A Qualitative Analysis of Father–Son Relationships among HIV-Positive Young Black Men Who Have Sex with Men

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ABSTRACT *Young black men who have sex with men (YBMSM) are experiencing high and rising rates of HIV infection, more than any other age-risk group category in the USA. Contributors to HIV risk in this group remain incompletely elucidated. We conducted exploratory qualitative interviews with 20 HIV-positive YBMSM aged 17–24 and found that father–son relationships were perceived to be important sociocontextual influences in participants’ lives. Participants discussed the degree of their fathers’ involvement in their lives, emotional qualities of the father–son relationship, communication about sex, and masculine socialization. Participants also described pathways linking father–son relationships to HIV risk, which were mediated by psychological and situational risk scenarios. Our thematic analysis suggests that father–son relationships are important to the psychosocial development of YBMSM, with the potential to either exacerbate or attenuate sexual risk for HIV. Interventions designed to strengthen father–son relationships may provide a promising direction for future health promotion efforts in this population.*

KEYWORDS *HIV/AIDS, Adolescents, Fathers, Black/African-Americans, Men who have sex with men, Sexual risk behavior*

INTRODUCTION

Although HIV incidence in the USA has stabilized for most population subgroups, young black men who have sex with men (YBMSM) between the ages of 13 and 24 continue to experience high and rising rates of infection.¹ HIV incidence among YBMSM increased by 48 % between 2006 and 2009; both the absolute incidence and the rate of increase are disproportionately high relative to other young MSM.² In order to begin to address these alarming trends, there is a need to improve our collective understanding of background factors with potential relevance to HIV

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acquisition among YBMSM. Youth sexual behavior is influenced by a host of sociocontextual factors, including characteristics of families, community norms, early childhood environments, and traumatic experiences.³⁻⁵ However, existing studies of HIV risk among YBMSM tend to focus on more proximate influences on sexual behavior (e.g., substance abuse, partner characteristics), with comparatively less emphasis on developmental and contextual influences over the life-course.

One understudied sociocontextual factor within this specific sub-population is that of father-son relationships. For the purpose of this paper, we use the term "fathers" to refer to biological fathers unless otherwise stated. There is good reason to believe that father-son relationships could be especially relevant to understanding the psychosocial development and sexual risk behaviors of YBMSM and that these relationships might differ from other youth based on both their race and sexuality. First, black youth, including YBMSM, are likely to have non-resident fathers (fathers who do not live in the same home as their children). According to the 2010 Census, 64 % of black children were living in single-mother homes, compared with 25 % of white children and 34 % of Hispanic children.⁶ The sociohistorical reasons underlying this phenomenon are well-characterized and include the systematic disruption of black families begun during slavery, shifting patterns of urban unemployment, and mass incarceration of black men.⁷⁻⁹ The implications of non-resident fatherhood for black youth, however, remain controversial in both popular and academic spheres.¹⁰

Secondly, father-son relationships have also been demonstrated to be of critical importance for gay youth of all racial backgrounds. These relationships are often cast in a negative light, as most studies show that gay youth are more comfortable disclosing their same-sex attraction to their mothers than their fathers and that fathers may be more likely to have negative reactions to such a disclosure.¹¹⁻¹³ In one ethnically diverse sample of young MSM, disclosure of sexuality to fathers was lower than to mothers across racial groups, but disclosure rates to fathers were even lower for YBMSM compared to their white counterparts.¹⁴ However, it is important to note that fathers, including black fathers, do not have uniformly negative reactions to same-sex attraction in a son; in this and other studies, a significant minority of fathers are described by sons as being supportive. Illustrating the complexity of such relationships, one small qualitative study of YBMSM and their parents explored not only the challenges but also the evolution of thinking for black fathers as they adapted to the knowledge of their sons' same-sex attractions.¹⁵ This study's authors highlighted the importance of engaging fathers, particularly those who are often dismissed as uninvolved, in mental health interventions focused on YBMSM.

In addition to impacting general youth development and adjustment, father-son relationships also have specific influences on sexual risk and protection. Fathers have been theorized to exert influence on sons' sexual risk behavior primarily through the following key mechanisms: (1) degree of father involvement, (2) emotional qualities of the father-child relationship, (3) communication about sex, and (4) masculine socialization. Evidence supporting the importance of these mechanisms is reviewed briefly below; except where specified, the referenced works do not focus specifically on black and/or sexual minority youth.

