

THE SPIRIT OF DEFIANCE IN MENTORSHIP AMONGST BLACK MEN AND BOYS

KELLY N. FERGUSON*

ABSTRACT

Black male students are disproportionately disciplined in schools, primarily for subjective acts of defiance. This scholarship explores how defiance is an integral force in the lives of Black males from boyhood to manhood and how schools can contribute to the development of this unique expression of resilience. Defiance is a personal and collective set of resistance strategies to counter the economic, racial and social constraints unique to Black life in American society and schools. When defiance is channelled constructively, Black males use it to foster productive academic, social and professional lives, and to counter negative stereotypes. Understanding the spirit of defiance will aid teachers, schools and communities in minimizing cultural misunderstandings that lead to punitive and exclusionary disciplinary referrals.

Keywords: Defiance, Discipline, Black Males, Mentorship, Disproportionality.

INTRODUCTION

The overrepresentation of children of color, particularly African Americans, in a variety of school disciplinary outcomes has been documented for over past 25 years (Skiba, Michael, Nardo, & Peterson, 2002). Skiba et al. (2011) reported, "Students of color have been found to be suspended at rates two to three times that of other students, and similarly overrepresented in office referrals, corporal punishment, and school expulsion." The federal Office for Civil Rights (2014) analysis revealed that while Black students represent only 16% of the student population nationally, they are 32% of suspensions and 42% of students expelled from U.S. public schools. In comparison, White students are 51% of US public school students, but are underrepresented in suspensions (31%) and expulsions (40%) relative to their proportion of the student population. These disparities are magnified when considering the intersections of race, gender and school disciplinary patterns. Research confirms that boys of color are over 4 times as likely as girls to receive school discipline (Monroe, 2006; Skiba et al., 2002; Skiba, Horner, Chung, Karega Rausch, May, & Tobin, 2011). A national survey of schools concluded that among males, Blacks were 3 times more likely than Whites to receive out-of-school suspensions (Office for Civil Rights, 2014). Intersectionality research has further

* Clinical Assistant Professor, Loyola University, Chicago, United States. kferguson@luc.edu

concluded that Black male students are most often disciplined for subjective infractions such as “defiance,” “disrespect,” and “insubordination,” (Skiba et al., 2011; Fenning & Rose, 2007; Gregory & Weinstein, 2008; Losen & Martinez, 2013).

Moreover, several theories have been offered in an attempt to explain why these disparities persist. Cultural mismatch theories are forwarded as one possible explanation for Black males’ disproportionality in subjective areas of discipline. Accordingly, cultural mismatch theories posit that conflict arises when teachers’ cultural backgrounds differ from their students (Milner, 2010). African American pupils tend to have a distinct cultural orientation based on their African heritage (Monroe, 2006), which are often marginalized in Eurocentric classrooms. Without culturally sensitivity and responsiveness among educators, too often Black male students’ attitudes, speech, behaviors, referents, and impassioned or emotive interactional patterns are misconstrued as combative or argumentative (Monroe, 2006; Skiba et al., 2011).

Another line of research takes a more sociological or systems approach to understanding the persistent nature of Black male overrepresentation in school discipline. Mincy (2006) and the National Urban League (2007) assert that a school-to-prison pipeline is animated by the misapplication of “zero tolerance” policies, which were designed to eradicate drugs and weapons from schools through harsh punishments. This approach was designed to make schools safer, but was expanded creating harsher penalties for all student misbehavior. The result has been disproportionate numbers of Black males being pushed out of schools into the prison industrial complex and economic disenfranchisement (Mincy, 2006). This “school to prison pipeline” is most concentrated in urban schools among low income, African American male learners. These two competing lines of inquiry (cultural and structural) converge in classrooms as teachers and Black male students interact.

