

Outside Insiders: Remember the Time

by

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Abstract

The lives of African American men are situated in and are products of demographic, historical, social, institutional, and cultural sentiments and changes. Over time, Black men's understanding and concepts of masculinity have been immensely impacted by these changes. Black males' struggles took root during enslavement and are a cultural pathology wreaking havoc not only on the African American community, but the entire population. Thus, for Black men, life already begins with a second class social standing. The experience of being Black and male in America often means unemployment, school failure, and violence and crime (see Wilson, 1987; U.S. Department of Labor, 1991; and BJS, 1988). Such patterns are shaped by racism, discrimination, and poverty. Compounding this with incarceration, these men literally move into the status of non-citizen, losing basic American rights that have been put in place by our constitution. In this article, I outline the historical context for thinking about Black masculinity today. I review major historical eras that have had significant impacts on Black men and the African American community, such as enslavement, reconstruction, Jim Crow, the Civil Rights Movement, and the contemporary war on drugs. I also highlight some significant factors that structure Black men's lives today – i.e. family, work, imprisonment, etc. Because incarceration has continued to play a normative role in the lives of many African American men, I conclude by discussing issues that formerly incarcerated Black men face and the potential impact of these factors on constructs of masculinity.

Keywords: Black, Male, Masculinity, Race, Incarceration

All too often, the images that come to the minds of Americans when thinking about Black males are images of criminals and violent street thugs. In 1998, Melissa Barlow stated that “talking about crime is talking about race” (Barlow, 1998, p. 151). Her statement highlights that presumptions about the racial identity of criminals may be so ingrained in public consciousness that race needs no mention for a connection to be made between the two. My acknowledgement of the association of crime with the African American community is not to suggest it as new; however, it is imperative to note that it is a connection that has perpetually plagued the Black population throughout history, Black men in particular. So, in thinking about contemporary Black masculinity, it goes without question that we must comprehend, historically, the circumstances which have created the image of the “criminally predisposed” Black male today.

The pages to follow outline a historical framework for thinking about Black masculinity today. I briefly review major historical eras which have had significant impacts on African American men and the larger African American community, such as enslavement, reconstruction, Jim Crow, the Civil Rights Movement, and the contemporary war on drugs. Following such periods, Black men face a world infused with challenges to the structure of their lives today. Thus, I also highlight additional significant factors impacting Black men’s lives today – i.e. family, work, and prison. I conclude by discussing the ever-present threat of incarceration on Black men and the issues that formerly incarcerated Black men face during reentry and present the potential impact of these factors on constructs of masculinity post-incarceration.

Black Males and Enslavement

Any discussion of Black masculinity must consider the impact of enslavement. Black male identity is a product of an American history that has been saturated with the unequivocal impact of enslavement, combined with narrowly defined understandings of masculinity – i.e. power, dominance, along with educational, economic, and social advantages. Unlike their White counterparts, Black men, both presently and historically, have had fewer economic and social privileges.

During enslavement, African bodies were equated to property and denied participation in public life. Thus, social identities for enslaved Africans were non-existent, as far as being socially recognized by non-Blacks. However, enslaved Blacks found ways of maneuvering such restrictions. David Johns (2007) pointed out in his investigation on the “problems” surrounding the construction of Black masculinity in America that “the transition of enslaved Africans into freed people ushered in a bifurcated Black/White social schema. Subsequently, preserving the socially constructed category of “Whiteness” required of Whites, the categorization of “Blackness” in opposition to the purity, entitlement, and moral hegemony associated with Whiteness.

As such, anything identified with Blackness was fixed within a contradictory and flawed notion of inherent deficiency—based primarily on the construction of the word itself” (Johns, 2007, p. 2). The power of land owning European Protestants power to create, validate, and sustain notions of Black masculinity that began during enslavement cannot be emphasized enough here. Pejorative images of Black males as lazy, violent, and disengaged, which were first offered to justify enslavement, continue to impact the ways Black males are represented, understood, and in many ways understand themselves (ibid.). Black men construct their identity through and against a cultural, economic, and historical backdrop that has limited their participation in public life. Moreover, Black men’s contemporary realities are bound in their histories and inextricably connected to its historical production.

The historical realities of enslavement deeply impacted Black families. From the perspective of southern slaveholders, slaveholding was a most Christian act and during wartime, Southerners grew more comfortable with the idea that all of the world’s lesser peoples should find their way into God’s community through enslavement (Fox-Genovese & Genovese, 2008). However, the reality of enslavement did not allow enslaved men (and women) the ability to always protect and/or financially support their families. Black men have been a subject met with disagreement over the years. The earliest work in the area of the impact of enslavement gave rise to theoretical perspectives that depicted the Black male as a docile personality whose will had been broken by enslavement. In an opposing view, the adaptability and flexibility of Black families to either be headed by a male or female has been cited as “a source of strength and stability” (Hill, 2003, p. 11).

