BLACK MENTAL HEALTH

Unravelling the stressors and stigma surrounding the mental health of black men

by Joel Isimeme
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Submitted in Partial fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Fine Arts In Studio and Digital Arts at Liberty University

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Dedicated in the memory of my friend and brother Jason “DJ Randoo” Randoo, who always was in high spirits no matter what and the life of the party. We love you and miss you. Fly high brother!

Thank you to my parents and my brothers for always being my rock. Love you!

Thank you to my thesis committee for pushing constantly throughout this process.

Thank you to my Editor’s Tino Mutuono for helping organize my thoughts in the beginning and Nicola McNeil for all your help in getting to the finish line.

Thank to all my friends and coworkers that help make this project a success, from the all nighters to sacrificing your time to be in this project.

This project is for black men everywhere that think they are alone, I hope this projects helps to take some weight of your shoulder.
Mental health and illness have become increasingly relevant concerns in contemporary society. While the collective conversation around psychological health has begun, within the black community, mental health remains taboo. Mental illness is seldom seen as affecting black people. All individuals, however, are susceptible to mental illness, especially black men of African descent. This thesis, therefore, aims to explore the everyday experiences that adversely affect the mental health of black men. Specifically, it seeks to identify the factors that contribute to this mental ill-health. To this end, it will examine the role of society, religion, and the media in stigmatizing poor mental health among black men since it is this stigma that discourages black men from receiving the support required to ensure psychological wellbeing. The accompanying creative project, meanwhile, aims to address this stigma by visually representing the ways in which these factors affect the health of African American men and discourage them from seeking the support needed to mitigate mental ill-health. It is hoped that this imagery will raise awareness and promote productive conversations about mental illness among the black community and beyond. Crucially, presenting this series in a traveling exhibition will enable the project and its message to reach a wider audience and provide a safe space in which these much-needed conversations concerning the mental health of black men can take place.
Introduction

Conversations around mental health have become prevalent in contemporary society following considerable increases in mental ill-health. According to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), the estimated number of Americans over the age of eighteen living with one mental illness in 2015 was forty-three million or eighteen percent of the adult population. By 2019 this figure increased to fifty-two million or the equivalent of one in five adults. This situation raises important questions concerning the mental health of the African American community since their increased experience of trauma renders them more vulnerable to psychological illness. According to the US Department of health and human services, "Ethnic and racial minorities in the United States face a social and economic environment of inequality that includes greater exposure to racism and discrimination, violence, and poverty, all of which take a toll on mental health." (41).

Indeed, though African Americans make up approximately thirteen percent of the American population, the suicide rate of non-Hispanic African Americans in 2019 is 84.53 per 100,000 versus 76.84 per 100,000 White non-Hispanic Americans ("WISQARS Data Visualization"). This clearly demonstrates that the African American community is considerably more vulnerable to mental illness. In an article by the American Psychological Association in (Fact Sheet: Health Disparities and Stress), Racial and ethnic minorities have health that is worse overall than the health of White Americans. Health disparities may stem from economic determinants, education, geography and neighborhood, environment, lower-quality care, inadequate access to care, inability to navigate the system, provider ignorance/bias and/or stress.

Mental health issues are further exacerbated by unrealistic expectations, false stereotypes, and discrimination, which could potentially prevent black men from seeking the treatment needed to mitigate and manage mental ill-health. “Vulnerable trauma survivors often report many barriers to seeking mental health services, including cost and the belief that it will not be helpful” (Ghafoori et al 457). Specifically, these socio-cultural factors promote the belief that mental illness does not affect black men and, more importantly, that emotional vulnerability is a sign of weakness. A survey conducted by the National Mental Health Association, for instance, revealed that sixty-three percent...
percent of African Americans believe that depression is a personal weakness (Ward et al. 9). Socio-cultural stigmatization of psychological pathologies, then, contributes to the prevalence and poor prognosis of mental illness observed among black men living in America.

This thesis, therefore, aims to demonstrate how these socio-cultural factors play a significant role in the development of mental health problems and their stigmatization among black men. Meanwhile, the accompanying creative project aims to address this stigma by visually representing the ways in which these factors affect the health of African American men and discourage them from seeking the support needed to mitigate mental ill-health. It is hoped that this imagery will raise awareness of the prevalence of these problems and promote empathy and understanding. Essentially, presenting this series in a traveling exhibition will enable the project and its message to reach a wider audience and thus help educate black communities about mental health. Indeed, as Pulitzer prize-winner and philosopher, Dr. Ralph B. Perry, states, “Ignorance deprives people of freedom because they do not know what alternatives there are. It is impossible to choose to do what one has never heard of”.

12 Black Mental Health
Although mental illness is increasingly prevalent in American society, little conversation about mental health takes place among black men. This is a result of the stigma surrounding the topic in their communities. According to studies conducted by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and the National Mental Health Association, “...African Americans view mental illness as highly stigmatizing,” and this prevents them from seeking treatment for such illness (Ward et al 3). This is particularly problematic since black men in America have been and continue to be exposed to many traumatic events that negatively affect their mental health. Furthermore, this situation is further complicated by the fact that mental health resources tailored to black men are scarce.

RESEARCH PROBLEM

When we feel physically ill, we seek medical help. The same practice should apply when we feel depressed or experience anxiety. Therefore, the goal of this project is to combat the stigma surrounding mental health in black communities that discourage black men from seeking help. It aims to do this by visually representing the mental health stressors specific to this group in order to promote empathy and destigmatize such struggles. In doing so, it is hoped that the project will encourage productive conversations around mental health struggles experienced by black men and encourage such individuals to access mental health resources where they exist.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This thesis will begin with an investigation into the problem outlined at the outset in order to inform the creative project proposed to help solve this problem. Specifically, in order to achieve this aim, the following research chapter will address the following questions:

- What is trauma?
- What causes trauma for black men in America?
- What stigmas surround mental health and how do they affect black communities?
- What factors encourage the stigmatization of mental health in the black community?
- What roles do society, religion, and media play in mental ill-health and its stigmatization among black men in America?
- What resources are available to help black men manage mental ill-health and what are their limitations?
- What can be done to improve mental health for black men?
TRÀUMA

Trauma is a complex concept, and its definition has constantly evolved throughout successive studies across different disciplines. In 2013, The American Psychological Association (APA) defined trauma as the direct or indirect exposure to threats of death, serious injury or even sexual violence (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders 271), while in 2014, the U.S. Department of Health & Human Service SAMHSA adjusted their definition to encompass a broader range of experiences including “an event, series of events, or set of circumstances experienced by an individual as physically or emotionally harmful or life-threatening with lasting adverse effects on the individual’s functioning and mental, physical, social, emotional, or spiritual well-being” (7). Critically, black men are at an increased risk of exposure to trauma. Studies charting trauma exposure reveal that black males have a sixty-two percent chance of directly experiencing a traumatic event in their life together with a seventy-two percent chance of witnessing such events. The same studies, meanwhile, also indicate that fifty-nine percent of black men have learned of a traumatic event involving a friend or family member (Motley and Banks 2). Despite their increased risk of experiencing trauma, however, black men are less likely to seek help for the lasting psychological impact trauma can cause, being half as likely as their white counterparts to access professional mental health services (Motley and Banks 2).

The definition of trauma outlined above by the Substance Abuse and Medical Health Services Administration recognizes the role of the everyday stressors in the development of psychological distress alongside more extreme stressors such as death or sexual violence. Certainly, everyday experiences can affect the way people perceive and process trauma. Such experiences are conditioned by factors including, the community an individual was raised in as well as the presence of support networks such as family and friends (SAMHSA 14, George 2). Consequently, experiencing trauma significantly increases the risk of an individual developing mental illnesses (Turner and Lloyd 372). As we have established, when an individual experiences a physical illness, they typically seek clinical assistance, but this is not always the case when it comes to mental health concerns. Such avoidance is particularly prevalent in black men, and, as outlined, the stigma surrounding mental health is one of the key reasons for this avoidance. For Gary A. Faye stigma is “a collection of negative attitudes, beliefs, thoughts, and behaviors that influences the individual, or the general public, to fear, reject, avoid, be prejudiced, and discriminate against people with mental disorders” (980). Significantly, Faye also observes that “[stigma] is a barrier to those individuals who need mental health services, but who are reluctant or refuse to seek help because of the potential for discrimination and rejection by others” (980). Although mental health infrastructure exists, for black men, the stigma associated with poor mental health adversely affects their choice to make use of these resources. Some of the main factors that will be discussed throughout this research, promote mental health stigma among black men are as follows:

1. Society: the promulgation of problematic notions of masculinity, which discourage and denounce emotionality and emotional intelligence as ‘feminine’ or ‘not masculine.’
2. Religion: the over-spiritualization of psychological issues and a lack of awareness from within the Church, which forms a pivotal part of the black American community.
3. Media: a lack of or otherwise negative representation of black men in the media.

In the section that follows, I demonstrate how these three factors play pivotal roles in promoting mental illness and the stigma surrounding it among black men.
A Nigerian proverb says, “a tree stands still when the winds come and go, not because of its size, but because of its roots.” As this aphorism suggests, a strong foundation is the most important part of any system, and the same thinking might be applied to the family and community in which black men are raised. The family is the core of every society since it is the nexus in which individuals first learn and develop the worldview and ideals that inform their behavior in society as a whole. “The close relationships among individual members of a family provide the economic and moral support that assists in day-to-day living as well as in times of crisis” (Littlejohn-Blake and Darling 462). The wider community in which the family exists also plays a vital role in the socialization process and can therefore affect an individual’s experience and behavior by promoting either positive or problematic values and ideals. “Social bonds are the nexus of human life and societies. They transmit cultural knowledge and are the vehicle by which social change occurs. They are intertwined with health and longevity from birth to death” (George 10). Social interaction, then, whether within the family or the community, is something that we engage in daily throughout our lives, and the impact of both forms of interaction, as I go on to demonstrate, has an important influence on the mental well-being of black men.
The importance of the family structure in the development of the individual has often been observed, and, indeed, the family is a core factor in the psychological development of black men (Thomas). Individuals raised in traditional black communities develop a system of core beliefs, particularly spiritual, which contribute to psychological resilience (Littlejohn-Blake et al 462). For African Americans, families provide the practical, economical, and emotional support needed to mitigate the social stressors all too often experienced by their community (Littlejohn-Blake et al 462). A stable family, then, provides its members with a better chance at maintaining mental wellbeing since it offers the emotional support needed to mitigate mental health problems. And the social support extends into adulthood with friends and a spouse. “Ghafoori, Barragan, and Palinkas examination of enabling factors revealed that health insurance and income was not significantly associated with mental health service use for Black males, whereas social support (friend, spouse/partner, family) significantly predicted current mental health service use” (qtd. in Motley and Banks 4). Equally, there is increasing evidence that poor-quality familial relationships can harm rather than help physical and mental health and that a dysfunctional family can therefore have adverse effects on an individual’s mental well-being (George 5). Significantly, such family structures negatively affect the mental health of black men in particular:

In respect to family structure, significant differences were identified among the children who were admitted to an inpatient psychiatric unit. We were able to highlight that only eleven percent of children came from biologically intact families and the remaining eighty-nine percent had some kind of disruption in their family structure (Behere et al 463).

