Resisting the Neoliberal Role Model: Latino Male Mentors' Perspectives on the Intersectional Politics of Role Modeling

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This article reports on case study research with two Latino male youth workers who critique their positioning as positive male role models for struggling Latino boys in a Latino male mentorship program. In response to the persistent educational marginalization experienced by boys of color (Noguera, 2012), the past two decades have seen an explosion of intervention strategies aimed at uplifting and empowering boys of color in schools (Harper & Associates, 2014; Noguera, 2009; Saenz & Ponjuan, 2011). Many of these strategies aim to recruit and retain more male educators of color and are rooted in what I refer to as the positive male role model discourse. This discourse asserts that boys of color rarely see men of color embodying dominant notions of successful manhood. It is believed that by increasing the amount of successful men of color in the lives of struggling students, there will be a positive impact on the attitudes, well-being, and academic achievement among boys of color. However, despite the common sense nature of this assumption, the perspectives of the two Latino male youth workers highlighted in this research (a) raise important questions surrounding the neoliberal logics commonly undergirding mentor/role model intervention strategies and (b) speak to the intersectional politics of role modeling in the neoliberal era.

LITERATURE REVIEW
Men of Color Supporting Boys of Color
Qualitative research on male educators of color highlight the benefits men of color bring to the lives of male students of color (Brown, 2009; Howard, 2013; Lynn, 2006). Common themes in this literature center around culturally relevant pedagogy, interpersonal connections, and, most pertinent to this article, the belief that male educators of color serve as positive male role models in the lives of their students.

The notion of the positive male role model is a widely employed framework that informs conversations surrounding teacher diversity, youth programming, and efforts to diminish the achievement gap experienced by boys of color.

Critiquing the Role Model Strategy: Issues of Gender and Sexuality
Despite the popularity of the positive role model approach, recent literature offers compelling critiques of the fundamental assumptions and framing of the role model strategy (Pabon, 2016). First, scholars of gender and sexuality have criticized the notion of role modeling to be "grounded in reductionist and essentialist notions of racial and gender affiliation" (Rezai-Rashti & Martino, 2010, p. 38). In this critique, the act of defining a positive male role model is inextricably linked to dominant and confining notions of gender, race, and sexual identity (Britzman, 1993; Martino & Rezai-Rashti, 2010). The strong focus on the masculine gender of men who are teachers can lead male teachers to function as systems of surveillance for proper masculinity among their students (Martino & Frank, 2006). Furthermore, male teachers of color report feeling overly pushed into the role of disciplinarian. This has led Black and Latino male teachers to be habitually asked to perform tough-love, hypermasculine personas that are incompatible with their own identity (Brockenbrough, 2018; Lara & Fránquiz, 2015; Singh, 2019).

Critiquing the Role Model Strategy: Neoliberal Co-Optation
Researchers critical of racial capitalism also point to the way initiatives targeting boys of color are frequently complicit with neoliberal framings of urban education (Dumas, 2016). Here, structural reform is abandoned for targeted programming. This technocratic solution individualizes the problem of racial inequality and overly idealizes the potential of individual educators. Brockenbrough (2018) contends that this framing builds a *saviorist discourse* around the superhero-like work Black men are expected to perform with Black boys. This can result in students feeling like they themselves are the problem in need of fixing (Johnson & Philoxene, 2018).

NEOLIBERAL MULTICULTURALISM
Melamed (2006) describes neoliberal multiculturalism as a contemporary racial discourse in which "multicultural reference masks the centrality of race and racism to neoliberalism" (p. 1). I use neoliberal multiculturalism as a race framework to illuminate the ways an intersectional politics of race and neoliberalism informs the experiences and critiques of the two youth workers in this study. This conceptual framing aids in an analysis of the ways racial logics are reconstituted in a program aimed at empowering Latino boys through male mentoring.

