

Sophisticated Practitioners: Black Fraternity Men's Treatment of Women

Rashawn Ray

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Abstract This paper aims to fill an important gap in the literature on BGLOs—how black fraternity men treat women. Analyzing interview and observation data from a 9-month study including 28 black fraternity men, I find that the level of accountability, visibility, and personalization elicited by the small black community at PWIs leads to black fraternity men acting as “sophisticated practitioners” to strategize about the best ways to romantically and sexually engage women. Three factors—perception of the type of woman being engaged, desired relationship status, and structural conditions—facilitate the strategies (i.e., language usage and “reverse psychology”) they employ. Still, black fraternity men treat women more respectfully than white fraternity men and other black men due to the socialization process that black fraternity men normally undergo to be members of their organization.

Keywords Black Greek Letter organizations · Race · Gender · Sexuality · Masculinity · Peer culture · College students

Despite the recent surge of research on Black Greek Letter organizations (BGLOs; Kimbrough and Hutcheson 1998; Kimbrough 2003; Brown et al. 2005; Torbenson and Parks 2009; Skocpol et al. 2006; Parks 2008; Hughey 2007, 2008a, b), one important part of the experiences of these organizations has gone understudied—black fraternity men's treatment of women. Using data from a 9-month ethnographic study including 28 black fraternity men, this paper aims to contribute to filling this gap in the literature by focusing on black fraternity men's romantic and sexual relations with women. Unlike most studies on Greek life that make assumptions and/or accusations about black fraternity men's relations with women, or research on

R. Ray
Department of Sociology, University of Maryland, College Park, MD, USA

R. Ray (✉)
Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Health Policy Research Program, University of California,
Berkeley/UCSF, CA 94720-7360, USA
e-mail: rashawn.ray@berkeley.edu

black men's interactions with women outside of the college context that is mostly attitudinal or anecdotal at best, this paper focuses on black fraternity men's behavior and examines what they do instead of just what they say.

In the sociology, gender, education, and Greek life literatures, there are three main perspectives about black men's relations with women: (1) black fraternity men are similar to white fraternity men; (2) black men are even more sexually aggressive than white men due to their limited status within the broader society; and (3) structural conditions (e.g., community size and living arrangements) hold black fraternity men more accountable than white fraternity men for their treatment of women. The first perspective is consistent with most research on collegiate Greek life and traditional views of hegemonic masculinity. Fraternity men are implicated as exposing college women to individual-level risks factors including sexual assault, rape, relationship violence, and binge drinking (Armstrong and Sweeney 2006; Boswell and Spade 1996; Martin and Hummer 1989; Sanday 1990). Although this research has been novel on many fronts, it has primarily focused on whites. In turn, assumptions have been made about how black fraternity men relate with black women. While at times not purposeful, this body of research places black fraternity men in the same category as white fraternity men in regards to their privileges to control social environments and relate with women in a more sexual, unaccountable, and candid manner.

For example, in one of the few studies that examines racial differences in fraternity men's treatment of women, Black et al. (2005) interview black/white and male/female students, alumni, and university administrators about their perceptions of black and white fraternities and their propensity to be violent and sexually aggressive toward women. Following important findings of Boswell and Spade (1996) about fraternities being high and low risk for rape, researchers asked the Greek Director of the university which fraternities are prone to more rape incidents. The Greek Director did not mention any black fraternities in his initial response. When asked about black fraternities by the interviewer, he responded that he forgot about black fraternities, but they are high-risk fraternities for rape because it is a "cultural thing" with them (Black et al. 2005). Researchers found no evidence in the interviews with students supporting this accusation. The Greek Director's response is in line with the second and most mainstream perspective about black men's relations with women.

The second perspective posits that black men are sexually aggressive with women based on their marginalized status within the broader social system of race.¹ Majors and Billson (1992), along with the work of Anderson (1978, 1999), is mostly cited to document how black men interact with women in public spaces. Cultural motifs like the "cool pose" (Majors and Billson 1992) depict black men as culprits of sexual violence. The "cool pose" is a presentation of self that has mostly been related to black men in America and how they aim to gain status and respect in social environments by acting "hard." When relating with women, black men become

¹ Sociologists frequently use status as a proxy for social class. Social class normally encompasses education, occupational prestige, income, and self-employment (Davis and Robinson 1988). However, not all forms of status are economic. Status also taps power differentials between groups. This paper takes this perspective. Here, status is used to highlight the differences between black fraternity men, collegiate black men who are not in fraternities, black men who are not in college, and white fraternity men regarding how these various roles influence the treatment of women.

sexually aggressive and violent to display hegemonic characteristics that show how masculine they are. This perspective, however, which is often the dominant discourse about black men in the media including movies, blogs, and the news, neglects gender attitude research (Blee and Tickamyer 1995; Konrad and Harris 2002) that documents that black men are actually more supportive of gender equality than white men and family research that shows black men, compared to similar white men, are more likely to be involved with housework and care-giving duties when their spouse works out of the home (McAdoo 1988; Pleck 1985; Ray 2008). Furthermore, as Jeffers et al. (2010) argue, Majors and Billson (1992) do not show adequate evidence of black men even employing a “cool pose,” leaving scholars to make assumptions about how pervasive this phenomenon is while continuing to lend support to cultural stereotypes about black men as rapist (Black et al. 2005).