Black men’s emasculation during enslavement, and its lingering contemporary impact, has often been cited as one of the causes for the high rates of female-headed households, single-parent families, and divorce rates within the Black community (Jones, 2009; McWhorter, 2011; Staples, 1982; Stevenson, 1996; Wilson, 1987). However, despite multiple structural and psychosocial barriers, historical accounts have shown that even in the worst conditions – i.e. enslavement and poverty – Black abolitionists, and the African American community in general, have managed to develop a sense of dignity and self-worth, they connected to their families, and provided for them as best they could (Bowman, 1989; Cazenave, 1979; Feagin, 2014; Hunter, 1988; Mitchell, 2005 Stevenson, 1996). However, because we associate masculinity with being the economic provider and as head of the family, what Black males are and what they should be is measured against the status and privilege of White males. This comparison, which is infused with unacknowledged inequality, has impacted their community, their sense of self-worth, and their ability to embody dominant practices and conceptions of masculinity. Many of these contemporary stereotypes of African American men developed during the bellum period and continue to impact the lives of Black males (Smith, Hung, & Franklin, 2011).

In sum, I do not want to imply that Black people in general and Black men in particular are not active agents in the construction of their selves and their identities. However, Black masculinity has been intimately shaped by enslavement and by abolition. Understanding how Black men performed masculinity during enslavement is instrumental to conceptualizing Black masculinity today.

Emancipation/Reconstruction Era [1865-1877]

If we view enslavement as a form of social death for African Americans, then emancipation, or the Reconstruction era as it is also known, alludes to a social rebirth with enfranchisement and other rights bestowed on Black people (Franke, 1999). However, for many emancipation appeared to just be a theme of this era, or civil war tactic (Schwartz & Schuman, 2005). This time immediately following the abolition of enslavement was critical for African Americans in relation to civil rights and state regulation. During this period, just after the Civil War, Blacks celebrated the right to own property, to alienate or exercise control over their labor, and to participate in institutions of civil and public life that were considered essential to a good and free life (Johnson, 2004). As this post antebellum period progressed, African Americans quickly learned that just because they were gaining civil rights did not mean there would be absence of restrictive state regulation. The relationship between Blacks and state regulations changed because they were not seen as capable of fully handling autonomy, independence and full citizenship immediately, with that they remained under close scrutiny (Franke, 1999; O'Brien, 2009). The childlike Sambo image of Black masculinity during enslavement was met with a more evil incarnate construction as tactic used to uphold White supremacy post-emancipation (Thomas, 2013). More simply, they had to be “domesticated” into citizenship.

The acquisition of rights during reconstruction was a two-fold battlefield of victories and defeats. For the formerly enslaved, rights were a source of emancipation, but entrusting rights was a source of social power for Whites as it gave them the tools to *naturalize* their dominant positions with regards to and social power (Ortiz, 2005). For example, marriage is a domestication of more “primitive” sexuality (Franke, 1999). It is a site for the transformation of behavior and a placing of men and women as husbands and wives in society. This “domestication” of formerly enslaved persons is crucial in understanding the rights of Blacks during this time because it was one of the most important ramifications after emancipation. For a large number of the formerly enslaved, legal marriage was not experienced as a source of validation and empowerment, but rather a source of discipline and punishment (Franke, 1999). The inauguration of Blacks into the institution of marriage can be understood through the converging interests of Black and White males. On the one hand, for the African American community, the ability to marry was important because it signified freedom and acceptance into civil society; on the other hand, for White males, it had powerful economic undertones and was a way to maintain control over Blacks (ibid.).

The enforcement of bigamy, fornication, and adultery laws served to “domesticate” Black people, whose sexuality was seen as outside the normative Victorian matrimonial customs of the time (Ryan, 2014). Once emancipated, Black people were in violation of marriage laws for a number of reasons; for instance, it was not uncommon for a man to marry a woman and then be sold under enslavement. Subsequently, they would marry another spouse believing they would not see each other again. Franke (1999) argues that African Americans were given marriage rights when public interests took priority in marriage as an institution over private interests. With these rights came the creation of more laws regulating marriage; consequently, this created marital deviance, in which Black males were the primary “offenders” (ibid.). White masculinity required new grounds to continue social dominance since the integrity of White masculinity was being challenged because now, at least theoretically, all men were free market agents. Thus, Black men were aggressively prosecuted for matrimonial deviance (McCune, 2014). Just as it does today, the use of criminal prosecutions disenfranchised Black males. Moreover, it supported the creation of a criminal leasing system in which Black male prisoners were rented to White planters to work in the fields, sometimes under conditions that were worse than enslavement (Shelden, 2008). Essentially, this has manifested as a legal form of enslavement, with the penal system as well as White farmers profiting at the expense of Black males.

