CULTIVATING A PROFESSIONAL POSE:

Collegiate Black Men and Professional Self-Presentations

Brandon A. Jackson

Department of Sociology and Criminal Justice and the African and African American Studies Program, University of Arkansas

Abstract

In this article I investigate how a group of Black men in college worked together to learn and practice the professional pose—professional styles and behaviors meant to navigate professional settings. I argue that these behaviors were adopted to preempt any potential discriminatory acts and would ideally disassociate them from the negative labels associated with Black men. Specifically, I examine how leaders of the group Uplift and Progress (UP) prepared other members and recruits by teaching them how to present themselves as professional Black men who were familiar with White middle-class practices. To further encourage their success, group members sought out opportunities to practice these styles in public. By cultivating this professional pose, they were able to claim their place at a White institution and distance themselves from the unfavorable stereotypes of Black men. This strategy also bolstered their reputation on campus and would ideally prepare them for the predominantly White workplace.

Keywords: Race, College, Class, Professionalism, Black Men, Social Mobility

INTRODUCTION

Previous research has described the strategies Black college students and professionals use to respond to the negative images associated with their race (Evans and Moore, 2015; Feagin and McKinney, 2003; Feagin and Sikes, 1995; Harlow 2003; Lacy 2007; McCabe 2009; Moore 2007; Solorzano et al., 2000; Wilkins 2012; Wingfield 2007). In essence, these performances are meant to show others (usually White colleagues and peers) that they are capable, qualified, and familiar with White middle-class behaviors. In doing so, these professionals and students are hoping to counteract any potential microaggressions, discrimination, and other acts of racism that belittle their achievements, and suggest that they are not fully suited for their current position.

But less is known about how these approaches are taught and practiced. Instead, the dominant line of inquiry examines such behaviors in action, as opposed to their preparation. For instance, Karyn Lacy's work (2007) reveals how middle-class Black adults may pay particular attention to what they are wearing when out in public in order to reflect their class status and avoid being stereotyped; however, we know little about how such practices are honed and developed. This project builds on this tradition by examining how these behaviors and strategies are collaboratively taught and prepared.

Specifically, I examine how a group of Black men in college worked together to learn and practice what I refer to as the professional pose—professional styles and behaviors adopted to navigate professional settings. As a group of collegiate Black men with professional aspirations, Uplift and Progress, or UP members (all proper names are pseudonyms) collaborated to refine these behaviors that would ideally undercut acts of discrimination and disassociate them from the negative labels associated with Black men. Instead of acquiescing to stereotypes, members collaborated with one another to present themselves in a different light—as a group of professional and respectable Black men. This strategy bolstered their reputation on campus and would hopefully prepare them for the predominantly White workplace as such behaviors and styles were meant to counter potential prejudices and diffuse negative stereotypes.

Theoretical Background

Black men must cope with the countless negative consequences of racism in the workplace. Black male full-time wage and salary workers can expect to see about 75% of what their White male colleagues earn in the workplace (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2018). Middle-class Black workers are subject to discriminatory firing, blocked mobility, and daily harassment (Roscigno et al., 2012). Drawing on a sample of verified workplace discrimination cases, Sherry Mong and Vincent Roscigno (2010) find that Black men faced discrimination in hiring, were held to higher performance standards, were blocked from promotion opportunities, were sanctioned more harshly for policy violations, and dealt with workplace harassment, including racist jokes and being left out of meetings. Having to maneuver this minefield of racism requires many different strategies. I refer to these practices as the professional pose.

I define the professional pose as styles, behaviors, and practices adopted by African Americans to navigate middle-class White professional settings, such as the workplace or college campus. This includes adopting certain styles of dress and speech, avoiding potentially racist interactions, downplaying acts of racism, and withholding emotional responses, among other acts (Evans and Moore, 2015; Feagin and McKinney, 2003; Feagin and Sikes, 1995; Harlow 2003; Lacy 2007; Moore 2007; Wilkins 2012; Wingfield 2007, 2013). Much like script-switching in social settings (Lacy 2007) the professional pose is meant to showcase one's capability in work and work-related environments. These acts are meant to avoid association with the damaging stereotypes of African Americans that may prevent one's social and economic mobility. In other words, by showing that they are familiar with middle-class White practices when in these surroundings, socially mobile African Americans hope to receive unbiased treatment, or at least avoid negative reactions, from Whites.

Stereotypes and Controlling Images

Controlling images are stereotypes that are so pervasive that they have social consequences for African-Americans (Collins 2000, 2004). Patricia Hill Collins explains

that throughout American history, controlling images of African Americans have been used to justify their discrimination. She analyzes popular culture and media noting two dominant themes of Black masculinities. One controlling image is that of the working-class Black man depicted as an athlete or criminal. This idea perpetuates the idea that Black men are dangerous, hypermasculine, and aggressive. This image of the working-class thug may be used to justify differential treatment for Black boys and men.

Controlling images of Black men shape their experiences in both school and work settings. The result is often microaggressions and other acts of discrimination from authority figures that depict these men as dangerous, hypermasculine, or as those who don't belong in a particular environment. In elementary schools, for example, negative images of Black men may shape how teachers view and treat their Black male students. Teachers and staff members may show little faith in these Black boys' success, and as a result, severely punish them for minor offenses. These students may be viewed as "having jail cells with their name[s] on it" (Ferguson 2001, p. 221). At the collegiate level Black male students are often harassed by police officers who claim that these students 'fit the description' (McCabe 2009; Smith et al., 2007). One study cited a Black male student who expressed disbelief that he and his friends were threatened with jail time for a residence hall liquor violation, while a group of White students were only issued a citation for the same offense (McCabe 2009). Other Black men reported that campus police would harass them to either ask for their identification, force them to leave a particular area that is commonly used by other students, or question their motives as suspicious persons when reported in the area (Smith et al., 2007). Depictions of Black men in groups as gang members have caused Black male fraternities to suffer comparisons to street gangs (Hughey 2008). For these Black students, the larger cultural images of Black men far too frequently led to negative personal experiences.