Critical Race Theory

Guiding our orientation toward Black males’ educational, social, and professional development is Critical Race Theory (CRT). CRT has five key tenets to guide research: (1) the centrality of race and racism, (2) challenge given to the dominant perspective, (3) commitment to social justice, (4) value placed on experiential knowledge, and (5) the value of interdisciplinary knowledge and multiple perspectives (Kohli & Solorzano, 2012). Tenets 1 (centrality of race/racism) and 4 (experiential knowledge, voice or counterstorytelling) are most germane to this research.

Asset-Based Frameworks for Black Male Development

Asset-based frameworks, counter deficit thinking and problem-centered research on Black males can provide positive and practical insights to support Black male development. Milner (2010) addressed cultural conflict as that which occurs when teachers’ cultural background and expectations of classroom behavior differ from students’ cultural orientations. Milner forwards the idea that many times teachers are quick to discipline students for behaviors that they see as socially unacceptable before ever teaching the child what the expectations are. Because behavior norms can differ greatly from one culture to another, it is vital that teachers take this into account when educating and disciplining students. Rather than trying to “fix” students and remediate them to catch up with their “normal” peers through improving test scores, it is important to recognize the cultural knowledge that students bring to the classroom

and build upon it through means that allow creativity and critical thinking to occur (Milner, 2010).

Another asset-based framework to consider is Blackmaleness, which focuses on how highly educated African American males develop amidst multiple forms of oppression (James & Lewis, 2014). Despite the educational consequences of limited social, political and economic opportunity, Black males can navigate systems of oppression to obtain a measure of academic and career success (James & Lewis, 2014). Blackmaleness is a multidimensional, shifting, and oftentimes contradictory reality of Black males that consists of two extremes and a void that must be traversed through contemplation, choice and chance to solidify a truer Black male identity. Blackmaleness is “theorized as a transgenerational collective force, organized to contest, defy, resist, and persist despite the presence of social barriers particularly constructed to make war with the potential of Black males in American society and education” (James & Lewis, 2014, p. 7). Knowledge of this construct can help teachers develop and embrace approaches informed by the lived experiences of successful Black males (James & Lewis, 2014; Lewis, James, Hancock, & Hill-Jackson, 2008). Blackmaleness conceptually provides a perspective that departs from dysfunctional ideologies that tether Black male learners to expected mediocrity (James & Lewis, 2014).

A Spirit of Defiance

I explore Black male students’ “misbehaving” or defiance as an early indicator of leadership potential rather than a marker of social deviance. For the purposes of this study, I assert that defiance is a personal and collective set of resistance strategies, evolved to counter the economic, racial and social constraints unique to Black male life in U.S. society and schools. The intentional focus on the lived experiences of successful Black men yields a clearer understanding of the developmental pathways, processes and educational supports needed to promote maturation among Black male youth. Defiance for these men began as “misbehaving” in the classroom, but evolved into a set of essential personal, social and cultural traits which they employ in their personal and professional lives. In this light, defiance as a framework can inform new approaches for teachers, schools and communities to support the development of Black male youth through the cultivation of a spirit of defiance.

Defiance here is conceptualized as a set of resistance strategies, evolved to counter economic, racial and social constraints unique to Black male life in American society and schools. When defiance is channeled constructively, Black males use it to foster productive academic, social and professional lives while countering negative stereotypes. Defiance often begins as “misbehaving” in classrooms but evolves into a set of essential personal, social and cultural leadership traits among college educated Black males.

One guiding research question was addressed in the study: How do successful Black men develop socially, academically and professionally? The analysis of eight college educated Black males’ lived experiences provides important insights into why teachers usually struggle to understand and relate to Black male students. Intersectionality research as a mode of inquiry has encouraged researchers to integrate the impact of interlocking systems of oppressions related to race, class and gender (Simien, 2007). Increasingly, educational researchers have turned to

intersectionality research to offer fresh perspectives on persistent and unresolved issues of social justice in education (Davis, Brunn-Bevel & Olive, 2015). Here we examine how the intersection of race and gender impacts educational and professional development of African American males in concert with the goal of remediating their overrepresentation in school disciplinary actions. This led to the development of an inductive framework entitled a spirit of defiance.

Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure that participants had experience with the phenomenon being studied. Accordingly, participants needed to be Black males 25 or older who demonstrated success as defined by their (a) educational attainment (a minimum of an associate's degree or professional certification), (b) employment (current working professionals), and (c) leadership-those who provide service in the community as mentors to Black male youth for a minimum of three years. The average participant was 34 years old, and all had earned either a bachelor's or advanced degree.

Acts of Academic Defiance

Data revealed acts of academic defiance as an emergent theme which described how participants held a positive academic identity of themselves contrary to the negative imaging of Black males. Acts of academic defiance allowed Black males exposed to images of Black male intellectual inferiority to develop positive academic identities, primarily through culturally responsive educational experiences. Participants reported experiencing first-hand, through stories from other Black males and various forms of social media, a daily assault of negative images and stories about Black men. In their lives, this occurred throughout their schooling experiences to varying degrees and included insults by everyone from teachers to peers. They recalled terms like "incompetent," "unintelligent," "stupid," and "lazy" being used about themselves and other Black males. Despite these challenges, participants demonstrated positive scholar identities and high intellectual capacity through their high grade point averages in college, leadership roles within school organizations, their athletic achievements connected to school-based sports, and their ability to balance all of these responsibilities. While these acts of academic defiance were individually unique, they evolved within the context of culturally responsive classrooms.

Participants in this study also identified elements of culturally responsive pedagogy (CRP) in their interviews and discussed how these experiences were important throughout their elementary through post-secondary schooling experiences. CRP is teaching that uses the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant and effective for students (Gay, 2013). Participants articulated how they valued their cultural backgrounds being affirmed through the use of textbooks that addressed, "real issues," "local problems" and "the Black Experience."

Simply being exposed to relevant texts was not enough. Rather, how teachers used curriculum materials during class-time proved critical for Black males. The participants described how their teachers who they learned the most from seemed to focus more on how abstract ideas could be used to solve real-world problems. This practical application of knowledge heightened both their interest and engagement during lessons. In turn, they were able to recall abstract facts because "the teachers used examples that I could related to." These higher levels of motivation allowed them to persist when concepts were initially difficult to understand.

Teacher discourse inside and outside of the classroom about relevant issues tied to the curriculum promoted the development of academic defiance because they modelled such defiance for their students in how they refused to teach in a manner that disengaged students. Perhaps the key separator between the effective teachers described by participants and those deemed less effective was the ability of the teacher to tailor corrective guidance, content and instruction to the unique need of Black males. This was only possible when a teacher had deeper insights to Black males through their relations with the community, parents and students themselves. While CRP was found to enrich the learning experiences of the Black male participants, it was found to be an irregular occurrence throughout their schooling. Yet, these teachers were pillars of defiance precisely because they were able to include relevant learning experiences amidst years of absent voices and positive images.

Acts of Social Defiance

Acts of social defiance are individual and collective strategies designed to productively respond to negative images and social experiences common among Black males. One research subject, Joe, an educator noted that "I constantly reminded myself that we (Black men) are more than what we see on TV or the news." Joe continued by recalling that

as a kid growing up in the city between the gangs, the drugs, the guns, the music, the poverty and family issues, I had to decide what kind of man I wanted to be. And that's without really understanding what that meant, what questions to ask or a quality example of manhood, until I was fourteen.

This dilemma was particularly pronounced for participants who did not have a father figure during their elementary years. They reported often examining models of manhood found in television and movies (e.g., "Cosby Show," "A Different World," "Boys in the Hood"), music and "the streets" to find their ways.