It is my view that this “criminal leasing system” is reflected in what we call today “Transitional Work or Work Release Program” except there are more humane laws to protect inmates from extremely harsh treatment. Such programs allow states to gain profit at the expense of the inmate because the inmates are responsible for housing and transportation reimbursement as well as incidental fees. Offenders are also responsible for paying their own medical and dental fees while in the program. Earning little from these programs, inmate exploitation in these programs mirrors the racial exploitation for Black men during enslavement, as they too were bought, sold, and loaned out as cheap (or free) laborers.

Also during this time period, the Freedmen’s Bureau – an agency created by the war department set up in 1865 to assist freed persons of color in obtaining relief, land, jobs, fair treatment, and education (U.S. Statutes, vol. 13, 1866) – became overwhelmed by reports of systematic violence against African Americans, i.e. lynchings, rapes, beatings, and other brutal assaults, at the hands of Whites. This brutality was supported with arguments that freed men and women were continuing the “disgusting practice of living together and calling themselves man and wife as long as it conveniently suited them,” and “maintaining bigamous or adulterous relationships” (Franke, 1999; see also Schenk, 2014). The ratification of these new laws was a double-edged sword. Some couples found themselves unintentionally married or “married” to multiple people or at least they were defined that way and these acts were in direct violations of the law. Even without matrimonial intentions, African Americans found themselves with substantial obligations of marriage and divorce under the new technical operations of the law.

Moreover, skin color mattered during reconstruction. The symbolic nature of goodness being attached to Whiteness, which developed during enslavement, affected economic and political opportunities for African Americans during reconstruction. With enslavement, biracial, or mulatto, laborers were often given less menial tasks, offered more educational opportunities, and treated better than those enslaved with darker complexions. Thus, this provided advantages which prepared them to be leaders in their postbellum communities. By no means did a fair complexion mean that the men in this category would be fully accepted in society. They were not fully accepted into either group (Office of History & Preservation, 2012). Reconstruction created a unique bifurcation in society for all people, but in particular males. There was a new hierarchy among males that consisted of White men, Mulatto men, and Black men. Among the Black men, Mulatto males had greater access to opportunities, but there was also a resentment that formed among darker-complexioned men because of those privileges afforded to mulatto men and the snobbery that sometimes accompanied their privileged existence. Such sentiments of colorism continue to linger in African American attitudes towards each other, as well as in the way that other ethnicities view members of the Black community (Hill, 2000; Hunter, 2002, 2007; Robinson & Ward, 1991).

Jim Crow [1877-1954]

The Jim Crow era furthered conditions that perpetuated restrictions for Black males as White Democrats slowly, but surely regained political power in the South. Southern Whites resisted the power of freedmen, fearing Black domination. During Reconstruction the majority of southern states were controlled by the Black vote; however, through intimidation tactics, poll taxes, and literacy tests Black voting decreased (Kousser, 1974). As African Americans regained power, laws were passed that made voter registration and electoral rules more restrictive. New legal restrictions – a combination of poll taxes, literacy, comprehension tests, residency, and record-keeping requirements – disenfranchised more Blacks (along with many poor Whites); resulting in a decrease in political participation among Blacks (Kousser, 1974). Not only were many African Americans disenfranchised, but electoral political strategies played on the racist sentiments of poor Whites as they also felt threatened by and resented the gains of African Americans. Alexander (2012) discussed this *Southern Strategy*, highlighting how racially coded legal appeals to social issues swayed poor Whites towards to Democratic vote, ultimately strengthening White political power. Such tactics continued later with the “War on Drugs”. These changes did not mean that this was solely an era of legal separation for Blacks and Whites, but more so a period where, in order to retain dominance, Whites had to assert and reiterate Black inferiority within both public and private life. Howard Thurman elaborated on the workings of segregation in his 1965 book *The Luminous Darkness*, arguing that in White supremacist society legislation and law enforcement must be accompanied by a falsification of history and a tampering of religious insights.

Additionally, all public accommodations must be kept separate in order to immobilize the Negro in society and keep him in his place. Black children learned through experience, through taunting from White children, and from witnessing degrading treatment of Black adults who was better off; and under such circumstances they often grew up with feelings of inferiority and inadequacy (Chafe, Gavins, & Korstad, 2001). Tenets of White supremacy became increasingly supported by legislation and custom that decreed that African Americans remain in a subordinate place in American society. History was transformed into a terrain of social and cultural struggle.

