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# An Exploratory Study of Stress and Coping Among Black College Men

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Research on coping mechanisms among Black Americans is robust, yet there is a dearth of studies that use qualitative approaches to examine coping specifically among young Black men. The current and historical landscape of race relations in the United States calls for additional concern and exploration of this topic. To fill gaps in this area, this study uncovered the ways Black college men cope with various stressors that impact their mental health. Eleven qualitative interviews were conducted with 18- to 25-year-old Black men enrolled at a college in the Midwest who participated in the Young Black Men, Masculinities, and Mental Health (YBMen) project. Data were analyzed using a rigorous and accelerated data reduction technique that involved transferring transcript data onto spreadsheets, reducing the data, and conducting a rigorous content analysis to generate themes and subthemes. Participants reported that Black college men cope with stress by discussing their issues with members of their social support networks, engaging in physical activities, and relying on themselves. Some respondents reported that they intentionally avoided dealing with their mental health, whereas others attempted to make sense of their problems. Substance use, violence, and anger were all identified as markers of unaddressed stressors. Stigma emerged as a barrier to seeking help. Study findings highlight within-group differences among Black college men. Mental health researchers must continue to develop creative ways to examine stress and coping so that resources can become more culturally relevant and readily available both within and outside of the spaces Black men occupy.

***Public Policy Relevance Statement***

When considering the current state of race relations in the United States, the growing concern for the ways members of marginalized groups cope with societal and environmental stressors, particularly young Black men, becomes even more important. Findings from the current study highlight the various stressors young adult Black men oftentimes face, along with providing additional insight into the myriad ways they cope with these events. Implications for researchers and practitioners are discussed.

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When considering the prevailing social climate in the United States, where threats of racial violence and hate crimes on college campuses have increased (Hope, Keels, & Durkee, 2016), it remains imperative for researchers and practitioners to recognize how young adult Black men cope with stress. The death of Richard Wilbur Collins, a senior at Bowie State University who in May 2017 was fatally stabbed on the University of Maryland's campus by a White male member of the Alt-Reich Nation Facebook group warrants additional cause for concern (Serhan, 2017). Recent studies have reported that recurring national and campus-related crises evoke both an emotional and physiological response in Black college men (Brooms & Perry, 2016). Young adult Black men persist in their efforts to effectively manage their experiences with distress, despite the apparent injustices they face every day.

To date, research has examined the role of coping with societal stressors, environmental stressors, and mental and physical health challenges among Black Americans broadly (Greer, Ricks, &

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Baylor, 2015; Oliver, Datta, & Baldwin, 2017; Utsey, Ponterotto, Reynolds, & Cancelli, 2000; Vassillière, Holahan, & Holahan, 2016; D. R. Williams, Neighbors, & Jackson, 2003). Yet studies that deconstruct the unique race-, age-, and gender-specific coping mechanisms in response to stress for Black men have remained scant (Aymer, 2016; Ward, Wiltshire, Detry, & Brown, 2013; Watkins, 2012a; Watkins, Allen, Goodwill, & Noel, 2017; Watkins, Hawkins, & Mitchell, 2015). The ways that race, age, and gender impact the stress and coping outcomes of Black men are often conflated with those of Black women. This has led to incomplete knowledge of the extent to which race, age, and gender impact, both individually and collectively, the stress and coping experiences of Black men (Harnois & Ifatunji, 2011; Ward et al., 2013).

A more critical analysis of race-, age-, and gender-specific coping strategies among cohorts of Black men can help researchers and practitioners develop culturally sensitive and gender-specific psychoeducation resources that could improve Black men's mental health and well-being (Ward et al., 2013; Watkins, 2012a; Watkins et al., 2015). By examining the intersections of race, age, and gender over the life course, one can target interventions to reverse deleterious effects on the mental health of Black men during various developmental stages of the life course (Watkins, 2012a). For example, coping techniques specific to Black college men should be explored, because their experiences navigating the demands of college are unique and can have direct implications for their psychological health. To fill the gaps in this research, this study examined stress and coping strategies in a sample of Black college men.

## Stress Among Black College Students

College enrollment among Black college students has steadily increased over the past 10 years (U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, 2015), despite their increased levels of stress associated with their pursuit of higher education (Blackmon, Coyle, Davenport, Owens, & Sparrow, 2016). For the purposes of this study, *stress* is defined as social or environmental factors that adversely impact one's well-being and exceed the resources one would normally use to manage problems (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Meanwhile, stressors are indicators that result in feelings of stress. Previous research on the stress of Black college students has focused on the types of stressors experienced by Black college students attending predominantly White institutions (PWIs) compared to those experienced by those who attend historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs).

First, previous studies on the stress of Black college students have focused on variations in the types of stressors they experience during their college years. These stressors can ultimately shape and significantly impact not only their academic performance but their well-being and overall college experience. For example, Black students may enter college having already experienced stressors related to financial difficulty and college readiness (Banks, 2010; Greer & Brown, 2011; Greer et al., 2015; Hu & Wolniak, 2013). Employment is also a common stressor for Black college students, because they often need to work multiple jobs to pay tuition (Watkins, Green, Goodson, Guidry, & Stanley, 2007) and to alleviate some of the financial strains of their loved ones back home (Freeman & Huggans, 2009; Watkins et al., 2007; Wood, Hilton, & Lewis, 2011). The added responsibility of working to support not only oneself but also one's immediate and extended family members might contribute to adverse psychosocial health outcomes for Black college students who are simultaneously learning to navigate the rigorous academic demands of their college experiences.

