Toward a new narrative on Black males, education, and public policy

Anthony L. Brown\textsuperscript{a}; Jamel K. Donnor\textsuperscript{b}

\textsuperscript{a} Department of Curriculum & Instruction, University of Texas-Austin, Austin, USA
\textsuperscript{b} Department of Curriculum & Instruction, The College of William and Mary, Williamsburg, USA

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This article examines the Black male crisis thesis promulgated by the social science literature, public policy, and mainstream discourse, respectively. The authors contend that the stock-story that the majority of African American males are ‘at-risk’ for engaging in self-destructive behavior or on the verge of extinction perpetuates a discourse of Black male pathology, which leads to over-emphasis of behavior modification as a strategy for their collective improvement. Subsequently, de-emphasis on the historical and structural role of race as a life opportunity-shaping variable occurs, which renders an incomplete understanding of the social and educational status of Black males in the United States. As a result, public policies and social programs guided by this deficit discourse are unlikely to create meaningful change for this population, because society’s existing political economic structures are left unchallenged. The article concludes with the assertion that a ‘new narrative’ is needed in order to rethink the complex and systematic ways the social and educational status of Black males in the United States are constructed.

Keywords: Black males; public policy; Black male crisis

‘A key question about stories, as with other situation-defining symbolic forms like metaphors, theories, and ideologies, is whether they introduce new and constructive insights into social life.’

W. Lance Bennett and Murray Edelman (1985)

Introduction

The quote above by Bennett and Edelman suggests that stories are not only useful for conveying particular viewpoints, they are particularly powerful in explaining the human condition. Indeed, the manner in which a social problem is framed not only determines the scope of its stakeholders, but more importantly, its solutions (Doherty 1998). One of the most dominant and persistent social narratives in the United States is that young African American males are in a perpetual state of crisis. From the mainstream media’s frequent portrayals of Black youth as criminals to the education literature’s regular reporting on the academic shortcomings of the nation’s young Black men, such stories have increased the public’s awareness of the disparities and inequalities this social group disproportionately endures. The reoccurring accounts on the marginal status of young African American males has led to a proliferation of targeted...
responses in the form of public forums, academic symposiums, philanthropic reports, and trade publications portending to address the crisis.

While the Black male crisis narrative has generated a significant amount of mainstream and scholarly attention, it has not necessarily led to systematic improvement for the group (Trammel et al. 2008). A reason for the lack of measurable progress, we argue, is that the young Black male crisis narrative overlooks the significance of the historical and structural interrelationship between race and social inequity. Thus, programs, policies, forums, and trade publications asserting to address the young Black male crisis are unlikely to produce meaningful outcomes because they lack a structural critique and historical analysis of racial inequity. As a result of this omission, targeted responses to the young Black male crisis narrative inadvertently recapitulate a larger societal discourse of African American males as a population needing to be saved from themselves.

The purpose of this article is to explain how articulations and responses to the Black male crisis circuitously perpetuate a racialized understanding of this population. The goal of this article is twofold. The first is to disrupt the Black male crisis narrative by identifying its analytical and conceptual shortcomings. The second goal of this article is to expand the policy discourse concerning young African American males by discussing how race is engendered informally through language, ideology, habit, and practice.

The first section of this article discusses the historical context of social policies targeting African American males. The second section explains the framework for analyzing social policy and public discourse regarding African American males. The third section discusses the proliferation in advocacy trade books on African American males. We conclude by calling for a rethinking of the Black male crisis narrative.

**Historical context of the social policy about the African American male**

The policy discourse from the mid-1960s through the 1990s, concerning the social and educational conditions of Black males provides the historical backdrop for contemporary policy discussions about African American males. It is important to note that the attention given to this history also encapsulates the nuances and contours of African American male policy discourse in relation to the most recent proliferation of concern about the African American male. Each period points to larger sociopolitical contingencies (e.g. poverty, unemployment, single mother home etc.) that informed the social milieu of both young and adult African American male life. We contend that there are three distinct periods of policy discourse about African American males from the 1960s to the present.

