Masking Mentoring: Critical (Race) Care (for, from) Black Males in Special Education

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Abstract
This chapter addresses institutional racism as an impediment to the success of Black males in special education, whether they are students or faculty. Extrapolating from their personal narratives and relevant literature, the authors provide a counter-narrative about the mentoring and care of Black males and by Black males that entails the practice of masking. The lenses of critical race theory (CRT) and care theory support the development of an ethical and moral leadership framework they refer to as critical (race) care, which includes attention to the ethic of care, risk and political clarity.

Keywords: mentoring, critical (race) care, ethic of risk, critical race theory
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Introduction

Throughout the annals of United States history, Black males have been portrayed as a violent, irrational, and dysfunctional subgroup deserving of societal animus (Hutchison, 1996). Hutchison (1996) offers a well-argued critique that, along with other harmful sociocultural narratives and practices, positions the media as a major arbiter responsible for the widespread misrepresentations of Black males. Though today it is not uncommon to hear public declarations that the election of our nation’s first Black male president, Barack Obama, has helped mollify such harmful societal disbeliefs and tensions, still, there remains hardly a day that elapses when the Black male image is not assailed in some way in our society. Even President Barack Obama’s natural born citizenship and legitimacy as president has been challenged through media commentary in television, radio, print, and the Internet. Notably, though, that of White Republican presidential hopeful Mitt Romney, by his own admission and with clear implications denying President Obama’s citizenry, was never questioned (Haake, 2012).

While the media constructs negative representations and narratives of Black males, it is not the only institution that does so. To some degree, schooling acts in concert with institutions like the media and the justice and healthcare systems, serving to reproduce, reflect, and respond to the harmful sociocultural narratives and practices assailing the image of the Black man. Such a multitude of damaging portrayals decreases the likelihood that Black males can overcome such narratives, even after they leave school. Moreover, systems of formal education support the dehumanization of Black males through acts that marginalize, commodify, or reinforce other sources contributing
to their degradation or maltreatment. Giroux (2011) describes the assault on youth as the politics of disposability. Thus, the probability that Black males will drop out of school, be pushed out, or become ensnared in the penal system (Togut, 2011) presents unique structural challenges for the development and sustainability of positive, nurturing mentor relationships.

Various attempts have been made by researchers, educators, parent groups and community organizations to understand and confront obstacles that undermine social and academic achievement of adolescent, Black males in schools (Bailey & Paisley, 2004; Howard, 2008). For instance, disproportionality in the incarceration rates of Black males, out-of-school suspensions, and dropout rates among Black male adolescents have been often adduced as structural impediments that jeopardize their life experiences in America (Hall & Karanjha, 2012; Noguera, 1997). Additionally, the overrepresentation of Black males in special education (Harry & Anderson, 1994; Patton, 1998), as well as their absence from advanced courses and programs (Ford & Grantham, 2003; Patterson, 2005; Whiting, 2006) has been well documented. As Ladson-Billings (2011) observes, Black males are bound in a love-hate relationship with society, both nationally and globally. However, at the same time, societies often embrace Black males as icons of youth culture, as it excommunicates them as problems in need of eradication or oddities that trespass in spaces typically reserved for those more admired and invested with care, such as in classrooms reserved for students labeled as gifted and talented, programs offering advanced placement courses that facilitate college access, or in higher education like doctoral programs.
Media portrayals of the current president and the situations described above tell a narrative of the Black male in crisis. While this narrative can shed light on the plight of the Black male image as depicted through a broader public lens, it simultaneously reinscribes the problematic image of Black males as being beyond love (Duncan, 2002). As a master narrative, then, it projects the danger of a single story (Adichie, 2009).

Whether told through the media, educational literature, or work done in the social sciences, this master narrative reproduces negative stereotypes of the Black male (Brown, 2011; Brown & Donnor, 2011; Fultz & Brown, 2008). In contrast to the narrative of the Black male in crisis (Noguera, 1996, 1997) are narratives of care. Mentoring can be viewed as a manifestation of an ethic of care (Noddings, 2005) that challenges educators to envisage public schooling beyond the current orthodoxy of high-stakes testing policies, competitions, and school-choice schemes (Ravitch, 2011), and the issue of unfunded or under-funded educational opportunities for students who are, notably, primarily of color (Kozol, 1992). However, not enough is known about the ethic of care of Black males, or about how they care for others or are cared for through mentoring.