Collins (2004) asserts that black men historically have been depicted as the overly aggressive and sexually promiscuous “Mandingo.” She and others (Staples 1982; Hoberman 1997) argue this perspective is a dramatized and problematic characterization of black men that places too much emphasis on cultural explanations of gender inequality within the black community. By focusing on culture alone, scholars have overlooked important structural components of black men’s treatment of women that highlight the heterogeneity of black men.

The third perspective draws attention to structural conditions that affect black fraternity men’s treatment of women. Two studies are noteworthy here. First, Stomblor and Padavic (1997) investigate how women in black and white fraternity little sister programs on campuses in the Southeast resist men’s domination. Using interview and participant observation data, they find that black women were more successful at combating domination by implementing collective forms of resistance, compared to the individual resistance strategies of white women. Stomblor and Padavic (1997) conclude that historical consequences of racism and discrimination have potentially resulted in more gender equity among black men and women in college settings.

Second, using data from a study of black and white fraternity men at a Midwestern university, Ray and Rosow (2010) find that black men, compared to white men, are more likely to employ romantic approaches rather than sexually objectifying approaches when relating to women. They conclude that the small size of the black community at Predominately White Institutions (PWIs) hold black fraternity men more accountable for their treatment of women in a way that the larger white community does not for white fraternity men. Collectively, these studies imply that black fraternity men, compared to white fraternity men, are held accountable to women in ways that lead to distinct types of treatment and relations with women.

In this paper, I assess the three perspectives above and find evidence supporting the third perspective. However, the findings presented here extend the third perspective by highlighting how these structural conditions that hold black fraternity men accountable also create a mechanism that leads to more creativity for them to achieve sexual goals with women. As a result, some black fraternity men become “sophisticated practitioners” (Jackman and Muha 1984) by accomplishing hegemonic pursuits by “trading on” (Chen 1999) their masculinity and fraternity status. This leads to black fraternity men being perceived as more supportive of gender equality, while they still pursue the same sexual goals as white fraternity men. In other words,

black fraternity men often perceive they cannot enact the behaviors that mostly coincide with hegemonic masculinity due to the level of accountability and visibility they experience as black fraternity men. In turn, some black fraternity men develop sophisticated romantic and sexual strategies that often get categorized as more beneficial for gender equity. These strategies, however, can result in women feeling as if they have been “led on” by black fraternity men. In this regard, the evidence presented here has broader implications than just within the black Greek community. These findings also extend to a major issue within the broader national landscape—black relationships in America.

Black Fraternity Men as Sophisticated Practitioners

Sophisticated practitioners are individuals who use their knowledge of a topic and literacy level to develop constructive strategies that allow them to be perceived as genuinely supportive of a social cause by not antagonizing marginalized groups, while still embodying ideals of the dominant group. Using survey data from a national study of 1,914 respondents, Jackman and Muha (1984) argue that whites act as sophisticated practitioners of their group’s ideology by developing constructive strategies that allow them to maintain racial boundaries while not drawing formal distinctions between themselves and blacks. As a result, well-educated and informed whites, who still have attitudes that indicate their invested interests to maintain racial inequality, can make statements about race without being perceived as racist, unlike some of their less-educated white counterparts.

Since sexual norms are molded to fit the wants of men (Connell 1995; Kimmel 2008), it is plausible that black fraternity men act as sophisticated practitioners by implementing creative strategies that allow them to not seem sexist, and instead be categorized as supporting gender equality more than white fraternity men and other black men. Using narrative accounts from students on the East Coast, Grazian (2007) argues that men who convey a more trustworthy and competent presentation of self are more successful at navigating sexual scenes and marketplaces. A trustworthy presentation of self can be categorized as a strategy that appears romantic and supportive of gender equity. Some black fraternity men may use this strategy and be simultaneously more successful at navigating sexual markets and be viewed as more trustworthy than other men. Using life history interviews with Chinese American men, Chen (1999) finds that they strike a “hegemonic bargain” by consciously or unconsciously trading on (or taking advantage of) privileges associated with their gender, status, or sexuality to achieve masculinity in spite of encountering negative racial stereotypes. Chen (1999) says future research should focus on the mechanisms that encourage men to utilize certain strategies over others. By investigating why black fraternity men employ certain romantic and sexual strategies, this paper addresses Chen’s call.

Besides the important contribution this paper makes to the literature on BGLOs, it fills three gaps in the sociology, gender, and education literatures. First, previous research on collegiate Greek life has paid little attention to black fraternity men. By overlooking racial differences, important mechanisms that trigger fraternity men’s behavior have gone underdeveloped. As a result, research to date paints a uniform

picture of fraternity men, regardless of status, race, and social context, as objectifying women and reproducing gender inequality in similar ways. Second, the attitudes and behaviors of black men remain curiously absent from gender research more broadly. By including the perspectives of black fraternity men, this paper seeks to better understand how a group of high-status black men make sense of their world and the privileges afforded to them, thereby exposing more exclusive processes that underlie inequality and place women at a social disadvantage. Third, the specific strategies men use to engage women have gone understudied in the literature on romantic and sexual relations. This paper highlights the mundane, everyday ways that gender inequality is maintained in institutional contexts.

Three research questions are addressed in this paper. (1) What are the strategies black fraternity men use to romantically and sexually engage women? (2) What are the factors that influence strategy selection? (3) How do structural conditions facilitate the usage of these strategies? In the following sections, I describe the data and methods, present the research findings, and discuss the broader implications of the paper.

