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## He Didn't Want Any of That: Considerations in the Study and Theorization of Black Boys' Sexual Victimization in the United States

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### Introduction

Child sexual abuse is an under-researched area of public health scholarship and family conflict studies. Research acknowledging the sexual abuse of Black boys is practically non-existent. Over the last decade, the National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey conducted by the Center for Disease Prevention and Control (CDC) has shown that Black males over the age of eighteen suffer some of the highest rates of sexual coercion and made to penetrate violence over a 12-month period. Despite this data, boyhood studies scholars, gender theorists, and public health researchers remain indifferent to these findings and consider the evidence showing Black men (6.5%) in the United States experiencing contact sexual violence (which includes rape, being made to penetrate, sexual coercion, and unwanted sexual contact) as often as

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Black women (5.8%) in a given year, or have rates of sexual victimization higher than White women (3.6%) to be incredulous (Smith et al. 2017: 18, 21, 28). Much of the current theoretical and sociological research on race and racism in the United States ignores the sexual victimization of Black males. Even when scholars invoke intersectionality as a framework for understanding Black boys and sexual violence, there is little understanding of this group or the causal or correlative determinants that produce the Black male vulnerability to sexual violence (Curry 2018a, b, 2021a, b). The inability to recognize Black boys as victims of sexual victimization and coercion impedes our ability to conceptualize sexual victimization and violence against Black males, or their vulnerability to various forms of sexual violence, as enduring throughout their lives. Whereas our narration of sexual violence against women generally anticipates a particular vulnerability the female body has to rape and sexual violence throughout girlhood and womanhood, this explanatory schema is absent in how researchers and theorists conceptualize male sexual victimization, particularly Black male sexual vulnerability from boyhood to manhood.

The scant research on the sexual abuse of Black children reaches back to the 1980s, however, the focus of these few studies mentioning Black children's sexual victimization focuses primarily on the sexual abuse of young Black girls by a male perpetrator and rarely acknowledged the sexual assault or rape of young Black boys (Ashbury 1993; Hampton and Oliver 2006; Hampton 1987). Contemporary studies into sexual abuse and early sexual debut, which often occurs as statutory rape, systematically ignore Black males' experiences of rape and sexual assault to hold fast to the idea that Black males are primarily perpetrators of sexual violence, not victims to it be they adults or children (Curry 2017a, b; Curry and Utley 2018). The early sexual debut of Black boys is referred to as "any adolescent boy engaging in sexual intercourse before he is 15 years old" (Lohman and Billings 2008, p. 724). Statutory rape is often understood as an adult, or older peer in some cases, having sex with someone under the age of consent (Goodwin 2013). Age of consent laws have historically sought to protect young people from sexual exploitation by adults (Sutherland 2003), however, the race and sex of the victim often determine whether courts see any violation at all. Statutory rape

laws are highly prejudicial and have primarily focused on convicting men and boys for sexually violating women and girls (Sutherland 2003), consequently, boys sexually coerced by older women or girls are not recognized by courts to be victims of any sexual violation at all (Burrow et al. 2020). When Black boys are coerced into having sex with older girls or women, they are believed to have wanted these sexual events to occur and consequently are thought to be unaffected by these coercive sexual debuts.

These interpretative gaps are as much an expression of our cultural biases as they are the manifestation of the habits academic disciplines have in narrowly construing sexual violence. Unfortunately, many of our academic assumptions about gender, sexuality, and Black masculinity are rooted in racist and classist assertions that have very little evidence to support them. Many of our current gender theories concerning Black masculinity rely on outdated subcultural analyses concerning Black men and boys drawn from outdated criminological theories claiming that poor young Black males have compensatory masculinity that is uniquely predatory (Curry 2021a, b). Compensatory masculinity theory asserts that Black males use violence—specifically rape, intimate partner abuse, and homicide—to define their masculinity, because they are denied access to mainstream education and employment. Historically, feminist analyses of Black masculinity have asserted that young poor Black men are violent, and particularly hypersexual and sexually aggressive (Brownmiller 1975; Cooper 2006; White 2008; Garfield 2010). Throughout bell hooks' work *We Real Cool: Black Men and Masculinity* (2004), for instance, she insists that violence against women be it physical or sexual is foundational to Black male identity. Without evidence or ethnographic accounts, she asserts that young Black boys have been so seduced by the myth of Black male hypersexuality that they will seek out sexual conquests, even if it means raping innocent women, without reflection or hesitation and regardless of consequence (hooks 1990, p. 63). Drawing inspiration from subculture of violence theories arguing that Black masculinity was uniquely violent and rape prone—operating on different and deficient values (Wolfgang and Feracutti 1967; Amir 1971)—the analyses of hooks relies on popularly accepted stereotypes concerning Black males and offers no evidentiary support or ethnographies for her

claims about Black male hypersexuality (Pitt and Sanders 2010). Unfortunately, these claims have dictated the interpretation of Black boys' sexual vulnerability for the last several decades.