For these men, mentorship found in their communities provided answers and guidance as they tried to figure a path forward. Joe goes on to describe two pressing matters that Black young men faced in his community:

...well you had to make some choices. Moms didn't have a lot of money, so how are you going to help out? How I am going to get the clothes and shoes I need to go to school and not be made fun of? I had to hustle, but my mom didn't want us involved with drugs. So, me and older brother, we took peoples' groceries to their cars, cleaned yards, collected cans and bottles, then gave the money to our mother to help out. My mom was so strong that she forced us on the right path, until high school. I don't think these young brothers are bad even now days, they just don't know which direction to go in, then they make a wrong choice.

A general theme among participants was access to a network of supports that assisted them in successfully navigating the social uncertainty associated with coming of age as a Black male. For some participants, it was the mentorship received from trusted individuals, older Black males usually, who provided guidance about traversing these local community obstacles and how to navigate well in a predominantly White society. These mentors typically emerged during the middle school years, lived in the community, worked outside of the school, and helped to clarify the type of character that defied negative social images of Black males.

Also, the role of Black fraternities for four of the participants were particularly instrumental to their success beginning in college. Participants expressed a sense of belonging through this brotherhood of men who shared experiences unique to Black men. This group consisted of individuals who, as participant Byron described, were

like-minded...they are really spiritual, they're in the church, they love God, like I love God. They're passionate about the community. They are successful, African Americans who are trying to progress, maybe entrepreneurs, whether it's through the ranks of moving up through their jobs but they all are like-minded like me.

Organizations like Black fraternities promoted acts of social defiance that countered negative social stigmas because the focus was on collegiate education, responsible citizenship, and community service.

Another site of defiance as described by 5 participants was the African American church. Joe described the impact of his mentor on his development:

When I turned fourteen I met my mentor; he lived in the community and owned a small business. He was a Christian; I mean he lived it. He gave me a job, which I worked after school and on the weekend. He introduced me to Godly wisdom. He wanted to help me know how to treat other people, love other people, how to work hard in school and on my job, how to treat women, and how to honor my mother. He became what it meant to be a Godly Black man to me, and he changed my life.

Other participants articulated similar impacts about their involvement in local churches, which provided them social skills, life lessons, character development, moral character, opportunities to serve others, and a network of resources to resolve almost any challenge. Overall, while acts of social defiance are individual, actions they were born from a network of community support structures that enriched the lives of successful Black males.

Acts of Professional Defiance

Acts of professional defiance manifested as deliberate practices that participants engaged in to contest or defy the daily challenges associated with being a Black male professional. Like in their academic and social spheres, participants described continuously evolving professionally to meet the daily challenges associated with their professional lives. Participants shared a plethora of epithets used throughout media and on their jobs to describe Black men generally in the U.S. and elsewhere. Unfortunately, these images were also projected upon these college educated professionals. Joe lamented, "You have to overcome all these stereotypes starting day one of your job if you hope to be successful; even still you can be great at your job but it won't stop the stereotyping." A shared sentiment among participants as expressed by Henry was that these images are "controlled by individuals or decision makers that do not look like us and/or do not have the best intent [for us] even though they may not vocalize it." This sample of college educated men in fact believed themselves to be "productive," "hard working," "civic-minded," "intelligent," "caring," "moral," and "ambitious" men who added value to the companies they worked for. But, due to direct patterns of interactions and micro aggressions in their workplaces, they felt "unappreciated," "unwanted," "devalued," and "overlooked."

One aspect of participants' success as professional Black men was attributed to an awareness of the stereotypes concerning Black males. This awareness equipped participants with an understanding of how they needed to present themselves to others and how to respond to perceived mistreatment. Participants also employed

advice from mentors concerning challenges faced by Black male professionals as well as suggestions for navigating these barriers. Although participants expressed a positive professional concept of themselves, they felt the need to take additional steps to ensure their success. Being positive even in the face of mistreatment, working early and late, and putting in extra effort and energy were all perceived as necessary strategies to demonstrate their intellectual and professional capacities to others and to avoid being stereotyped.