The Fraternity Project

Funded by the Kinsey Institute and the Center for the Study of the College Fraternity, The Fraternity Project is a 9-month ethnographic study consisting of interviews, surveys, and ethnographic observations with 52 black and white fraternity men collected from spring 2005 through fall 2005. Twenty-eight men are from four black fraternities and 24 men are from three white fraternities. Two focus group interviews were conducted (one black, one white) consisting of eight black men and six white men who were also one of the 52 men from the study. The premise behind this study was to collect data with men about their perceptions, attitudes, interactions, and behaviors on topics including race and status relations, romantic and sexual relations, sexual attitudes, sexual experiences, partying, hooking up, relationships, sexual coercion, sexual assault, and family and Greek background.

Study Site

Named State University (SU), the study site is a PWI with 30,000 undergraduates and roughly 10,000 graduate students. Similar to most large state schools, SU is characterized by US News and World Report as “selective” in its undergraduate admissions, while having many graduate and professional programs ranked in the top tier. In addition to its academic reputation, SU was ranked as one of the number one party schools by the Annual Princeton Review at the time of the study. This combination means that SU is an ideal site for this study because of its strong academic reputation, vibrant social life, and party scene. SU is also considered to be in a “college town” potentially making the saliency of the fraternity role even more pronounced.

In regards to the Greek system, roughly 20% of the white students are Greek, while 10% of the black students are Greek. At SU, there are about 25 white fraternities with approximately 100 members per fraternity. This totals to over 2,500

members in the white fraternity system. Black fraternities are substantially smaller. There are only five black fraternities each with about ten members. This totals to slightly over 50 fraternity members in the entire black Greek system. These data come from Greek Affairs and Student Affairs at SU and are comparable to similar colleges and universities across the US.

Sample Selection and Recruitment

Purposive sampling was used to select the fraternities for this study. Researchers went with fraternities that students and administrators considered to be the top on campus. Similar to Boswell and Spade (1996), the study used a “reputational approach” to identify “high-status” fraternities. Researchers relied on rankings of fraternities by members of sororities and fraternities, students in sociology classes, informants in Greek Affairs, and the Assistant Dean of Students. These individuals ranked fraternities based on popularity, academic and philanthropic events, and athletic prowess. Three white fraternities were ranked in the top five on every list. All three were included in the study.

Although the selection panel was diverse in their positionality at the university, none of the black fraternities were included in the ranking. The selection panel was predominately white. This research note speaks to assertions by Brown et al. (2005) and Hughey (2008a, b) about the two different worlds that exist between white and black Greek life. Since the black population at SU is only about 4%, researchers deemed that membership in any black fraternity generally convey a certain high status, particularly within the black community. Researchers aimed to gain entry to all five and were given access to four. The study includes the four oldest black fraternities. Participants were recruited by emailing the presidents of the targeted fraternities to see if investigators could attend a chapter meeting to make an announcement about the study, invite members to participate, and leave flyers that detailed the study and provided contact information. In addition to contacting the fraternity presidents, snowball sampling and contact referrals were utilized.

Methodology

The Fraternity Project has four types of data including observations, interviews, focus groups, and surveys. The ethnographic observations were collected during the spring 2005 and fall 2005 semesters. Researchers wanted to capture fraternity men interacting during the school year and then when they returned in the fall to see if any differences surfaced in their attitudes and behaviors related to the topics mentioned earlier. Using the approach of Corsaro (1985) on recording field notes, personal notes, methodological notes, and theoretical notes, the researchers had a strict blueprint to collect data while in the field. Fraternity men were observed in a multitude of settings including fraternity houses, rented houses, apartments, dorms, organization meetings, social, educational, community service, and philanthropic events, athletic competitions, step shows, classrooms, and parties. Researchers aimed to collect data that painted a holistic picture of these men’s Greek-related lives. Researchers frequently spent days with a few respondents at a time to see how they interacted in different settings. The researchers primarily observed how fraternity

men interacted with each other, other Greeks, non-Greek students, women, sorority women, and authority figures.

In addition to the observations, 30 in-depth interviews and 22 informal interviews were conducted. The 30 in-depth interviews were collected with 15 white and 15 black fraternity men. The in-depth interviews lasted on average 2.5 hours. Similar to the study of Armstrong et al. (2006) on collegiate women, an 8-page, semi-structured interview guide was used to ask fraternity men about the topics mentioned above. The in-depth interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed using pseudonyms to ensure personal and organizational anonymity. In-depth interviews are especially useful for developing a broad understanding of students' experiences in various aspects of college life and for exploring the meanings students attach to those experiences (Denzin and Lincoln 1994).

The 22 informal interviews were collected when the researchers were conducting observations. Certain respondents did not want to participate in the formal interview process, either because of hesitancy related to anonymity or due to time constraints. Nonetheless, researchers noticed that once rapport was established with an organization, members were normally more than willing to discuss the topics related to the study, especially when a member who had completed an in-depth interview discussed his interviewing experience. During these times, the researchers used their cell phones, hands, or notepads to record data.

At the end of each interview, respondents were asked to complete a paper-and-pencil survey. The survey included questions on sociodemographics, family background, sexual attitudes, relationship history, and sexual experiences. Data from this survey provide contextual information about each respondent. These surveys also allow researchers to further validate the information provided by each participant. The 30 men who participated in the in-depth interviews, in addition to six additional respondents, completed a paper-and-pencil survey.