The second body of literature on the stress of Black college students has focused on the environmental stressors they experience and how these stressors are largely dependent on the campus climate and institution type (Greer, 2008; Greer & Brown, 2011; Mincey, Alfonso, Hackney, & Luque, 2013; Oliver et al., 2017; Watkins et al., 2007; Womack & Sloan, 2017). Findings are mixed in determining academic outcomes and emotional well-being among students enrolled at HBCUs compared to those enrolled at PWIs. For example, Black students enrolled at HBCUs have reported stronger academic outcomes (e.g., higher grade-point averages [GPAs], retention rates, and graduation rates), more positive relationships with faculty, stronger social networks and friendships, and higher rates of overall satisfaction (Allen, 1992; Patton, Bridges, & Flowers, 2011; Seifert, Drummond, & Pascarella, 2006). However, other studies have found no significant differences between Black students who attend HBCUs and Black students who attend PWIs when exploring these outcomes (Flores & Park, 2015). In addition to the differences in campus climate, being a first-generation college student, having negative interactions with nonethnic minority-group faculty, and experiencing racial discrimination on campus have all been identified as stressors germane to Black college students (Blackmon et al., 2016; Greer & Brown, 2011; Guiffrida & Douthit, 2010; Jones & Greene, 2016; Kohn-Wood, Hammond, Haynes, Ferguson, & Jackson, 2012). Furthermore, researchers would be remiss to overlook chronic stressors nested within race and racism, because activism on college campuses has increased since the tumultuous events surrounding recent events related to human rights and social justice issues (Hope et al., 2016).

## Coping Among Black College Students

Previous research has examined stressors as well as the ways Black college students are responding to stressors—specifically through *coping*, which is defined as the ability to manage various aspects of stress (D. T. Smith, Mouzon, & Elliott, 2016). To date, research on coping among Black college students can be categorized into two areas: coping strategies and coping categories. *Coping strategies* are the techniques used to manage (e.g., deal with) stress, and *coping categories* are the overarching groupings under which coping strategies can be placed.

Previous studies on coping strategies have listed the types of coping techniques that have been used by Black college students. Examples of these coping strategies include talking with family and friends (Guiffrida & Douthit, 2010), engaging in physical activity (Oliver et al., 2017), and turning to religious or spiritual support (A. S. Franklin, 2016; Kohn-Wood et al., 2012).

For instance, one study found that both male and female students relied upon social support from family and friends as a means of coping with school-based stressors (Mosher, Prelow, Chen, & Yackel, 2006). Results from this study were supported by another study that used the informal support of campus networks

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(e.g., university students, staff, and faculty) as therapeutic support for Black college students (Grier-Reed, 2013). In a related vein, previous research has suggested that Black students underutilize campus counseling resources when compared to their White peers (Duncan & Johnson, 2007; A. Williams & Justice, 2010). Though findings from these studies suggested Black college students may benefit from informal networks as an alternative to traditional campus counseling centers, there is a need for more exploration of informal support systems as a means of support for the unique needs of Black students on college campuses.

Research on coping categories for Black college students has suggested that there are several types of coping categories (e.g., active, emotion-based, problem-solving, and passive or avoidant) and that coping strategies can be grouped under these categories (Kohn-Wood et al., 2012; Mincey, Alfonso, Hackney, & Luque, 2015; Wang, Nyutu, & Tran, 2012). For example, Sheu and Sedlacek (2004) found that though Black college men were more likely to use avoidant coping techniques when compared to Black women, Black students broadly were more optimistic and open to seeking help during troubled times when compared to their White and Asian peers (Sheu & Sedlacek, 2004). Additional research on coping among Black college students has considered whether the relationship between perceived racial discrimination and stress is moderated by either avoidance or problem-solving coping (Barnes & Lightsey, 2005; Jones & Greene, 2016). Findings showed that neither avoidance nor problem-solving coping moderated the relationship between racial discrimination and stress, but instead, higher rates of stress and avoidance coping led to poorer overall life satisfaction—providing additional support for problem-focused coping among Black college students (Barnes & Lightsey, 2005). These findings were contrary to those by Wang et al. (2012), who found that avoidance coping served as a buffer against suicide ideation and attempt among their Black college student sample.

## Stress and Coping Among Black College Men

Although the majority of research on stress and coping among Black college students has been conducted with mixed gender samples, there is a growing body of research exploring the unique experiences of Black college men. Over the past 20 years, research on the stressful experiences of Black college men has increased, with a focus on the educational experiences and health-related outcomes of this subgroup of Black men (W. A. Smith, Allen, & Danley, 2007; Swim, Hyers, Cohen, Fitzgerald, & Bylsma, 2003; Watkins et al., 2007). For example, Watkins and colleagues (2007) reported that although Black college men identified some of the same stresses across both the PWI and HBCU (e.g., financial difficulty, coursework, interpersonal relationships), men enrolled at the PWI addressed more school-based stressors within their academic and social lives compared to men at the HBCU, who identified family responsibilities and employment as their primary stressors.

