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Bringing Our Boyz to Men

Black Men's Reflections on their Mother's Childrearing Influences

This paper will critically examine the role of African mothers in the Diaspora, who are raising sons, from the perspective of sons. Using a reflective analysis of data gathered in a cross-national research project that explored survival strategies used by Black men in Halifax, Nova Scotia and Sheffield, England, this paper will focus on their discourse about mothers and Black women who fulfill *mothering* roles in their lives, as grandmothers, sisters, aunts and *othermothers*. The findings in this research challenge some of the social science literature which pathologizes the role of Black women who are described by Symonds (1989) as "loving their sons" and "raising their daughters."

My interest in this topic is both personal and professional. The professional interests emerged through the conduct of the research with Black men. However, this was also deeply embedded in my personal connection to the topic. I have spent considerable time analyzing the different relationships I observed between my mother and her sons, as compared to her daughters. I have also looked at these relationships across generations and over time. I am a step-mother to a young Black man, and I have been an othermother to my brothers, nephews, and community sons and daughters. I want to develop richer understandings of the multi-generational motherlines between mothers and sons. This is a beginning journey, a work in progress, which examines Black men's views of their mothers, grandmothers and othermothers' contributions to their successful negotiation to manhood. This article explores the three themes that emerged in this study: Black mothers and othermothers are seen as superwomen and are key to Black men's survival; grandmothers are guardians of the generations, particularly the maternal line; and othermothers lessen the negative impact of mother absence. I begin with a review of the literature on Black motherhood.

Naming contradictions: the experiences of Black motherhood

It has been argued in the literature that the Black woman, as matriarch, is largely responsible for the social castration of Black men (Moynihan, 1965 qtd. in Rainwater and Yancey, 1967, Staples, 1978). The relative lack of involvement of Black men in the parenting role [regardless of the reasons for this phenomena], has frequently meant the overinvolvement of Black women in the lives of their sons (Bernard, 1996). Some suggest that the institution of Black motherhood has helped to exonerate men from authentic fathering and shared parenting roles and responsibilities (Franklin, 1984).

Collins (1990) provides a useful critique of the literature and the various perspectives on Black Motherhood. She challenges white male scholar's claim that Black mothers, as matriarchs, have contributed to the deterioration of the family structure as we once knew it. Collins (1990) also asserts that whilst white feminists have challenged white male perspectives on motherhood in general, they have not significantly challenged the matriarch image of Black motherhood. Finally, Collins (1990) challenges the Black male scholars who tend to glorify Black motherhood and have helped to fuel the superwoman image.

In examining the politics of Black motherhood, Bernard and Bernard (1998) state that Black motherhood may be the site of oppression, or an opportunity for creativity, empowerment and social action. Acknowledging the contradictory nature of Black motherhood, they go on to suggest that Black mothers' ability to cope with race, class, and gender oppression should not be confused with transcending those conditions. Placing Black women on a pedestal, as the strength of Black families and communities (Bernard 1996), also sets them up for failure in the role, particularly in relation to the mother/son relationship. Collins (1990) advances our analysis of Black motherhood with her position that self-definition is essential, as externally defined definitions of Black motherhood are always problematic, both those that are positive and affirmative, and the more visible negative and controlling images. Externally imposed definitions of Black motherhood help to reinforce the marginalization and oppression faced by Black women, children and families (Bernard and Bernard, 1998). Collins (1990) argues that when Black women self-define Black motherhood, they expose the contradictions that are inherent in the role, the tensions between the oppression that is reinforced through the controlling images of Black mothers, and the potential empowerment and independence that the site of Black motherhood offers.

Black women have been described as the "strength" of Black families, the matriarch, the super woman. McCray (1980) says:

the Black woman has either been depicted as the dominating, castrating female under whose hand the Black family and the Black community are falling apart, or as the romanticised, strong, self-sufficient female responsible for the survival of the Black family and of Black people. (67)

These dichotomized views of Black women permeate the social science literature, and the popular media. Collins (1990) identified four controlling images of Black women: mammy, matriarch, welfare mother, and jezebel (the sexually aggressive woman). She argues that these images, designed as tools of domination, are used to make poverty, racism and sexism appear to be a natural part of everyday life. These images are transmitted through institutional sites such as: the media, schools and other external sites; and internal sites within African communities such as the family and the Church.