Focus group interviews were conducted after the individual interviews were completed to clarify themes that surfaced during the individual interviews. Focus group interviews were used to triangulate the data by focusing on themes that evolved from the individual interviews and allowing for the interrogation of emerging propositions. Because collective discourses are documented to occur in peer groups, the unique environment generated in focus groups was well suited to this project (Hollander 2004; Morgan 1997).

Analytic Strategy

Inductive and deductive reasoning were used as analytic approaches to “double fit” the data with theory and literature (Ragin 1994). Themes were initially allowed to emerge from the data focused on how fraternity men relate socially, romantically, and sexually with women. Deductive reasoning was used to look for evidence and theories to contextualize the themes. ATLAS.ti, a qualitative data analysis software program, was used to connect field notes and interview transcriptions. After establishing patterns in the coding, these data were searched thoroughly again looking for examples that both confirmed and contradicted emerging patterns. The propositions were then refined and eliminated to explain negative cases (Rizzo et al. 1992).

The Black Fraternity Men in the Study

Most of the black fraternity men are active on campus and have higher GPAs (mean of 2.92) than non-Greek men. On average, black fraternity men are 21 years old with roughly 3.5 years of college and 2 years as Greeks. They report being moderately religious, family oriented, and career oriented. Two thirds of the sample is in committed relationships and all report being heterosexual. Their self-reported family household income is lower–middle class.

Strategies of Sophisticated Practitioners

Two main strategies—language usage and “reverse psychology”—emerged from the data with fraternity men on how they romantically and sexually engage women.² The following two quotations categorize men who employ these strategies well.

They're pretty suave. They have language skills. Like they can talk with girls. They're like attractive, I'd say. They can entertain...keep a girl's attention... Real good at small talk. Like this one kid I know. I think he's an idiot, but I don't understand how he gets girls. But he can just talk!

I mean you always got guys that are a little more at ease who articulate with the ladies who can say what's on their mind or they can manipulate their words a little better than others. Say what the girl wants to hear type of thing. So there's always going to be those guys that can speak well or give orders.

The two participants above basically describe sophisticated practitioners (Jackman and Muha 1984) from a gender perspective. The men who fit the description above are probably classified as “ladies’ men.” Men described above implement a dramaturgical presentation of self (Goffman 1959) to romantically and sexually engage women. Similar to Grazian (2007), I find that black fraternity men’s dramaturgical self must be viewed as truthful and authentic in order to “successfully” navigate the sexual market place. Goffman (1959) asserts that an individual’s dramaturgical self is contingent on audience, place, and time. Similar to Goffman (1959), I find that the social environment and others in that environment influence how black fraternity men display their dramaturgical self.

Language Usage: Content and Quality Matter

Language usage is a vital strategy that black fraternity men utilize to engage women. This strategy is about being charismatic, being able to hold an engaging conversation, making complements, and “going with the flow.” The following two participants respond after being ask, “How are you and your fraternity brothers able to attract such a wide range of women to come to your parties and events?” The quotation below speaks to being charismatic.

² Although some may find the term “reverse psychology” to be uncommon, this is a term used by several study participants. While some may also contend that as researchers we should critique terms such as these, privileging participants’ voices can be extremely advantageous. I believe it is fitting in this context.

I'm not going to say that it's all me, but I would say mainly because I have, I'm like known for having a sense of humor and I've always been like a cool guy. So I make females laugh, man. Umm...I'm just a cool guy to be around.

The quotation below speaks to holding a conversation and making compliments.

You give her the eye contact. Make sure she sees you. Then once you catch that look, you ease the way on over to her. You get a small conversation, even when they got nothing special to say. If she's talking right then you compliment her a couple times, tell her a joke or two, then let it go from there.

The following two participants respond when asked, "What do you say when you approach women?"

If I don't know her, I'd step up to her like very respectful. I would look her directly into her eyes and I would just tell her something like, "I usually don't do this with every lady. You're looking really good today." I introduce myself. "How you doing, I'm Jermaine? What's your name?" Just very respectful; not too much, not to over the top or nothing like that. Like a lot of guys when they first meet a girl, they talk to them like kind of disrespectful, but I give them something that's kind of like different. And usually like you really can't turn that down unless you're really in love with somebody.

Another participant says:

R: I'm pretty much like, man, I don't say like right out, you know I'm trying to get to know them that way [sexually]. I try to like gauge it out. "Like so, what's up, how are you doing?" and all that good stuff. I basically have to go through the formal things to get to where it is, like I'm really trying to get to, which is okay. "So have you got my number? Matter of fact, why don't you give me a ride after this because I'm not doing nothing and you can just swing through." She's like, "Okay, I'll do that." Prime example. Last night it was something just like that. "What you doing after this? 'I'm going to the crib.' Well just holla at me when you get home, I'll come over there." And it went down [referring to a hook-up].

I: Okay, and was it a girl that you had already know previously?

R: Yes, that I had known previously.

I: Okay, okay, so that's kind of just your language. It's nothing like I'm trying to get you into bed; I'm trying to have sex with you tonight, nothing like that.

R: I'm always trying to be tactful, you know what I'm saying.

I: So are some of your friends untactful?

R: Oh yeah, some of them are... I won't say untactful, I'd say just down right disrespectful. It gets to that point where it's just like, "Man! Stop it!"

I: What do they say, like as far as in your opinion as far as being disrespectful? What do they say?

