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Balancing Challenges and Solutions

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Balancing Challenges and Solutions

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Editorial

By Serie McDougal, III Ph.D.

This volume seeks to establish a balance between challenges and solutions for African and Black communities. Each of the student authors sheds light on obstacles in the path of liberation for people of African descent, and points us toward strategies for resisting, healing, and remaining steadfast in our pursuit. Ms. Ashley Gregory describes a state of warfare, highlighting the legacy of resistance to police terrorism. That state of warfare involves many theaters, one of which is institutions of higher education. Ms. Beatrice Obialisi highlights the reasons that Black males do not reach their potential in higher education, and the kinds of support that fuel their success. Ms. Lauren Johnson deconstructs false narratives about Black women's sexual identity and highlights the importance of centering Black women's voices. Ms. Brianna Martinez identifies both barriers to and supports for Black males' mental health-seeking attitudes and behaviors. Mr. Paul Stanford explains the ways that Black college students use spirituality and religion to improve their mental health. By exploring the intersections of gender, sexuality, education, mental health, spirituality, and police terrorism, the authors of this volume present the reader with a broad range of challenges. Understanding these challenges, identifying solutions, testing and applying them, and sharpening our tools in the process of nation building is at the core of applied pan African studies.



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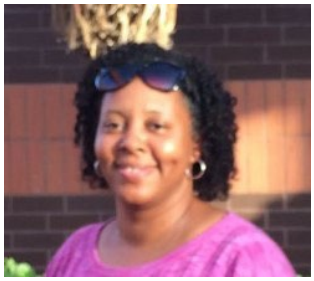
Introduction

By Ms. Eva Nicole Vines

> "*...for the South believed an educated Negro to be a dangerous Negro. And the South was not wholly wrong; for education among all kinds of men always has had, and always will have, an element of danger and revolution, of dissatisfaction and discontent. Nevertheless, men strive to know.*"
>
> ~W. E. B. Du Bois, "Of the Dawn of Freedom," in *The Souls of Black Folk*, 1903[1]

Within the collection of essays written by W. E. B. Du Bois in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), "Of the Dawn of Freedom," describes the role the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands (Freedman's Bureaus) played in shaping social access for formally enslaved Africans in the United States during the Reconstruction Era. While land procurement, employment, health services and access to the ballot were primary goals of the *Bureau*, for African Americans, formal educational attainment was a top priority. As schoolhouses for African Americans opened across the nation, White backlash to, and condemnation of, Black educational institutions was immediate —it would take almost a century after legal emancipation for Black education to stabilize from educational assaults. Yet, even prior to *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* (1954) which outlawed racialized school segregation at the federal level, African Americans fully embraced the primacy of education and understood it to offer a pathway towards their liberation.

Documented in Jarvis R. Givens book, *Fugitive Pedagogy: Carter G. Woodson and the Art of Black Teaching* (2021), Givens explores how Black educators have often functioned in subversive



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[1] Du Bois, W. E. B. (William Edward Burghardt). 1868-1963. "Of the Dawn of Freedom," in *The Souls of Black Folk; Essays and Sketches*. Chicago: A. G. McClurg, 1903. New York: Johnson Reprint Corp., 1968.

capacities. Helping Black students navigate racially hostile institutions, Black educators teach beyond state mandated curriculums and harness classroom pedagogies to assist students in achieving balance between "authorized" educational knowledge and the educational knowledge essential to their survival; stated by James Baldwin, education should serve in a capacity which allows our students to "examine the society in which [they are] being educated."[2]

A main tenet within the discipline of Pan-African Studies centers on helping our students challenge their self-understanding of the world around them. As educators, we expose young scholars to various and, hopefully, exploratory ideas that challenge them to wrestle with questioning and critiquing the societies in which they inhabit and will eventually inherit. Maintaining a commitment to deepening student engagement so that they are prepared to take up the torch of producing knowledge –not only to survive, but to thrive, is what the discipline of Pan-African Studies strives for and, the works contained within this journal do just that.

Within this third volume of *So Dayi: Pan African Studies Student Journal*, a recurring theme underpinning the work of our undergraduate scholars explores a connection between mental health and education –how the mental health of Black males navigating higher education is impacted, the psychological impact of living in surveilled communities and, the lack of control over our own bodies and sexualities. The scholarship contained in this journal demonstrates the intellectual rigor necessary to push our society toward being a better space for us all. In this current moment with the status-quo of society being questioned by this generation of rising scholars and disciplinary subjects such as Ethnic Studies and Critical Race Theory (C.R.T.) under scrutiny (in 2022, seven states have educational bans on C.R.T. and sixteen additional states are proposing bans),[3] we know why these

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[2] Baldwin, James. 1963. A Talk to Teachers, *Delivered on October 16, 1963, as "*The Negro Child-His Self-Image*"*, published in *The Saturday Review,* December 21, 1963*,* reprinted in *The Price of the Ticket, Collected Non-Fiction 1948-1985,* Saint Martins 1985.

[3] 2022: Critical Race Theory has been banned in: Arkansas, Florida, Idaho, Iowa, New Hampshire, Oklahoma and Tennessee. Bans have been proposed in: Alabama, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Michigan, Missouri, Montana, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, South Carolina, Texas, Utah, Washington, West Virginia and Wisconsin. https://worldpopulationreview.com/state-rankings/states-that-have-banned-critical-race-theory

disciplines and topics are under attack --what is taught frees minds; what is taught facilitates liberation; what is taught is paramount to the transformation of this nation and, as Black educators, the leadership roles our students embrace as well as the academic scholarship they produce, remains our greatest compliment. I hope you'll join me in commending the work and congratulating the scholars selected to add their voice and vison to the discipline of Pan-African Studies at the California State University, Los Angeles!

On Policing and Rebellion

By Ashley Gregory

In the modern political history of the United States, the police have become an overwhelming force in oppressed communities. During the 1960s and 70s, Lyndon B. Johnson's War on Crime joined his War on Poverty.[4] This poison pill provided the seeds for the police state that we now inhabit, where police helicopters overhead are the norm, police have immunity regarding what they do to citizens, and police militarization provides the main conduit through which our oppression becomes more brutal and aggressive.

But this was not the beginning of policing. It has its roots in the enforcement of chattel slavery. Parts of that system of oppression persist even today, most significantly in the consistent terror pursued as policy in Black communities, and the tearing apart of families for the purpose of financial gain for a small clique of ruling-class plutocrats. That system of chattel slavery included slave patrols: people hunters who were needed due to the "widespread and consistent" loss of enslaved people due to runaways. These runaways also supplemented the growing Black revolutionary abolitionist leadership.[5]



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[4] Hinton, E. K. (2017). Origins of Mass Incarceration. In *From the War on Poverty to the War on Crime: The Making of Mass Incarceration in America*. Introduction, Harvard University Press.

[5] Du Bois, W. E. B. (2007). The Black Worker. In *Black Reconstruction in America: An Essay Toward a History of the Part which Black Folk Played in the Attempt to Reconstruct Democracy in America, 1860–1880*. Essay, Oxford University Press.

In the North, the evolution of policing followed a different path. They faced different opponents during the first half of the nineteenth century, mainly poor White workers, especially recent immigrants from Europe who were versed in the language and action of class conflict. Although they never agreed with abolitionists, they shared a common enemy: the ruling classes of both the North and South.

During the Civil War, Black soldiers, especially the recently freed, took up arms against the Confederacy. They walked off plantations in numbers high enough to disrupt the Southern war economy. They fought for their own freedom against those who had done them wrong for centuries. It is unfortunate that they did so for the ultimate gain of Northern capital, as it allowed that entity to determine the economic destiny of the nation.