Furthermore, Black men at the PWI underscored experiences related to racism, Black male stereotypes, and connections to their Black and White peers as some of their more pressing concerns (Watkins et al., 2007). Similar findings from another study found that racial microaggressions among Black college men enrolled at different PWIs revealed themes of anti-Black male stereotyping and hypersurveillance as their two primary concerns (W. A. Smith et al., 2007). Findings from previous studies are noteworthy, because past efforts revealed that Black college men held less favorable views toward counseling and instead relied heavily on informal networks of support as their preferred coping strategy (Chiang, Hunter, & Yeh, 2004).

Just as research on the stressful experiences of Black college men has increased, so has research on coping categories among Black college men. For example, acceptance, active coping, positive reframe, religiosity, and self-distraction were the most prevalent forms of coping categories (Mincey et al., 2015). Similarly, other studies on racial identity in Black college men have reported they intentionally distanced themselves from White students on campus—both physically and psychologically—as a coping technique that allowed them to persist in the face of environmental and societal stressors (e.g., Bridges, 2011). Black men in the sample would not only avoid close physical encounters with their White peers but also disengage emotionally during conversations—being careful not to share their full selves when interacting with colleagues and other school officials (Bridges, 2011). Studies such as these further confirm the multiple stressors Black college men face at various points throughout their educational trajectory and the need for a more detailed understanding of their coping strategies for intervention purposes.

## The Current Study

Two conceptual perspectives were used as the lenses through which we conducted this qualitative inquiry. The first is the *life course perspective*, which proposes that the life course is a sequence of age-linked transitions and includes times when social roles change; new rights, duties, and resources are encountered; and identities fluctuate (Settersten, 2004). The life course perspective is guided by the notion that no single threat but rather an accumulation of these threats negatively impacts health overtime (Blane, Higgs, Hyde, & Wiggins, 2004; Watkins, 2012a). For Black college men who are entering the adulthood stage of the life course (Arnett, 2000), this accumulation of threats can be particularly deleterious if their negative social and environmental conditions shape how they identify with their aspiring roles, relationships, and employment opportunities.

The accumulation of risk factors associated with the life course perspective overlaps with our second conceptual perspective, *intersectionality.* Intersectionality is an analytic and theoretical framework that considers how socially constructed and meaningful demographic characteristics (e.g., sex, race, gender, age, socioeconomic status) are inextricably intertwined and manifest within the context of power (Collins & Blige, 2016; Crenshaw, 1991). These individual factors are not mutually exclusive and should not be examined within the literature as such, because focusing on various intersecting identities alone represents a shallow interpretation of the overarching notions outlined in the intersectionality framework. Instead, the role of systemic and structural power is a critical force that must be considered within the context of personal positions and identities in order to uncover the lived experiences of members from marginalized groups. An intersectional approach to examining stress and coping for Black college men would suggest that different aspects and implications about the stress and coping experiences of Black college men cannot be adequately understood

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when examined independently (Griffith, Ellis, & Allen, 2013); rather, key demographic characteristics that influence stress and coping among Black college men would be examined simultaneously and associated with different social and structural positionalities, conditions, behaviors, and health outcomes. In short, life circumstances influence the way Black boys navigate the pathways to manhood (Hunter et al., 2006; Mankowski & Maton, 2010; Watkins, 2012a); those pathways, and subsequent health outcomes, are influenced by the intersections of race, age, and gender over the life course (Bowman, 1989; Watkins, Walker, & Griffith, 2010). It is important to note that it was not our intention to test the life course perspective and intersectionality in the current study. Rather, our intentions were to consider these two frameworks as overarching perspectives during our qualitative inquiry.

Although an extensive amount of research has explored coping among Black Americans and Black college students, few studies have explored coping strategies specific to the experiences of Black men ages 18 to 25 (Thomas, Hammond, & Kohn-Wood, 2015; Utsey, Howard, & Williams, 2003; J. Wong & Schwing, 2014), and even fewer have utilized qualitative approaches to do so (exceptions include Bridges, 2011; Fries-Britt & Griffin, 2007; Mincey et al., 2015; Watkins et al., 2007; Watkins & Neighbors, 2007). Qualitative methods can be helpful in uncovering nuances and complexities tied to sensitive issues (e.g., mental or physical health concerns), particularly among Black men, who are taught to adhere to hegemonic masculine norms that may prevent them from seeking help when challenges arise (Watkins, 2012a; Watkins et al., 2017). Moreover, integrating elements of qualitative research would allow researchers to assess whether Black college men's personal descriptions of stress and coping align with existing quantitative measures used in the stress and well-being literatures.

Of the studies that have focused exclusively on Black men, Thomas et al. (2015) found distractive coping techniques to be advantageous for young Black men whose race was central to their racial and ethnic identity, whereas distractive coping was harmful for those without strong ties to their identity. These findings reinforce the idea that Black men are not a homogenous group and instead require closer, more careful examinations of the coping strategies that are most effective and sustainable.

