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Aggression in African American Males: A Review of Selected Literature on Environmental Influence_s

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ABSTRACT

The aggressive African American male is a pervasive stereotype in America. This view of African American males has found support from those who claim a biological basis for this perceived propensity for aggression and violence. High arrest rates are used as an indicator for defining African American males as more aggressive and more violent than males from any other ethnic group. There are, however, environmental factors, such as the industrial shift of the 1980s, the dynamic blending of race, the legal system, the community and the individual, and the influence of family structure that do not receive serious consideration in the extant research. These factors examined from an ecological framework are revealed as possible predictors, confounding variables or direct or indirect causes of the disproportional representation of African Americans in crime statistics.

Early theories from researchers like Cesare Lombroso "argued that criminals were throw backs to an earlier and more primitive form of human being" (Haralambos and Holborn 1995: 387). Others like Sheldon and Eleanor Glueck, following in the same vein of physiological explanations for deviant behavior proposed the mesomorph body type as that which is most indicative of innate criminality and deviance. Mesomorphs, they explained, were "more active and aggressive . . . and are therefore more prone to committing crimes" (Haralambos and Holborn 1995: 387). These characteristics

are more likely to be used to describe African American males than any other race and or gender grouping. These early ideas are similar to the Jonathan Crane (1993) research, which aimed to substantiate the claim of intellectual inferiority of blacks to whites via genetic evidence. This research though has been challenged successfully on grounds of construct validity, analysis, significance of findings and on the operational definition of the key research term - intelligence.

"Blacks are 6 times more likely than whites to die by homicide, a crime that is overwhelmingly intra-racial in nature" (Sampson, Morenoff, and Raudenbush 2005). While these stark statistics speak for themselves, the confounding factors in the analysis have not been represented in much of the research. This paper focuses attention on violent and criminally violent behavior as representative of aggressive behavior. The paper will attempt to deal with the confounding variables of aggression in African American males from an ecological framework. Existing research suggests, and in many cases, asserts that there are serious environmental factors that are either predictors or confounding variables or causes (direct or indirect) of the disproportionate representation of African Americans in crime statistics.

Societal reality is defined by the dominant group, and in this case, the dominant group is white males. Thus, the relative exclusion of African American males, either by design or by consequence, has lead to increased violence and crime which in turn is interpreted by society and the by product of that process is the stereotype that Black Males are genetically predisposed to aggression. A number of factors need to be examined before this rush to a genetic explanation for the perceived aggressive nature of Black Males.

The industrial shift and the resultant polarization of the labor market have led, invariably, to increased aggression and violence from the group most economically disenfranchised by this shift. Utilizing government agency statistics on crime and population of U.S. cities with a population of 100,000 or more in 1980, Parker (2004) sought to examine the effect of the industrialization shift and its polarizing effect on the labor market and Urban Violence as far as Blacks are concerned. Statistics from agencies such as the Federal Bureau of Investigation's Uniform Crime Report, the 1980 and 1990 Census of Population and the Bureau of Justice Statistics' Census of State Adult Correctional Facilities were used.

The research points to industrial restructuring as the main factor in the, ". . . removal of a manufacturing and production-based economy in urban areas, which had served as a catalyst in concentrating disadvantaged and polarizing labor markets since the 1970s" (Parker 2004: 619). The researcher's aim was to see whether there was any link between this industrial shift and the upsurge in urban crime. She found that there was a signif-

icant decline in service sector jobs for black males as well as black females, but the job prospects for white males increased significantly. "White males are benefiting from . . . highly skilled information-oriented service positions in urban cities" (Parker 2004: 628). This increased disadvantage for blacks corresponded to an increase in black gender-specific homicide. The loss of jobs was also felt by black women; however, there was no similar trend in homicide rates. The social expectation that women be less confrontational and use more passive means to release frustration and aggression may account for this disparity.

The laws represent the societal reality and substructure, thus black males (the economically and socially disenfranchised) represent a disproportionate segment of arrest statistics and of the prison population. This is primarily so because the American justice system purported to operate under the principle of impartiality, depends on ". . . an interdependent relationship between impartial laws and culturally influenced legal agents . . ." (Cureton 2000: 703). Thus, while there are social, economic, and cultural factors that lead to increased criminal activity and a greater concentration of said activity in certain areas and subsets of the population, the justice system does not factor this into legislation, arrests, or punishment.

