

Reconsidering the “Crisis” Of the Black Male in America

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IN RECENT YEARS, TERMS SUCH AS CRISIS, AT-RISK, MARGINAL, AND ENDANGERED HAVE been used with increasing regularity to describe the plight and condition of black males. Though the origins of this terminology are distinctly North American (U.S.) (Taylor-Gibbs, 1988; Kunjufu, 1985; Anderson, E., 1990), in Britain, Canada, and increasingly, throughout the Anglophone Caribbean, expressions of this kind have begun to find their way into the popular culture and, increasingly, into the vernacular of social science (Miller, 1986; Small, 1994).

The rationale for using such stark and ominous descriptions of conditions facing black males is provided by a broad array of social and economic indicators, all of which point to the undeniable fact that large numbers of individuals who fall within these two social categories, black and male, are in deep trouble. While acknowledging the extreme nature of the many problems disproportionately confronting black males, this article seeks to interrogate the validity of this particular formulation and to posit an alternative strategy for understanding the set of phenomena in question.

Three questions will be employed to guide this analysis and to generate an alternative interpretation of the social phenomenon under study. First, why are race and gender treated as salient to the understanding of the various complex issues and problems confronting individuals who happen to be black and male? That is, to what extent does a racialized and genderized conception of the problem exaggerate the importance of these factors and negate the significance of others?

Second, if we accept the argument that many black males are experiencing severe economic and social hardships and have become increasingly marginal to their families, communities, the labor market, and social institutions, how do we explain the relative prominence and high visibility of black males in public life? In the United States several major politicians, a number of highly visible entertainers and celebrities, and individuals with wealth and status are black and male. Does the notoriety of such individuals suggest that some black males may be immune from the crisis? If so, which ones, and what might this tell us about the nature of the problem?

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Finally, if the black male is in a state of crisis, what does this mean for black women? Have black women also been affected by this crisis or have the hardships facing black males resulted in improved social and economic status for black women? Does the crisis afflicting certain black males imply that patriarchy as a cultural system and the norms and values associated with it are in decline among black Americans? Or is it that the troubles facing black males are of a different order and perhaps even more severe than those facing black women? Or, could it be that the problems confronting black males are merely symptoms of broader problems confronting black people or poor people generally? If so, why does it appear as though the troubles confronting black males are overshadowing those facing black females?

I will attempt to answer these questions in the pages ahead and, in so doing, suggest another way of interpreting this and related phenomena.

Evidence of the “Crisis”

The most obvious problem with the notion of a crisis confronting black males has to do with the term “crisis.” First, the term implies a deviation from a more stable norm. It suggests a period of temporary urgency, or even a short-term emergency, and not a prolonged and persistent degenerative condition. Second, the term also suggests that a better and more secure period preceded the present condition, and that once the crisis is over, conditions will return to the former state, which, even if not ideal, was clearly superior to the way things are at the moment.

For males of African descent in the U.S., there is no evidence to indicate that present conditions are temporary, or that by some means presently unknown, they will eventually improve. As will be shown, not only are the problems that particularly afflict black males persistent, but all signs also indicate escalating rather than declining severity. Moreover, while data from various sources suggest that conditions for black males may indeed be growing worse, the deterioration is, of course, measured in relation to prior conditions that most observers agree have been bad for a very long time. For example, although unemployment rates for black males in the U.S. are higher now than they were 30 years ago (Wilson, A., 1992), the fact that black males were almost exclusively restricted to the lowest paying and most menial jobs at that time, and that more have now entered professional and managerial positions, suggests at the minimum that measuring real or actual progress is difficult, at least on the basis of some relatively objective criteria.

Yet, it would be at best untruthful, and at worst a cruel game of sophistry, to pretend that many individuals who are both black and male are not experiencing problems of an extreme and severe nature at rates vastly disproportionate to their numbers in the U.S. population. In the U.S., the preponderance of evidence is mind numbing. In the labor market, black males earn on average 73% of the income earned by white males (Watson and Smitherman, 1996). In professional and

managerial positions, black males are vastly underrepresented, and in some fields (e.g., many high-tech and science-related jobs), are almost entirely absent (National Research Council, 1989). Numerous studies indicate that despite the existence of laws prohibiting discrimination in employment, black males are widely regarded as less desirable employees and therefore substantially less likely to be hired in most jobs (Massey and Denton, 1993; Hacker, 1992; Feagin and Sikes, 1994). At the aggregate level, it continues to be the case that a black male with a four-year college degree earns less than the average white male possessing only a high school diploma (Hacker, 1992).