Within the labor market, employers often believe that Black men lack the appropriate attitude and appearance that warrant employment opportunities, promotions, and management positions (Feagin and Sikes, 1995; Waldinger and Lichter, 2003; Wingfield 2013).[1] Further, employers have been found to equate Black men with the inner city, poverty, and criminality (Kirschenman and Neckerman, 1991; Smith, et al., 2007). In white-collar careers, Black men must frequently deal with the effects of tokenism (Kanter 1977; Wingfield 2013). Due to the few Black men in these settings, they often face a higher level of scrutiny as they are seen as representatives of their entire race (Wingfield 2007 2013). These controlling images are often used by others to discriminate against Black men in the workplace.

Controlling images are so extensive that inconsistencies in these images can give rise to prejudices and microaggressions nonetheless. Work on Black professionals has noted the "flower blooming in the winter effect," (Bell and Nkomo 2001, p. 145), or the "exceptional negroes," (Wingfield 2013, p. 45) label often given to Black professionals who do not fit the stereotype of the incompetent worker. In other words, when Black professionals are successful at their job, they are often met with microaggressions that suggest they are the exception to the rule, as opposed to the stereotyped norm. Despite this racially-based harassment and discrimination, Black men and women continue to try to resist these controlling images.

Resisting Controlling Images

When thinking about how to respond to these transgressions, African Americans consider the "emotional, professional, or material costs of responding too aggressively," (Lamont et al., 2016, p. 115). As such, potential responses range from downplaying acts of racism, concealing one's true feelings, and avoiding self-blame for Whites'

prejudice and discrimination (Evans and Moore, 2015; Feagin and McKinney, 2003; Harlow 2003; Wilkins 2012; Wingfield 2010). Michèle Lamont and her coauthors (2016) find that though the type of racist incidents middle-class and working-class African Americans encounter is similar, those in middle-class are often subjected to stereotypes related to being low-income or poorly educated.

In response, Black professionals present themselves as competent and professional to avoid being associated with such stereotypes (see Feagin and Sikes, 1994; Lacy 2007; Lamont et al., 2016; Moore 2008; Wingfield 2007). Middle-class Black adults may "script-switch," (Lacy 2007, p. 88), or show that they are familiar with middle-class behaviors and lifestyles by temporarily adopting behaviors that will not provoke White antagonism. This includes dressing up while in public to reflect, or emphasize, their current class status, and monitoring their speech and mannerisms. Further, managing the self by "projecting an image of oneself that is positive or conform to out-group norms," may also be a useful strategy (Fleming et al., 2012, p. 408). Containing one's emotions and role distancing to avoid investing one's ego while dealing with racist remarks are two approaches that may be used. These responses have become a necessity for upwardly mobile Black workers as controlling images of African Americans depict them as unworthy of middle-class respectability (Feagin 2006; Feagin and Sikes, 1994).

Recent research suggests that some collegiate Black men present themselves in ways that resonate with the image of Black professional men by adopting pro-school attitudes and developing strategies to cope with discrimination. For example, by utilizing a range of emotional strategies to downplay racism, some Black men in college distance themselves from the "angry Black man" stereotype and frequently view their college experience as positive (Wilkins 2012). One study found that high achieving collegiate Black men felt that their peers respected their leadership and services to the Black campus community (Harper 2004). Further, studies have shown that Black men in college associated success in school and their future careers as true marks of manhood (Ford 2011; Harris et al., 2011). Often collegiate Black men alluded to continuing the tradition set by admirable Black men who were willing to sacrifice their time and efforts for the betterment of the Black community. Although they were aware of the pressure to adopt the thug image, they nonetheless focused on graduating and becoming "a provider, a leader…a positive role model…family oriented, [and] spiritually centered," (Ford 2011, p. 53). Another group of Black men felt that their success in college would lead to financial success in their future careers (Harris et al., 2011). Thus, research finds that many collegiate Black men develop strategies geared toward professional success.

These behaviors are not limited to one's social class; we can see a similar pattern among Black men that are not college educated. This is illustrated by the Black men observed in Jay MacLeod's *Ain't No Makin' It* (1995). Here, MacLeod describes a group of young Black men who "are at a disadvantage unless they can cultivate a style of social interaction that puts employers and customers at ease" (p. 227). In fact, the young Black men that were most successful among this group were the ones who were best able to respond at the microlevel and interact with their White coworkers. These young Black men had to adopt certain behaviors to present themselves as familiar with middle-class White styles and behaviors. Joleen Kirschenman and Kathryn Neckerman (1991) echo these findings, noting that, "Black job applicants, unlike their White counterparts, must indicate to employers that the stereotypes do not apply to them…by adopting a middle-class style of dress, manner, and speech," (1991, p. 231). Prudence Carter (2005) adds that the high school students in her study believed that Black and Latino men were less likely to be hired than their female counterparts as men were

seen as more threatening and less capable of presenting themselves professionally. All of the research above suggests that to be successful young Black men must be aware of the subtle ways that organizations dominated by Whites put them at a disadvantage, and therefore develop self-presentation strategies that are palatable to middle-class Whites.

These particular behaviors and strategies can be viewed as an exercise in respectability politics. This term describes how marginalized groups work to show those in the dominant population that they are indeed worthy of respect and able to adopt the dominant group's values and behaviors. This also includes policing other in-group members to ensure their adherence to respectable behaviors. At the same time, these strategies of behavior and appearance do little to address systematic discrimination. Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham first introduced the term in *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880–1920* (1993). In this work, she discusses Black women's church and social organization efforts to promote and serve Black communities in order to be seen as respectable. These activities "had two audiences: African Americans, who were encouraged to be respectable, and White people, who needed to be shown that African Americans could be respectable," (Harris 2003). Indeed, there is a long history of African Americans working to show Whites that they are not the negative stereotypes that have been thrust upon them.

