



The feminization of social services: Implications for black male youth

Ronald E. Hall*

Michigan State University, United States

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ABSTRACT

Throughout the institution of social services attention to the needs of black male youth has been subjugated relative to the needs of women and girls. Despite the educational failures and hyper-incarceration of black male youth they remain aloof from social services. In the aftermath is an invisible crisis not irrelevant to the feminization of social services. Such feminization is evident in the social work databases and social service help models where it has dominated. If social service agencies are to balance the influences of feminization, it is imperative to de-feminize social services by systematically addressing the needs of black male youths. The outcome will contribute to their academic successes and reduction in rates of hyper-incarceration. Only then will it be possible to sustain alternatives to the feminization of social services and the potency of the social work profession at-large.

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1. Introduction

In 2006 Dr. Ronald B. Mincy of the Columbia University School of Social Work published *Black Males Left Behind*. According to Mincy the economic gains spurred by the Clinton administration failed to significantly impact the quality of life for black males as a demographic. Said quality of life impact is evident in the posture of social services particularly as pertains to black male youth. According to statistical data black male youth experience the most pessimistic life chances of any demographic group within the social service population (Mincy, 2006). Their various social problems are precipitated throughout the black community inspired by educational failure and relegation to the criminal justice system. In the aftermath are contributing factors which require various social service assistance vis-à-vis single parent families, increases in non-marital childbearing, and a plethora of associated societal drug and legal problems. By application of a rigorous scientific method Mincy substantiates the critical status of black male youth as pertains to the feminization of social services. Said feminization is a status quo prerequisite to the current social service dysfunctions.

Throughout the institution of social services attention to the needs of black male youth has been subjugated relative to the needs of women and girls. In the education system black males have historically dropped out and otherwise performed poorly in school K through 12. Subsequently such failure is dramatized in the rate of black male college graduates compared to black females. According to Nebbitt (2009) social workers have responded poorly to the needs of black male youth not irrelevant to a cultural and political environment

unsympathetic to their needs. In similar fashion while the rates of black female incarceration have increased they are dwarfed by those of black males who as youth could not overcome the various social problems they may have encountered. Educational failures and high rates of incarceration all but insure the inability of black male youth to gain employment once they reach adulthood. Those who refuse to accept poverty frequently resort to crime as an avenue to wealth creating a cycle of circumstances which increases their need for social services with each generation.

In an effort to address the predicament, this paper has three objectives: (1) to provide a beginning introduction to the social problems of black male youth; (2) to address the feminization of social services; and (3) to suggest the implications of feminization for social services.

2. The social problems of black male youth: education and criminal justice

In the course of maturation the developmental process of black male youth is regarded as more problematic, stressful, and unpredictable than that of black girls (Connell, Halpern-Felsher, Clifford, Crichlow, & Unsinger, 1995; McAdoo, 1988). The research of Gibbs (1988) suggests that the experiences of black males are generally less favorable than that of black females in their family, school and community environments. McAdoo (1988) asserts that as it is becoming increasingly laborious for black male youth to attain their goals, fewer of them are found in higher education than their female ethnic counterpart.

Connell et al. (1995) illustrate their results of the differences between black boys and black girls as they pertain to school tendencies within an ecological context. Their longitudinal study consisted of 443 urban black seventh, eighth, and ninth graders (218

* Room 224 Baker Hall, School of Social Work, Michigan State University, East Lansing, MI, 48824, United States. Tel.: +1 517 432 3729; fax: +1 517 353 3038.

E-mail address: hallr@msu.edu.

males and 225 females). Behavioral, psychological, and contextual factors were related to the likelihood that the males remained in school. The conclusions of path analysis revealed that males' reports of more familial support at home eventually influenced self-system processes of perceived competence for both black males and females, perceived relatedness for black females, and perceived autonomy for black males. Those black boys from familial situations that were less economically deprived were found to exhibit minimal educational risk behavior, however, they reported less support from adults in their school setting. Black male youth from the same economic situation residing in more affluent neighborhoods with higher concentrations of affluent neighbors sustained a greater probability of remaining in school.

Demographic scholars have found that black male youth, in particular, live in the inner-cities where children attend inner-city elementary, secondary, and high schools. Education administrators are cognizant of the problems of inner-city school districts such as lack of student discipline, teachers who are less competent, and poor facilities complicated by low student motivation. Such problems are recapitulated for black male youth who enter institutions of higher education. The politically incorrect reality is that this problem may require a complete overhaul of the American educational system to bring about a resolution to problems in inner-city public school districts.