The first period emerged in the mid-1960s amid growing concerns of urban poverty and the development of social policy in the era of the pre-Great Society policies and the civil rights acts. The second period resurfaced in the mid-1980s, a period of rapid de-industrialization and alarming rates of urban unemployment. The third and most recent instantiation surfaced in the last ten years in an era when African American men can be found working and succeeding within every sector of society, including the presidency of the United States which occurred simultaneously with the growing number of African American men suffering from unprecedented numbers of unemployment, health-related deaths, incarceration, violent death and educational underachievement.
By the mid-1960s, there had been three decades of secondary attention given to the social conditions of African American males (Fultz and Brown 2008). The policy discourse about African American males was often secondary to larger concerns about the African American family. From the 1930s to the 1960s, researchers constructed the African American man as an unknown and unidentified subject within empirical research studies and policy discussions. Eliot Liebow’s (1967, 6) words illustrate this sentiment:

Neglect of the lower-class male is a direct reflection of his characteristic ‘absence’ from the household, leaving behind him the ‘female-based’ or ‘female-centered’ households, so that one comes away with a picture of the low-income urban world as one peopled mainly with women and children. The adult male, if not simply characterized as ‘absent,’ is depicted as a somewhat shadowy figure who drifts in out of the lives of family members.

Contrary to Liebow’s assertion, this was not the case by the mid-1960s. While much of the policy discourse about African Americans focused on the African American family as the face of urban poverty, researchers and policy makers began to pay closer attention to the social and psychological contexts of both young and adult African American males. The growing attention given to the Black male was most visible via the controversial and widely read federal policy document ‘The Negro Family: The Case for National Action,’ also known as the ‘Moynihan Report.’ Published in 1965 by then Assistant Secretary of Labor Daniel Patrick Moynihan, the objective of the report was to make public the social context of American poverty and promote social policies that advocated for families in poverty – what was also referred to the ‘Moynihan strategy.’ Moynihan attempted to paint a sociological portrait of Black life. To do this he had drawn from theories and research about African Americans that had been in existence since the late 1930s. He was particularly influenced by the work of E. Franklin Frazier and Kenneth Clark.

The ‘absent father’ and its effects on Black boys was now the central focus of the discussion about the African American family. Moynihan posited that because young Black males did not have access to masculine norms, this affected Black boys’ ability to develop normally and find motivation to achieve. Thus, he recommended that Black male youth gain compensatory masculine norms via programs outside of the home, most notably the military (Moynihan 1965/1967). Moynihan in particular felt that the military would be an ideal space to instill compensatory masculinity. Moynihan (1965/1967, 88) states:

There is another special quality about military service for Negro men: it is an utterly masculine world. Given the strains of the disorganized and matrifocal family life in which so many Negro youth come of age, the Armed Forces are a dramatic and desperately needed change: a world away from women, a world run by strong men of unquestioned authority, where discipline, if harsh, is nonetheless orderly and predictable, and where rewards, if limited, are granted on the basis of performance.

While different methodologies and approaches to make sense of the cultural context of African American males emerged from the 1960s through the 1970s, the policy narrative of the impoverished Black family and the emasculated Black male remained the fundamental belief among scholars concerned with promoting policies to address African American poverty.
Then from the 1980s through the 1990s, a full-blown national debate emerged that focused on the context of the African American male in a de-industrialized economy. The metaphor used to describe the social, psychological and educational conditions of African American males was to refer to them as an ‘endangered species’ and on the precipice of peril due to illness, incarceration, and violent death. Jewell Taylor Gibbs here (1987, 1–2) defines the endangered Black male:

…an endangered species is, according to Webster, ‘a class of individuals having common attributes and designated by a common name… [which is] in danger or peril of probable harm or loss.’ This description applies, in a metaphorical sense, to the current status of young black males in contemporary American society. They have been miseducated by the educational system, mishandled by the criminal justice system, mislabeled by the mental health system, and mistreated by the social welfare system.

William Legette (1999, 291) also referred to this period of policy discourse as the crisis of the black male thesis, which he defines as a ‘consensus that social and economic problems in the black community [were] the result of black men not being able to perform the roles expected of men in a patriarchal society.’ Within this policy era, the African American boy was now also an explicit subject of inquiry. Much of this discussion was also made visible within widely-circulated public discourse because of the work of educational advocate Jawanza Kunjufu, specifically his four-volume, self-published Countering the Conspiracy to Destroy Black Boys. Another significant feature of this period of research was the focus on African American men to serve as role models and mentors to historically underserved African American male students. This recommendation is striking because from the 1930s to 1970s the policy discourse about African American boys generally blamed Black men for either being absent or peripheral fathers or serving as negative male role models.

By the late 1990s, however, much of the discussion about African American males had slowed down. Then for approximately the last eight years, society has witnessed the most significant attention given to African American males. This surge in attention grew exponentially with the nomination and election of Barack Obama, the first African American male president of the United States. The questions that many ask are whether the election of Barack Obama settled the race question for African Americans en masse and whether his presence in the White House will have an impact on how African American males make sense of their own life chances and identities.