The “matriarch” image which has dominated the social science literature allows Black women to be blamed for the success or failure of Black children (Collins, 1990: 74) and for the perceived social castration of Black men (Moynihan, 1965 qtd. in Rainwater and Yancey, 1967). Collins argues that these views divert attention away from the systematic inequalities that Black women face socially, politically and economically. It also serves to create divisions between Black women and men, diverting attention from issues of racial and gender inequality. What is needed is a more balanced perspective which looks at the various roles performed by Black women in families and communities. Given the opportunity to tell their own stories, some Black men present a different view of the roles of their mothers and Black women as othermothers in helping them to negotiate the rocky terrain they must navigate on the journey to manhood. In this article, I explore the role of Black motherhood in the rearing of sons who are perceived as successful, from the voices of the sons themselves.

The research study

This participatory action research project involved two groups of Black men, in Halifax, Nova Scotia and Sheffield, England, called Research Working Groups (RWGs), in an exploratory study of the strategies they used to survive in societies where they were expected to fail. They also examined the definition and meaning of success, as defined by Black men themselves. Data gathering included individual interviews with forty men, twenty in each site; two focus groups in each site, involving another twenty men; and a conference in each site, which allowed for a wide range of Black men, as well as others interested in Black masculinity, to be involved in the research.

The RWGs did an initial thematic analysis of the data, which was further developed by the focus group participants, and the conference participants. The conferences and focus groups enabled many more men to be involved in this research, creating member checks and inquiry audits (Lather, 1991). The research process was fluid and dynamic. The participatory model was a successful tool for a woman to use in engaging men in an exploratory study of their lived reality. However, this success was also partly due to the way in which we developed a working relationship, where people from diverse backgrounds and social positions, and shared histories, were able to build partnerships as they engaged in this collective study.

One of the survival strategies that emerged in the research, was the significance of family and friends. Further analysis of this finding suggested that in naming family, many of the Black men were referring to the significant roles their mothers, grandmothers and othermothers played in their survival. Our analysis suggests that the role of Black mothers in particular and othermothers or community mothers, were key to the survival of many of the men who participated in this research.

What follows is a discussion about the ways in which Black women, as mothers, othermothers and community mothers, contributed to the survival and success of Black sons, as told by the sons. The men's stories are organized around the following themes: Black women and mothers are superwomen, and are essential to Black men's survival; grandmothers are the guardians of the generations; and the impact of mother absence is lessened by the presence of othermothers.

Black men's views of their mothers' influences: Black mothers as superwomen

The majority of our Sheffield participants described their mother's influence as very positive, nurturing and caring.

She played a major role in my survival, but she has also performed her duties as a Mom, in terms of protection: we are all very well balanced in terms of morality ... She is supportive in terms of work, goals and achievement.... (Sheffield)

"My mother was nurturing, and I value that a lot. She would worry about my safety, and always had a great caring thing ... She would look after my needs ... She was protective and fuss.... (Sheffield)

Most of what we [Black men] learn, we learn from Black women [mothers]. They make more contributions to our survival than the men.... (Sheffield)

The Halifax participants shared very similar descriptions about their mother's role and influence.

My mother was a very strong, caring and dedicated woman. She was always there for her children ... She was there to cook, clean, sew, and to heal you when you got sick. Her affection was always evident and outgoing. (Halifax)

"Black women have made quite a lot of contribution to my survival, beginning with my mother who gave me protection and always shielded me from harm. (Halifax)

*"Black women have given me life; they taught me how to be a strong person.
My mother ... [has] been the most influential in my survival. (Halifax)*