After the Civil War, Reconstruction brought the possibility of a truly multi-racial democracy in the United States. With the Union Army standing by their side, Black people were able to exercise their right to vote, to hold office, and to sell their own labor. The time was ripe for justice, but the opportunity was squandered. The assassination of President Lincoln left the vision of the savior of the union incomplete. Lincoln died before significantly shaping the situation that came after slavery, and Andrew Johnson stood as a bulwark against Thaddius Stevens and other radical factions of the Republican party. In 1877, the Union Army ended its occupation of the Southern states, marking the end of the Reconstruction era.

The leaders of the Confederacy got off scot-free after starting a civil war to keep millions of people enslaved for their own personal benefit. The oligarchy that ruled the South returned with whatever landowners were still alive. As convict leasing and sharecropping becoming the order of the day for Black people, their situation changed little. Northern liberals were unable to fully support Black freedom in the swing of Reconstruction. Although amendments to the Constitution were ratified, they also sowed the seeds for convict leasing and the prison industrial complex. The 13th Amendment specifically allows for slavery as a punishment for crime, and this has been utilized to horrible effect.

Jim Crow was the new social order that emerged in the post-Reconstruction South. Racial castes were reinstated, and Black people were subjected to laws that destroyed their rights to vote, hold public office, and participate in society at the same level as White people.

As the twentieth century dawned, police in the North did not have to contest with very dissimilar forces from their predecessors of the previous century. But in the South the story had changed slightly. Police now reinforced White terror through means such as convict leasing and public lynchings of men who were innocent of the crimes they were accused of. Southern police often helped mobs torture their victims, and city officials would do everything they could to get the White community involved in the action while Black people feared for their lives.[6]

It would be a useful time to mention polices links with the Ku Klux Klan, the White terrorist organization that grew among former Confederate soldiers and had ties to police across the nation that continued well into the twentieth century. From Portland to Los Angeles to Atlanta, ties between the KKK and law enforcement run deep. The KKK is not the only White supremacist group with ties to law enforcement; the New Jersey State Troopers were founded by Nazis.[7]

Even through Jim Crow, Black people still fought against racial agitation and conflict from the unfair system forced on them. In *Race Rebel*, Robing D. G. Kelley shows how segregated buses became a terrain of racial conflict.[8] Kelley is an expert in the specific ways that women fought the racial caste system they were born into.

In the late 1960s and 70s, we reached a new era of policing. The Civil Rights Movement had highlighted the need for expanded government intervention into the lives of Black people. The FBI had been working tirelessly, through projects such as COINTELPRO (Counter-Intelligence-

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[6] Wells-Barnett, I. B. (1892, June 25). *Southern horrors: Lynch law in all its phases*. The Project Gutenberg eBook of Southern Horrors: Lynch Law In All Its Phases, by Ida B. Wells-Barnett. Retrieved December 16, 2021, from https://www.gutenberg.org/files/14975/14975-h/14975-h.htm

[7] Shakur, A. (2014). *Assata an autobiography*. Zed Books.

[8] Kelley, R. D. G. (1996). *Race rebels: Culture, politics, and the Black Working Class*. Free Press.

Program) to stamp out dissent in Black communities through any means necessary, and they were extremely effective at assassinating leaders. The assassination of Fred Hampton, leader of the Chicago chapter of the Black Panther Party, by the FBI and Chicago PD is a telling example. He was killed in retaliation for a shootout a few weeks earlier between two Panthers and the Chicago PD, in which two officers and one of the Panthers were killed; the other was later charged with murder.

In the following days, one of the most sinister tools of law enforcement was revealed in a raid on the Black Panther Party headquarters at 41st and Central in Los Angeles. Before the sun came up on December 8, 1969, only four days after Fred Hampton was assassinated, the LAPD deployed the first-ever SWAT team to execute a no-knock raid. In the ensuing gunfight, five thousand rounds of ammunition were exchanged. Although both sides received wounds, no one was killed. Eventually, the Panthers who were charged were acquitted. The jury saw that they had the right to defend themselves against police enforcing an unlawful warrant without even identifying themselves.[9]

These attacks foreshadowed the militarization of police that took place over the following fifty years. Tactics like the no-knock raids are still used today. Tragically, one such raid led to the death of Breonna Taylor at the hands of Louisville police officers just in 2020.[10]

One of the newer pieces of the racial caste system is the prison industrial complex. Prisons served as some of the main battlegrounds and recruitment sites for Black movements like the BPP and the Nation of Islam, the latter having converted Malcolm X while he was in prison.[11] The BPP had wide-ranging networks in the sprawling prison system that produced amazing revolutionaries

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[9] Fleischer, M. (2019, December 8). *50 years ago, Swat raided the L.A. Black Panthers. it's been targeting black communities ever since*. Los Angeles Times. Retrieved December 16, 2021, from https://www.latimes.com/opinion/story/2019-12-08/50-years-swat-black-panthers-militarized-policinglos-angeles

[10] Oppel, R. A., Taylor, D. B., & Bogel-Burroughs, N. (2020, May 30). *What to know about Breonna Taylor's death*. The New York Times. Retrieved December 16, 2021, from https://www.nytimes.com/article/breonna-taylor-police.html

[11] X., M., & Haley, A. (2015). *The autobiography of Malcolm X*. Ballantine Books.

like George Jackson, whose brother Jonathan Jackson took up arms against the court that had imprisoned his brother.[12]

Prisons riots and street riots with an increasingly militarized police force represent the current state of war between Black people and the ruling class that benefits from our oppression.

[12] Jackson, G. L. (1972). *Blood in my eye*. Black Classic Press.

The Impact of Environmental Hindrances on Black Males' Success in Higher Education

By Beatrice Obialisi

When Sam was growing up, he often heard his parents express regret for not pursuing bachelor's degrees. Because they had not been supported when they were younger, Sam's parents surrounded him and his siblings with literature and intellectual stimulation. As he grew older, college became less a vicarious dream of his parents' and more a goal he wanted to accomplish for himself (Hines et al., 2015, p.). Unfortunately, Sam did not find the same enthusiastic support at school that he'd had at home. Rather than steering him toward colleges, his guidance counselors suggested he focus his efforts on trade school. Extracurricular programs that he tried to join for college preparation suddenly changed their acceptance policies. Sam also noted that he was consistently graded lower than his White peers on assignments, no matter how much effort he put in. The continued backlash he received at school made him resent the idea of going to college. He felt that if high school was already so difficult, surely college would be insufferable. And in fact college would prove to be just as difficult, if not more (Hines et al., 2015). Sam's dilemma was one that Black male students across America face with daily.

In the U.S., Black males "account for less than 5% of undergraduate students and about one-third graduate from four-year colleges over six years from initial enrollment" (Brooms & Davis 2017, p. 34). This is not because Black males are not interested in higher education, but because they do not receive adequate support in secondary school to make undertaking college



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feasible. To exacerbate the situation, the young Black men who do make it to college are not met with the support they need to transition into the new environment. Unable to acclimate, many drop out or end up on academic probation.

This paper addresses the question, What are the impacts of environmental hindrances on Black males' success in higher education? I analyze the effects of racial stereotyping in lower education on Black males and how this affects their ability to succeed in higher education. I also examine the carryover of racial discrimination into college environments and how those issues are exacerbated there. This dive into environmental hindrances facing Black male students is necessary for the growth of the entire Black community. Although Black people deal with different problems related to their individual identities, these problems overlap with the overall community and affect everyone. Bringing attention to the difficulties Black male students face is crucial to strengthening Black people as a whole.