Following Smith’s (1997) description of the role of care in mentoring, we discuss mentoring as a form of leadership that can be invested with care. Given the scant research in this area, we turn to critical race theory and care theory to present a counternarrative of Black males in special education as giving and accepting care. This counternarrative provides educators in K-12 and post-secondary institutions with a mentoring framework that recognizes the politics of care and values the act of masking. We present the major tenets of critical race theory and how they have informed the scholarship on the education of Black males in schools, before then turning to examine the extant literature on
mentoring and ethical theory such as care and risk. These perspectives provide a backdrop for our personal narratives of masking mentoring and a framework for critical (race) care mentorship. Framing critical (race) mentorship as a counternarrative and an expression of leadership aligns with Tillman’s (2004) position that “we must reverse the ‘manufactured crisis’ in the education of African-American children” (p. 301).

**Tenets of Critical Race Theory**

The scholarship on the education of Black males and other people of color drawing on critical race theory (CRT) through critical race ethnography (Duncan, 2002) or reviews of research from the social sciences and K-12 education literature (Brown, 2011, Brown & Donnor, 2011) – whether it is focused on students from K-12 through graduate school (Gildersleeve, Croom, & Vasquez, 2011; Solórzano & Villalpando, 1998; Villalpando, 2004; Yosso, Smith, Ceja, & Solórzano; 2009) or on adults working in schools – brought attention to the broader context and narrative of how formal institutions of education systematically construct an apartheid system of knowledge (Delgado Bernal & Villalpando, 2002). CRT provides a framework for understanding how race, racism, and anti-racism are constructed and perpetuated at the levels of individual experience, institutional constructs, and societal interactions like the social constructions of race and the normative everyday practices of people in relationships; all of these factors are reflected in CRT as a broader collection of individual and institutional forces that can coalesce in national and international trends. The tenets of CRT, and its foci, have been collected by critical race legal theorists and academics in education (Ladson-Billings, 1998; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). The five tenets identified by Villalpando (2004) – race and racism, contestation of dominant ideologies, social justice
theory and practice, experiential knowledge, and historical context – bring theoretical focus to inquiry. These tenets are based in critical (legal) theory, which provides an ethical grounding and guide for inquiry into race-related phenomena as they intersect with other aspects of identity and status in relationship to the exchange of power, or intersectionality.

Analytical tools such as intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1995), counterstories, and counternarratives (Bell, 1992; Delgado, 1989) are also hallmarks within CRT’s repertoire. CRT has been further elaborated through strands particular to the histories and condition of multidimensional social groups in order to understand race, racism, and anti-racism alongside another defining features of social difference like gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, tribal affiliation, immigration status, and language, resulting in ideas like Latino/a Critical Theory; Critical Race Feminist Theory, Whiteness Studies, and TribalCrit. Counterstories and counternarratives, for instance, involve an analysis of how stories can be crafted into a single tale that can be destructive in stereotyping or offering a grand narrative, and then countered through multiple stories that undercut the dominant narrative and support anti-oppressive action (i.e., naming patterns of injustice or sharing experiences around which to collectivize). The tenets of CRT have provided methods used by faculty to raise attention to the marginalization of students from underrepresented racial and ethnic minority groups in higher education, and to equip them in overcoming related obstacles. These include creating an awareness of microaggressions, creating counterstories, and creating counterspaces in which to share their counterstories that challenge microaggressions (Howard-Hamilton, 1997). For the purpose of this chapter, we focus on mentoring that provides academic counterspaces
Counterspaces are also referred to as safe spaces and safe places (Ballard & Cintrón, 2010), venues that marginalized groups use to express their counterstories (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Recalling Derrick Bell’s counternarrative Space Traders, Howard (2008) interprets its subtext as posing the question: *Who would really care if African Americans no longer existed in this country?*