Although scholars increasingly recognize the prevalence of strategies used by socially mobile Black Americans to avoid stereotypical labeling, less is known about how they may collaborate with others to cultivate these professional presentations, behaviors, and styles. By working together, Uplift and Progress members sought to represent themselves to the outside world as a unified group of respectable and dignified Black men. In doing so, the men hoped to equip themselves for the professional workforce. In sum, this study aims to highlight the process of how Black male students collaborate to learn and practice professional behaviors.

Setting and Methods

The research site for this study is Maxwell Central University (MCU). A relatively diverse campus (roughly 9% of the degree-seeking undergraduates identified as Black or African American in the Fall 2012 school year), Maxwell Central is a large public university located in the Southeast (School Website 2013). During my observations Uplift and Progress (UP), was a national organization located on six college campuses. My research took place with MCU's chapter, which is both the founding chapter and the largest in terms of membership. Founded in the late 1980s, the group claimed a roster of over fifty active members. The majority of group members were from working-class and lower-middle-class backgrounds, although there was a small handful that would admit to growing up solidly middle-class on one end of the spectrum or impoverished on the other. In interviews, roughly half of the men admitted to being raised by two parents and about a quarter of the respondents claim to have grown up in a middle-class neighborhood. Most of the men said they were raised in a working-class or poor neighborhood.

In keeping with their mission statement of erasing negative stereotypes of Black men, UP members sought ways to encourage positive images of Black men. As such, members participated in community service, philanthropic activities, and campus events designed to spark dialogue on socially relevant topics (such as a student-organized roundtable related to gender titled "The Power of Sex," and a discussion on the current state of African Americans). I spent two years with the young men of Uplift and Progress (2009–2011), participating in and observing weekly general body meetings, social events, their twentieth anniversary celebration, events with their sister organization, and the Recruit Education Process (REP).

Brandon A. Jackson

In addition to participating in public events, UP members also held private events for members to help in the group's mission. During REP, membership chairs would lead recruits to the group in a series of classes. These classes, which usually took place over the course of a few weeks in the fall semester, covered topics such as public speaking, job interview prep, dinner etiquette, and professional dress code presentations—all of which were designed to teach recruits and members how to present themselves as professional Black men. Group members believed that these lessons paid off for several members in a variety of ways. For example, many members eventually became presidents of fraternities and other campus groups, members of honor and academic societies, high-ranking members of the student senate, and nominees to Homecoming Court.

While observing UP members, I jotted my fieldnotes in spiral notebooks or my cell phone, depending on practicability. After spending time with the group, I would transform these jottings into full fieldnotes, capturing dialogue, outward appearance, emotional expressions, and other nonverbal cues (Lofland et al., 2006). As a young Black man, my commonalities with group members allowed me to form a relationship with several members. Although I was a few years older than most members, our shared gender, race, and proximity in age allowed us to share many of the same interests. I would often join in their conversations regarding the latest happenings in the NFL or current popular rap artists. Further, as a Ph.D. student, I occupied a role model status. Several UP members planned to attend, or were curious, about graduate school, and would often ask for my insight regarding applying to and attending graduate school. These multiple statuses provided me with a high level of access with the young men.

In addition to fieldwork, I also conducted interviews with seventeen members who were heavily involved in UP. All but one of these meetings took place in my on-campus office; that one took place at the work office of one of the members. On average, interviews lasted about an hour and a half. During interviews I asked members about their life before college, family make up, stereotypes of Black men, their college experiences and career goals, and how their involvement in UP played a role in all of this. Combining interviews with fieldwork provided me with an understanding of how UP members viewed their efforts in learning and promoting their professionalism.

The data was analyzed using NVIVO software. I was immediately struck by UP members' emphasis on professional behaviors and styles. Although they did not always adhere to professional standards, the topic of professionalism and respectable self-presentations was a frequently discussed topic. Making note of these patterns, I later coded for themes regarding professional behaviors, conversations, and so on. This focused coding allowed me to "synthesize and explain larger segments of data," (Charmaz 2006, p. 58). Continuing with grounded theory techniques, I worked to review these initial focused codes and recode them into theoretical codes to "specify possible relationships between categories you have developed in your focused coding" (Charmaz 2006, p. 63). This originally led me to focus on how the men prepare the pose backstage to practice it publicly. But subsequent revisions focused specifically on how the men worked together to perform the pose, privately and publicly, by making use of speaking opportunities, encouraging a professional dress code, and volunteering in public to promote themselves as a group of young professional Black men to audiences on and around campus.

Becoming Professional Black Men

Group members emphasized the necessity of adopting behaviors that would be found acceptable in middle-class White contexts. In doing so, UP leaders made discrimination explicit, highlighting the potential interactions members could face working in

middle-class White contexts. For example, Brad, who would later be elected to the school's student senate, informed the recruits, "You're navigating the White world, you gotta be on point at all times; there is no room for error." UP members were aware of the stereotypes White society held for Black men. To address these issues, UP members taught and practiced appropriate self-presentation strategies that worked at the interpersonal level to help "navigate the White world." To do so UP members worked together to cultivate their professional pose. This included pursuing public speaking opportunities and monitoring one another's dress and appearance. To further encourage their success, group members sought out opportunities to practice these styles in public by volunteering and working with other campus organizations. This strategy boosted their reputation on campus as others recognized the group members as accomplished Black men.

