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From Fathers to Sons: The Intergenerational Transmission of Parenting Behavior among African American Young Men

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Abstract

This study examined the intergenerational transmission of fathering among young, African American fathers in rural communities. A sample of 132 African American young men living in the rural South reported on the quality of their relationship with their biological and social fathers in the family of origin, their own involvement with their young children, and relational schemas of close, intimate relationships. Results of path analyses supported the hypothesized mediational model, such that a better relationship with one's biological (but not social) father predicted increased father involvement in the next generation, and this association was partially mediated through positive relational schema after controlling for a range of covariates. Tests of moderated mediation indicated that the link between relational schema and father involvement was significantly stronger among fathers of girls than fathers of boys. Findings highlight the unique influence of close, nurturing father-child relationships for downstream father involvement, and the role of relational schemas as a mechanism for intergenerational transmission among young, rural, African American fathers of girls.

Over the past several decades researchers have documented the profound role that fathering plays in child development (e.g., Flouri & Buchanan, 2004; Sarkadi et al., 2008; Tamis-LeMonda, Shannon, Cabrera, & Lamb, 2004). An initial generation of fatherhood research focused on the impact of fathers' residential status. These studies found that compared to children with residential fathers, children growing up in homes without a father were more likely to show deficits in both cognitive and socio-emotional functioning (McLanahan, Tach, & Schneider, 2013; Paschall, Ringwalt, & Flewelling, 2003). Children growing up in father-absent households demonstrate poorer grades and higher levels of aggressive behavior than children whose fathers live with them (Howard, Burke Lefever, Borkowski, & Whitman, 2006; Osborne & McLanahan, 2007). In adolescence and young adulthood, children in father-absent homes have lower high school graduation rates, higher incarceration rates, and

a greater likelihood of drug and alcohol abuse than those raised in two-parent households (Harper & McLanahan, 2004; Hoffmann, 2002)

More recent research has focused on the concept of *father involvement* — or how much time fathers spend engaged with – or accessible to – their children. These studies acknowledge that father involvement may vary considerably among both residential and non-residential fathers. Although residential fathers are in general more involved than nonresidential fathers, involvement in either case has a positive influence on children's development. For example, when non-residential fathers remain positively involved with their children those children show heightened social and emotional well-being and greater academic achievement (Adamsons & Johnson, 2013). Similarly, high quality relationships between non-residential fathers and their children predict fewer externalizing and internalizing behavior problems (King & Sobolewski, 2006).

Among the rural, African American fathers who are the focus of the present study, there is an elevated risk of disengagement from their children's lives. The majority of rural, African American children are raised in single parent homes (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2014). Although most biological fathers are involved around the time of a child's birth, studies suggest that over time a variety of factors – including economic distress, few community resources, and racial discrimination – combine to reduce many of these men's involvement. For example, Barton et al. (2015) reported that among young, rural African American men, more than a third reported little or no contact with their fathers growing up. Low levels of father involvement in the lives of African American children are associated with decrements in school readiness, emotion regulation, social competence, and psychological well-being (Downer & Mendez, 2005; McHale et al., 2006).

Studies documenting the impact of father involvement on African American children underscore the vital importance of understanding the factors that promote father involvement in general and among rural African American families in particular (Caldwell et al., 2014; Barton et al., 2015). One factor that has been proposed as a potential influence is men's experience of supportive relationships with their own fathers. The *intergenerational transmission of parenting* perspective suggests that the nature and quality of parenting are intergenerationally transmitted, with parents in one generation parenting in a manner similar to that which they experienced growing up (Serbin & Karp, 2003). Support for this perspective comes largely from studies documenting associations between mothers' parenting and their children's parenting in the subsequent generation (e.g., Belsky, Conger, & Capaldi, 2009). The intergenerational transmission of fathering suggests that fathers' parenting in one generation may also be linked to the parenting behavior of their sons in the next generation. Although men's exposure to close, nurturing relationships from their fathers has been proposed as a causal factor in their own behavior as fathers, empirical data on this conjecture is lacking. In the present study we address this gap, examining the influence of supportive father-child relationships in the family of origin on father involvement in the next generation among a sample of young, rural, African American men.