Although familial environmental factors such as parents' educational level and socioeconomic status are assumed to exert some impact upon educational orientations, for black male youth there is increasing evidence suggesting that such factors in isolation do not account for variations in outcomes. Some scholars maintain that relatively weak evidence is provided as reference in support of family-background variables having a significant affect on educational outcomes for black male youth. *Dombusch, Ritter, and Steinberg (1991)* further contend that such educational factors may indeed be more relevant in the assessment of white male youth and their families than for black male youth. Thus, theoretical and empirical research would necessitate that the analysis of unique black family processes will provide greater insight into their educational orientation and achievement styles.

Akin to the familial rationales is the assertion that differences in achievement among black male youth may be better explained by their interpersonal relationships. Significant adult family members may have the potential to enhance academic achievement as would be required. *Clark (1983)* considered such relationships to be the family's pivotal contribution to the ability of black male youth to succeed in education. He further contends that family-background variables do not determine behavior in the school setting, but that success in education is grounded in family beliefs, activities, and overall cultural style. *Reynolds and Gill (1994)* and others suggest that parenting behaviors such as monitoring school progress, parent-child interactions, and parent involvement in school can be positively correlated to educational achievement and educational success. *Datcher-Loury's (1988)* exploratory investigation of the impact of parental behaviors and attitudes on academic performance revealed statistically significant relationships between parent-child interactions and long term educational success. Similarly, *Ford's (1993)* research revealed that familial achievement orientations vis-à-vis perceptions of parents' attitudes and beliefs were of more significance than family demographic variables. The impact of parents' educational level and employment status on success in education among black male youth is then inconclusive.

The family dynamic as a significant force in the educational process has been investigated and demonstrated extensively (*Billingsley, 1992; Coates, 1985; Lemer, 1993; McAdoo, 1985, 1988, 1993; Taylor, Chatters, Tucker, & Lewis, 1990*). Unfortunately, the differentiations in outcomes where black male youth are concerned have not been substantially associated with any particular subsystem within the

family environmental domain. Contemporary research has not provided any conclusive explanation as to the impact of the family environment upon the educational achievement of black male youth. Most scholars would attest to a lack of consensus about what is known regarding black male youth and the family life or the process by which adult family members influence their educational orientations. Matters are further complicated given the fact that more extensive comprehension of the impact of family on the development of black male youth from various backgrounds is necessary. Comprehension of family impact may be best served by investigating the organizational and interactive processes within a specific culture of the subjects concerned. Thus as pertains to black male youth and education their problems are multifaceted and complex. Their inability to successfully negotiate the educational system is a frequent harbinger to the criminal justice system where as youthful offenders they are incarcerated at alarming rates.

Existent literature provides insight into the hyper-incarceration rate of black male youth. As per, "the war on drugs" incarceration rates in the U.S. have distinguished it as having the largest penal population of any advanced technological society in the world. Moreover, most data show that these are non-violent offenders who primarily acted as low level dealers and transports or "mules." Thus it is safe to assume that the increased incarceration rates have more to do with political objectives than problem resolution. The process starts with young adolescent black males who initially appear in the juvenile justice system. Data tends to show that not only are black adult males subjected to hyper-incarceration rates but that their adolescent counterparts are as well. *Wordes, Bynum, and Corley (1994)* show that black male youth are more likely to experience detention via a judicial process (regardless of offense seriousness) and that detention leads to more intrusive sanctions.

Qualitative research analysis suggests that adolescents who appear in court absent intact families (inclusive of fathers) were perceived by judicial personnel to be in a more critical need of direct court supervision (*Wordes et al., 1994*). This may not seem race based initially, but when one considers that approximately 74% of all black children born in the U.S. are born to single parent households it is evidence of a loosely organized conspiracy and its effects become readily apparent. Hence the majority of black male youth are not raised in two parent homes and this proves consequential particularly as pertains to the judicial decision to incarcerate them for firearm violations.

The issue of firearms exacerbates compromise of the judicial process via the hyper-incarceration of black male youth (*Harris, 2002*). The Michigan Felony Firearms Statutes began in 1977 followed by the Michigan Sentencing Guidelines that were enacted in 1988. In a recent study population characteristics were ascertained regarding offenses which included drug law violations and crimes committed with a firearm. Offenders were classified by age, race (blacks and whites) and gender as well as other socio-legal variables. These variables were viewed in relation to their impact on length of incarceration. Multivariate analysis of the demographic variables (age, gender and race) revealed that age significantly impacted sentence length for offenders convicted of carjacking and assault with intent to do great bodily harm less than murder. When gender was examined, these data did not suggest that the gender of the convicted offender had a significant impact on the length of incarceration. Race was operationalized to maximize comparisons between black and white offenders. Multivariate analysis revealed that the race of the offender correlated with incarceration as whites received shorter sentences than blacks for second degree murder, armed robbery and assault with intent to do great bodily harm less than murder. Additionally this group data showed sentence length was significantly impacted by race for offenders convicted of felonious assault, assault with intent to do great bodily harm less than murder, assault in commission of armed robbery and total crimes.

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