Black boys are aware of the negative racial and sexual myths associated with Black manhood that are imposed upon them as young children (Hust et al. 2008). Recent research has suggested that some pubertal Black boys begin manifesting depressive symptoms given their anxiety toward approaching Black manhood (Carter et al. 2020). These negative ideations affect Black boys' realizations of themselves as sexual beings. More recent research (Curry and Utley 2020) has sought to humanize Black boys and explain their choices regarding sexual debut as a complex personal decision. Interviews with Black men about their first sexual experiences have shown that Black boys are reflective and emotional beings who not only show trepidation over their sexual debut but prefer their first time to be with close friends whom they trust. Contrary to the literature framing Black males as hypersexual and predatory, Black boys are often aware of the sexual scripts imposed on Black men and chose close intimate friendships to experiment and comfort their anxieties regarding sex. Academic discussions fail to approach the study of Black boys' sexuality as a serious inquiry into experiences individuals from this group have when negotiating structural racism and sexual victimization (Curry 2017a, b) and often interpret young Black males in line with pathological assertions and unsubstantiated presumptions about Black males as a group. The exploration of Black boys' sexual victimization must keep in mind that these individuals are experiencing trauma and sexual violence in a world that often denies such violence is possible.

While the ethnographies and research into Black male sexual vulnerability are slowly increasing, Claudia Bernard's (2019) recent statement that "we lack knowledge of Black boys who are affected by sexual exploitation and the needs and issues of vulnerable and at-risk Black boys are little understood" is accurate and must be remedied (p. 195). Investigations concerning the sexual victimization of Black boys through child sexual abuse or rape require the researcher to confront various stereotypical assumptions and ideological assertions about Black males. Social scientific research into Black male sexual victimization, even as children, is still thought to be controversial within the academy. This controversy

is not as much about the victimization of young Black boys as it is about the perpetrators of violence against them. Our exploratory study (Curry and Utley 2018) revealed that many Black men recount their earliest experiences with sex as coercive adult violations. Many of these violations were at the hands of women who were family friends, caretakers, or older peers. While our initial research did capture several cases of older men abusing young Black boys, most of the testimonies described female perpetrators.

This chapter aims to explore some of the conceptual and interpretive obstacles in our understanding of Black male vulnerability to sexual assault and child sexual abuse. The recent intervention around Black male sexual vulnerability in Black male studies (Curry 2017a, b, 2021a; Kitossa 2021) has introduced a nascent conversation concerning the role that statutory rape, early sexual debut, and made to penetrate violence have over the life course of Black boys in the United States and abroad. While the dearth of scholarly research on the sexual violence that Black boys suffer tends to give the impression that rape and sexual coercion almost solely affect girls, this chapter aims to convince the reader that Black boys' sexual victimization requires not only public health interventions but more rigorous theoretical engagements within academia.

## Defining Child Sexual Abuse

The CDC defines child sexual abuse as “the involvement of a child (person less than 18 years old) in sexual activity that violates the laws or social taboos of society and that he/she: does not fully comprehend, does not consent to or is unable to give informed consent to, or is not developmentally prepared for and cannot give consent to” (CDC 2022). Research by practitioners, clinicians, and public health scholars have stressed that child sexual abuse can be from peers, adolescents, and older children, as well as adults or caretakers (Shaw, Lewis, Loeb, Rosado, and Rodriguez 2000), and asked for more numerous categories of child sexual abuse that account for a range of age differences between victim and perpetrator. These differences in interpretive approaches dictate how

researchers interpret what is taken to be child sex abuse and more importantly what they believe constitutes violence toward young children. These debates have serious consequences for what is reported as the prevalence and incidence of child sexual abuse and rape in various communities.

Accurate measurement of the prevalence of childhood CSA is made difficult by several methodological issues. Definitions of CSA typically vary across studies, such as in terms of the age used to define childhood, whether an age difference is specified, or if peer abuse is included, as well as the types of acts considered as sexual abuse (e.g., both contact and noncontact). (Murray et al. 2014: 323)

The variability of definition not only makes epidemiological analyses of child sexual abuse difficult or inaccurate but complicates the ability of researchers, especially theorists, to formulate strict criteria for the violation of consent or coercion among children and adolescents (Leeb et al. 2008; Mathews and Collin-Vezina 2019). If one believes that sexual abuse or coercive practices among peers constitute a more symmetrical power relationship than that of a child and an adolescent, the researcher creates a rationalization that may overlook the vulnerability the child and adolescent have to larger sexualized or traumatic environments. How researchers and theorists conceptualize the *asymmetrical power relation* and how that relationship is established between children and peers, or children/adolescents and adults, determines the seriousness of the violation. Throughout the literature on child sexual abuse, epidemiological concerns are translated into moral claims and public health agendas based primarily on what one perceives as constituting a sexual violation, statutory rape, or sexual violence and child compliance (Hines and Finkelhor 2007; Lanning 2005). How one defines the act of violence, deeming it child rape or molestation, for instance, affects one's sense of urgency and the measure of violence imposed on a child or group. At a practical level, "varying and inconsistent definitions and stereotypical and inaccurate perceptions can influence how cases are investigated, prosecuted, and decided" (Lanning 2017, p. 317).

