

January 2014

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Recommended Citation

Aguilar, Danielle Nicole (2014) "Oppression, Domination, Prison: The Mass Incarceration of Latino and African American Men," *The Vermont Connection*: Vol. 35, Article 2.

Available at: <http://scholarworks.uvm.edu/tvc/vol35/iss1/2>

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Oppression, Domination, Prison: The Mass Incarceration of Latino and African American Men

Danielle Nicole Aguilar

The disproportionate number of Latino and African American men who occupy prison beds brought much attention to the U.S. prison industrial complex. According to Sabol and Couture (as cited by Rios, 2011), "In 2007, about 16.6% of all Black males and 7.7% of all Latino males were or had been incarcerated" (p. 34). This literature review connected internalized oppression and the prison industrial complex. It further explained the prison system as a form of internalized domination. A review of drug laws and federal financial aid is discussed.

This literature review defined and explored the concepts of internalized oppression and internalized domination as it pertained to the academic success gap and mass incarceration of Latino and African American men. Hostile educational environments of Latino and African American youth were explored to uncover the connection between the flawed education system and the prison industrial complex. Internalized domination was used to analyze the prison industrial complex and argued the prison system as a cultural tool that perpetuated the subordination of Latino and African American men in U.S. society. Considering the high rates of incarcerated Latino and African American men, student affairs professionals should understand the implications of this racist institution, the challenges ex-prisoners face when entering the academy and the financial implications certain charges have on federal financial assistance.

Internalized Oppression

Griffin (as cited by Tappan, 2006) defined internalized oppression as a phenomenon such that the subordinate group adopts the dominant group's ideology resulting in the "acceptance that their subordinate status is deserved, natural and inevitable" (p. 2116). Although individuals internalize these ideologies, Pyke (2010) argued

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that internalized oppression was “not the result of some cultural or biological characteristics of the subjugated. Nor is it the consequence of any weakness, ignorance, inferiority, psychological defect, gullibility, or other shortcoming of the oppressed” (p. 553). Pyke’s clarification was crucial because subordinate groups are blamed for their inferiority when their actions align with cultural stereotypes. For example, Latino and African American youth who do poorly in school are blamed for their failure. Internalized oppression works when the dominant discourse becomes powerful to the extent that people internalize negative ideas about their group. The result was dominant group members, through assumptions and superiority, blamed subordinate group members for their subordinate status and subordinate group members did the same through the mechanisms of internalized oppression. Pyke (2010) wrote, “Renowned African American Professor Henry Louis Gates Jr., who heads Harvard’s W.E.B. Du Bois Institute for African and African American Research, attributes poor Blacks’ poverty to ‘deciding to get pregnant. Deciding to do drugs. Deciding not to study.’” (p. 565).

Henry Louis Gates Jr. perpetuated a cultural stereotype, placing the responsibility of poverty on the impoverished. He failed to critique the long-standing institutional policies and systems that ensured the continuation of African American poverty. Furthermore, through his remarks, Professor Henry Louis Gates Jr. positioned himself as an African American scholar at an Ivy League institution, distancing himself from poor African Americans. Pyke (2010) attributed *distancing* as a form of internalized racial oppression. “The strategy of distancing oneself from negative stereotypes [occurs] by suggesting they are true, just not for oneself” (p. 558). Internalized oppression blames the oppressed and hinders growth of individuals and communities of color, a concept that will be explored in the next section.

The History of “Acting White”

The “acting White” phenomenon received much attention since Fordham and Ogbu (1986) coined the term. They argued the academic gap between the African American and White communities was due in part to the concept of acting White. The authors’ interviewees equated academic success as “White” therefore, “to behave in a manner defined as falling within a white cultural frame of reference is to ‘act white’ and is negatively sanctioned” (p. 181). The authors claimed that African American students do not want to be ostracized or negatively sanctioned by their peers. Therefore, they performed below capability as a way to ensure in-group respect. Fordham and Ogbu (1986) found that “*one major reason* black students do poorly in school is that they experience inordinate ambivalence and affective dissonance in regard to academic effort and success” in the form of name calling, disownment or even physical violence (p. 177). African American students are seen as purposely performing poorly in class and blamed for their

failure without criticizing the system and institutional culture that perpetuates the academic success gap.

Contemporary “Acting White” Findings

Since Fordham and Ogbu’s (1986) original claim, Wildhagen (2011) and Rios (2011) conducted research that refuted the acting White phenomenon as a factor within the academic success gap. Wildhagen (2011) argued, “no scholarly research has tested the validity of the process proposed by the acting White hypothesis” (p. 445). Rios (2011) claimed that the Latino boys he interviewed actually congratulated their friends for their academic success. Similarly, Wildhagen (2011) found that “African American students actually identify African American with doing well in school” (p. 445). Although high achieving students of color may get encouragement from friends, why does a common misconception that academic success within communities of color equates to “acting White?” The academic gap continues to expose disparities between high school graduation, college matriculation, and college graduation rates.

