

I This chapter explores the effects of historical and current racism on the educational experiences of American Black males. The authors use critical race theory to illustrate how assumptions about culture and gender have subverted the egalitarian ideals of adult education. Teachers and students are urged to use critical reflection and open discussion about racial issues.

Race, the Black Male, and Heterogeneous Racisms in Education

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The 2008 election of Barack Obama, a Black male, as the 44th president of the United States was a historic first that reignited a national conversation on race. The *Chronicle of Higher Education* posed in a bold headline, “Are We Living in a Post-Racial, Post-Ethnic America?” However, the national discussion that commenced was not on race, but specifically on the status of the Black American male. Despite the intensity and abundance of the questions around race and Black men, important underlying questions remained unaddressed. This chapter will undertake to answer a major query omitted from the intense race considerations: How do the complexities of race affect the dilemma of racial disparities?

Although race is a social construct that has no basis in biology (Frankenberg, 1993; Gregory & Sanjek, 1994; Omi & Winant, 1994), it consistently shapes lives and experiences. We are “raced” in our society, either consciously or not. Notwithstanding the assurances of anthropologists and biologists that there are no absolute racial categories, the accepted determinations of White, Black, Brown, and Yellow carry with them embedded and permanent stereotypes. Race and the social construct of race determine one’s place in society. Racial classification designates a group’s rights, privileges, or baggage (Frankenberg, 1993; McIntosh, 1995; Omi & Winant, 1994).

We bring to this discussion both firsthand experience and a theoretical understanding of race. We are mothers of an adult daughter and school-age male children; all of us live the daily reality of being Black in America. We are also researchers who employ a conceptual framework based on critical race theory (CRT), which posits that racism is an undeniable component of

American life (Bell, 1992; DuBois, 1903/1953; hooks, 1989; Outlaw, 1993). CRT values personal experience as a legitimate and appropriate basis for examination of racial subordination. Five tenets support the CRT perspective, as asserted by Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995): (a) a central focus on race and racism, (b) a direct and overt challenge to hegemonic discourse, (c) a commitment to social justice, (d) an honoring of the experiential base of marginalized people, and (e) a multifaceted disciplinary viewpoint. Our discussion in this chapter is steeped with an awareness of the diffusive nature of power and positionality (Foucault, 1980).

All areas of education reflect the world in which we live and are part of the systems that reproduce and maintain the whole of American society. Adult education, though founded on principles of leveling the playing field for all adults, especially those lacking a basic education (Cunningham, 1988; Johnson-Bailey, Baumgartner, & Bowles, 2010), does not stand in better stead than other fields. While the stated goal of adult education has been to empower learners so that they might engage in full citizenship, just the opposite often occurs. Adult education, like the other branches of American education, has followed the covert societal guidelines that have disenfranchised learners along racial and ethnic lines.

The Significance of Race in Education

Sixty years after the Supreme Court's 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* public school desegregation decision, African Americans in the U.S. educational arena are still confined to a lesser existence, a legacy left behind by racist laws that forbade and then restricted their education with Jim Crow practices. Prejudice is not erased by law: Invisible systems and unspoken assumptions have created a hostile education system that still denies Blacks equal access.

At this point, we want to moderate our discussion by stating that any talk of race in America must examine the norm or concept of Whiteness (Keating, 1995). For although race is consistently presented as Black, Hispanic, or Asian, it is done so against the concealed specter of White as the norm. To label Whiteness and maleness as the norms of the culture accords power, against which all "others" are judged. We agree with Patai (1991) and Johnson-Bailey and Cervero (2000), who contend that such actions are intentional. The underlying ideas of Whiteness as superior and non-Whiteness as inferior or deficient are ever-present unless we attach the designation of racism.