Alongside inaccurate definitions is the problem of compliance or the willing child or teenager under the age of consent that freely chooses to engage in sexual intercourse with an older peer or adult. Statutory rape laws tend to assert that it is primarily young girls that need protection from older boys and adult men, so the willingness of the young girl is irrelevant to how the state asserts its need to protect her from a male perpetrator (Goodwin 2013), however, this is not the case for Black boys. The presumption of compliance or the sexually willing, sexually curious, and sexually insatiable Black boy is an enduring myth throughout sexual violence scholarship (Curry and Utley 2018). Some of the first descriptions of Black boy sexual victimization were found in the scholarship of Kardiner and Ovesey, two white sociologists studying the sexual behaviors of lower-class Black males to show that the segregated Black boy is more sexually active than his white counterparts. In Kardiner's and Ovesey's (1951) *The Mark of Oppression: Explorations in the Personality of the American Negro*, the authors describe the early age of Black boys' first sexual experience as an indication of the Black race's premature sexual development compared to whites'. Kardiner and Ovesey (1951) argue that, unlike their white middle-class counterparts who learn about sex from their mothers and fathers, Black boys "learn about sex in the streets, masturbation generally begins early six to eight. On the whole, masturbation does not play much of a role in the growing lower-class boy. This is due to the early opportunities for relations with women. First, intercourse at seven or nine is not uncommon, and very frequent in early adolescence usually with girls much older" (Kardiner and Ovesey 1951: 68). The sexual activity of Black boys has historically been framed as a particular race-sex trait among Black males. There was no worry of Black boys suffering trauma from their early sexual debut with female peers or statutory rape by adult women because Black boys were prone to sexual excess and embraced a view of masculinity that sought out sexual conquest. This mid-twentieth-century idea of Black male sexual development is only beginning to be challenged in scholarly research, and only being interpreted as evidence of Black male sexual abuse and statutory rape over the last several years (Curry 2017a, b; Curry and Utley 2018, 2020). Black male studies scholars have begun to interrogate intersectional feminism's reliance on white criminology

and second-wave feminist assumptions about Black men and boys that pathologize Black masculinity as hypermasculine and violent. By tracing the sources of prominent theories concerning Black masculinity, Black male studies scholars have not only shown how intersectional feminist theories concerning Black males are inaccurate (Oluwayomi 2020) but depict dangerous racist tropes as cutting-edge gender theory (Curry 2021a, b). These theories often insist upon the invulnerability of Black men and boys to sexual violence, unless this abuse occurs at the hands of other men (Curry 2019).

Child abuse is not an exceptional form of violence inflicted upon children living under repressive social conditions. It is part of an ecology of violence and trauma that exists within the home and throughout the community which is often the product of marginalizing structures within a society. As Murray et al. (2014) explain: “Childhood sexual abuse often occurs alongside other forms of abuse or neglect, and in family environments in which there may be low family support and/or high stress, such as high poverty, low parental education, absent or single parenting, parental substance abuse, domestic violence, or low caregiver warmth” (p. 324). Male victims of child abuse tend toward the sexual coercion of future sex partners, increased risk-taking behavior, post-traumatic stress syndrome, substance abuse, affective numbing, and sexual promiscuity (Hernandez, Lodico and DiClemente 1993; Lohman and Billings 2008). Male victims of child sexual abuse also suffer from depressive symptoms and multiple mental health issues well into adulthood (Shaw et al. 2000; Homma et al. 2012).

Black boys are particularly susceptible to negative health consequences caused by child sexual abuse because of racism and the lack of positive support structures enabling Black male victims to deal with the trauma (Gray and Rarick 2018). Similarly, Wyatt (1990) found that structural racism amplifies the negative consequences of child sexual abuse physiologically and psychologically for young, racialized children. Hernandez, Lodico, and DiClemente’s research (1993) found that:

Black children are at higher risk of abuse than white children, particularly black males. Children from single-parent households and of lower



socioeconomic status are more common targets, as are children with physical, neurological, or emotional problems; black males are overrepresented in all those situations...Although age of onset of abuse is similar across genders, girls are generally abused up to an older age, as boys begin to fend off abusers sooner. Actual or attempted intercourse is more common with boys, as is extrafamilial abuse. (Hernandez et al. 1993: 594)

The higher risk Black boys have to attempted and completed sexual abuse is contrary to the cultural assumptions that researchers and the at-large public have about child sexual abuse. These assumptions, or more accurately biases, not only limit research but the ability of this information to change the intellectual and social culture around child sexual abuse.

## **Prevalence of Sexual Violence Against Black Boys in the United States**

The lack of national data makes it extremely difficult to authoritatively show repetitive patterns of Black boys' sexual victimization. Prevalence data concerning made to penetrate violence and sexual violence against Black boys is largely unavailable within national datasets in the United States. The CDC understands made to penetrate violence as a form of sexual violence similar to rape. According to the CDC, made to penetrate violence occurs if "the victim was made to, or there was an attempt to make them, sexually penetrate someone without consent as a result of physical force or when the victim is unable to consent due to being too drunk, high, or drugged, (e.g., incapacitation, lack of consciousness, or lack of awareness) from their voluntary or involuntary use of alcohol or drugs" (Smith et al. 2017, p. 17). The Child Maltreatment Surveys produced by the Children's Bureau under the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services does not report rates of child sexual abuse by race and sex in the yearly publications, nor does the CDC's National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey (NISVS) racially disaggregate their age of first made to penetrate victimization data (Smith et al. 2017: 170). The CDC NISVS dataset does show that roughly twenty-five percent of made to penetrate victimization of males in the

United States occurs before the age of eighteen (Ibid). The lifetime prevalence of contact sexual violence for Black males in the United States is roughly twenty percent which translates into about 2.5 million Black male victims (Smith et al. 2017, p. 21) according to the most recent NISVS data. Contact sexual violence includes various kinds of violence including rape/made to penetrate violence, unwanted sexual contact, and sexual coercion.