Providing Speaking Opportunities

Group members were concerned with how they conducted themselves publicly. In the workplace, Black employees are often characterized as ill-suited and unprepared for leadership roles (Feagin and Sikes, 1994; Wingfield 2013). This is exacerbated by the tokenism experienced by Black men in the professional workplace. In these workplaces, "the increased attention they bear means their mistakes appear more conspicuous" (Wingfield 2013, p. 40). UP leaders encouraged recruits to avoid such mishaps by finding ways to present themselves as capable and competent. During a candid conversation Tyson explained to me how the group worked to prove stereotypes wrong:

> And that's what we want people to understand…just because we're Black don't mean that we can't live up to your par. I know those stereotypes that they have about Black people, and I just do the opposite. They feel like Black people can't speak properly, [so] when we stand up and we speak, we speak properly.

Indeed, Black workers inability to communicate with customers, clients, and coworkers is an oft-cited stereotype that employers use to explain why Black applicants are not desired as employees (Kirschenman and Neckerman, 1991; Waldinger and Lichter, 2003). UP members' engagement in strategic behaviors served to help members learn how to present themselves in ways that were unlikely to invoke the controlling images of African Americans.

Developing public speaking skills was one method through which members learned to present themselves as professional Black men. One Recruit Education Process (REP) session for recruits was scheduled to have a former student body president (who happened to be a young Black man) address public speaking techniques. Unfortunately, he was unable to make the meeting due to a scheduling conflict. Nonetheless, UP leaders came up with an alternative plan—they would have the recruits debate one another. Five UP members would serve as judges, and the recruits would discuss a number of socially relevant topics (e.g., "Are HBCUs still relevant?" "Is the N-word acceptable in today's society?"). The judges were responsible for critiquing the recruits on both their argument and speaking style. The recruits were split into four groups, given topics, and assigned to be in favor of or opposed to the topics. Next, they were given a few minutes to formulate their arguments.

After a couple of minutes to discuss among themselves, groups were pitted against one another as members from each group took turns presenting their argument. Cameron, the youngest of the recruits, was criticized for swaying and not making eye contact as he spoke. Elgin, a respected recruit, was critiqued for speaking too quickly.

Brandon A. Jackson

On the other hand, Frank, who members often teased for seeming dim, was applauded for speaking with passion and clarity as he paraded around the room doing his best TV lawyer impression while projecting at the top of his lungs. This exercise allowed the community of Black men to work together to practice professional behaviors. When one member was not effective, his brothers would let him know. Similarly, members were applauded by their brothers for proper public speaking techniques. UP members and recruits used behind closed doors occasions like these to help one another understand and prepare behaviors that they hoped would benefit them in the professional workplace. For these men, it was better to be corrected and chastised behind closed doors by fellow group members, than to suffer the professional consequences that come with being sanctioned in the workplace.

But UP members did present some recruits with opportunities to speak in public. One of these moments was during the induction ceremony for the newest recruits. In a room filled with about 100 people, the recruits would be making the transition into full members of UP. In a 90–minute ceremony, a few recruits were asked to speak on their experiences in REP. Ernest spoke about academic excellence, while Drew reflected on communal support. Cole discussed what a fellowship of brothers meant to him, "in conclusion, I think my class represents the concept of brotherhood because they look at me and know I got they back, and I look at them, and I know they got mine." Many members of UP and their sister organization, STRENGTH, also took the time to address the audience. These speeches did not only serve to congratulate the newest UP members on their achievement—they were instances whereby individuals could gain real experience preparing remarks and sharing them in front of others in a professional context. During this solemn occasion, speakers were to dress appropriately, be prepared to speak and do so in a manner that would showcase their qualifications as selected speakers. In other words, this was an occasion to practice and showcase the professional pose.

UP members wanted to respond to such stereotypes that surround Black people's ability to engage and succeed in professional settings. Communicating effectively was one way in which to contradict prejudicial ideas of Black students' and workers' speaking ability. Accordingly, providing spaces for public speaking opportunities were just one way UP leaders guided recruits into adopting professional behaviors and styles.

Sticking to the Dress Code

Another way UP leaders taught recruits about professional self-presentations was through their dress and appearance. In her study of middle-class African Americans in the Washington DC area, Lacy (2007) explains how these adults put effort into their appearance when in public to signal their class status. This exclusionary boundary-work serves to differentiate middle-class Blacks from those in the lower-class. This is meant to "minimize the probability of encountering racial discrimination [by] successfully convey[ing] their middle-class status to White strangers," (p. 75). Drawing similar conclusions, UP leaders worked to teach recruits and other members how to dress for their anticipated class status.

Seasoned UP members often took it upon themselves to teach others to always be aware of their appearance and how they were presenting themselves. It was commonplace to observe members fixing one another's shirt collars or neckties. Members and I continuously offered advice—"V-neck shirts should be worn underneath open collar shirts," "necklaces should not be worn with a shirt and tie," and "lanyard key chains should not hang out of your pocket." At other times, the advice was more practical. During one of the recruits' classes, an UP member encouraged

the recruits to understand the difference between dressing up for casual and festive affairs and dressing for job interviews, "You're Black, you already have a strike against you. The business world is especially White; do you wanna lose your job because you wanna [dress in a causal manner to] make yourself feel better?"

Here, the UP member pointed out the racial inequality that exists in corporate America to emphasize the need for Black employees to take on a professional dress code. In noting the racial differences between them and those who control the business world, the speaker was suggesting that dressing in a professional manner would help the young men avoid embodying negative stereotypes and help them be more attractive to White business leaders. Moreover, dressing like young professionals would show others in the organization that they belong in this world. In making potential racism explicit, UP leaders were instructing others how to counter these possible interactions by adhering to a specific dress code. These lessons were meant to help members prepare themselves for life in middle-class America, a predominantly White institution.

Dress code violations were heavily sanctioned. Often this included light-hearted teasing: "There's a button on that shirt for a reason," or, "Boy you got some taco meat on your chest" (in reference to having one's shirt buttoned low and showing off too much chest hair), and "How you wear tight-ass jeans? Your nuts must be suffocating." Moments like this, where group members teased one another, were typical. The target of the joke would often laugh along with the group, try to defend his fashion choices, or point out fashion flaws among other members. More importantly, violators would correct the fashion faux pas. This teasing was often taken in stride and understood as something that took place among a close group of friends.

