly observing and continuing to learn about society's expectations so that they could perform with congruence. By describing how they wore their mask both consciously and unconsciously, the participants also lend support to Butler's notion that performativity is much more than just an intentional performance that one puts on or can stop putting on, but instead a conscious and unconscious construction of identity.

The expectations of society and the performance on men to meet those expectations helps begin to explain some of the roots of troubling behaviors that have been observed in men in general and college men specifically (Davis & Laker, 2004; Pollack, 1999). Literature on men and masculinities, particularly from a critical or pro-feminist perspective, has outlined how men's conformity with the traditional definition of masculinity contributes to boys' (Pollack) and men's (Katz, 2006; Kivel, 1992) degrading and demeaning attitudes and behaviors towards women and among college men in particular (Capraro, 1994; Heisse, 1997; Hong, 2000; Katz, 1995). The participants in this study also discussed wanting more meaningful relationships with other men and joining fraternities or athletic teams as a way to form those kinds of bonds with other men. The reality that the participants experienced and observed in these environments was that because of increased competition in these all-male environments, men's relationships were

even more limited as has been observed in other studies of college men's bonding in fraternities and athletics (Curry, 2004; Lyman, 1987). Men's loss of self to the traditional definition of masculinity has been explored through scholarship on men's physical, mental, and emotional well-being (Kindlon & Thompson, 2000; Pollack). The men in this study had experienced pressure to hide their emotional lives, other than anger, for so long that several of them were actually unable to express their emotions despite their best efforts. The participants also described feeling pressure to be violent, get in fights, and engage in risky behaviors, particularly related to sex and alcohol. This connection between society's expectations of college men and their dangerous behaviors have also been observed in relation to college men's overall well-being (Courtenay, McCreary, & Merighi, 2002) and increased alcohol consumption in particular (Capraro, 2004b).

The participants' insights around how they were struggling to begin to take off the mask adds to the scholarship on college men's gender role conflict and provides insights into how student affairs educators may encourage men to begin to transcend external expectations and live their lives as themselves (Freire, 1972/2000; Johnson, 2001; Kivel, 1992). College men who experienced gender role conflict have also experienced, "communication restrictions associated with scripted gender roles, fear of femininity, feelings of being overly challenged, and a sense of confusion about 'masculinity'" (Davis, 2002, p. 508). Realizing that they didn't fit, and didn't want to fit, society's expectations of them as men, left the participants in this study caught between their desires to be a different kind of man and a need to prove their manhood according to society's expectations as a result of their insecurities. The participants in this study tried to modify the traditional

definition of masculinity to create what O'Neil (1990) called "a more positive sense of their masculinity" (p. 24). The men in this study found more positive versions of the traditional definition of masculinity from personal influences, literary and historical influences, alternative versions of masculinity, academic courses, and critical events in their lives. Interestingly, both deeply painful and traumatic personal events as well as powerful positive experiences helped men begin to move towards taking off the mask.

Implications

The results of this study reveal insights with implications for student affairs practice, theory development, social justice efforts, and future research. These insights come not only from the theory that emerged from the study but also from the process coming to this theory through the framing of the study, the interviews, and the process of making meaning of the participants' experience.

Implications for Student Affairs Practice. The emerging theory offers new insights into understanding college men's experience and can help inform more effective practices for student affairs educators seeking to address issues arising in college men's academic success, well-being, and role as campus citizens (Kellom, 2004). The emerging theory helps frame college men's partying behaviors, such as drinking; doing drugs; competitive, demeaning, or degrading sexual activities; lack of academic effort; and general disregard for institutional policies and procedures, not as deviant, but as conforming performances men feel they must put on to be seen as men. Rather than seeing men who party as ignoring social norms or irreverent to authority, instead student affairs educators may understand them, in part, as men who feel trapped by social norms as they understand them and confined by the authority of society's expectations. Attempts to shame or chastise

college men may be understandable given their problematic behaviors; however, because it may leave the man feeling emasculated it could result in further anti-social behaviors as he tries to reclaim his manhood the way he has been socialized. Instead of responding to the performance, educators may find more success helping men grow and changing their behaviors by working past the performance by trying to address developmentally appropriate interventions based on the men's real identity and not think that the performance accurately represents their identity. Although student affairs educators may be frustrated with these men, it may be that the men are just as frustrated, ashamed, or embarrassed by their behavior as well. The challenge is in creating opportunities where men feel comfortable to let go of the performance and reveal their real identity so that those interventions can be informed by something other than the performance.

The participants already had their own personal definition of what it meant to be a man that was decidedly more pro-social. What they needed was encouragement and help in actually being the men that they wanted to be and not the men that they felt they had to be. For example, counseling, mentoring, supervisory, or coaching relationships may all provide opportunities for educators to connect directly with college men and foster the kinds of interactions that the men described were so meaningful in this study. Living learning communities, athletic teams, men's groups, fraternities, or sexual assault prevention organizations could all be structured to provide supportive environments for men to let go of the performance and move towards being themselves. Student affairs educators can also work to create environments on campus in which men do not feel a need to perform or wear a mask as a protective or adaptive strategy to be seen as "real men." The results of this

study also indicate that academic courses and student affairs programs that raise students' consciousness of social group identities in general, expose men to historical and literary figures who offer new ways of being a man, and offer alternative versions of masculinity may be effective in helping men begin to transcend the traditional definition of masculinity.