METHODOLOGY
This research is designed as a qualitative case study focused on the experiences and practices of Mr. Agustín and Mr. Javier, two Latino male youth workers critical of their positioning as positive male role models. It encompasses two rounds of interviews with both mentors as well as ethnographic data collected in the classroom of Mr. Javier over a 2-year period. The case stems from a larger ethnographic project exploring the influence of neoliberalism on Latino male identity in Latino Male Success (LMS), a school-based mentorship program for middle and high school Latino boys.

I ask the following questions:
1. *Why, and in what ways, are the subjects of this case study resistant to the label of positive male role model?*

2. *How do the subjects of the case understand their work with Latino boys in relation to contemporary racial and intersectional oppression?*

FINDINGS
Limits and Contradictions of Role Modeling as Racial Justice
Mr. Javier and Mr. Agustín were resistant to viewing their work as mentors and role models for Latino boys as racial justice work. Both mentors believed that the notion of role modeling in their organization advanced an individualistic solution to what they recognized as a structural problem. This uncritically posited them as success stories within the current sys-

Project MALES
Mentoring to Achieve Latino Educational Success

tem, creating a common sense around the possibility of achievement through hard work, self-discipline and the age-old "bootstraps mentality." "That can be dangerous," warned Mr. Agustín, "it makes students think that maybe something's wrong with them if they aren't turning their grades around."

This framing also positioned Latino male youth workers to be models of respectability and the "fixers" of problematic Latino boys. "We are put in a position to get kids to act a certain way…to change them," criticized Mr. Javier. Both mentors pushed back against deficit-orientations of mentorship and challenged what I describe as neoliberal multicultural framing of what a "good" and "deserving" Latino man should embody.

Role Modeling a Heteropatriarchal Manhood

As the only gay mentor in his organization, Mr. Agustín found that his queerness deviated from an implicit (and at times explicit) expectation that mentors would be good examples of heteropatriarchal respectability. This posited mentors as guides towards benevolent patriarchal gender roles. "A lot of our lessons on gender are very: men/women and male/female, very 'this is your role as a man,'" explained Mr. Agustín.

Here, a racial deficit intersects with gender and sexuality, positing Latino men and boys as failing to embody proper (heteropatriarchal) manhood. As a gay man uninterested in marriage or children, Mr. Agustín deviated from the hegemonic manhood that was normalized in the mission of LMS. "My online bio will never say, 'Mr. Agustín is a devoted husband and father of two kids…the whole white picket fence thing,'" he joked with me. "And I think there's value in that."

Resisting the Neoliberal Role Model

As a form of resistance, Mr. Javier and Mr. Agustín utilized critical mentoring approaches (Weiston-Serdan, 2017) that cultivated an awareness of systemic racism and challenged the no-excuses, "bootstraps mentality" in their mentoring program. They also consciously and intentionally disidentified with the neoliberal figure of the role model by refusing to normalize the notion that they embodied "positive" masculine qualities that their students were lacking. Mr. Agustín did this by uplifting queer Latinx voices in his classroom, including his own, to disrupt the heteropatriarchal imagination of proper manhood. Both mentors criticized the notion that Latino boys need *character development* and challenged a good/bad Latino male binary often touted by neoliberal multiculturalism.

IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

As the movement to support boys and men of color through male mentorship continues to gain traction, this research offers valuable insights into the limitations of positive male role modeling as a form of racial justice. It also underscores the need to critically examine the rationale used to establish male of color initiatives, mentorship programs, and recruitment campaigned aimed at increasing the amount of men of color in the teaching force.

For educational stakeholders, this research highlights the perspective of critical youth workers who challenge the ways they are positioned as fixers of problematic boys, and how this deficit-orientation to mentoring intersects with race, gender, and sexuality. There must be an effort to shift the focus away from the character of boys, and instead focus on structures and the political economy of race and schooling. Furthermore, this work identifies a need for programs to value educators and mentors of color for their abilities to enact sustaining and critical pedagogy (Paris & Alim, 2017), rather than cultural correction.

AUTHOR BIO

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