Conceptual and Empirical Support for the Intergenerational Transmission of Fathering

The vast majority of studies linking parenting across generations has focused on the influence of mothers on their children's later parenting behavior (Belsky, Conger, & Capaldi, 2009; Kerr, Capaldi, Pears, & Owen, 2009). This work has shown that mothers' positive and constructive parenting in the first generation is related to positive parenting practices in the second generation (e.g., Bouchard, 2012; Capaldi, Pears, Patterson, & Owen, 2003). Few investigations have directly considered the intergenerational transmission of parenting from fathers to sons. In general, many family and contextual predictors of fathering behavior differ in magnitude from the correlates of mothering (e.g., Doherty, Kouneski, & Erikson, 1998), and there are some reasons to believe that the intergenerational transmission of fathering could be weaker than the intergenerational transmission of mothering. For instance, mothers in most families continue to do the lion's share of child care and spend significantly more time with children than fathers throughout childhood (e.g., Yeung, Sandberg, Davis-Kean, & Hofferth, 2001). As such, mothers (and not fathers) may be the primary caregiving model that sons rely on to guide their own parenting in the next generation. Similarly, past investigations suggest a somewhat weaker transmission of attachment styles across generations for sons than for daughters (Scharf, Mayseless, & Kivenson-Baron, 2012; van Ijzendoorn, 1995).

Nonetheless, several studies do suggest the plausibility of intergenerational transmission of parenting behavior from fathers to sons. For example, studies have found that men whose fathers were absent during their childhood were more likely to be absent from the lives of their own children (e.g., Furstenburg & Weiss, 2000; Pougnet, Serbin, Stack, Ledingham, & Schwartzman, 2012). New fathers who had an involved, coresidential father growing up were more likely than those with uninvolved fathers to support the notion that fathers play important roles as authority figures in the family (Guzzo, 2011). Similarly, Beaton, Doherty, and Rueter (2003) found that expectant fathers' reports of their own fathers' competence were related to more positive attitudes toward father involvement.

These studies provide initial support for intergenerational transmission of parenting behavior from fathers to sons. However, a number of key limitations to this research base are apparent. First, prior studies on the intergenerational transmission of fathering have focused largely on residential status rather than the quality of the relationship with one's father (Furstenburg & Weiss, 2000; Pougnet et al., 2012). In fact, many men who do not live with their children develop close and nurturing relationships with them, which in turn have positive consequences for child development (Adamsons & Johnson, 2013). This is particularly true among African American non-residential fathers, who are more likely to be engaged in children's lives than White non-residential fathers (Jones & Mosher, 2013). Thus, it is critical that studies investigating the intergenerational transmission of fathering among African American men consider father-child relationship quality rather than residential status as a predictor of downstream father involvement. One exception to the focus on residential status is work by Hofferth, Pleck, and Veesely (2012), which found that men whose fathers were positively involved with them growing up subsequently engaged in

more praise and physical affection with their children. However, this study was not specifically focused on African American fathers and did not include a comprehensive assessment of fathers' involvement with children in the second generation. Thus, the extent to which African American fathers' involvement is linked to father-child relationship quality in the family of origin is not yet known.

A second limitation of the research on intergenerational transmission involves a lack of investigations regarding the role of social fathers. Social fathers are men who play a fathering role in children's lives despite not being the child's biological father. Past research reveals that social fathers play a particularly important role in African American communities, with the majority of low-income, African American young children reporting a social father, often a male relative or romantic partner of the mother (Jayakody & Kalil, 2002). Involvement of social fathers has been linked to reductions in children's behavior problems and increases in prosocial behavior (Coley, 1998; Zimmerman, Salem, & Maton, 1995). Recent investigations find relatively few overall differences in the parenting practices of biological and social fathers (Bzostek, 2008) and suggest that the involvement of a residential social father may be equally important to child well-being as the involvement of a residential biological father (Berger, Carlson, Bzostek, & Osborne, 2008).