**Color(ful) Critical Race Care through Mentoring**

Pimentel (2011) describes critical approaches to caring in contrast to colorblind or aesthetic approaches to caring, noting that they are “grounded in a political, color-conscious, and culturally relevant perspective that is concerned about the well-being and education of the whole child—not just school-sanctioned criteria for academic achievement” (p. 3). Furthermore, Pimentel (2011) asserts that providing critical care to students in assimilationist and deficit-oriented school contexts is not necessary a straightforward process. Instead, providing color(ful) critical care requires educators’ understanding of the context (Rolón-Dow, 2005), such as how schooling structures emphasize some forms of caring and conditions over others, with schools acting as sanctuaries (De Jesús & Antrop-González, 2006), and mediating the tensions that coalesce into the politics of caring.

Researchers have begun to explore the importance of fostering caring mentoring relationships for Black male adolescents in K-12 (Bailey & Paisley, 2004; Grant & Dieker, 2011) and young adults in higher education (Harper, 2006) in order to improve their life experiences. Grantham (2004) identifies mutual caring as part of a multicultural approach to mentoring that helped to increase the integration of Black males in gifted
Several studies of mentoring for Black male students have shown positive results, a deterrent to their risk of failure (Grant & Dieker, 2010; Smith, 1997). However, formal mentoring has also been found to further marginalize individuals when such programs are planned and operated from a sense of false empathy rather than an ethic of love (Duncan, 2002). For adults, multipurpose and multi-tier support networks that extend into local educational communities and connect to scholars and practitioners of color at the national and international levels have been recommended (Young & Brooks, 2008; Young, Petersen, & Short, 2002). Such findings and recommendations point to the promise of research to provide a more robust understanding of the kinds of mentoring and related principles – such as critical care – that oppose the crisis narrative by undermining the structures from which it is constructed. However, the “political and ideological dimensions of caring and loving are seldom addressed” (Bartolomé, 2008, p. 2).

**Risk in Caring: Masking Mentoring**

**Professor V. Agosto’s Counternarrative of Critical (Race) Mentoring**

My personal experience teaching at the K-12 level in special education was the precursor to my academic engagement with critical multicultural theory, political clarity, and critical race studies. These areas of study and experiences, working with students in secondary and postsecondary settings, inform how I conceptualize mentoring relationships with Black males in particular, but not exclusively. Additionally, working with primarily African American/Black and Latino/Hispanic males in secondary education and their families as we engaged with special education helped me develop political and ideological clarity about how the relationships between youth, schools, and society differentially structure their successes and failures, and in not so subtle ways told
me who (not) to love (Bartolomé, 1994). In other words, I became more conscious about
the interaction between micro- and macro-level instances of systemic injustices, thus
gaining political clarity, as well as the discrepancies between the dominant and
counternarratives I held and received but resisted, providing me with ideological clarity.
Just as important was the realization that I could harness my sense of power and
responsibility into an assault against the stereotypes imposed on my students (Beauboeuf-
Lafontant, 2002), some of which have also plagued me as a woman of African-American
and Mexican-American descent. More specifically, stereotypes about having limited
cognitive ability, excessive rates of reproduction, and a flawed character, including the
angry Black woman or the submissive Mexican, suggest that I, like many of my Black
and Brown brethren, do not belong. Even as an assistant professor, I have had White
female students question whether or not I was married when they found out that I had a
child, and then note that they did not see a wedding ring on my finger – all within earshot
of a Black female mentee. The racial overtones of such comments were not lost on the
mentee, who later commented in our counterspace after class that she perceived several
students to be racist.

Narratives of women in educational leadership (Karanxha, Agosto, & Elam, 2011) and theories of care (Noddings, 2005) among teachers guided by political clarity
(Bartolomé, 1994, 2008) have informed my thinking about leadership and its expression
through mentorship. For instance, Beauboeuf-Lafontant’s (2002) characterization of
womanist caring among teachers as the embrace of the maternal, political clarity, and an
ethic of risk resonates with my perceptions of what is involved in caring relationships
with students who have been historically, consistently, and systematically marginalized in
most major institutions. Although the maternal quality of womanist caring is not a quality that resonates with my own sense of care, I do recognize that gender – and, therefore the gendered way one knows and mentors – is an inescapable feature of academia and the U.S. more broadly. To break with the status quo and care for Black males working and studying in special education is to embrace risk. To provide critical (race) care requires that I mask my mentorship and the academic counterspaces it provides such as funding, presenting, publishing, networking, and so on. As an assistant professor, I serve as a mentor for Roderick.

