...the quality of life for Black males in America *can* be improved.

The Other Side of Gender Equity: Black Males in America

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Introduction

Equity, as an education, gender and racial concept, encompasses issues of access, treatment and/or outcomes (Harvey, 1982). It implies a mentality of fairness and justice; one which allows all parties to participate in education, economic and other social arrangements from an equitable posture. Equitable relationships and arrangements are built through coalitions and collaborations between parties deemed equal. Economic factors are often considered to be the most reliable indicator of whether and in what areas equity has been achieved (Harvey, Noble, 1984).

The constructs of race, gender, level of education and social class are factors closely inter-related with all aspects of one's life chances, from health and life expectancy to housing and income (Persell, 1977). Monroe (1987) reports that Black males have the highest infant mortality rates and the lowest life expectancy rates. In addition, Black males are six times more likely to be murder victims than White males and are two and one-half times as likely to be unemployed as White males. Also, the median income of Black males is 71 percent of White males' (Farley, 1984).

As is apparent, the social history and present condition of Black males in America is replete with inequities. Moreover, the cultural history of Black males in America is riddled with conflicting images of self-perception. The larger society has defined standards for masculinity based on Western European norms, values and behaviors, while systematically excluding men of color from those definitions.

The Black American male has undergone a series of experiences in which he was informed his role was one of tremendous physical attributes. While the data may show sociological patterns resulting in gender related advantages for Black males when compared to Black females, the socialization of Black males warrants further study as a variable that impacts their total behavioral profile.

The basic assumption of this discourse is that the quality of life for Black males in America can be improved. Such improvement, however, should not come at the expense of one's sense of self as an adequate individual. Traditional notions of socialization have placed great emphasis on gender; Black males have long recognized the myths attached to both racial and gender identities. However, those myths have persistently emphasized factors *which do not* contribute to economic sufficiency, academic proficiency, political empowerment, family solidarity or positive cultural continuity.

Endangered Species

Emerging from an initial framework which fails to encompass racial affirmation and which distorts the definition of masculine humanity, Black males have engaged in a struggle of adequacy as human entities. Given the historical roots of the American cultural and academic institutions, Black American males are still in the process of discovering, analyzing and re-shaping definitions of maleness as it relates to the reality of their existence. Sociologist Robert Staples (1987) writing in the **Black Scholar** offers the following:

"While all Blacks—men, women and children—are burdened by the persistence of institutional racism, the situation of Black males has deteriorated to the point of their being called an *endangered species*" (p. 9).

The Black male child experiences contradictory reinforcements of the image which has been created for him by image makers outside his group. These image makers include, but are not limited to, the mass media, curriculum materials of all descriptions, toy makers, etc. Instead of promoting images of psychological independence, economic strength and family solidarity, negative images are created and disseminated. Such images contribute to negative self-perceptions. In light of this phenomenon, the cultural conditioning of Black American male children at this point in social history, needs further analysis as part of the gender conceptualizations.

Cultural Conditioning

What does it mean to be a male person in a Black family? What are the emotional dimensions of his existence? What non-verbal messages are communicated to the male child regarding his legitimacy and sense of self? What practices are employed which communicate messages of inadequacy? At very tender ages, most Black children are aware that Black males are over-represented in America's prisons and they are keenly aware that they are over-represented in classes for the mentally handicapped and the emotionally fragile. Given these indexes, what ingredients are also part of the Black male child's self-definition?

Considering these realities, one then asks the following questions as part of the cultural socialization of male children:

1. How is the male or father self-concept developed within the Black male child? What are the factors which contribute to the self-definition of a male child?

2. What constitutes strength? What constitutes power? What constitutes justice?

3. What is the degree of sex-role stereotyping which emerges from mass media? from family? from one's daily interaction within the community?

4. Inasmuch as custodial parenting is still awarded primarily to the female parent in cases of separation and divorce, does the male child conclude that some form of abandonment is a natural/normal part of adult masculinity?

5. What constitutes nurturing behavior and how are these behaviors assigned along gender lines? What is the cost of modifying such assignments?

Understanding human behavior now requires being keenly aware of gender-influenced behaviors, gender-influenced circumstances and the economic implications of one's gender identity. Additionally, little attention has

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been given to the process of socializing Black males for academic purposes.

The Schools, Academic Socialization and Black Males

Kunjufu (1984) discusses the weak transition Black males make between the primary and intermediate divisions in public schools. His research is consistent with others who have described the hierarchical academic performance structure operating in most classrooms; that is, White males occupy the highest academic profile with White females in the middle and Black males at the bottom. Likewise, Black males have the highest dropout and suspension rates.

Should the definition of a "good" student in school be made by persons who have never experienced cross-racial, cross ethnic teaching and learning styles? Answers to these questions would generally require some analysis of the American schools—the way they are conceived, the way they are organized and a massive review of instructional delivery to Black male learners.