The little research that does exist about sexual violence against Black boys consists of some periodical sources trying to convince America that Black boys under the age of eighteen are children (NPR 2009; New York Public Radio 2021) and bring more public attention to the fact that the sexual abuse of Black men by other men and women does happen in the United States (Woodyatt 2022) as well as a few peer-reviewed sources which will be discussed below. A recent study tracking the sexual debut of U.S. adolescents has noted an especially early age of first sexual experience for Black males which would fall within the ages of pre-consent or statutory rape. Cavazos-Rehg, Krauss, Schootman, Bucholz, Peipert, Sander-Thompson, Cottler, and Bierut (2009) used the National Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS) from 1999 to 2007 to analyze trends in the sexual debut of racial and ethnic groups analyzed by sex and was not able to ascertain consent or coercion throughout their study. Using a Kaplan-Meier analysis, the authors showed that Black boys had the earliest sexual debut of all groups, or were the least likely to survive to the age of twelve without sexual debut compared to whites, Asians, Hispanics, and their female counter (p. 161). Kaplan Meir estimates for surviving until one's 17th birthday without sexual debut for Black boys at the age of twelve was 0.85 (95% CI: 0.83–0.86), by the age of thirteen was 0.72 (95% CI: 0.700–0.74), by the age of fourteen was 0.58 (95% CI: 0.55–0.60), by the age of fifteen was 0.42 (95% CI: 0.40–0.45), by the age of sixteen was 0.28 (95% CI: 0.25–0.31), and by the age of seventeen was 0.18 (95% CI: 0.16–0.20). These survival estimates were lower than all groups of boys and girls across the selected age groups (see Table 9.1).

Cavazos-Rehg et al. (2009) considered that the higher rates of sexual debut among Black boys did not seem compatible with the ages of sexual debut among Black girls. At the age of twelve, roughly 96% of Black girls survive without sexual debut while only 85% of Black boys do. By the

**Table 9.1** Kaplan Meier (KM) estimates for surviving free of sexual debut through 17th birthday, according to race and gender

Time point (age)	Caucasian		African American		Hispanic*		Asian	
	KM estimate	95% CI	KM estimate	95% CI	KM estimate	95% CI	KM estimate	95% CI
<b>Males</b>								
12.0	0.97	0.96–0.97	0.85	0.83–0.86	0.94	0.93–0.95	0.97	0.95–0.98
13.0	0.94	0.93–0.95	0.72	0.70–0.74	0.88	0.87–0.89	0.95	0.93–0.97
14.0	0.89	0.88–0.89	0.58	0.55–0.60	0.77	0.76–0.79	0.93	0.90–0.94
15.0	0.79	0.78–0.81	0.42	0.40–0.45	0.64	0.62–0.66	0.87	0.84–0.90
16.0	0.65	0.64–0.67	0.28	0.25–0.31	0.47	0.45–0.49	0.80	0.75–0.84
17.0	0.47	0.45–0.49	0.18	0.16–0.20	0.31	0.29–0.33	0.67	0.61–0.73
<b>Female*</b>								
12.0	0.98	0.98–0.99	0.97	0.96–0.98	0.98	0.98–0.98	0.98	0.97–0.99
13.0	0.97	0.96–0.97	0.92	0.90–0.93	0.96	0.95–0.96	0.98	0.96–0.99
14.0	0.93	0.92–0.93	0.83	0.81–0.85	0.90	0.89–0.91	0.96	0.94–0.97
15.0	0.82	0.80–0.83	0.66	0.63–0.68	0.78	0.76–0.79	0.91	0.88–0.93
16.0	0.63	0.61–0.65	0.45	0.43–0.48	0.59	0.57–0.61	0.85	0.81–0.88
17.0	0.42	0.40–0.45	0.26	0.23–0.29	0.41	0.39–0.43	0.72	0.64–0.78

\*Includes multiracial Hispanic

age of fourteen, roughly 83% of Black girls have not had sex while only 58% of Black boys report they have not. While 26% of Black girls tend to delay their sexual debut at the age of seventeen, only 18% of Black boys managed the same. Cavazos-Rehg et al. (2009) explain, “From the data, we are unable to identify the sexual partners of these adolescents. Black girls tend to have a later sexual debut than their male counterparts. However, because far fewer female adolescents have had a sexual debut

at a very early age, we can speculate that these young African-American males were exaggerating reports of sexual debut or are having their first sexual intercourse with older females” (p. 161). It is important to note that the selected ages of Cavazos-Rehg et al. (2009) are under the age of consent which is 18 in most states in the United States. The early sexual debuts of these Black boys would likely constitute statutory rape or some form of sexual coercion if their sexual partners are indeed older women or girls who may be slightly older peers.

In a more recent study by French, Tilghman, and Malebranche (2015) analyzing sexual coercion among high school and college male students in the United States, the authors found that Black men from their cohort of 284 males reported the highest rates of sexual manipulation (43%) and statutory rape (67%) compared to white, Asian, Latino, and multiracial male (p. 47). In a subsequent study, French, Teti, Suh, and Serafin (2019) found that racialized men sexually abused by women of color were more likely not only to engage in risky sexual behaviors but “more likely to endorse stereotypes of hypersexuality about women in their racial group” (p.8). Being sexually victimized by Black women from a racial or ethnic minority enables racialized boys to more easily believe that these women are aggressive, untrustworthy, promiscuous, or dangerous as a way to make sense of the sexual violence they suffered. French et al. (2019) show that racialized males internalize the harm that women of their groups enact against them. The negative racialized ideations of the society, specifically the various myths of racial inferiority, are assimilated by the young racialized male as a way to explain the harm non-white inflict on them. It is important to understand how previous sexual abuse conditions intra-racial conflicts among young men and women. Often current works analyzing Black masculinity insist that Black boys hold negative stereotypes about Black women because of sexism or patriarchy (hooks 2004). None of that work considers that some Black boys hold negative views of Black women because of the sexual abuse and coercion they experience throughout their lives from female caretakers and peers.