Inviting Roderick to explore the possibility of entering a doctoral program is where our lived experience first intertwined. We met while I was conducting a study of inclusion in a school where he worked in a semi-administrative position as a behavior specialist. I was immediately impressed with his thoughtfulness and intellectual acuity. Roderick, as well as other male students of color I met who were working in similar positions at the graduate level, had greater aspirations, but they felt discouraged from leaving special education to seek other positions of authority and decision-making. I can recall even reading literature on how Black men are often placed in schools and programs to control Black male youth; arguably, that may be, at least in part, the impetus for men like them being dissuaded from moving on to higher-level positions. Thus, of those entering the principalship, I was curious to find out how many were tracked into assistant principal positions in charge of discipline rather than curriculum. Encounters like these with men like Roderick have made me fear that the stereotypes about the Black male body, character, and cognition are deeply ingrained in society and evidenced in education leadership through discourses of eugenics that determine which people should fill and be
primed for leadership roles. Notably, the literature on educational leadership confirms the underrepresentation of African Americans in particular, for they represent only 10.8% of all principals nationally (Tillman, 2004).

While attending a conference to present a paper that we were beginning to co-author, I noticed how many Black men who had not previously approached me at earlier events approached Roderick. It is not that they were unfriendly or unwilling to interact with me – they responded if I initiated the interaction – but observing how they interacted with Roderick helped me become more aware of the gender dynamics of mentoring. As a woman, I had to initiate the lines of communication with potential male mentors, whereas Roderick was approached, offered business cards, and urged by many to “keep in touch.” In other words, when seeking mentorship from Black males in particular, I had to work twice as hard as my Black male student. By the same token, Black women at the conference approached me, or I engaged with them, more fluidly and promptly, and offered advice, invitations, and opportunities as the men did with Roderick. Such clear gender dynamics and behavior disparities suggest that we need to pay more attention to how mixed-gender mentoring relationships, as in males of color mentoring or sponsoring women of color or vice-versa, come with the risk of gossip, jealous partners, and sexual attraction or tension (Noe, 1988).

If these risks deter cross-gendered professional supports, it suggests the need to express mentoring masked as indifference in order to avoid giving the appearance of caring too much, or at all. For example, to support Roderick’s travel to another conference, I sought funding from multiple sources on his behalf, largely due to my concern about funding equity for students of color and the differential amount of effort
that is required of them to attain funding like travel grants. After several failed attempts to obtain funding I had been promised, I gave up and paid for his travel expenses myself. As a result, when he enrolled in my class, I paid less attention to him than other students, in an effort to mask the fact that our relationship was more developed or special. Moreover, I did not want other students to accuse me of favoritism or feel that I was less available or open to working with them because of my unique relationship with Roderick.

As Roderick continued in the program and developed his identity as a scholar (Whiting, 2006), he decided that he would like continue in academia. As a driven individual seeking an academic position, Roderick is a strong investment for professors chairing doctoral committees. In other words, talented students like him, who are likely to do well and plan to continue in academia, generally require less work and worry from their advisors. Additionally, they help to build their advisor’s reputation as a successful mentor. As they advance in their careers, as, for example, in research-intensive universities, they may also be inclined to promote or at least cite their advisor’s scholarship. While I want to mentor Roderick and serve in whatever professional capacity makes sense for his studies, socialization, and career trajectory, I am opposed to the commodification of students in this way, and do not believe they should track into and out of relationships with would-be advisors. My suspicion is that such tracking across race, gender, and academic ability happens in subtle ways and is rationalized behind false pretenses. Commodification of doctoral students is part of the process of dehumanization or un-selfing. As described by Black teacher Iola Taylor in a study conducted by Wilson & Seagall (2001), “[un-selfing] means that you either overtly or covertly take a person’s dignity. It can be done very, very subtly, but it can be done” (p. 41). I have attempted to
mask my suspicions about these mentoring/advising dynamics from Roderick and, instead, I emphasize the need for him to make informed and thoughtful decisions about the composition of his dissertation committee. Through the practice of critical (race) care mentoring, I am reminded to pay attention to the racial and gendered power dynamics beyond our institution, namely how his relationships with advisors and mentors will serve him in subfields like education leadership and special education, where race and gender matters.