Racial Discrimination against Black Males in Lower Education

Black males endure racial discrimination from childhood onward that destabilizes their position in society by weaponizing negative stereotypes against them. Naturally, negative stereotyping follows them into almost every area of their lives, school being no exception. Due to the tendency for school administrators and staff to view Black males as aggressive, uncaring, and aloof, they are given fewer opportunities than their peers to excel in school. They are often taught that restricting themselves makes more sense than trying too hard academically or setting ambitious goals (Dow, 2016). This eventually dulls their drive in their educational careers. Stagnating personal goals is one way schools create barriers that hinder even the most determined students.

Racial prejudice accounts for much of the emotional distress Black males experience in early schooling. It is also responsible for their isolation from school activities. Although these are problems for all Black children, Black males tend to be stereotyped more strongly than Black females, and they tend to face harsher methods of discipline than their Black female and White peers (Dow, 2016).

Entry into post-secondary institutions requires more than the minimum effort in school, and this is the point where institutional barriers come in. These barriers include "high-stakes testing and accountability, pressure to address curriculum mandates, scripted literacy programs, unqualified and inexperienced teachers, and limited resources. These have resulted in Black children's underrepresentation in gifted education and their overrepresentation in special education classrooms" (Turner 2020, p. 445). Many other Black boys are hampered in the same way that Sam was robbed of extracurricular opportunities and pushed toward trade school. Because these issues are not adequately addressed in lower-level educational institutions, the problem worsens if these students try to pursue college degrees.

Racial Stereotyping of Black Males on College Campuses

The racial stereotyping and consequential marginalization of Black males does not stop after lower education. It follows them and makes their transition into adulthood difficult.

Racial stereotyping on college campuses tends to be very similar to what Black males would have experienced in their earlier years. Constant anti-Black male stereotyping by administration results in over-scrutinizing of their behavior, both on and off campus. Because of this, several Black male students have described their colleges as teeming with micro-aggressions (Brooms, 2018).

Being perceived as a criminal and made an outcast in one's school is detrimental to academic prospects. College typically serves as both a school and a home to incoming students, and the inability of schools to show that they care about and are willing to protect their Black male students in either of these categories is a worrying matter that will naturally beget mistrust and culminate in the student's decision to leave the institution or at least pull away academically. Because this is a problem across the country, there is no guarantee that the same issues will not resurface elsewhere if the student transfers.

Being an outcast has far more dire consequences than it might seem. Black male students who suffer racial stereotyping and microaggressions exhibit "increased racial battle fatigue—psychosocial stress that includes frustration, anger, resentment, anxiety, helplessness, and fear"

(Brooms, 2018, p. 61). This is the result of racial marginalization that follows young Black men from early school years onward. Rather than vanishing, or at the least becoming easier to handle as the students ages, racial issues only become more prominent.

One main reason that climates like this exist at higher institutions is that administrators and staff often turn a blind eye to the problem. Many of the injustices that Black males face on campus are not hidden, one-off situations. They happen to enough students that the problem is evident to the administrators and faculty members who govern operations. However, college administrators instead operate on a don't ask, don't tell basis. Black male students have reported that they are seldom approached or questioned about their experiences in the institutions they attend. No one asks their opinions on how the environment could be improved and made more welcoming for them (Kim & Hargrove, 2013). And even when administrators are confronted with the racial injustices that plague their students, they remain indifferent (Feagin, 1992). The issues are not deemed pressing enough to spend valuable time solving.

Consequences of the Lack of Resources for Black Males at Higher Institutions

Beyond racial stereotyping, the lack of resources for Black males on college campuses further threatens their ability to obtain college degrees. Sam remembers being placed on academic probation at the end of his first year in college. He also recalled navigating his school life on his own, with little or no guidance. His lack of preparation for the fast-paced college environment came as a shock to him (Hines et al., 2015).

Because Black male students are not given the same attention as other students when it comes to college preparation, they tend to fall behind when they enter the fast-paced new environment. They often have a far harder time acclimating properly. Colleges do not provide them with resources for learning how to change their study habits, manage their time, network with new people, and so forth. When left to their own devices, it is easy for them to overlook specific steps and sell themselves short. At that point, these students will often leave school because they constantly feel unseen and unheard (Woldoff et al., 2011).

However, the neglect does not end when students graduate or drop out. Just as the discrimination they faced in secondary education followed them to college, the discrimination they faced in college follows them into their adult lives. Because Black male students are subjected to antagonizing behavior and isolation in college, they are more likely to perceive their future workplaces as an extension of the same situation, which can result in them unnecessarily isolating themselves even further (Woldoff et al., 2011). When Black male students pull away from their education after being alienated, there is a predisposition for others to label them as uncaring.

The reality for Black male students in college is that about 70% of them will not complete their degrees within the expected six-year timeframe (Kim & Hargrove, 2013). Two of the biggest reasons for this are that they end up dropping out or being expelled. Popular narrative about Black males' work ethic claim that they would rather engage in hypersexuality, drug abuse, criminal activity, and overall delinquency than further their education (Brooms & Davis 2017). But the true cause is the failure of institutions to integrate Black male students into their campuses properly. Like Sam, many Black males have grown up aspiring to attend college but found the reality of getting there more daunting than they imagined.

Successes of Black Women in Higher Institutions

Not everyone who examines the difficulties Black males face in higher education believes that it is a dilemma. Like Black men, Black women are exposed to racial stereotyping and discrimination from a young age. This racism also follows them into their adult years and makes their academic endeavors more challenging. That being said, Black females excel in higher education in comparison to their male counterparts. In 2010, studies showed that they earned twice as many baccalaureate degrees as Black men (Kim & Hargrove, 2013).

Black women are subjected to many of the same discriminatory practices as Black men, but they manage to overcome them and succeed in school. This implies that although the situation is bleak, it is not dire enough to warrant serious attention. The problem with this sentiment is that it does not consider the severity of the factors stacked against Black males.

From lower education to higher education, Black males are vilified at higher rates than Black women. Although Black women are subject to their share of daily racism, statistically Black men bear more of that weight in educational institutions. In mass media, Black men are overly represented as foolish, violent, and hypersexual (Brooms & Davis 2017). This portrayal goes beyond television and computer screens into everyday life. The narratives assigned to Black men cease to be understood as fiction and are taken as realistic insights into their nature. The presentation of Black males in the media overlaps with how they are perceived in various social institutions, especially schools (Brooms & Davis 2017). The negative stereotyping in the media is impossible to ignore, and it inevitably shapes the perception of Black men in higher education. This is why so few Black men complete their baccalaureate degrees. They are more likely than their peers to encounter hindrances that cause them to struggle academically.

Black Men Succeeding in College Despite Racial Barriers

Despite the odds stacked against them, Black male college students still defy statistics and succeed in college. There are three main strategies they use to their advantage. First, they use support and academic assistance programs offered by their schools to help them navigate their environment. Second, they rely on family members who to provide encouragement. Lastly, they rely on their spiritual beliefs to provide them with the strength to overcome challenges (Kim & Hargrove, 2013). Black male students can flourish in higher institutions. If they search diligently for the resources they need, they will find that they do exist.

Though Black male students do succeed in higher education by using the resources around them, that is not reflective of the entire population. It remains the case that Black males make up less than 5% of undergraduate students, and only one-third graduate within six years (Brooms & Davis & Davis 2017). There are exceptions, but there is still a severe problem that needs addressing for the majority. Some students try to navigate college without familial or spiritual encouragement. Some have never heard of the academic support programs their schools offer. The idea that it is not impossible to succeed as a Black male student in college is accurate. However, one has to be realistic

about the weight of the barriers to that success. Resources exist, but they are not being offered on a large enough scale for the vast majority to be positively affected.