For vast numbers of African American youths coming of age during this time period, education may have taken a back seat to seizing the few economic activities available to them once they reached an age suitable for the labor force. It was not that there was a rejection of education, but rather a reaction to the still present lack of job opportunities available for Blacks, combined with their already limited economic position (Litwack, 1999). The Jim Crow period placed Black men in an impossible paradox. On the one hand, this system did not see men of African descent as fully men, or at least they were not capable of being *normal* men; in the sense that they were incapable of handling the same responsibilities as White men, such as being proprietors, entrepreneurs, fathers, state representatives, and inventors. This view served as a justification to exclude Black men from full citizenship with rights, access to networks, and full economic prosperity. Such a system makes it difficult for Black men to be adequate heads of households, protectors, and providers for their families. On the other hand, the Jim Crow regime claims that Black men are naturally deficient as *men* because it demands that they adhere to and aspire to the social codes established for the conduct of men. By perpetuating the idea of Black male deficiency, the Jim Crow regime justified its administration of an entrenched colored division through violence, intimidation, coercion, and manipulation of the courts, schools, public transportation, and other instruments of public interest (Ross, 2004). By juxtaposing deficient beliefs with high demands, Jim Crow placed Black men in a rather tricky position in their families which ultimately required role variation in Black households.

Civil Rights Movement

There were both victories and struggles produced by the Civil Rights Movement. It was a time that produced a Black masculinity modeled after the middle-class, which included conceptions of public civility, private morality, and individual responsibility (Gray, 1995). However, although the civil rights struggle was successful in theoretically winning African Americans freedom from discrimination, some argue that it failed to secure a national commitment toward ameliorating prior effects of discrimination, like that of violence and self-destructive behavior (Loury, 1998). Among some Blacks such effects have manifested in patterns of behavior which lead to seemingly self-imposed limits on their acquisition of skills. For example, research on stereotype threat and social identity has shown that priming one's social identity with a negative stereotype leads one to perform poorly or in a stereotypic manner (Schmader, 2002; Shih, Pittinski, & Ambady, 1999).

The mid-twentieth century's pervasive racism and economic exploitation of Black people left the ideal of manhood beyond the reach of virtually Black men. It weakened their position in every way and made it virtually impossible for them to achieve the goals which society set as a test of their manhood. By reducing them to terms like "boy", racism comprehensively demeaned and emasculated Black men (Zink, 2011).

Some observers note that while overt racism has been implicated more in the past, today it is behavioral differences that are at the root of racial inequality in contemporary America (Thernstrom & Thernstrom, 1997). However, the deeper issue when we look at the underclass is that the African American experience has been shaped by political, social and economic institutions that have been extremely oppressive (Schiele, 2005). Moreover, for the bulk of African Americans, they remain in a bind as new images of Blackness surface today that differ from those that developed prior to and during the civil rights period. For example, Tim Wise (2010) notes that Barack Obama's presidential win created a new model of acceptable Blackness, however, it also developed higher barriers for many African Americans as they were forced once again to deal with tokenism, or the isolation of "acceptable" Blacks by Whites. Thus, what we are seeing for Blacks is that their lives are not only a product of that oppressive history, but also a continuation of such constraints in contemporary America.

War on Drugs

As the Civil Rights movement slowed, new challenges developed. Ideally, discrimination was supposed to end, but the reality is that new forms continued to develop, especially because this is the time the "war on drugs" began. In fact, on July 14, 1969, in a special message to Congress, President Richard Nixon identified drug abuse as "a serious national threat" and called for a national anti-drug policy at the state and federal levels (National Public Radio, 2007). This has had a significant impact on the alarming rate of incarceration for African American males and the stigma of incarceration makes successful reentry quite difficult. Alexander (2012) informs us that with nearly one-third of Black men likely to spend some time incarcerated in their lives, they find permanent second-class citizenship waiting for them after they are released.

Simply put, she sees the "war on drugs" as a deliberate effort to reduce the gains of the Civil Rights movement, rather than a response to an actual increase in violent crime. Interestingly, the Federal Bureau of Investigations (FBI) reported a decrease in violent crime during the very time that the modern "war on drugs" was beginning to intensify significantly – in the 1990s – and it had since continued and began to stabilize in the 21st century (FBI, Uniform Crime Reports, annually).

Although the war on drugs does not directly affect all African American men, it does significantly contour their lives. Scholars have argued that overtly racist policies created during the Civil Rights movement combined with racial disparities in law enforcement and sentencing have come to diminish the spirit not only of Black men but also the Black community as a whole (see Bobo & Thompson, 2006; Rosich, 2007; The Sentencing Project, 2000, 2008; Wacquant, 2010). For example, parental incarceration affects a large and increasing number of children. The New York Times (2009) reports “at any given time, more than 1.5 million children have a parent who is currently in prison. Most of these children are young, low-income, and Black or Hispanic. These children face great uncertainty in many aspects of their lives. Temporary, informal care arrangements may permanently separate children from their imprisoned parent, their family, and their friends. The expense and discomfort of prison visits may limit the contact between parent and child needed to maintain relationships during incarceration. For young Black males, the distance created by this impediment exacerbates the social problem of fatherless households, leaving many Black male youth searching to learn masculinity through other channels.