During this period, politicians, comedians, educators, actors, social scientists, journalists and newscasters have all joined the discussion about the social and educational conditions of the African American male. What is unique about this era of discourse is the implicit belief that African American male social problems were no longer informed by race and racism, given that African American men are now represented in almost every facet of society including CEOs of Fortune 500 companies and now the presidency of the United States. The next section of this paper explores this era’s construction of African American male social problems via policy reports and popular trade books.

The framing of the young Black male problem
Two presuppositions guide our analysis of policy discourse and popular responses to the young Black male crisis narrative. The first is that both mechanisms portray young Black males as culturally and psychologically damaged (Scott 1997). The notion of
psychological damage has taken on different instantiations since the 1960s, which in some instances refers to Black males as powerless individuals who fall victim to self-fulfilling prophesies of defeat and failure to more recent analyses concerned with how racial stereotyping produces an internalized negative self-concept, or what Claude Steele (1997) refers to as stereotype threat. The second is that policy discourse and popular responses to the young Black male crisis narrative are rooted in contested notions of respectability (Higginbotham 1993), which emphasize individual behavior and attitudinal modification as the primary strategy for collective improvement. The confluence of both constructs, we argue, perpetuates a dual understanding of Black males. The first is through its behavioral assumption that presumes young African American males rely on a set of ‘decision heuristics’ or non-traditional decision-making schematas, such as ‘cool pose,’ which produces attitudes and behaviors that are antithetical to individual success in a democratic society (Schneider and Ingram 1990, 517). The second way is by minimizing race as a life opportunity-shaping variable (Gordon 1997). Stated differently, contemporary policy discourse and public responses to the young African American male crisis narrative conveys a meta-narrative, postulating that the existing structural organization of American society is fair, equal, and blind to race. We define meta-narratives as totalizing or mythical stories that provide the foundational context and knowledge about people and racial groups (Pride 2002; Somers and Gibson 1994)

**Black males as damaged**

The notion that young Black males are culturally and psychologically damaged is one of the oldest and most common approaches used to craft social policy and elicit public action (Scott 1997). This deficit view of African American males is buttressed by America’s noxious legacy of chattel slavery, Reconstruction, and Jim Crow segregation. As a result of the foregoing racial formation projects, contemporary conceptions of young African American males as acutely susceptible to engaging in self-destructive behavior is used to argue on behalf of public policies and social programs that purport to improve their collective status (Omi and Winant 1997). Indeed, the idea that people of African descent are psycho-culturally deficient is not a recent phenomenon. Utilized by racial conservatives and racial liberals, the notion that African Americans are damaged has been employed to justify *de jure* racial discrimination and racial integration, respectively (Scott 1997). According to Scott (1997, xii):

> Between 1880 and 1920, the period in which conservatives instituted *de jure* segregation and disenfranchisement, the experts who dominated the image of black people depicted African Americans as incapable and undeserving of participation in a modern society...As the South codified segregation, the experts believed that the separation of the races, far from damaging blacks, was healthful. During the interwar years, liberals replaced conservatives as the hegemonic group of experts on African American life, history, and personality. Many liberals shared the view that blacks were psychologically damaged, including the assumption that in race relations proximity rather than distance was more damaging to blacks.

In essence, African Americans have been socially constructed through politics, culture, and the social sciences as a target population in which society’s well-being is directly affected – good and bad (Schneider and Ingram 1993). With respect to young African American males, however, what is unique about the crisis narrative is its lack
of rigorous analysis and overemphasis on modifying behaviors, attitudes, and culture – all non-structural factors.

As a target population for public policy, young African American males have been constructed through the social scientific literature of the mid-twentieth century as endangered and disconnected from mainstream society. Subsequently, philanthropic reports, policy initiatives, and trade publications have tried to link the group’s social status to the public interest by articulating a dire situation. For example, in *Stepping Up and Stepping Out*, a report for the Association for Black Foundation Executives, public awareness on the collective status of the young Black male crisis is sought by highlighting the practices of funders that have ‘stepped up to the significant task of seeking to improve the life chances and opportunities of black males; and in doing so have stepped out on the proverbial limb’ (Littles, Bowers, and Gilmar 2008, 9). The invoking of the metaphors ‘stepping up’ and ‘stepping out’ is intended to evoke cognitive structures that not only articulate the social status of young Black males in America, but also point out the burden or significance of the actions taken to address the crisis. For instance, A Legacy of Tradition (ALOT), The Chicago Community Trust (CCT), and The Schott Foundation for Public Education organizations are respectively profiled in the report as private agencies involved with attending to the supply-side of the young Black male crisis through fundraising and grant-making.

