



# **“The Reward Was Worth the Sacrifice”: How Membership in Black Greek Letter Fraternities (BGLFs) Redefines Black Men’s College Experiences**

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## Black Men in the College Setting...

- The black student population is relatively small at less than 20 percent of the student population on predominantly white institutions (PWI) of higher learning (“Black Enrollments in Higher Education Continue to Decline” 2014; Lopez and Gonzalez-Barrera 2014).
- African American student organizations, including Greek organizations, serve as agents for social integration of students of color (Hayek et al. 2002; Guiffrida 2003; Patton, Bridges, and Flowers 2011; Pike 2003).



## Black Greek Letter Fraternities (BGLFs)

- African American student organizations help black students become socially and academically integrated at PWIs (Guiffrida 2003).
- Educational and Social Benefits:
  - Strong sense of racial solidarity among black students
  - Higher academic achievement for their members compared to non-Greek students
  - An increase in campus and community engagement (Harper 2007; Nelson et al. 2006; Kimbrough and Hutcheson 1998; Smith and Mignon 2000).
- Black fraternities improve the quality of Black men's college years through a combination of brotherhood, mentorship, and networking
- **Relatively little is known about the specific *role* that black Greek letter fraternities (BGLFs) play in black men's lives. Their experiences of *joining* and *belonging* to these fraternities merit *closer* examination.**

# Purpose of the Study



- The purpose of this qualitative study was to critically examine how black Greek letter fraternities (BGLFs) served as agents for the academic and social integration of black men attending a predominantly white institution (PWI).

# Research Questions



The research questions ask:

**What are some of the positive and negative consequences of membership in BGLFs?**

**How has their involvement in black fraternities affected respondents' personal relationships (e.g., family, friendships, and romantic relationships)?**

**How do current and prospective BGLF members define what it means to be a man?**

**How do black men reinterpret their college experiences in light of the positive and negative consequences of membership in BGLFs?**

# Literature Review



## Rashawn Ray (2012):

- White fraternity men experienced lower levels of visibility and accountability
- Black fraternity men managed higher levels of visibility and accountability (Ray and Rosow 2012).

## Black Fraternity Men's Treatment of Women

- Black fraternity men approach women respectfully with romantic intentions in order to present themselves well and protect their fraternity's reputation (Ray 2012).
  - Black fraternity men's peers can negatively perceive black men's interactions with women as hookups (Ray 2012; Ray and Rosow 2010).
  - Black fraternity men's treatment of women is different from white fraternity men's treatment of women (Ray and Rosow 2010).



## Participant Information...

- **Methodology:** Grounded theory
- **Interviews:** Semi-structured, in-depth interviews. Each interview lasted an hour or more
- **Participants:** 20 participants (pseudonyms)
- **BGFLs:** 3 out of 5 black fraternities (pseudonyms)
- **Research site:** Large public research university in the southern United States

## Data Collection...

- **Sampling Technique:** Snowball sampling
- **Sample Collection:** Approval from the University's National Panhellenic Council → contacted the presidents of the black Greek letter fraternities on campus
- **Recruitment strategy:** Presidents as gatekeepers, I recruited participants at monthly chapter meetings and members scheduled interviews



## Analysis

- Interviews were transcribed verbatim. Themes that emerged from interviews and analytical memos were utilized.
- 5 themes emerged from data:
  - Mentorships – Fraternity brothers and black male role models
  - Personal maturing - Individual transformation from adolescent boys into young college men
  - Consumption of participants' personal time
  - Lack of Individualism
  - Trust Issues with women

# Results



## Mentorship

Fraternity brothers played honorary “big brother” roles for many participants.