Though the traditional American family consists of a married couple together with their children living in a single household, the nuclear ideal has witnessed a considerable shift over the past decades. This shift has been driven by a decrease in marriages and an increase in the number of pre-marital births. According to Pew Research center results, one in four parents in the United States is unmarried, reflecting a fourfold rise in the number of unmarried parents from four million in 1968 to seventeen million in 2017. Significantly, U.S. Census data demonstrates that, in 2018, black Americans had the highest number of children in single-parent homes in America: sixty-five percent of all African American children compared to only twenty-four percent of white American children. Indeed, key stressors experienced in the family home that adversely affect mental health include lacking a strong parental figure or having caregivers that lack emotional intelligence. A complete and balanced family structure is a key factor in the mental development of any individual (Thomas). In the case of young black men, for instance, the father or father figures in the family are direct examples for young black boys to emulate. If these role models are either absent or do not demonstrate positive portrayals of masculinity including emotional intelligence, this can cause young black men to ignore or otherwise misunderstand the signs of psychological ill-health.

Though the family is an important sphere of influence on the mental health of black men, able to empower individuals by instilling a strong sense of pride and self-esteem and that protects their sense of self in the face of setbacks (Littlejohn-Blake 463), less stable family structures, which research reveals are prominent among the black community, have been correlated with trauma and poor mental health. Consequentially, trauma experienced in childhood and its injurious effects on mental health can persist into late adulthood if not addressed by a mental health practitioner. Turner and Lloyd, for instance, cite several studies that link traumatic experiences like sexual abuse, physical violence, and parental deaths with adverse mental health outcomes (361). This research, then, foregrounds the importance of a stable and functional family in promoting and protecting psychological wellbeing for men in the black community.
Like the family, the community has considerable power to shape its members’ mental health. According to the National Alliance of Mental Illness:

Humans crave connection. Feeling accepted for who you truly are can give you validation and self-worth. Knowing there are people who support you and will be there for you when you’re struggling provides a sense of safety. And knowing you’re needed, that you have a purpose, reminds you that you are valued. Community provides all these qualities and more.

Critically for the purposes of this thesis, notions of what it means to be a man or masculine behavioral norms are shaped by the community: “Men’s sense of identity is influenced by evaluation of how well they feel they are accomplishing social roles that are important to them” (Watkins et al 304). Often these norms and ideals are problematic where the mental health of black men is concerned. Men who show emotions other than anger or rage positioned as black masculine behavioral norms are considered weak (Ward et al. 9, Vinson et al. 401). In a podcast by the American Psychological Association, Dr Wizdom Powell explains that gender norms can govern the way men seek help and the kinds of disclosures they make when they are feeling distressed. Importantly, she also notes that these norms also vary by race and social context.

An example of a problematic gender norm at play in a mental health context is the statement ‘man up’ when said in response to any display of emotion by a male. The statement implies that displays of emotions are not consistent with normative masculinity. Essentially, this statement and the social expectations it reveals could conceivably discourage men from expressing problematic psychological states. In the black community, specifically, this norm is prevalent in the ‘black man as strong’ stereotype (Vinson et al. 401). “Many felt the need to avoid asking for help because they needed to be “strong” regardless of the growing inability to handle deteriorating circumstances” (V Hines et al. 247). This expectation has led to the erroneous assumption that mental illness, because it is considered a sign of weakness by African American men (Ward et. al 9), is not a problem for black men. Black men are therefore encouraged by their peers and community to avoid showing any signs or symptoms of mental health since, according to this reasoning, such symptoms would be evidence of weakness not considered consistent with idealized forms of masculinity in the black community. It is easy to see, then, how the masculine behavioral norms prevalent in the black community have contributed to the stigmatization of mental illness in black men.

More importantly, perhaps, attempting to adhere to these problematic ideals and the pressure they present to black males can themselves lead to mental exhaustion and exacerbate underlying psychological illness (Watkins et al 305). The community, then, plays a pivotal role in shaping the psychological health of black males and, though this community currently promotes problematic ideals, by the same token, has the potential to promote a more positive form of black masculinity, one which recognizes and sees mental illness in a constructive light.
According to the American Psychological Association, socio-economic status is best defined as “the social standing or class of an individual or group. It is often measured as a combination of education, income, and occupation” (Socioeconomic Status). In a capitalist economy, like that of America, an individual’s socioeconomic status strongly dictates their standard of life and, pressingly, access to healthcare including, that needed to ensure mental wellbeing. In Speaking of Psychology podcast, Dr Wizdom Powell identifies how their typically lower socio-economic status affects black men:

...low-income black men and men of color, boys of color are predisposed to engaging in riskier behaviors and having poorer health outcomes...

we know that when people have lower income, they have less access to resources. They have lower access to opportunities for upward social mobility and, as a result, they have lower access to mental healthcare.

The socio-economic status of the black family in the United States of America is heavily influenced by the racial wealth gap. A 2019 article published by the U.S. Census Bureau indicated that the median household wealth of non-Hispanic whites was $139,300, while the average black household held less than ten percent of that figure ($12,780).

Moreover, “about nineteen percent of African Americans live below the poverty level compared to seven percent of non-Hispanic whites in 2019” (U.S. Census Bureau). This racial wealth gap is the result of “long-standing patterns of discrimination in hiring, training, promoting, and access to benefits that have made it much harder for African Americans to save and build assets” (Shapiro et al 5). These factors are important to consider when exploring the socioeconomic status of black men and the effect it has on their mental health.

It is unsurprising that socio-economic status determines the quality of health services an individual can access. Those with a lower socioeconomic status, such as the black community, are adversely affected by a lack of access to proper services that are present for their counterparts in with a higher socioeconomic status:

Within the communities that black men exist in, socioeconomic status plays a vital role and creates a sort of Domino effect. If those with low socioeconomic status have less access to good education, then they are less informed on mental health and the help that is available, and even if they do know, there is a lack of funds to access that help (Hines et al 238).

Even if black men are aware of and willing to participate in programs designed to improve mental health—which we have learned is less likely given the stigma attached to psychological pathologies by the black community—they will likely receive poorer quality services. Socioeconomic status and race/ethnicity have often been associated with untreated disease. Lower socio-economic status, then, is contributing factor in poor mental health among black men since it prevents access to quality mental healthcare (Ethnic and Racial Minorities & Socioeconomic Status).
Access to proper education is also a vital factor in addressing the stigma surrounding mental illness since individuals are at their most receptive to information as children (Atkins et al. 1, Fazel et al. 1). The general low socio-economic status of the black community outlined above, however, also affects the quality of education available to black men. Indeed, as Shapiro et al., observes “neighborhoods have grown more segregated, leaving lower-income students, especially students of color, isolated and concentrated in lower-quality schools, and less academically prepared both to enter and complete college” (5). This dearth of effective education functions as another barrier to dismantling the stigma surrounding ill mental health since, as we have established, such stigma is rooted in ignorance and can therefore be addressed through education. Specifically, the ability to identify symptoms of mental ill-health and access the correct kind of support necessary for recovery can be relayed through the education system. Critically, since black men are less likely to have access to the education that could facilitate this understanding, they are at a higher risk of developing serious and severe mental health problems. Links, for instance, have been observed between African American men with lower levels of formal education and higher instances of depressive symptoms (Ward et al. 9). More importantly, according to the National Institute on Minority Health and Health disparities, African American men are four times more likely to die by suicide than African American women are (CDC). This alarming statistic demonstrates the dire need for young black men to access education that helps raise awareness and dismantle the stigma that otherwise prevents such individuals from seeking the support needed to prevent such outcomes.

CULTURAL FACTORS

Culture is defined as a “group sharing a set of beliefs, norms, and values” (Office of the Surgeon General 25). Cultural factors play a significant role in how individuals think and the beliefs that they share on subjects, including mental illness. Understanding how mental illness is represented and understood in African American culture is key, therefore, to address the stigma that we have established surrounds mental illness in black men. This is especially important since “how cultures define illnesses differs and can carry grave consequences like extreme distress and even suicide if care is not taken” (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services 26). Indeed, as we have seen, the way in which African American culture associates mental illness with emasculation has contributed considerably to a low number of mental health referrals in the black male community (Vinson 401, Watson 1008), while their unique social situation—specifically, increased exposure to poverty and violence—renders black men more susceptible to the psychological effects of trauma such as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services 26). Complicating their increased exposure to traumatic experiences is the cultural stigma that exists around mental illness in the black community. A recent review of stigma and ethnocultural beliefs, for instance, found that, compared with other racial/ethnic groups, African Americans were more likely to believe that people with mental illness are dangerous and hold negative expectations of
the therapeutic process (Vinson et al 400). With this in mind, it makes sense that black men are less likely to admit to experiencing psychological distress and subsequently receive the support that should follow such disclosures.

Cultural factors, then, have considerable responsibility for the higher than normal instances of severe mental health and suicide amongst black men in America. Conversely, however, this same culture can also be a vehicle for positive change. “culture may influence receipt of care, including how individuals from a particular culture manifest their symptoms, their support system, their coping styles and attitudes, and their willingness to seek treatment” (Ghafoori et al. 456). Cultural perceptions and products can contribute to combatting erroneous and problematic beliefs surrounding the mental health of black men by portraying emotional vulnerability among black men in a positive light, normalizing conversations around mental health, and, ultimately, encouraging black men to seek the mental health resources they require.