Nonetheless, biological and social fathers may differ in the quality and/or quantity of their parenting behavior. For instance, biological fathers may be more likely than social fathers to invest material goods and socialization efforts in their children, both for evolutionary purposes and because of deeply ingrained legal and social obligations to do so. Furthermore, some studies have documented unique correlates of biological vs. social fathering. These studies have shown that father involvement among biological (but not social) fathers is linked to young men's future expectations (Barton et al., 2015), and that the entrance of a biological father in a child's life is related to lower levels of boys' antisocial behavior, but the entrance of a social father is related to more antisocial behavior in boys (Mitchell, McLanahan, Brooks-Gunn, Garfinkel, & Notterman, 2015). These investigations suggest the utility of considering the influence of both biological and social fathers in the family of origin on men's parenting behavior. Nonetheless, to date we are aware of no studies that examine the quality of relationship with social fathers as a contributor to the intergenerational transmission of parenting from fathers to sons.

Relational Schemas as a Mechanism Underlying Intergenerational Transmission

A third limitation of studies on the intergenerational transmission of fathering involves a lack of information on the mechanisms that connect parenting behavior across generations. One way in which fathers' parenting behavior may carry forward to their sons' parenting behavior is via the internalization of *relational schemas*. Relational schemas are cognitive structures that represent patterns of relating within interpersonal contexts (Baldwin, 1992; Planalp, 1985). Developed in response to one's history of interpersonal interactions with important others, relational schemas help individuals to define situations more efficiently by drawing attention to salient cues in the social environment, goals associated with response

options, and consequences associated with particular responses (Baldwin, 1992; Bowlby, 1969; Planalp, 1985).

Interactions with parents are thought to be particularly influential in the development of adults' processing of information about current relationships, which may be especially critical among young parents who are often navigating many new social roles (i.e., parent, partner, worker) simultaneously. Among studies of the intergenerational transmission of parenting from mothers to daughters, relational schemas have been implicated as a causal mediator in the transmission of parenting (e.g., Belsky, Conger, & Capaldi, 2009). For example, Chen & Kaplan (2001) found that the intergenerational transmission of constructive mothering was mediated by mothers' general feelings about close, interpersonal relationships. Similarly, Shaffer et al. (2009) found that the association between mothers' parenting quality across generations was mediated through adults' perceptions of the quality of their own social competence in close relationships.

Empirical evidence on the intergenerational transmission of fathering via relational schemas is lacking. Past studies, however, suggest the plausibility of this mechanism particularly among young fathers in emerging adulthood. For example, young adults who reported having loving relationships with their fathers in childhood were more likely to seek comfort from close relationships (Black & Schutte, 2006), whereas distant father-child relationships have been linked to greater feelings of relationship anxiety (Seiffge-Krenke, Overbeek, & Vermulst, 2010). In turn, men with relational schemas that promote close, trusting relationships with other adults are more likely to engage in sensitive parenting and form high-quality relationships with their young children (McFarland-Piazza, Hazen, Jacobvitz, & Boyd-Soisson, 2012). Based on these studies, we hypothesized that positive relational schemas will mediate the transmission of fathering behavior across generations.

Child Gender and Fathering Behavior

Fathers often interact with sons and daughters in qualitatively different ways (Russell & Saebel, 1997). There is evidence that fathers are more likely than mothers to adjust their parenting behavior according to the gender of their child (e.g., Starrels, 1994). This gender-differentiated pattern is manifested in infancy in greater synchrony (responsive matching of children's affective states by a parent) among father-son than father-daughter dyads (Feldman, 2003), and fathers spending more time with sons than daughters (e.g., Lundberg, McLanahan, & Rose, 2007).

