"It's a M-A-N Thang":
Black Male Gender Role Socialization and the
Performance of Masculinity in Love Relationships"

by

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Abstract

Black scholars writing on Black male/female relationships tend to agree that they are problematic. However, what they do not agree on are the causes of the problems between Black men and women. Some believe that Black men are the problem while others contend that Black women contribute disproportionately to Black male/female conflict. As opposed to faulting a particular party, it is necessary to examine the ways in which men and women are socialized to not only enter, but to navigate relationships with each other. Through a discussion of the gender socialization of Black children, this article will review the ways in which socialization affects how Black men and women perform specific gender scripts and sex roles in romantic relationships. More specifically, this article will examine the sex role socialization of Black males and how their internalized sex role definitions shape their behavior and interactions with Black women and their expectations of how a Black woman should perform in a relationship. By renewed attention to the issue of the gender socialization of Black children, we can begin to lay the foundation for healthier relationships, families and communities throughout the Black community.

Men have got to develop some heart and some sound analysis to realize that when sisters get passionate about themselves and their direction, it does not mean that they are readying up to kick men's ass. They are readying up for honesty.
– Toni Cade Bambara (1970)

In the African American community, debates on gender and male-female relationships have always been in the forefront of general discussions about the state of the Black nation and family (Bambara, 1970; Staples, 1979; Franklin & Pillow, 1982; Collins, 1987; Aldridge, 1991; Dixon, 1991; Staples and Johnson, 1993; Hill, 2002; hooks, 2004). In the late 1960's and throughout the 1970's, this discussion became especially prominent with the rise of the Black Power Movement and the Women's Movement causing many African Americans to question the ideas of Black masculinity and its affect on Black male-female interpersonal relationships (Karenga, 2002). Authors like Alice Walker (1967), Toni Cade Bambara (1970), and Michele Wallace (1978) explored what Wallace coined the "Black Macho" or generally, the idea that Black women had to begin to step back and allow Black men to reclaim and put to use their long denied masculinity.

Wallace's notion of the "Black macho" was extremely provocative in that in her analysis of Black male-female relationships (unlike many authors who had previously blamed conflictual relationships between Black men and women on white society), Wallace implied that the blame lay with Black males. Wallace's *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman* caused such a stir among Black men and women that a few months following its publication, an entire issue of the *Black Scholar* was devoted to the discussion of Black male-female relationships, often with Wallace's concept of Black Macho as the starting point (Jones, 1979; Karenga, 1979; Staples, 1979).

Scholars like Karenga (1979), and Staples (1979) argued that women like Michele Wallace and Ntozake Shange (1977) unfairly and unjustly hated Black men. Critiques of Wallace's work were typically grounded in the belief that Wallace was misguided and speaking out of personal hurt. It was also believed that her middle class status and education in a predominantly white environment prevented her from truly understanding the influence of the white power structure on Black male-female relationships and therefore rendered her argument null and void (Karenga, 1979). A holdover from the Black Power Movement, there is often the idea in the Black community that gender conflict is a "white thing" that does not affect Black people and most often, it is believed that Black people do not adhere to typical gender roles because racial inequality and the enslavement process have prevented them from doing so.

Steeped in this argument is the belief that during enslavement, African men were not allowed to be "real men" and consequently African women began to take on a more prominent and dominant role in the family and community (Frazier, 1939; Monyihan, 1965)[1]. As a result, many people began to argue that "on the institutional level, most Black men do not have the power to force women into subordinate roles" (Staples 27) and that the problems in Black male-female relationships were most likely due to the restraints that Black women put on Black men inside the home and were therefore, the Black woman's fault. Staples (1979) even goes so far as to argue that while sexism may be an emerging problem within the Black community, because of the lack of institutional power available to Black men, and because of low male involvement in families, Black men cannot, as a result, be sexist (27). Staples also theorizes that it may not necessarily be Black women that Black men are angry at, but their own societal condition which due to frustration, causes them to act out their aggression in ways that may directly or indirectly affect their mates and families.