**RACISM & MARGINALIZATION**

The cultural history of America is riddled with stories of racism and systematic marginalization against people of color, especially those of African descent. “America’s history abounds with prejudice and discrimination against African Americans, American Indians and Alaska Natives, Asian Americans, and Hispanic Americans. Unfortunately, prejudice and discrimination continue to exist and affect all aspects of these people’s lives” (Gary 982). The black community has been subject to considerable trauma, from the transatlantic slave trade and segregation to the Jim Crow laws (“Research Guides: African American Studies: Slavery and the Slave Trade”), and, most recently, the rise of White Nationalism. Today’s society has seen racial prejudice evolve into more systematic and institutionalized forms of discrimination, evident in everything from significantly higher interest rates for black borrowers (Barlett et al 1) to the hyper-criminalization of black men by the criminal justice system and racial discrimination in the housing and health sector (US department of health and human services 38). “Racism and discrimination by societal institutions have resulted in minorities’ lower socioeconomic status and poorer living conditions in which poverty, crime, and violence are persistent stressors that can affect mental health” (39). Each of these factors, whether overt marginalization or institutionalized discrimination, adversely affects the mental health of black men. A recent report into race, ethnicity, and mental health by the U.S. Department of health and human services, for instance, concludes that “ethnic and racial minorities in the United States face a social and economic environment of inequality that includes greater exposure to racism and discrimination, violence, and poverty, all of which take a toll on mental health” (42). Crucially, the marginalization that black American men endure gives rise to stress-inducing situations that are detrimental to psychological wellbeing. Williams and Williams-Morris, state, for example, that “the internalization of cultural stereotypes by stigmatized groups create expectations, anxieties, and reactions that can adversely affect social and psychological functioning” (255). Moreover, for Watkins et al., such prejudice may trigger emotions including rage, anger, frustration, bitterness, and resentment, which, intrinsically, can lead to the onset of psychological diseases such as depression (306). Racism and the marginalization it gives rise to, then, have a significant impact on the mental health of black men.

Racism and discrimination by societal institutions have resulted in minorities’ lower socioeconomic status and poorer living conditions in which poverty, crime, and violence are persistent stressors that can affect mental health” (US Department of health and human services 39)
Racial disparities disproportionately affecting men of color are prevalent, for instance, in the country’s criminal justice system. “More than 60% of the people in prison today are people of color. Black men are almost six times as likely to be incarcerated as white men” (Criminal Justice Facts | the Sentencing Project). According to the Department of Justice, black men between the ages of eighteen and nineteen are thirteen times more likely to be incarcerated than their white counterparts. Tellingly, a 1986 comparison between the sentence length served for the possession of crack cocaine—which was predominantly used by black Americans—and possession of the powdered cocaine used more commonly by white Americans found that possession of the crack cocaine more commonly associated with black Americans typically resulted in no less than ten years imprisonment whereas a white user of powdered cocaine would need to possess the equivalent of one hundred times more cocaine to receive the same sentence (258). This is a trend that continues today. In 2016, “Black male offenders received sentences on average 20.4 percent longer than similarly situated White male offenders, accounting for violence in an offender’s” (United States Sentencing Commission). Fundamentally, negative stereotyping of African Americans as inherently violent has led to the widespread use of race in the creation of law enforcement profiles of likely criminals. As a result, to be black—especially a young black male—in America makes an individual more likely to be suspected of committing a crime (William and Williams-Morris 258).

This is especially problematic since interactions between minorities and the police are often linked with adverse physical and mental health outcomes. A study of policing practices in New York, for instance, revealed that ‘stop and frisk’ situations, for which black individuals are disproportionately targeted, are often harsh encounters involving physical violence and racial/ethnic discrimination likely to affect mental adversely (Geller et al 2321). In that same article, Geller goes on to explain how the use of physical force, specifically the throwing of individuals against walls and slamming of suspects to the floor, can cause intense emotional stress and subsequent depressive symptoms (2321). Given that black men are more frequently subject to such encounters with law enforcement than their white counterparts (William and Williams-Morris 258), these situations pose a serious threat to the mental health of black men.

Significantly, the prevalence of cases involving the murder of unarmed black men at the hands of police and the lack of convictions they typically result in has become a key source of mental distress for black men. Cases like the recent murder of George Floyd, where the world was able to view video evidence of his murder, negatively affect the mental health of the wider black community. “Beyond the immediate consequences for

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victims and their families, police killings might also affect the mental health of people not directly connected to the killings or to the people involved” (Bor et al 302). Indeed, according to a recent survey by the Census bureau, anxiety and depression for black Americans spiked from thirty-six to forty-one percent within a week of video footage from George Floyd’s murder being released. In this way, then, racial discrimination and its impact on the treatment of black men is a key factor in the higher levels of psychological distress reported among this population.

In the healthcare system, racism and racial inequality are also prominent. As outlined earlier, this bias has adversely affected the black community’s attitude towards seeking professional medical and psychological support. The mistrust fueling the black community’s apprehension over seeking medical assistance can be attributed to multiple examples of misconduct and medical malpractice affecting people of African descent. A prominent and high-profile example of such misconduct is the Tuskegee syphilis study, carried out between 1932 and 1970. Vitally, the study was revealed to have been unethical since the six hundred black men who served as participants were never made aware of the study’s purpose and, more problematic perhaps, adequate treatment was withheld from patients, even following the discovery of penicillin as a treatment for syphilis in 1947 (Tuskegee Study - Timeline - CDC - NCHHSTP). Also James Marion Sims, the father of modern gynecological surgery, performed surgeries on enslaved Black women with no anesthesia. (Walker 71, Washington 8). Another instance would be the overdiagnosing of schizophrenia in black people dating back to 1960. (Williams and William-morris 256, Metzl 14). Significantly, such studies have fueled the mistrust prevalent within the black community where professional healthcare is concerned. Also within today’s society, racist stereotypes affect the quality of treatment that black men can receive (Pager & Shepherd 13). According to a study by Johnson et al, in regards to Mental Health Disparities, on African Americans Physician-patient communication differs for African Americans and whites. They spoke about a study which found that physicians are 23% more verbally dominant, and engaged in 33% less patient-centered communication with African-American patients than white patients. “While racism and discrimination have certainly diminished over time, there are traces today which are manifest in less overt medical practices concerning diagnosis, treatment, prescribing medications, and referrals” (US Department of health and human services 32). Coupled with the cultural assumption that black men are not susceptible to mental illness, it is not difficult to see how racism in healthcare provision adversely impacts not only the physical but also mental health of black men.
RELIGION

Religion is a key part of many cultures. As a fundamental part of life, religion influences attitudes and shapes the experience of individuals including that of mental health. This is especially true of the African American community, who report significantly higher levels of religiosity than white individuals (U.S Department of health and Human Service 15). “79% of black Americans identify as Christian, and an additional 3% identify with other non-Christian faiths” (Nguyen 2). Though a variety of belief systems, from African spirituality to Islam and Christianity, shape the lives of African American individuals, for the purposes of this project, I will focus on the role of Christianity in influencing the mental health of black men.

Christianity and the Black community have had a long relationship, and the Christian Church is often considered a key pillar of the African American community. Historically it provided African Americans a safe place from Slavery days, segregation, ‘Jim Crow’ laws, and even through the civil rights era (Dempsey et al 74) and “…in addition to being a religious institution, is a social, cultural, civic, educational, and political institution that is central to black communities” (Nguyen 3). Church leaders are considered community leaders and even father figures to many people in the black community, especially younger black men, who, as outlined earlier, may not have male role models at home (Dempsey et al 77), while the Christian faith forms a source of strength and support for black individuals it can also. In this way, the Christian faith and the Church can be a positive influence on an individual’s mental health. Indeed, ninety percent of African Americans reported resorting to religion as a coping mechanism during periods of mental ill-health (Ward et al 4).
If this system is ill-informed or promotes problematic beliefs concerning mental health, however, it can, conversely, become a cause for psychological stress rather than support. “Negative aspects of religious involvement, such as negative interaction with congregants, religious doubt, and negative religious coping, are often linked to poorer mental health and well-being” (Nyugen 4). Interactions within the church congregation can also become a source of stress to black men dealing with mental illness. Individuals who report regular attendance at religious services but describe their congregations as unsupportive, for instance, also report worse mental health than persons who do not attend religious services (George 5; Dempsey et al 74). Moreover, their longstanding influence and authority within the black community mean that the views of Church leaders are often accepted without question, even if these views are erroneous and misinformed. “The results indicated pastors and church leadership have a strong influence on their parishioners, which signified working directly with the church and their leadership regarding mental health education and collaboration is imperative” (Dempsey et al, pg. 77). This is especially problematic if Pastors sometimes promote spiritual intervention, such as prayer, in place of psychological support and interpret mental distress as a self-inflicted punishment for sin, as they contribute to mental stress and stigmatization of mental health among young black men. “Negative religious coping (maladaptive coping strategies such as redefining stressors as punishment from God) can contribute to poor mental health. (Nyugen 7). As important and beneficial as faith is in the lives of black men, if the Church fails to give the support that black men struggling with mental health conditions require it can become a source of stress. Majorly, its pivotal position and importance in the black community makes the Church a key ally for helping raise awareness about mental health and subsequently breaking down the stigma that otherwise surrounds it.

“The results indicated pastors and church leadership have a strong influence on their parishioners, which signified working directly with the church and their leadership regarding mental health education and collaboration is imperative” (Dempsey et al, 77)
ROLE OF MEDIA

In this era of global connectivity, we have instant access to an abundance of information. As a result, the media has become a highly influential cultural product, having a considerable ability to shape our perceptions and beliefs:

Mass media serve as socializing agents that aid in [the] construction and perpetuation of perceptions and learned behaviors. Serving as a central source of information, mass media not only reflect public attitudes and values but also take part in shaping them. (Srivastava et al 1).

Crucially, for the purpose of this thesis, the content we consume regularly plays a part in determining how mental illness is understood and perceived, particularly where black men are concerned. One of the ways in which media does this is by reinforcing problematic stereotypes, both of African American men and sufferers of mental illness. Hilton and Von Hippel defined a stereotype as “…beliefs about the characteristics, attributes, and behaviors of members of certain groups” (240). Though sometimes helpful and grounded in truth, stereotypes are typically problematic: “although not all stereotypes are not necessarily negative in nature, stereotypes about out-group members are more likely to have negative connotations than those about in-group members, even when the attributes they include may seem objectively positive” (Hilton and Von Hippel 240).