In an educational setting, membership in a disenfranchised group translates into direct inequities: substandard education, tracking, and fewer opportunities for the future. Although we describe learners as at-risk or underprivileged, we do not refer to the inevitable and corresponding overprivileged student (Manglitz, Johnson-Bailey, & Cervero, 2005). It is a logical conclusion that the collective losses of the one group create the abundance of another.

Black Men and Education. An assessment of the state of American schooling readily reveals that African American males suffer from higher high

school dropout rates and lower college entry and completion rates than any other racial or ethnic group. However, we contend that African American males are the proverbial canary in the educational mines, warning of dangers and pitfalls that are inherent in our educational system. Although race is a central location for the negotiation of power and privilege in education and in society, it is rarely coupled with a discussion of maleness unless the problem of the educational environment being researched is the African American male.

For clarification, let us briefly focus on Black males and the American educational system, looking explicitly at how African American males have fared inside of the compulsory elementary and high school education, and how they have fared in higher education and in adult education. Black males fall at the bottom of most indices regarding school success. Approximately 47–50% of Black male students fail to graduate from high school (Schott Foundation for Public Education, 2012), with urban areas, such as New York City, Philadelphia, Washington, DC, Detroit, Cleveland, and St. Louis, having failure rates as high as 60%. In fact, in all but 12 of the 50 states and the District of Columbia, Black males graduate at a lower percentage than Latino and White males and females, and also lower than Black females (Schott Foundation for Public Education, 2012).

Statistics are similar for higher education. Black college students experience issues that are exacerbated by racism. Sixty percent of Black students encountered racism (overt and covert forms) and routinely feel that there is bias in the ways that they are treated and graded (Allen, 1988; Engberg, 2004; Suarez-Balcazar, Orellana-Damacela, Portillo, Rowan, & Andrews-Guillen, 2003). Overall, undergraduate matriculation for Blacks with high school degrees who entered college in 2000 was 30.3%, with women at 35% of the total and men at 23% (Cose, 2003), making up 8.7% of all college students. However, the college graduation rate for 2000 showed that of the Blacks who completed college, Black women comprised 65.7% and Black men 34.2%, indicating a significant lack of completion for Black college men (NCES, 2002). However, what is lost in the statistics is that the percentage of Black students who attend four-year colleges and universities continues to be significantly smaller than their proportion in the population (Chen, 2005). Overall, Blacks are underrepresented by racial group membership in college. Though Black women are more successful in respect to their incidence in the four-year college participation and completion, it is only in comparison to Black males, who are the more unsuccessful.

The Crossroads of Heterogeneous Racisms. While we center on race for our chapter's discussion, we acknowledge that other important areas of disenfranchisement exist, such as gender, class, and physical ability. Therefore, let us begin this discussion by first troubling or deconstructing (Foucault, 1980) the notion of race, and then offering a gendered discussion of race. Racism is routinely researched as a distinct entity, but it is actually varied, often context-driven, and exists as an across-race and within-race phenomenon. In support

of this position, we will offer accounts of how national origin, colorism, and gender all impact race.

An important first illustration is the use of and understanding of the word *Black* as a descriptor. For example, using the term “Black people” is a collective descriptive that represents persons of the African Diaspora, or anyone of African descent regardless of national origin or habitat. However, in reality, to be a Black African living on the continent of Africa or elsewhere in the world is different from being an African American residing in the United States. This variance is attributed to Africans having a culture connected to a prime homeplace (Okonofua, 2013; Omi & Winant, 1994; Waldinger, 2001). In “I Am Blacker Than You’: Theorizing Conflict Between African Immigrants and African Americans in the United States” (Okonofua, 2013), the author posits that Blacks from Africa and the Caribbean who reside in the United States see themselves differently because of their distinct culture and their perspective, which was developed in a homogenous society where they had majority status. This dissimilarity is also recognized by Whites and African Americans.