Although some African Americans reported negative sanctioning for taking school seriously, they also reported “lower academic payoffs” from teachers, such as negotiating a grade or having the teacher believe that the student is putting in a full effort (Wildhagen, 2011, p. 459). It is possible that the idea of acting White may actually be academically successful African American students are *treated* similarly to White students as opposed to the effort put into school. African American students may understand that regardless of the effort they put into school, teachers have continued to privilege their White classmates. African American students may feel compelled to maintain respect with other African Americans and resist acting White, behavior which is interpreted as not putting effort into academics. Currently the variables attributed to the disparities between academic success of African American and White students are unknown. Internalized oppression and acting White may contribute to the academic success gap. How is the academic success gap seen within society? Where do the majority of male high school students of color end up?

Internalized Domination

Internalized domination is defined as “members of the [dominant] group who accept their group’s socially superior status as normal or deserved” (Griffin as cited by Tappan, 2006, p. 2116). Tappan (2006) argued, “internalized oppression and domination become deep, internal, psychological qualities, characteristics, or ‘marks’ that are extremely difficult to resist, interrupt, or abandon once they are in place” (p. 2122). Due to this circumstance, the relationship between internalized oppression and internalized domination is referred to as mediated action.

Mediated action consists of two elements: “an agent and specific cultural tools” (Tappan, 2006, p. 2122). Wertsch (as cited by Tappan, 2006) argued that mediated action accounts for both “the psychological inquiry and the sociocultural inquiry to understand the relationship between the individual and the social, cultural, historical and institutional contexts in which the individual lives” (p. 2122). Therefore, a teacher’s preferential treatment towards White students can be viewed psychologically and socioculturally. The teacher’s assumption that White students try harder in school than African American students is the psychological aspect and the differentiation of treatment between White and African American students is the sociocultural aspect.

Within this context, the agent is White society and cultural tools are the systems and institutions put in place to allow the perpetuation of the academic success gap. A cultural tool can be a physical or linguistic. The physical tools emphasized in this paper are police enforcement and prisons and the linguistic tools are the policies and laws that have disproportionately affected Latino and African American men. These linguistic tools are communicated to Latino and African American youth in a variety of ways, but particularly through the classroom.

Classroom Realities of Young Latino and African-American Men

Rios (2011) analyzed how high schools with large populations of Latino and African American students consequently became hostile environments. Police presence on campus created a disadvantageous atmosphere for the school’s foundational purpose – learning. The policing within the researched high school classrooms are both a physical and linguistic tool. It is a physical tool because police officers are actually present on school grounds policing the behavior of the students. It is also a linguistic tool because there is most likely a policy that allows free movement of police officers at the high schools.

The young men Rios (2011) interacted with during his research felt the concept of policing had infiltrated every aspect of their lives, including school. Davis (2003) argued “when children attend schools that place a greater value on discipline and security than on knowledge and intellectual development, they are attending prep schools for prison” (p. 39). Rios (2011) found that teachers used jail, prison, and/or the police as a threat to get the young men to act how the teachers wanted them. This threat by the teacher, the agent, is another example of a linguistic tool. Similarly Wildhagen (2011) critiqued the notion of the proper way to act in class because it becomes synonymous with White middle-class culture. The term acting White may not be synonymous with high academic achieving students of color but rather with the manner students of color adopt while in a classroom setting. The threats and policing of high schools are two characteristics of what has been termed “the school to prison pipeline,” a phenomenon of funneling

disadvantaged youth from schools into the criminal justice system.

Davis (2003) claimed that Latinos and African American men have a better chance of ending up in prison throughout their lives than getting a decent education. Psychologically, police officers and other forms of authority are trained to police Latino and African American youth in high school. Socioculturally, laws and policies ensure the imprisonment of Latino and African American youth. One example of this cultural tool are drug laws that have disproportionately affected communities of color.

Drug Policy as a Cultural Tool

The United States has one the fastest growing prison populations in the world. “In less than a single decade, 1984–1989, the number of California prisons doubled” (Davis, 2003, p. 13). Sabol and Couture (as cited by Rios, 2011) argued that “roughly 27% of the incarcerated population is Latino, while it represents only 16% of the total US population and roughly 50% of incarcerated population is Black while making up only 14% of the U.S. general population” (p. 34).