Recognizing the different pressures placed on men and different responses to those pressures based on their perceived privilege can help student affairs practitioners to understand the differences in how college men from different backgrounds experience college. Men with greater perceived privilege may be hiding the preparing that they are doing out of fear of being emasculated. They may also be engaging in more partying than they can afford financially or academically and more than they want to engage in. Again, giving these men the permission to let go of some of their partying behaviors and encouraging them to engage in more of the preparing aspects of college may not just encourage behaviors that are more consistent with higher education's educational mission, but also might be just what these men are looking for. Keeping this in mind may help higher education communicate, particularly with men of color and working class men, from a perspective that is culturally relevant to them with regard to race, class, and gender cultural perspectives (Liu, 2005). Men who perceive they have less privilege and feel a greater need to prepare for life after graduation may be willing to take advantage of curricular and co-curricular opportunities, particularly if they are framed in a culturally relevant manner.

Implications for Theory Development. The theory emerging from the participants' understandings of themselves as men offers insights for future theory development, particularly identity development theory. The emerging theory in this study highlights the critical importance of exploring dominant

identity development processes and the importance of both separating out multiple social group identities and re-forming these identities in an effort to understand the whole person. The findings of this research provides further support that the privileged nature of dominant group identities leaves them unexplored and unexamined not only in the literature but also in the individuals themselves (Johnson, 2001; Jones, 1997). The insights that the participants in this study came to may be valuable not only to them but also to the men and women in their lives as they described beginning to break down at least their overt sexism and barriers to their relationships with other men. Another implication for theory development from the emerging theory is the importance of both separating out multiple social group identities and re-forming these identities in an effort to understand the whole person. An important contribution of this study is that it explores men *as men* and examines how other social group identities influenced gender identity development specifically (Jones & McEwen, 2000). This study also builds on the work of those (Abes, Jones, & McEwen, 2007) who have observed the connection between domains of theory, specifically between identity development and cognitive development processes such as self-authorship (Baxter Magolda, 1992). Although the examinations in this study did not focus on exploring a meaning-making process, the way that the participants described trying to move from an externally defined version of what it means to be a man to an internally defined version is consistent with Abes et al.'s reconceptualization.

Implications for Social Justice. This study was framed by a social justice theoretical perspective and one of the explicit aims was to develop a theory about college men's gender identity development that could advance social justice goals. The emerging theory of this study reveals

the consequences for women, other men, and for the men themselves of men's conforming to the traditional definition of masculinity. Those concerned with individual men's sexism, including degrading and demeaning attitudes and behaviors towards women, may find the emerging theory in this study useful in understanding and addressing men's sexism and misogyny. Similarly, the findings in this study demonstrate homophobia's role in enforcing the traditional definition of masculinity and how men may exhibit homophobic behavior and comments, not out of a hatred for gays or lesbians, but potentially as a way of either intentionally or unintentionally trying to regain their manhood. A better understanding of the roots of men's sexist and misogynistic behaviors can provide guidance for more appropriate and effective social justice interventions. Helping men recognize that this performance is not only hurting women but also diminishing their relationships and sense of self can be a way to foster an enlightened self-interest to trying to be a different kind of man. This enlightened self-interest may be useful in creating men who are more effective, consistent, sustainable, and accountable in their efforts to work against their own sexism and the sexism in society (Edwards, 2006).

Understanding men's sexism as rooted in part in a conscious or unconscious performance according to the traditional definition of masculinity and fostered by men's insecurity as men offers several means of beginning to address these behaviors. Social justice advocates may seek to foster men's security as men as way of encouraging them to be themselves and stop performing to patriarchal expectations of men.

Implications for Future Research. Through the process of conducting this study several implications for future research emerged. First, it became readily apparent that all research is intervention, whether that is the intent or not.

This further supports scholarship examining the influence of interviews and qualitative research processes on participants' development (Torres & Baxter Magolda, 2002) as well as the potential for unintended harm that could result from these interviews (Magolda & Weems, 2002). The emerging theory suggests that this is an area ripe for research using both qualitative and quantitative means of inquiry examining men beyond college and further examination of college as partying and not preparing and the connection privilege has to this dynamic. Research on other college men representing other social group identities and college experiences is encouraged as is research on noncollege men with different experiences and different perspectives. Finally, further research on how men can begin to transcend society's expectations of them as men is deeply needed as the participants in this study had just begun to struggle with this.

Limitations and Strengths of the Study

There are some important considerations to keep in mind before others use the emerging theory in this study to guide theory, practice, or research. This study was conducted on a single campus with a small number of participants and was, in part, retrospective in nature. The purpose of this study was to explore in depth the experience of these specific participants, not to develop a theory that would be generalizable to all college men. The participants were also a unique group of college men and by no means average or typical.

The strengths of this study stem from procedures that were consistent with grounded theory methodology and the college men's open and honest participation in the study. Trustworthiness criteria were also tended to throughout the research process using peer

debriefers, inquiry auditors, member checks, and a detailed audit trail. As a result, the findings of this study reflect the process of the participants' gender identity development. The participants in this study were incredibly honest, vulnerable, and forthcoming about their experience. The participants also represented a variety of college experiences and social group identities.

CONCLUSION

The college men in this study engaged in a process of gender identity development that centered on a complex interaction between them as individuals and society's expectations of them as men. Over time they were socialized into and then internalized dominant society's increasingly complex expectations of them as men. These men spent their lives wearing a mask and performing these expectations, which was a struggle because it did not reflect their true selves. This performance had consequences for women, other men, and for the participants themselves. Each of the men had begun to remove the mask and transcend society's expectations of them in certain situations or under certain circumstances. They described critical influences and critical events that helped them to begin transcending these external expectations of them as men. Because of their honesty, the 10 college men who participated in this study were able to offer rich interviews from which a theory of college men's gender identity development emerged as a result. Along the way, the participants also learned about how they could be more like the men they wanted to be and less like the men they felt they had to be.

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