R: Like if a girl don't pay them no attention, "Well fuck you bitch!" Like all those types you know what I'm saying? There's no need for that! (Black)

Although the participant above perceives himself to be different from his friends and other fraternity men because he is "nicer" and "more respectful" to women, his goals for sexual gratification are the same. Still, most women view him as more

romantic in his approaches towards women, respectful, and supportive of gender equality. The following participant responds when asked, “How do you make women feel special?”

R: Umm...well if I want a woman to feel special I just compliment her. Not a lot of guys do that nowadays. A lot of guys are very disrespectful and I just compliment her. Now a lot of this is just getting a sense of a woman. A woman who may have kind of like low-self-esteem who doesn't get complimented a lot and I'll just give her an off the wall compliment. I say something like, “You know what? You look really pretty today.” You know women don't really hear the word pretty too much anymore. When you start off with something nice, it's not too much, but it's just enough. It's just enough to put a smile on somebody's face. Or I'll say something if I really want to put myself in there later, I'll say something that's sexy about her. I'll say like, “You know you've got some sexy lips.” Or like, “You've got beautiful eyes” or something like that. Just compliment a body part. You know what I'm saying? And I go from there.

I: So is it usually true what you say about them? Or do you sometimes embellish it.

R: If I say it. If I say it! I usually think it!

As seen in this section, black fraternity men discuss the importance of respecting women. They state that some of their friends and other men can be very disrespectful to women. In this regard, their responses lend support to the second perspective about black men aiming to show how masculine they are by displaying dominance over women. It should be noted that researchers seen similar “disrespectful” interactions between men and women in predominately white settings. White fraternity men were observed taking up for women they consider friends. Regardless of the level of closeness of the relationship, black fraternity men were observed telling their friends and other men to treat women respectfully.

Now, there were reports of one black fraternity man physically abusing his girlfriend. His fraternity brothers were outspoken about their disdain for their brother acting this way. Researchers heard them telling him to seek professional help. He responded that his girlfriend hit him first and was bigger than him. These are frequent excuses men use for domestic violence. Besides this negative case, black fraternity men were observed having what researchers interpreted to be cordial and respectful interactions with women.

Overall, while black fraternity men state they do not “spit game” at women, others may contend this is exactly what these men are doing. They are flirting or “macking” on women to reach a particular romantic or sexual goal. What seems to make these men different is that they have truly incorporated the sophisticated practitioner presentation of self to be a part of their authentic self. In other words, the way these men interact with women is not a façade to simply hook-up and have sex. They value conversation and romanticism.

“Reverse Psychology:” Acting in Opposition to Other Men in the Social Environment

Fraternity men also use what some participants call “reverse psychology” by making assumptions about what other men do and do not do in a social environment, and in

turn, acting in opposition to how other men behave. This leads to fraternity men being perceived by women as different from other men in the setting. Two field note examples are fitting here. First, men at a party are playing a drinking game and acting loud and obnoxious. The study participant stands on the wall alone to distinguish himself from the other men. Then, when a woman looks in his direction he rolls his eyes to indicate his disdain for the behavior of the other men. Second, a participant overhears a woman receiving, and turning down, several offers for alcoholic beverages. So the participant offers her water or something to eat.

Now, some may say the two individuals observed in these interactions are actually genuine in their interactions with these women. While this may be true, and the interview data further supports this claim, interactions such as these were recorded several times throughout the duration of the study and frequently ended in a long conversation and/or a phone number exchange. Some even ended with the man and woman leaving together. As a result, interactions such as these do not just happen. Instead, they are conscious interactions to elicit a desirable response from women.

The following two participants respond when asked, “What kind of things do you do to try to ensure that you have a successful hook-up?”

I don’t know. I’m not like really pushy, so it’s not like I say that like I go up to a girl and you know, almost act creepy. Like I hate guys that like go up to them and there almost like creepy nice, like arm around her, and she’s like, “What are you doing?” I’m not like that at all. I don’t like force it... it’s not like I just went up to her and started making out with her. I’m really not like that either. It’s just like one of those things I usually just find myself in a position where it just happens. So I mean I guess it’s more like establishing like comfort, I guess.

Another participant says:

A lot of times like I don’t make the first move cause you know, it’s just one of those things that I’ve learned that she feels comfortable, like, she’ll you know, ask first. Like I’m not like real forceful, like if I just start like making out with a girl I don’t know, like ten-minutes later I’m not going to be like, “Hey want to go up to my bed?” I mean, you know, if she wants to, then she’ll bring it up.

The two participants above speak to going with the flow and not being overly forceful in settings where women expect them to and see other men act aggressively sexual. As a result, fraternity men who behave this way not only distinguish themselves individually, but they also distinguish their entire fraternity as respecting womanhood.

Factors that Influence Strategy Selection

The data indicate that the romantic and sexual strategies fraternity men employ to engage women are influenced by three main factors—(1) perception of the type of woman being engaged (e.g., good girl/wifey material, classy, slut); (2) desired relationship status (e.g. hooking-up, dating, committed relationship); and (3) structural conditions (e.g., community size and engagement setting).

Perception of the Type of Woman Being Engaged

The perception of the type of woman is determined by the woman's overall physical appearance (e.g., beauty, weight, dress, accessories), social network ties, previous interactions, and lastly personality characteristics. The quotations below are exemplars as to the thought process of black fraternity men as they categorize women. The following participants respond when asked, "How do you distinguish women at parties?"

How they carry themselves. How they're dressed. How their hair is, their makeup, just completely for their appearance.