While the previous arguments may be accurate as far as the discussion of enslavement and its interruption of certain African cultural characteristics pertaining to gender, such as the complementary nature of interactions between African men and women, the issue of the "dominance" of one group –men or women – is one that needs to be analyzed in its proper context. Not only had enslavement altered the way Black men and women interacted, but it also resulted in the larger Black community taking on European cultural values in regards to sexuality and gender. Using this as a starting point, the issue then becomes, how does the socialization of Black male children into the larger Euro-American ideas of manhood and masculinity, and the desire of Black men to fulfill this notion of manhood affect Black male-female relationships, the Black family and most importantly, the larger Black nation?

Often, the discourse centering on Black children and socialization tends to focus on the role of the family in the racial socialization of Black children and around issues of racial attitudes and self-esteem. Understandably, it has been of interest to many scholars to comprehend how the Black family prepares its members for life in a world that is racist and discriminatory and how life in such a world affects the psyche of Black children. However, just as important is the unanswered question of what role families play in the gender socialization of Black children – especially boys[2] – and how life inside and outside of the family as a Black girl/boychild shapes the way Black adults interact with each other when it comes time to begin relationships and families of their own.

There is an overwhelming lack of research concerning the gender socialization of Black children. In McAdoo and McAdoo's (1985) text, a seminal work on Black children, only one of the fourteen articles in the book deals with gender, and this is only in the context of educational achievement[3]. However, seven of the articles in the text deal specifically with the racial socialization of Black children. This is not to undermine the importance of the text, however it does speak to the weaknesses in the literature about gender socialization and African Americans. Many Black women writers from the Black Power and Women's Movement have written on their experiences with gender socialization as children, and on their interactions with men in both familial, love and work relationships. In her essay "Brothers and Sisters", Alice Walker (1967) recalls the differences in how boys and girls were treated in the home,

> *And so, on Saturday nights, into town they went, chasing the girls. My sister was rarely allowed into town alone, and if the dress she wore fit too snugly at the waist, or if her cleavage dipped too far below her collarbone, she was made to stay home. 'But why can't I go too,' she would cry…'They're boys, your brothers, **that's** why they can go.'* (**Emphasis hers**, 328).

While authors like Walker have helped to provide good insight on how Black men and women have been socialized according to gender, they do not rigorously investigate the specific socialization of Black boys into manhood and masculinity and the subsequent affects on love, marriage, dating and familial relationships.

Boys vs. Girls: Black Child Socialization

Euro-Americans have consistently made the distinction between men and women based on the idea that men are strong, rational beings that are generally expected to be "aggressive, uncompromising, factual, lusty, intelligent providers(s) of goods" while women are weak, emotional creatures that are "retiring, gracious, intuitive, attractive consumer(s) of goods" (Bambara 124). White males have long been the face of all that is good and right about human civilization. White males have been credited with the best and most important discoveries known to humankind and in that, are the best that humankind has to offer. White women, on the other hand, have also been viewed as good (in comparison to Black men and women) but less than good enough in comparison to white men due to their lack of rationality. With European men positioned as the symbol of humanity, European women became something other than human. This dichotomy itself is reminiscent of the dichotomy posed by European thinkers concerning the differences between Europeans and Africans in which Europeans are viewed as rational and intelligent humans and Africans as emotional, irrational, unintelligent and animalistic (Ani, 1987; 1994).

In accordance with the larger European definitions of masculinity, young boys in American society are typically socialized to think that they must refrain from showing emotion in order to avoid being thought of as weak or feminine. Those boys that do show any emotion outside of anger are often told that they must "Stop being such a punk", that they are "acting like a little girl" or that "boys don't cry". Boys and men are ridiculed for their lack of masculine behavior by being called wimps, sissies, and girly-men. From a very early age, American boys are taught that the worst thing for a boy to be is "girly", because in the male/female dichotomy, to be female is to be less than human and less than respectable.

Black scholars have argued that due to race, Black and white children are socialized according to gender in different ways (Franklin, 1984; Collins, 1999). However, in Hill's (2002) study of how African American parents socialize their children according to gender, she argued that due to media influence, the upward mobility of Black people and the desire of many African Americans to assimilate, Black children are often taught to adhere to typical European gender norms[4]. As a result of both racial and gender socialization, one finds that Black men try very hard to be the most rational of the irrational and the most unemotional of the emotional – defying those racial stereotypes that position Black people as irrational and animalistic and adhering to those pertaining to gender which position men as human and rational.