At other times, violations could be met with more serious insults. During REP, recruits were often required to attend campus events in a professional dress code. Specifically, they were to wear white shirts and black ties. Simple enough—most recruits understood this as a traditional long-sleeve button-up white shirt and black tie. But one recruit, Victor, violated dress code while attending a campus seminar by wearing a short-sleeve white shirt. Tyson, who as the membership chair was responsible for mentoring the recruits, later told me how this act embarrassed him in front of other student organizations and friends, "Every time he got up to speak, somebody would text me, 'Tyson what are you teaching these boys'…and he kept getting up!" This was especially embarrassing as other students recognized Victor's appearance as a violation of the professional image UP members were known for. Tyson would later harshly scold Victor, bringing him close to tears. As a group, one's mistake was often a reflection of the larger organization. Because Tyson was the membership chair, the recruits' actions, for better or worse, rested on his shoulders. After the initial shock of the moment had passed, it would often be referred to by other recruits (usually with Victor as the butt of jokes). After this incident, Victor, or any other recruits for that matter, no longer wore short-sleeve button-up shirts while attending campus events. Witnessing the potential consequences of dress code violations helped recruits understand professional dress codes.

Other events were seen as chances to stand out in a crowd. For instance, UP members would often dress in their group-sanctioned blazers during campus-wide events in the student union. Like the jackets provided to the winners of the Master's golf tournament, UP members received their blazers during a special ceremony after they became full-fledged UP members. One event that required members to wear their blazers was their Reclamation Day. This event called for all UP members across campus, whether regularly active in the group or not, to show up in the union wearing their blazers. This event accomplished two things: 1) it reaffirmed members' commitment to the group, including those who may have moved on to fraternities, other

student groups, internships, and so on; and 2) this event served as a show of force; several UP members would show up in the union dressed to the nines (including those others may not have known were UP members), capturing other students' attention. The blazers worked like billboards, advertising the young men as a community of professionals. Worn as a sign of pride, the blazers would solicit attention from other students and help increase UP members' status. In doing so, UP members were showing others that they can meet the White middle-class expectations of professionalism, undercutting the prejudicial attitudes that reflect that Black students do not belong at predominantly White college and universities.

Just like the middle-class Black adults described in other works that strived to avoid negative images by monitoring their appearance when in public (Feagin and Sikes, 1994; Lacy 2007), UP members were sure to adhere to a dress code when attending campus events. Braylon, who served as chapter president, explained why these displays were important for group members, "it really helps with the image. It's very uncommon to see a group of Black men looking professional. So that really helps us out as far as gaining publicity." Braylon's comments highlighted the usefulness of a professional dress code as a way to negate negative stereotypes of Black men. Further, although UP members were adopting a businesslike image, his remarks point out that they wanted others to take notice as well, to gain "publicity." In other words, for them, it was important that others recognized that they were not the stereotype.

Volunteering in Public

Practicing the professional pose in public was part of a purposeful strategy employed by UP members, and allowed them to show that, as a group, they were polished, poised and making important contributions to society. As Braylon's acknowledgment above illustrates, UP members were hoping others would notice and approve of their professionalism. In turn, by keenly creating opportunities to present themselves, they were able to solicit positive feedback that affirmed their pose.

One strategy used to practice this professional image involved volunteering for community service opportunities and highlighting their philanthropic efforts. Similar to the Black church women in Higginbotham's work (1993), UP members hoped these activities would bring a certain level of respect to members. Although these activities are not typically labeled professional behaviors, they did help bring attention to UP members' professionalism. For starters, by participating in community service activities, members promoted the image of Black men who cared about and took care of their community. Acts such as mentoring children and participating in neighborhood cleanup events do not elicit images of thugs and criminals. At one particular cleanup site, an elderly Black woman stepped out onto her porch, curious as to who this group (Uplift and Progress was joined by their sister organization STRENGTH) of young Black people infiltrating her neighborhood were. After a few members of UP and STRENGTH spoke to her briefly to explain who they were and what they were doing, she thanked them. Taking part in community service activities only helped to bring attention to their overall professionalism.

Community service events were also advertised to those who could not witness their work first-hand. During one of the group's weekly general body meetings, members held a vote to donate money to a fellow campus organization dedicated to aiding the victims of Hurricane Katrina. After a vote to confirm their decision, Craig, an older member of the group, stood up to add, "maybe we can have a presentation at the 20th Anniversary Banquet." The group nodded in agreement; they were to publicly donate aid money during their upcoming anniversary banquet.

After a late start, the banquet eventually got underway. When it came time to offer their donation, members began by presenting a slide show of their service trip to New Orleans that took place a year prior. The slides were backed by a song by rapper Lil Wayne dedicated to New Orleans and Hurricane Katrina. The group strategically decided to use the banquet, which was an event open to guests, to showcase their community service work, which extended beyond state borders. The group often spoke of this trip to New Orleans, priding themselves on how, according to Clyde and Braylon, they were, "the first out-of-state African American male group to come to New Orleans solely to help out with post-Katrina rebuilding," (during my time with the group, UP members also took service trips to Washington, D.C. and Memphis, Tennessee). By presenting their good deeds to a larger group of people, UP members were able to showcase themselves in a positive light. Though potential antagonists might assume that this level of commitment is uncommon, UP members' consistent efforts were designed to make this behavior seem typical.

UP members wanted to present themselves as respectable Black men in front of wide audiences of students. To do this, UP members would host a variety of events meant to promote this image, such as an annual charity dinner that took place on campus, and seminars that sought to address social topics and issues relevant to students. These activities showed that as a group of Black men, UP members didn't do a few good deeds here and there, but that the professional pose was part of their identity.