Conclusion

The majority of Black male students are not able to excel in their lower education courses. They are overly disciplined and treated as problem children rather than students who probably have different communication styles. They are not given the same opportunities as their peers to engage in extracurricular activities to prepare them for higher education. Young Black males are often pushed toward trade work rather than college. Although there is nothing wrong with trade school, the idea that that is more suitable for Black males than college is rooted in racist ideology.

When Black males get into college, they have to deal with a heightened version of the racism they dealt with in high school. This racism is often candid rather than overt. It manifests in a lack of interest by the administration in their proper integration into campus. There are few or no resources for helping with academic or social acclimation. Because of this, dropout and probation rates are high among Black male college students. If administrators would take the time to understand the experiences of these students, there would definitely be an improvement.

Some Black males defy the odds and excel in higher education. They make use of academic resources or encouragement from familial and spiritual support systems. However, this is not true of all Black male college students. Many lack support systems, and they suffer because of it. Some people also use the fact that there are successful Black female students to discredit the plight Black males face. The problem with this is that more academic barriers hinder Black men than Black women. In school, they have to jump over more hurdles. Lower and higher education institutions alike need to restructure their environments to accommodate Black male students. Like any other students, they deserve the chance to realize whatever goals they have.

As the years pass, more researchers have come to understand how to make students of color feel more welcome in school. However, a deeper dive into the experiences of Black males in educational environments is still needed. Such research would contribute to bridging the gap

between administration and Black students. Behavioral analysis focusing on the interactions between Black male students and school administrators is probably the most crucially needed research. This would show which problems stem from misunderstandings and which are purely racist and need to be addressed. Several problems arise and are sustained because of lack of knowledge. Although there are probably perpetrators of antagonistic behavior towards Black male students who do not wish to change, providing the resources is still necessary. A broken system cannot be improved without knowing where the cracks have formed.

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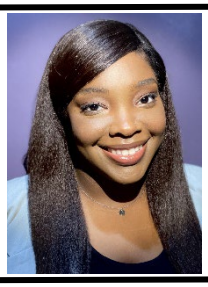
Taking Back What's Mine: Black Women's Sexual Plight and America's Contribution to Black Women's Sexuality

By Lauren Johnson

Narratives of the identity of Black women and their sexuality are often not told by Black women themselves. Instead, Black women's sexual narratives are observed by outsiders who are blind to the struggles of Black womanhood. Black women have unwillingly had overt sexualization imposed on them, and this has caused their real sexual existence to be suppressed and disregarded by American society. Yet their sexuality has undeniably been exploited.

To be accurate, Black women do in fact have proprietorship of their sexual identity, but this is often overshadowed by uninvited critics providing false perceptions of Black women and their sexual autonomy and femininity. Patriarchy, racism, sexism, and slavery have all aided in shaping the impact on how Black women view themselves. The sexualization of Black women and their limited freedom to express their sexual identity is a topic of conversation that is continually neglected, as though there is an on going tussle between Black women reclaiming their sexual identity and American society infiltrating it.

Anderson et al. (2018) reported that objectification theory describes how a person is viewed and considered as an object from social experiences, as well as from media images. Women learn



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to internalize spectators' outlooks and begin to view themselves through the same objectifying lens. When women begin to embody being sexually objectified, it can lead to detrimental consequences and behaviors. Anderson et al. (2018) noted how self-objectification leads to mental health problems such as depression and body shaming among women. They also reported that the "objectified gaze" results in social physique anxiety and increased self-silencing. The mental problems of body anxiety, body shaming, depression, and self-silencing only reiterate how Black women's sexual identity is rebuffed.

It is important to analyze and address the falsehoods that have been ingrained in our society, and to understand the injurious language, actions, and presumptions that continually damage the Black woman's experience in America. The purpose is to acknowledge the sexual plight of Black women and the way being overly sexualized can prevent one from having a healthy sexual identity.

My research focuses on understanding the cultural impact of American society and mainstream media to the sexualization of Black women. My proposed research question is "How do American society and mainstream media contribute to negative perceptions and stereotypes of Black women and their sexuality?" Many factors need to be considered in exploring the sexualization and sexual identities of Black women. In sequence this paper covers the impact of American enslavement, the contributions of the Black community, and sexualization, sexual stereotypes, and the influence and effects of mainstream media. Black women's sexuality is adversely impacted by American society and the mainstream media's stereotypical perceptions of Black women.

American Enslavement and Black Womanhood

To understand the present-day complexity of Black women's sexuality, we must examine the past. Upon their arrival in the new world, Black women and men alike were considered

inhuman, but the autonomy of Black women in particular was brutalized in horrible ways. According to Angela Davis, "The slave system defined Black people as chattel. Since women, no less than men, were viewed as profitable labor-units, they might as well have been genderless as far as the slaveholders were concerned" (1981). American enslavement reduced Black women into "genderless" property, which meant that any one of them could be subjected to horrific mistreatment. Enslaved women were victims of vicious abuse that could only be imposed on women. Slaveholders exploited them for capital gain, which again degraded them as genderless, but sexual exploitation became the ultimate punishment of Black women that made them female again (Davis, 1981). What Davis described was the culmination of enslaved Black women dissociating themselves from their sexual identity and femininity.

In the eyes of White people, Black women did not have the grace of not being considered sexually deviant. Wyatt (1997) asserted, "Many White men and women came to think of Black women as basically immoral, 'loose and easy,' and deliberately enticed White men" (p. 11). Their attractiveness became their burden. Enslaved Black women were made to believe that they were at fault for their own sexual demise, but in fact it was White men who lacked sexual control. No matter what emotions Black women had about their circumstances, externally they had to educate themselves on pretending to comply, appear in good spirits, and be content with their reality (Wyatt, 1997, p. 21). This statement speaks to the mental affliction Black women experienced under slavery and could lead one to believe that their sexual identity was being destroyed. Wyatt (1997) added that keeping quiet about your trauma meant that you were strong, and you did not permit intrusive thoughts even if your physical being was violated (p. 22). Black women were belittled into being nothing more or less than a field or house slave, a sex slave, and a reproduction machine. We can assume that enslavement caused their sexuality and femininity to be eradicated,

but instead we can view this as Black women compromising their sexuality and femininity for the sake of survival.

The trauma of sexually violation wasn't exclusive to mature enslaved women; it happened to young girls as well. Young enslaved girls were held to the same conditions as older women. Because of this, "in spite of all the hardships the women knew their daughters would encounter, they generally did not inform them about normal sexual development or about their own emerging sexuality" (Wyatt, 1997, p. 17). Older women were afraid and kept silent instead of informing young girls about their sexual health, because of the inevitable consequences. The sexualization and violation of the Black female body were forced on them, to be both accepted and concealed regardless of one's age.

The Role of the Black Community in Sexualizing Black Girls

The sexualizing of young enslaved girls also provided excuses for the present-day sexualization and adultification of young Black girls. Although this paper focuses just on Black women, it is important to acknowledge the troubles Black girls confront regarding their sexuality. The mental and social conditioning we receive as children translates into adulthood. American society subjects Black girls to hyper-sexualization and adultification: "the process through which an adolescent acquires or assumes behaviors and roles that are typically adult" (Nebbitt & Lombe, 2010). Black girls are more likely to be deprived of a childhood and given adult-like responsibilities. Teshome and Yang (2018) reported Black girls between the ages of five and fourteen not requiring nurturing and protection in contrast to their White counterparts, and Black girls are more likely to be informed about sex than White girls. We can ask why Black girls are removed from needing protection and nurturing, but we can quickly renounce this inquiry and revert to the circumstances of slavery and overall racism. Black girls are not given the opportunity

or the freedom to simply be children. Instead, our society has ingrained and memorialized an image of black girls and women as hyper-sexual and sexually objectified.

