

Episode 224 – Janelle Goodwill: How Media Influences Young Black Men’s Conceptualization of Masculinity

[00:00:08] Welcome to inSocialWork. The podcast series of the University of Buffalo School of Social Work at www.inSocialWork.org. We're glad you could join us today. The purpose of inSocialWork is to engage practitioners and researchers in lifelong learning and promote research to practice and practice to research. We educate. We connect. We care. We're inSocialWork.

[00:00:37] Hi from Buffalo. The end of September brings another unique aspect of life to Buffalo. Curtain Up the 36th annual celebration of the opening of the Buffalo Theatre season is upon us. Many visitors are surprised to see that downtown Buffalo has a thriving theater district of our own. Curtain Up celebrates the new theater season with dinner opening night performances at various theaters and when the curtain finally falls the Theater District street party goes into full gear. I'm Peter Sobota. In this episode our guest Janelle Goodwill describes her research exploring what is unique about how media affects black college age men eventually identifying their preferences and attempting to learn how young black men use media for social support and how it affects their mental health and views of black masculinity. Specifically our guest describes the YBMen Project an intervention that attempts to answer these questions and also attempts to learn more about how black men are interacting with each other across media platforms. Ms Goodwill describes how she worked to build an engagement with the traditionally difficult to engage and retain research population. Now that they've implemented their project intervention she describes what she is learning and comments on the post intervention outcomes. She is reviewing our guests concludes with implications for social work practice and the new questions. Her current research has fostered Janelle Goodwill is a Ph.D. candidate in the joint program and social work and psychology at the University of Michigan. Janelle was interviewed in August of 2017 by Christopher St. Vil PhD assistant professor here at the UB of Social Work.

[00:02:26] Thank you for coming to the inSocialWork Podcast. My name is Chris. I'm here with Ms Janelle Goodwill who is a Ph.D. candidate at the University of Michigan School Social Work. And we're here to talk about your research. We're here to talk about Ms. Goodwill's research around media and black men. So to start with you noted the media impacts people in different ways. For example with girls in particular we noted the images of women on TV and in the magazines how they tend to make little girls have a negative body image or they compare themselves to the body and television and in the media. We know the immediate impact people in different ways. So should we be concerned about the impact to the media and black males.

[00:03:12] That is the question. You know I just want to start off by saying thank you so much Dr. St. Vil for having me on the podcast. I'm really excited and feel free to call me Janelle from this point out, I'm becoming a doctor but I'm not quite there just yet. So in terms of your question though I think you're totally on the right track when you mention the role of media with young girls typically black women's experiences with self-esteem and the way they feel about themselves. But I think it's interesting because we really don't know much about how media impacts young black men. Seems like there's a lot of really great work that's been done with adolescent black males so those may be in elementary middle or high school but it seems like there's kind of a drop off once folks get to college or even young adulthood. For black men so I think that essentially there a gap here in the literature where you know we've been following black men throughout those adolescent years. Once they get to college it seems that we really don't have much information about how they are interpreting media and how media impacts their experiences with manhood masculinity and adult development. So essentially I think that's why we should be concerned about it because simply there is just not enough information out there particularly on the research side of things of how media is shaping young black men's views of themselves in the world that they live in.

[00:04:26] Very interesting. Tell me a little bit about the whole project that you have carving out this particular question involving your research. Tell me about this why men project.

[00:04:37] Sure I'd love to. So essentially the YBMen Project is an online Facebook based intervention that really seeks to better understand and address mental health and social support needs of called Black Men. And so the intervention was developed by Daphne Watkins is a professor here of University of Michigan. She's also my advisor and so under her leadership I worked as a project manager for the past few years in the intervention. And essentially what we've done is we've gone around to different schools in the Midwest and we've offered this intervention for guys who are in college to really try to understand what it is that their unique social support needs are and also of their ideas surrounding manhood masculinity and also mental health. So essentially the aim the whole goal is to really try to combat these rising rates of depression and other adverse mental health outcomes. So we thought that using online can be a really helpful way to reach people some who because of the age that we live in but then also in terms of feasibility and a sensibility it seems like we're creating an intervention online could be a way to reach folks who usually have not been represented in the literature.

[00:05:45] I'm really curious how is the data collected today.