A second exemplification of this phenomenon is colorism among African Americans, a form of within-group racial discrimination, where lighter skin that is closer to Caucasian skin pigment is considered better, and an indicator of multiple superiorities. Although colorism is generalized as applicable to several disenfranchised groups of color in the United States (Asians, Hispanics, Blacks), there is significant literature only about Latinos and Blacks (Chavez-Dueñas, Adames, & Organista, 2014; Essed, 1996; Glenn, 2011; Russell, Wilson, & Hall, 1992). Skin color preference has been demonstrated in research on job applicants, customer partiality studies by advertisers, and longitudinal studies on socioeconomic measures in the African American population.

The final illustration for contemplation is the index of gendered racism (Essed, 1996), the intersection of two major forms of oppression: sexism and racism. According to Essed (1996), gendered racism is replete with master narratives driven by such forces as colonialism, sexual violence, economics, slavery, and politics, which are also major factors in the experiences of Black people. Gendered racism brings to the discussion of racism complex and separate legacies of inequities for men and women. When gendered racism pertains to Black women, it has been labeled as ethgender (Ransford & Miller, 1983) and also frequently referred to as double jeopardy (Beal, 1969/2008; Evans & Herr, 1991; King, 1988; Smith & Stewart, 1983).

Gendered racism is rarely thought of or acknowledged as affecting Black men. Additionally, members of the White race are set forth in history as the standard, and this depiction is most often accompanied by the phantom of maleness. Historically, when Whiteness and maleness are fused, they are viewed as the highest ideal of colonialism, the master, conqueror, and ruler (Alridge, 2006). In such an interpretation, the Black man and his male privilege are in a lesser position since the Black man’s legacy is not one presented

as part of the master narrative, and therefore a representation of the Black male is viewed in a lesser position. Although males, regardless of racial group membership, are privileged by their male gender, males of color, in this case Black males, are not part of the dominant ideology of history. Instead, a counternarrative is constructed for Black males that omits any place or importance that Black men have had in history (Aldridge, 2006; Cox & Stromquist, 1998) and instead focuses on their physicality and sexuality, and consistently constructs a picture of Black men as pathologically flawed, with strong tendencies toward criminality and violence (Entman & Rojecki, 1992; Hines & Humez, 2002).

Black Males and Masculinity. What makes a man? How is masculinity constructed in the culture? In their important text on men and masculinity, *Men's Lives*, Kimmel and Messner (2013) assert that "To be a man is to participate in social life as a man, as a gendered being. Men are not born, they are made" (p. xvi). Normative masculinity requires that men be tough, independent, aggressive, unemotional, and the like. To be appropriately masculine, according to the dominant culture, men are to eschew any qualities such as nurturing, relationship, and sensitivity that are associated with femininity.

Behaviors and attitudes ascribed to manhood and masculinity are neither innate nor a biological imperative, but are social constructions legitimated by long-standing social, political, and economic institutions. Scholars of men's lives and masculinity have long asserted that men "make themselves" according to the social and cultural dictates of a particular point in time. For example, the "breadwinner/homemaker" model of the mid-20th century reinforces the popular belief that men should be the financial providers and that women are responsible for caregiving and labor in the home (Amott & Matthei, 1996). This model is rooted in beliefs that men and women are inherently different and, therefore, should be accorded certain tasks based on those differences. Individual men and women then perpetuate and uphold these beliefs that can result in separation and hierarchies created between them. Ultimately, these dualisms reinforce patriarchal and sexist systems in society.

Constructions of Black masculinity can also provide great insight into the impact of race in the educational experiences of Black men. There are a wealth of studies on Black males in P-12 education (Davis, 2003; Ferguson, 2000; Noguera, 2003) and higher education (Feagin, Vera, & Imam, 1996; Harper, 2006), but there are very few studies that examine the complex nature of Black masculinities and how they manifest within social institutions. However, researchers suggest that it is imperative that more studies be done on the gender identities of Black men, with a particular emphasis on the expressions of Black masculinity (Harris, Palmer, & Struve, 2011).