Our Curry and Utley (2018) study suggested that the lack of a nationally representative sample to obtain prevalence data provided the opportunity to utilize qualitative interviews with Black men discussing their early sexual experiences to better contextualize the harms of such

experiences throughout their lives. Our study selected five narratives from “a larger collection of 60-min semi-structured phone interviews with 27 black men over the age of 18 who were asked to define a sexual experience, describe their early sexual experiences, and discuss how those sexual experiences impacted them as adults” (Curry and Utley 2018: 215). These Black men were from various parts of the United States and held various occupations. They answered a call for interviews on Black men’s early sexual experiences which was advertised on multiple social media platforms and academic discussion forums. Like the larger quantitative studies, the sample showed both early peer exploration (Curry and Utley 2020) and adult sexual abuse of minors. In the stories describing the sexual abuse of minors, the perpetrators were predominately identified as older women or caretakers. Our testimonies showed that Black males had various experiences of sexual violation and abuse as children. Even when they felt or knew something was wrong at the ages of three, or nine, they were never taught to think of themselves as victims of sexual violence. There was simply no cultural script that Black boys had access to that allowed them to understand older women and girls making them perform cunnilingus against their will or making them penetrate their vaginas as an act of rape or sexual violence. In some cases, Black boys were abused by older boys or white teenagers. While the male perpetrators were more easily identified as wrong, the Black boys did not see the violence as an act of rape. In several of those interviews, the Black male did not disclose the events of their abuse that happened before the age of ten in some cases until there were well within their thirties. The suppression of the trauma associated with these sexual violations had a profound effect on how the subjects of our study perceived sex as adults and their ability and willingness to trust women in relationships.

## Risk Factors and Challenges

Black boys are placed in multiple negating social contexts in the United States (Curry 2017a, b; Kitossa 2021). The relative isolation of Black males through downward economic mobility, mass incarceration, police

homicide, and domestic abuse compared to other race-sex groups conditions their societal vulnerability to the will of other more powerful and recognizable groups (Curry 2018a; Smith et al. 2020). The negative stigmas associated with Black boys make their recognition as victims of abuse and sexual violence difficult for Americans regardless of racial or ethnic background (Curry and Utley 2018; Curry 2017a, b). Across all the available studies, the evidence showed that Black boys are sexually vulnerable to men and women as well as older boys and girls. From the perspective of the Black boy victims, it cannot be overlooked that there was an inability of Black boys to recognize themselves as victims of rape and child sexual abuse until much later in life. While the disclosure of child sexual abuse among men often occurs later in life for various reasons (Alaggia and Millington 2008), the reticence of Black boys must be contextualized within ongoing and daily negations of Black male life and the over-representation of Black males in death. While the disbelief of males as sexual victims is common throughout American society as well as the very institutions created to treat and reassure victims of sexual violence (Hlavka 2016), the violence inflicted upon the Black male child stems from a degradation—an imposed devolution of his kind—which insists as a Black male he is nothing more than the pathologies other assert about him. He is thought to be the cause of his suffering. His existence dooms him to suffer within the disbelief that he is injured by the acts of violence others commit against him. This creates an immense problem for the public health scholar and social worker who would attempt to develop interventions to remedy this problem.

Child sexual abuse literature rarely engages how racism and systemic oppression affect the child victim. Lisa Fontes (1995) was one of the first child sexual abuse researchers to introduce the idea of studying child sexual abuse within an eco-systemic approach that recognized the interplay between “individual, familial, cultural, and societal factors” (p. 1). “Although researchers sometimes consider race and culture as demographic labels, culture as a complex web of behaviors, values, and attitudes has hardly been discussed in relation to sexual abuse,” writes Fontes (1995: 2). Fontes maintained that previous research primarily understood race and ethnic markers as demographic labels of targeted

populations, not an indicator of cultural meaning or societal location. Consequently, previous research failed to understand how different cultural meanings and definitions of abuse were operating under systems of oppression that did not trust the police or social workers to remedy the abusive conditions. The deleterious effect of maleness on the life chances of Black boys requires researchers to think more carefully about how Black men and boys make sense of a world that primarily depicts them as violent deviants and denies their ability to be victimized by violence other than death.

Early explorations of Black and Latino populations' perception of child sexual abuse from men and women did not consider the possibility that boys were regularly victimized or that Black boys could be victimized by women (Fontes et al. 2011). Racial scripts in the Black community regularly depict the sexual victimization of Black boys as rare, a white problem that does not affect Black children, especially Black male children (McGuffey 2008). Abney and Priest (1995) similarly observed that:

significant segments of the African American community have traditionally taken a twofold thematic variation of "see no evil, hear no evil." On one hand, sexually abusing children is something other ethnic groups do. On the other hand, if, in fact, African Americans do engage in incestuous acts or other sexually abusive behavior with children, it is not to be talked about because it is thought that acknowledging sexual child abuse will be used in some damnable way to further exclude African Americans from the American mainstream. (Abney and Priest 1995: 11)

This culture of silence and unbelievability is especially disadvantageous to collect data, stories, and design meaningful interventions into the sexual victimization of Black boys. The distrust of police, social workers, and academic researchers who have all historically harmed the Black community makes remedying and understanding the dynamics of Black male victims of child sexual abuse a formidable task.