Steven Cureton's research, "Justifiable Arrests or Discretionary Justice: Predictors of Racial Arrests Differentials," examines the claim that "Blacks face a higher probability of arrest than Whites because of police discretionary justice" (Cureton 2000: 704). Cureton also examines the fact that "police operations and services are concentrated in certain criminogenic, low-income, mostly non-white areas because of citizen requests, preference of victims . . ." (Cureton 2000: 705). The research used Crime Reports and census data from "municipalities with a population of 25,000 and over . . . The sample included 442 cities for 1980 and 435 cities for 1990" (Cureton 2000: 707). The data showed a few interesting facts that have direct relation to arrest differentials for blacks and whites.

Cureton's research yielded a racial bias in arrests made. He found that in cities where blacks were the minority and were governed by whites there were higher arrests rates for blacks particularly for murder, rape, and robbery for both years 1980 and 1990. There was no accounting for cities characterized by black governance. Police services were concentrated in those areas where blacks were in greater concentrations. This concentration represents a threat to the authority of the elite and results in a fear of crime. Thus, the concentration of blacks in an area governed by whites is likely to lead to discretionary justice based on this perceived challenge. The social threat phenomenon and benign hypothesis, suggests that segregation of minorities will actually lead to a decrease in minority arrests ". . . because segregation decreases any visibility of minorities and increases the chances of intra-

racial crimes. . ." (Cureton 2000: 706). The idea does not hold much credibility since the segregation of a disadvantaged group means that the police services become essentially centralized around that group in order to keep the group "corralled." Additionally the idea that this segregation of the minority group will result in greater intra-racial crimes perhaps at the expense of interracial crimes is also shaky. A segregated disadvantaged group will have to go outside of itself to take or earn the resources that it needs for survival. Lacking the skills necessary to earn these resources, the alternative is usually to take those resources, often resulting in criminal offences that now take on an interracial label.

Race relations have been fingered as a "critical social factor context for understanding violent behavior as a response to oppression" (Caldwell, Kohn-Wood, Schmeelk-Cone, and Chavous and Zimmerman 2004). The research is showing that as young Black males experience racial discrimination there is a greater likelihood of their involvement in violence, usually as a response or a defense to the experience. This correlation was even greater when race was a central feature to the individual's identity. "The Surgeon General's (USDHHS, 2001) recent report on youth violence concludes that risk factors do not operate in isolation and that they can be buffered by protective factors" (Hawkins, Herrenkohl, Farrington, Brewer, Catalano and Harachi 1998) thus making it essential for the examination of as many possible confounding factors as can be researched.

Caldwell et al (2004), quoting the aforementioned statistic asserts that "risk markers such as race and ethnicity are frequently used as risk factors for violence, yet being African American has no causal relationship with violence. On the other hand, living in environments with limited opportunities and little supports for success increases the risk for engaging in violent acts" (Hawkins et al., 2001). For a black American male, the transition into adulthood racial discrimination is one source of stress. This stress is most pronounced in those youths for whom race was less central to their identity. One researcher offered this Afro-centric explanation "the internalization of a definition of manhood based on a European American culture combined with the deleterious historical effects of slavery . . . an internalization of a strong sense of racial centrality and group affiliation may offset the stigmatization and marginalization that being African American . . . engenders" (Schiele 2000). Thus, it can be concluded that the continuation of violence in black males across the developmental span cannot be explained by a genetic predisposition but rather because of the social stresses that they must negotiate which in turn reinforce antisocial and often violent behavior.

The communities that produce the most violence are those that are depressed, and are described as being in a state of "concentrated disadvantage." There is a greater possibility of a black male living in this kind of

social circumstance than for a white or Mexican male. Social disadvantages as well as the psychological disadvantage of being part of a depressed and disadvantaged community are both possible confounds that must be included in the mix when one attempts to proffer explanation or to launch investigations into the possible origins of the disproportional rates of aggression in black males.

Social disadvantages, moral cynicism, and low collective efficacy are some factors that are characteristic of violent neighborhoods. According to Kirov and Peterson (2000) "the same social conditions are at the root of violent crime for all racial groups" (Kriwo and Peterson 2000: 547). The authors of the article point to a common error to either structuring of genetic research into behavior or the interpretation of the results of such research. They argue that the views that hold a genetic basis or even a social basis for aggression often assume that the conditions that are at the root of violent crime are the same for all racial groups.

The article "The Structural Context of Homicide: Accounting for racial Differences in Process", is based on research conducted using "race-specific homicide rates for large U.S. cities with appreciable African American populations. The chosen cities had to meet the 100,000 total and 5,000 black population requirements. Of the 124 cities only "12 (10 percent) had levels of disadvantage for whites above 11. In sharp contrast, 81 percent of cities have levels of concentrated disadvantage for blacks above this point" (Kirov and Peterson 2000). As home ownership in blacks increased (*a decrease in concentrated disadvantage*), offending in blacks decreased. However, it is more the rule than the exception that the institutional and economic resources that could affect the level of concentrated disadvantage and thus the rate of offending in blacks are located further from blacks and much closer to whites.