The extent to which child gender affects a) the intergenerational transmission of fathering, and b) the mediation of this transmission via romantic relationship schemas is unknown. We hypothesize that relational schemas will have a relatively greater predictive impact on fathers' involvement with daughters than sons. Recent research on fathering indicates that fathers spend a large portion of their time with their young sons engaged in rough and tumble play and physically stimulating activities (e.g., Fletcher, George, & Freeman, 2013). For men, clear cultural scripts exist for engaging with male children around these types of physically and emotionally activating activities (Paquette, 2004). We speculate that these scripts and the relative ease with which men can engage with their sons allows them to build

a sense of closeness without accessing relational schemas related to emotional intimacy. In contrast, with daughters, the lack of a readily accessible and practiced behavioral script for engagement may lead to greater reliance on internalized schemas to determine how to interact. In this case, men's development of relational schemas that specify how to behave in close relationships will hold greater importance to behavior with one's child. Thus, we hypothesize that the association between relational schema and father involvement will be significant for father-daughter relationships, but not for father-son relationships.

Disentangling Father Influences

In Figure 1 we summarize our primary hypotheses. We expect that men's exposure during childhood to close nurturing relationships with biological and social fathers will affect their involvement with their own young children both directly and indirectly via their development of positive relational schemas. In order to increase the rigor of our examination, it is necessary to consider a number of potentially confounding variables and control for them in our analyses. First, relational schemas may be affected not only by father-child relationships in the family of origin but also by mother-child relationships. We thus consider young fathers' reports of their current relationships with their mother as a proxy for that relationship in the family of origin. In addition, generalized adversity in the home is linked to the internalization of less positive relational schemas (Murphy et al., 2014). We thus consider and control for a history of adversity during childhood in our models.

Father involvement may also be influenced by other powerful contextual factors. These include fathers' work hours and residential status, both of which will be considered in our analyses. Finally, past research suggests that a potential mechanism of intergenerational transmission of parenting involves problems with regulating behavior, such that poor relationships in the family of origin may lead to greater aggression, less self-control and more antisocial behavior (Capaldi et al., 2003; Neppl et al., 2009), which results in an inability to engage in close committed relationships and a lack of positive father engagement. Thus, we account for the influence of fathers' self-regulation in all models to better test our hypotheses regarding the explanatory role of relational schemas.

Method

Participants

Hypotheses were tested with data from the African American Men's Project (AMP), a study of young adult men living in the rural, southern United States. Men were recruited from 11 contiguous counties in southern Georgia. These counties were selected based on their non-urban designation per the census and having a population density of less than 100 persons per square mile. Eligibility criteria included self-identification as African American, residence in the sampling area, male gender, and age of 19 to 22 years. Of the total AMP sample ($N = 505$), 132 men reported having at least one child; these men comprised the focus of our analyses.

Participants were recruited using respondent-driven sampling (RDS), a chain-referral protocol designed to mitigate biases commonly associated with network-based samples and a preferred method for sampling hard-to-reach, young adult populations (Kogan, Weinert, Chen, & Brody, 2011). Research staff recruited 45 initial “seed” participants from the 11 sampled counties and scheduled data collection visits at the participant’s home or a convenient community site (usually a private room in the public library). Upon completion of the data collection visits, each of the initial “seed” participants provided the names of three men in their personal networks who met eligibility criteria. Project staff contacted these men regarding participation. As with the seeds, upon completion of data collection, these participants also provided referral information for three network members. For each network member successfully recruited into the study, the referring participant received \$25. After recruitment of seeds, 618 men were referred to the project by participants and screened for eligibility by phone; 460 (74.4%) completed the survey. Among those who did not participate after contact, 5 refused to participate, and the remaining failed to complete a data collection visit due to other reasons (did not show for appointment, lost contact with staff, moved).

The mean age of fathers in the AMP sample was 21.3 years old ($SD = 1.16$). The majority of fathers (78%) reported having completed high school or receiving a GED; 22.8% of men had completed some college or trade school. Just over a third of fathers (34.2%) reported being currently enrolled in schooling of some sort and 48.5% were currently employed. The majority of fathers were single and never married (89.5%), with 4.5% married and the remaining separated or widowed. Over half of the fathers (56.1%) reported that they usually lived in the same home as their child. The majority of the sample (89.4%) reported a current romantic partner. Mothers were reported as current, primary parent by 72% of men, grandmothers by 13.6%, and fathers by 6.8%. Only 19.5% of the sample reported living with their biological father during all of childhood and 40.9% reported never living with their biological father. Over half of the sample (55.3%) reported the presence of a non-biological “social father” who was an important part of their life growing up. A total of 11.4% of the sample never lived with their father and reported no social father in their life, and 26.5% of the sample reported having a social father and also living with their biological father at some point.