When I left my role as a high school teacher to pursue my doctorate, I was convinced that I could help instigate change to reduce the oppression of students. Around this same time, I was asked by a young adult Black male, “Why do you care so much about other people?” To this, I responded, “How do you not [care]?” The young man’s question still baffles me personally today, but I do think it is a question that needs to be asked directly to those entering educational leadership. I imagine that a critical (race) care framework built on political clarity, ethics of risk and care, and the tenets of critical race theory will contribute to the conversation on mentoring Black males through constructions of race, gender, and dis/ability. As I mentor Black male doctoral students who plan to work or study in special education settings or, more generally, with dis/ability, I work through them and with them to model a moral activist stance (Ladson-Billings & Donner, 2005) that aims to reduce those oppressive forces which impede the opportunities and conditions that enable youth to flourish, as in counterspaces and sanctuaries.
Roderick’s Counternarrative of Critical (Race) Mentoring

The concept of *in loco parentis*, a Latin phrase meaning “in the place of the parent,” vouchsafes my ability as a Black male, K-12 special educator to develop caring mentoring relationships with Black male adolescents. I use the term *in loco parentis* to illuminate my teaching and mentoring experiences over the years as embodiments of genuine acts of care – and even a sense of love – in the lives of many Black male adolescents who impacted me as much I did them. I have since come to understand the myriad of ways in which my ability to act as a parental figure has lead me to negotiate the politics of gender insofar as my relational space to female students were concerned. For instance, one such political overture shared by other educators and family members, usually Black women, demanded that I, as a young Black male teacher in secondary schools, remain cautious of close affiliations with adolescent females. Consequently, as an act of professional self-perseveration and a desire to avoid perceptions of impropriety, I sustained few mentor-mentee relationships with young females. Even the few times when I chose to resist this narrative, I still kept my mentoring relationship with those minority female students professional and very public. However, as deficit-oriented discourses (Duncan, 2002) and racial microaggressions (Solórzano et al., 2000) surrounding Black males permeated my teaching experiences, I often felt obliged to conceal or mask rather than outright spurn my efforts to care for and to receive care from Black male students. For instance, it was not uncommon to hear, or disrupt with my unexpected arrival, colleagues’ conversations about Black males who exhibited learning or behavioral challenges. Some teachers would call for the student’s permanent removal from class because of such concerns, while others did not go as far. Yet, notably, the
assumptions that informed these teachers’ actions were often undergirded by a narrative that blamed Black males’ underachievement on their home life and/or a lack of good parenting skills.

Official displays of mentoring appropriated much of my time. However, more authentic acts of caring (Bartolomé, 2008) that took place between myself and my Black male mentees often transpired in the privacy of my office. This physical counterspace allowed me to engage Black males in a sort of “unseen and unspoken” pedagogical rite of passage as they encountered personal and familial/peer situations, or institutional mores like policies and rules, that were either unsettling or too complex for them to mediate alone. Over the years, many students told me that I acted as if I were their “father.” Whether they simply wanted a place to visit or receive advice about their day-to-day academic and behavioral experiences, this counterspace served as a safe harbor for us – one Black male to another – to articulate our mutual concerns about institutional discrepancies that appeared, on the one hand, institutionally neutral but also disproportionately adverse for Black males on a wider scale. At times, these concerns resulted in my expression of personal views that blatantly challenged the rationale of my mentees’ perceptions of the concept of fairness. Conversely, our masked conversations allowed me internalize their collective frustrations and formulate counternarratives that they could later use to reject stereotypes that transgressed their sense of self-efficacy and self-worth. It also served as a means to establish a relational metric of trust and refresh our sense of purpose and hope in the wake of institutional encroachments that stymied our ability to evince positive Black male imagery.
Invoking two of several assumptions regarding the nurturing of African-American males in relation to academic achievement put forth by Bailey and Paisley (2004), specifically the belief that “all [Black males] are worthy of love, nurturing, guidance, support, and meaningful relationships; and stereotypes of male African Americans can only be changed by providing positive views of male African Americans” (p. 12), I delve deeper into more personalized and nuanced acts of care and masking. For the most part, it is considered apolitical and, indeed, given certain contexts, unethical for public school educators to provide students with financial assistance. Careful discernment is paramount here because public perception regarding the provision of monetary aid by teachers to students can easily transform an intended act of altruism into an act seen as unprofessional and, even worse, criminal.