Significantly, cultural stereotypes propagated by the media have shaped how black men see themselves. As Barrett and Flynn argue “regardless of the medium available in any given era, there is one thing that has remained ominously constant – the collective images of African Americans, especially males, have been distorted” (28).
Likewise, the media often promotes problematic stereotypes surrounding mental illness, regularly exaggerating and distorting its portrayal, and is therefore complicit in promoting the stigma attached to psychological pathologies. “Stereotypes can negatively influence the lives of individuals with mental illness through the public’s thoughts about violence, incompetence in self-care and independent living and self-blame including the insinuation that individuals with mental illnesses are responsible for their own disorders” (Gary 986). Tellingly, research demonstrates a clear correlation between negative views of individuals with mental illness and increased time watching television (Srivastava et al 1). As I go on to illustrate, this problematic portrayal of both mental illness and black males in the media is a key contributor to the specific stigma that surrounds mental illness in African American men.

NEWS

News outlets have played a significant role in the misrepresentation of black men in society and the sensationalization of criminality in mental illness. Significantly, the two are often conflated, contributing to the creation of and perpetuating existing stereotypes that depict black men as violent and mentally unstable. As established, cultural stereotypes influence not only the way that black men view themselves but also the way society as a whole views them. These ideas can be very harmful where their mental health is concerned. News outlets, for instance, often represent black men using police mugshots while black-focused stories are more than twice as likely to focus on crime than those featuring white individuals (Bjornstrom et al 4). In study a in Omaha, Nebraska where the black population was 14% Black males were the primary topic for 69% of all the crime-related local news broadcast while only accounting for 31% of all the arrests during that time (T Creighton et al 5-6). The misrepresentation of criminal activity promotes the false belief that all black men are criminals. This is especially problematic since, as Arthur Whaley explains, the belief that black men are prone to violence can contribute to the misdiagnosis of certain mental health problems as paranoid schizophrenia (77).

Since the news exerts a unique influence over public perception of both people and situations, such media have the potential to promote racial bias or hostility towards certain groups. Indeed, “…if media sources overrepresent certain groups (e.g., males, people of color, etc.) as perpetrators, this may promote racial or gender stereotypes that reinforce public hostility toward such groups” (Bjornstrom et al 1-2). In addition to inciting racism and discrimination in the minds of other groups of people, which we have already established is a key source of psychological distress for African Americans, such outlets, in doing so, can also lead to low self-esteem for black male viewers (McCreary and Wright 27). The portrayal of black men in the media using negative stereotypes can be especially problematic if it results in as such individuals behaving in ways that fulfill or adhere to these stereotypes:

Some might say that many African Americans are themselves affected by negative messages about themselves in the mainstream media and, therefore, are internalizing these messages. Many of these messages may lead them to perpetuate a slave mentality that lends itself to believing what others think about who they are, what they are worth as people, and how they should behave (Barnett & Flynn 31).
Clearly, then, news media are implicated in adversely affecting the psychology and subsequent behavior of American black men.

**FILM INDUSTRY**

The film industry is, like the news, a highly influential force in modern American society. Given its global reach, with the rise of instant access to entertainment services like Netflix and Hulu, Hollywood’s products have exceptional power to influence and shape public perceptions of certain topics or social groups. This is especially true of both mental illness and black men. The entertainment industry often exaggerates portrayals of mental illness, regularly associating it with excessive violence and portraying those with mental illness as dangerous and thus needing to be locked up for the safety of society:

> The media consistently portrays persons with mental illness as violent, murderous, unpredictable individuals who have themselves to blame for their condition. These are gross exaggerations and misrepresentations of reality and are completely untrue (Srivastava et al 2).

Likewise, the entertainment industry has also played a key role in the promulgation of negative or limiting African American stereotypes, specifically those concerning black men (Miller 19). Often using them in roles like rappers, athletes. Through the media’s stereotypical portrayal of African American men, they are perceived as naturally born athletes but intellectually dull (Hall 105, Keia Janese Bragg 45). It has painted African Americans problematically from the dehumanizing practice of blackface at its inception to the creation of characters like Sambo and, more recently, the casting of black men as thugs and drug dealers (Barnett and Flynn 28, Hall 106). Even though practices such as blackface are no longer considered acceptable, the film industry still

Self-fulfilling prophecies emerge when people hold expectancies that lead them to alter their behavior, which in turn causes the expected behaviors to be exhibited by people who are targets of the expectancies” (Hilton and Hippel 244)

continues the racist and discriminatory practices at the heart of blackface through the casting of black men in roles that fuel public fear and racist feeling:

Either way, a show characteristic that could be seen as problematic was the use of the excess malapropisms (misuse of vocabulary) which, when combined with already negative perceptions of African Americans, could, for some, perpetuate the “coon” stereotype of the inarticulate and mentally inept black man (Barnett and Flynn 29).

Like negative news perspectives, in this way, the entertainment industry has immense potential to affect the psychological wellbeing of black men, offering negative expectations and assumptions that can lead to self-fulfilling and self-destructive behaviors. As Hilton and Hippel explain “Self-fulfilling prophecies emerge when people hold expectancies that lead them to alter their behavior, which in turn causes the expected behaviors to be exhibited by people who are targets of the expectancies” (244). Given its potential to prompt such self-fulfilling prophecies and damaging behavior among black men, the film industry, then, is clearly complicit in the onset of mental illness among black men and the stigmatization of such illness in this social group.
SOCIAL MEDIA

With the rise of social media, in particular platforms like Facebook and Twitter, individuals have become more connected than ever. In 2019, for instance, the number of social media users worldwide was 3.484 billion (Karim et al, 2). Given its prevalence in society, such media has the ability to influence the mental health of black men in numerous ways. Certain studies found that ‘social media envy’ for instance, can adversely influence the level of anxiety and depression experienced by users of social media (Karim et al 7). Moreover, since social networking sites have now become the key source through which many receive news and entertainment, such platforms have the ability to spread the problematic stereotypes and beliefs surrounding black men and mental illness that we have established were propagated previously by the news and entertainment industries. Furthermore, the increased interconnectivity offered by social media means that these problematic portrayals are spread further and faster. Bearing in mind that African Americans are more active on social media than any other ethnic group in America (Barnett and Flynn 30), this means that black men are especially exposed to these negative notions and problematic stereotypes pertaining to their social identity.

This impact is compounded since social media’s reach has likewise enabled the spread of inaccurate and negative ideas concerning mental illness. Indeed, as Srivastava et al explain “The media contribute to mental illness stigma through the exaggerated, inaccurate, and comical images they use to portray persons with psychiatric disorders as well as providing incorrect information about mental illness” (1). We have already witnessed how these negative representations adversely affect the self-esteem and mental health of this minority group. Again, internalization of these beliefs might cause African American men to overlook or otherwise deny any signs of mental ill-health and avoid seeking treatment since such issues have been misrepresented and heavily stigmatized in the media that we know they regularly consume.

MENTAL HEALTH FIELD

Currently, in America, about one in five adults aged eighteen and older suffer from a mental illness according to the National Institute Mental health. The need for specialist mental health practitioners this increase indicates is problematic since such demand exceeds the existing supply of support available, which is expected to be outstripped by twenty-five percent by 2025 (National Council for Behavioral Health 15). Notably, it is rare to see African American men represented within this profession, and this lack of representation is another key factor preventing black men from receiving the psychological support they require. According to the American Psychological Association, eighty-six percent of psychologists are white while African Americans make up merely four percent of the profession. Significantly, of this four percent only twenty-nine percent were men (CWS Data Tool: Demographics of the U.S. Psychology Workforce). This is potentially a result of similar racial and gendered discrepancies demonstrated in access education. In 2018, for instance, 18,635 psychology degrees were conferred to African Americans compared with the 84,850 conferred to their white counterparts. It is also significant that, of these 159,493 total degrees awarded, only 33,680 were conferred to men (American Psychological Association).

This lack of male African American mental health practitioners is an issue where the mental health of black men is concerned since research demonstrates that mental health patients feel more comfortable talking to a clinician that can relate to them. This is especially true of African American patients: “Research indicates that African Americans turn to more informal forms of care like Church, family and friends but when they turn to mental health professionals, they prefer a therapist of the same race or ethnicity” (U.S. Department of health and Human Services 28). Moreover, there are clinical benefits behind this preference. Pertinently, black men are more likely not only
to seek out but consequently comply with treatment if assigned a practitioner of the same ethnicity. As Hoge et al observe “healthcare consumers who share a culture and race with a provider develop a stronger therapeutic alliance and have higher treatment retention rates, compared to consumers who are from a different culture and race than their provider” (2007).

More importantly, perhaps, an intimate understanding of the stress specific to the everyday experience of black men reduces the risk of misdiagnosis due to the bias and stereotyping potentially prevalent in healthcare. Indeed “when clinician and patient do not come from the same ethnic or cultural background...clinicians may be more likely to ignore or misattribute symptoms that the patient deems important...” (U.S. Department of health and Human Service 31). This is important where black individuals are concerned since evidence indicates that such misdiagnosis is prevalent in the treatment of African Americans. Black youths, for instance, are four times more likely to be physically restrained after acting aggressively than their white counterparts, while therapists are inclined to view conditions like depression more negatively when demonstrated by a black rather than white person ( U.S. Department of health and Human Service, 32). Better representation of black men in the mental health profession would help reduce this risk of misdiagnosis due to bias and stereotyping and therefore positively impact the mental health of African American men, who, evidence suggests, would be more likely to seek and comply with treatment for mental ill-health if provided with a practitioner of the same ethnic background. Significantly, my accompanying creative project seeks to address this underrepresentation and encourage black men to consider a career in mental health support.

CONCLUSION

According to the U.S Department of Health and Human Services, mental illness is the product of a complex interaction between biological, psychological, social, and cultural factors (26). This review of the research has revealed the existence of multiple stressors, both historic and current, that play a pivotal role in the susceptibility to and the onset of mental illness among the black community, in particular, black males. It also identifies a variety of barriers, both social and economic, that prevent black men from accessing the mental health support, not least, the widespread stigmatization of mental illness within this community. Primarily, it also demonstrated that such stigma has been propagated by a variety of social, cultural, and ideological factors including the media and the Christian Church. In this way, this review informs the proposed creative solution that follows since it highlights areas in which conversation surrounding the mental health of black men is either nonexistent or problematic and thus needs to be addressed as a key part of any solution to this problem.