Procedures

Self-report data were gathered from participants via audio computer-assisted self-interviews (ACASI). The user-friendly program allowed participants to navigate the survey with the help of voice and video enhancements that read survey questions aloud and presented pictures to participants, alleviating concerns regarding literacy. Each participant received \$100 at the conclusion of the data collection visit. All study protocols were approved by the University Institutional Review Board.

Measures

Father Involvement—Father involvement was assessed using a 6-item measure adapted from the Fragile Families and Child Well-Being study (e.g., Carlson & McLanahan, 2010). Fathers were asked how often in the past month they participated in a series of caregiving

and play activities on a 5-point scale (0 = *never*; 4 = *at least once a day*). Items consisted of the following: “How often did you prepare meals for your child?”, “How often did you change your child’s diapers or help your child use the toilet?”, “How often did you help your child to bed?”, “How often did you help your child get dressed?”, “How often did you help your child with eating?”, and “How often did you play with your child?” ($\alpha = .96$).

Relationship with Birth Fathers and Social Fathers—Men self-reported on the quality of their relationship with their birth fathers using a 3-item measure developed for AMP. The response scale ranged from 1 (*not true at all*) to 4 (*very true*). The items were “Growing up I could depend on my birth father to always be there when I needed him”; “Growing up I knew that my birth father cared about me”, and “Growing up I spent a lot of time with my birth father.” Previous research utilizing similar retrospective reports of parent involvement have demonstrated sound psychometric properties and predictive validity (Finley & Schwartz, 2004). A sum score was computed, with higher scores reflecting more father involvement ($\alpha = .93$).

Relationship with social fathers was assessed by asking whether participants had a man in their life “who was like a father to you growing up but wasn’t your birth father.” Participants who reported having a social father ($N = 73$) were asked the same three questions about this father figure, which were also summed to create a composite scale assessing quality of relationship with a social father ($\alpha = .90$).

Relational Schema—Relational schemas were assessed with the short form of Experiences in Close Relationship Scale (ECR; Wei, Russell, Mallinckrodt, & Vogel, 2007), which asks participants about their feelings in emotionally intimate relationships in general. Although the original scale was designed to yield Anxious and Avoidant scores, this factor structure failed to replicate in the current sample or yield internally reliable sub-scales. Instead, our factor analysis revealed a single, 6-item “positive relational schema” scale that combined both (reverse-scored) avoidance and anxiety items ($\alpha = .74$). Although the two-factor version of the ECR is commonly used in most samples, this transformation is consistent with past research that also found a single-factor solution in a sample of young, African American participants (Simons et al., 2012). Example items included, “I do not often worry about being abandoned” and “I feel comfortable depending on romantic partners.” The response set ranged from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 4 (*strongly agree*).

Covariates

Residential Status—Participants reported whether or not they lived in the same home as their child (1 = residential; 0 = non-residential).

Work Hours—Participants reported the number of hours per week that they worked.

Self-Regulation—Self-regulation was assessed via a short version (10 items) of the Self-Regulation Questionnaire (SRQ; Brown, Miller, & Lawandowski, 1999), an instrument designed to assess aspects of impulsivity and risk-taking behaviors. Sample items include: “If I wanted to change, I am confident that I could do it”, and “As soon as I see a problem or challenge, I start looking for possible solutions”. Items use a 4-point Likert scale (1 =

strongly disagree; 4 = strongly agree), and were summed to create a composite self-regulation score ($\alpha = .90$).