Degree of Father Involvement

The degree of father involvement, which is dichotomized in many studies as presence or absence, has been demonstrated to correlate with a range of youth behavioral

outcomes.¹⁶ Studies have linked father absence to sexual risk behaviors in adolescence and adulthood, including early sexual debut and sexual partner concurrency.^{8,17} In analyzing such studies, however, it is important to differentiate presence and absence, which connote levels of paternal involvement, from residence/non-residence in the home. Importantly, non-resident fathers can also be partners in prevention, and effective interventions have strengthened relationships between non-resident fathers and adolescent sons as a risk-reduction strategy.¹⁸ Dichotomous, cross-sectional studies (e.g., Census data) looking only at co-residence will often underestimate father involvement, particularly for black non-resident fathers, who have been shown to have more contact with their children than non-resident fathers of other races.^{19,20} Other work has highlighted the intricacies of father-child relationships in youth from diverse ethnic backgrounds and shown that youth derive benefit from contact that is not only frequent but also involves various activities, communication, and emotional closeness.²¹

To add further complexity, the trajectories of black father-child relationships are also frequently characterized by fluctuation and re-entry after absence.^{10,19} Additionally, many youth have substitute father figures in their families and communities; such “social fathering” is more common in black families.¹⁰ “Natural mentors,” including father figures, are also described as being important to gay/bisexual youth across racial groups.²² In analyzing paternal involvement in the lives of YBMSM, it is therefore critical to take a longitudinal view over time that accounts for diverse father figures.

Emotional Qualities of the Father-Child Relationship

The most frequently studied paternal influences on adolescent sexual risk are emotional qualities of the father-child relationship, including attachment styles and feelings of closeness.²³ In predominantly heterosexual samples, positive emotions and attachment to fathers correlate with delayed sexual debut and fewer partners,²⁴ whereas weaker ties are associated with riskier behavior.²⁵ One study of black heterosexual adult men found that father presence and levels of paternal caregiving predicted sons’ attachment styles and monogamy in sexual relationships.⁸ These findings highlight the importance of understanding not only the frequency of contact but also the quality of spent together by fathers and sons.

Communication About Sex

Direct communication about sex between fathers and children has been demonstrated to influence sexual risk attitudes, behaviors, and beliefs in several studies.^{23,26} Often, such communication appears to have a protective effect. One study of black father-son dyads recruited from a church-based sample correlated sons’ perceptions of father-son communication around sex to increased self-efficacy for abstinence and condom use.²⁷ Furthermore, communication is amenable to augmentation through public health interventions; a father-son intervention improved levels of paternal communication about sex, leading to increased abstinence in a predominantly black sample.²⁸ Further analyses in the same cohort suggested that this relationship between father-son communication and sexual risk reduction was mediated by increases in the sons’ self-efficacy for abstinence.²⁹ Other studies, however, have found null or even negative effects of father-son communication on sexual risk behaviors and attitudes,²⁶ suggesting that such communication is highly variable (e.g., in terms of timing, tone, and content) and may have heterogeneous effects on behavior as a result. Importantly, father-son communica-

tion about sex may also include indirect, often heteronormative, messages about sexuality.³⁰ The implications of this latter type of communication for adolescent sexual risk have not been fully characterized to date.

Masculine Socialization

Role modeling is a key feature of the father-son relationship and critical to the positive masculine socialization and identity formation of young men,³¹ including young black men. Several authors have described masculinity beliefs and expectations in black communities as being even more traditional, or hypermasculine, than those in the general population.^{15,32} Endorsement of these traditional masculinity norms, which may include promotion of sexual partner concurrency and negative attitudes toward same-sex attraction, has previously been associated with HIV risk behaviors in both heterosexual and gay-identified black men.³³⁻³⁵ Higher levels of agreement with traditional masculinity beliefs are generally associated with risk behaviors such as sexual partner concurrency and inconsistent condom use.³⁶⁻³⁸ Some researchers have suggested that growing up with non-resident fathers is associated with less adherence to traditional masculinity norms,³⁹ which might be interpreted as portending lower sexual risk. On the other hand, other work in adult black MSM described lack of masculine socialization from absent biological fathers in childhood and adolescence as a potentially detrimental influence on partner selection and risky sex later in life.³⁴ Paternal role modeling and its relationship to masculine socialization remain understudied among YBMSM.