By bearing in mind each of these pivotal factors while approaching the proposed visual solution, I was able to illustrate the impact these stressors have on the average African American man and his psychological wellbeing. Specifically, the visual solution proposed engages with the research from a conceptual perspective, using props to signify and symbolize these influences and their role in the lives of black men. In doing so, the creative solution serves not only to highlight the mental health problems that black men face but, importantly, stimulate conversations around these experiences in an attempt to dismantle the stigma surrounding mental illness within the black community and encourage sufferers to seek out support tailored to their specific needs.
INTRODUCTION

This chapter outlines the process of producing the visual solution proposed in order to solve the problem outlined at the outset: mental illness and the stigma surrounding it among black men in American society. Specifically, it describes the creation of ‘Unravelling’, the conceptual photographic series produced to this end, with a particular focus on the ways in which the research outlined above influenced its creation.

CONCEPT

“Unravelling” is a pictorial series illustrating some of the key mental health stressors specific to the experience of black men in contemporary American society. The research conducted has demonstrated how necessary mental health awareness and support is for members of the black community, specifically black men. This is the key concept addressed and represented in the project. In visualizing and representing the stressors revealed through the research, the series aims to raise awareness of the difficulties in coping with and seeking treatment for mental illness that black men in America face. Sources of stress highlighted in the research and thus important to represent in the series include family, community, religion, healthcare, and the media, specifically, news, social media, and film.
MOTIVATIONS AND INSPIRATION
As a black man living in America and someone who has experienced mental illness, this project and the problem at its heart is especially important to me. As established in the review of the research above, African American men are subject to a wide range of social, cultural, ideological, and economic stressors that render them susceptible to ill mental health. The stigma surrounding mental health in the black community, however, prevents black men from accessing the support needed to mitigate these issues. My Nigerian heritage and the problematic perceptions and practices related to mental health prevalent in Nigerian culture (Onyemelukwe 64), moreover, have also influenced my desire to promote awareness and understanding surrounding mental health in the black community.

As well as my personal experience of this situation, research into the mental health of black men was important to inform my photographic project since it revealed the key factors my visuals would need to address to help solve the problem I identified. This process was especially difficult for me, however, since I am a visually driven person, more familiar with photography, design, and video directing than academic research. Since I am particularly influenced by cinematic visuals and set design and aware that lighting, costume, props, and their placement can all be used to help tell a story, I opted to approach this project from a symbolic angle, producing visual representations of the topic through careful selection of lighting, props, and costume.
The intended output of this project was a series of images that visually represent the experience of mental illness as it pertains to black men in order to raise awareness of the issues surrounding this topic and revealed by the research outlined about. This series will be displayed in a traveling exhibition, enabling the messages it communicates to reach a wider audience and allow the communities implicated in the topic to engage with the work. Since this project aims to address the stigma surrounding mental health for black men, informational materials to accompany the exhibit were produced to further the conversation around mental health prompted by the photographic series. Finally, to ensure the project reached a wider audience and its message was made more permanent, a website displaying the final retouched images together with brief explanatory text based on the findings of my research was created.
**STYLE**

The approach to the visual style for the photographic series is Editorial in nature. Making use of clean lighting, bold colored wall and lighting is made to replicate the lighting of home scene so as to properly communicate the internal struggle of mental illness in relations to the black man living in America. Visually each scene depicts the main character sitting on a couch while being tied and held hostage by the stressors that have been discussed previously in the research.

The stressors represented are as follows:

1. News (5 O clock News)
2. Religion (Revival)
3. Entertainment (Silence on set)
4. Family (Why can’t you be like...)
5. Friends (The Gang)
6. Health industry (Hey Doc)
7. Himself (Reflection)
SET DESIGN AND PRODUCTION

With the research complete, I began by building the set that would form the backdrop to the photographic series outlined above. Firstly, I selected a location that was suitable to accommodate this set. The options available to me were the photography studio or the broadcast studio B in Green hall. While the broadcast studio was ideal because it offered a large, open space allowing me to easily assemble the set and lighting and shoot using a telephoto lens for compression, its frequent use for Liberty related events meant I would not be able to keep the set assembled throughout the project. For that reason, I opted to use the photography studio instead. Since it is much smaller, I took measurements of the room prior to the production of the set to ensure that the set-up and lighting placement I had planned would be possible in this space.
Having taken these measurements, I contacted Liberty University’s Theatre Arts Departmental workshop, who put me in contact with a carpenter able to advise me on the specifics of producing the wall that constituted the set for the shoot. Following an assessment of the available space, we agreed on a wall eight feet high by twelve feet wide and produced a plan to create and install the wall within the studio. After receiving a quote for the parts and labor involved in this process, we began building.
Color is an essential aspect of any art form since it has the potential to influence our perceptions and behavior. As Goethe argued in his Theory of Color, “certain colors (e.g., red, yellow) produce systematic physiological reactions manifest in emotional experience (e.g., negative arousal), cognitive orientation (e.g., outward focus), and overt action (e.g., forceful behavior)” (Elliot 368). Employing color theory in the creation of my ideas, then, was extremely important to achieve my aims. The living room needed to symbolize the peace associated with the home but which is shattered by the social stressors the subject experiences. Since blue is believed to promote a sense of calmness and peace, the wall that formed the backdrop to this shot was painted blue. According to Psychology Today:

One surprising effect of blue lights may be suicide prevention. In recent years, Japan has experienced an increasing number of suicides at train stations as people jumped in front of oncoming trains. After blue lights were installed at seventy-one Japanese train stations between 2000 and 2010, data analysis revealed an eighty-four percent decrease in the number of suicides.
Conversely, though, the color blue is also commonly used to describe a depressed state of mind, as is evidenced by the well-known idiom, “feeling blue.” Even in fine art, Picasso’s blue period is associated with somber emotion. Using blue as the color for the wall in this scene, then, was suitable since it addressed both the adverse state of mind symbolized by the subject as well as the potential for improvement in this mood.

The models who represented stressors, meanwhile, were dressed in black with a touch of red. Black was chosen since, as a combination of all colors, it enabled me to signify the diverse spectrum of emotions such stressors promote in the mind of the black man. Its association with some of the negative emotions caused by these stressors, in particular anger, informed the addition of red to these otherwise black costumes (Buechner et al 1). Elementarily, since red is effective in grabbing attention and also represents danger and urges caution (Elliot, 368), it enabled me to highlight how dangerous these stressors can be for the black man. The decision to use small splashes of red rather than large swathes was also significant, serving to represent the way in which the existence of these stressors, though problematic, is not always easy to identify. Pertinently, as the research reveals, an inability to identify symptoms of mental illness is one of the key reasons black men are less likely to seek professional mental health support.

MODELS

Next, I secured models for the shoot. The casting of my models was especially important since they were to play a key role in the representation of the stressors and situations central to achieving my project aims. Given the topic at hand, ethnicity was a key factor in these decisions. For instance, though my main subject was to be a black man, I specifically chose a darker-skinned black model over a lighter-skinned black model as a response to racist ideals that deem lighter-skinned black people more attractive and therefore see them represented more often in the media (Hill 77). Ethnicity and skin color was
likewise important in casting other characters. The news team, for example, were to be white to reflect the lack of racial diversity within this industry (“TV News Employees by Ethnicity U.S. 2019 | Statista”), which the research demonstrates is a key factor in the racial bias such broadcasts perpetuate and which adversely impacts the mental health of black men. Since the research also indicates the same is true of the health sector, a white man was cast as the doctor in ‘Hey Doc’ (Figure 18. Percentage of All Active Physicians by Race/Ethnicity, 2018). The family, friends, and Church goers, meanwhile, were all played by black individuals to realistically represent the black community and their beliefs being addressed by these particular shots.

LIGHTING
Lighting was key to achieving the overall feel of the scenes depicted. Overall, I sought a clean and editorial style of lighting. Top-down lighting using three to four lights and a boom arm hanging right over the set was ideal for achieve this feel and enabled me to produce consistent results between images. Boom lighting was also necessary to create a realistic atmosphere on the image depicting the main subject at home, where lighting is typically top-down since it comes from ceiling light fixtures. One fill light was placed on the camera left and one directly behind the camera, helping lighten any shadows cast by the key light above. Finally, adding one background light aimed at the wall enabled me to increase the subject’s separation from the background and thus make post-production compositing in Photoshop easier.

**FIG 3.20 - 3.21** - First test shoot setup to test lighting and camera settings
Main Light

Overhead boom (alien bee 800) with a 5 foot octobox with a grid
POWER- 1/2 power.
HEIGHT- 90.5 inches
WIDTH- 67 inches boom arm.
This was the key light to simulate a normal home lighting situation that was soft without the light spilling all over the background and still illuminate the model.

Fill Light 1
Flashpoint 360 Strobe
POWER- 1/1 Full power
HEIGHT- 82.5 inches
This fill light was on camera right on the side closest to the couch to fill out the shadows from the top down lighting on the main character that sits on the couch.

Fill Light 2
Einstein E640 Strobe
POWER- 1/1 Full power
HEIGHT- 80.5 inches
This light was placed behind camera to uplift the shadows from the top light.
**GEAR LIST**

- Nikon D810
- Nikon 24-70mm F2.8 Vii
- Einstein E640
- Alien Bee 800
- Flashpoint 360
- 5 Foot octobox w/ diffusion and grid
- 51 inch Parabolic umbrella with diffusion
- 42 inch Silver umbrella
- Tether tool 15 foot tether cord
- Apple Macbook pro 13 inch

**SETTINGS**

- Shutter speed- 1/250th sec
- Apeture- F6.3
- IS0- 200
- 24mm wide
- White balance- 5060 Kelvin
- Camera height- 28 inches
- Camera distance- 117 inches
PROPS

Each image in the “Unravelling” series is a visual representation of the stressors black men in contemporary American society are subject to and which have the potential to adversely affect their mental health. The visual thread woven throughout is a black man sitting in the comfort of his home but subject to and affected by these social, cultural, and economic stressors, which still have a hold on him despite the supposed serenity of his home. As established, props were essential to symbolize these socio-cultural stressors visually. Each aspect, then, from the couch the subject sits on to the trash can in the corner of the room, was carefully selected to this end and strategically placed to represent aspects relevant to the experience of a black man in modern-day America. Significantly, I used a mixture of antique and modern props to signify the novelty of some stressors, like social media, or, alternately, the historicity of others, such as religion and racism, which are inherited almost like antiques passed down from generation to generation.