Health indicators for black males reveal similar hardships. For the last 10 years, black males have been the only group within the U.S. population to record a declining life expectancy (Spivak, Prothrow-Stith, and Hausman, 1988). The homicide rate for black males ages 15 to 24 is seven to eight times higher than that of white males in the same age group (Roper, 1991), and since 1980, the suicide rate for this age group has also surpassed the white male rate (West, 1993; National Research Council, 1989). Black males are also at greater risk of substance abuse, of dying during infancy, or of dying prematurely due to heart disease, hypertension, diabetes, and AIDS.

Finally, where blacks generally, and males in particular, once saw education as the most viable path to social mobility, it now increasingly serves as a primary agent for reproducing their marginality. In most urban areas, 20 to 30% of black males drop out of school before graduation (Taylor-Gibbs, 1988). Black males are four times more likely than white males to be suspended or expelled from school, and nine times more likely to be placed in special education classes (Meier, Stewart, and England, 1989). From 1973 to 1977, there was a steady increase in black male enrollment in college, from 39 to 48% of all high school graduates (equaling the rate for whites). However, since 1977 there has been a sharp and continuous decline in black male college enrollment (National Research Council, 1989). Moreover, at colleges and universities throughout the U.S., fewer than 40% of those admitted to college graduate within six years. For growing numbers of black males, prison rather than college is a more probable destination during adolescence and young adulthood. In 1995, one out of every three black males (versus one out of 10 white males) between the ages of 18 and 30 were either incarcerated or in some way ensnared by the criminal justice system (Noguera, 1995). In California, the percentage recently increased to 40% (*San Francisco Examiner*, February 18, 1996).

Given this evidence, if we concede that severe problems for many individuals who are both black and male exist, can or should we conclude that these problems are primarily caused by or somehow related to the race and gender of those individuals who experience them? That is, to what extent can one assume that black males are being targeted for various forms of victimization as part of a larger assault or even conspiracy against them? Or, could it be that there is another lens

through which these social issues can be understood and studied? If so, why have we become so preoccupied with measuring social problems in terms of race and gender rather than by some other criteria?

Responding to the Black Male Problem

As awareness of the acute nature of the problems facing young black males has grown, an array of innovative educational programs aimed at preventing hardships and addressing the particular needs of black males has been initiated. This includes various mentoring and job-training programs that match youth with adult role models (McPartland and Nettles, 1991), rites-of-passage programs aimed at socializing and preparing young males for manhood, fatherhood, and community responsibility (Watson and Smitherman, 1996), and the creation of all-black, all-male schools that have been perhaps the most radical and controversial of all (Leake and Leake, 1992). The common theme underlying each of these initiatives is an assumption that the needs of black males can best be served through efforts specifically targeted at them, even if it may require isolating them in order to apply the intervention (Ampim, 1993; Myers, 1988). Often this assumption is combined with the belief that adult black males are the most appropriate persons to provide the services and support needed by black male youth (Hale, 1982).

Yet, regardless of how benevolent or well intentioned these efforts may seem, history would suggest that great risks are involved in advocating and promoting separate treatment for African Americans, whether they be male or female. Slavery and Jim Crow segregation were rationalized and sustained by the notion that blacks should be separated and accorded different treatment from the rest of the population because of their racial inferiority (Fogel, 1989; Franklin and Moss, 1988). In more recent times, there has been growing awareness that special education programs and schools specifically designed for dealing with troubled youth often target black males because of persistent prejudice, assumptions of innate inferiority, and deeply ingrained fear and hostility (Milofsky, 1974; Wilson, A., 1992). Rather than helping those served, such interventions have frequently been criticized for stigmatizing black youth and depriving them of access to mainstream programs (Taylor-Gibbs, 1988). Interestingly, although programs such as special education were not created for the purpose of addressing the needs of black males, the fact that in several cases black males comprise a disproportionate number of those served has furthered the perception that these young people are fundamentally deficient and different from the rest of the population. Increasingly, many of these programs have come under attack because there is now considerable evidence that, more often than not, placement in such a program does not lead to improvement in academic achievement or behavior for those served (Wilson, A., 1992).