R: First you gotta have your dress game together. You can't be coming looking raggedy. You can't be ugly. That's just off tops. You can't be doing too much no matter how good you look. I can't holler at you. I don't like to see girls smoking. That's like the number one turn off in the world. Like I said, their dress game gotta be together. Their breath can't stink. You just have to have yourself together.

I: What's "doing too much?"

R: Doing too much. I don't need to see you talking to every dude. I don't need to see you dropping it like it's hot in the middle of the floor on everybody that walk past that try to dance with you; kissing on dudes, doing too much.

The quotations above imply that women must act "lady-like" and present themselves in a respectable manner. If women do not act according to the standards set by fraternity men, they will quickly be labeled as being a "slut" and "hoe" or "doing too much." The participant below further speaks to appearance and how it contributes to the perception of the type of woman being engaged.

I think one way in distinguishing women is the way they dress. I feel like there are certain girls who wear things to a party where if they're in a relationship, they don't care how they necessarily dress. But then at the same time there are certain women who dress a little bit more scandalously. So you trying to look for a girl to get off for that night or whatever, you might be more inclined to go ahead and approach that girl who ain't dressing as conservative as the other girl.

The participant above perceives that women who dress more revealing may not be in a committed relationship and may want to hook-up. The following quotation discusses personality characteristics. However, the inclusion of personality is not until after all body parts from head to toe are included in the evaluation of a woman.

I kind of do a twofold thing. Of course, right off the bat, looks. You know I'm just being honest. Does she got a big bootie? Does she got a nice chest size? Is she cute? Then after we get past that, conversation. Like is she dingy? Is she not? Some girls you end up talking to them and it's like talking to a box of rocks!

The participant below discusses how repeated interacts affect romantic and sexual strategies. The following participant responds when asked, "Do you have a script to talk to women?"

R: I think with me I approach every girl different. And so like I try to study a girl and her mannerisms and like from the prior existing knowledge that I have

of her. But some girls I might start off with a joke or something. Some girls you might have to be quiet and let them think you're shy and let them come to you. Some girls you got to be real kind of aggressive.

I: Okay. So how do you decide like when to do these things? How do you actually decide when to act shy? When to be funny? When to be serious? You said you read the girl, but give me an example.

R: If I see a girl at a library or whatever then obviously my mind set is thinking that she's really into her books or whatever, depending on what she's studying. So if I see a girl studying like chemistry or biology or something like that you might try to use your knowledge of those types of subjects and ask her how her classes are doing. Tell her what you know and that might be a way of approaching a girl. Or maybe at the same time, that type of girl because you always see her studying, you might throw in a joke or something like that. Like, "Why I always see you studying? Why aren't you never out? Loosen up or something, you know. Break out of your shell." I just go with the moment; however, whatever the vibe is basically. That's basically how I go with it.

Tim, the participant above, is the embodiment of a sophisticated practitioner. His statements document how men use knowledge of women for romantic and sexual goals. The quotation below alludes to the importance of social network ties for determining the type of woman.

I think after you get to know all the black students on campus you separate them by people who they hang out with. Cause nine times out of ten, if you don't know a girl, you might know her girlfriend, her friend, or whoever or somebody who knows her. And so like pretty much you have that mind set of who's who. What they're doing or what they're willing to do and what they're looking for.

The participant above also speaks to the small black community at SU. Community size is addressed specifically in the next section. The quotation below speaks to what men do when they make distinctions between women.

I: Is there a difference between the things you say to very attractive and not so attractive women or are the compliments pretty much the same?

R: No two [women] are the same because with elite women they already hear that enough. So like if I wanted to talk to someone that's elite, I'll go with the sexy theme because one, they probably already knew they looked good today. I'll say something to them that hints towards sex. Because if you just another dude, it's like damn, you know today she's probably heard that like about six times already that day and it doesn't really mean anything. Step to one of the elite chicks just like, real strong like, "Like you have no idea what I would do to you!" Something like that. That's different to them cause they're probably not used to that.

The quotations above imply that sophisticated practitioners engage high-status women in a sexual or physical manner if they perceive that other men in the same environment have complimented these women for their beauty and status. Comparatively, if these men engage less high-status or attractive women, they may

compliment them on beauty because they perceive that these women may not receive many compliments on their physical appearance. Researchers observed Jermaine employing the technique above at a Delta Sigma Theta Sorority cookout. He approached a member of DST as detailed above regarding how sophisticated practitioners interact with high-status women. Jermaine and the woman planned to hang out at his rented house later that night.

Desired Relationship Status

The perception of the type of woman contributes to the relationship status these men seek and how far they aim to go romantically and/or sexually with a woman.

I'm very cordial and to the point; all that good stuff. But if this is someone who thinks something possibly could jump up, of course the conversation is a bit different.

In short, the more attractive women are, the more likely fraternity men are to pursue a committed relationship. If the woman is not "committed relationship material," they may still pursue her sexually. The two quotations below are quite fitting here. The first participant (Brian) compares women to vehicles, while the second participant (Tim) uses a 1–10 scale to classify women.

I use this analogy, some people say it's corny, but whatever. When you have the title of a car, you want it to be nice, but you'll jump in your friend's car. You'll ride, you'll ride anything, you know what I mean, because it's not your title, but if I'm going to have the title to you... oh, oh, you've got to be nice because you're going represent me, but now I'll ride in a pinto, but I just won't buy one.