Given the importance of fathers for development, sexual socialization, and masculine identity formation and the relative lack of research on sociocontextual influences on YBMSM living with HIV, we conducted a qualitative analysis of father-son relationships among a sample of YBMSM receiving outpatient HIV care in Atlanta, Georgia. The objectives of this analysis were to: (1) characterize father-son relationships from the perspective of YBMSM living with HIV and (2) explore potential effects of father-son relationships on child development, well-being, and HIV-related sexual risk.

METHODS

Participant Recruitment and Informed Consent

The data presented here were derived from a qualitative study designed to explore the lived experiences of HIV-positive YBMSM in Atlanta, Georgia. The project was conceived with a phenomenological orientation, in that the participants' subjective experiences of their lives were the focus of our qualitative inquiry.⁴⁰ Participants were recruited from two HIV clinics between February and May of 2012. The study team approached potential participants during clinic visits; others were referred by health care providers and contacted later for screening. Eligibility criteria were, by self-report: (1) black/African-American race, (2) age 13-24 years, (3) sexually acquired HIV infection, (4) history of having sex with a man, and (5) engagement in HIV care. We obtained verbal informed consent or assent before each interview and verbal parental consent for the single participant under age 18. The Emory University IRB and Grady Research Oversight Committee approved this protocol.

In-Depth Interviews

One author (SAH) conducted and digitally audio-recorded the interviews, which averaged 1.5 h in length. The semi-structured interview guide consisted of open-ended questions in the following conceptual domains: (1) General Life Questions (including current living and work situations), (2) Early Life and Childhood Experiences, (3) Identity and Intersectionality, (4) Sex and Relationships, (5) HIV, (6) Stigma, (7) Healthcare Experiences, and (8) Future Orientation. Although father–son relationships were not originally conceived as an interview domain, participants in the early pilot interviews initiated substantial discussions about their relationships with their fathers and clearly perceived these relationships as being significant in their lives. We subsequently incorporated an additional question, “Tell me about your relationship with your father,” into the interview section focused on early life experiences. Consistent with our phenomenological orientation,⁴¹ we phrased this question broadly, to elicit descriptions of a wide range of father–son relationships without imposing theoretical expectations about those relationships or their consequences. After the interview, participants completed a demographic survey and were compensated with a \$25 gift card for time and transportation.

Thematic Analysis

Two analysts (SAH and DG) transcribed the interviews verbatim and imported the transcripts into MAXQDA 10 (VERBI Software, Berlin, Germany), a qualitative software package. We first developed a code highlighting all text relevant to father–son relationships. Both analysts then coded a subset of transcripts in parallel and compared the coded text to ensure consistency in application. Differences between coders were discussed, and the dimensions and attributes of the code were refined until inter-coder agreement was achieved; DG then coded the remaining transcripts. Next, both analysts independently synthesized the coded text to develop analytic memos comprising individual case summaries for each participant. These memos described each participant’s relationship with father figures, as well as their assessments of the significance of these relationships within their broader lived experiences. Finally, memos were compared across cases and between analysts. Salient themes were identified in a deductive manner. For theoretical consistency, however, the thematic findings are organized below according to the pathways of paternal influence discussed in the introduction. Of note, pseudonyms were assigned to each participant and are given, along with the participant’s age at the time of the interview, where quotations are displayed below.

RESULTS

Our participants were 20 HIV-positive YBMSM who ranged from 17 to 24 years of age (see Table 1 for demographic information). All participants were current residents of Atlanta, but many were raised in other parts of the country. All had acquired HIV sexually through encounters with other men, and they were diagnosed an average of 3 years prior to the interview. Almost all had completed high school, and most had some postsecondary training or education. Characterizations of their relationships with fathers varied considerably. Participants described their fathers in terms of the degree of father involvement, emotional qualities of the relationship, communication about sex, and masculine socialization. Additionally, participants discussed ways in which father–son relationships influenced psychological and situational risk for HIV.