The absence of ready employment and other legitimate means of self-sufficiency and the maintaining of one's family lead to eventual frustration and use of illegitimate means of meeting those needs. Violence therefore is incidental - one necessary by product. In the previously cited article, Karen Parker employs a Marxist approach to examining this factor in the consideration of causes of aggression in black males. Parker (2004) explains, "Deprivation, either relative or absolute, heightens feelings of anger and frustration that result in aggression." Going on to reference another research team, Parker (2004) asserts, "When an economically polarized environment is coupled with ascribed (racial) inequality, the potential for violence becomes more pronounced . . . deprivation could exacerbate frustration and contribute to the change in disaggregated homicide among blacks." Thus if a community is characterized by chronic unemployment, and little or no resources for self improvement, then one could expect high homicide and

crime rates.

The Sampson et al. (2005) article entitled "Social Anatomy of Racial and Ethnic Disparities in Violence" examines the idea that "racial and ethnic minority groups in the United States are differentially exposed to salient neighborhood conditions such as the geographic concentration of poverty and reduced informal community controls"(2005: 224). They note that "Latinos experience lower rates of violence overall than blacks besides being generally poorer" (2005:224). However, the research sheds light on the possible reason for this. Whites and Mexicans are more likely to live in neighborhoods that, while mixed, have an almost 85 percent non-black population. This statistic rings true since blacks are more likely than either of these ethnic groups is to "live in neighborhoods characterized by concentrated disadvantage, high legal/moral cynicism, and low collective efficacy" (2005: 227). The researchers close the article by suggesting that intervention strategies would possibly result in a reduction of the crime rate in those communities and among the black minority. They suggest policies such as the issuing of housing vouchers so the poor could secure housing in middle-class areas, as well as policies to increase home ownership in general.

The family is the basic unit of society, thus, from this assumption; any malfunction within society can be traced back to its basic unit, the family. It is crucial therefore, that in an exploration of the factors that contribute to violence in African American males that we examine the effect of family structure and parents. Social learning theory holds that children learn how to behave socially from their environment. With reference to aggression, the key element of modeling is at play as children learn conflict resolution skills. African American males, it is theorized, learn conflict resolution skills that allow them to maneuver within the reality of their neighborhood, but these skills are of little use outside of that environment. A study by David E. Jorgenson (1985) when using a structured questionnaire administered to students in a sociology class at "a regional university and a small college located in a larger city" (1985:111) found that when the method of conflict resolution used by parents was physically aggressive, males adopted it while females adopted more readily the verbally aggressive methods. This was so whether they were black or white males. The absence of, or the mother's non-use of discussion as a conflict resolution skill influenced greatly the adoption of physical aggression by either sex.

A study on school-related violence found that black males were more likely than any other racial and or gender grouping to have carried a weapon to school. The study by Susan C. Hill and Judy C. Drolet (1999) employed a "secondary analysis of school-related violence. YRBS data was conducted for the years 1993 and 1995" (1999: 265). The YRBS uses a nationally representative sample of 6th - 12th graders in the United States. The study also

found that black males were more likely to have been involved in a fight or other infraction. However, the article notes that overall, males were more likely regardless of ethnic grouping to have carried a weapon or be involved in a fight at school. This bears credence to the erstwhile issues examined in this paper – namely – that individuals from disadvantaged neighborhoods have a greater propensity for violence. However, the Hill and Drolet (1999) article point to the social expectation of greater assertiveness in males - an assertiveness that is often proven or conveyed through violence. Additionally, the disproportional representation of black males in these school-violence statistics points to the social learning that has been facilitated in the homes. These boys are taught the social skills that are necessary for survival in their disadvantaged neighborhoods. Without those skills, the neighborhood becomes even more dangerous and potentially lethal. However, when the black male attempts to use those skills in the schools that are characterized by the white culture, the actions are interpreted as aggressive and violent.

African American males, more than any other male racial population, are more likely to be from single parent families. While matriarchal families do not cause violence in these males, there is significant correlation between to cause concern. Many violent African American males are from single parent households or unwed households. This increases the risk for the presence of a number of other such as absence of discipline, economic and social deprivation, and insufficient positive exposure. Sampson et al. (2005) argue that family conditions play an important role as well. Although the female-headed household that many black males are born into is often identified as the cause of black male violence, one must be careful of such explanation. The female-headed household is yet another reflection of the economic situation, as the mother struggles to keep the family afloat in the absence of the economic contribution of the economically disenfranchised father.