Despite the risks, there is a renewed effort to address the "crisis" facing young black males by creating new programs based on a different set of assumptions.

Often managed and directed by individuals who empathize with those served, and who often share a similar background and experience, the new initiatives are rationalized as being better able to help black male youth because they are "culturally authentic" and "culturally appropriate" (Giribaldi, 1992). These initiatives are different from past efforts to separate black youth in that they are not based on the premise that those served are intellectually deficient or culturally deprived. Rather, the new efforts are based on the assumption that black youth from low-income urban areas possess the potential to excel and succeed if provided with proper guidance and support in a culturally affirming environment.

Still, good intentions are often not good enough. The efforts undertaken by a middle school in an economically depressed section of West Oakland to address the problem of disruptive students illustrate how an intervention designed to help black males can end up producing the opposite effect. Teachers at the school had been complaining for some time that they had too many disruptive students. Several asserted that these difficult students posed a threat to other students and even posed a threat to the safety of teachers. Finally, in an attempt to respond to the faculty's concerns, the district administration offered the school the opportunity to participate in an innovative new program designed to deal with difficult students.

Teachers were asked to put forward the names of their most difficult students. The principal then created a list of the names that came up most frequently, and these students were selected for placement in a new class. Not surprisingly, given the history of behavioral problems at the school, all 21 of the students selected were African American males. To address their special needs and to insure that the students would be helped, the district assigned a young, energetic, black male teacher, who was specially trained in Afrocentric education, to teach this newly created class. Once established, the class was publicized as a unique and "innovative educational opportunity" that, beyond its culturally enriched curriculum, would also provide work experience, mentors, and other special services for its students. If successful, the district administration planned to use the class as a model at other schools throughout the school district.

Interestingly, within a relatively short period of time it became clear that the class was a complete failure. Trapped together in the same classroom for four and one-half hours a day, and isolated from the rest of the school, the students soon began to resent their placement in the special class. Much of this resentment was taken out on the teacher, who also felt trapped, and who had grown increasingly short tempered and authoritarian toward his class as the frustration of the students escalated. The teacher was also extremely resentful toward the district administration once it became clear that much of the support that had been promised either would not be delivered, or would take some time before becoming available.

What was perhaps most interesting about this pilot disciplinary program was that when other teachers at the school were asked about how their classes were

going now that the disruptive students had been removed, several pointed out that there were now a number of previously nondisruptive students who had now emerged as new troublemakers in the classroom. Some of the teachers even suggested that what was needed was at least one more separate classroom for the other disruptive students.

The Role of Class and Social Structure

What is perhaps most telling about this case is how quickly the individuals involved jumped to the conclusion that the cause of the problem of disruption in the classroom lied in the children and not in something else, namely, the environment and teacher-student relationships. This tendency to overlook the social context, and even more importantly, the structures that frame and constrain social relationships, is common in American society. It is one of the reasons why policymakers are more likely to seek punitive measures to hold fathers responsible for supporting their families, rather than to recognize that employed men are eight times more likely to provide support than those who are unemployed (Wilson, 1996).

In a probing inquiry into the problem of youth violence, Greenberg and Schnieder (1994) ask the following: “Young black males is the answer, but what was the question?” The phrasing of their paper’s title as a question is not intended to be rhetorical. Rather, the authors demonstrate through an analysis of the many factors influencing the incidence of homicide in five New Jersey cities that the way a question is posed strongly influences the framing of the answer.

By focusing almost exclusively on race and gender, other factors that may be relevant to understanding the causes of social problems like crime, drug trafficking, or violence often go ignored. Most important among the omitted factors are the influence of class and geographic location. Many, though not all, of the problems cited as afflicting black males are most prevalent in poverty-stricken urban areas. These are typically communities that lack a sustainable local economy, where community institutions are weak or barely existent, and where environmental degradation and an absence of social services are primary characteristics of the social landscape.