TABLE 1 Demographic characteristics of participants

Characteristic	Total sample (n=20)
Age	
Age range	17–24 years
Age mean	21.6 years
Age median	22 years
Age SD	1.8 years
Highest level of education completed	
Some high school	4 (20 %)
High school graduate/GED	2 (10 %)
Some college	14 (70 %)
Years since HIV diagnosis	
Range	6 months–6 years
Mean	3.2 years

Degree of Father Involvement

Presence, Absence, Re-engagement, and Substitution Our participants’ descriptions of their relationships with their fathers challenged binary conceptualizations of presence and absence. Only one participant lived with both of his parents throughout his childhood; one other alternated equally between his parents’ homes. The remainder ($n=18$; 90 %) described some degree of father absence during their childhood. Three participants had never met their fathers. For most participants, presence and absence were not static over time, and fathers were in and out of their lives. For six of the 15 men whose fathers were intermittently present, incarceration was the primary reason for absence. Notably, many described fathers who, though previously absent, were making efforts to re-engage in their sons’ lives. Such efforts were usually appreciated but often accompanied by a feeling of awkwardness as fathers and sons struggled to repair previously damaged relationships.

He’s trying to build a relationship now and he still is. Its just hard to do it, like, I do love my dad, just, its hard to reconnect, like, I don’t know what I’m talk to him about, I feel like we’re completely opposite people, so, its kinda, I feel like its useless but I’m trying still because its my blood, its my dad, but I just don’t know how. . . He does try. But he has odd ways of doing it. Like, and I hate this, he has a Facebook. My dad has a Facebook. And he will send me a message, like on my birthday, he sent me a message on Facebook telling me happy birthday. So I took it upon myself to call, I was like, at least he sent a message, so I called, and he wished me happy birthday. But that’s the only time my dad can really communicate with me, is sending me a message on Facebook. He’ll send me a message on Facebook before he tries to call. (Vince, 22)

Many participants, whose fathers were less involved in their lives, looked to substitute father figures during their childhood and adolescence. Some stated that their mother filled both parental roles, essentially functioning as both mother and father. For others, a mother’s partner acted as a father figure. A few participants’ mothers got remarried or had a long-term partner, but others

were more transiently involved. Several participants cited older brothers, uncles, and grandfathers as father figures. Male role models were also found outside of the home in some cases. Jeremiah, 22, for example, never met his father but described a very involved high school teacher as a father figure who frequently gave him life advice and boosted his self-esteem through consistent encouragement.

As participants entered adolescence and began to express their gay identities, some met older men in the gay community who provided them with guidance and support. "Gay fathers" were described frequently in our sample, although participants had polarizing views about the merits of such relationships. Some described gay fathers as positive influences who provided key instrumental support, as below.

Quentin: I basically always wanted, my father to basically be in my life. Like, I have a 'gay father'. Like, he's gay. I done known him like 10 years since I been in Georgia... I done known him like 10 years, he's the longest dude I ever known. I look at him as a father, like, he kinda like, when I moved out my mother's house, I was like actually like staying with him... So he was kinda like taking care of me basically. Making sure I ate, making sure I was going to school, making sure I had clothes on my back.

Interviewer: So is he still someone that you can call on?

Quentin: Yeah! I still talk to him or whatever.

Interviewer: And was there ever any kind of sexual or romantic relationship?

Quentin: No deal! I looked at him as a father. I don't look at him like a father having sex with. (Quentin, 22)

Conversely, other participants described gay fathers who tried to take advantage of them sexually in exchange for housing or mentorship.

It was times where guys would wanna be my dad, but then the first week on the job, [they're] trying to sleep with me. . . So its very common in our [gay] lifestyle that this happens. But I think it's a good thing overall in general that you know, that people would take on the responsibility to mentor somebody. But you gotta be careful you know, who you take on, and who you decide to allow to teach you things. (Jeremiah, age 22)

Although mothers and substitute father figures were appreciated, it was clear in most cases that these individuals could not fully compensate for the participants' sense of loss about the absence of a biological father.

Emotional Qualities of the Father–Son Relationship

Positive Feelings Toward Fathers Participants expressed a range of emotions toward their fathers. One group of young men voiced primarily positive sentiments when describing their fathers. This group included the two participants who had a consistent father presence in the home. While neither of these young men described themselves as being particularly close to their fathers and both were closer to their mothers, they still spoke of their fathers in generally respectful terms. There were also some participants whose fathers did not live with them but were currently becoming more involved after a previous absence. This previous absence was often solely due to incarceration, after which paternal involvement was promptly re-

established; in these cases, participants seemed to understand that the absence was not under their fathers' control, and they were therefore not particularly embittered. Byron, 24, for example, described his intermittently incarcerated father as follows: "My dad, even though he was a pop-in and out guy, whenever he'd come he never steered me wrong, he always tried to instill good values or good things in us so we could go on the right path in life."