Sexual? My standards are lower. To be my girl, you have to meet a lot of qualifications. (Chuckle) To be my sexual partner...you can't just be anything... well, ok ok, if I mess with a girl, I at least want her to be in the eight, seven range. You know what I mean? But if I'm gonna have sexual intercourse with somebody, I at least want her in the five (exaggerated) and up you know what I mean, fifty percent... yeah, five and up. I might mess with a five.

While Brian was the most original with his "pinto" quote, the rating scale used by Tim was quite common among black fraternity men and how they distinguished women and their "potential" as relationship partners. The following participant responds when asked, "Do you or your fraternity brothers treat women differently if it is just a hook-up compared to a committed relationship?"

Yes! Because I think with certain girls I dealt with, I honestly do treat them differently than how I would treat the girl that I've been on and off with who I would like possibly be with for the rest of my life. So of course, I am going to treat her differently. "Honestly, you're cool, we have fun, but this is not anything past what it is." I don't treat them bad, but it's just not the same because I don't really go out of my way to spend time with them or talk to them as much.

While black fraternity men report it is a difference between how women are treated based on relationship status, they still mention the importance of treating all

women respectfully. In other words, these men do not simply treat women more or less respectfully based on goals for romantic or sexual relationships or based on campus status or relationship status. In this context, black fraternity men are primarily speaking to the quality and depth of social interactions they have with women.

Structural Conditions

Structural conditions including community size and a central fraternity house facilitate the romantic and sexual strategies fraternity men employ to engage women. In order to properly assess structural conditions, a racial comparison must be made. Similar to most universities, black fraternities do not have fraternity houses on campus properly. This lack of property ownership leads black fraternity men to interacting with women primarily in public settings, dorms, or apartments (Brown et al. 2005; Ray and Rosow 2010). Accounts of black and white fraternity men suggest that the size of their respective racial communities and the presence or absence of a fraternity house underlie racial differences in the strategies they employ to engage women. Due the small size of the black community at SU, black fraternity men are held accountable to black sorority women and the black community in a manner that their white counterparts are privy from.

Greek and Racially-based Communities

Interview and observation data indicate that community size facilitates romantic and sexual strategies. The smaller size of both the black Greek communities and the black student community inclines black fraternity men to be savvier than white fraternity men when relating to women. Black fraternity men, and many black students, cannot overcome the reputational constraints of the small black student population. Because black fraternity men fear that “the word” will always get around, they are constantly held accountable for their behavior in ways white fraternity men are not. In other words, white fraternity men can be anonymous, while black fraternity men perceive themselves to be constantly visible and therefore continuously held accountable for their treatment of women. Consequently, some develop more savvy strategies in order to be perceived as romantic, supportive of gender equality, and not sexist.

The following two quotations speak to how community size holds black fraternity men accountable for their interactions with women. The NPHC President says:

Because there’s only seven [black Greek] organizations on campus, we have a huge impact on the black race here. Where there’s like 750 different [white] organizations, their impact is not as severe. It’s not as deep, especially cause they have more people than our race.

A black fraternity President says:

It’s kind a like being on the basketball team or being on a football team. You know what I’m saying? It’s kinda like “Eta” [his fraternity name] puts you on the next level. Like you’re black Greek but you are like the...you are supposed to be representing the black Greek. It’s kinda hard to get that out, but when we

do something we are suppose to be setting the bar for everybody else. It's like a known thing that we suppose to be setting a bar. You know what I mean?

While white fraternity men perceive they can engage the entire student population, black fraternity men perceive they are mostly limited to only engaging black women on campus. Despite what some may think, there is very little racial overlap in the relations between men and women. The settings that blacks and whites interact in are extremely segregated. In other words, black fraternity men primarily relate with black women and white fraternity men primarily relate with white women.

“The House”

Strategies are also facilitated by the presence or absence of a fraternity house. Having an on-campus fraternity house places men in control of social, gender, and sexual environments and offers a convenient and less obtrusive means to engage women. Like the discourse purported in the media regarding how expensive vehicles facilitate men's romantic and sexual encounters with women, the fraternity house plays a similar role for white fraternity men. None of the black Greek organizations have houses on campus.³ For black Greeks, not having a house is the norm. Therefore, they primarily socialize in apartments and rented houses (Brown et al. 2005). Conversely, “the house” as a resource speaks loud and clear for white fraternity men. In fact, most of the romantic and sexual relations discussed by white fraternity men occur in fraternity houses, whereas black fraternity men discuss many interactional settings. The following quotations by white fraternity men highlight how “the house” structures romantic and sexual relations.

Pretty much you do not need to do all that wine and dine them and all that. You can skip all that and just bring them back to the house and do what's important to you. (White)

They like our house a lot. They think they can be respected I think. They could go to our house and we won't be assholes to them. We'll like give them what they want and give them a place to sit and stuff like that. (White)

You meet a lot more girls in the house. The frat [house] is easier, a lot easier too in that sense cause coming back from the bars, it's not necessarily like “let's go back to my place.” Instead it's like, “Let's go back to the frat [house] and have a couple more drinks.” It's like you don't sound like you're trying to hook-up with them. “Let's go back to my house and just... get it on”... [laughs] ... It's easier. (White)

³ Although there are some black Greek chapters across the US that have on-campus houses, they are few in number. They also do not benefit from the privilege of unaccountability and invisibility like white fraternity men. At Cornell University, Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity has a house that is centrally located on campus property. Speaking to men at the Alpha Chapter reveals that black fraternity men at Cornell potentially perceive more scrutiny from university police and administrators than the black men discussed in Ray and Rosow (2010).