Sampson et al. indicate though that “parent being married but not family configuration per se, is a salient factor in predicting both the lower probability of violence and a significant reduction in the black-white gap in violence” (Sampson et al. 2005: 231). The female-headed family, however, cannot be demonized as a link between it and violence rates can be ascertained. What is being seen though is that “being reared in married-parent households is the distinguishing factor for children” (Sampson et al. 2005: 231). The authors therefore call for “renewed attention to the labor market contexts that support stable marriages among the poor” (Sampson et al. 2005: 231).

The final part of Urie Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory is the individual. The individual's self-concept influences his reality or at least his perception of reality. For the African American, violence is just one pos-

sible response to this perception. The stereotypes of African American males as aggressive and violent have persisted to the point that the victims of the stereotype have assumed their ascribed position. This is either a self-fulfilling prophecy or an internalization of negative labeling. In a study by Nesdale et al. (1975), the researchers found that person's perceptions of aggressors were formed not by the aggressor's intentions but rather by the perceptions of the other. While the study was of twenty-eight women, who read transcripts of interviews that described attractive or unattractive males who had engaged in aggression, the basic issue remains. Just as in this experimental situation, in real life situations people are judged subjectively and often erroneously based on heuristics such as stereotypes and prejudices.

Harrison and Esqueda (1998), in their research "Race Stereotypes and Perceptions about Males Involved in Interpersonal Violence" examine the less obvious effects of stereotyping. With "Two hundred and sixty volunteers from a large Midwestern university" the researchers randomly assigned volunteers to the following groups: "2 (male race: black or white) x 2 (type of provocation: aggressive provocation or no provocation) x 2 (type of escalation: aggressive escalation or no escalation) between-participant designs" (1998: 83). After interactions with the vignettes and the interviews, data on the participants revealed that perceptions of blacks were that they were violent and had been involved in prior criminal behavior. "National Crime Victimization Statistics [for 1987-1992] indicates that abusive black men are two times more likely to be arrested than abusive white men" (1998: 89). These findings shed light on the reaction of blacks to these perceptions of the law and whites in general. The situation becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy as black males respond aggressively to a group they believe (or know) perceive them as violent and aggressive.

The general attitude of African American males with regard to their neighborhood and themselves is grim. They see drugs, peer pressure, police not caring and poor educational opportunities as just a few of the barriers to self and community improvement. The response to these barriers is most often one that is reactionary and survivalist by nature. Most suggest a bleak outlook on the future and thus hold off on long-term hopes. A cross-sectional longitudinal study was carried out in a large Southeastern American city with data being gathered on 8th, 9th, and 10th graders, then later on 10th, 11th, and 12th graders using a combination of quantitative and qualitative instruments.

The researcher, Michael Cunningham (1999) attempted to investigate "African American adolescent males' perceptions of their community resources and constraints . . . focus on how perceptions of neighborhood characteristics were related to how adolescent males interpreted and integrated their social experiences . . . with their cognitive representations of self

in a social environment" (1999: 571). The data showed that adolescents had full understanding of their concentrated disadvantage. Pointing to drugs in the community, the subjects of the study identified it as one of the many factors that would have a very serious impact on their life chances. Factors such as unemployment, poor schools, gangs, and negative police attitudes were among other factors that they identified. The fact that these adolescents had already identified some of the main factors in their disadvantaged environment means that there is the possibility that a fatalistic approach to their life chances may have already developed or was developing. This fatalistic attitude and the perceived or real absence of control over one's life is what often lead to frustration. The frustration-aggression hypothesis argues that aggression and frustration are directly related one feeding into the other in a vicious cycle. Young black men it seems have become the perpetual victims in that cycle, impacted by social, economic, psychological, familial, community, and individual factors that all contribute to exacerbating the general male predisposition to be more aggressive than females. While the statistics speak clearly that African American males are disproportionately the perpetrators of violence, the statistics belie the confounding factors that speak much louder. The prevailing economic system does not afford African American males equal access to the legitimate means of survival, thus, illegitimate means of meeting those needs are utilized. More often than not, these methods lead to violence. The neighborhoods and family situations that these males come from lend themselves to ease of entry into violence and aggressive behavior. The skills that must be learnt to allow the male to navigate the depressed community are in large measure violent in nature, or at least described as violent by the dominant culture. Thus, any attempt to employ those same social skills to maneuvering within the wider society results in conflict. Eventually these social pressures are assimilated and accepted by the individual as his lot. Thus, the development of a fatalistic attitude is almost inevitable. The individual resigns to his "fate," as it were, and becomes the violent, angry black male that he has been repeatedly characterized as being.

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