1. Couch

The couch is the consistent visual symbol that unifies each of the images in the series. Relevantly, a couch is a significant symbol of the comfort and homeliness key to the project. We see it being used to represent those same ideas frequently in TV shows and sitcoms such as Friends, Living Single, and even The Simpsons. Sitting on a couch evokes associations between relaxing and connecting with those that mean the most to us. Moreover, the couch is also a stereotypical item or even metonym for therapy sessions, believed to render the patient more comfortable talking about their deepest, darkest secrets. In an article on Psychology Today Psychologist, Dr. Jennifer Kunst, states, for instance, that a couch is potentially helpful in such situations since it creates a safe space for mental health patients who may otherwise feel vulnerable. The couch, then, was also chosen to emulate the therapeutic session revealed within the research as vital but under-accessed by African American men. Specifically, it enabled the images to resemble a therapy session in which the viewer is positioned as the black male subject’s therapist and so formed the ideal backdrop against which to present a visual representation of mental health. The couch chosen to represent this scenario was upholstered in plush velvet since such fabric appears more tactile and comfortable when compared with leather equivalents, for example. The green color of the couch was likewise chosen since it connotes and promotes the relaxation required to ensure the mental wellbeing under discussion in the project (Cherry).
2. White rope
The rope is the most prominent prop in this project. It represents the invisible but compelling grip that each of these stressors has over the subject. The color white is significant since it represents the fact many of the stressors that affect the black male subject have been promoted by white society. In his 1903 book The Souls of Black Folk, civil rights activist, Du Bois, for instance, states “The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color-line.” Indeed, “White people in North America live in a society that is deeply separate and unequal by race, and white people are the beneficiaries of that separation and inequality” (Diangelo 22). As seen in the research chapter, people of color are treated unfavorably when compared with white individuals in matters of education, healthcare, employment, and policing. Significantly, the research also revealed that such racial discrimination is behind many of the key mental stressors adversely affecting the mental health of black men. While the color white typically carries connotations of peacefulness, then, it is used here to represent the society which promotes anything but peacefulness among black individuals and, instead, plays a fundamental part in the onset of mental illness in black men.

3. Dead plant
Using plants in art is not a new practice. From medieval and renaissance to modern art, plants have been used as symbols as well as for aesthetic purposes. Indeed, “Botanical symbolism has its origin in the literature of antiquity, where plants are often used as metaphors for virtue and vice” (MET Museum and Meagher). Accordingly, artists like Bernadino Luini, who painted The Madonna of the Carnation along with more well-known artists like Vincent van Gogh and Andy Warhol have all used plants in their work to similar symbolic ends. Plants have also been proven to be beneficial to physical and mental health. Numerous scientific studies document the benefits of their presence, from improved air quality to faster physical recovery, and, significantly for the purposes of this project, lower levels of stress and mental fatigue” (Lohr 1). Given that this project focuses on the problems posed by ill mental health in black men, then, I opted to include to a dead plant in attempt to subvert such symbolism and depict, instead, the negative impact poor mental health can have on an individual’s surroundings. The proximity and placing of the dead plant, for instance, shows that mental strain is toxic not only to the subject suffering these feelings but also those around him (Gary 988). Additionally, its dead state symbolizes neglect and therefore demonstrates how mental illnesses can make taking care of important things such as health difficult.
4. Clock

As stated above, I made use of both modern and vintage props for symbolic reasons. A vintage clock, for instance, was placed within the imagery as a commentary on the longstanding and historic origin of many stressors affecting the mental health of black men. Essentially, this also allowed me to commemorate the passing of George Floyd as a result of police brutality on May 25th, 2020. The broken clock hands show 8:46PM, which represents how long the police officer knelt on George Floyd’s neck that led to his death. As revealed in the research, black men are considerably more likely to experience the police brutality that can, and did—in George Floyd’s case—result in death: “Over the life course, one in every thousand men can expect to be killed by police” (Edwards et al 16793). That the phenomenon of black men being murdered at the hands of those who are employed to protect them has a long history explains why I chose a vintage clock to represent it. Critically, such stories of racially motivated violence have an adverse effect on the mental health of the black men fortunate enough to avoid being implicated in such situations themselves (Bor et al. 302). As the Census Bureau survey cited earlier revealed, levels of anxiety and depression among black Americans increased considerably within a week of the video of George Floyd being murdered. This sad situation was important to represent since it raised awareness and important questions concerning a long-lived source of trauma for the black community and black men in particular. Using a clock as a prop enabled me to symbolize the longstanding nature of this exceptionally problematic stressor.

5. Trash can

The overflowing trashcan depicted was included as a metaphor for the baggage of traumatic experiences that black men have to deal with and the consequences of suppressing rather than addressing these. By depicting a trash can overflowing with waste, I was able to visually represent the suppression of such trauma and, by extension, the consequences that avoidance of or inability to access mental health infrastructure might lead to. As the research reveals, black men suffering ill mental health in modern-day America tend not to seek such support not only since the stigma attached to mental health and mistrust of healthcare sector in the black community discourages them from doing, but also because the services they require are often unavailable or, if they are, are either unsuitable for their specific needs or inaccessible due to their lower socioeconomic status. In this way, then, the overflowing trash can also symbolize both the lack of mental health resources available to black men and the oversubscription of such services where they do exist.
6. Skittles and a black sweater

In another ode to a victim of racially motivated violence, the inclusion of skittles and a black sweater serve to, likewise, symbolize the racially motivated brutality that black men are inherently susceptible to and which, as a result, constitutes a key source of psychological stress for this group. “Among all groups, black men and boys face the highest lifetime risk of being killed by police”(Edwards et al 16794). Trayvon Martin was wearing a black sweater and had some skittles in his pocket when he was shot and killed after being racially profiled by a Miami man who was not consequently convicted of murder (the CNN Wire Staff). This example of racial bias and misconduct of justice, like that demonstrated by the murder of George Floyd, is significant where the mental health of black males is concerned since it illustrates the link demonstrated in the research between police contact and higher levels of anxiety in African American men (Geller et al 2324). Since this was an especially high profile case, the skittles and black sweater serve as overt reminders of this event and the fear it struck into the hearts of African American males.

RETOUCHING

STEP 1
Having backed up all photos to a backup drive and the cloud, I began rating and subsequently culling the images, deleting unsuitable or unsuccessful images due to expression, lighting, and lack of focus.

STEP 2
Basic Editing & Corrections
Using Capture one pro 11, I performed a basic correction edit on all the images, altering the exposure, contrast, color temperature, and sharpening the images. Copied the basic adjustments and applied it to all the images. Having this unified preset made it easier to blend the photos in Photoshop in order to make it appear as if each component had been shot at the same time.
STEP 3

*Photoshop Composite*

After this base editing, I began compositing the images of all the separate images in Photoshop. I started with a photo of the mock wall with no props and began extending the size of the wall and the floor to fit the main character and the stressors in the same frame. Though this was time-consuming, it enabled me to effectively composite any image from the scenes that I shot. For this step I made use of the clone stamp tool to copy the pixels as I wished. Followed by using the mixer brush tool to smooth the pixels and transitions between light and shadow for a realistic look. Finally I used the healing brush to enable me to erase any specs of dust specs and visible marks on the wall. I repeated the above process with the carpet in this scene.

STEP 4

Next, I had to drag and drop the different elements into the file with the extended wall and floor. I had to adjust the perspective of each element I used for each photograph in the series from the trash can, to the stressors standing. To achieve this, I cut out the individual shots of each model using the quick selection tool and then refined each selection to make a clean cut out. I was then able to drag and drop each of those images into the background shot.
LIMITATIONS

The main barrier to the completion of this project was the outbreak of COVID-19 and its development into a pandemic necessitating stringent restrictions on public life and work. These restrictions affected almost every element of this project. Most notably, it affected my choice of models and their availability as well as the location chosen for the shoot and my ability to complete the shoot while adhering to strict COVID-19 Safety guidelines to ensure the safety of all involved.

STEP 5

After dragging and dropping the cutouts, I made use of the warp and liquify tool which all enabled me to push and pull the pixels as a felt necessary. Lastly I added shadows where it was necessary to replicate the exact same lighting used to photograph all these elements. After this i made sure to add texture to the corners of the carpets since those where artificially made.

STEP 6

Each of the cutouts also required some editing, specifically, altering contrast, brightness, and the creation of clip-in-mass to match each individual shot. I created masks so as the make sure the different settings only affected the cutouts and for some images I made the cut outs into smart objects in order to make some more in-depth alterations. After making all the necessary changes the final images were ready to be exported as JPEGs for web and print purposes.
Visual Solution

My visual solution is a traveling gallery that showcases ‘Unravelling’ the photography series as the main attraction. Also, I designed a trifold pamphlet with a single insert for guests to read as they go through the entire gallery. The pamphlet contains information about mental health for black men specifically and it is informed directly from the research. Also, sharing some mental health resources patterned for black men.

The aim of the pamphlet is to encourage conversations during and after the show.

SKETCHES
## INTRODUCTION

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### MENTAL HEALTH FOR BLACK MEN

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### BORIS LAWRENCE HENSEN FOUNDATION

The Boris Lawrence Hensen Foundation is a philanthropic organization focused on providing mental health support and resources for the black community. Founded in 2019, the foundation aims to address the disparities in mental health care access and promote awareness of mental health issues among black individuals. Through a variety of initiatives, the foundation seeks to empower individuals, families, and communities to overcome the challenges faced in mental health care.

## RESOURCES

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## STATISTICS

- **20%**: Percentage of black individuals who have experienced mental health issues.
- **<2%**: Percentage of black individuals who receive mental health care.
- **15-24**: Age group with the highest prevalence of mental health issues.

### MENTAL HEALTH INITIATIVES

- **Let’s Talk Mental Health**: Educational sessions aimed at reducing the stigma surrounding mental health issues.
- **Mental Health Awareness Campaign**: Public outreach programs to increase awareness and encourage help-seeking behavior.

### RESOURCES

- **BlackMentalHealth.org**: Online platform providing information, resources, and support for mental health issues.
- **Mindful Moments**: Mobile app offering guided meditations and breathing exercises.
- **Support Groups**: Online and in-person support networks for individuals facing mental health challenges.
Unravelling

A photo series

A thesis inspired by Joel Isimeme.