In both Halifax and Sheffield, the mothers are described as the epitome of strength, and the foundation of the family. These views are consistent with the ways in which Black women have been typically viewed in the literature. Confronting both racism and sexism, Black women know intimately the place of oppression. A tradition of resistance and a collective Black women's consciousness does exist, yet these are consistently overlooked, or misunderstood in the movements to eradicate sexism and racism (Collins, 1990; Scott, 1992). Black women have much to offer, however, the persistence of such dichotomised views about their role leaves us divided on many levels. Yet these men tell a somewhat different story. The Black men in this study stressed the significance of Black mothers and othermothers in their struggle to survive, and to become men that their mothers could be proud of. One participant put it succinctly:

I never got into trouble with the law, thanks to my mother ... I was always more afraid of disappointing her, than I was scared of the police. I had such respect for her that I would never do anything to bring her shame or distress.... (Halifax)

Another participant offers a similar perspective. He said:

"I would not have survived if it had not been for my strong and supportive family, especially my mother ... I could not have coped with all the racism in the world without them as my safety net. (Sheffield)

Whist the literature suggests that the matriarch role and the superwoman image helps with the social castration of Black men, these men credit their mothers strong, supportive and stern presence as one of the most significant contributions to their survival and success. For many, their mothers have been role models and mentors that have helped them prepare for survival in a hostile and unwelcoming environment, where they are constantly devalued. In addition, despite the superwoman image that is evident in these men's stories, there is also a recognition of the struggles and suffering that Black women endure. The following quotations are illustrative of their perceptions and serve as an acknowledgement of the difficulties that Black women deal with as they fight for the survival of their families and communities.

They [Black women] have taken on burdens above and beyond the call of duty.... Their strength has been passed on to their children.... They have worn our problems for too long, and now it is time for us to "give back" as Black men.... (Sheffield)

The preserverence of Black women is admirable ... I want to emulate this ... we need to gather strength from each other.... Black women can't carry the burdens on their own.... I would like to see a better, stronger Black family in the future.... As families we must realize that we are in this struggle together so we must work together.... (Halifax)

Brothers could take a lesson or two from a page of the Black woman's book of struggle and success ... we have a lot to learn from our sisters and it is time for us to shoulder more of those responsibilities.... (Halifax)

More than an acknowledgement of their strength and the additional burdens they have carried historically, these men called for their brothers to work more collectively with Black women, and to take on responsibilities for nurturing and mentoring Black sons and daughters. There is also an acknowledgement of the role of mothers across generations. We heard many accolades about the strengths of Black grandmothers, especially the maternal line. Similar to their views about their mothers, these men's stories reveal a reverence and respect for their grandmothers, and one gets a sense of their positive contributions to the survival of Black men.

Grandmothers: guardians of the generations:

There has been little research done on the experiences of Black grandparents. However, Taylor *et al.* (1990:998) reviewing a study done by Cherlin and Furstenberg, 1986, reveals that in comparison to whites, Black grandparents take a more active part in the parenting of grandchildren. The reasons for this vary, however, cultural traditions of extended family and elasticity of roles may explain this in part, as is evidenced in some of our data. The role of grandmothers, particularly maternal grandmothers, is quite similar to that of mothers, with many of them being seen as superwomen, and as guardians of the generations.

My grandmother gave me much insight and was a strong influence. She was always there, even when my parents were not. We had such respect for our grandparents, especially our grandmother ... I am sad that my kids don't have that in this country ... but we have found replacements ... older women in the community are like community grandmothers. They pass on the wisdom from the former generation.... (Sheffield)

However, for many of our respondents, especially in Sheffield, grandparents are generally not available and/or accessible, as they are more likely to be still living in the Caribbean. Fifty per cent of our Sheffield respondents had no contact with their grandmothers who were either still living in the Caribbean (50 percent of this group) or had died when they were young (25 percent), or before they were born. For the 50 percent who had contact, 75 percent of these had positive, nurturing contact with their maternal grandmothers, and none

with their paternal grandmothers. There appears to be more contact with the maternal lineage.

The other 25 percent of this sample had positive contact with both grandmothers. For those with contact, the relationships were usually described as caring, loving, supportive and nurturing, in fact, as indicated these are strikingly similar to the way in which their mothers are described.