Adverse Childhood Experiences—The Adverse Childhood Experiences Survey (ACE; Felitti et al., 1998) assessed general adverse early experiences. The ACE is a 10-item survey assessing child maltreatment and household dysfunction during the first 16 years. Items assess neglect (e.g., “did you often or very often feel that you didn’t have enough to eat, had to wear dirty clothes, and had no one to protect you?”) and abuse (physical, verbal, and sexual; e.g., “did a parent or other person in the house often or very often hit you so hard that you had marks or were injured?”), as well as other risk factors such as substance abuse in the home (e.g., “Did you live with anyone who was a problem drinker or alcoholic or who used street drugs?”) and inter-parental violence (e.g., “Was your mother or stepmother often or very often grabbed, slapped, or had something thrown at her?”). Participants responded yes (1) or no (0) to all items, resulting in a scale indicating the number of adverse experiences during one’s childhood ($\alpha = .71$).

Current Relationship with Mother—Participants reported about their current relationship with the primary parent to whom they are closest. In 73% of cases, participants chose to report about their current relationships with their mother. These participants’ scores on the “Support from Parents” subscale of the Network Relationship Inventory (NRI; Furman & Buhrmester, 1985) were included as covariates in the model. Missing data were handled using full information maximum likelihood estimation (FIML), which is the default estimation procedure in Mplus. This 6-item scale assessed the quality of the current relationship between the participant and his mother. Participants reported the frequency (0 = *never*; 3 = *very often*) with which they depended on their mothers for emotional or material support (e.g., “How often do you depend on this parent for help, advice, or sympathy?”; “How often do you turn to her for support with personal problems?”; $\alpha = .94$).

Plan of Analysis

Initial analyses examined the RDS-derived network using the RDS Analysis Tool (Volz, Wejnert, Degani, & Heckathorn, 2007) to determine the effectiveness of the sampling procedure. The statistical theory upon which RDS is based suggests that, if peer recruitment proceeds through a sufficient number of waves, the sample composition will stabilize and become independent of the seeds with whom recruitment began. In this way, any bias the nonrandom choice of seeds may have introduced will be overcome. This stable sample composition is termed “equilibrium” and should occur within four recruitment waves.

The conceptual model presented in Figure 1 was tested with a series of path analyses as implemented in Mplus version 7 (Muthen & Muthen, 2012). We first tested a direct effects model to investigate the influence of biological and social father relationship quality on father involvement. In this analysis we controlled for the effects of child gender in addition to maternal relationship quality, adverse child experiences, work hours, residential status, and self-regulation on both relational schema and father involvement. We then tested a mediational model linking relationship with one’s own father to father involvement via relational schema with the same variables controlled. Indirect effects were tested using

bootstrapped confidence intervals. In a third step, we examined the influence of gender on the association between relational schema and father involvement using multigroup analyses for testing moderated mediation.

Results

RDS analyses on all study variables indicated that recruited participants were not biased by the initial seeds' characteristics; sample equilibrium on all study variables was achieved within two waves of recruitment. *T*-tests comparing, across all study variables, seed participants and participants who were part of networked referral chains were non-significant, supporting the acceptability of testing hypotheses with data combined from seeds and recruited participants.

Means, standard deviations, and *t*-tests examining mean-level differences of study variables by child gender are presented in Table 1. Correlations among all study variables are presented in Table 2. Notably, bivariate associations between father involvement, relationship with birth father, and positive relational schema were all significant and in the expected direction. Father involvement was also significantly higher among fathers of boys than fathers of girls. Mean levels of other variables did not differ significantly for boys vs. girls.

Preliminary analyses tested the influence of biological and social father relationship quality on father involvement net of covariates. The path coefficient from relationship with birth father to current father involvement was significant ($\beta = .27, p < .01$), such that men who reported close, nurturant relationships with their birth fathers were more involved with their own children net of covariates. The link between close, nurturant fathering from a social father and father involvement, however, was not significant ($\beta = .05, p = .71$). Thus, relationship with social father figure was dropped from subsequent analyses.

Mediational Model

Next, a model was tested to determine if relational schemas mediated the association between close, nurturant fathering and later father involvement. As before, child gender and all covariates were included as predictors of relational schemas and father involvement in this model. This model, presented in Figure 2, fit the data well, $\chi^2(10) = 7.12, p = .71$, RMSEA = .00, CFI = 1.00. A close, nurturing relationship with one's birth father predicted a positive relational schema, which in turn predicted increased levels of father involvement with one's own child. Furthermore, the magnitude of the indirect effect from birth father relationship to father involvement via relational schema was significant, bootstrap 95% CI [.01, .17], providing support for the mediational hypothesis.