Negative Emotions and Resentment A second group of participants was completely resentful and did not ascribe any positive qualities to their fathers at all. Such unilaterally negative sentiments came exclusively from those who had irregular and unpredictable contact with their fathers. Even those who had never met their fathers did not exhibit as much antipathy as the participants who saw their fathers intermittently but perceived them as unreliable. Alfred, age 19, illustrated this type of complete resentment. He described his father as chronically unemployed, philandering, and in and out of jail. Perhaps more importantly, he and several similar participants described serial disappointments in childhood, when fathers did not keep promises about attending birthday parties or spending time together: "I don't ever really remember my father being in my life. It was always broken promises, so that's why I have so much resentment towards him, 'cause he's always saying he's gonna do something and it doesn't happen." Poignantly, Alfred was a "junior," named after his father, but was legally changing his name to sever their symbolic connection.

Conflicted or Mixed Emotions About Fathers A third group of participants expressed more mixed emotions toward their fathers. Like the group discussed above, they also expressed hurt feelings and resentment; however, they tempered their critiques somewhat, simultaneously expressing that they still loved and/or respected their fathers. Interestingly, every participant in this ambivalent group described a father who, despite previous absence or inconsistency, had made some recent effort to improve their relationship. Vince, 22, who is quoted earlier in the section on fathers re-engaging in their sons' lives, provided one example of such ambivalence above. In other parts of the interview, he described his father in unflattering terms: as an under-achiever who was inconsistently involved during his childhood, who was not accepting of his same-sex attractions, and was perceived by Vince as having a preference for other half-siblings. As evidenced by the earlier quote, however, he clearly loved his father but at the same time described the difficulties in forming a meaningful bond in the context of this previous damage to their relationship. In another example, Chris, 23, received an unexpected call at age 19 from his father who he had never met but who now wanted to establish a relationship with him. Chris struggled to reconcile feelings of anger and abandonment with his happiness about their long-awaited re-connection. He displayed considerable efforts to understand the prior absence of his father, who, he explained, was young and immature when Chris was born and later became busy and preoccupied with school, work, and building his own family. From these examples, we can see that many young men who felt abandoned or disillusioned with their fathers still feel an important emotional connection to their fathers and a desire to improve their relationships.

Communication About Sex and Sexuality

Lack of Sexual Education We asked all participants how they first learned about sex. Only one, Omar, 24, recalled a sex talk with his father at age 10, which he described as simplistic and ineffective “I remember the birds and the bees talk from my dad, but I knew what it was before hand.” A few participants had similar talks with other relatives and/or substitute figure figures, like Keith, 21: “My brothers [talked to me about sex]. And my uncle did. Also, my cousin, my auntie, and my mama yeah.” Other participants, however, cited the lack of communication with fathers about sex as a reason why they were not prepared to protect themselves when they became sexually active, as described below.

I felt like there were some situations I did not know how to address in life, and I knew that when I was growing up. I knew I did not know how to talk to women, I knew I did not know how to really just stand up for myself. I kind of learned those things along the way, but before I went into the situations I knew I was unprepared. (Jeremiah, 22)

Paternal Attitudes Toward Same-Sex Attraction Although fathers did not often teach sons about the mechanics of sex, they frequently communicated their feelings about gay sexuality. In some cases, tense relationships were strained further by paternal disapproval of same-sex behavior. Mario, age 21, gave such an example:

I was sitting in the back seat of the car and [my dad] . . . said I swear if any of my children were gay I would disown them. And once he said that I said, ‘I’m not going to tell him.’ Because I love my dad and it would have hurt me dearly if he just did not own me anymore, because he wasn’t really there for a partial part of my life so you leaving again will be hard on me . . . It did eat at me and I just, I didn’t really talk to my dad, I didn’t really try to do too much with him. I would come to family events but I was always terrified of him so our relationship was not that great.

In contrast, a few others had more accepting fathers with whom they could openly discuss their sexuality, like Antonio, age 19:

My dad understands that I’m going to be me regardless. In some ways he’s more supportive of my orientation than my mother because he really overlooks it, he don’t let it get in the way of our relationship. . . He’s pretty cool. . . he’ll be like ok is this guy treating you right? Do he take you out to eat?