She (maternal grandmother) was like my mother. I was very special to her and she to me. (Sheffield)

She (maternal grandmother) was always there for guidance and support. (Sheffield)

I was influenced very early by my grandmother. She was always a constant source of strength and love for me. She always stressed that I should be all that I could be, and I always knew and believed that she wanted the best for me. (Sheffield)

Halifax participants described their grandmothers' influence in similar ways: supportive, encouraging and caring, and a replacement Mom.

My (maternal) grandmother taught me about human emotions; that everyone can cry. I learned from her that crying was "okay" even when everyone else said it was bad . . . (Halifax)

My (maternal) grandmother kept me in line. She was there for me at lunch and after school because my mother worked. (Halifax)

My grandmother was a carer and she taught me to be a caring person. She also taught me how to respect and love myself so that I could learn how to love and respect others. She handed down all sorts of stories and family traditions that I still share with my children today. (Halifax)

Once again, we see incredibly high expectations of grandmothers, particularly maternal grandmothers. Frazier (1966 qtd. in Hutchinson, 1994) described grandmothers as the guardians of generations. McCray (1980 qtd. in Hill, 1977) argues that grandmothers are the most significant force in the socialisation of Black children. These findings support the theory that grandmothers, especially maternal grandmothers are very significant in the socialization of Black men, for their positive survival. The lineage from mother—to daughter—to children appears to be the one most strongly identified by our respondents. Despite this generally positive picture that emerged about grandmothers, there was also some concern expressed about the preservation of that role given the challenges faced by families who are displaced due to immigr-

tion and migration. One participant aptly states:

I am concerned about the future of Black families and Black men because parenting is changing . . . Today's parents are forgetting their cultures; they do not teach their children the things that we were taught, and they don't have contact with the grandparents who were able to fill the gaps.... What will happen to the next generation? (Sheffield)

Who will fill the role of grandmothers as guardians of the generations for the next generation? To what extent can community mothers and othermothers help in the process of bringing our boyz to men?

Mother absence: othermothers and community mothers

A major gap in the literature that explores Black motherhood is the lack of attention paid to the issue of mother absence. As noted previously, Black women are seen as the epitome of strength and few writers dare to examine mother absence in African communities. Collins (1990) begins a dialogue about the challenges faced by some Black women who do not want to be, or are not able to be mothers to their children. The topic emerged in this research as Black men talked about their mothers and those people who became replacement mothers when their birth mothers were not able to be there for them.

In most of the Halifax cases, the mothers, othermothers and community mothers were identified as being present, and as an integral part of the lives of these men. One Halifax participant was raised by foster parents, who described his foster-mother as being very significant. However, wanting to find his biological mother was an issue which he struggled with during adolescence. For another, the death of both parents led to bonding with othermothers who filled those roles.

After my parents died I had to have somebody that I could confide in and to console me; I had my Godmother and some aunts. I had a lot of people that were instrumental in my life.... (Halifax)

My adopted mother is a white woman, and I love her to death, but I went to Black women in the community to really find out who I was, to find my true identity. I will be forever grateful to the Black women who helped me to understand myself and Black women.... (Halifax)

In Sheffield, two participants indicated they were not raised by their mothers:

My mother was an absent parent; her always being away perhaps affected my relationship with women. (Sheffield)

*I still get angry sometimes when I think about my mother leaving
Things were never the same when I joined her in this country ... the
mother-son bond was broken ... and this angers me. (Sheffield)*

There appears to be an undertone of anger and resentment towards these absent mothers, which was not evident in respondents' responses regarding absent fathers.¹ This may reflect a position of internalised sexism and the expectation that mothers are 'supposed' to be there, and that all bloodmothers want to be mothers. However, as Collins (1990) and Bryan (1992) argue, motherhood may be burdensome and oppressive for some women.