In providing financial inducements and capacity-building instruments, such as grants, these funding organizations assume that the conditional transfer of money to community agencies will elicit action or lead to the development of a knowledge-base or set of competencies that will improve the collective status of young Black males (Elmore 1987; McDonnell and Elmore 1987). Clearly, there are benefits of both policy instruments. For example, ALOT’s ‘giving circles’ seek to expand members’ understanding of issues facing Black males, as well as recruit older professional African American men who otherwise would not participate in philanthropy (Littles, Bowers, and Gilmar 2008). Similarly, CCT provides grants to agencies in the Chicago metropolitan area with a strong record and interest in Black males, such as the Center for the Study of Race, Politics, and Culture at the University of Chicago and the Intergovernmental Committee at the University of Illinois. Likewise, the Schott Foundation for Publication Education awards grants to public schools that ‘successfully’ closed the achievement gaps in graduation rates for African American male students.

Unfortunately, the benefits of supply-side strategies, such as inducements and grants, are diffuse and limited to recipient agencies, rather than the target population (Elmore 1987; McDonnell and Elmore 1987). For example, while capacity-building tools are useful for encouraging the adoption of non-traditional programs, they also encourage short-term responses to structural problems (Schneider and Ingram 1990; Legette 1999). A notable example of a short-term response to the young Black male crisis narrative is all-male schools. Particularly popular in urban communities, single-sex schools are viewed as viable mechanisms for addressing the low graduation rates of young Black males, because they portend to provide needed discipline and limit distractions (Brown 2003). However, the success of such authoritarian mechanisms are mixed given that curricula and teacher instruction at these schools are prescribed by the No Child Left Behind Act of 2007 (NCLB), which emphasizes high-stakes testing over higher order cognitive skills, such as reasoning and interpretation (Donnor and Shockley 2010). Moreover, because African American males are more likely to attend schools guided by NCLB, they are less prepared for college and more prepared to participate in the military (Brown 2003; Lipman 2004; Donnor and Shockley 2010).
On the surface, all-male schools may appear as a viable response to the crisis narrative, below the surface, however, students may be further marginalized, unwittingly. Lastly, grants and similar incentive instruments presume that awardees are ‘utility maximizers’ that possess the capacity to recognize opportunities and ‘choose higher valued alternatives’ (Schneider and Ingram 1990, 515). Instead, students who are viewed as damaged or in crisis are further stigmatized, because requirements for participation in programs involve affirming the target population’s pathological deservingness (Scott 1997).

**Advocacy trade books and the African American male**

Since the mid-1980s when concerns about African Americans males surfaced as a national crisis, there have been countless numbers of books published to address their conditions. While many of these books are edited or single-authored full-length books published within the academic literature, a more significant number of trade books have been published with the intention of reaching the wider public. These books address different topics such as education, the criminal justice system, gangs, relationships, fatherhood, masculinity, mentorship, HIV and AIDS, suicide, and drug abuse and rehabilitation. Oftentimes the audience of these books is wide in terms of readership, but the focus is generally intended to speak directly to African American men and youth. In recent years, a number of trade books published within major publishing presses and readily available within major book distributors such as Amazon, Barnes and Noble, and Borders have surfaced. The importance of trade books is significant given the wide readership of these texts. Our analysis will give attention to five books published in recent years: *Letters to a Young Brother: MANifest your Destiny* (Hill Harper 2006); *Being a Black Man: At the Corner of Progress and Peril* (staff of the *Washington Post* 2007); *The Black Male Handbook: A Blueprint for Life* (Kevin Powell 2008); *What Black Men Should Do Now: 100 Simple Truths, Ideas, and Concepts* (K. Thomas Oglesby 2002); *Come on People: On the Path from Victims to Victors* (Bill Cosby and Alvin Poussaint 2007).

In our analysis of trade books, we found three overarching meta-narratives about African American males. The first is that African American males instigate their own problems by embodying an autonomous Black male subculture of apathy and disrespect, which we call the ‘politics of disrespectability and apathy.’ We define the ‘politics of disrespectability and apathy’ as the belief that African American males possess a defined racial ontology or way of being that is antithetical to mainstream norms of society as well as apathetic to the histories of political struggles that advocated for their civil and human rights. In addition, Black males intentionally portrait the ‘politics of disrespectability and apathy’ even when issues of poverty or racism are no longer perceived as a defining factor. The second meta-narrative present in trade books about African American males is the implicit construction of the African American male as irresponsible, destructive, oversexed, agnostic, unhealthy and adverse to schooling and work. Said differently, we posit that the self-help discourses found within trade publications, while seeking to provide a blueprint for African American males to change their lives, implicitly reify negative and essentialized constructions of an autonomous African American male subculture. The third and final meta-narrative that often surfaces within these trade books is the ideological belief that race and racism are no longer factors in African American male problems.
Looking closely at trade books