Marc Mauer (2004) argues that racial disparities in rates of incarceration in the United States partially result from sentencing and drug policies which, intended or not, produce disproportionate racial/ethnic effects. One such example is the sentencing policies that were created for powder cocaine and crack. Although the two types of same drug cause similar physical reactions, the sentences that the users and sellers of the drugs face are vastly different. For powder cocaine, possession with intent to distribute carries a five year sentence for quantities of 500 grams or more. But for crack, possessing only 5 grams carries the same term. Because it takes 100 times more powder cocaine than crack cocaine to trigger the same mandatory minimum penalty, this penalty structure is commonly referred to as the ‘100-to-1 drug quantity ratio.’ The maximum sentence for simple possession of any other drug, including powder cocaine, is 1 year in jail (U.S. Sentencing Commission, 2007). To remedy such injustices, in 2010, Congress passed the Fair Sentencing Act (FSA), which reduced the sentencing disparity between offenses for crack and powder cocaine from 100:1 to 18:1. However, prior to the passing of the FSA, sentencing had detrimental impacts on the Black community. The U.S. Sentencing Commission reports (2007) that historically, the majority of crack cocaine users have been Black, but that proportion has been on a decline since the early 1990s: 91.4 percent in 1992, 84.7 percent in 2000, and 81.8 percent in 2006. Approximately 2/3 of crack users are White or Hispanic, yet the vast majority of persons convicted of possession in federal courts in 1994 were African American, according to the USSC. Similar trends follow with the powder form. Such sentencing disparities between the two forms reflect cultural misconceptions about crack – i.e. who uses it, who sells it, etc. Moreover, such disparities are an illustration of a disturbing issue within America, its embedded racist and classist undertone that has historically fueled our society’s political, legal, and law enforcement structure. Belgrave & Allison (2014) document that African Americans represent 12% of the U.S. population of drug users, but 38% of those arrested for drug offenses, and 59% of those in state prison for drug related offenses.

In 2002, attendees of the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights testified before the U.S. Sentencing Commission that despite similar drug use rates between minorities and Whites, minorities are disproportionately subject to the penalties for both types of cocaine (see <http://www.civilrights.org>). While some think of these disparities as a matter of circumstance, Mauer (2004) highlights that many of these effects and disparities could have been predicted prior to the adoption of the legislation that produced them by considering alternative policies that accomplish the same goals of reducing drug use without causing undue racial effects and contributing to the lack of Black male figures in communities.

The increase in Black men in prison is also related to economic profits. According to the New York Times (2012), “As financial pressures grow, officials are using halfway houses as dumping grounds... where low level offenders are thrown together with violent ones.” The incentive is simply financial – to raise money for the counties that house the inmates. For example, a recent investigation revealed that Essex County, New Jersey, receives as much as \$108 per day for each bed the federal government uses at the county jail, according to federal contracts. The county spends \$73 per day for a bed at Delaney Hall in New Jersey, which is run by a company, Community Education Centers. The difference of about \$35 a day per bed is extra revenue for the county. To date, Essex County has been paid more than \$77 million by the federal government for housing inmates and immigration detainees in the county jail. The county expects to receive at least \$200 million more through 2016. In the current prison system which is increasingly based on profit, Black men are taken from their families and shifted from location to location with only economic considerations at hand – a situation which all too ominously mirrors enslavement. Thus, the American Criminal Justice System serves as a modern racial caste system disguised behind a new mask (Alexander, 2012).

The *Times – Picayune of Greater New Orleans* (Chang, 2012) reported that for the past five years, Harris County Jail – the third largest in the nation behind those in Chicago and Los Angeles – and LaSalle Correctional Center (LCC) have had a mutually dependent relationship. LCC, sitting in the middle of nowhere 40 miles north of Alexandria, is a Louisiana-based for-profit prison chain and, as reported, “always needs bodies to fill its beds and can provide them – bodies – at a very competitive price with pick-up and delivery included.” With Louisiana being the world’s prison capital, having an incarceration rate that is nearly five times Iran’s, 13 times China’s, and 20 times Germany’s (Chang, 2012, p. 5), the masked engine behind the state’s full speed incarceration is *green* - cash. The majority of Louisiana’s inmates are housed in for-profit facilities, so maintaining high incarceration rates ensures that Louisiana continues to profit from these “bodies.” However, as this cycle continues, the profit comes at the expense of Black male youth and the entire African American community.

Modern Day Challenges

As America has changed over time, it is only fitting that forms of discrimination alter as they perpetuate inferiority among minorities, in particular toward Black men. For example, in *Thinking About Crime: Sense and Sensibility in American Penal Culture*, Michael Tonry (2004) documents how governments have historically used punishment as a tool of social control, with the extent or severity of punishment being unrelated to actual crime patterns. One such punishment, monetary sanctions, generate extreme debts, which are “incompatible with policy efforts to enhance” the reintegration of criminal defendants, who are overwhelmingly poor (Beckett & Harris, 2011). Comparing the extreme increase in the incarceration rate in the United States to stable incarceration rates in other advanced countries over the same time period, Tonry concluded that governments decide the amount of punishment that is enforced. Moreover, he argues that these decisions are unrelated to actual crime rates and trends. The U.S. has emerged as the leader in severity and length of punishment in the developed world. Furthermore, the targets of much of this punishment are primarily African American men.