## Understanding the Overdetermination of Black Males as Predators and Incapable of Sexual Victimization

The history of American racism has not only involved the demonization of Blackness as inferior to whiteness but also created sexual narratives legitimated by “science” that established Black males as sexual predators. In the 1800s, ethnologists asserted that Black males were primitive beasts who were less evolved than white men. This perception that Black males were incapable of developing proper manhood and patriarchal virtues such as chivalry, sexual restraint, and paternalism meant that Black men were to remain devolved and trapped by their insatiable sexual appetites (Curry 2017a, b; Stein 2015). This was an evolutionary pattern of sexual development that was codified in the very being of Black males. In the 1890s, ethnologists termed the sexual insatiability of Black males *furor sexualis*. George Frank Lydston, a noted nineteenth-century physician explained that there was not “any difference from a physical standpoint between the sexual furor of the negro and that which prevails among the lower animals...the furor sexualis in the negro resembles similar sexual attacks in the bull and elephant, and the running amuck of the Malay race” (McGuire and Lydston 1893, p. 17). Such theories were not uncommon at the dawn of the twentieth century. William Lee Howard, a well-regarded sexologist, once wrote that:

With the advent of puberty the Negro shows his genic instincts to be the controlling factor of his life. These take hold of his religion, control his thoughts, and govern his actions. I the increase of rape on white women we see the explosion of a long train of antecedent preparation. The attacks on defenseless white women are evidences of racial instincts that are about as amenable to ethical culture as is the inherent odor of the race. When education will reduce the large size of the Negro’s penis... then will it also be able to prevent the African’s birthright to sexual madness and excess. (1903: 424)

The description of Black male sexuality as a racial and primitive instinct is thought to be a fact of racial differentiation scientifically proven by



nineteenth-century ethnologists. Early twentieth-century social scientists merely extended these assumptions through ethnographic studies of Black populations across the world. For example, the British psychologist Havelock Ellis argued in *The Psychology of Sex Volume III* (1913) that primitive peoples have breeding seasons like most animals. However, the peculiar sexual development among Negroes gave Black men a novel sexual power to delay ejaculation. According to Ellis (1913), Black males had slower ejaculation because “of his blunter nervous system which takes three times as long to reach emission as the white man” (p. 271). This made him a better lover for the white woman, but also a sensual being designed primarily for sexual excess and incapable of sexual restraint.

The sociological account of poor Black American culture insisted upon the predator nature of the Black male adolescent. As a creature driven almost solely by external stimuli and immediate gratification, poor Black boys in urban environments (i.e., ghettos) were thought to pursue sexual conquests over young girls due to compensatory masculinity (Williams and Holmes 1981). Sociologists and ethnographers believed that the satirical disposition of the young Black men and boys indicated a primordial bio-cultural tendency in less developed racialized males. Subculture of violence scholars insisted that the strong cultural and racial inclination of Black males to use sexual aggression and violence to display masculine prowess was an expression of an antecedent and repetitive trait that could be observed in the sexual activity of Black boys as early as the age of seven in some cases (Hannerz 1969; Rainwater 1970; Curtis 1975). Ira Reiss's (1964) study on the sexual permissiveness of the Negro compared to whites insisted that the racial difference, or more accurately the racial distance, between Blacks and whites, explained why Blacks engaged in premarital sex more easily than whites. Reiss suggested that Blacks were culturally disposed to premarital sexual permissiveness, while whites were a much more adaptable population whose morals could be corrected through church attendance and social environment. Blacks, especially Black men, were simply a more morally debased racial group. Unsurprisingly, he concluded his study with a lesson on Black male sexuality. Reiss (1964) wrote “white women's permissiveness is affected by all the variables investigated [race, church attendance, romantic love, and

frequency of falling in love]; that of Negro men is affected by none of them" (Reiss 1964: 698). Black Americans were thought to not only be more culturally inferior to whites, but sexually permissive than whites because of their primitive and undeveloped moral virtues as a race. Black men were of worry because their lack of moral conscience and sexual insatiability posed a danger to white racial reproduction and white women's safety, but also the rampant impregnating of Black girls and women in slums (Rainwater 1966a, b, 1966a).

Robert Staples (1972) explained that this racist imagery of "Black people as a sexually animated group that is immune to any restraints on its sexual conduct...has inculcated in the public mind a host of myths concerning the sexual behavior of Afro-Americans" (p. 183). Recognizing that much of white sociology's analysis of Black promiscuity was geared toward proving the unamenable sexual behavior of the Black male, Staples (1972) insisted once age was controlled for, larger samples of Blacks were taken Black men (as well as women) were not vastly different from whites. Robert Staples argued that racial differences in sexual activity between whites and Black were not due to some innate racial traits or cultural deficit, but the simple fact that white men and women substituted heavy petting, masturbation, and fellatio for sexual intercourse (Robert, 1972: 185). Staples understood that the attack on lower-class Black men and boys' sexuality was not simply about the class biases of white social scientists, but rather part of a racist program that made the sexual behavior of lower-class Blacks the presumed norm for all Black people in the United States regardless of class background or educational attainment. Recent research has sought to complicate the long-standing view that the earlier sexual debut of Black Americans is simply cultural differences. Biello et al. (2013) does support previous research showing that there is a verifiable Black-white disparity in the age of sexual debut, however, their results suggest that "residential racial segregation may help to explain this disparity" (p. 28). The authors concluded "In hyper-segregated areas, black participants were at increased odds of adolescent first sexual intercourse compared with white people. This racial disparity did not exist in non-hyper-segregated areas" (Biello et al. 2013: 31).