Moderation by Child Gender

The next set of analyses tested whether the association between relational schema and father involvement differed for fathers of girls versus boys. Following protocols for testing moderated mediation (Preacher, Rucker, & Hayes, 2007), a multiple-group structural equation model (with child gender as the grouping variable) with all paths constrained to equality was compared to a model in which the path from relational schema to father

involvement was allowed to vary between the two groups. A significant difference in model fit between these models, $\chi^2(1) = 4.03, p = .04$, revealed that gender of the child moderated the link between relational schemas and father involvement. For the model with male children, the link between relational schema and father involvement was non-significant, $\beta = .01, p = .97$, as was the conditional indirect effect, bootstrap 95% CI $[-.10, .06]$. In contrast, for fathers of female children the link between relational schemas and father involvement was significant, $\beta = -.33, p = .02$, as was the conditional indirect effect, bootstrap 95% CI $[-.04, .51]$.

Discussion

Despite popular conjecture that how one was fathered affects men's involvement with their own children, little empirical research has tested this proposition. This study is the first to examine the influence of both biological and social father relationship quality in childhood on young, African American fathers' involvement with their children. The present study provides supporting evidence for the intergenerational transmission of parenting from fathers to sons. Specifically, young fathers who experienced a close relationship with their own biological father, compared to those who did not, were more likely to be involved in their children's lives. A close relationship with a social father, however, did not evince a similar effect on downstream father involvement. The transmission of fathering behavior was mediated, in part, by positive relational schemas. Young fathers who reported close, supportive relationships with their own fathers were more likely to report positive relational schemas which in turn predicted their involvement with their young children. The influence of relational schemas on father involvement, however, differed based on the gender of the child. Relational schemas were particularly important in predicting father involvement among fathers of girls.

Although past research has found support for the intergenerational transmission of parenting from mothers to daughters (Belsky et al., 2009; Kerr et al., 2009), the extent to which parenting is transmitted from fathers to sons has been not been investigated. The present study suggests that the intergenerational transmission of parenting is also relevant when considering fathering. Although this study examined relationship quality with fathers in the family of origin, these findings are largely consistent with past investigations which have found that biological father absence is related to an increased probability of low father involvement downstream (e.g., Furstenburg & Weiss, 2000; Pougnet et al., 2012), and that father-son relationship quality in the family of origin is associated with attitudes about how one should father (Beaton et al., 2003; Guzzo, 2011). Study results go beyond past research by examining father involvement (rather than fathers' residential status or parenting beliefs) and providing evidence for a link between fathers' early relationships with their own fathers and their involvement with their young children among young, rural, African American fathers who are at risk for disengagement from their children's lives.

Despite past research indicating that social fathers are highly prevalent in low SES, African American families (Jayakody & Kalil, 2002), nearly half of the men in this sample did not report the presence of a social father in their lives. In contrast to our expectations, a positive relationship with a social father growing up did not have a direct influence on men's

behavior as fathers. This is consistent, however, with findings suggesting that the developmental impact of this relationship can be positive when the social father is a biological relative, but negative when the social father is the boyfriend of one's mother (Jayakody & Kalil, 2002). Although social fathers may well have positive benefits for some domains of child well-being (e.g., Bzostek, 2008) these findings speak to the privileged role of the biological father-child relationship in promoting father involvement in the next generation. Other relationship dimensions may also explain these findings. It is possible that in our sample biological fathers, compared to social fathers, may have had more consistent involvement over time or been involved at an earlier age when relational schemas are most influenced by parenting behavior. Moreover, among fragile families with high levels of relationship instability, entrances of biological fathers into the lives of their children may have more enduring effects than entrances of social fathers (Mitchell et al., 2015). Future studies that include detailed data on patterns of involvement from both biological and social fathers over time are needed to investigate these possibilities.