In 2020, Grower et al. conducted a study of 473 Black and White adolescent girls to test whether objectification and sexualization affected the mental health of adolescent youths of color (p. 273). Specifically, they measured body surveillance, enjoyment of sexualization, and mental health. "Body surveillance" refers to actively monitoring or observing one's physical appearance; "enjoyment of sexualization" was defined as liking sexual attention from men and finding it positive and rewarding (Liss et al., 2010). The study measured the subjects' depression, anxiety, self-esteem, and sexual dysfunction and found direct connections between body surveillance and mental health being negatively affected by low self-esteem, body shaming, and anxiety (Grower et al., 2020). The authors concluded, "Although mean levels of body surveillance and enjoyment of sexualization did not differ by race, their consequences appeared to be stronger for Black girls. Perhaps this differential contribution stems from unique cultural stereotypes of their group that Black girls and women must confront" (p. 278). The researchers found that because of cultural and societal stereotypes about Black girls and women, they are prone to receiving backlash for sexual expression and their sexual identities.

American society is responsible for establishing racial and sexual stereotypes and stigmas about Black girls and women, but we should acknowledge how the Black community continues to endorse these societal attitudes. The African American community prides itself on indoctrinating children with Christian ideologies, yet young girls are taught differently about sexuality. Wyatt (1997) argued that after emancipation, Black people "believed that too much sexual information, exposure to the world, and knowledge of street language or carnal behavior would be a direct indication that Black women were as sexually immoral and impulse-ridden as Whites claimed they

were" (p. 23). These types of ideologies are still prevalent today, and they can do more harm than good in the upbringing of Black girls. Black families obviously want to protect their children, but this approach ultimately teaches them to feel fear and shame about their sexuality, and to believe that they are sexually damned.

Black girls shouldn't be made to feel guilty for their budding sexuality. Instead, the Black community should abandon actions and language that cause Black girls to feel cursed. Wyatt (1997) described how, to ready Black girls for sexual roles, parents must educate them about sex and its ramifications, oversee activities the child takes part in, create boundaries against exploitation, manage friend groups to ensure that the child is around others who uphold the same values, and help the child learn appropriateness and self-confidence as an individual (p. 65). By breaking old patterns and stigmas surrounding sexual behaviors, the Black community can implement new strategies to improve the sexual identity not only of Black girls but of Black women as well.

Stereotypes and Their Effects on Black Women

Black women have had to endure horrendous labels that contribute to the societal pressures and intersectionalities of being a woman. The term "intersectionality" was coined by Crenshaw (1991) to refer to the complexities of gender, race, and class. The term reflects how discrimination and marginalization affect the social experiences of women of color, and more specifically Black women. Crenshaw also used the term to illustrate how Black women experience coinciding systems of subjection at the brinks of feminism and anti-racism. Black American women have had to confront the intersectionalities of being Black and being female, and of sexual oppression, racism, and other involuntary identities.

The term "stereotype" refers to beliefs about the behaviors, patterns, attitudes, and

characteristics of specific groups of people (Rosenthal & Lobel, 2016). Rosenthal and Lobel went on to define stereotypes as based on some truths but overgeneralized and exaggerated. During enslavement, Black women were typecast as the "sapphire," the "jezebel," and the "mammy." The sapphire was a combative, controlling, Black matriarch; the jezebel was promiscuous, sexually immoral, and loose; and the mammy represented the ugly mother figure who was devotedly subservient to Whites (Rosenthal & Lobel, 2016, p. 416).

Our society hasn't shied away from using terms like "mammy," "sapphire," and "jezebel." Now, though, American society uses terms like "strong Black woman" or "independent Black woman" to refer to the sapphire archetype. Thomas et al. (2004) demonstrated how "African American women are socialized to appear strong, tough, resilient, and self-sufficient [and] are viewed (even by themselves) as being impervious to the hardships of life." We also call Black women "hoes" or "THOTs" (That Hoe Over There), and are quick to call little Black girls loose, fast, or too grown when they are wearing something not considered age appropriate or when exuding confidence in their behavior or personality.

Thomas et al. (2004) confirmed needing always to be perceived as strong and unmalleable causes women to not want to share their desires and needs, and can cause mental anguish and prevent them from pursuing mental health services. The permanence of cultural stereotypes negatively pervades Black women and girls' experiences in America. These inaccurate, harmful messages tell Black women and girls to subscribe to these simulated narratives, and that they are not granted confirmation of their hardships.

Mainstream Media's Influence on Black Women

Media representation of Black people has changed drastically. Black people are slowly gaining access to and control over Black narratives in the entertainment industry, and it is

positively affecting the Black community. But alongside positive representation of Black people, White impressions of Black people continue to heavily saturate Black storylines through the preservation of racially stereotypical roles for Black people. Grifflin (2014) stated that the media we consume are widely controlled and owned by White people and are part of a social institution that constantly illustrates discriminative and oppressive principles (p. 183). Hence, media are another gateway to objectifying and controlling images and perceptions of Black people. And specifically, Black women become the old-timey tropes of the mammy, sapphire, and jezebel again. Adams-Bass et al. pointed out, "These historical caricatures have been transformed into contemporary distortions: the welfare queen, who is sexually promiscuous and schemes for money; the video vixen, a loose woman; and the gold digger, who schemes and exploits the generosity of men" (2014). Current mainstream media have updated negative archetypes and shifted the way we view and accept Black women in American society.

Anderson et al. (2018) conducted a study of whether Black women were more prone to being sexually objectified and dehumanized through the White gaze. The study sampled 38 White men and 28 White women, and used images of Black and White women . They measured whether White men and women fixated longer on photos of Black women wearing revealing clothing (e.g, a bikini) than on similar photos of White women. The researchers concluded that Black women do experience sexual objectification, and that participants spent more time gazing at Black women's sexual body parts than at White women's (Anderson et al., 2018). They also confirmed that the White gaze perpetuates "Jezebel" or "THOT" stereotypes of Black women. The White gaze does continue the sexualized misrepresentation of Black womanhood, and further embeds damaging stereotypes.

Grifflin (2014) gave a compelling description of White people being the "lookers" while

people of color are relegated to "being the looked at." Again, we can reiterate how Black women don't always have ownership of their own existence, even in media.

Not only do adultification and the Black community contribute to negative perceptions of young Black girls, the media plays a crucial part in how Black girls view themselves. Focusing on television, Adams-Bass et al. (2014) reported that African American youths watch television at much higher rates than their White counterparts, and researchers have found that when people are continually exposed to poor images of Black people, they develop negative conceptions which in turn harm Black children and their psychosocial development.

American television still plays into damaging archetypes like the mammy, the sapphire, and the jezebel, so it is no surprise that our society unknowingly internalizes and directs these negative stereotypes against Black people, especially Black women. Adams-Bass et al. (2014) organized a focus group to measure whether Black youths experienced negative messaging about Black people, and specifically Black women. The study consisted of Black youths 14 to 21 years old. The findings categorized imagery of Black women as unusually sexual, the caretaker, the strong Black woman, and the angry Black woman. It revealed that Black youths did not consider negative images of Black people to be reality and were able to differentiate between negative and positive images of Black women (Adams-Bass et al., 2014). These results are important and should be highlighted because they undermine negative imagery of Black women and show that Black youths are able to resist internalizing and projecting such harsh and unrealistic stereotypes.