However, the problems facing black males are increasingly not discussed in the context of their interaction with these types of conditions. Instead, race and gender are employed as explanatory categories, resulting in an explanation of the crisis facing black males that focuses almost exclusively on cultural rather than structural factors. For the scholars and writers who advocate this perspective, these cultural factors can include the matriarchal black family (Glazer and Moynihan, 1963; Kunjufu, 1985), opposition attitudes and behavior (Ogbu, 1988 and 1990; Solomon, 1992; Fordham, 1988), or the violent and destructive culture of inner-city streets (Anderson, E., 1990). Even when not intended, such explanations tend to reinforce and affirm many of the negative images and stereotypes that have historically been associated with black males.

In the past, propagation of negative stereotypes could be understood as the by-product of racist and racially based theories of black behavior. However, in the current period, these ideas are being produced by a wide assortment of journalists, scholars, and political actors, many of whom perceive themselves as sympathetic to the plight of black males, and some of whom also happen to share their race and gender.

Beyond pointing out the importance of class and geography in understanding the complex social problems confronting individuals who are black and male, it is also important to recognize the potential dangers associated with overemphasizing race and gender in explaining or responding to social problems. By focusing exclusively on race and gender, some of the initiatives undertaken to address the needs of black males may inadvertently serve to reify the negative images of black males that permeate the media and society generally. A prime example of this can be seen in the Million Man March, which was held in Washington, D.C., in October 1995. Though organized to encourage and empower black men to take action to improve black communities, the event was advertised as a "Day of Atonement," which conjures up a completely different image. Throughout the day, numerous speakers called on black men to be responsible fathers and role models in their communities, and to reject drugs and violence. Though some speakers at the rally, such as former U.S. Representative Gus Savage, questioned the logic behind one million black men appealing for atonement before a Congress and federal government that was in the process of decimating social programs that serve black communities through their Contract on America, the majority seemed to agree with Louis Farrakhan that black men had to take responsibility for saving black communities.

At first glance, this might seem to be a noble message, one that even many of those who are not followers of Louis Farrakhan and the Nation of Islam could embrace. However, further examination of the logic of such an appeal reveals several fundamental problems. By what means and with what resources are black men to address the economic marginalization of black communities? In many cases, these are areas that have become urban wastelands as a result of deindustrialization, suburbanization, and the flight of the middle class. Should black men alone be responsible for countering the failure of public schools, the lack of access to adequate health care, and the general decline in the quality of life that has been exacerbated by federal and state cutbacks in social services? What about the role and responsibility of the federal government and private capital? Furthermore, what role should black women play as black men take on these tremendous challenges? Should they continue to stay home as they were encouraged to do on the day of the Million Man March to "foster the value of home, self-esteem, family, and unity" (*San Francisco Chronicle*, October 17, 1995)?

For all its good intentions, there are real limits to what can be accomplished through self-help strategies initiated by black males. The prospect of uplifting

black communities through the efforts of black men may be inspiring and may indeed play a part in efforts to revitalize urban areas, but given the structural nature of the problems facing poor black people in the United States, it is undoubtedly unrealistic to think that hard work alone can bring about change. Worse yet, to the extent that self-help or even the latest fad, “volunteerism,” are put forward as the solution to the problems facing economically depressed black communities, it becomes much easier for those with power and resources to absolve themselves of accepting any responsibility for these dire conditions. Indeed, perhaps the greatest reason to be skeptical about events such as the Million Man March is that if they can be applauded by Newt Gingrich and Bill Clinton, they probably don’t pose much of a threat to the structure of power in the U.S., or worse yet, might even unwittingly contribute to further marginalization for black communities.

The Limits of Racial Reasoning

Among those presently responsible for administering and providing leadership to economically marginal urban areas, black self-help has as yet largely failed to be embraced as a serious strategy for development. However, at state and federal levels of government, such initiatives have come to replace the more extensive poverty elimination efforts of the recent past. Increasingly, no-cost initiatives such as mentoring, private charity, and volunteerism form the basis of the government’s approach to dealing with the social conditions that accompany urban poverty. Yet, despite what would appear to be the apparent limitations of such approaches, they are growing in popularity and dominating the policy agenda at the state and federal levels.