To reach students, UP leaders would frequently inform recruits on different strategies to attract students to their events. For instance, during one REP session, the recruits were updating their membership chairs, Tyson and Kendrick, on their upcoming planned events: "We're planning on meeting with a White sorority tomorrow for a possible event." "Don't make it a social," Tyson told them, "if y'all do that y'all will be boosting up again; we haven't done stuff with White people in a while." As they had recently hosted a social event, Tyson explained to the recruits that they had to do more than just host social events with other groups. It would seem then, that Tyson was more interested in the recruits conducting more activities that would promote their professional selves. He smiled as the recruits informed him of their plans to host a seminar on African American ethnic identity, a leadership workshop, and their community service and fundraising activities.

"In the future, when you want other organizations to support you, you should send them invitation letters." Clyde then added, "You need to create a purpose statement and then place it on your letters." Tyson continued, "[Other] groups and organizations bring their own crowd [to attend UP's events]; send invites to other groups."

By working with a White sorority on a non-social event, this would be an opportunity for a more diverse group of students to become familiar with UP. The events usually hosted by UP members were primarily attended by Black and Latino students. Therefore, this could potentially be a chance for White students to discover the upstanding Black men of UP. By inviting a broad group of student organizations to their events, UP would be able to showcase their positive qualities to a wide array of students, thereby extending their reputation. And sending formal invitation letters with a statement of purpose would hopefully remove them from stereotypical images other White students may have of a student group of Black men and instead promote the group's professionalism. These strategies—inviting new groups of students, planning non-social events (such as seminars), and sending formal invitations—worked to bolster the group's reputation. This reputation lent credibility to UP's efforts in cultivating their professional pose.

The credibility of adopting a professional pose could also be seen by the numbers of young Black men that sought to join the organization semester after semester.

Many men spoke highly of the reputation afforded to UP as a group. For instance, every fall members held an informational meeting for young men interested in joining Uplift and Progress. At one meeting, the young men were asked to stand to introduce themselves and mention why they were interested in joining. One-by-one the men stood up and shared their views: "I hear good things about UP," "I want UP to shape me into a better individual," "I see what it has done for my roommate and all my good friends last year," "You rarely see a group of Black men come together to achieve one goal and I wanna be a part of that." When I asked Edward why he wanted to join UP he responded, "Most of the Black men that I've seen that were doing things were UP [members]. All those successful Black men were in UP." Tyson would tell me that the group was held in high esteem by other students as well, "that's just where the organization comes in. Because if you hear about UP, most of the time [other students] be like 'oh they're leaders on campus, they're this, they're professionals.'"

But the group's reputation was not limited to the minds of students. UP's biggest promotion probably came from one of Maxwell Central University's associate deans, who spoke at the informational meeting about UP's dedication to academic achievement. Pointing at statistics regarding Black men and college completion, he informed the room that UP members knew "how to get the job done," before urging the men to reach out to other Black men who needed guidance. Because of what they've seen and heard members do, many viewed Uplift and Progress as a respectable organization that could move young Black men beyond the controlling images that were placed upon them.

As part of their efforts to preempt prejudice, Uplift and Progress members made an effort to seek out opportunities to practice professional behaviors in front of audiences. UP members were able to perfect their behaviors and receive feedback on their practices by highlighting their professionalism, dress code, and community service efforts. As evidence of the effectiveness of their endeavors, UP members gained a certain level of respect from other students, potential members, and the larger campus community. In doing so, members displayed their commitment as students and professionals, bringing attention to their inclusion on campus. By presenting themselves as a group of professional Black men, these men distanced themselves from the unfavorable stereotypes of Black men and instead were seen as examples of Black male success.

DISCUSSION

Members of Uplift and Progress worked together to teach, learn, and display their professional behaviors and styles intended to assist them in professional settings. By adopting the professional pose, UP members were able to show others that they were familiar with the middle-class behaviors and styles expected by Whites in professional settings, and not the thugs and criminals depicted in the media. Leaders of Uplift and Progress sought to teach recruits how to appear professional by cultivating their professional pose. This included encouraging particular behaviors by promoting public speaking opportunities and monitoring one another's dress and appearance. The men also pursued opportunities to highlight their professionalism to others through their community service efforts. This allowed them to hone behaviors and receive feedback on the effectiveness of their practices. The positive reputation they were able to maintain on campus served as evidence of the success of the professional pose. Ideally, group members would be able to take these behaviors with them into the workplace.

An effort to engage in respectability politics, the professional pose helped Uplift and Progress members show that they could adhere to professional standards while avoiding stereotypical behaviors. Aware of the power of racism, group members policed

one another and exhibited to outsiders their sense of professionalism. As a strategy to avoid prejudice and stigmatization, respectability politics is not new. In today's times, just like in the past, the college campus and professional worksites remain largely White-dominated spaces. As a response, members of UP learned how to interact in a way that served to undercut discriminatory messages that campus life was for White students. By offering a public display of their professionalism, the men worked to demonstrate that they do fit into and belong in White institutions; the cultural ideas regarding Black male achievement that lead to discrimination are thus weakened (or at least the men believed so). The professional pose demonstrated, as Tyson put it, that these Black men could "live up to your par." Socially mobile Black adults often find themselves doing the work of showing that they are indeed worthy of participating in these institutions.