Conclusion

American enslavement has had a long-lasting negative impact on the way Black women view their sexuality. In this paper, I identified the sexual plights Black women have had to encounter. But we can attest to the progress made by Black women in finding sexual liberation

while confronting historical sexual trauma and the underlying sexual stereotypes and archetypes that plague them. Our media echo stereotypes of promiscuity, sexually aggressiveness, and combativeness, but we should not forget the resiliency, poise, and resistance that Black women exude. Even though American society has tried to narrate Black women's sexuality, Black women continue fighting to reclaim their sexual identity. Black women have found various ways to cope with and eliminate deprecating ideologies that prohibit them from sexual, social, economical, and political liberation. By ratifying theories and movements such as womanism and Black feminism, Black women are constructing safe spaces and solace for those who remain under oppression.

Modern media provide opportunities for women of color to tell their own stories. Marquita Gammage (2019) argued, "As Black women gained access to media and literary productions, their fabrication of Black womanhood differed dramatically from previous White male dominated portrayals of Black women" (p. 3). Although the entertainment industry is still dominated by White narratives, Black women are navigating the trenches of misrepresentation. Misrepresentation of Black women in the media can seemingly perpetuate negative stereotypical scripts, but Adam-Bass et al. (2014) combatted that assumption with the racial encounter coping appraisal and socialization theory (RECAST), a "racial/ethnic socialization theory that proposes that youth who receive racial socialization are better at interpreting messages and images about Black people as positive or negative." Because of constant exposure to racial socialization, Black viewers can differentiate between stereotypical tropes and stigmas in the media. The RECAST lens is important because it means that Black people are not internalizing misrepresentations of Black women.

Black adolescent girls also feel the cultural and historical impact of American sexualization and objectification. They are sexually adultified and represented as not needing protection or education about their sexuality. The Black community furthers this hyper-sexualization and

adultification by misinforming Black girls about sexual health. This teaches them either sexual repression or rebellion, but ultimately it reiterates the inattention to Black women's sexuality. By unveiling the toxic rhetoric surrounding Black girls and sexual identity, the Black community can dispose of the septic culture of adultification and sexualization.

My research focused on the harmful ways Black women and their sexuality are engaged because I wanted to address this neglected subject. It is vital that we confront America's contribution to the way Black women are perceived sexually, but it is also vital to dismantle Black women's sexual burdens. The research that has been conducted on this will be extremely beneficial to pan African American studies because it has acknowledged that there is a problem in American society, and more importantly a problem in the Black community, regarding awareness of Black women's sexuality. Further research is needed on the mental health of Black women and their sexual identity, and on how the lack of a sexual identity can cause psychological harm to Black American women. In what ways are Black American women are reclaiming sexuality? Future research should also examine positive representations of Black American women using and owning their sexuality in pop culture.

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Mental Health Help-Seeking Behaviors of Young Black Males

By Brianna Martinez

Mental health is a sensitive and in many cases taboo topic in the Black community. Although young Black males are among the demographic groups with the most historical trauma, meaning they experience the same trauma their ancestors endured (Jones, 2021), this issue continues to be ignored, and even when revealed it is brushed under the rug. Luckily, with smart phones and social media, there is much easier access today to information about mental health. This includes easy-to-read articles and videos for young people on various disorders and examples of the behaviors people suffering from them might display. People can also find encouragement to acknowledge these issues, seek help improving their mental health, and learn to lead healthier lifestyles. Hotlines, therapy, and community support are all more accepted today and often right at our fingertips. But just because all of those things are there for the taking, not everyone who could benefit from them, especially in the Black community, is taking full advantage of them.

Although we have made a lot of progress as a nation over the years, racism and stereotypes continue to affect the pursuit of mental health treatment in the Black community. Some factors in the lack of mental-help seeking are societal conditions, attitudes, historical affliction, mistrust of medical professionals, lack of education, and lack of access to insurance (Mental Health America, 2021). Today African Americans can report the same symptoms as White people and be diagnosed



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with a completely different disorder. The progress that has been made is definitely a start, but more focus needs to be put on the mental health experiences of Black males.

Adult African American males are more likely to have negative feelings such as sadness, hopelessness and worthlessness than adult White males (Mental Health America, 2021). In addition, 16% of young Black males (4.8 million) report having a mental illness, but 58.2% of those who reported struggling with mental illness did not seek or receive treatment (Mental Health America, 2021). This raises the question, what factors influence whether young Black males seek mental health help?

Identification and exploration of these factors is crucial to the future of Black communities. We must figure out what drives young Black men to accept and seek help so that they can better themselves, and we must instill it in youths now and in the future. It must be kept in mind that young men go on to become fathers, husbands, and household leaders. Their families and future ones will benefit from this research, and more importantly the course of mental health in Black history as a whole can be altered. In this paper, we explore what it means to be a psychologically healthy Black male, the different factors that contribute to psychological disturbances among young Black men, their hesitancy about seeking help for mental health problems, who does seek such help among young Black males, and what can be done to ensure that more of them do.

Attributes of Psychologically Healthy Young Black Males

Before discussing help-seeking behaviors among young Black males, we must understand what it means for this demographic to be psychologically healthy. A young Black male must display six characteristics to be considered to have good intellectual health: a positive self-concept, a positive racial identity, an understanding of racism and the social-political environment, the ability to cope with cultural oppression, involvement in emotionally healthy relationships, and the

ability to work productively, competently, and effectively (McDougal III, 2020). When those characteristics are threatened by outside sources, psychological health begins to decline. When a young Black man is not able to thrive in all these respects, he often feels isolated, angry, and resentful. These built-up negative feelings can lead to the stereotypical behavior of a Black man in America, as overly aggressive, sexual, or violent (Carabello, 2020).

Elevated Psychological Disturbances among Young Black Males

Many factors might contribute to the elevated psychological disturbances among young Black males. One of the most important is epigenetics, they way our ancestors have an impact on who we are today (Jones, 2021). Others are historical trauma, post-traumatic slave syndrome (P.T.S.S.), mass incarceration, socioeconomic status, and discrimination. Add to these factors unemployment, substance abuse, and high dropout rates, and we can begin to understand why these young men are mentally disturbed. These are all systematic problems in our country, and we need systematic solutions to see a change (Jones, 2021).

Black father absence is also, without question, an area of struggle in our country's history. From the statistics of Black single-mother homes to the distasteful jokes that have been normalized in society, this is a problem that is partly to blame for the rising mental health problems among young Black males, which leads us to look for the roots of this high absence of African American fathers from the home. What causes these men to leave their sons and daughters fatherless and take away one of their most important role models?

The answer lies in negligence regarding the mental health of Black fathers. Given the importance of providing for families despite socioeconomic hardships and struggles, a high rate of mental health problems among new Black fathers is understandable. Statistics show that anxiety and depression rises in Black fathers during their partners' pregnancies and in the post-natal period

(Baldwin, 2019). These struggles that new fathers face often go untreated, leaving them to suffer in silence, and they could be responsible for the rise in absent fathers.

Hesitancy about Seeking Mental Health Help

To understand the roots of refusing to admitting to struggling or to seek help, it is important to understand the basics of Black masculinity and the role it plays in Black mental health. Black males are socialized from a young age to put their health second and often associate illness with weakness. Many report their mothers taking them to the doctor only when they were seriously ill (McDougal III, 2020). This teaches boys to neglect themselves and that the problems they face are merely inconvenient and to be taken care of only when absolutely necessary. It is possibly because of this that Black men are more likely to seek treatment only when their symptoms are unbearable and avoid acknowledging their struggles in the first place (Mental Health America, 2021).

One of the biggest fears young Black males have in regards to seeking mental health help is being labeled "crazy" (Hartnell, 2021). With all of the other adversities they face in society, they fear also being seen as unstable and even more of a threat. Throughout history, Black men have been labeled as violent, hypersexual, and aggressive. This has led to a cultural norm of constantly trying to prove themselves to be the opposite. Because of this, instead of feeling safe and understood enough to be vulnerable, African American males often feel internally forced to keep quiet and focus on what they have historically been prized for, their looks or their bodies (Carabello, 2021).