All of the books we reviewed either implicitly or explicitly worked from the premise that African American males fashion their own problems by embodying a ‘politics of disrespectability and apathy.’ In each of the texts reviewed, the authors provide a clear description of the deleterious statistics of African American males, followed by a discussion of a Black male culture trapped by materialism, affected by father absence and handcuffed by an existing script of manhood. While four of the five texts analyzed employed the narrative of the Black male crisis as a way to provide a more holistic and complete picture of African American males, Cosby and Poussaint’s book Come on People – particularly their opening chapter, ‘What’s going on Black men?’ – takes a slightly different approach, suggesting that entrenched African American problems are anchored by an aberrant Black male culture of coolness and detachment. Here Cosby and Poussaint (2007, 11) make this point about Black male coolness:

To be cool is to be emotionally detached, at least on the surface. For some, showing emotions is uncool, unmanly. Expressing the kind of emotions that any good father should express – like warmth, love, caring, and grief – is almost impossible for someone who has spent his whole life stuck on being cool. Many who feel abandoned by a parent protect themselves from being hurt by putting on a cool detachment. Better to put on those bad shades and shut off the world.

What underpins the discussions on coolness or the cool pose is the belief that African American males suffer from a damaged psyche (Scott 1997, 15) that prohibits them to take responsibility for their mental and physical health, economics, spirituality, and relationships. For example, one of the authors in the text The Black Male Handbook argues that Black males suffer from feelings of ‘[a]lienation, marginalization, and isolation [causing] them to adopt a “me against the world” mentality.’ In another instance, the text What Black Men Should Do Now: 100 Simple Truths, Ideas and Concepts, 17 of the 100 ‘simple truths’ focus on the socio-psychological conditioning of Black males’ inability to love, to commit, to work hard, to express affection and to have an overall positive self-concept.

What is striking about these texts is how they inadvertently help reify long-standing constructions about the African American male. The idea of African American males’ lack and deficiency is foundational to many of the texts. Within the self-help genre of trade books, the author will first outline the Black male problem or manhood problem and then offer a myriad of corrective practices, philosophies, meditations, beliefs and anecdotes that Black males must do to change their lives. Texts such as Letters to a Young Brother, What Black Men Should Do Now, Come on People and The Black Male Handbook each provide explicit advice to African American males and their families.

While these anecdotes and self-help philosophies may seem innocuous or even helpful, such narratives are problematic for two reasons. First, they help to reify a standard prop taken from policy discourse that suggests that Black males are an autonomous pathological subculture. Second, by only focusing on self-help ideologies much of the historical legacy of race and racism in this country goes unexamined, leaving only a Black male subject for us to examine his flaws, insecurities and subcultures.

This leads us to our final concern with trade texts. In these texts few discussions account for the structural and institutional implications of race and racism to Black males’ lives. For example, the editor of The Black Male Handbook states: ‘Yes, racism
is alive and well in America, and we will forever challenge and critique it, no question. But if black males are going to be empowered, that empowerment has to be proactive – and holistic’ (xxii). In many cases race and racism is mentioned in passing or, as in the case Cosby and Poussaint’s *Come on People*, racism is acknowledged but the authors can only provide a limited explanation of why Black men are not doing well in society. Here Cosby and Poussaint (2007, 8) state:

Black Americans fought to open doors of opportunity – and now black immigrants are walking through those doors while too many of us [Black males] are hanging out on street corners. There certainly is institutional racism – particularly ask black men – but racism doesn’t explain everything.

This was an explicit and implicit sentiment for each of the trade text reviewed. Racism is either slightly recognized or it is seen as only a partial explanation to the social and educational conditions of Black males. Again, in looking across these texts, the ‘politics of disrespectability and apathy’ emerged, suggesting that African American males writ large – regardless of class, region, sexuality – are a group of men who are deeply troubled by personal, psychological, social, spiritual and educational inadequacies that transcend the structural and institutional factors that help to reproduce the conditions of Black males’ lives.