[00:05:48] So essentially the way that it works is that we go to a school and then in the beginning of the fall term we will recruitment participate in the intervention. At that point guys will participate in both and interview with one of our research staff members and then they'll also participate in a Facebook group and the Facebook group is private. So people who are not in the intervention can not have access to it for safety and privacy concerns. And so essentially after completing the interview portion guys with this page and the Facebook members of our research team will then go into the Facebook group and post all sorts of psychosocial and mental health support and educational information inside this group. We ask guys to respond because essentially we recognize young black men are the masters of their own experiences. I mean we're the researchers but we are not the masters. I myself identify as a black woman so I definitely don't have the answers and so I think that it's really important that we are actually seeking the advice information from the participants the people that we include in our study. And so from there once guys in the Facebook group are research will post and really our goal is to facilitate the discussion there so we'll post different things whether it's a song from YouTube or you know a hot article that's out or we'll ask them to respond about different things that are happening in today's popular culture. And we'll tie all that information back to things related to social support mental health and manhood. So by that tie and through those interactions are able to really see how black men are interacting with us how the men are interacting with media in popular culture but also more importantly how black men are interacting with each other and amongst themselves.

[00:07:27] That's amazing. Just curious how many men will be able to sustain that study.

[00:07:32] Yes so essentially we rely on our campus partners to determine how many men they want to be in the group. And so a lot of times that in the past as we've gone to schools we've worked with maybe the multicultural center or one of the on campus student groups and then at that point they determine how many people they would want to participate in the intervention. So this last go round we had 22 guys the time before that we had 30 guys total within we had about half of those men participate in the intervention so we never want to face that group to be too big we never won it. I say no more than like 12 or 15 people but at different points throughout the intervention we have different Facebook groups going on in ways that concerned that the Facebook group gets too big that people won't participate or they won't feel comfortable sharing with too many people. So essentially you know we were on our campus partners. You've been number but we do try to keep it

relatively small.

[00:08:24] That's great. So given that black men in general are hard to reach to sustain research activities. What steps did you or your team take to ensure that there was a cultural sensitivity humility during this whole research process in trying to sustain this hard to reach population in the study.

[00:08:42] You know that wasn't it. I'm so glad you asked that question because I think there's something really important that social research and really our researchers to be considering and thinking about whenever. Working with community based populations are undersurface this happens. And so you're totally right in saying that black men are hard to reach. I think it's because historically research has not been always so kind and welcoming and inclusive of black men. And so I think that can be one barrier to getting black men involved in research. But essentially what we did is that my advisor really modeled this really well. Again her name is Daphne and so what she did is that she contacted leaders at the schools where working with people who were in administration positions or working the multicultural center. And from there just reached out to them and asked to meet with them. And over time began to build relationships with them before we even stepped from the campus before we even did one ounce of the question before we even did one survey with participants. We were there for months and the relationships with our staff workers at the university the people who were there on the ground doing the work with students we built relations with those folks for months before we even went into the field. And so during those conversations and during that time that those staff members gave us feedback on our recruitment materials they gave us feedback on some of the questions you were asking and they told us hey you know that's not going to work for young black men or you know you should really revise this to change that. And so again I think it takes that culture humility piece recognizing that we're the researchers and that's all but we are not the experts on everything and we are not the masses of these young black men experiences. So you know I think just to kind of sum it up I would say you know building relationships early and then also having a sustainability plan in place for what happens after the research is done. You know a lot of times there's researchers who may go into a community collect their data and then the folks never hear from them again. So the YBMen project we have developed some ways to create some sustainability plans to ensure that we can build relationships that last will the army interventions ending because you know we don't want to be irresponsible resurface. We don't want to go into a community and just be done with them once we're done with our data collections. I would say that that was the main ways that we practice cultural sensitivity humility.

[00:10:52] It's amazing to take a page out of your book that today you are able to achieve these black men in college are able to sustain them. You're providing positive online messaging to get them to reach some positive outcomes. So what were the findings of your study in particular regard to the media.

[00:11:10] What I think this is one of the really interesting things because we did not anticipate guys kind of sharing so much about how media influence their views on it really. So many aspects of their life. And so essentially the finest kind of came out in three separate overwatching being the groups you could say guys talked about black men in the media who were either athletes who were entertainers or who are also social movement figures and so you know this is another reason to be mindful of the cultural context of the time that you are living in poverty or collecting the data because these data were collected in 2014 and so that was a really really interesting time in U.S. history and particularly for race relations social justice issues and so guys talk about those sorts of things in these three groups of social movements years athletes and entertainers.

[00:11:58] I'm just a little jealous that college professors weren't in that. So I guess I'm not someone

people are looking up to.