These sexual myths came to define the twentieth-century accounts of Black male sexual development. While one may find the renderings of sexologists such as William Lee Howard a testament to the ignorance of white racist pseudo-science, these theories impacted sociologists, psychologists, criminologists, and feminists well into the 1970s and 1980s when gender theorists were beginning to formulate the systematic accounts of rape and masculinity. Unfortunately, feminist theories offered by Susan Brownmiller's *Against Her Will: Men, Women, and Rape* (1975), and Joyce Williams' and Karen Holmes' *The Second Assault: Rape and Public Attitudes* (1981) would come to define the boundaries of sexual victimization and male sexual predation for the next several decades. Throughout these texts, Black males are depicted as culturally maladjusted predators incapable of civility and defined by sexual pathology and aggression. By depicting Black males, poor young Black boys as sexual predators who used rape and sexual violence to reclaim the manhood lost from racist oppression, these theories bolstered the criminological and carceral logics of the racist American state (Bumiller 2008) to incarcerate and murder young Black men and boys to protect women and girls. This formulation of gender, which placed Black males outside the realm of victimization, became canonized theory and a foundational assumption of intersectional theory (Curry 2021a, b).

Black males are primarily depicted in Black feminist theory as hypersexual threats to women in intimate relationships. Speaking about the aggression of Black working-class men who spend their time on the streets, Patricia Hill Collins (2004) argues: "When joined to understandings of booty as sexuality, especially raw, uncivilized sexuality, women's sexuality becomes the actual spoils of war. In this context, sexual prowess grows in importance as a marker of Black masculinity. For far too many Black men, all that seems to be left to them is access to the booty, and they can become depressed or dangerous if that access is denied. In this scenario, Black women become reduced to sexual spoils of war, with Black men defining masculinity in terms of their prowess in conquering the booty" (p. 151). In *We Real Cool*, bell hooks (2004) similarly warns that intimacy with Black men is a perilous endeavor "Since so many black males, especially young black males, feel that they are living on borrowed time, just waiting to be locked down (imprisoned) or taken

out (murdered), they may as well embrace their fate—kill and be killed” (p. 57). Like the subcultural criminologists before her (Amir 1971; Curtis 1975, 1976), hooks (2004) asserted with no evidence whatsoever that challenges the masculinity of Black men—interrupting the idea they have of themselves from movies as “fearless, insensitive egocentric and invulnerable”—causes them to respond with “anger and sexual predation to maintain their dominator stance” (p. 57). According to these aforementioned theories, Black men and boys are perpetrators of sexual violence against women, not victims of sexual violence by women. This meant that the testimonies and early sexual experiences of Black males documenting statutory rape, sexual coercion, or highly sexual childhood encounters at the hands of a female perpetrator were thought to be the consequences of the young Black boys’ agency and desire for sexual intercourse.

It is not simply that the nineteenth and twentieth centuries created racist and biased pseudo-scientific scholarship depicting Black males negatively, what is of central concern, is how these pseudo-scientific claims concerning Black males are culturally inculcated and conceptually solidified in how academics and the public think about the properties thought to be natural and essential to the bodies claimed under the general idea of “Black maleness.” If Black maleness is thought to be violent or exhibiting sexual excess, then all those bodies that fit that definition are almost intuitively (analytically) asserted to have these properties. Previous research on race and gender theory has referred to this as the failure of the concept, or the inability of our abstractions and general categories of thought to accurately depict groups as they exist in the real world (Curry 2021b). The historical and contemporary demonization of Black males in media, gender theory, and American society (Curry 2017a, b) creates a crisis of thought whereby the very category/abstraction/concept we have of Black maleness is inextricably tied to the pathological excesses believed to be incidental to other bodies or race-sex groups.

What constitutes a sexual violation, an act of sexual violence, or rape against young Black boys has remained a conceptual and sociological problem for over a century among historians, sociologists, and public health scholars in the United States. Only recently have historians begun

to unearth the narratives and archival documents showing that the rape of Black men and boys during slavery and Jim Crow were a normal and regular occurrence in the United States (Foster 2019, 2011; Curry 2017a, b, 2018a, b). Being the kind of body that was assumed to be completely sensual and consequently irrational makes Black males incapable of being seen as victims of sexual violence. The Black brute was invulnerable to sexual violence because rape and pedophilia emanated from his primitive satyriasis (Curry 2017a).