According to Mauer and King (2007), the war on drugs was a campaign started by Richard Nixon to reduce the presence of illegal drugs. This legislation is another example of a linguistic tool within mediated action. Any policy, law, and/or rule that is institutionalized and targets a specific population is a linguistic tool. According to Mauer and King (2007), “the ‘war on drugs,’ officially declared in the early 1980s, has been a primary contributor to the enormous growth of the prison system in the United States” (p. 1). The statistics indicate this effort may actually be a war on communities of color as opposed to drugs. For example, there has historically been a significant sentencing disparity between crack cocaine, mostly found in poor African American neighborhoods, and powder cocaine, mostly found in White affluent neighborhoods. According to the Washington Post (2010), “under the law, a person convicted of crack cocaine possession got the same mandatory prison term as someone with 100 times the same amount of powder cocaine” (p. 1). Although the sentencing ratio was reduced 18:1, the law perpetuates internalized domination because crack cocaine still holds harsher sentencing penalties than powder cocaine and therefore the sentencing is racialized.

Mauer and King (2007) analyzed the arrest records from the Federal Bureau of Investigation in 2002 and found that “African-Americans [only] constitute 14% of the nation’s monthly drug users [yet comprise] 56% of those in state prison for a drug conviction” (p. 2). The stigma and penalties drug offenses carry are heavier for African Americans. The U.S. federal government and society have a greater commitment to incarcerating Latino and African American men than educating them and have mastered a system that ensures their continued subordination.

Federal and State Commitment to Higher Education

Today, the United States is known more for its mass incarceration than its education. “The United States has fallen from 12th to 16th in the share of adults age 25 to 34 holding degrees” yet accounts for the largest prison population in the world (Washington Post, 2011). “The U.S. population in general is less than five percent of the world’s total, whereas more than twenty percent of the world’s combined prison population can be claimed by the United States” (Davis, 2003, p. 11). Regrettably, the same statistics cannot be said about higher education. “The chance of a Black male going to prison sometime in his lifetime is one in three, compared to one in six for Latino men and one in seventeen for White men” (Rios, 2011, p. 34). This is an unfortunate reality that has plagued Latino and African American communities. Knowing these odds, how do young Latino and African American men defy this reality? Rios (2011) found that even when young men wanted to change their paths, they were criminalized and bound to certain stereotypes making it difficult to go back to school or find employment. Rios (2011) argued, “the after effects of incarceration include permanent stigma, the loss of opportunities to receive federal and state assistance or accredited certification in several trades (e.g. automotive, construction, plumbing)” (p. 37).

The issue is not merely who is in prison but also how much is devoted to the prison system. According to Meiners (2011) and Hatt (2011), between 1980 and 2000 state spending on prisons was six times greater than that of higher education. Historically, politicians used fear tactics to make people think prisons equal safety. In reality, the boom of the prison system occurred when overall crime was decreasing (Davis, 2003). Considering this contradiction, it can be concluded that the prison system is just another institutional way of subordinating Latino and African American men, ensuring that their social mobility is non-existent.

According to the Legislative Analysis Office of California, the state cost per inmate in 2008 was \$47,000 whereas the average cost per student attending the University of California while living on campus was \$25,000 according to the California Student Aid Commission. The commitment to the prison industrial complex is not only legislative, but also monetary. Legislation and financial restrictions have and continue to work together to keep men of color from pursuing a higher education. This unfortunate reality keeps higher education as a luxury from which many are excluded.

The overrepresentation of incarcerated young Latino and African-American men is clear. According to Sabol and Couture (as cited by Rios, 2011), “In 2007, about 16.6% of all Black males and 7.7% of all Latino males were or had been incarcerated” (p. 34). When comparing these numbers to the amount of bachelor,

master, and doctoral degrees awarded to young Latino and African American men, it is more common to find these young men in prison cells than in classrooms.

Drug Offenses and Financial Aid

A criminal record can have detrimental effects on whether a student receives financial assistance for college. The Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), asks the applicant about previous drug charges. It is noted that an answer of yes can affect eligibility. Considering the percentage of Latino and African American men who are charged for drug possessions, one can assume that those men will most likely not obtain the aid necessary to pursue higher education. This is not only an issue of racialized discrimination and injustice but also a matter of access to higher education. With increasing tuition and student fees nationwide, federal student aid is a necessity for many.

Conclusion

The present and future cost that internalized domination and internalized oppression has had on Latino and African American men is unmatched. The prison and education systems are set up to ensure that Latino and African American men are left out of the higher education conversation. The prison industrial complex and drug laws have created an access issue for Latino and African American men. It is crucial that student affairs professionals understand the multiple barriers between convicted Latino and African American men and higher education. Student affairs professionals need to understand the complexity of finances that a student may have. Being aware of programs and scholarships to aid such students is vital. Furthermore, education in general needs to be something that is valued beyond imprisonment. As seen from the financial commitment, more time, effort and money needs to be funneled into all levels of education and away from prison construction.

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