Black Mental Health

Art Gallery Show

May 2020 - May 2021

Unravelling is a photo series inspired by the thesis of Joel Isimeme. The thesis delves into the mental health crisis affecting black men in America. The thesis highlights the mental health stigma in black communities and how that affects black men specifically. This series aims to solve this issue visually by personifying the mental health stressors that are specific to black men in order to destigmatize mental health by normalizing mental health struggles and encouraging the initiation of these conversations in safe spaces.

Resources

BLACK MENTAL HEALTH
ART GALLERY SHOW

WHAT IS MENTAL HEALTH?

Mental health is the state of an individual’s emotional and psychological well-being. It includes their ability to cope with stress, perceive reality, and engage in their daily lives. Mental health is important for overall health and well-being.

MENTAL HEALTH MATTERS?

Mental health is important because it affects how we think, feel, and act. It also impacts our ability to work and take care of ourselves and others. Mental health problems can affect people of all ages, gender, and race.

The Boris Lawrence Henson Foundation

The Boris Lawrence Henson Foundation is a nonprofit organization founded in 2019 by actor Boris Lawrence Henson. The foundation aims to address the mental health needs of African American youth and adults.

MENTAL HEALTH STATISTICS

According to the National Institute of Mental Health, 1 in 5 adults in the United States experiences a mental health condition. Mental health conditions can be acute or chronic and are often co-occurring.

Contact

For more information, visit www.blmhealth.com
UNRAVELLING

A photo series by

Joel Isimeme

Unravelling is a photo series inspired by the thesis of Joel Isimeme. The series aims to address the mental health crisis affecting black men in America. The thesis delves into the mental health stigma in black communities and how that affects black men specifically. This series aims to solve this issue visually by personifying the mental health stressors that are specific to black men in order to destigmatize mental health by normalizing mental health struggles and encouraging the initiation of these conversations in safe spaces.

Mental Health Statistics

According to the American Psychological Association, black men are less likely to seek mental health services. This is partly due to the stigma associated with mental illness in black communities. Additionally, black men are more likely to experience social and economic barriers that can make it difficult to access mental health services.

1. MENTAL ILLNESS

Black men are less likely to seek mental health services. This is partly due to the stigma associated with mental illness in black communities. Additionally, black men are more likely to experience social and economic barriers that can make it difficult to access mental health services.

STATISTICS

- 10-34
- 20%
- <2%
- 4X
- 63%
- 9.4%
- 8.7%

Mental health statistics are based on data from the National Alliance on Mental Illness. The statistics are intended to raise awareness and encourage the destigmatization of mental illness.

TO SEE MORE VISIT THIS WEBSITE BELOW

www.blackmentalhealth.com
Final Pamphlet Design

UNRAVELLING

A photo series

Unravelling is a photo series inspired by the story of black men. The images capture raw emotion and strength in America. This series highlights the mental health struggles of black men and how they affect communities.

This series aims to shine a light on the mental health challenges that are specific to black men in order to destigmatize mental health by normalizing mental health struggles and encouraging the initiation of these conversations in safe spaces.

For more visit this website below:
www.blackmentalhealth.co

RESOURCES

Boris R. Henson Foundation
www.borishensonfoundation.org

Whole Brother Mission
www.wholebrothermission.com

THERAPY FOR BLACK MEN

BLACK MENTAL HEALTH
www.blackmentalhealth.com

BLACK EMOTIONAL AND MENTAL HEALTH
www.blackemotionalhealth.com

BLACK MENTAL HEALTH GALLERY SHOW
MAY 2014 - MAY 2015

SOURCES

"Unravelling the stressors and stigma surrounding the mental health of black men"

LETS TALK MENTAL HEALTH

Mental health is defined by the World Health Organization (WHO) as a state of well-being in which the individual realises their own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to the community.

Today, mental health conversations are becoming more prevalent in our society. According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (SAMHSA), the estimated number of Americans living with a mental illness is 47.6 million, representing 18.5% of the U.S. population. In 2019, it is estimated that 1 in 5 American adults (age 18 or older) experience mental illness in a given year. This includes about 40 million adults who experience serious psychological distress in a given year. Mental illness, like other chronic medical conditions, has a strong genetic component. In some cases, genetic factors can be passed from parent to child. Mental illness is often a lifelong condition that requires continued management. People who have a mental illness are at risk of experiencing a wide range of symptoms, including depression, anxiety, bipolar disorder, schizophrenia, and other conditions. Mental illness can affect people of all ages, races, and ethnicities. It can have a significant impact on a person’s ability to work, learn, and maintain relationships. Mental illness can be treated with medication and therapy, and many people with mental illness lead full and productive lives. However, many people with mental illness do not receive the care they need. This is often because of a lack of understanding, discrimination, and stigma. Mental health is a critical component of overall health and well-being. It is important to talk about mental health and work to eliminate the stigma that surrounds mental illness. Let’s work together to create a world where everyone has access to the care they need to live healthy, happy, and fulfilling lives.

15 SIGNS OF MENTAL ILLNESS

- Feeling excessively low.
- Difficulty concentrating.
- Social withdrawal/isolation.
- Increased nervousness.
- Extreme mood swings without much notice.
- Increased risk-taking behavior (e.g., Overuse of substances like alcohol or drugs).
- Significant weight-loss or gain.
- Changes in sleeping pattern (e.g. Sleeping a lot or not at all).
- Inner turmoil affecting ones ability to carry out daily activities.
- Restlessness and irritability.
- Feeling like a burden.
- Physical ailments without logical reasoning (e.g. headaches, breathing difficulties, ache 7 pain)
- Suicidal thoughts.
- Feeling like you’re “existing” instead of living.
- Difficulty perceiving reality & feeling disconnected.

STATISTICS

10-34

The death rate from suicide for African American men was more than four times higher than for African American women in 2017 (CDC).

20%

African Americans are 20% more likely to have serious psychological disorders than white adults (NIMH).

<2%

of African American Psychologists Association members are Black or African American (Lit et al).

-4X

African American are more than 4 times more violent than Black or African American (Lit et al).

63%

African Americans believe that it is a mental health condition is a personal sign of weakness (Ward et al).

8.7%

In 2018, only 8.7% of Non-Black men, people received mental health services versus 15.6% of Non-Black White counterparts (Overton).

9.4%

Major depressive episode, increased from 6.1% to 9.4% in young adults aged 12-17 6.2% in the 20-24 age range between 2010 and 2015 (SAMHSA).

10-34
UNRAVELLING

This series aims to showcase some of the stressors that the research has revealed to be detrimental to the mental health of black men. In doing so, it is hoped that it will help dismantle the stigma that we have discovered surround mental illness among this group. To this end, the stressors symbolized in each image are shown holding the main character hostage in his own home, using a rope to represent the significant psychological hold such stressors can have on an individual even in times of apparent peace and comfort. Crucially, the subject is shown as unaware of the toll these stressors are taking on his mental health since it is this unawareness that the research has shown prevents black men from seeking psychological support and thus increases the prevalence of behavioral issues, low self-esteem and mental illness within this group. With these aims in mind, the following synopsis briefly outlines the rationale behind each image in the series.

5 o'clock News show

This image depicts a TV news crew on location reporting a breaking news story. The news crew holding the rope that bonds the main character represent the racial bias and stereotypes that news outlets are complicit in perpetuating and which the research has shown adversely affect the mental health of black men. The film industry have a considerable influence on the beliefs and attitudes of modern society. Sadly, the research also indicated that the film industry has played a considerable part in perpetuating damaging stereotypes concerning black men through problematic portrayals of this group.

Silence on set

The film industry have a considerable influence on the beliefs and attitudes of modern society. Sadly, the research also indicated that the film industry has played a considerable part in perpetuating damaging stereotypes concerning black men through problematic portrayals of this group.

The Gang

Friends can be a beneficial source of psychological support for an individual, especially those suffering from mental ill-health, but they can just as easily hinder psychological recovery or even contribute to mental ill-health in the first place by propagating social stigma surrounding such issues.

Why can’t you be like...

The family is one of the core influences in the life of an individual. In this image, the subject’s wife serves to represent the family as a whole and by extension, the support or lack thereof that this group can provide in times of stress. Indeed, when family support is not forthcoming, this clearly has an impact on the mental health of black men since these factors are likely to discourage them from accessing the professional treatment needed to manage mental ill-health.

Church

The Church plays a pivotal role in the black community. Consequently, pastors hold particular influence in this community since their role often means that the congregation turns to them for guidance and so often accept their views uncritically. This can be problematic for young black men and their mental health if Church leaders espouse negative views towards mental illness or even promote prayer in place of professional help.

Reflection

In the final shot of the series, I sought to highlight how negative ideas of black male identity propagated by mass media are internalized by this group and subsequently impact their self-esteem. Specifically, I aimed to symbolize the inner struggle that these cultural representations can bring about in black men.

REVIEW

SYMBOLISM
- Mental illness is shown to be a reality that black men must overcome to progress in a society where the link between mental health and success is often underestimated.
- The character is depicted as being held hostage, symbolizing the psychological hold such stressors can have on an individual even in times of apparent peace and comfort.

CONCEPT
- The research has shown that the lack of mental health awareness and support among the black community increases the prevalence of behavioral issues, low self-esteem and mental illness within this group.

SILENCE ON SET

SYMBOLISM
- The research indicates that the lack of mental health awareness and support among the black community increases the prevalence of behavioral issues, low self-esteem and mental illness within this group.

CONCEPT
- The research has shown that the lack of mental health awareness and support among the black community increases the prevalence of behavioral issues, low self-esteem and mental illness within this group.

THE GANG

SYMBOLISM
- The research indicates that the lack of mental health awareness and support among the black community increases the prevalence of behavioral issues, low self-esteem and mental illness within this group.

CONCEPT
- The research has shown that the lack of mental health awareness and support among the black community increases the prevalence of behavioral issues, low self-esteem and mental illness within this group.
News (5 o'clock News show)
This image depicts a TV news crew on location reporting a breaking news story. The news crew represents the racial bias we have established news outlets are complicit in perpetuating and which adversely affects the mental health of black men. The crew appears cheerful, and the image shows them going about their job unaware of the black subject staring at them. In this way, this scene represents their ignorance concerning the influence that their work has on black men and their mental health.