Taking into account these considerations, especially when asked by Black male mentees to provide financial assistance to help pay for their school lunch, school supplies, or admission to a much-anticipated school event like the prom, I always seek to mitigate my ambivalence toward helping them financially by encouraging or helping them pursue alternative school-based financial assistance. Many of them were too prideful to ask for financial aid or educational assistance (Bailey & Paisley, 2004; Duncan, 2002) from those they did not trust. I initially identified with this sentimentality because I often believed that my White colleagues’ mistrust of my skills hampered my own professional experiences. Additionally, my mentees solicited other types of educational resources from me, including the use of my computer to complete assignments; my office or personal cellular phone to contact parents in emergency situations; and my intervention in matters involving disciplinary referrals they had
received. In such situations, I directly provided assistance to Black male mentees within the privacy of my office, knowing that it would be otherwise untenable for me to do so in plain sight of other students or colleagues.

Over the past three years, my position as a behavior specialist, a semi-administrative position funded through the district’s Special Education Department, has allowed me work extensively with special education and general education students with serious disciplinary issues and histories. In addition, my role involved assisting teachers of both special education and general education with behavioral interventions intended to modify and extinguish undesirable student behavior. Most of my work in this regard has dealt with minority males. Rather than doling out formulaic punitive prescriptions for minority and Black males, there were many instances in which I actually lessened the disciplinary consequences I could have administered per the school’s policies. Moreover, I also routinely encouraged Black males and their parents to appeal disciplinary consequences assigned by administrators and their assistants that we considered too harsh compared to the treatment of other students with comparable discipline histories who had committed similar infractions.

Again, such discussions not only involved serious professional risk, but were cornerstone to the perpetuity of the masking project. On one hand, I worked against colleagues by helping Black males and their parents interrogate the inequities of our school’s discipline policy, fully aware that these students and their parents could have implicated me at any time during the disciplinary process. Alternatively, though, my sense of care and love for Black males, especially my mentees, prevented me from encouraging them to dismiss actions as merely part of a neutral policy agenda. I was
unable to view the policy as carrying no serious educational, social, or lifelong implications, particularly insofar as the deleterious effects of out-of-school suspensions on Black males’ lives is concerned (Hall & Karanxha, 2012). Ultimately, our success or failure in the masking project could only be realized as a consequence of care and support and, therefore, the maximization or deprivation of trust that we were willing to extend to each other.

**Conclusion**

The low prevalence of Black males thriving in K-12 and postsecondary education, coupled with the destruction of the Black males’ image in society, provides ample ground for further academic inquiry. We have attempted to provide a preliminary framework that situates the care of Black males as a response to Howard’s (2008) question, “Who really cares” (p. 954) about the disenfranchisement of African American males? While our personal narratives highlight our experiences mentoring with individuals, our critique of schooling systems and institutions working in combination to construct the experience of Black males in special education is much broader. The tenets of critical race theory help us point to both the systematic patterns of intersectional oppression and the lived experiences that occurs individually and collectively, or relationally. Critical (race) care as a framework for mentoring addresses the need for recognitive justice without ignoring other forms or paradigms like distributive, procedural, and restorative justice. Critical (race) care offers a response for leadership that includes mentoring as an action-oriented response that often requires masking, because it challenges injustice, White supremacy, liberal forms of equality, analyses along a single axis of oppression or form of identity,
and race neutrality. In other words, critical (race) care mentoring reflects the moral activist role for critical race leadership.
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