Many mental health services are centered on the participation of the patient. If the subject is not open to growth and practicing what they learn, there is no real benefit to the services. Furthermore, many Black men receive mental health services due to involuntary referral and have no choice in the matter (McDougal, 2020). Regardless of whether they need the services, this

situation leads to them viewing the help as a form of punishment and not being open to getting the most out of the treatment.

Considering the history of medical abuse in the Black community, it makes sense that there is a communal distrust of medical authorities among this demographic. In times of slavery, it was claimed that Black people felt no pain, so they were experimented on without anesthesia (Clemmons, 2021). Because of this abuse, Black men came to see steering clear of assistance as a way of protecting themselves from further harmful and hurtful experiences. It has also been shown that Black men receive poorer care in hospitals and are less likely to be prescribed talk therapy (McDougal, 2020). Instead, they are categorized as aggressive and hostile when a White man with the same symptoms might be considered "troubled" or "disturbed."

African Americans make up only 4% of the mental health professional field (Lin, 2018). Because of this underrepresentation, many Black males feel that those who are appointed to help them are incompetent. They are unable to relate to them, therefore they cannot fully understand of what they suffer from. Black males see White therapists as a factor in the racist social structure of the country (McDougal, 2020). For the field of psychology to gain the trust of young Black males, not only must they see more of their own people seeking help, they must also see their own people among those doing the helping.

Young Black Males Seeking Mental Health Care

Only one in three young Black males who show symptoms of mental health problems seeks treatment (NAMI, 2021). This means that two-thirds of young African American men are struggling mentally while trying to live in a society that is already built against them. Some factors common to those who make use of mental health services are higher income, age, and social class (Duncan, 2003): young Black males of lower social classes are less open to seeking professional

help.

As stated earlier, cultural acceptance of seeking mental health help plays a large role in whether someone who needs it will seek it out. According to Hartnell, 70% of young Black men who seek help are referred by a friend or relative (Hartnell, 2021). This means that encouragement from friends and family plays a huge part in openness to some form of help. It has also been found that men are not likely to discuss emotions in general with other men, let alone refer them to mental health services, even ones they use themselves (Hartnell, 2021). The largest number of Black males in treatment are those who are mandated to obtain therapy or who would otherwise be put in a mental healthcare facility. This tells us that the culture of Black men still struggles over accepting mental health problems. They continue to view these as feminine, weak, "lesser" traits.

Ensuring More Young Black Males Seek Help

What seems to be the most important factor is creating a safe space and healthy companionship for young Black males. Throughout history, Black men have been taught to be strong and tough and not show vulnerability or weakness. When a safety net and emotionally healthy relationships are present, young African American males are more likely to be open to sharing and talking through repressed problems. But how do we put these young men in a position to receive this type of care and treatment?

Barber shops have been shown to be effective at improving mental health (Wells, 2021). Wells gave a perfect example of the creation and maintenance a safe space for young Black men to feel seen and heard. She described Ray Connor, a business owner and mentor to young men in the Black community, who traced his aspiration to do this back to being a kid in a barber chair. He said that his own barber changed the course of his life and credited him for his own success. The intimacy and familiarity people feel in a barber's chair can go a long way. If the Black community

put more focus into educating barbers, as Ray Connor did, and teaching them to navigate certain conversations with their clients, a big change could be made.

This is only one small example of how young Black men can be reached and heard regarding their internal struggles. The bigger picture of what these small but meaningful interactions can do is what is important. We must seek out other ways to meet young Black males where they are, going to them and finding ways to break the barriers to vulnerability that have been built up around them over the course of history.

More importantly, to fully rewrite Black masculinity and vulnerability and encourage more growth and help-seeking behaviors among young Black males, we must look at the restrictive emotionality and self-reliance among them. Restrictive emotionality consists of having "difficulty and fears about expressing one's fears and difficulty finding words to describe basic emotions" (Hammond, 2012). This leads Black men to turn inward and become self-reliant, instead of the openness and vulnerability necessary to achieve psychological health. While these two things are evident in the male population as a whole, they are more so affecting Black males due to the other things in society restricting them as well. We must acknowledge these struggles and teach young Black men that feelings, vulnerability and reaching for a healing hand is more than okay.

Conclusion

Throughout the course of this research, we learned what it means to be a psychologically healthy Black male, different factors that contribute to elevated psychological disturbances among young Black men, hesitance towards seeking help for mental health among Black males, who has mental health seeking behaviors in the young Black male community and what can be done to ensure more young Black males will start to seek help. Based on the results of this research, we can conclude that young Black males struggle with mental health more than they are admitting to.

While there is a lot of understandable reasoning behind this hesitancy, it must be changed.

It is important to see young Black men as what they are, which are future fathers, husbands and household leaders and to treat and respect them as such. It is evident that there is not enough focus or studies done with emphasis on African American males' mental health struggles. Because of this, solutions and plans for a better future on this subject is very limited to those seeking change. In order to alter the future, family dynamic and overall success in the Black community we must put more importance on the psychological health of young Black men. Not only will this heal them as individuals, it will change the course of history for their families and generations to come.

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The Role and Effects of Spirituality and Religiosity on the Mental Health of African American College Students

By Paul Stanford

Many college students face stress due to their transitional period of life. There are deadlines to keep up with, a social life to establish, and career questions looming over their heads. However, stress is felt especially strongly among African American students due to a variety of factors (Barnett et al., 2019). An African American student may have to deal with stereotype threat, dualism, and mundane extreme environmental stress (MEES) on top of the usual stressors (Barnett et al., 2019). Stereotype threat is the psychological anguish felt by minority students in predominantly White institutions and spaces out of fear of being associated with stereotypes (Barnett et al., 2019). Dualism is the stress African American students feel over having to navigate an institution that operates from a Eurocentric worldview while not embracing traditional African American culture and beliefs, viewing those as "other" (Barnett et al., 2019). MEES is the added stress due to constant microaggressions, negative stereotypes, and the resulting feelings of suspicion, of not belonging, and of being unqualified (Barnett et al., 2019).

These factors add to the stress of African American college students and can affect their mental health. It is important to consider them, among others, when considering the mental health of these students. Because these negative factors are known, it is important to examine already-



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existing positive mental health behaviors in African American college students and determine what behaviors contribute to mental health so that these can be encouraged and promoted as buffers or coping mechanisms for the stressors African American college students face (Barnett et al., 2019).

In this paper, I examine the role that spirituality and religion play in the mental health of African American college students. Specifically, the purpose of this research is to discover existing religious and spiritual behaviors in African American college students and see whether these are positively correlated with their mental health. If there is a positive correlation between mental health and religiosity and spirituality among these students, there is a significant need to consider religion and spirituality when counseling them and promoting positive mental health behaviors.

I first explore how the multidimensionality of spirituality and religiosity can affect mental health, and then the ways in which they are positively correlated to mental health. I then address a study that offers contradictory findings of a negative correlation between religious engagement and mental health. I then draw conclusions about the benefits to Black psychology.

The Multidimensionality of Religion and Spirituality

The roles that spirituality and religion play in an African American college student's life must be considered when counseling such a student. The multidimensionality of spirituality and religion means that some ways of being religious may be expressions of one's spirituality, while others may fill needs unrelated to spirituality, such as social or personal needs (Berkel et al., 2004). This is important for researchers and practitioners to understand in order to promote the aspects of spirituality and religion that are most associated with positive mental and physical health outcomes (Berkel et al., 2004).