Even within black communities, the call for self-help, which is rooted in a long history of resistance to racial oppression, has been supported more recently in part because it has been interpreted by some as a form of self-determination. Resonating from organizations such as the Nation of Islam, and personalities like Tony Brown, the call for self-help has blended into black nationalist aspirations for control over the organizations and institutions that dominate the lives of black people. For many of those concerned with the problems confronting black males, the solutions must come from within the black community because it is unrealistic and naive to expect support from those perceived as responsible for perpetuating the problems.

Additionally, part of the appeal of black self-help is based upon a form of reasoning that considers race the central and defining feature of social reality. This is not surprising, given that racial reasoning is rooted in the history of black struggle against slavery, colonization, and white supremacy. Appeals to race have historically provided a source of resistance to racial oppression, most notably in the Pan Africanist movement, and such sentiments continue to find expression in the music, language, and actions of people in poor black communities throughout the United States.

Though it may seem logical to situate race centrally in any analysis of problems and issues facing racial minorities in the U.S., and black people in particular, we must also recognize the risks associated with this logic and the discourse that emanates from it. Racial reasoning has historically figured prominently in most rationalizations of black subordination and played a central role in justifications of slavery and later segregation. The notion that racial differences were immutable was used to promote notions of black inferiority, which linger on in the present day (Herskovits, 1941; Davis, 1980). It consistently emerges in discourse on crime, school performance, and intelligence. Hence, an overreliance on racial reasoning is a bit like a double-edged sword: it can be used as an effective means to rally the black masses, but can also be used to justify differential and discriminatory treatment of blacks.

In the United States, racial reasoning is pervasive. In every sector and on almost every issue, race occupies a central role as a variable that can be employed to explain and interpret social reality. Frequently, within the black community, it is also profoundly influenced by a form of gendered reasoning that is based on a preoccupation with restoring males to their rightful place as leaders. Even though there is substantial evidence that black girls and women face problems and hardships that are at least equivalent to those experienced by males, there is a growing sense that somehow males are worse off and therefore deserving of more attention. Raced and gendered reasoning may be understandable given the history of racial oppression in both the U.S. and the Caribbean, yet the distortions that are produced through the logic of such perspectives compel us to critically examine the implications of such logic.

In *Race Matters*, Cornel West calls for “the undermining and dismantling” of racial reasoning and its replacement with “...moral reasoning, to understand the black freedom struggle not as an affair of skin pigmentation and racial phenotype, but rather as a matter of ethical principles and wise politics...” (1993: 25). He goes on to add that the black nationalist attempt to “subordinate the issues and interests of black women” must be challenged by a commitment to “egalitarian relations within and outside black communities.” West’s critique of racial reasoning is based both on the distortions of analysis that it creates and the misguided actions it generates.

When policies are being formulated and responses to social problems are implemented, racial reasoning can undermine the effectiveness of interventions if they are based on faulty assumptions about the homogeneity of black communities. Racial reasoning typically is accompanied by essentialized notions of blackness, which fail to recognize the diversity of outlook, experience, and interests present within black communities. Such denial leads to incomplete and superficial analyses of black culture and identity and undermines the viability of initiatives and community-based programs, regardless of how well intentioned they are. On this point Stuart Hall writes:

The point is not simply that, since our racial differences do not constitute all of us, we are always different, negotiating different kinds of differences — of gender, of sexuality, of class. It is also that these antagonisms refuse to be neatly aligned; they are simply not reducible to one another; they refuse to coalesce around a single axis of differentiation. We are always in negotiation, not with a single set of oppositions that place us always in the same relation to others, but with a series of different positionalities. Each has for us its point of profound subjective identification (1992: 31).

Hall's point regarding the diversity of experience and perspective among black people further illuminates what is wrong with some of the ways in which the "crisis" of the black male has been defined and formulated. By disregarding the extent of difference and variation among those who are black and male, we too easily fall prey to existing conceptions of black males that have been shaped by images of savagery and a language rooted in white supremacists' notions of inferiority.