Although UP members maintained that their goal was to undermine negative cultural stereotypes of Black men, it is debatable whether or not their emphasis on presenting themselves as professional accomplished this. The primary reason for this has to do with where controlling images typically stem from—White minds, institutions, and media. This, as Joe Feagin notes, is one way in which the White racial frame works (2013). The White racial frame is defined as "an overarching White worldview that encompasses a broad and persisting set of stereotypes…" (2013, p. 3). It also "shapes action and thinking in everyday practice," (p. 91). As such, regardless of intentions, when UP members presented themselves as professional, it may very well lead White outsiders to view them as token exceptions, which may lead to microaggressions nonetheless (Bell and Nkomo, 2001; Wingfield 2013). The White racial frame does not allow African Americans as a group to step outside of those negative stereotypes that have for too long shaped American race relations. So while attempting to be seen as a professional and working to avoid stereotypical images may help individuals avoid negative labels, it may also lead to microaggressions like "you're so articulate," or "you're not like the other Black students." Hence, the problem with controlling images; they're so pervasive that individuals are often in a "damned if you do, damned if you don't" scenario—reflect the image (consciously or unconsciously) and you are the stereotype or avoid it and become the exception. Thus, while the professional pose may help prevent overt mistreatment, acts of racism may still arise as the negative group stereotypes remain.

This level of ubiquity is in part why Collins (2000, 2004) refers to some stereotypes as controlling images. These stereotypes are so strong that they control how Black men are seen by both themselves and others. As such, they influence how Black men are treated by others, and in turn, how Black men may respond. In these instances, stereotypes become more than just ideas; they become the guidelines for interaction.

Nonetheless, adopting the professional pose remained a useful strategy. Uplift and Progress membership provided the men with a safe place to develop approaches to sidestepping potential discrimination before practicing these performances in the view of others. These public displays, and subsequent approval from other students, helped members claim their place at a White institution. UP members demonstrated, or at least tried to demonstrate, that being a successful Black man in college wasn't exceptional (as some might assume), but normative.

Future research should explore how other marginalized groups learn and practice behaviors meant to assist them in interacting with dominant groups. For example, Robert Granfield (1991) and David Karp (1986) have discussed how working-class Whites have worked to fit into middle-class White institutions and settings. Anthony Jack (2014) examines how Black first-generation college students that attended middle and upper-class secondary schools are more familiar with White middle-class institutions

compared to their Black peers who did not attend such schools. This provided them with a certain amount of ease in interacting with professors and other institutional figures. And yet, more detail is needed to understand how groups come to develop and practice professional strategies over time to perfect them.

By acknowledging and confronting the controlling images of Black men, the men of UP were able to disrupt, at least in some part, some of the negative experiences members would otherwise experience. The work of Uplift and Progress members and their recruits accomplish two things: 1) group members are able to contest controlling images through their overall professionalism, and 2) the men are preparing for their professional lives, where they may face discriminatory acts that suggest that they do not belong. By learning and adopting some of the unwritten rules of middle-class White institutions, and developing the sense that they do, in fact, belong in these settings, members are learning to be at ease in White organizations (Jack 2014). Shamus Khan (2011) explains this ease as a "knowledge of how to carry oneself within the world," (p. 83). Basic know-how of the ins and outs of middle-class White institutions is only part of the equation—UP members also learned to be comfortable being around and interacting with White colleagues in these settings. Learning to be comfortable within White spaces can be seen as a way to counter some forms of racism—particularly those that suggest these men are not fully a part of these institutions ("you're only here because of affirmative action,"). The professional pose arms UP members with tools that will not only attempt to contradict controlling images, but also help them deflect some discrimination through their familiarity with White professional institutions. Although adopting the professional pose is not an end-all solution to racism or representative of all Black male college students, understanding the patterns found here shed light on how these behavioral practices adopted by Black students and workers are conscious efforts that are carefully considered and practiced in hopes of better treatment from their White peers.

Corresponding author: Assistant Professor Brandon A. Jackson, Department of Sociology & Criminology, 211 Old Main, University of Arkansas, Fayetteville, AR 72701. E-mail: brandonj@uark.edu.

NOTES

1. Interestingly enough, one study finds that Black male CEOs who were seen as having a "baby face" were seen as warmer than White CEOs and earned higher salaries than mature-faced Black CEOs (Livingston and Pearce, 2009).

REFERENCES

Anderson, Elijah (1999). *Code of the Street: Decency, Violence, and Moral Life of the Inner City*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company.

Bell, Ella L. J. Edmondson, and Stella M. Nkomo (2001). *Our Separate Ways: Black and White Women and the Struggle for Professional Identity*. Boston, MA: Harvard Business Review Press.

Bureau of Labor Statistics (2018). *Usual Weekly Earnings of Wage and Salary Workers Fourth Quarter 2017*. Washington, DC. https://www.bls.gov/news.release/pdf/wkyeng.pdf (accessed January 20, 2018).

Carter, Prudence L. (2005). *Keepin' It Real: School Success Beyond Black and White*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Charmaz, Kathy (2006). *Constructing Grounded Theory: A Practical Guide through Qualitative Analysis*. Los Angeles, CA: Sage Publications.

Collins, Patricia Hill (2000). *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. New York: Routledge.

Collins, Patricia Hill (2004). *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism*. New York: Routledge.

Evans, Louwanda, and Wendy Leo Moore (2015). Impossible Burdens: White Institutions, Emotional Labor, and Micro-Resistance. *Social Problems*, 62(3): 439–454.

Feagin, Joe R. (2006). *Systemic Racism*. London: Oxford University Press.

Feagin, Joe R. (2013). *The White Racial Frame: Centuries of Racial Framing and Counter-Framing*. New York: Routledge.

Feagin, Joe R., and Karyn D. McKinney (2003). *The Many Costs of Racism*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield.

Feagin, Joe R., and Melvin P. Sikes (1994). *Living with Racism: The Black Middle Class Experience*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.

Feagin, Joe R., and Melvin P. Sikes (1995). How Black Students Cope with Racism on White Campuses. *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*, (8): 91–97.

Ferguson, Ann Arnett (2001). *Bad Boys: Public School in the Making of Black Masculinity*. Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan Press.

Fleming, Crystal M., Michèle Lamont, and Jessica S. Welburn (2012) African Americans Respond to Stigmatization: The Meanings and Salience of Confronting, Deflecting Conflict, Educating the Ignorant and 'Managing the Self.' *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 35(3): 400–417.