**Making respectable Black men**

When crafting less formal responses to the young Black male crisis narrative, many organizations, popular media outlets, and trade publications focus on addressing behaviors and characteristics deemed counterproductive to the group’s advancement. In this instance, enhancing the public image of young African American males becomes the site for collective improvement (Cohen 1997). Because young African American males are publicly defined as a population in a perpetual state of crisis, organizations and individuals responding to the narrative proffer programs and advice for altering behaviors and attitudes considered deleterious. For example, African-centered Rites of Passage programs seek to provide participants with the foundational understanding of African and African American history and culture, as well as life skills and character development necessary to help young Black males better assimilate into society (Alford, McKenry, and Gavazzi 2001). According to Alford and others (2001, 141), African American Rites of Passage programs (AA-RITES) serve to ‘increase the self-esteem and ethnic pride of adolescent Black males, helping them to be better fit, both mentally and socially, to receive the academic regimen placed before them.’ Here, the engendering of culturally specific attributes is framed as a pathway for reshaping the collective fortunes of young African American males. Furthermore, individual reform is tacitly advanced as leading to racial and social equality for African Americans as a whole (Legette 1999).

For historically oppressed groups, such as African Americans, adherence to behaviors and traits generally accepted as respectable is intended to counter racist images and establish ‘common ground on which to live as Americans with Americans of other racial and ethnic backgrounds’ (Higginbotham 1993, 188). According to Higginbotham:

…[r]espectability demand[s] that every individual in the black community assume responsibility for behavioral self-regulation and self-improvement along moral, educational, and economic lines. The goal [is] to distance oneself as far as possible from
images perpetuated by racist stereotypes. Individual behavior...[will] determine the collective fate of African Americans. It [is] particularly public behavior that [is] perceived to wield the power either to refute or confirm stereotypical representations and discriminatory practices. (196)

In the search to define what it means to be a young male of African descent in the United States, responses to the young Black male crisis narrative do not avail themselves to systematic critiques of the political economic structures responsible for racial and social inequities, because social change is sought by reforming the individual not society. Hence, responses to the young African American male crisis narrative are often hortatory and symbolic (Schneider and Ingram 1990). As a traditionally underserved population, responses and recommendations for the young Black male crisis are authoritarian in focus because they advance ‘certain goals without the need for coercive or incentive-driven government intervention’ (Schneider and Ingram 1990, 519). Paradoxically, there is an inadvertent recapitulation of the group’s marginalization because members of the target population are not recognized as possessing the autonomy or capacity to contribute to their betterment. This ‘population reasoning’ (Popkewitz 1998, 26) normalizes society’s understanding of young Black males as being in a constant state of crisis, because they are defined and redefined in a manner that separates them from their ‘immediate historical situation’ (Popkewitz 1998).

Discussion and implications
In working toward a new narrative, it is important to point out that no single story or counter-story can accomplish this task. Rather, a new narrative requires an examination of historically contingent narratives informed by the social and epistemic forces of place and time. Otherwise, future policy discourse concerning African American males will fall into the conceptual trap of moving from one grand narrative to another (Brown in press). Thus, we argue that a melding of methodological approaches and analytical tools is required to fully articulate why the life opportunities, experiences, and outcomes of African American males are disparate from other social groups.

History and the structure of inequality in education
Given that social inequality, racism, and racial discrimination in the twenty-first century occurs through a ‘subtler series of screens,’ rather than overt and de jure methods deployed during the nineteenth and twentieth century, we argue that understanding and improving the collective educational opportunities and social experiences of African American males requires a historical perspective and a sociopolitical understanding of public education, including its connections to shifts in the US economy (Holt 1995; Omi and Winant 1997; Katz, Stern, and Fader 2005, 76–7; O’Connor, Lewis, and Mueller 2007).

Because many of the concerns and problems facing African American males in education and society are not new, we contend that contemporary responses to the Black male crisis narrative must reference history to avoid inaccurate descriptions and incomplete solutions. Used as a method for comparison, history links the past to the present by allowing for a comprehensive understanding of trends and patterns, including, how and why conditions have changed or remained constant over time (Katz 1993). For instance, in analyzing the ‘historical continuities and discontinuities’ of racial inequality
in the American public education system, Walters (2001) discovered that the ‘distributional processes’ in education, specifically, school funding arrangements (e.g. property taxes), are the most durable over time (36). According to Walters (2001):

…the system of distributing education that is in place at any given time is the product of the past: The institutional mechanisms available to the state to implement change, available to threatened groups to resist change, and available to disadvantaged groups to foment change are constrained in critical respects by policy decisions made in earlier periods. State policies instituted in one era, even for egalitarian purposes, may work at cross-purposes to equalizing attempts in later periods (36).