From birth, Black boys and girls are socialized differently according to gender. Aside from being taught the typical American ideas about boys and girls, Black children are taught that womanhood is something that one must grow into while manhood is something that is both natural and automatic. While it is typically considered okay for girls to be tomboys up to a certain point in their adolescence, Black boys are regarded as adult men from young ages and therefore are expected not to participate in behaviors associated with girls or childhood. It is not uncommon to find Black parents referring to their young (sometimes infant) sons as "Little Man" or "Man-Man" and dressing them in outfits similar to their fathers – a clear indication that these boys are already well on their way to being perceived as men.

Automatic manhood brings along with it the notion that boys cannot participate in behavior categorized as unbecoming of a man. In her interviews with African American parents, Hill (2002) encountered a father that would not tolerate his son acting in "feminine" ways:

> *[Mother] Our son wanted a stove and refrigerator for Christmas once and I was going to get it, but he [the father] wouldn't let me even though he's a cook. [Father] Well, today I know which way he's going, so I would. [**You mean his sexuality?**] Yeah…if he wants to play with girl things now, it's okay, because I know which way he's going* (**Emphasis hers**, 500).

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As illustrated by this father, cross gender behavior is usually more tolerated in young girls than in boys, due largely to the fact that Black girl children are encouraged to be strong and intelligent, and playing with toys like a stove or doll is generally equated with homosexuality in boys (Hill, 2002; hooks, 2004). At the same time, there is also a link between expressiveness and femininity. Those men that are expressive run the risk of being called "soft", exposing their vulnerabilities and of having their sexuality/manhood called into question. The risk associated with being expressive deters Black men from sharing their feelings and emotions – a necessary aspect of intimate relationships. Black men are not expected to have or want to share their feelings, and as a result, are not taught how to do so.

Gender Socialization and Sexuality

The emphasis placed on sexuality for young boys helps to draw the inference for both boys and girls that manhood and masculinity are inherently sexual matters and that for one to fully become a man, one needs only engage in sexual intercourse (hooks, 2004). The inconsistencies about what cross gender behavior can be tolerated and in what context it will be accepted, (i.e. a young boy can only play-act as a cook once his parents know that he is not homosexual), affects both Black boys and girls in that it makes certain behaviors acceptable only under certain circumstances and as a result, the socialization process provides them with contradictory and confusing messages about masculinity and femininity.

During socialization, Black children internalize conflicting definitions about what it means to be men and women. Black girls are told by both parents to expect that they will be left alone without a mate at some point in life and that they must be able and ready to provide financially and economically for themselves and their family. However, they are simultaneously given the larger message that as women, their ultimate goal is and should be to "snare" a Black man who will take care of them (Franklin, 1984).

On the other hand, Black boys are taught that they must be aggressive, dominant and sometimes, violent in order to be true men. Like Black girls, they also receive a secondary message which warns them that as Black men in American society, they cannot be too aggressive or dominant because of repercussions from white racists (Franklin, 1984). The interesting thing about Black male socialization is that while they are inundated with the "man as aggressor" role, they are not given the complete message that is given to young white males that outlines not only aggression as masculine, but the idea of "man as provider" which requires that men act as sole or primary provider for their families. Historically, this has not necessarily been a role that Black men have been able to fulfill due to issues like high rates of unemployment and the underemployment of Black men – issues which serve to show that the "man as provider" role is not only a luxury, but largely a matter that only white men and women grapple with.

As a result of these societal constraints, Black men only internalize half of the traditional Euro-American definition of what it means to be a man. Along with the fact that Black children are given these contradictory roles in regards to their own gender identity, they have also been given non-complementary roles in regards to each other, which causes problems later in life as they begin to engage in love and family relationships.