The main character looks directly at the stressors almost unaware of the hold onto his mental wellbeing. Representing how some are unaware of the effects of racial bias news has on the psyche like behavioral issues, low self-esteem, self-fulfilling prophecy of being criminals (McCreary & Wright 27, Barnett & Flynn 31, Hilton & Von Hippel 244) which might lead to serious mental illness. The way in which the rope, which, as established, symbolizes discriminatory ideologies, connects to the microphone aims to demonstrate not only that this media outlet plays a part in disseminating racist bias but also the ‘hold’ this bias has on the mind and mood of black men. This image, then, aims to make the viewer aware of the power their words can have over the mental health of others and encourage them, therefore, to be more mindful of the biases and beliefs that they express, and which are often driven by news media.
As established, films have a considerable influence on the beliefs and attitudes of modern society. Sadly, the research also indicated that the film industry has played a considerable part in perpetuating damaging stereotypes concerning black men through problematic portrayals of this group. I intentionally made the main character look directly at the camera that has historically continued to represent black men in a limited or stereotypical light, looking at the camera operator who is also black for help who in turn is more focused on doing his job. Leaving him feeling alone in his plight while simultaneously feeling trapped by the rope “stereotype” that the film industry continues to propagate.

The choice to cast the camera operator as black, then, was an attempt to demonstrate that even black individuals can be complicit in the creation and promotion of these stereotypes and unaware of the impact that their work has on their community. “Blacks complain that mainstream films present a negative impression of black people and have a detrimental effect on their lives... if Black producers were given the freedom and support to produce films about black people, they would project a different image” (qtd. in Miller 22). Films typically cast black men in limited and stereotypical roles such as rappers and basketball players, or, more problematically, thugs and drug dealers—roles which perpetuate long-lived associations between black men and criminality. “Young, impressionable black males construct their own reality from the images they see in American media” (Miller 21). This stereotypical casting is especially detrimental to the mental health of black men, especially younger males, whom we have established are more likely to emulate what they see in the media.
The research demonstrated that the Church plays a pivotal role in the black community. Crucially, it revealed that, accordingly, pastors hold particular influence in this community. Their role as ‘Shepherd the flock of God’ (New International Version, 1 Peter 5:2-3) means the congregation turn to them for guidance and so often accept their views uncritically. This is especially problematic for young black men and their mental health since, as the research indicates, some Church leaders espouse the idea that mental illness is self-inflicted or promote prayer in place of professional help and young black men, who are likely to see Church leaders as father figures, are therefore susceptible to accepting these damaging views uncritically. In an attempt to raise awareness of this situation, ‘Revival’ depicts this common but problematic attempt to use prayer alone to mitigate mental illness is a negative coping mechanism (Nyugen 7), depicting the pastor as praying for the main character. The main character’s disposition is not interested in the pastor praying, completely unfazed by the prayers in order to depicts a disconnect between the real-life issues of mental illness and the over spiritualization that sometimes occurs in the church when the pastor is not equipped. “While clergy in Black churches have historically supported the Black community, many are not properly trained to administer counseling for the mentally ill” (Demsey et al 84). This lack of training enables the stigma surrounding mental health and mental illness. Again, the white rope is used to symbolize how this situation is problematic for the black male subject and exerts a powerful force over his mental health. Directly connected to the pastor’s hand holding the Bible, it represents how even the word of God, which the research demonstrates can and should be a source of support for black individuals, can in fact affect the mental health of black men adversely by discouraging them from seeking professional support as a supplement to prayer.
Friends (The Gang)

As the aphorism goes, “show me your friend, and I’ll tell you who you are.” Indeed, friends heavily influence a person’s identity and are a part of the community (US Department of health and human services 28). In this way, friends can be a beneficial source of psychological support for an individual, especially those suffering from mental ill-health, encouraging them to express their feelings and providing a much-needed sense of social acceptance to mitigate low self-esteem and loneliness. “…social relationships have demonstrated to decrease the likelihood of the onset of chronic disease, disability, mental illness, and death” (George, 3). In this scene, then, I wanted to highlight how damaging it can be when those who can potentially provide this vital support overlook the signs of mental illness and, in particular, how this can contribute to the difficulties a black man suffering mental ill-health experiences. To this end, the main character is placed in juxtaposition with his friends, seated on the couch with a morose and troubled expression. Not paying them any attention to the shenanigans of friends more concerned with In contrast, his friends are depicted with playful expressions, evidently unaware of or refusing to acknowledge the difficulties their friend is suffering. This juxtaposition serves to demonstrate the detrimental impact on an individual’s mental wellbeing when friends overlook the signs of mental illness in one of their group or, worse, play down the issue by making jokes that contribute to the stigma that research indicates is a key barrier to black men seeking support for mental illness (Littlejohn-Blake & Darling 462, Motley and Banks 4).
Family (Why can’t you be like…)

The family is one of the core influences in the life of an individual. As the group we spend the most time around, family, as we have established, has the potential to provide the support needed to ensure mental wellbeing in the face of the stresses provided by society. Conversely, when such support is not forthcoming or a family is dysfunctional, this group can in fact add to these stresses and promote rather than prevent mental illness. To represent this situation, I opted to depict a wife and daughter as a visual representation of the family unit since these women play a significant role in a black man’s life, and therefore their support, or lack thereof, is a key determinant in a black man’s wellbeing. “On the other hand, a family environment marked by severe marital discord, overcrowding, and social disadvantage can contribute to the onset of mental illness” (US Department of health and human services 27). The body language of the wife is overtly antagonistic—she is depicted as screaming at her husband—in order to demonstrate the potential that spouses have to be a stressor rather than source of support in a black man’s life. The demeanor of the main character is one of detachment by not maintaining eye contact. He is completely unbothered by the conversation that the wife is having showing the marital discord that is contributing heavily to the mental turmoil. This represents the effects of the unsupportive family unit as described in the research.
Healthcare (Hey doc)

The research reveals that the American healthcare system is a particularly important influence on the mental health of black men. Though adequate healthcare is a key requirement of all individuals and communities, the relationship between the black community and the healthcare system in the United States has been particularly problematic. As outlined in the research chapter, cases of medical misconduct involving persons of color together with its prohibitive cost for those living below the poverty line means that many black people avoid seeking healthcare until it is too late. This clearly has an impact on the mental health of black men since these factors are likely to discourage them from accessing the professional treatment needed to manage mental ill-health. This scene, then, aims to illustrate this problematic relationship between the healthcare sector and black men. To this end, I cast a white man and a black woman in the role of doctor and nurse, respectively. A white, male doctor represents the lack of racial diversity within the psychology profession specifically that the research indicates is a contributing factor in black males both seeking and receiving adequate care. The black female nurse, in contrast, represents the empathy and sense of solidarity required to make black men feel more comfortable accessing medical care while also speaking to the statistics mentioned in the research (CWS Data Tool: Demographics of the U.S. Psychology Workforce). In an attempt to symbolize the propensity the research revealed for medical practitioners to treat black patients as statistics rather than individuals, the scene presents the doctor as more focused on the charts than his patient. When the clinician and patient do not come from the same cultural or ethnic background it can lead to the clinician ignoring the symptoms and fears of the patient (US Department of health and human services 25). The main character is purposely looking at the nurse in his time of need looking lost and defeated, waiting for the verdict of the medical staff that show no real concern for his well-being. Though the black nurse is shown with her gaze focused in the direction of the main character, illustrating that she, unlike the doctor, is empathetic towards the patient, she is ultimately powerless to change the situation since the doctor, a white male, is the one in power. In this way, then, this image illustrates the problems posed for the mental health of black men by their underrepresentation within the medical profession.
Himself (Reflection)

In the final shot of the series, I sought to highlight how negative ideas of black male identity propagated by mass media are internalized by this group and subsequently impact their self-esteem. Specifically, I aimed to symbolize the inner struggle that these cultural representations can bring about in black men. The subject, therefore, is pictured both on the couch and screaming at himself, symbolizing the divide between his inner self and society’s expectations of who he, as a black man, should be. “Men’s sense of identity is influenced by evaluation of how well they are accomplishing social roles that are important to them” (Watkins et al. 304). The intense facial expression and body language of the screaming inner self represent the frustration the subject feels at having his identity dictated by society and the media. Looking away really highlights that disconnect that he feels internally. That his self sitting on the couch does not make any eye contact with his internal self, despite his screaming, illustrates the propensity for black men to suppress these uncomfortable emotions since, as the research indicates, these same cultural expectations link psychological distress with weakness where black men are concerned.
Conclusion

Those within the black community tend to misunderstand mental illness. As the research reveals, mental ill-health is highly stigmatized in the African American community, associated with weakness and a lack of masculinity. The prevalence of this stigma begins to explain the reluctance to seek psychological help demonstrated by men in the black community. This is a problem, however, since, as we have established, black men in America are more likely than their white counterparts to witness, if not, experience the traumatic acts of violence and mistreatment that adversely affect mental health and require professional psychological support.

This project aimed to raise the awareness needed to help dismantle such stigmas surrounding mental illness and encourage black men suffering psychological distress to seek support. The research chapter revealed the multiple factors—social, cultural and ideological—that contribute to ill mental health and its stigmatization among African American men, while the accompanying photographic series sought to visualize these stressors and the struggles they incite using props, color theory and body language in order to raise awareness of these difficulties and reduce the stigma surrounding such struggles in the black community. Integrally, it is hoped that these images will also stimulate the conversation around mental health among individuals outside of the black community, making them aware of the adverse effects that implicit bias, stereotyping, and racism in society can have on ethnic minorities. In particular it is hoped that individuals belonging to the groups highlighted in the research and represented within the series as exerting influence over the mental health of black men, such as pastors, healthcare workers, scriptwriters, and film directors, will be made aware of the impact such sectors have on the mental health of black men and, by the same token, the potential their work has to promote awareness and understanding surrounding it. Finally, but most importantly, the project promotes not only awareness but also positive action in the face of mental illness through the creation of informational material detailing and directing individuals to mental health resources, as the research demonstrates, black men might be otherwise reluctant or unable to access.
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Black Mental Health


American Psychological Association. “CWS Data Tool: Degrees in Psychology.”


120 Black Mental Health
For more information on this thesis and to see more photographs from each series, please visit: www.blackmentalhealth.co

If you are struggling with any kind of mental illness or would like more information on the subject, please visit: www.borislawsonfoundation.com

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Printed in the United States of America

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