Notably, all of the participants who expressed positive feelings toward intermittently present fathers also had fathers who were supportive of their same-sex identity and HIV status.

Masculine Socialization

The majority of our participants wished that their father had been more involved in their lives growing up. Specifically, they lamented not having a role model who could teach them how to “be a man.” Some participants alluded to specific life lessons or skills they would have liked to learn from a man. These included

household skills like cutting the grass, as well as interpersonal skills including self-defense and tips for dating. Freddie, 23, whose father was in prison at the time of our interview, exemplifies this type of sentiment:

Freddie: Um he's been in prison 4 or 5 years. I don't know how long he has [left in his sentence]. I'm not saying that I don't care but at the same time he left me when I was 12 and that's when I needed a father the most, you know, I'm going through adolescence, I still had to ask my mom and you know what I'm saying, I didn't have a dad there.

Interviewer: What kind of stuff would you have wanted to ask him?

Freddie: I mean, just how to do certain things or you know, how to like, you know, cut a lawn, my grandpa taught me that. You know, that's usually things that your dad teaches you.

Many participants eventually learned these skills on their own; a few stated that substitute father figures, like Freddie's mother and grandfather, stepped in at these times. Despite the lack of direct role modeling described by many of our participants whose fathers were less involved, participants were very aware of traditional masculinity norms in their communities:

About being gay, you know, its actually a lot of, when you're young there's a lot of hate crimes centered around sexuality that people probably don't really know, but kids who grew up in like inner cities, like, if you're not wearing your pants sagging or wearing the coolest stuff or talking to as many girls as there is to talk to, there's something wrong with you. (Jeremiah, 22)

Indirect Pathways of Influence

Psychological Risk Participants also described ways in which strained father-son relationships led to heightened psychological and situational risk, and in a few instances, they retrospectively attributed some of their prior HIV risk behaviors to these processes. The previously mentioned findings allude to the sense of loss and trauma that many participants felt when reflecting on intermittent or complete paternal uninvolvedness. Additionally, some participants described overt psychological symptomatology which they also attributed to father absence. Psychological symptoms included internalizing symptoms such as low self-esteem, stress, and depression, as well as externalizing symptoms including anger and delinquent behaviors. Two examples are listed below.

I used to have issues with my self-esteem, and I think some of my issues with my self-esteem came through my sexuality and not really knowing who my father was. (Jeremiah, age 22)

One day I had wrote a poem in class and I guess my teacher read it and she took it to my parents. And my dad got worried because he thought I was going to commit suicide. But he thought I was going to take my own life and they put me in therapy. And I think, I can say that's when my emotions did come out because I think I did have a little hatred toward my dad because he wasn't there. (Mario, age 21)

A few participants went on to link their psychological problems to high-risk sexual behavior. Sebastian, 22, for example, related his psychologist's observation that he used sexual behavior with random or casual partners to cope with depression.

I've been talking to the [mental health clinic] upstairs, the psychologist up there made a comment that she believes that I'm a sex addict because of some of the things that I talked about . . . Which is probably the reason why I'm here [in an HIV clinic] today, because I've had sex with so many guys. And sometimes when I feel stressed. . . I will watch porn, masturbate or go onto some of the sites like Black Gay Chat or Adam4Adam or Craigslist to find someone random to have sex with, stuff like that and I guess that's a big stress relief thing for me.

Situational Risk Participants also described ways in which strained father-son relationships led to increased situational risk for HIV. This relationship strain was often due to paternal disapproval about same-sex behavior. In one example, Andre, 22, was kicked out of his home when his father learned of his sexuality. He fled to the home of an emotionally abusive partner, where his need for shelter compromised his ability to negotiate condom use.

I always use protection, its just in this one case I [didn't], because of the fact that, he was saying that if I didn't have sex I would be put outside and it was raining that night. And I'm like no, there's no way I'm doing that. So basically, I kept saying, 'Well, where's the condom?' And he said, 'We're all out.'

Andre believes that this unprotected sexual encounter was the instance in which he acquired HIV. Whether or not that was the case, Andre's story demonstrates how lack of acceptance from his father put him in a high-risk situation for HIV acquisition. In less extreme cases, fear of parental disapproval and inability to discuss same-sex relationships with parents led to hasty selection of casual sex partners without thorough assessment of sexual risk.