The mothers in our sample were described as having a very important, significant influence on the survival of their sons. Even in the absence of blood mothers, the mother's influence was sought and found by these men, as noted in the examples cited above. For the most part, these women are revered and placed on a pedestal in the eyes of their sons. These stories help to fuel the stereotype of the Black superwoman, which fails to reflect the diversity in the lives of Black women. Higginbotham (1982) argues that although Black women are able to overcome very difficult situations, they are not superwomen who have no needs or emotions. An assessment of Black women's roles as mothers reflects such a diversity of experience. That diversity can be seen in the way in which these men described the significance of other women in their lives who performed the nurturing roles. This extended family network is common amongst African families throughout the Diaspora. Migration has broken those bonds for some Africans and African Caribbeans in Britain and Canada, however, the kin network remains a strong stabilizing influence in Black families. The separation of blood kin was also a focus of discussion at the Sheffield Conference on Black masculinity that we held as part of this research. In the workshop on Black Men and Displacement, participants discussed the impact of forced migration and immigration on Black families. The resulting absence of mothers and grandparents in the Sheffield sample is one example of this.

However, for many of our Sheffield and Halifax respondents, this void has been replaced by the development of other family support networks, and reinforces the significance and value of othermothers (Collins 1990), the extended family network (Stack, 1974; McAdoo, 1980; McCray, 1980; and Neverdon-Morton, 1989), and what Edwards (2000) calls community mothers. The men's stories proclaim the significance of othermothers and community mothers.

*My parent's friends became aunts and uncles because we had no other family
here.... (Sheffield)*

*My Aunt has sort of replaced my parents, who are now dead. She's like a
grandmother to our children, so the lineage continues... (Sheffield)*

Participants identified a host of extended family and friends, in the absence of family or in addition to, who have had a positive, supportive and encouraging impact on their survival. Aunts, uncles, cousins, neighbours and parent's friends were identified as significant people in the lives of these men.

All of my family have had a strong influence on me. We are a strong, close family. The extended family maintains contacts, although we are on several continents now. (Sheffield)

I have no other family in England. We had family friends who were considered family, special aunts, uncles and cousins. (Sheffield)

Because the communities are divided, the family, including extended family members, has the strongest stabilizing influence. The children especially have an impact on the lives of Black men. (Halifax)

... This continuation of family networking is vital to our future ... I believe that family unit, and community support tempers everything else. The family including the extended family, is the 'buffer zone'. It is a great source of social support for Black people. (Sheffield)

It appears that in addition to being a source of support, comfort and nurturance, the Black family is also seen to have an educative role, one which imparts social, political and cultural education, as well as values and morals. The data here also suggests that the women have been seen as the primary performers of these expectations. Are these role prescriptions that Black mothers, grandmothers, othermothers and community mothers want to take on? Is this consistent with how Black women see themselves in their families? How does this fit with the ways in which Black women are described in the literature?

Conclusion

Do Black women place too high expectations on Black men? Or, conversely, are their expectations too low? Do these positive perceptions of Black women's contributions to the survival and success of Black men, from the voices of sons, reflect an acceptance of the matriarchal role of women as care-takers, nurturers, and primary child rearers? The findings in this study suggest that these Black men perceive the role of Black women in a positive light. Black mothers are seen as superwomen who are crucial to the survival of their sons. Grandmothers share a similar role, but are more important as guardians of the generations, passing on traditions, values, history and legacies from one generation to the next. Finally, when mother is not there, emotionally or physically, then grandmothers, othermothers and community mothers fill the nurturing roles that have been ascribed to Black mothers.

However, an issue that needs further discussion is the potential for these perceptions to reinforce patriarchal sexist definitions of Black women's contributions to the survival of Black men. There is some attention paid to the multiple oppression of Black women, and the sacrifices that Black women have made, and continue to make, in their efforts to help the family and community survive but is this understood? How do we move forward from here? We need to continue the dialogue that gets Black men and women talking with each other about Black women's roles in bringing our *boyz to men*. We need to critically examine these roles, strengthening that which is working, and challenging those things that are problematic. Black men in this research project thank their mothers and Black women in general for the work they have done over the years to preserve and protect the Black family, including Black boys. They also invite their brothers to take on more of the responsibilities for helping to bring Black boys to manhood.

¹Further discussion of Black men's experiences with their fathers can be found in Bernard's *Black Men: Endangered Species or Success Story*, (forthcoming, Fernwood Publishers, Halifax).

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