The Marginality and Centrality of Black Males

Though several negative indicators of quality of life suggest that black males are disproportionately overrepresented in many of the most undesirable categories, statistics on incarceration, homicide, and life expectancy do not capture the complex nature of the black male experience in the United States. In sports and entertainment, politics and the military, black males occupy positions of high visibility and are often compensated handsomely for the roles they perform. Moreover, for those who rise to the top of their fields, popularity and admiration are available as well. It may well be that what is admired is the symbol rather than the individual, and that the commodification of certain black male personalities has deprived the individual of privacy and a personal life, but it is impossible to deny the centrality of certain black males in American popular culture.

How does this odd juxtaposition of centrality and marginality shape the experience of individuals who are both black and male? As was pointed out previously, generalizing is dangerous, but it may be that at an abstract level it is possible to discuss some of the consequences of these contradictions without essentializing or homogenizing the black male experience. That is, it may be possible to analyze the images and symbols of black masculinity that permeate the popular culture to unlock some deeper meaning and interpretation of this phenomenon.

For example, in recent years the travails of several high-profile black men in the U.S. have been used to draw attention to various social pathologies that have existed for years, but for various reasons were not confronted. Through public hearings on the appointment of Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas, the viewing public was provided a graphic lesson on sexual harassment in which the

lives of the prospective jurist and his former employee, Anita Hill, were subjected to probing public inquiry. The murder trial of O.J. Simpson served as the opportunity for consciousness-raising on the long-neglected issue of domestic abuse, while pop star Michael Jackson provided an opportunity for the public to be educated about the sexual exploitation of children. Boxer Mike Tyson shared the limelight with William Kennedy-Smith in trials that provided titillating details on the issue of date rape, but at sentencing time Kennedy-Smith went off to medical school, while Tyson went off to the federal penitentiary.

If powerful politicians and wealthy entertainers are also perceived as being trapped in this "crisis," the nature of the black male crisis is at best ambiguous. For the vast majority who experience disproportionate levels of unemployment and incarceration, the crisis would appear to be rooted primarily in conditions of economic deprivation. However, for the black elite, the so-called crisis appears to be more connected to questions of morality. In either case, discussions of the crises are carried out in public and the lives of individual black men typically serve as the real-life examples through which various points are made.

Though this phenomenon may be a relatively recent development, Michelle Wallace, author of *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman* (1991), reminds us that the practice of punishing black men in public as a way of sending a message to others is rooted in the history of slavery and segregation. Though the earlier message was primarily aimed at "preventing the black man from violating the sacred white women" (1991: 25), it may be that old habits are hard to quit. Saving white women may be less of an obsession these days, but the execution of justice upon modern black male sports heroes or politicians through public excoriation serves another purpose as well. As Manning Marable (1992) pointed out in his analysis of black reaction to the confirmation hearings of Clarence Thomas, such occasions serve as "a signal to the other black people that no matter how high you climb or how successful you are, you too can fall, because ultimately you're still black, or as some would put it, just a nigger."

But not all black heroes fall. Some manage to hang on to fame and glory and withstand the pressures that accompany superstardom. Though he has never run for public office, Colin Powell remains one of the most attractive noncandidates in American politics. Similarly, Ron Brown, the recently deceased Secretary of Commerce, was a figure who managed to transcend the racialized politics of America, and was as easily accepted in corporate board rooms as he was on the streets of Harlem. Of course, there is Michael Jordan, the most popular and highest-paid player in professional basketball, the preeminent example of the individual as commodity, who has been described as "more popular than Jesus, and with better endorsement deals" (Vancil, 1992: 51).

Even some of those who have fallen have found ways to bounce back, like Marion Barry the mayor of Washington, D.C., who even after being caught on video tape smoking crack in the hotel room of a woman who was not his wife,

found redemption through the District's voters, who returned him to the mayor's office after a stint in the county jail. Barry is not alone. Several black males with wealth and status have managed to weather charges of infidelity, domestic violence, drug use, and corruption.