Ford, Kristie A. (2011). Doing Fake Masculinity, Being Real Men: Present and Future Constructions of Self among Black College Men. *Symbolic Interaction*, 34(1): 38–62.

Granfield, Robert (1991). Making It by Faking It: Working-Class Students in an Elite Academic Environment. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 20(3): 331–351.

Harlow, Roxanna (2003). Race Doesn't Matter But…: The Effect of Race on Professors' Experiences and Emotion Management in the Undergraduate College Classroom. *Social Psychology Quarterly*, 66(4): 348–363.

Harper, Shaun R. (2004). The Measure of a Man: Conceptualizations of Masculinity among High-Achieving African American Male College Students. *Berkeley Journal of Sociology*, (48): 89–107.

Harris III, Frank, Robert T. Palmer, and Laura E. Struve (2011). 'Cool Posing' on Campus: A Qualitative Study of Masculinities and Gender Expression among Black Men at a Private Research Institution. *The Journal of Negro Education*, 80(1): 47–62.

Harris, Paisley Jane (2003). Gatekeeping and Remaking: The Politics of Respectability in African American Women's History and Black Feminism. *Journal of Women's History*. 15(1): 212–220.

Higginbotham, Evelyn Brooks (1993). *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880–1920*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Hughey, Matthew W. (2008). Brotherhood or Brothers in the Hood?: Debunking the 'Educated Gang' Thesis as Black Fraternity and Sorority Slander. *Race, Ethnicity, and Education*, 11(4): 443–463.

Jack, Anthony Abraham (2014). Culture Shock Revisited: The Social and Cultural Contingencies to Class Marginality. *Sociological Forum*, 29(2): 453–475.

Kanter, Rosabeth Moss (1977). *Men and Women of the Corporation*. New York: Basic Books.

Karp, David A. (1986). You Can Take the Boy Out of Dorchester, But You Can't Take Dorchester Out of the Boy: Toward a Social Psychology of Social Mobility. *Symbolic Interaction*, 9(1): 19–36.

Kirschenman, Joleen, and Kathryn Neckerman (1991). We'd Love to Hire Them, But … The Meaning of Race for Employers. In *The Urban Underclass*, Eds. Christopher Jenks and Paul Peterson, pp. 203–232. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution.

Khan, Shamus Rahman (2011). *Privilege: The Making of an Adolescent Elite at St. Paul's School*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Lacy, Karyn (2007). *Blue-Chip Black: Race, Class, and Status in the New Black Middle Class*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Lamont, Michèle, Graziella Moraes Silva, Jessica Welburn, Joshua Guetzkow, Nissim Mizrachi, Hanna Herzog, and Elisa Reis (2016). *Getting Respect: Responding to Stigma and Discrimination in the United States, Brazil, and Israel*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Livingston, Robert W., and Nicholas A. Pearce (2009). The Teddy-Bear Effect: Does Having a Baby Face Benefit Black Chief Executive Officers? *Psychological Science*, 20(10): 1229– 1236.

Lofland, John, David Snow, Leon Anderson, and Lyn H. Lofland (2006). *Analyzing Social Settings: A Guide to Qualitative Observation and Analysis*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.

MacLeod, Jay (1995). *Ain't No Making It: Aspirations & Attainment in a Low-Income Neighborhood*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.

Majors, Richard, and Janet Mancini Billson (1992). *Cool Pose: The Dilemmas of Black Manhood in America*. New York: Lexington Books.

McCabe, Janice (2009). Racial and Gender Microaggressions on a Predominantly White Campus: Experiences of Black, Latina/o and White Undergraduates. *Race, Gender, and Class*, 16(1/2): 133–151.

Mong, Sherry N., and Vincent J. Roscigno (2010). African American Men and the Experience of Employment Discrimination. *Qualitative Sociology*, 33(1): 1–21

Moore, Wendy Leo (2007). *Reproducing Racism; White Space, Elite Law Schools and Racial Inequality*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.

Patillo-McCoy, Mary (1999). *Black Picket Fences: Privilege and Peril among the Black Middle Class*. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press

Rios, Victor M. (2011). *Punished: Policing the Lives of Black and Latino Boys*. New York: New York University Press.

Roscigno, Vincent J., Lisa M. Williams, and Reginald A. Byron (2012). Workplace Racial Discrimination and Middle Class Vulnerability. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 56(5): 696–710.

School Website (2013). *Institutional Research: Student Indicators*. Accessed Feb. 16, 2013.

Smith, William A., Walter R. Allen, and Lynette L. Danley (2007). Assume the Position… You Fit the Description: Psychosocial Experiences and Racial Battle Fatigue Among African American Male College Students. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 51(4): 551–578.

Solorzano, Daniel, Miguel Ceja, and Tara Yosso (2000). Critical Race Theory, Racial Microagressions, and Campus Racial Climate: The Experiences of African American Students. *The Journal of Negro Education*, 69(1/2): 60–73.

Waldinger, Roger, and Michael I. Lichter (2003). *How the Other Half Works: Immigration and the Social Organization of Labor*. Berkeley, CA: University of California.

Wilkins, Amy C. (2012). Not Out to Start a Revolution: Race, Gender, and Emotional Restraint among Black University Men. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 41(1): 34–65.

Wingfield, Adia Harvey (2007). The Modern Mammy and the Angry Black Man: African American Professionals' Experiences with Gendered Racism in the Workplace. *Race, Gender, & Class*, 14(1/2): 196–212.

Wingfield, Adia Harvey (2010). Are Some Emotions Marked 'Whites Only?': Racialized Feeling Rules in Professional Workplaces. *Social Problems*, 57(2): 251–268.

Wingfield, Adia Harvey (2013). *No More Invisible Man: Race and Gender in Men's Work*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.