If I had came out to my parents earlier then maybe I would not have turned out [HIV] positive, 'cause I wouldn't have been hiding it. I mean I came to the city to do whatever with whomever, and it was always a secret, I was always just out and my parents like, if I came home from work and nobody was home, it was like bet, I'm bout to take a shower and be out before anybody, so I can just go and do some scandalous crap. . . I feel like, if I was a little more open with my parents... maybe I wouldn't have been so sneaky and so scandalous to try to go have sex in the 3 h window that I had. It had me in this situation I'm in now [being HIV positive]. (Omar, age 24)

Another situational risk factor that was frequently mentioned by participants was gravitation toward older men. Several postulated that lack of a father figure led them to seek support and love from older men. The absence of their fathers prompted gravitation toward older men not only as gay fathers but also as friends and sexual/romantic partners. One such example was provided by Steven, 22, who was living with a partner who was 12 years older than himself and who hypothesized: "I think that that lack of love and attention I would have got from my dad, I think I seek and sought that from someone else, from other guys." Approximately half of our sample described sexual relationships with considerably

older men. Some of these relationships, particularly those which were still ongoing, were described as equal partnerships. When remembering relationships earlier in their adolescence, however, participants were often dependent on older partners for financial and/or housing support, resulting in extremely imbalanced power dynamics. Often, these were the relationships in which participants thought that they acquired HIV.

DISCUSSION

We found that father-son relationships were critically important in the developmental histories of our sample of HIV-positive YBMSM. Our first objective was to characterize our participants’ perceptions of their own relationships with their fathers. Participants described these relationships as dynamic trajectories and specifically discussed the degree of paternal involvement, emotional qualities of the relationships, communication about sex, and masculine socialization. Our second objective was to understand how these features of father-son relationships was perceived to have influenced sons’ development and HIV risk. Our proposed conceptual model (Fig. 1) summarizes the direct and indirect pathways by which father-son relationships were perceived to have influenced HIV risk by our participants. Of note, this cross-sectional analysis cannot definitively establish causal directions of these mechanisms; this model is simply meant to depict conceptual relationships as they were described by our participants, reflecting retrospectively on their own life trajectories.

In analyzing the degree of paternal involvement for our sample, we found that most of our participants had non-resident fathers who were intermittently involved in their lives. Fluctuating father involvement was often attributable to societal structural barriers such as incarceration and unemployment. Notwithstanding these structural challenges, participants experienced a wide range of father-son relationship trajectories. Some narratives portrayed completely absent fathers and resentful sons, but many others described previously absent fathers making efforts to re-enter their sons’ lives and appreciated these efforts. Additionally, many participants accessed substitute father figures in their families and communities, echoing previous

FIG. 1 Conceptual framework of father-son relationships and HIV risk

studies of “natural mentors” and “social fathering” in gay/bisexual youth and in black communities more generally.^{10,22}

Participants’ emotions toward their fathers varied widely. Several studies have focused on emotional qualities of the father–child relationship, emphasizing the risk-attenuating influence of positive affect and attachment on sexual behavior.²³ However, these primarily quantitative studies have not provided detailed descriptions of qualities of relationships that led to positive or negative emotional states. Among our YBMSM, consistent paternal presence and acceptance of sons’ sexuality were the two characteristics that seemed most associated with positive feelings toward fathers. On the other hand, most negative comments about fathers came from those who perceived their fathers as inconsistent or unreliable.

Lack of communication about sex sometimes led to poor understanding of sexual risk and/or low self-efficacy for protection against HIV. This is consistent with research in the general adolescent population, where father–child communication about sex is most frequently characterized as awkward and infrequent.²⁶ One other qualitative study of YBMSM also found that fathers were an infrequent source of HIV prevention information; the authors hypothesized that this was due to a combination of lack of paternal involvement and negative paternal attitudes toward same-sex behavior.¹³ Similarly, for our participants, unfavorable paternal attitudes toward same-sex behavior often exacerbated the inherent challenges of sexuality conversations between parents and children. Unfortunately, lack of open communication between parents and children may increase reliance on alternative, higher-risk sources of sexual learning such as the Internet, peers, or early sex partners, a pattern which has previously been associated with riskier behavior among black men.⁴²

Many participants described insufficient male role modeling to guide them through adolescence. In HIV research, many discussions of masculinity have focused on the negative or risky implications of masculinity beliefs, which are frequently associated with high-risk behaviors such as sexual partner concurrency and inconsistent condom use.^{36,38} Interestingly, one recent study found that having more male family network members and confidants was associated with lower HIV rates among YBMSM.⁴³ Therefore, although endorsement of traditional masculinity beliefs tends to increase risk, there may also be a necessary and risk-lowering aspect to masculine socialization, which many of our participants were missing.