Few studies have taken a gender- and age-specific approach to understanding the coping experiences of Black men using qualitative measures. Qualitative studies on stress and coping among Black men are helpful in debunking antiquated stereotypes about their coping trends that may be harmful and overly simplistic. Such stereotypes include, but are not limited to, Black men being described as innately angry, hyperaggressive, violent, and criminal in nature (Eberhardt, Goff, Purdie, & Davies, 2004; hooks, 2003; Todd, Thiem, & Neel, 2016). This study sought to provide a more holistic portrait of how 18- to 25-year-old Black men cope with stressors by reporting findings from 11 qualitative interviews conducted with Black college men.

# Method

## Study Design

Data from the current study were retrieved from a larger intervention—the Young Black Men, Masculinities, and Mental Health (YBMen) project—a mixed-methods study that sought to understand the unique stressors and pressures young Black men encounter in their daily lives (Watkins et al., 2017). The YBMen project is a Facebook-based intervention that explores young Black men's beliefs surrounding issues related to mental health, masculinity, and social support. Psychoeducational information is administered to participants through a private Facebook group where the research team facilitates discussion with participants using culturally relevant popular culture resources (e.g., YouTube videos, song lyrics). Intervention participants' rates of depressive symptomatology were measured at three different time points to test intervention effectiveness (pretest, posttest, and 2-month follow-up).

Data from the YBMen Facebook intervention were collected at a college in the Midwest from 2014 to 2015 (Watkins et al., 2017). The 5-week intervention included an investigation into participants' views about coping strategies. A nonrandomized assignment process was used to determine participant group condition: 19 participants were assigned to the comparison group, and the remaining 11 participants were enrolled in the YBMen Facebook intervention group. Because this iteration of the YBMen project was a pilot study, interviews were conducted with members of the intervention group only. The current study reports findings from the pretest interviews with the 11 Black college men who participated in the YBMen Facebook intervention and described their coping strategies for handling stressors.

## Data Collection

The research team visited the campus site before the study began and partnered with a student group to solicit student involvement. We also used snowball-sampling methods by asking administrators in the multicultural center and enrolled participants to help us recruit for the study. Informed consent was obtained during on-site enrollment at the college's multicultural center. The Institutional Review Board at the first author's home institution reviewed all study protocol materials and procedures. Participants were compensated for their participation during each data collection time point, receiving either $15 or $20 cash incentives. To be eligible for the study, participants needed to (a) identify as a Black and/or African American man, (b) be 18 to 25 years of age, and (c) have never been diagnosed with a mental illness. The latter criterion was especially important, because the intervention was not designed to be treatment-based. The research team included male and female graduate students who identified as White or Black. The research team was led by a Black female professor who served as the principal investigator of the study. Semistructured interviews lasted between 10 min and 1.5 hr.

## Data Analyses

The rigorous and accelerated data reduction (RADaR) technique was used to code and analyze the data (Watkins, 2017). Whether applied using grounded theory, phenomenology, or ethnography, the RADaR technique allows researchers to rapidly review and report findings from their qualitative data (Watkins, 2017; Watkins & Gioia, 2015). A team of three data analysts, two Black women and one White woman, were involved in the qualitative coding and analysis process. Using a grounded, team-based approach, the data analysts met weekly to mine the data and discuss data analysis and

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reduction plans for the current study. Before using the RADaR technique, data analysts were responsible for reading transcripts and listening to audiotaped interviews, because these steps have proven helpful in other team-based qualitative analysis processes (Fernald & Duclos, 2005; Guest & MacQueen, 2008; Padgett, 2008; Watkins, 2012b).

Then, to organize and manage the data, all 11 interviews were entered into a table created in Microsoft Word. The first step of the RADaR technique involved creating this table, also called the "RADaR table," which included five column headers at the top of the page: participant identification number, data collection time point, question asked, participant response, and notes. The research question was then placed at the top of the page, above the column headers, and the subsequent steps of the RADaR technique involved working to reduce data from the table that did not directly relate to the overarching research question. Then, analysts identified key themes that emerged from the data, while continuing to condense data in the table and take the RADaR table through a series of shorter, more condensed tables. These steps were repeated until all that remained in the tables were the data that answered the research question at the top of the page (Watkins, 2017). Themes were then finalized from these data.

For the current study, two levels of coding were employed to analyze the themes. First, open coding was used to identify overlapping ideas and constructs from the data tables (i.e., coping strategies). Next, more focused coding techniques were used to decipher patterns worth further inquiry. To reach consensus, the analysts studied the RADaR tables individually, before working collectively to review, develop, and critique emergent themes and subthemes derived from the data (Watkins, 2017). Discrepancies and concerns related to interrater reliability were resolved during team meetings, where analysts worked together to discuss differences and plans for next steps. The three analysts voted and came to full consensus before determining the final themes or subthemes. In the final steps of the RADaR technique, the analysts extracted exemplar quotes from the tables that were considered for inclusion in this article (Watkins, 2017). RADaR data tables for this study underwent six phases of reduction before the final list of themes, subthemes, and exemplar quotes were selected for the current study.