In essence, history requires one to think holistically and continuously about inequality in education. Moreover, given that students, especially African American males, schools, and opportunities are enmeshed within a particular set of discourses, processes, and hierarchies regarding purpose and functionality, existing structural arrangements, collective outcomes and disparities must be viewed as products of a cumulative interrelationship between competing ideologies, institutions, and human behavior (Apple 1995; Mickelson 2003). Indeed, a ‘paradox of inequality’ is the ‘coexistence of structural rigidity with individual and group fluidity’ (Katz, Stern, and Fader 2005, 77). According to Katz and others, the continuance of structural inequality in conjunction with individual and group mobility ‘highlights the limitations of policies that focus only on access to education without addressing the factors that structure and reproduce inequality’ (107). In short, inequality in education is contextual according to place and time.

Consider for example, that since the Kennedy administration, the tax rate for the richest 1% of Americans has declined from 85.5% in 1963 to 22.45% in 2007 (Anyon 2005, 52; Henchman 2009). During the same period, federal, state and local taxes paid by corporations have declined from 40% in 1940 to 9.2% in 2000. More recently, the Government Accountability Office (2008) reported that two out of every three United States corporations did not pay federal income taxes from 1998 through 2005 (Browning 2008).3 Conversely, the payroll taxes for middle and low-income families have increased dramatically during the same time period (Anyon 2005).4 For instance, the tax rate for middle-class families rose from 5.3% in 1948 to 24.63% in 1990, while payroll taxes paid by middle-class families rose from 6.9% in 1950 to 31.1% in 2000 (Anyon 2005, 53). What this means is, the burden for funding public goods and services, such as schools, is disproportionately paid for by the middle- and lower-class. Thus, the current American tax structure places a premium on residential locations with quality goods and services, including schools, thus causing for an aversion to share or equally reallocate resources. Subsequently, racial inequity becomes geographically locked-in according to where one lives. Much of the literature on school quality and neighborhood capacity indicates that race and class are proxies for which schools fail (Briggs 2005a, 2005b; Powell 1997). Hence, additional analytical queries informed by geography and performance are needed (see Tate and Hogrebe, this issue).

As a matter of equity, we recommend a ‘split-rate taxation’ method to remedy structural deficiencies (Brunori 2003, 13). This method of taxation places a premium on the value of the land, rather than the improvements made on the property, which is difficult to tax (Brunori 2003). Moreover, it allows local governments to generate the revenue necessary to provide basic services and not make decisions based on the free market or redistributing wealth, because the tax base is stable (14). More importantly,
it would allow local governments to spend as much as they want on education and to monitor the school system, rather than being dependent on inter-governmental allocations, which often comes with mandates that determine the curriculum and teacher pedagogy. Most important, the public benefit to reforming the current tax structure would provide municipalities with the funds necessary to invest in the public education of African American males. According to Levin and others (2007), ‘simply [equalizing] the high school graduation rate of Black males with that of white males would yield approximately $256,700 per graduate or $167,600 in additional tax revenue, save $33,500 in public health costs, and save a minimum of $55,500 in costs associated with the criminal justice system. They estimate that the aggregate net public benefit would range from $3.27 billion to $4.74 billion, with a median figure of $3.98 billion. Further, such an approach would not only increase Black male employability, but also reduce their participation in illegal activities and reliance on state and federal government social services (Sum et al. 2007).

The global political economy of American education

Schools are a microcosm of society. Thus, the social, political, and economic implications for education and traditionally marginalized groups, such as Black males, are inextricably linked to the exogenous and macro-level forces that shape American society (Burbules and Torres 2000; Green 2001; Lipman 2004; Waks 2006). In this particular instance, both African American male social and educational inequality, and advancement must be situated in the context of globalization. By globalization, we are referring to the restructuring of the US economy, along with members of the Group of 8 (e.g. United States, France, Germany, Italy, Canada, United Kingdom, Japan, and Russia), in which the exchange and movement of capital, ideas, labor, culture, and commerce for the world are reliant upon information technology, and premised on free market principles (Green 2001; Lipman 2004). At the core of globalization, is the processing information and generation of knowledge efficiently at high speeds to create goods and services for consumption worldwide (Lipman 2004; Nembhard 2005).

Concomitantly, the nature of work and the skills necessary for sustainable productive employment opportunities have been fundamentally altered (Burbules and Torres 2000; Green 2001; Lipman 2004; Nembhard 2005; Waks 2006). In the global economy, international economic competitiveness is contingent upon the productivity of well-trained people and the steady stream of scientific and technical innovations they produce. Globalization has not only altered the types of products required for international competitiveness, more importantly, the requisite skills needed to ensure workforce participation have been altered (Waks 2003). Hence, the purpose of education in the global economy has changed (Hargreaves 2003). In moving toward a new narrative, questions about why African American males are underachieving in schools must be buttressed against various global forces that define and inform social and economic opportunity in America. In other words, researchers, policy makers, and educators must not only explore questions that account for how Black males are experientially positioned within education, but also, how the broader American political economy defines and constrains the educational experiences of Black males (Donnor and Shockley 2010).