Clearly, some black males are not in crisis at all. Particularly for those that have wealth and power, it is possible to avoid many of the pressures that affect other black males. Class privilege has a way of insulating some individuals from some of the more pernicious effects of racism, as well as providing protection from ethical missteps and professional ineptitude. Yet more is involved. As Homi Bhabha (1994) has argued, in any society that is based upon the systematic domination of a particular group, hatred and vilification of that group are only part of the way in which individuals from that group may be perceived and imagined. The other side of domination is typically characterized by a distorted form of desire, or fetish for the other. He writes:

The construction of colonial discourse is then a complex articulation of the tropes of fetishism — metaphor and metonymy — and the forms of narcissistic and aggressive identification available to the Imaginary. The taking up of any one position, within a specific discursive form, in a particular historic conjuncture, is thus always problematic — the site of both fixity and fantasy.... The stereotype varies from loyal servant to Satan, from the loved to the hated.... The black is both savage (cannibal) and yet the most obedient and dignified of servants; he is the embodiment of rampant sexuality and yet innocent as a child; he is mystical, primitive, simple-minded and yet the most worldly accomplished liar, and manipulator of social forces (1994: 81, 82).

Recognition of such dichotomized views of colonized and oppressed peoples can be found in the work of other scholars as well, including Albert Memi (1965), Frantz Fanon (1967), and, more recently, Michael Eric Dyson (1993), to name a few. For example, in an analysis of the commodification of the image of basketball star Michael Jordan, Michael Dyson writes:

In the final analysis, his black body — graceful and powerful, elegant and dark — symbolizes the possibilities of other black bodies to remain safe long enough to survive within the significant but limited sphere of sport.... His body is the symbolic carrier of racial and cultural desires to fly beyond limits and obstacles.... It is this power to embody the often conflicting desires of so many that makes Michael Jordan a supremely instructive figure of our times (Dyson, 1993: 74).

Dyson's point, like Bhabha's, is that even in societies where the evidence of oppression seems overwhelming, and where the objects of that oppression seem

to be at-risk or even endangered, the cultural meaning attached to membership within an oppressed social category is always multifaceted, complicated, and mediated by other social forces, especially class. The fact that some black males acquire wealth and popularity certainly does not negate or lessen the extent of the hardships experienced by other black males. However, it does point to the problem of overemphasizing race and gender as an explanation for the social and economic problems affecting individuals who happen to fall into particular socially constructed categories.

The Crisis of the Black Male and Its Implications for Black Women

Perhaps the most troubling aspect of the new focus on the problems of black males is the implicit assumption, in some cases made explicit, that males are worse off than females and therefore more deserving and in need of attention, assistance, and intervention. This argument has been made in a variety of ways. For example, Haki Madhubuti (1990: 70) contends that though a comparison of the hardships experienced by black men and women is fruitless, "white men do not fear black women, but they do fear black men" and, hence, it is black men who are the targets of "severe physical and psychological enslavement and elimination." Other arguments have been made by writers such as Jawanza Kunjufu, who suggest that single black mothers contribute to the failure of black males by:

...rearing their male child with little or no household responsibilities required. Mothers raise their daughters and love their sons.... They demand less academic achievement, maturity, and household chores.... It is very difficult to be economically self-sufficient if academic mediocrity, non-attendance at spiritual activities is condoned (Kunjufu, 1985: 18).

Despite the growing popularity of arguments such as these, it is not clear that black men are indeed worse off than black women. Although it is true that many individuals who are black and male are experiencing a variety of severe hardships, the same can be said for many black females. Comparisons are in themselves problematic because the difficulties facing black women typically are of a different nature. For example, black males in the U.S. have higher rates of incarceration than black females, but black females experience substantially higher poverty rates (National Research Council, 1989). Beyond the difficulty of drawing comparisons, there is the more important point that quantifying and measuring the degree of suffering can become an absurd undertaking. Is a life in poverty, confined to run-down, crime-filled slums, better than a life filled with interpersonal violence spent in and out of prison? The question itself seems preposterous, but nonetheless comparisons are made and hence it becomes necessary to critically examine the notion that black women are privileged in relation to black men.

In terms of economic indicators, the available evidence is at best inconclusive, or somewhat slanted in favor of males. In the U.S., unemployment rates are higher for males than females, yet more women live in households with incomes that fall below the poverty level. Given that women are increasingly more likely to be responsible for raising young children, the impact of low wages and impoverished living conditions is even greater than the data might suggest. There is evidence in certain sectors that employers favor black women over black men as prospective employees (Moss and Tilly, 1993), yet black men still hold more managerial and professional positions than do black women (National Research Council, 1989). This continues to be the case even though black women have higher rates of graduation from high school, college, and post-baccalaureate degree programs than do black men (Reed, 1988).