The various forms of discrimination in the U.S. have culminated to form a significant barrier to pathways to the American dream for African Americans. With such barriers to success in place, prison has seemed to continue to have a swinging door for African American men, housing an extraordinary percentage of Black men. The U.S. Bureau of Justice estimates that Black males make up 40.2 percent of jail and prison populations, even though they make up less than 13.6 percent of the overall U.S. population. Alexander (2012) points out more Black men are behind bars or under the watch of the criminal justice system than there were enslaved in 1850. In short, incarceration has allowed these old forms of discrimination – employment discrimination, voting discrimination, housing discrimination, denial of educational opportunities, etc. – to remain legal for the formerly incarcerated. Federal and state laws have created a web of entrapment for the outstanding numbers of Black men who are, have been, or whoever will be in prison in their lifetimes.

In America, our punitive laws are a reflection of our attitudes that have penalized Black men. Racial typification of crime has been found to be a significant predictor of the punitiveness (Chiricos, Welch, & Gertz, 2004; Unnever, Benson, & Cullen, 2011). Peffley and Hurwitz (2002), in their examination of White support for punitive laws report that negative stereotypes of African Americans— specifically, the belief that Blacks are violent and lazy—are an important source of support for punitive policies such as the death penalty and increasing prison terms. Moreover, they show that negative evaluations of Black prisoners are much more strongly tied to support for punitive policies than are evaluations of White prisoners. The findings from their multi-method approach suggest that when many Whites think of punitive crime policies to deal with violent offenders they are thinking of Black offenders.

Chiricos and Eschholz (2002) implicate the media in helping this typification, or association of a particular race with crime, along pointing out that when Blacks and Whites are shown in television news stories, Blacks are much more likely than their White counterparts to be portrayed as criminals as opposed to police officers, role models, news commentators, or other positive figures. While these projects have specifically looked at the racial component of Whites' support for ostensibly race-neutral crime policies, ultimately they yield implications for the intersection of race, crime, and political behavior. Furthermore, with such demoralizing imagery of Black life, it becomes extremely difficult for African American you to find viable and prosperous role models to look to, in particular Black males, for gender socialization.

With incarceration being commonplace in the lives of many Black men and given these shifts in the American prison system, it is important to understand the potential impact of such conditions in the lives of formerly incarcerated African American men. Briefly summarizing major areas impacting the lives of formerly incarcerated men, this articles should be used as a blue print for beginning to understand the secondary status negotiated by Black men, as well as the stigma of such a stereotype of Black men as criminals that so many negotiate daily in their pursuits to establish themselves as "masculine" men. Furthermore, it becomes imperative to consider how such a system shapes the way that we see, perceive, interact with, and respond to African American men and, specifically, formerly incarcerated Black men.

Work Life

Contrary to popular belief, dual-parent families were the norm for African Americans, not the exception, yet they began shifting as a result of enslavement (Ruggles, 1994). What was unique to Black families was that Black women always worked along with their male counterparts (Jones, 2009). African American women's work in both the paid and unpaid labor force, but in particularly the paid labor force, is fundamental in understanding the trouble with comparing Black men to standards of White male masculinity. Black women's work shows how patriarchal White demarcations of public and private divisions of labor are problematic when looking at the African American community.

Black family and work life during Jim Crow exposes the arbitrary nature of gendered divisions because Black women, who unlike their White counterparts, worked and were supported through the collectivist values and mutuality that developed within the African American community (Stanik & Bryant, 2012). The egalitarian feature of the African American family structure removes the supposedly "natural" division between men and women in White American culture. Egalitarianism within Black families is a consequence of living under the harsh economic conditions of the late nineteenth century.

This stands in stark contrast to the sharp dichotomy between male and female sex roles so common to White middle class families during this era. However, as expectations of Black males as sole economic providers eroded they became more “dispensable” to the family, further providing justification for viewing Black men as deficient. Holding such an optional status, there is a difficulty in definitively distinguishing a relevant identity that is solely associated with Black men.