People don't really go on dates here. My friends don't go on dates. People [his fraternity brothers] have people [women] come over and hang out, get drunk with them. Girls will come over and they'll mess around, maybe for like a couple of weeks and they'll be considered dating or talking or what you want to call it. (White)

Unlike most white fraternity men who interacted with women primarily in fraternity houses, black fraternity men were more likely to take women out on traditional one-on-one dates. Since the black Greek and student communities are small and insular, black fraternity men were more private about their relations with women than their white counterparts. Even when interacting with women in their place of residence, black fraternity men may have one or two roommates who have access to relationship information compared to 100 men in a fraternity house. Furthermore, black fraternity men have traditional views of committed relationships. Most believe that a person in a committed relationship cannot date another person. Although some fraternity men and girlfriends were caught or accused of cheating, several reported being monogamous during the time of the study.

Taken together, structural conditions facilitate the strategies that fraternity men employ to engage women. White fraternity men have large, central fraternity houses that allow them to control the social boundaries of interactions between men and women. Based on the constraints of the small black Greek and student communities at SU, black fraternity men are often more sophisticated in how they strategize about engaging women.

Discussion and Conclusion

This paper has aimed to fill an important gap in the literature on BGLOs—how black fraternity men treat women. Accordingly, this paper has examined the strategies that black fraternity men use to engage women. I find that fraternity men use two main strategies—language usage and reverse psychology—to romantically and sexually interact with women. Three main factors—perception of the type of woman being engaged, desired relationship status, and structural conditions— influence when and how these men utilize these strategies. Applying the “sophisticated practitioners” concept of Jackman and Muha (1984) to gender, black fraternity men implement savvy strategies to engage women. More importantly, the men who are the best “sophisticated practitioners” would usually not be considered sexist but instead be perceived by women as the most respectful, trustworthy, and supportive of gender equality.

Structural conditions including community size and the presence or absence of a fraternity house underlie racial differences in the content and quality of strategies. Black fraternity men have a community size that increases visibility, accountability, and personalization. Yet, it enhances the possibility that they will have a wider range of strategies and employ a dramaturgical presentation of self to engage women. On the other hand, a community size that enables individuals to become anonymous allows men, in this case white fraternity men, to be more straightforward when engaging women. When men have control of social and gender environments, it increases the likelihood that they will be more candid in their interactions and

language usage with women because of the power they have in that environment. Accordingly, social environments controlled with hegemonic ideals allow for the boundaries between social and sexual spaces to be blurred. Men who control these spaces are able to configure romantic and sexual interactions how they see fit. Men who do not readily have to trade on their masculinity use strategies less, whereas men who have to trade on their masculinity use strategies more. These findings are in line with studies by Chen (1999) and Grazian (2007) about how men in other social contexts relate with women.

These findings further suggest that the structural conditions that hold men more accountable serve women better than if these accountability mechanisms were not in place. In comparison to white fraternity men and black men who were not in fraternities, most black fraternity men were observed treating women respectfully, regardless of the relationship status or the status of the women in the social environment. They were also observed speaking up and speaking out against other men when they talked disrespectfully to women. While structural conditions increase accountability by reducing anonymity, black fraternity men were more likely to employ strategies to interact with women, engage in active reputation management, and make fewer relational mistakes. Although black fraternity men are more romantic in how they approach women, romance does not always mean equity (Ray and Rosow 2010). In fact, romantic and sexual encounters followed by limited social interactions may affect women's self-esteem and elicit feelings of unworthiness.⁴

So, what would be the findings if this study took place at a HBCU? The black Greek community and student population at HBCUs, in comparison to the small Greek community and student population at PWIs, would still elicit an accountability mechanism for black fraternity men. During the membership intake or "pledge" process, black fraternity men are socialized to respect women. While black fraternity men are becoming members, they are taught by older members how to treat and interact with women. They are also socialized to represent "the black Greek" in predominately black settings and "the black college student" in predominately white settings. In this regard, black fraternity men embody what Du Bois (1903) termed the Talented Tenth. Du Bois (1903) conceptualized the Talented Tenth as the top 10% of blacks who are educated, politically active, and in a position of influence to assist with ameliorating racial inequality. BGLOs are positioned to contribute to this cause and have historically done so. Members of BGLOs were at the forefront of The Civil Rights Movement in the mid 1900s (Brown et al. 2005; Torbenson and Parks 2009). The socialization process that black fraternity men undergo to be members holds black fraternity men accountable in ways that other black men are not. While there may be more opportunities to treat women disrespectfully and take advantage of their high status at HBCUs compared to PWIs, the findings here suggest that black fraternity men would objectify women less than black men who are not in fraternities and white fraternity men.

Future research is needed to further investigate black fraternity men's relations with women. If the findings in this paper hold across social contexts, black

⁴ Though being hurt emotionally by a man may be better than being sexually assaulted and/or raped, these unfulfilling interactions can have consequences for the mental health of women. Future research is needed to examine the mental and emotional aftermath of hook-ups and how these outcomes vary by race.

fraternities serve an essential function of creating a mechanism that leads to black men treating women more equitably than they otherwise would. As future husbands and fathers, black fraternity men can continue to serve as role models for other black men, contribute to increasing the number of married black families, and assist with changing the current perception of black men in America.

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