The sexuality of Black males continues to be theorized as hypermasculine and hypersexual, as well as aggressive, immoral, and dangerous (Pass, Benoit and Dunlop 2014). The enduring myths of Black male hypersexuality and promiscuity are not fixed stereotypes or idle ideas about a group. These caricatures of Black boys are dynamic and integral to the interpretive schema of researchers (Pitt and Sanders 2010). Gail Wyatt (1990) once recalled her experience at a symposium on adolescence where a well-known researcher said, “you have to go to the second grade to find adequate samples of Black male virgins to include in research” (Wyatt 1990: 339). As a researcher of Black male sexual vulnerability, it is not uncommon to hear scholars make similar remarks despite being thirty years after Wyatt’s account. As a philosopher, integrating public health perspective or epidemiological findings to theorize the sexual victimization of Black boys is often met with hostility and distrust of data that contradicts the anecdotal experiences of theorists. At a national philosophy conference where I suggested that young Black boys experience rape as young children and suggested the need to track Black male sexual vulnerability into manhood, a female professor said, “You cannot rape Black boys, they always want sex.” These are not simply statements of racial ignorance but indicate the presence of a cultural-disciplinary schema that codifies (or more accurately ontologizes) the invulnerability of the Black male to sexual violence by pathologizing the Black male body (Okello 2022).

The ethnological characterizations of Black men and boys that are routinely dismissed as racist sciences from a long-gone era nonetheless influence our twenty-first-century notions of Black male bodies and sexuality. Like the sexologists of the early twentieth century, contemporary gender theorists, public health scholars presume the Black male

body cannot be harmed by sexual violence in ways that produce negative psychological symptomologies and harm Black boys' socio-cultural development. Working from the assumption that Black boys are anti-social and deviant, and exhibit these deficits throughout their journey toward manhood, researchers often cannot conceptualize what aspect of Black males' personality is harmed by abuse. Whereas other race-sex groups are thought to suffer physical injury and psychological harms that increase the likelihood that they (as a victim of sexual violence) will engage in anti-social behavior, riskier sexual practices, and more interpersonal conflicts with friends, peers, and intimate partners, Black males are assumed to engage in these behaviors without suffering injury or experiencing a traumatic event. Said differently, non-Black male groups are thought to be more civil and socially adjusted than Black men and boys, so the etiology of anti-social behavior and promiscuity for these groups would have to be due to an external event that changes their psychological and behavioral norms. For Black males, anti-sociality and hypersexuality are thought to be endemic traits and ultimately unaffected by early sexual debut, sexual violation, or rape/made to penetrate violence.

## Conclusion

The small amount of published research on Black boys and sexual assault makes evidence-based analyses of child sexual assault exploratory at best, however, the increasing interest and recognition of Black male sexual victimization make further research necessary to any efforts attempting to decrease sexual violence within Black communities in the United States. Despite the evidence, academia remains resistant to the study of Black boys as victims of child sexual abuse and sexual violence. Theories that should be evaluated for their explanatory power given the sociological, epidemiological, and historical evidence available to researchers are politicized and moralized as sacred and beyond contestation. Accepting that Black boys and young Black males are victims of sexual violence at rates comparable to their female counterparts upset the asymmetrical accounts of gendered violence found throughout various

disciplines. While liberal academics are more willing to accept that Black men and boys could be victimized by other men (Curry 2019), there is outright hostility to theorizing the consequences of female perpetration of sexual violence against Black boys. The data and stories of Black male survivors show that Black boys are suffering and hurting. Regardless of the resistance to or outright hatred of this research, public health scholars and ethicists have a responsibility to lessen the harm experienced by vulnerable groups.

Public health scholars would better serve Black boys victimized by child sexual abuse if Black males were educated about their risk to sexual abuse and sexual violence more generally (Curry and Utley 2018). Black males currently have no publicly available materials educating them about sexual violence and child sexual abuse. Among many Black Americans, the sexual victimization of Black boys is thought to be a minor problem that occurs at the hands of men, not women or older girls. The risks and associated consequences of child sexual abuse and statutory rape need to be provided to young Black boys as early as six to nine years old in some cases. Parents also need to be educated about the characteristics of perpetrators who given the available evidence tend to be female caretakers or older female peers. This pattern of female perpetration also holds over many Black men's adult life since roughly 80% of made to penetrate violence against men are committed by women (Smith et al., 2017, p. 32). The deleterious mental health effects of child sexual abuse are compounded by the widespread aversion and fear white Americans have of Black men. Black boys are rarely believed to be victims of sexual violence. The myths of hypersexuality and sexual predation are still part of the American cultural schema. Consequently, Black boys will be depicted as compliant at best, or at worse the sexual aggressor. This means that public health officials and counselors need to specifically engage and unlearn the misandric stereotypes associated with Black males to effectively treat them (Smith et al. 2020).

Black boys need protection from sexual assaults by women and girls as well as other men and boys. To acknowledge these forms of sexual vulnerability requires massive resocialization programs involving schools, universities, social workers, doctors, and scholars working on sexual violence and child sexual abuse. This is not only about recognizing the

vulnerability of Black boys but accepting that their victimization fundamentally challenges our cultural schema which not only maintains that Black boys are not victims of sexual abuse, but that Black women and girls are not perpetrators of sexual violence either. For academics, grant awarding agencies and universities must insist on inclusive research practices that not only include male victims of sexual violence and rape but address the racial variation in prevalence throughout men's lives. Despite Black boys having the earliest sexual debut of all racial groups in the United States, and Black men (over the age of 18) having the highest rates of sexual victimization over a twelve-month period, Black males remain absent from ongoing research and recent publications engaging sexual violence. The silence surrounding the statutory rape and sexual abuse of Black boys must end if scholars and public health practitioners aim to truly help all victims of child sexual abuse.

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