Other indicators of quality of life present a mixed picture that makes comparisons between men and women difficult. Black women have longer life expectancies and are generally healthier than black men. However, women are more likely to experience a variety of illnesses and chronic health conditions that lead to death and disability, which are not encountered by men. Breast and cervical cancer occur with greater frequency and are more lethal than comparable afflictions that affect men, such as cancer of the colon or prostate (Sandler et al., 1985). Black men are more likely to die of heart disease than are black women, but only black women face the risk of death during child birth and their maternal mortality rate is more than three times higher than that of white women (Farley and Allen, 1987). Finally, while the number of black men with HIV infection is substantially higher than the number of women with HIV, the rate of infection among black women is growing at a faster rate than that of any other segment of the U.S. population (Centers for Disease Control, 1988).

Beyond these kinds of comparisons of hardship, there is the more important and pervasive reality of patriarchy. Most research on black families identifies clear patterns of gender relations in which males are dominant. On a public level, this domination is manifest most clearly in politics, business, and churches, where black males occupy most leadership roles. This is often even the case when the membership of organizations is disproportionately composed of black women. However, it is also manifest at a more private level within families and in interpersonal relationships through the numerous privileges men enjoy over women in everyday life. From household chores to child rearing, and from domestic violence to providing support for children, men experience privileges that guarantee them less stress and responsibility, and more power in relation to women. It may well be that because the benefits of patriarchy, like the benefits of racism, are in many cases subtle and taken-for-granted, the privileged role of men is easily ignored and unrecognized. However, this merely attests to the ways in which male dominance is ubiquitous and invariably provides advantages to all males, including those who happen to be black. The fact that male privilege is

likely to be unrecognized and uncontested also helps to explain why the so-called crisis of the black male receives attention, while the continued oppression of black females is accepted as the norm.

Conclusion

Once again, the point of this analysis is not to discount the hardships experienced by black males. Many individuals who are black and male experience a range of debilitating disadvantages and constraints on their opportunity that warrant attention and intervention. The central point of this article is that by focusing exclusively upon race and gender as an explanation for these hardships, the issues become distorted and, consequently, the remedies employed to bring relief are typically either ineffective, or worse, contribute to further marginalization.

Black males don't exist in isolation. Most belong to families, live within communities, and are members of complex societies. It is therefore impossible to understand and address the issues confronting black males out of context, for it is in relation to others and to the structure of power and privilege in society that the issues confronting black males have meaning and significance.

This does not mean that the particular kinds of problems facing black males cannot or should not be addressed. Rather, it suggests that this must occur as part of a broader strategy aimed at social and cultural change. If, for example, there is recognition that the way in which masculinity has been socially constructed contributes to the incidence of violence among black males, then we might consider examining patterns of child rearing and socialization within schools and families in order to prescribe alternative approaches for caregivers. It may be that combating sexism and various forms of bias against females is the best way to address the machismo of black males. If this is the case, the advent of alternative approaches for understanding and responding to the problems facing black males should ultimately benefit both males and females.

Similarly, if interpersonal violence is understood as a conditioned behavior that is produced largely by poverty, deprivation, and desperation, then conflict-resolution programs or mentoring programs will never suffice as solutions. Such approaches, no matter how well intentioned and conceived, are premised on faulty notions of the problem because they isolate the cause of the problem within the individual and ignore the economic and social dimensions of the problem. As an alternative, a broad effort aimed at improving social and economic conditions through the provision of jobs and educational opportunities would undoubtedly do more to address the social and economic roots of the problem.

This is not to suggest that race and gender are irrelevant as descriptive variables in the study of social problems and issues. However, even as behavioral patterns related to race and gender are studied, they must be acted upon in a guarded manner. There are too many cases in which overemphasizing their importance has led to gross distortions and a reification of racist and sexist formulations. Since

such tendencies are so prevalent within the popular culture, analytical diligence and critical consciousness must be honed as tools of scholarship, policymaking, and social action; otherwise, we risk wasting our energies on efforts that do nothing to reverse the horrific trends that give rise to new fears of genocide.

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