Of the problematic messages given to Black children about gender roles are ideas about what it means to be men and women and their links to objectification (hooks, 2004). Inherent in the connection to objectification is the emphasis placed on sex for men and women. Women are receivers that are pursued and acted upon, and men are seen as pursuers, actors and agents who objectify the women that they pursue. Ideally, as receivers, women are also supposed to be disinterested in physical contact with men in order to allow men to convince them to participate in sexual activity.

There is a definitive link between masculinity and sexuality in American society. A boy becomes a man with the completion of his first sexual act and the loss of his virginity (Walker, 1967; hooks 2004). Then, and only then is he a "real man". "Real Men" are those males that are virile as well as sexually active and experienced. Consequently, for young Black men, the idea of what it means to be a man tends to focus solely on the sexual aspect of their lives and does not include any rules on how to act in regards to family and partnerships. Alice Walker recalls her father's own socialization of her brothers when she says,

> *My father expected all of his sons to have sex with women. 'Like bulls,' he said, 'a man **needs** to get a little something on his stick'* (Emphasis **hers**, 328)[5].

The interest in Black sex and sexuality is reflected in the mainstream American media, which consistently hypersexualizes African American people (Collins, 2004). The emphasis on hypersexualization coupled with the sexual basis for what it means to be a man reinforces the idea that Black men are and should be that much more sexual and sexually active. Black boys are taught that as men, they should have sex with as many women as possible as often as they can in order to assert their manhood (Collins, 2004). The ability to engage in patriarchal sex[6] that emphasizes conquest, and the ability to spread their seed to make babies serves to remedy the lack of control and power Black men have in larger society and functions as an arena in which they can seek fulfillment, power and affirmation (Staples, 1979; Collins, 2004; hooks, 2004).

The emphasis placed on male sexual activity poses a direct problem for Black men when approaching and entering into love relationships mainly because the "cult of masculinity" (hooks, 2004) teaches men that manhood is first and foremost about "fucking", or more specifically, penetration and conquest, but not necessarily about responsibility to nation and family.

This, however, is not solely an issue of men's concept of manhood and masculinity being skewed. Since Black girls are taught the same lessons about manhood, as women, their own ideas of what it means to be a Black man are also skewed. Toni Cade Bambara described what she knew "men" to be as a child when she says,

> *We used to think, at least where I grew up, that the pimp and the hustler was a Man - pressed back, fly, easy-spending, exploitive of women, a fancy stud. We also thought of the celebrity and entertainer as a Man - jewelry, frilly shirts, tenor voice, women hanging on his neck and tearing off his clothes, a pretty stud. Then there was the athlete - stupid, brutal, white man's pawn, but graceful and sexy, a muscular stud.* (130).

As Bambara shows, not only have Black men internalized the idea that manhood is about an outward, often sexualized, exhibition of status and wealth, but so has the larger Black community. Both men and women – as parents and partners - take part in the proliferation of these ideals and consequently enter into love relationships in problematic ways as well.

Ultimately, this discussion begs the questions: How are Black men and women supposed to foster healthy in relationships if their ideas about manhood are based largely on physical sex and rooted in European and Euro-American social history?

I very often encounter students who frequently look to me to explain why the Black family is "falling apart". Typically, they do not expect or fully accept my answer. The way that we have been raised and continue to raise our children in regards to gender role socialization helps only to worsen those problems that the Black community seems so desperate to solve. These skewed ideas of manhood and womanhood contribute to dysfunctional relationships between Black men and women. If a man is defined by his sexuality, then the other things in life like mates, family and children will suffer because dealing with and handling them does not fit in with the requirements for manhood in the Black community. How is it possible that a man's masculinity can be called into question if he cries, but not if he neglects to care for the children he fathers? On the contrary, he is praised as more of a man for being able to father numerous children with numerous women and for their ability to put on the *cool pose* or seem emotionally aloof and distant (Majors & Billson, 1992).

Clyde W. Franklin (1984) attempts to provide answers for the questions posed above. However, his solutions are largely one-sided in that he urges that Black women be cautioned against sexual freedom in order to foster "self-sufficiency, assertiveness and responsibility" (150) and asks that Black men be taught to be as self-sufficient, assertive and responsible in dealings with the larger society as Black women have historically been. While his work is valuable, Franklin has fallen short of the actual goal.

