


# Chapter 4

## I Am a Man: Understanding Black Male Identity and Mental Health Needs

**Rommel Johnson**

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0681-2435>  
University of Texas Rio Grande Valley, USA

### **ABSTRACT**

*Despite the historical and perpetual trauma, racism, discrimination, socio-economical, and socio-political disparities they have experienced in the United States, Black men have consistently forged ways to demonstrate resilience and assert their own sense of autonomy and masculinity. Nevertheless, their ecological context of living in a country that has historically sought to dehumanize them and eradicate their manhood is cumbersome to their mental wellbeing. Furthermore, the tendency by researchers to pathologize Black males obfuscates the reality of their situation in the United States, minimizing their mental needs. Understanding both the complexity of their ecological context as well as their adaptability and resilience will give behavioral health providers better insight into the realities of Black men's sense of masculinity and implications for their mental health. This chapter elucidates on the complexities of the Black male experience, Black masculinity, and implications for their mental health. The chapter concludes with recommendations for treatment.*

DOI: 10.4018/979-8-3693-1459-3.ch004

Black males comprise roughly 12% of the U.S. male population (Korhonen, 2023) and 48% (19.5 million) of the total Black population in the United States (U.S. Census Bureau, 2022). Black male identity in the United States is a complex and multifaceted concept that is shaped by a number of historical, social, and cultural factors and systems. These systems, including slavery, racism, discrimination, and aggressive policing, combined with deplorable socioeconomic and sociopolitical dynamics have created an extremely deleterious ecological context in the United States for Black men. However, despite the pathologization of Black males dominating medical and behavioral science research, which primarily focuses on Black men's deficits (Adkinson-Johnson, 2023; Hunter, 2016), their existence has a complexity that behavioral health professionals (BHPs) have yet to adequately understand.

While Black men have experienced significant trauma and disparity in the United States, it is very important for BHPs to also recognize that, despite these challenges, Black men have forged ways to demonstrate resilience and assert their own sense of masculinity in a country that has historically sought to dehumanize them and eradicate their manhood. Understanding both the complexity of their ecological context as well as their adaptability and resilience will help give BHPs better insight into the realities of Black men's senses of masculinity and implications for their mental health.

## **BLACK MALE HISTORICAL CONTEXT**

As stated by High (2022), "It is quite challenging, if not impossible, to understand the life trajectories and experiences of Black men without considering the impact of the systems ... [they] live within" (p. 48). Although the present-day Black male experience in the United States is shaped by the enslavement of their ancestors, segregation, and a plethora of systematic discriminatory laws and practices, it is important that BHPs recognize that the Black male presence in the United States not only precedes slavery, Jim Crow, and segregation; it began with Black male explorers and settlers in the colonial United States.

For instance, the first known Black male presence in the United States was Niño Pedro Alonso, an explorer who piloted the Santa María during Columbus's first voyage in 1492 (Knight & Gates, 2016; Morrison, 1978). The Black male presence in the colonial United States continued to flourish through exploration to indentured servitude, with the first recorded Black birth being that of William Tucker, the son of indentured servants, in Jamestown, Virginia, in 1623 (Wade, 2014). Two years later, in 1625, a census of Virginia counted 11 Black men among a population of 1,227 (Smith, 2005). Meanwhile, in the nearby Maryland colony, a Black man named Mathias De Sousa was elected to the Maryland General Assembly in 1641 (Berlin,

27 more pages are available in the full version of this document, which may be purchased using the "Add to Cart" button on the publisher's webpage: [www.igi-global.com/chapter/i-am-a-man/347707](http://www.igi-global.com/chapter/i-am-a-man/347707)

## Related Content

---

### Skill Development, Skill Premium, and Technological Change: A Gender-Based Approach

Harshil Sharma (2019). *Gender Issues in Technical and Vocational Education Programs* (pp. 200-217).

[www.irma-international.org/chapter/skill-development-skill-premium-and-technological-change/227947](http://www.irma-international.org/chapter/skill-development-skill-premium-and-technological-change/227947)

### Gender Differences in Motivations to Use Social Networking Sites

Valeria Noguti, Sonika Singhand David S. Waller (2019). *Gender and Diversity: Concepts, Methodologies, Tools, and Applications* (pp. 1565-1580).

[www.irma-international.org/chapter/gender-differences-in-motivations-to-use-social-networking-sites/209051](http://www.irma-international.org/chapter/gender-differences-in-motivations-to-use-social-networking-sites/209051)

### Association of Occupational Burnout and Nursing Errors With Patient Safety: A Systemic Review

Despoina Pappaand Chrysoula Dafogianni (2022). *Research Anthology on Changing Dynamics of Diversity and Safety in the Workforce* (pp. 912-925).

[www.irma-international.org/chapter/association-of-occupational-burnout-and-nursing-errors-with-patient-safety/287967](http://www.irma-international.org/chapter/association-of-occupational-burnout-and-nursing-errors-with-patient-safety/287967)

### Questioning Questions in Autobiographies of Intercultural Encounters

Paola Riviuccio (2021). *International Journal of Bias, Identity and Diversities in Education* (pp. 47-59).

[www.irma-international.org/article/questioning-questions-in-autobiographies-of-intercultural-encounters/281661](http://www.irma-international.org/article/questioning-questions-in-autobiographies-of-intercultural-encounters/281661)

### Adult Education Dilemmas: A Preliminary Study Exploring Major Challenges Through Linguistic Analysis

Xi Lin, Lingfei Luan, Xintian Tuand Yan Dai (2025). *International Journal of Bias, Identity and Diversities in Education* (pp. 1-21).

[www.irma-international.org/article/adult-education-dilemmas/392506](http://www.irma-international.org/article/adult-education-dilemmas/392506)