Academic socialization includes the realization that more boys get punished than girls in schools and that more boys get suspended from schools than do girls. Also, in addition to those elements which are viewed or perceived by the Black male child within the school, there are those non-school elements which communicate that males are expected to behave in ways which are considered non-complimentary in many instances. For example, some male children will have positive childhood experiences even though adult male modeling may not be readily visible. However, numerous male children, given limited direct help in their behavioral and self-perception definitions, will adopt behavorial codes and concepts distinctly different from the adults responsible for their socialization—codes and concepts which are considered inappropriate by the larger society. In this regard, Wade (1987) offers the following:

"Throughout their history in American society, Blacks have mounted a variety of practices for responding to and attaining acceptance and racial affirmation in White society . . . yet, the pejoratives of formalized and unofficial rejection of Blacks as normals in the main of American functioning cause them to expend tremendous amounts of energy to demonstrate intrinsic equality, competence and humanity" (p. 35).

Kirk (1986) indicates that not only are the Black American's abilities questioned, but, very often their humanness as well. The Black male child is still in the evolvement of his humanness. How human is he—as perceived by America's schools and school personnel? What constitutes ability? Is it always defined in terms of a particular learning style, one that has parameters that fail to consider race, gender, language or ethnicity?

The cultural and academic socialization of Black male children in America needs additional study by both authentic researchers/theorists and by basic scholars. Black males themselves must be included in any study of their profile, or such studies will be viewed as less than authentic scholarship. The inclusion of persons reflecting the profiles under study will provide for a lifetime of perceptions in that role. Such an approach can help add insight to traditional sociological and academic research findings.

Black Males: Toward Intervention for Survival

When one considers the human realities of Black males during present times, numerous variables impact such study. Gunnings and Lipscomb (1986) offer the following observation:

"In developing any theory dealing with human beings, it is necessary to be explicit about assumptions regarding the nature of humankind because theories, as the product of cognitive processes, are based on perceptions of reality, not reality itself. An effective intervention into the lives of any population, particularly Black men, must have as its core an adequate theory of human behavior" (p. 18).

They further cite a need to be aware of one's active interaction with social and physical environments; priorities that differ; interpretations that differ; and finally, that the researcher must realize that all experience is adapted and interpreted with some alteration.

Intervention will require deliberate destruction of those elements which influence self-destructive behaviors; these may be teachers who instruct Black children, textbooks given them for reading, library and other curriculum materials provided for their consumption and a host of other related factors.

Proposals

This author, while cognizant of the importance of family influence, focuses on intervention strategies which reside in agencies outside the home, but which touch the lives of Black children. The strategies proposed are as follows:

1. American institutions should deliberately engage Black male children in discussions of Black masculinity that lead to new definitions and are ones which help to erode traditional myths. Theorists and academicians need to explore Black masculinity at levels which respect the perceptions of those who must experience the role throughout their lives —Black males. Such discussions might yield a more functional definition particularly as it relates to competence as a member of a family unit.

2. Schools should study disaggregated data on punishment, suspensions, reward indexes, options provided, achievement motivation and similar elements of ongoing school factors. This includes patterns and practices of pupil assignment, especially in classes for mental retardation; and other human factors which could be interpreted as deficits of the human profile. When Black males are overrepresented in any such categories, immediate corrective action should be taken. Black males should not be represented in any category disproportionate to their numbers or percentages in the larger society. All intervention strategies at our command should be employed toward this goal.

3. Teaching at the elementary level is one of the least regarded endeavors of our society. Failure to see more Black males included among the ranks of those who provide instruction—despite the economic rewards—delivers a message to Black males that it is not a profession/career to be seriously considered as one's lifelong work. Deliberate effort should be initiated to intervene in this reality.

4. While some applaud Black male participation in sports, the following statement by Staples (1987) is enlightening:

"A closer look reveals that while Black males are engaged in injury producing sports that result in short, albeit lucrative careers, Whites have equally lucrative and greater longevity in sports such as golf, tennis and bowling that the more economically deprived Black male seldom has the opportunity to play" (p.7).

Most sports observers note that less than 1 percent of aspiring Black male athletes ever experience any career in injury producing sports. Thus, they must be encouraged to explore other options in sports. Encouragement should include statistical data which highlight the fact that lasting careers as athletes are extremely limited and potentially of

short duration.

5. Image makers (all institutions, mass media and school curriculum developers) need to engage in an analysis of the images presented. For instance, rarely do image makers present a holistic picture of male entertainers, whom young Black males may aspire to emulate. An holistic representation would include multiple facets of the entertainer's role, including a depiction of their wives and children.

Curriculum imaging is one of the most pervasive aspects of the Black male's academic socialization and must bear accountability for the scope and quality of Black male images presented daily to the learner.

In adulthood, many Black males have been victims of forced idleness and academic and cultural impotence. This has often resulted in self-destructive behaviors. In spite of negative experiences, Black males remain a vital pool of talent in need of development. Their energy and vitality is needed.

Lessons to be learned by Black men include resistance to the European definitions which result in limitations in family involvement, occupational diversity and positive and assertive influence in the major institutions of our society.

A Final Gender Note

Educators responsible for programs in which Black male children are served would do well to begin immediate engagement into the psychological issues surrounding their relationships with others, particularly Black males. Insight is needed on how those relationships are defined, perceived and maintained. The complexities surrounding gender identities are numerous and the educational enterprise is a primary place for its investigation and application.

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