Without question, there is a need to teach young Black girls to be more cautious about whom they lay with and Black boys need to be provided with the strength to interact with white Americans on all levels, however this does not holistically speak to the many issues surrounding Black male gender socialization.

Black men do not seem to have a problem exercising assertiveness in their relationships with Black women, they do however, have a problem functioning in healthy ways in emotional relationships (Aldridge, 1991; Dickson, 1993). Maybe the idea is that instead of teaching Black men to be more assertive, they need to be taught how to be less aggressive in certain situations. More specifically, this problem calls for an alteration of male and female sex role socialization as a whole. Not only should Black girls be taught to be self-sufficient, strong and assertive (in all realms – not just in their encounters with white Americans and with their children), but Black boys should (and have to be) taught to be expressive and nurturers in the same ways that women are.

Let's face it, Black women have, for centuries, been taught how to be "fathers" – protectors and providers for their families – in fact, they have been *expected* to know how. Black men, however, have not been taught how to be "mothers" – how to nurture partners, family and friends in emotional ways; how to put their own wants and desires aside for the benefit of the group and how to find joy and fulfillment in that which they create and care for.

In her essay "On the Issue of Roles," Toni Cade Bambara (1970) argues that in order to continue the efforts to liberate Black people from mental, emotional, physical and spiritual global white supremacy and colonialism, there has to be a reordering of our priorities concerning gender. Bambara's essay, although written over thirty years ago, is extremely pertinent because it speaks to many of the issues facing the Black community today. Being that the Black Power Movement was effectively brought to a halt over many issues, including gender relations, it is safe to argue that the Black community has been at a standstill since then, making Bambara's work extremely relevant. Ultimately, Bambara proposes that we abandon current definitions of Black wo/manhood in an effort to reshape our views and interactions with one another in order to achieve the larger goal of Black liberation.

> *The job then regarding roles is to submerge all breezy definitions of manhood/womanhood (or reject them out of hand if you're not squeamish about being called 'neuter') until realistic definitions emerge through a commitment to Blackhood* (109).

In order to begin the necessary work to repair our families and relationships it has become important – no, crucial – that we rethink, reevaluate and redefine the way that we organize our lives and families in order to strengthen the nation and people.

We can begin to rectify the issues in Black male gender role socialization by reevaluating the ways in which we socialize Black children according to the Euro-American definitions of masculinity and femininity. It is necessary to do away with these preconceived conceptualizations of gender and redefine masculinity and femininity in ways that will aid the repair of familial and love relationships as well as be beneficial to the forward movement of the Black community. If necessary, and I believe it is, we may have to begin to form new ways of thinking about gender that incorporate the culture, history and experiences that have made Black people who we are today, but do not perpetuate the current undesirable aspects of our day to day interactions. By renewed attention to the issue of the gender socialization of Black children, we can begin to lay the foundation for healthier relationships, families and communities in the years to come.

Notes

[1] From this argument we get figures like the "strong, castrating matriarch" and "weak, ineffective male" that Daniel P. Moynihan wrote about in his 1965 report, T*he Negro Family: The Case For National Action.*

[2] The emphasis on Black boys is especially important given that many times, only the socialization of Black women is examined, and then only to point out that the messages they receive do not adhere to those emphasized by larger society.

[3] This is speaking solely of the first edition of this book. The second edition, put out in 2001, no longer contains the article "Reexamining the Achievement Cultural Tendency: Sex Differences Within Race and Race Differences Within Sex" by Bruce R. Hare.

[4] Interestingly, in her study, Hill also found that class played a role in whether or not parents favored gender equality in raising their children such that lower income and less educated African American parents tend to follow typical gender roles in day-to-day family life more than middle class, college educated Black parents.

[5] Walker later points out that of her five brothers, only one acknowledges, sees and cares for his children. Interestingly enough, the one that did not fulfill his father's expectations and "get something on his stick" is the one that was the most attentive to his duties to his family and children.

[6] hooks argues that in patriarchy, "there is an imperative to fuck…what matters in patriarchal sex is the male need to fuck.", (70).

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