[00:12:09] Yeah you know I think it's just more about visibility and who guys were looking to more so than what they were exposed to and so I was I was really interested to see that guys were really talking about both the positive and negative aspects of some of these popular figures that they either want it to be like or want it to be absolutely nothing like I think that was one of the really interesting thing is that they were able to really kind of dissect which sorts of behaviours attitudes beliefs cultural views that were portrayed by men in the media that they either really liked they really didn't like and I think that that was one of the most fascinating really exciting things because it shows the young men in our study were really were critical consumers of the media and use these sorts of interactions and sort of portrayals in the media to determine what type of man they wanted to be.

So among those three, the athletes entertainers and the social media figures. Did any one of those three games get more attention than the other two.

[00:13:11] You know that's really interesting. I would say there were some that got more attention than others. Oh we did see some saturation essentially in some interviews with guys talking about particularly the athlete. I would say in particular the entertainers as well. I'm a lot of the guys like I mentioned these data were collected in 2014. So that was a year when athletes like Ray Rice and Adrian Peterson those stories went really really big in terms of the domestic violence charges that were brought up against both of those football players and so guys talked about watching the Ray Rice video or talked about Adrian Peterson situation with his young son and talked about essentially what it meant to be a man in romantic relationships and what it meant to show love to national love or to be physically abusive. And then also with Adrian Peterson a lot of guys reflected upon their own experiences with their father and what discipline looked like a lot of guys mentioned that for them getting spankings was they are whooping you know whatever term both to use on the part about how for them. That was a part of their experience growing up. But. There were other guys you mentioned that you know after looking at some live pictures they felt that it went too far. But then there was also this other piece about how these black football players how their lives off the field impacted people's perception of their ability to play in their worth as athletes. So I would say because of the time that we were living in it because that was a really really popular thing all over the news with those two athletes that doesn't give a lot of attention. But then also we what we had in 2014. So guys we're talking about the Michael Brown case and in his death and how that impacted them you know because Michael Brown was the same age as these guys who came in with first second and third year students in college and so you know they talked about just what he meant to them and how they feel if they had to essentially be more cautious more aware more mindful of the way that they interacted with people particularly regarding their bodies in whatever space that they went in on campus. Men not always feeling comfortable in many of these spaces on campus that may or may not have been designed for them. It was really interesting and really really important for us to hear from these guys about what sorts of things are facing and what such things are dealing with on a day to day basis.

[00:15:23] So when I think about these actually think about how the majority of men are probably interacting between groups via TV. So you talk about how black males are treated as consumers of the media. Should black males be looking to the media representations of role models.

[00:15:41] Oh you know that's a very very loaded question. And so you know I don't think that I have all the answers but I will say yes I want to I mean I definitely want to be clear in stating that media itself is not inherently bad. There are so many positive aspects of media and so many positive aspects of black manhood portrayed in media that I definitely am not one to say that men should not look to media for positivity. I would say that from these findings so we can really think about. The fact that it seems that black men. And like I mentioned before are really spending a lot of time

thinking about what two things they either want to adopt or project in their own lives and it seems like I think we all need help with that not just because black men but I think that we all need help in determining what sort of things we view on TV or see on social media what's was these were either adopted or reject what we do. So I would say yes look to the media. I mean I think it's also kind of impossible not to in the day that we live in. You are just a human being you alive particularly living here in the U.S. I think you are going to be exposed to media in some way somehow. So I would say overall yes to the media but then also make sure that you have people or you have support systems in place that help you determine which sorts of things are good and what the things are not so good. And what sort the things are more appropriate for you to actually carry out in your own life

[00:17:06] And getting to this importance of media in our lives I mean even as researchers we start to realize now the importance of media and engaging in research and engaging with the people that we the research. So in the article that you publish the 2016 title tracing the young black man masculinities a mental health Facebook project you discussed the of study participants like does desire for more media a culturally references. So here they are. They have an appetite for more media. What are the implications of that in the light of your study findings.