Family Life

Even though fatherless households have been the exception rather than the rule, they have laid the foundations for stereotypes about Black men being castrated by their women, who have left them behind with greater educations and economic achievement (Staples, 1978; Ricketts, 1988; Kirp, 2010). Such stereotypes have persisted due to the greater egalitarianism within the Black community. Staples’s (1978) work points out that this stereotypic thinking has manifested in many Black men’s negative self-image. Through the dissemination of Euroamerican cultural ideology Black men are bombarded with images of the worthless, good-for-nothing Black man, which serve as a constant reminder of their inferior status. A major aspect of this type of thinking is that people of European descent – i.e. White people – are inherently more intelligent, beautiful, industrious, and just than are non-White people (Alexander, 2011; Jordan, 1969). All other ethnicities in America (Black, White, Hispanic, Asian, and others) are exposed to pro-White socialization messages disseminated by the school system, mass media, and religious institutions (Baldwin, 1980; Cogdell & Wilson, 1980; Vittrup & Holden, 2010). Oliver (1989) points out that in America, pro-White socialization is primarily anti-Black and that ideas of White superiority are embedded in every aspect of American society. Research has shown that in an effort to escape this negative self-image, instead of using the higher standards of the majority group, many Black males measure their worth by the achievement of others within their own culture. Being a member of an oppressed minority group also allows individual members to be extrapunitive in determining the reasons for their failures in life (McCarthy & Yancey, 1971; Nobles, 1973; Sherman, Hartson, Binning, Purdie-Vaughns, Garcia, Taborsky-Barba, Tomassetti, Nussbaum, & Cohen, 2013). Simply put, by not trying to measure up to unrealistic standards of White maleness in America, Black men compare their situation to other Black men, finding that their status is not that far removed from their brethren – whether incarcerated or not, yet they are far from their White counterparts in the struggle for equality.

The Prison Industrial Complex and the Black Male

Prisons have grown to be a central feature in American life today. Even with the plethora of penal institutions that we have available, overcrowding of prisons is a major problem. At the end of 2010, the Bureau of Justice statistics reported a sum of 1,612,395 inmates under federal and state supervision, according to their National Prisoner statistics (Guerino, Harrison, & Sabol, 2011). Further at yearend 2010, Black non-Hispanic males had an imprisonment rate of 3,074 per 100,000 U.S. Black male residents – a rate that was nearly 7 times higher than that of White non-Hispanic males - 459 per 100,000 (ibid.). This huge growth in the prison population among Black men has prompted scholars and activists to dig deeper into the understanding of punishment in the U.S. and to develop an understanding of what Angela Davis (1997) has termed the “Prison Industrial Complex.” According to an international movement to end the prison industrial complex (PIC), the Critical Resistance (Herzing, 2011) defines the PIC as “a term used to describe the overlapping interests of government and industry that uses surveillance, policing, and imprisonment as solutions to economic, social, and political problems.” Angela Davis and Cassandra Shaylor (2001) point out that the proliferation of prisons and prisoners is more clearly linked to larger economic and political structures and ideologies than to individual criminal conduct and efforts to curb "crime."

The PIC simultaneously produces vast profit and social destruction. For example, on the one hand it may be economically beneficial for state governments, corporations, and politicians involved in the PIC, but on the other hand, the PIC impedes prosperity for the poor, racially marginalized communities represented in the vast number of arrests – i.e., high volumes of African American male arrests are a devastation for the entire Black community. What it boils down to is in the case of the PIC, as imprisoned bodies of Color are released and transformed into consumers and/or producers of commodities, there is also a transformation of public funds into profit (Davis & Shaylor, 2001). Public funds become profit as these bodies are returned to the PIC through recidivism; a recidivism that is somewhat unavoidable for formerly incarcerated men and women who want to overcome barriers erected, not only by incarceration, but also by poverty and racism. For example, after spending many years in prison, formerly incarcerated persons find that upon their release, instead of jobs, housing, health care, and education waiting for them, they are offered a small amount of release money, which may cover a bus ride and two nights in an inexpensive hotel (Davis & Shaylor, 2001). Further, out in the "free world," the stigma of imprisonment looms over their heads, which increases the difficulty for "felons" to find a job. Inevitably they find themselves tracked back into the PIC that is masked under the semblance of rehabilitation.

In sum, for those prisoners that are afforded the opportunity to get back into the public sector will be released with little to no rehabilitative services, no skills and leave jails without any money, where their cycle of crime often begins again. Thus, the PIC creates a secondary cheap labor force that is self-replicating; with the removal of many rights that “free” citizens enjoy.

Although laws vary across the U.S. in regards to former inmates, as a group they are the segment of the population that is at greatest risk of social isolation on numerous levels. Because of the variation between states, I will only briefly examine a few national restrictions – such as voting, employment, and registering as ex-offenders – that are basic rights in the U.S. and relevant to our dominant notions of citizenship and masculinity in America.