“All the people that I saw doing good things on campus – people who took their time out of their day to ask me how I was doing, took that time out to make sure I was doing well in school, took that time out to make sure I was involved on campus and that people knew who I was – they were just really taking care of me. Like an older brother figure, like a father figure. That’s what really attracted me to the fraternity.” - **Brandon**

“I had all of these role models surrounding me at once and all these different people who I perceived as men, like how their lives were different, their points of view, all this different feedback from so many sources. So a crash course on what it’s like to be a man. A man in college, a man in life.” - **Marcus**

# Results



## Personal Maturation

Another salient theme that emerged from the data focused on Black men maturing into young college men as a result of their membership in BGLFs:

“They think you changed, but you change for the better. Joining a Greek, it’s not bringing you down. Joining a Greek builds you up, builds you up into a better man.” – **Mario**

“The fraternity taught me that, before you do something, you have to realize that you are going to be held accountable for that and you need to think wisely.” – **Isaiah**



## BGLFs Consume Personal Time

Across my interviews, I consistently found that the BGLFs consumed the majority of participants' personal time:

“The thing about Greek life, when you get into it, you start doing way more than you think you [are] doing. For most people, it hurts you until you learn how to balance yourself.” – **Elliot**

“Family-wise since I became involved in the fraternity, I feel like I don't have the time to call home. I haven't forgot about y'all, I [am] so busy. People back home, they don't understand how your day is set up. I don't have time to just talk on the phone and have random conversations.” – **Elliot**

“Even though it is a social fraternity, you don't have much time to be social with people. It does take away the opportunity to build a lot of relationships. You don't have time to do that.” – **Marcus**



## Lack of Individualism

Each participant expressed frustration with the constant Greek association since joining their respective fraternity:

“People will associate me as a Theta, as far as stereotypes go. People are immediately going to put ‘Malik the Theta’ after everything. So anything you do, it’s still, ‘a Theta did it.’” – **Malik**

“People judge you being a part of fraternities. They already got a stereotype about you, so they talk about you a lot. People expect us to have higher standards.” - **Elliot**

“Everyone knows you. They can find your Instagram, your Twitter. You are so easy to be accessible to them. They know your business too. It’s not really your life, just people’s perception of it.” – **Reggie**



## Trust Issues with Woman

Interestingly, I also found that my interviewees' "instant popularity" resulted in negative interactions with women:

"As a fraternity on campus that's popular, sometimes you lose your standards, like messing with females and doing all of that crazy stuff. So females kind of judge you." - Elliot

"You start learning more about females, and it's hard to trust females as a fraternity member cause you see stuff, you hear stuff, and females do more weirder stuff to fraternity members than they do to regular guys." – Elliot

"At first there is no way I could be able to manage a [romantic] relationship. I feel like I can't give that other person as much time as I would want to, without making my school or fraternity lower." – Malik



## Agents of Academic & Social Integration

- Findings support the idea that black Greek letter fraternities play an important role in the social and academic integration of their members into PWIs. (Guiffria 2003; McClure 2006; Harper 2007; Patton, Bridges, and Flowers 2011).
  - Black fraternities introduce their members to the black student community; members motivate one another to pursue campus leadership opportunities and campus involvement

## Visibility & Accountability

- Because mostly white students surrounded them, the young black men in this study experienced similarly high levels of accountability and visibility from their peers and university administrators (Ray and Rosow 2012).
  - Participants served as positive role models for other black college men while positively representing their fraternities on campus



## Treatment of Women

- Women rejected the participants' approaches and romantic gestures outright (Ray and Rosow 2010).
- Several participants had deep-seated trust issues with women which kept them from pursuing romantic relationships with women entirely

## Challenging Stereotypes

- Participants consistently demonstrated professionalism in their actions, appearances, and conversations
- Black Greek letter fraternities provide black men with the opportunity to enact an alternative standard of black manhood that emphasizes professional behavior on college campuses, in an attempt to distance themselves from certain negative stereotypes of Black men

# Next Steps: Implications



## Future Research...

- Comparative analysis study of black men in black Greek letter fraternities and another group with a large representation of black college men: black male student athletes
- Another study could explore how fraternity members utilize their professional networks upon graduating from college

## Policy Implications...

- **Increased structural diversity** in student population as well as faculty and staff.
- **Examine current policies and practices** that perpetuate Black male stereotypes.
- **Create counterspaces** where Black men can gather, express their ideas and thoughts, and be supported by faculty and staff for which they identify (Solorzano et al. 2000).



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