Participants attributed negative psychological sequelae to father absence, consistent with previous research linking father absence to lower self-concept among black adolescent boys.⁴⁴ Many of our participants characterized father absence during their youth as a traumatic loss or major hardship, even if the absence was intermittent. A few participants linked these psychological problems to subsequent sexual risk behaviors including an absence of caution in engaging in sexual partnerships. Poor mental health, including depressed mood and low self-esteem, has been linked to sexual risk behavior in prior studies of adult MSM.^{45–47}

Finally, negative father–son relationship dynamics increased situational risk for some participants by predisposing them to form partnerships where they had limited power to negotiate safe sex. At its extreme, paternal rejection led to homelessness and exchanging unsafe sex in return for housing, a phenomenon that has been previously described in other gay youth.⁴⁸ Consistent with a recent study of both HIV-positive and HIV-negative YBMSM, our participants gravitated to older men,

both as sexual partners and as father figures.⁴⁹ Older partners may expose younger men to sexual networks with higher HIV prevalence, and more frequent age-mixing among black MSM is hypothesized to be a contributor to the black-white disparity in HIV incidence.⁵⁰ At the dyadic level, large age differences can lead to power imbalances, decreasing the ability of YBMSM to negotiate condom use.⁴⁹ These descriptions of imbalanced power dynamics echo well-described patterns in age-disparate heterosexual dyads in the USA,⁵¹ and similar phenomena are widely accepted as drivers of the largely heterosexual sub-Saharan African epidemic as well.⁵²

Limitations and Future Directions

Our study has several limitations. One author (SAH) conducted all 20 interviews and performed much of the transcription and analysis. To address this bias, we collaborated within our study team at every stage of analysis to ensure reliability of findings. We did not interview HIV-negative, non-black, or heterosexual youth and therefore cannot comment on the specificity of our findings to HIV-positive YBMSM. We were also unable to interview fathers in this study and were therefore examining the relationships only from the sons' point of view. This reflects the study's phenomenological orientation, however, and is not necessarily a weakness, as previous studies of ethnic minority^{27,53} and sexual minority⁵⁴ youth have highlighted the importance of the child/adolescent's subjective perceptions of parental relationships for outcomes including safe sex behaviors and emotional well-being. We did not specifically ask participants to define fatherhood but rather left this open to participants' interpretations. Again, this approach was consistent with our overall philosophical orientation; however, increased specificity in this area could help to define goals and outcomes for future interventions aimed at improving father-son relationships. Despite these limitations, this study is an important contribution to the still nascent literature exploring sociocontextual and developmental influences in YBMSM as they relate to the domestic HIV epidemic.

Future work can build on this exploratory study to refine and test our conceptual model; there are likely additional complexities and relationships between constructs beyond what is depicted in Fig. 1. For example, situational and psychological factors may be related to one another, and the various aspects of the father-son relationship are likely to be inter-related as well. Additionally, there are other closely related sociocontextual factors that are beyond the scope of this paper, most notably relationships with mothers and socioeconomic consequences of father absence; these are likely to influence the theoretical relationships described in our findings and are important directions for future inquiry.

CONCLUSIONS

The disproportionate and rising rates of HIV among YBMSM stem from complex mechanisms that are still being fully elucidated. The findings presented here are not meant to imply that father-son relationships are the only or primary driver of these disparities. However, in our analysis, YBMSM living with HIV viewed father-son relationships as important contributors to their psychosocial development, with potential to either exacerbate or attenuate sexual risk. To our knowledge, this is the first study to characterize father-son relationships among YBMSM living with HIV. Future studies should quantitatively and longitudinally explore both positive and negative aspects of father-son relationships and their influence on HIV outcomes.

Evidence-based interventions have successfully strengthened relationships between black fathers and sons in other settings^{18,28}; similar programs may provide a promising direction for future health-promotion efforts with YBMSM.

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