## Results

The purpose of this study was to examine ways that Black college men cope with stress, though participants also referenced the Black men in their familial and social networks when describing stress-management techniques and strategies. Participants identified strained interpersonal relationships, academic difficulties, racism, and discrimination, among other stressors, that impact Black men's mental health and well-being. Our analysis uncovered various themes and subthemes related to the purpose of the study, and we grouped the major study themes into three coping categories: isolated coping, engaged coping, and disengaged coping (see Table 1). We discuss these themes and their respective subthemes in the subsequent section and provide illustrative quotes.

**Table 1.** *Black College Men's Coping Strategies*

| Study themes and subthemes |
|---|
| 1. Isolated coping |
| a. Relying on self |
| b. Anger–resentment–frustration |
| 2. Engaged coping |
| a. Social interactions–relationships |
| b. Hobbies and physical activities |
| c. Substance use |
| d. Fighting–violence |
| 3. Disengaged coping |
| a. Just letting it go–acceptance |
| b. Not dealing with emotions |
| c. Cutting off emotions |
| d. Hiding emotions |

### Theme 1: Isolated Coping

The first major theme that was identified by Black male participants was related to the intrinsic ways in which they coped with their stress. Inspired by participants' responses, we named this type of coping *isolated coping* and defined it as participants' deciding to cope with their stress by "acting in," or handling stress on their own. Under this major theme, we identified two subthemes: relying on self and anger–resentment–frustration. These are described in the next two subsections.

**Relying on self.** The first subtheme under isolated coping was relying on oneself. During discussions about the various ways that participants coped with stressors, they often noted how they depended heavily on themselves. One participant stated,

> If I'm feeling down . . . feeling like kinda sad that day . . . I rarely talk to anybody like that, you know. I like to just stay to myself, just breathe. I do a couple of things that I feel like that will make me feel a little bit comfortable. But as far as talking to somebody or showing them exactly what is going on with me, I feel like I do not do that as often.

During these discussions, the interviewer asked participants to discuss not only how they would cope with various stressors but also how a "masculine man" would cope with stressors. To this question, one participant responded,

> A masculine man dealing with his mental health would deal with it himself. Would take on his burden of imbalance as if he were the only one who could handle it. That is not to say that's what I think a masculine person should do, that's just what I've observed.

**Anger–resentment–frustration.** The second subtheme that we identified under isolated coping involved the ways that participants described how they internalized their anger, resentment, and frustration regarding their stressors. These internalized approaches to coping involved descriptions of other Black men in their lives, as illustrated by one participant who noted,

> They'll have anger. Umm, frustration . . . I wouldn't say every Black man is like that, but I know some. Cause I think my dad struggles with depression a little bit. He'll have resentment. So I think he's kind of depressed . . . I do not think he's, you know, happy inside. I still think he has stuff going on that he needs to work out; and both my parents, my stepfather too. He has a little bit of anger.

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Though some participants talked about their family members, others discussed their experiences with their Black male friends, mainly those who had challenges with internalizing their anger. For example, one participant stated, "They just didn't wanna be bothered. They had very short tempers. If you said the wrong thing they'll blow up in your face and be like 'Oh no F-that,' you know, stuff like that." In many ways, the isolated coping strategies that participants reported involved ruminating on their stressors and not sharing their thoughts with others. Participants reported managing their stressors internally, especially if this was how other Black men in their lives dealt with stress or the stressor itself appeared to be one that they could manage on their own.

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## Theme 2: Engaged Coping

The second major theme that was identified from the data involved participants' conscious efforts toward doing something (e.g., engaging in actions) to cope with their stress. We categorized this type of coping into a group of coping strategies we called "engaged coping" and defined it as participants' deciding to cope by "acting out," or doing things outside of themselves to manage their stress. Under this theme, we identified four subthemes that helped to further explain Black college men's outward behaviors as a means for coping: social interactions–relationships, hobbies and physical activities, substance use, and fighting–violence.

**Social interactions–relationships.** The first subtheme under engaged coping involved participants' discussions about the ways they interacted with others to cope with their stressors. For example, one participant said,

> I don't know, . . . like my mom, I mean sometimes I express different things to her but I think that if I was married or something I would really express it to my wife, because I guess, she's my wife and I think a wife is different than a mother.

Meanwhile, another participant noted, "I talk to my friends. [Black men usually] talk to their peers first and then if their peers say they're having a problem, maybe they'll consider seeking help." Conversations with members of their social support networks (i.e., friends and family members) were discussed across several interviews; however, these conversations with their friends and family members varied in frequency, depth, and intensity.

**Hobbies and physical activities.** Another subtheme under engaged coping is hobbies and physical activities. When asked about the ways a masculine Black man might deal with his stress, many participants described hobbies and extracurricular activities in which a masculine Black man might engage ("he might like boxing, he might, he might like doing some other stuff, shooting pool"). For instance, one participant noted,

> If I was, you know, a masculine male that had to deal with mental health problems, I would go to the weight room and relieve stress that way. I would go to the basketball court, or I would listen to music or play games or just, you know, things that entertain me to get it off my mind. You know what I mean?