Overall, defiance or determination to define ones own character and potential in academics, social interactions and professionally was a central experience among successful Black males. Participants articulated strong, positive conceptions of self and their various capacities to weather difficult and unsupportive environments. Although their experiences academically, socially, and professionally didn't always reflect their self-image and affirm their worth, participants' internal drive to succeed and support networks allowed them to defy society's expectations of Black men. This success, however, could not have been achieved without participants' network of supports found in their families, mentors, select culturally responsive classrooms, fraternities, churches and the wider community.

A Developmental Continuum

As noted earlier, I began with this question: How do successful Black men develop academically, social and professionally? I assert that defiance is a set of resistance strategies developed to counter economic, racial and social constraints unique to Black male life in American society and schools. Yet, how speaks to a process of development. Among the participants, defiance began as "misbehaving" in classrooms. By incorporating strategies and insights from support structures, however, defiance evolved into a set of essential personal, social and cultural leadership traits. It is important to note that defiance is ever evolving to counter new obstacles, but it generally manifests in three unique types of defiance at different iterations of development: defiance of agitation, assimilation, and amelioration that successful Black males utilized by throughout their lives.

Schools play a critical role in either cultivating or diminishing the spirit of defiance in Black male youth. Among the participants in this study, few teachers impacted their long-term development, but those who did were described as practicing what is commonly termed culturally responsive teaching (Gay, 2013). Unfortunately, most P-12 schools are informed by developmental theories that discourage cultivating defiance in students, particularly among Black males (James & Lewis, 2014). Defiance is criminalized and penalized leaving far too many students without an essential tool that could promote their success. A spirit of defiance can become an essential leadership trait among Black males and should be cultivated rather than penalized and criminalized in schools.

So, what can schools and teachers do? First, realize that any form of suppressed defiance can hinder the development of Black male students. Unchecked misbehaving (agitation), passive conformity (assimilation), or disengagement and disinterest (amelioration) all constitute a form of under-investment in these students by teachers and schools, which will ultimately add to preexisting patterns of underdevelopment and underperformance.

In short, regardless of how they express defiance, Black males need structured attention, awareness and advocacy. Structures within schools (teachers, staff, administrators, policy, instruction and procedures) must become more attentive and responsive to student needs. If several data points of school data collection all converge negatively around attendance, suspensions, and test scores for the majority of Black male students, systemic action is necessary. Noguera (2003), though, reported on the unfortunate tendency of ignoring documented needs of Black male learners. Attending to all of the developmental needs of any group of students is well beyond the capacity of any teacher. Hence, school-wide systems are required that provide classroom and community supports.

Yet, before action can be taken schools should seek greater understanding of the "why" and "how" of defiance among Black male students. The following three questions can guide teachers or a school to greater awareness of their Black male students.

1. If agitated males disengage and resist unjust educational experiences and environments, how might classroom climates, interactions with staff, and common instructional approaches contribute to their agitation?
2. If assimilators passively confirm and are not deemed behavioral problems, how could we learn about their unmet academic, social or emotional needs?
3. If "giftedness" is equally distributed across racial and gender groups, how can we more accurately identify and serve "gifted" Black male students?

Lastly, advocacy is required by both teachers and administrators. This effort must begin by understanding how success evolves among men of color. The mistake is to study the problem and only then begin enacting solutions based on that problem. For example, knowing that Black males are overrepresented in discipline outcomes is not the starting point for solutions. Programmatic solutions must be informed by the lived experiences of successful mature Black males (James & Lewis, 2014). Developmental research (Bonner, 2014; James & Lewis, 2014) provides clear roadmaps for the types of educational and community support structures that promote academic and professional success among Black males. Teachers and schools can also start with men in their schools and communities for a more contextualized plan, but regardless, mature men of colour should be the center piece of any action plan.

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