[00:17:38] Yeah that's that was really really interesting so just to give a bit more context into this paper I'll say that my advisor like I mentioned before the person who actually started the intervention Dr. Watkins she's the first author on this paper I'm one of the coauthors. And so in that study the paper that you mentioned 2016 The Economist has gold gives an overview of things that guys really liked about the intervention things they want to see more of. And so guys we were really surprised to see that in the in the post tests interviews and in the Facebook group guys were asking for more more resources more information that was culturally sensitive and so I think that was really the main finding I think that's one of the strongest applications of that guys were interested in receiving more information from us. But I think the key is that they want it to be culturally relevant and culturally sensitive. So essentially there are some things that you know may be important to me because I am a doctoral student a black woman. Well that doesn't mean that is going to be as important to young black men who are in our study and so essentially I took it as them encouraging us to really spend more time actually hearing from other young black men about what sorts of things we should include in future iterations of the project in the future phases of the intervention so them asking and say what they want in more media culture references I think was overall encouraging but it was a signal to us that intervention research really has to be tailored for the communities that it is going to be implemented and because if not then the findings may not be what we're looking for. Even the participants may be hoping for.

[00:19:10] We're talking about specific interventions.

[00:19:13] Yes.

[00:19:14] What does all of this mean for social practice. A study findings. This whole idea between the relationship between how black males receive their in the media what does this mean for social workers practice.

[00:19:29] I spent so much time thinking about this just around our data collection processes and I suppose it means that I keep coming back to this but I think that social workers are uniquely situated more so I would say than people in other areas or other disciplines to really be bold connected to people in the community. But then also translating all that information and still doing rigorous research in the academy and so I think that's one thing that I really appreciate about social work is that it allows us to really travel between both spaces between community and the academy sharing the findings and sharing the research and all those sorts of things so I think for social practice it's just again a reminder that we have to be inclusive of people who typically haven't been

represented in research and in the literature that we're reading and also a reminder that we don't have all the answers and that is going to be important that we have strong relationships. With community members and with our community partners so like I mentioned earlier we spend time with those staff persons at universities way before we actually collected any data and if they had not been for them we would not have had an intervention not only because those folks helped us reshape and retool or recruit materials but they also got guys interested in the study. I mean those were the folks who were actually working there every day when we were only there for a few hours collecting data for you know a semester or whatever. Even before and after that those staff persons are the ones who were there on the ground doing all the work or were the guys I would say for social work practitioners and researchers alike will be important to maintain those strong community connections always demand for a cultural sensitivity and humility and also be open as a change and be open to changing some of the recreant materials some of the questions and also some of the content that you plan to cover the intervention because we were able to take their advice and take their responses so that we could create an even better and more culturally relevant and effective interventions in the future.

[00:21:28] I think we need to have you back to talk more about the outcome of the online fees aside from media fees. Sure some of our listeners would love to hear more about deciding on intervention and what kind of outcomes you are achieving for black males.

[00:21:42] Oh thank you I appreciate that. We know we're in the process of collecting data every fall so we're gearing up right now to start the question again in September of 2017 as some other schools here in the Midwest the paper that I've talked about and that's kind of referencing this podcast focused more on the media is under review right now so we're hopeful that we're going to continue to collect data and also translate that information and get some of these materials out to the public very soon.

[00:22:08] That is going to be very interesting. Tell us what do you plan on taking your research in the future. See.

[00:22:12] Well right now you know I just want to pass my preliminary qualifying exams and working on that now and so once that's officially done with I give the thumbs up or move on to the dissertation. I really have realised like I have a heart for intervention research.

[00:22:27] I think that's really exciting I think really what tugs My heart is being able to work in communities. It also just adds a dose of reality I mean it's one thing to sit behind the computer here at the University of Michigan and read a bunch of research articles which is great I love research but they actually go out in the community and see how research is impacting lives and improving social importance health outcomes for people that I care about really means a lot. Essentially I plan on continuing to learn so much more about this topic. Well that also blueprint's innovation or third feature.

[00:22:59] Amazing and we're going to be looking out for you a rising star in social work in this venture. We would love to have you back.

[00:23:06] Oh thank you. Thank you for being willing to partake in this and if you ever told me about your research. Like I said we'll be looking out for it in the future.

[00:23:14] Thank you so much. I appreciate you having me.

[00:23:16] You're welcome.

[00:23:17] Absolutely.

[00:23:18] You've been listening to Janelle Goodwill discussed the media effects on social support mental health and views of masculinity of college age black men in social work.

[00:23:37] Hi I'm Nancy Smith professor and dean of the University of Buffalo School of Social Work. Thanks for listening to our podcast. We look forward to your continued support of the series. For more information about who we are as a school our history our online and on the ground degree and continuing education programs we invite you to visit our Web site at [W W W dot social work dot Buffalo](http://www.socialwork.buffalo.edu). You. And while you're there check out our technology and social work Research Center. You'll find it under the Community Resources menu.