We suggest that in order to gain a more complex understanding of Black men in the educational system, it is beneficial to examine dominant constructions of Black masculinity. hooks (2004) uses the term "patriarchal masculinity" and posits, "In patriarchal culture, all males learn a role that restricts and confines. When race and class enter the picture along with patriarchy, Black

males endure the worst impositions of gendered masculine patriarchal identity” (hooks, 2004, p. xii). If normative conceptions of masculinity state that to be a “real man” is to be tough, financial providers, aggressive, dominant, heterosexual, competitive, and other stereotypical traits, then where do Black men fit into this framework? How do race and racism factor into constructions of masculinity and the masculine charge to embody and enact said characteristics?

Black masculine identities, like all other identity markers, are formed by those who embody the identity, as well as by individuals outside of the group in question. Unfortunately, Black men are often viewed through stereotypical lenses constructed by the dominant culture and rooted in a history of racial insubordination (hooks, 2004). Violent, hypersexual, and lazy, for example, are three common stereotypical characteristics attributed to Black men. For instance, in her work on the politics of Black sexuality, Collins (2000) contends that the hypersexualization of Black men in films and music videos can have detrimental effects on Black men, as well as on Black women and children. The acceptance of Black masculine norms can be used either to perpetuate dominant notions of masculinity or to subvert hegemonic conceptions of masculinity. To illustrate, Majors and Billson’s (1992) concept of the “cool pose” refers to particular ways of speaking, gestures, aesthetics, standing, walking, and the like that constitute expressions of Black masculinity. Black men have little or no institutional power and are often outside the bounds of acceptable masculine standards, so they engage in attitudes and actions such as cool pose as a way to empower themselves (Majors & Billson, 1992). It is a way of, as hooks (1989) puts it, “talking back” to particular constructions of manhood that are not applied to Black men.

The Relevance of Race to Educational Practice

Racism in its many forms has always been part of America’s social system. However, education, another component of the great American system, is charged with improving the lives of its participants. We believe that when adult educators understand how racism affects the lived experiences of Black men, they will be able to create an educational environment that will empower all students. We suggest two means of ascertaining how race manifests in the experiences of Black male students. The first method is to conduct a cultural assessment of one’s practice. The second approach is to consistently engage in critical reflection with learners.

When performing a cultural assessment of your educational practice, pose master questions that will allow you to examine how hidden and overt curricula function in your class. Ask if race/racism is appropriately part of a specific curriculum. Check to see if race is included in the readings and if the inclusion is analytical, judicious, and significant.

As pertains to the hidden curriculum, first determine whether Black men sign up for and subsequently participate in your classes. Because Black males

are most often disenfranchised in the learning environment, their presence, participation in, or possible avoidance of your classes can indicate if perhaps your programs' classes are considered a safe space.

The second recommended approach in assessing the relevance of race is to engage in reciprocal critical reflection (Brookfield, 1990; Mezirow, 1990) on race with your Black learners. First, identify what assumptions regarding race are driving your thinking and actions and encourage your students to do the same. Next, in concert with your students, determine the validity of your assumptions, asking yourself how the knowledge on race and beliefs relate to your reality. Finally, integrate your new knowledge into your way of living and learning in order to make your environment empowering for its participants.

Conclusion

The impact of race and its related complexities regarding Black men are sensitive and difficult topics to deal with in the educational setting. However, it must be understood that race is present in our classrooms irrespective of the presence of people of color because the vestiges of race/racism occupy a space in all our classes. Therefore, the responsible choice dictated by the social justice core belief of our adult education field is to be egalitarian in our practice (Johnson-Bailey et al., 2010), which decrees not only that adult educators provide equal access and opportunities to their programs, but also that they critically examine the oppressive societal power systems such as racism. Additionally, such a position necessitates that within our educational setting we should work to promote environments that empower the learners, especially our Black males and other disenfranchised learners.

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