Sports, physical activities, and other age-appropriate activities (e.g., playing video games) were frequently described by participants as ways in which they coped with their stress.

**Substance use.** Another subtheme under engaged coping involved other strategies ("Because, like, you've got different guys who may look to a bottle or may look to certain drugs"). Some participants discussed substance use in the context of other risk-taking behaviors that could potentially put Black men in danger. For example, when asked about the coping mechanisms some Black men use, one participant described how some Black men turn toward violence and substance use, stating, "like how Black people are here killing each other, I feel like that's their outlet. And like smoking weed and getting drunk, just stuff like that."

**Fighting–violence.** Though violent acts were often discussed in the context of substance use, some participants discussed violent acts apart from substance use. For instance, one participant made a connection between violent acts and mental health, stating, "You know most men; they don't deal with it well. That's where abuse and domestic abuse comes from. They don't know how to deal with their mental health well."

The idea that Black men who chose not to deal with their stress would act out in violent ways was a resounding realization for several study participants who reflected on their Black male friends, family members, and themselves.

## Theme 3: Disengaged Coping

The final theme that emerged from the data described Black men's conscious or unconscious decisions to do nothing to cope with their stressors. Under this theme, we identified four subthemes that further described Black men's disengaged coping behaviors: just letting it go–acceptance, not dealing with emotions, cutting off emotions, and hiding emotions.

**Just letting it go–acceptance.** The first subtheme under disengaged coping described the ways that some study participants handled their stress. Several participants admitted they would simply accept their situation or after trying to search for a solution, try to let it go. For example, one participant said, "If I can look for a solution to solve the problem, or [if it's] just something that I'll never be able to change, I'll just have to let it go, and just take it for what it is" whereas another participant noted, "After a while you just had to get over it and cope with it." The idea that letting a problem go and/or just accepting it and trying to move on was frequently acknowledged as a preferred means of coping for some participants.

**Not dealing with emotions.** The next subtheme identified under disengaged coping illustrated how participants discussed the ways they chose to not deal with the emotions associated with their stress. Whether neglecting their emotions was achieved by waiting for their stress to go away, not taking them too seriously, or trying to distract themselves from their stress, disengaged coping was a frequent way the men described dealing (or not dealing) with their stressors. For example, when asked about how he dealt with his stress, one participant stated, "I didn't deal with it just, gradually went away. Like I gradually got back to my normal self." Another participant spoke more generally about how Black men deal with their stress, noting, "We don't really try to pursue or talk to other people about it. That's 'cause I know, just personally me, I feel like well maybe it's something that's not too

serious." Distraction was also a means of coping. As one participant said,

> I just might play a game, watch a movie, or chill with somebody . . . but as far as actually showing it, talking to somebody about it, researching it, I do not think we do that as much. Or try to understand what's going on. We just try to push it away.

Not dealing with the emotions associated with their stress was distinct from participants' acknowledgment of the presence of emotions yet deciding to cut them off.

**Cutting off emotions.** Similar to neglecting the need to cope with one's stress, participants also discussed actively cutting them off. For instance, one participant stated, "I think basically, we try like to cut emotions off. And do something that keeps our mind off of it." Meanwhile, another participant noted,

> I basically was like when do you open up? Like right now I feel like I do not have no emotions. I do not. I got hate in my heart. I do not want to love. I think that's mostly every Black man. Once you find love and you get heartbroken, it's never the same.

Similar to not dealing with emotions and cutting them off was the idea of Black men's deliberately hiding them for the purpose of protecting themselves from scrutiny and stigma.

**Hiding emotions.** The final subtheme under disengaged coping involved participants' hiding emotions from others. Men described not wanting to "appear weak in front of another Black man" in order to maintaining their perceived sense of manhood and masculinity at all costs. For instance, one participant stated,

> I didn't want anybody seeing me crying and stuff. That's how I've been all my life, I do not know. I mean I'm not afraid to cry in front of people but I guess I like to deal with emotional situations by myself.

And a different participant affirmed, "Cause I don't know, it's manhood . . . it goes back to manhood. We don't want to look sad or weak in front of people."

## Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine the ways that Black college men cope with stress. Thus, participants shared insights about their own experiences with stress and coping, along with their perceptions of how other Black men manage the stress in their lives. Data used to address the research question came from an intervention aimed at improving the mental health and increasing the social support networks of Black college men. Analyses revealed that the men from our sample used 10 different coping strategies, which our team grouped into three coping categories: *isolated, engaged*, and *disengaged*. Our analyses used a grounded approach to deepen our understanding of the coping strategies adopted by Black college men, and these strategies align with existing coping literature related to this topic.

Although a robust literature has examined coping strategies among Black college students broadly, few studies have explored gender-specific coping strategies and categories among young Black adults (Danoff-Burg, Prelow, & Swenson, 2004; Greer & Brown, 2011; Greer et al., 2015; Jones & Greene, 2016; Mosher et al., 2006; Vassillière et al., 2016; Wang et al., 2012; Womack & Sloan, 2017). Previous research on this topic has made broad, race-based comparisons but has yet to fully explore the barriers to effective coping strategies employed by young Black adults broadly and young Black men more specifically. Therefore, our study methods and findings build on the current knowledge of Black college men by using a qualitative approach to explore the ways in which they deal with stress, while also capturing information on how the other Black men in their lives handle stress.