Voting Rights

Voting rights vary between states for formerly incarcerated populations; however, they must be discussed because suffrage rights have been debated for various groups throughout history. In an effort to remain consistent, I will discuss our incarceration capital, Louisiana, as an example of the detrimental effect losing them can have on Black men who have been incarcerated. The passage of the 15th amendment in 1869 during the Reconstruction period secured a huge gain for African American males providing them with voting rights that were constitutionally protected. That “protection” was not met without opposition. In Louisiana, the courts held that tests that required voters to interpret parts of the state or federal constitution as a prerequisite to voting were unconstitutional because the tests were being applied subjectively and in an arbitrary manner (Keller, 2006). Such gains were not accomplished without struggle. For example, as a source of Southern White resistance during the Reconstruction Era, to diminish Black voting strength, Southern conservatives used violence, voting fraud, corruption, gerrymandering, at-large elections, and statutory suffrage restriction (Davidson, 1992). Of course, at that time this only applied to African American men because Black women did not yet have the right to vote. While currently voting is the “right” of every American citizen; convicted felons are prevented from exercising this right. During a prison sentence, citizens are barred from voting. Obviously, they cannot register to vote from a prison cell and polling stations are not allowed in any prison. With many states having either completely barred or placed restrictions on ex-felons from this most basic right, in any given election this is a large segment of the population that is barred from active participation in the most basic democratic activity. With Black males disproportionately represented within this group, Democratic participation is restricted more for them than other groups, as has been the case historically. In fact, in 2006, Congress renewed the provision of the 1965 Voting Rights Act, after finding that discrimination still exists and is very problematic in the south (Sherman & Reeves, 2012). This is still a concern and the validity and necessity of this act is still being challenged today.

Employment Restrictions

Finding adequate employment is critical to successful reentry. Yet, the majority of states impose restrictions on the hiring of ex-prisoners for lawful employment. For some states the restrictions are in fields such as law, education, real estate, nursing, and medicine, while other states bar ex-prisoners from working in any position handling money including being cashiers in a supermarket or working as bank tellers.

Louisiana is among the few states that have eased barriers to employment for former offenders since 2006 by protecting the right to work under the state constitution (Cooper, 2010). However, such a protection may come with higher scrutiny from employers. A few states permanently bar ex-prisoners from holding any public employment. For example, in Philadelphia, the two largest employers, the University of Pennsylvania and Comcast (cable company), actively refuse to hire ex-prisoners. Studies show that time spent in prison lowers the individual's earning capacity (Kling, 1999). Because of the centrality of the role of provider or breadwinner to dominant constructions of masculinity, understanding this is important here.

Although they have paid their debt and served their time, individuals with criminal histories are often denied redemption and turned away from legitimate employment, which would help ultimately improve the quality of life for themselves, their families, and their community (Uggen, Manza, & Thompson, 2006). This would also enable them to become productive members of society and live with dignity. Typically, ex-prisoners can only find low-paid unskilled jobs, if they can find any job at all. These conditions further isolate ex-prisoners from vocation-based earnings and support the temptation for illegal cash-earning activities.

Registering as Ex-Prisoners

Increasingly, organizations are requiring applicants for work, housing, subsistence assistance, or even education to reveal any criminal history. Moreover, laws are being passed in various states that declare incomplete admission of past convictions an offense. Such laws reveal that some of these basic freedoms are not constitutional rights, but rather privileges of full citizenship, of which 33.4% of the Black male adult population do not enjoy as they are a large segment of our "felon class" here in the U.S. (Uggen, Manza, & Thompson, 2006, p. 283).

In 2008, Cnaan, Draine, Frasier, and Sinha explored national legal restrictions faced by inmates and former inmates, highlighting that "in the past thirty years, the rights of prisoners in the United States and their inclusion in society are undergoing a process of erosion" (p.7). Moreover, they argue that the more a society excludes prisoners and ex-prisoners, the more likely it is to limit the rights of other marginalized members of that society. Such exclusionary policies suggest to inmates and former inmates that they are considered unworthy of full membership in society and hence their rights are curtailed, despite paying back their debt to society. In doing so, we have curtailed not only the rights of many African American formerly incarcerated males, but indirectly the entire African American community. The harsh reality of Black male lives in America is that prison has become a staple in shaping Black masculinity.

Outside Insiders

Black males' struggles took root during enslavement and continue to impact not only on the African American community, but the entire population. Being born into a second class social standing the experience of being Black and male in America often means unemployment, school failure, and violence and crime (BJS, 1988; Garibaldi, 1988; Howard, 2008; U.S. Department of Labor, 1991; Wald & Losen, 2003; Wilson, 1987). Such patterns are shaped by racism, discrimination, and poverty. Having incarceration as a staple in their lives, Black males must tread lightly in shaping their lives and understanding masculinity to avoid being an "outside insider" – citizen only by birth, foreigner by rights stripped. For these reasons, it has become critical to consider the social and structural constraints, such as incarceration, mainstream gendered expectations, racism, and economic inequality, when theorizing about Black males and masculinity. This article hopefully has shed a little light on how such factors have in many ways impacted Black men and their potential for "masculine" achievement.

The lives of African American men are situated in and are a product of demographic, historical, social, institutional, and cultural sentiments and changes. Over time, African American men's understanding and concepts of masculinity have been immensely impacted by these changes. Because incarceration has continued to play a normative role in the lives of many African American men, it is important to understand how these men manage reestablishing themselves as men during reentry.

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