Hence, future studies on Black males and education must build on the works of scholars, such as Howard (2008), Ferguson (2002), and Noguera (2008) who illustrate how the educational experiences of African American males are constrained by teachers’ and school officials’ conceptions of race and achievement, which result in
higher school expulsion and suspension rates, and a disproportionate placement in special education. There are two conceptual lessons learned from this body of research. The first is that when Black males are given an opportunity to speak candidly about their educational experiences, a much more nuanced narrative surfaces, which accounts for the structural and discursive constructs that constrain their lives. The second is that by focusing on structural constraints of race, class and gender, researchers and educational advocates can better grasp the multitude of institutional and stereotypical discourses that reproduce the educational experiences of Black males and enable policy discourse to move beyond what Brown (in press) refers to as the *same old stories*. Finally, we argue that policy analysts and researchers must reveal the racialized nature of education policy and its implications to the public construction of Black males’ lives. In addition, educational policy analysis must reveal the racialized nature of educational policy and its implications to Black males. This kind of work has been poignantly expressed through the work of David Gillborn (2005, 2009) in the UK.

**Concluding thoughts**

The question underpinning much of the policy and public discourse about African American males is whether Black males are responsible for their own actions or whether there are real structural constraints that affect their life chances and outcomes. Our analysis of policy reports and trade books, uncovered that African American male behaviors, dispositions and culture receive greater attention than the institutional and structural contingencies that shape their life chances. While such attention might be rooted in altruistic efforts to solve Black male inequality, we argue, that this focus is more of a reflection of the power of the Black male crisis narrative in America. While there were varying degrees of attention in the policy reports and trade books examined in this article, across each of the texts we found that race as a structural variable was ignored or mentioned cursorily.

As we have discussed throughout this article, part of the problem is inherent in the process of promoting and stimulating social and educational policy. As several policy scholars (O’Connor 2001; Schneider and Ingram 1993; Scott 1997) have explained, a key element in the process of promoting social and educational policies is the manner in which the narrative about a social problem is dramatized. Meaning, in order to evoke public attention and legislative action the narrative must be compelling. As such, narratives used to frame policy discourse regarding traditionally underserved populations are often over-determined socially and psychologically in order to render them and their respective issues visible. According to O’Connor (2001), this approach toward policy discourse framing of social inequality is *poverty knowledge*, which ‘reflects a central tension within liberal thought about the nature of inequality…whether it is best understood and addressed at the level of individual experience or as a matter of structural and institutional reform’ (9).

In the context of education, Brown (2009) theorizes that the logic behind identifying particular individuals, student groups and populations as more likely than others to experience undesired outcomes is framed within a discourse of risk. According to Brown (2009) the different sociological, psychological and anecdotal logics employed to make sense of and redress the educational experiences of historically underserved students, most notably African Americans, while often well-intentioned re-inscribe and over-determine the broader societal categories that position groups as deviant. While there have been some shifts in the discourse about African American males in recent years,
in many respects it is the same old stories (Brown in press) of deficits, deviance, and cultural pathology. In essence, Black males create their own problems and that programmatic change can only come via the human capital of Black male role models, while institutional and structural mechanisms shaped by race are left unscathed (Brown 2009).

In thinking about new ways to redress the social and educational conditions of African American males, one must be mindful that Black males’ experiences are not isolated instantiations of social and educational inequalities tucked away in dark American ghettos, but rather the metaphorical and symbolic canaries in the mineshaft alerting us that something larger is fundamentally wrong with the body politic (Guinier and Torres 2002). More importantly, the racial injustice experienced by Black males is symptomatic of the unequal and unjust arrangements of power and privilege in America.

Notes
1. This paper was fully co-authored and the authors listed are ordered alphabetically.
2. The authors use ‘Black’ and ‘African American’ interchangeably throughout the manuscript.
3. The study covered 1.3 million corporations of all sizes, most of them small, with a collective $2.5 trillion in sales. It includes foreign corporations that do business in the United States (New York Times http://www.nytimes.com/2008/08/13/business/13tax.html).
4. The tax share at the federal level has declined from 40% in 1940 to 9.2% in 2000. The tax rate for middle-class families rose from 5.3% in 1948 to 24.63% in 1990. Payroll taxes paid by middle class families rose from 6.9% in 1950 to 31.1% in 2000 (Anyon 2005, p. 53).

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