Findings nested within the first theme of isolated coping included men's relying on themselves and facing feelings of anger or resentment. Depending on oneself to cope with life stress is not a new phenomenon. On the contrary, previous studies have alluded to self-reliance for health challenges among men broadly (Burns & Mahalik, 2006) and men of color specifically (Matthews, Hammond, Nuru-Jeter, Cole-Lewis, & Melvin, 2013). Also noteworthy and aligned with studies on gender norms is the effect of hegemonic masculinity on the mental health of men. Though questionable in early studies (e.g., Brooks, 2001), more recent research has indicated that hegemonic masculinity results in poor mental health for men (Kupers, 2005; McKeown, Robertson, Habte-Mariam, & Stowell-Smith, 2008; Sullivan, 2011; Y. J. Wong, Ho, Wang, & Miller, 2017). Future studies should test the influence of hegemonic masculinity on the mental health of Black men across varying identities, including age, economic status, education level, and marital status. Future research should also include both qualitative and quantitative investigations into how Black men of all ages define *masculinity* and how these definitions influence Black men's mental health (Hammond, 2012; Hammond, Matthews, Mohottige, Agyemang, & Corbie-Smith, 2010; Matthews et al., 2013; Watkins, 2012a; Watkins et al., 2015; Watkins & Neighbors, 2007).

The second theme from our study demonstrated that the Black college men in our sample turned to physical actives, hobbies, fighting, and substance use when navigating stress in their lives. These findings align with those from previous studies that have examined coping styles in young Black men, because our participants reported that the Black men they interact with seek informal and social support networks when faced with stressors and challenges (Chiang et al., 2004; Watkins et al., 2007). Furthermore, findings from participants in the current study support earlier work by Clark (2004), who found that Black college men were more likely to report more maladaptive coping strategies and further predicted poorer mental health outcomes compared to Black college women. Results yielded from the current study should also be considered alongside recent quantitative work that has described social support as an influential factor tied to coping among Black college students, though results specific to Black college men were not provided (Blackmon et al., 2016; Womack & Sloan, 2017). It will be essential for future research to examine coping strategies that are unique to Black college men and women.

The final theme determined by our analysis underscores Black college men's disengagement from their feelings during the coping processes. Participants in the current study shared that they, along with the Black men in their lives, actively worked to cut off or hide their emotions when overwhelming situations arose. Attempts to manage stress may manifest as resiliency, no matter the cost to their mental and emotional health. This strategy is comparable to the findings from recent studies that reported Black students utilized resilient, active, and religious coping strategies when

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experiencing stress (Blackmon et al., 2016; A. S. Franklin, 2016; Greer et al., 2015; Kohn-Wood et al., 2012; Oliver et al., 2017). Greer and colleagues (2015) found that Black students who used disengaged coping strategies had poor academic outcomes and low GPAs. Gender-specific results were not provided in this study, so it remains unclear whether Black college men and women experienced disengaged coping differently.

The qualitative findings from the current study provide insight into previous quantitative contributions by offering contextual information and perspectives directly from Black college men who were willing to discuss their lived experiences with stress. The inclusion of studies that incorporate both qualitative and quantitative methods will be important to this area of inquiry moving forward, because both quantitative and qualitative approaches are needed to understand the implications of race in Black male identity and how this impacts stress and coping. Likewise, disaggregating what it means to be a "man" from what it means to be a "Black man" is challenging (Watkins, 2012a) and should be dissected in future research. In some cases, participants' responses to our questions about how they cope with stress were not unique to Black men, and in other cases their perceptions acknowledged that the experiences of Black men are unlike those of other men. Ambiguity around hegemonic masculinity at the intersection of race, and what it means for men of color compared to White men, has been, and should continue to be, the topic of discussion in research on race and gender (Griffith, Gunter, & Watkins, 2012; Powell, Adams, Cole-Lewis, Agyemang, & Upton, 2016; Wesley, 2015; Y. J. Wong, Tsai, Liu, Zhu, & Wei, 2014).

The relationship between race and stress has been explored in several studies, whereas the need for more age-cohort- and gender-specific work remains important for researchers and practitioners who want to continue in this area of inquiry. Studies have begun to examine these issues specifically within the context of Black men, because Black men face a unique set of societal stressors and pressures that are likely to adversely impact both their mental and physical health (A. J. Franklin & Boyd-Franklin, 2000; Utsey, Bolden, Lanier, & Williams, 2007; Watkins, Hudson, Caldwell, Siefert, & Jackson, 2011; D. R. Williams et al., 2003). It will be even more important to disaggregate the gender differences of stress and coping in Blacks, because previous studies have suggested that differences do exist in experiences of racism for Black men compared with Black women (Harnois & Ifatunji, 2011; Ward et al., 2013). This becomes particularly important in the context higher education, because recent reports have suggested incidents of racism persist as matters of central concern on college campuses throughout the United States (Hope et al., 2016; Moore & Bell, 2017).