One study investigated the role of religiosity and spirituality in the lives of African American college students and showed how their multidimensionality can differ among students,

leading to different mental health consequences. The authors explained how intrinsic and extrinsic religious and spiritual motivations played roles in the participants' lives: according to the researchers, intrinsic religious orientation meant that participants used their sense of spirituality to view themselves, the world, and their thoughts and feelings about the transcendent. These participants were more deeply rooted in their sense of spirituality and the way it connected them to the world around them (Berkel et al., 2004).

By contrast, an extrinsic religious orientation emphasized external personal gain. The researchers also noted that the "other extrinsic" orientation had an inverse relationship with spiritual beliefs, and that it involved no acknowledgement of any importance of a god or higher being (Berkel et al., 2004). Because this sort of orientation focuses on the influence that others have on oneself, it is not connected with a greater sense of purpose or meaning in one's life (Berkel et al., 2004). This differs from the intrinsic motivation, which affects how one views oneself in relation to something transcendent and to how one views others. In effect, religiosity plays a different role in each individual's life, so it is important for counselors to consider the multidimensionality of religion and spirituality and how they differ when offering guidance to African American college students (Berkel et al., 2004).

Positive Correlation Between Religion/Spirituality and Mental Health

African American college students with pro-religious orientations are more likely to engage in health-promoting behaviors. Those with anti-religious orientations may also be at greater risk of poor health (Turner-Musa & Wilson, 2006). One study examined the influence of religious orientation and social support on health-promoting behaviors among African American college students. The participants were 211 African American undergraduates at a historically Black university in the northeastern United States (Turner-Musa & Wilson, 2006). The measures used

included religious orientation, social support, and health-promoting behaviors (Turner-Musa & Wilson, 2006).

This study is important because it displays the tangible effects of religious engagement on African American college students. It suggests that better health-promoting behaviors are related to pro-religious orientations and reduce high-risk behavior. Religiosity also affects mental health, as the study mentioned that it has a positive effect on stress management (Turner-Musa & Wilson, 2006). This supports the idea that religious and spiritual engagement have a positive effect on African American college students' mental health, so it would be helpful for counselors of this population to encourage their clients to explore this area of their lives. This would depend on the client's comfort with and openness to religion and spirituality, but it could include encouraging students to explore aspects of spirituality that resonate with them, whether that means continuing the spiritual practices of their families or exploring new ones.

Religiosity and spirituality also aid in career development and career choice for African American college students. Constantine et al. (2006) studied the roles of religion and spirituality in the career development of African American college students and found that it also had helpful implications for mental health. The participants in their study were twelve self-identified African American undergraduate students from a large, predominately White private university in the northeastern United States (Constantine et al., 2006). The study showed that religiosity and spirituality acted as a source of emotional support in the process of choosing a career by giving the participants a sense of life purpose (Constantine et al., 2006). Spiritual and religious activities provide a concrete role for African American college students to alleviate academic and career stress and develop positive mental health behavior.

Religion and spirituality also act as a psychological and emotional buffer against overt

racist incidents at predominately White institutions. They also serves as a source of resilience and perseverance at such institutions, where there may be few or no African American role models (Constantine et al., 2006). They act is a liberating force allowing the student to believe that they can achieve great things even if the institution creates barriers and does not support their success. They also serves as a mechanism to help students love themselves, thus guarding them against overt racism and preventing it from having a negative effect on their self-worth. Ultimately, for African American college students at predominantly White universities, religion and spirituality are positively correlated with mental health because they serve as a healthy adaptive behavior that buffers the overt racism and hardships experienced at these places.

African American college students are significantly more religious than students of other ethnicities, and their religious engagement is associated with mental health. A study was conducted on a diverse group of undergraduate students at a large public southwestern university, including European Americans, African Americans, Asian Americans, and Hispanic/Latino Americans (Cokley et al., 2012). The purpose of this study was to examine how religiousness could serve as a prediction of mental health in an ethnically diverse sample, and it offered helpful findings related to the African American college students (Cokley et al., 2012).

The researchers reported that African American college students were significantly more religious and spiritual than the other student groups (Cokley et al., 2012). Religious engagement in African American college students was also associated with better mental health. In fact, African Americans were the only racial group whose religious engagement positively predicted mental health (Cokley et al., 2012). The researchers suggested that religion is inherently part of African American culture, so the ways it is used as a coping mechanism differ than those of other ethnicities (Cokley et al., 2012).

This study helps us understand the significant role religion plays in the lives of African American college students and how it predicts mental health. Due to these results, at the discretion of the counselor, religious and spiritual practices should be considered and encouraged in the counseling of African American college students.

Contradictory Research Findings

Research has shown that more religious individuals tend to be less depressed and have greater life satisfaction (Cokley et al., 2013). The purpose Cokley et al.'s (2013) study was to examine this claim among Black American college students. They examined whether religious engagement, religious struggle, and gender predicted depression and anxiety in these students. The study was conducted on 218 Black students from various schools who were attending the Big XII Conference on Black Student Government (Cokley et al., 2013).

The results suggested that there were no gendered differences in religiosity: women were not more religiously involved than men, nor did they have greater religious struggles (Cokley et al., 2013). The researchers attributed this to the age of the participants (young adults) and their socialization to participate in religion (Cokley et al., 2013). The researchers also discovered that religious engagement in Black women was a predictor of lower depression and anxiety, but this was not the case for Black men. For Black men, religious engagement was instead predictive of higher anxiety (Cokley et al., 2013).

Regarding religious struggle, it was found that increased psychological distress correlated with individuals experiencing greater doubts about religion, and this was consistent across genders (Cokley et al., 2013). The researchers offered two explanations for this finding: first, Black churches and worship activities encourage high levels of emotional expression. However, Black men are socialized by gender roles that tell them that emotional expression is feminine and weak

(Cokley et al., 2013). Therefore, attending these services may result in a lot of emotions for Black men but an internal contradiction about expressing them, resulting in high anxiety. Second, the sample of Black men may have already had high anxiety and been using their faith to cope with it (Cokley et al., 2013).

The findings of this study are interesting, particularly that religious engagement resulted in higher levels of anxiety in this sample of Black college men. This contradicts the thesis of this paper, that spirituality and religiosity correlate to improved mental health. This contradiction is helpful to look at because it suggests that spirituality and religiosity do not always correlate to better mental health in Black college students. It would be helpful to further explore why anxiety is associated with religious engagement: Does it have to do with the religious setting or context, the pressure men feel in that setting to conform to traditional roles, doctrinal or theological differences felt by the men, or internal baggage brought into the setting? The finding could also be helpful for counselors to recognize that the effects of religion and spirituality on mental health vary with the individual patient, though with the overwhelming evidence that spirituality does correlate to improved mental health, I think that more research needs to be done on this subject.

Conclusion

Spirituality and religiosity do play a significant role in the lives of African American college students and has a positive effect on their mental health. Religion and spirituality have been proven to help with stress management and correlate with health-promoting behaviors. They also act as a psychological and emotional buffer against the challenges of navigating higher education at a PWI or any institution as an African American, and serve as a meaning maker in choosing a career. Lasty, religion and spirituality are a source of resilience and perseverance and are associated with mental health. Therefore, there is a significant need to consider and encourage

religion and spirituality when counseling and to promote positive mental health behaviors among African American college students. It is also important to mention that multidimensionality plays a role in whether an individual's religion correlates positively or negatively to mental health, so this must also be considered by counselors. The findings of this paper are connected to the advancement of Black psychology, as they explore the real-life psychological effects of spirituality and religion in the lives of African American college students and how these should be promoted by counselors to encourage mental health and success among this group.

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