Educational attainment is a predictor of improved health and well-being for young adults broadly, though it is uncertain whether the same holds true for Black college men. If anything, social and systemic forces may exacerbate stressors that have already materialized throughout their lifetime. Due to these complex social factors, it becomes increasingly important for researchers and practitioners to consider the unique challenges associated with being a Black man. When it comes to the life stressors of Black men, previous research has focused primarily on more nuanced factors of racism, suggesting that as Black men progress through various stages of development, their levels of stress related to subtle and overt forms of racism, coupled with societal stressors, significantly increases (Bridges, 2011; W. A. Smith, Hung, & Franklin, 2011). These findings are concerning and underscore the need for future efforts aimed at understanding the mental health and coping strategies of Black men, because regardless of their educational pursuits, the chronicity of racism is experienced at a seemingly high cost to their physical and psychological well-being (Bridges, 2011; W. A. Smith et al., 2011).

## Implications

Implications for professionals who work directly with Black men in counseling or clinical care settings are addressed across two primary streams. First, practitioners may consider exploring the interpersonal relationships of Black men to gain more insight into their ideas, beliefs, and feelings about stress and coping. Asking intentional questions about the fathers, uncles, brothers, cousins, and friends present within the lives of Black men would help practitioners understand the informal, yet crucial, support systems in the lives of 18- to 25-year-old Black men. Next, practitioners might also consider the role of informal group counseling sessions when working with Black college men. Because many of the men in our study explained that they oftentimes felt isolated, relied on themselves, and would either cut off or hide their emotions, it seems worthwhile for clinicians—particularly those who work on college campuses—to create in-person or online spaces where Black men can foster positive relationships with others who might be facing similar challenges. Informal group counseling sessions held in spaces that are culturally sensitive and relevant to Black college men could also help combat the stigma commonly associated with help-seeking (Grier-Reed, 2013; Utsey et al., 2003).

Though the kinds of stressors discussed by the Black college men from our study varied, we found commonalities across the men regarding the ways in which they coped with stressors; expanded research is needed to better interpret these findings. One potential next step for researchers might include the use of meta-analyses and metasyntheses in understanding the coping patterns of Black college (and college-age) men, because comparing findings across studies could serve as an effective tool for developing strategies that can ultimately improve the management of stressors. Researchers should also consider incorporating the two theoretical perspectives used to guide the current investigation—life course perspective and intersectionality—into future quantitative work with Black men. Although these two perspectives were not empirically tested in the current study, a promising area of additional probing and analysis would include evaluating these frameworks among representative samples of Black men. Thankfully many concepts tied to the life course perspective and intersectionality have been used to inform the development of recent gender- and race-specific psychometric measures of well-being (Bowleg et al., 2016; Mincey, Alfonso, Hackney, & Luque, 2014a; Schwing, Wong, & Fann, 2013). Nevertheless, the need for the pairing of qualitative and quantitative work continues as an area of necessity for those who study matters related to stress and mental health in marginalized groups.

## Limitations

The findings from this study should be interpreted in light of a few limitations. First, although our data coding and analyses procedures helped us acquire the themes most relevant to our research question, topics that were discussed by only a few participants were not included in the results of this study. Instead, the research team relied heavily upon a systematic data-coding and analysis technique that addressed issues of credibility and dependability (Watkins, 2012a) and allowed the team to extract only the most prominent themes and supporting subthemes to address the research question. Therefore, results from the current study are not generalizable and instead should be treated as exploratory findings that build on previous research and provide additional insight into the lives and experiences of a sample of Black college men.

Second, our research team was intentional in working alongside staff at the participating institution to build relationships that were both equitable and balanced. To do so we partnered with an existing student group designed to support men of color as they transition to college and get acclimated to campus culture. Many of the men who consented to join the study were also involved in this student group, which may have influenced their willingness to serve as active participants in the project. Thus, we may have yielded different results if participants who were not connected to the student group had enrolled in the study. Additionally, our team fostered positive, working relationships with the staff who facilitated the student group for men of color. Had staff members at the participating institution not been willing to assist in study recruitment, interest in the study among Black men on campus may have wavered. Despite the limitations, this study is an insightful investigation into Black college men's coping strategies to alleviate stress.

## Conclusion

This article examined the ways that Black college men coped with life stressors and included rich descriptions of how other Black men they know have responded to stressful occurrences. We used a grounded approach to rigorously analyze interview data from Black college men who participated in an intervention aimed at improving their mental health and increasing their social support networks. Our findings confirm the need for more concerted efforts and guided attempts to understand heterogeneity among Black men and the importance of targeted efforts that address the various intersections that make up their identity—particularly those of race, age, and gender. In doing so these factors, as well as others such as socioeconomic status, region of residence, and religious affiliation, serve as fertile areas for future inquiry by researchers, practitioners, and policymakers who want to promote the living, learning, and working conditions for young Black men.

**Keywords:** Black/African American men; coping; stress; mental health; qualitative research

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