Mediating Role of Romantic Relationship Schema

Consistent with our hypotheses, the influence of biological fathers' close, nurturant parenting on downstream father involvement was partially mediated by positive relational schemas. Empirical and theoretical work suggests that more positive parent-child relationships are linked to the development of positive relational schemas (e.g., Simons, Simons, Lei, & Landor, 2012). Little of this research, however, has documented the relational schemas developed in response to caregiving experiences with fathers. Our findings suggest that relational schemas may be one pathway through which the legacy of past parent-child relationships are carried forward into adulthood and ultimately transmitted to the next generation of fathers.

Although fathers' contributions to daughters' intimate relationships has received more attention in the literature, this work suggests the need to continue examining the ways in which father-son interactions in childhood may also promote men's attitudes and beliefs about close, emotionally intimate relationships. The link between relational schemas and subsequent father involvement contributes to a growing body of literature indicating that fathers' parenting behavior appears to be affected by their working models of close relationships (e.g., McFarland-Piazza et al., 2012). These positive relational schemas appear to be partially responsible for the transmission of father-child relationships across generations among a sample of vulnerable fathers and children.

Child Gender Differences

Consistent with previous studies, fathers were more involved with male children than female children (e.g., Russell & Saebel, 1997). However, the strength of their relational schemas as an antecedent to that involvement was more pronounced with daughters. This is consistent with studies indicating that many fathers socialize girls in a more caring and empathic manner than boys (e.g., Starrels, 1994). For fathers of daughters, positive expectations for intimate, emotionally-salient relationships may be a prerequisite for positive father involvement. In contrast, fathers of boys may not draw as prominently on schemas of intimate relationships, as their interactions have a more scripted and often physical

component (Paquette, 2004). Future work should continue to explore alternative mechanisms underlying intergenerational transmission of parenting from fathers to sons. Perhaps alternative conceptualizations of father-child relationships that focus on physical, stimulating, and rough-and-tumble play styles (e.g., Fletcher et al., 2013; Paquette, 2004) that often characterize early father-child interactions may better elucidate the mechanisms underlying potential intergenerational transmission of fathering to sons. Similarly, mother-child attachment relationships are consistently linked to sensitive and nurturing parenting behaviors whereas father-child attachment is more closely related to play activities and the management of children's emotional stimulation (e.g. Grossmann et al., 2002). As such, the processes linking parenting behavior across generations may vary greatly as a function of both parent and child gender.

Limitations and Future Directions

Findings from this study contribute to a greater understanding of young, African American fathers' involvement with their children. However, this research has a number of important limitations. The present study focused on African American young men living in resource poor rural environments, and thus may not generalize to men in other contexts and men who become fathers at a later age. Moreover, this study included only retrospective reports of early father involvement which may be subject to recall bias. Retrospective perceptions of father involvement, however, may be particularly useful for classifying parental effects from childhood into adulthood, as "what is important to the children in the long run and what most heavily affects children's current and future behavior is the long-term parent 'residue' within the children that is encapsulated within the children's retrospective perceptions of their parents" (Finley & Schwartz, 2004, p. 145). Nonetheless, studies using prospective longitudinal designs including both quality of relationship and quantity of involvement with children are necessary to fully clarify the extent and nature of transmission of parenting across generations. Such longitudinal studies would benefit from additional information on early mother-child relationships, thus allowing comparisons of the relative impact of these relationships on downstream parenting behavior. Although the RDS procedure has been shown to attenuate biases that affect chain referral methods, caution must be exercised in generalizing findings in the absence of a random sample. Finally, data on father involvement and retrospective reports of father-child relationship quality were collected from participant self-report which can increase the potential for Type II error. Despite these limitations, this study provides valuable new information on the transmission of fathering among young, African American men.

Conclusion

Results from the present study can be used to inform interventions and clinical practice with young fathers at risk for disengagement from the lives of their children. Programs aimed at supporting early father-child relationships may be well-served by targeting relationships with fathers in the family of origin. One example is the Supporting Father Involvement project, which includes information regarding three-generational patterns of relationships and parenting in their intervention with low-income Mexican American and European American families (e.g., Cowan, Cowan, Pruett, Pruett, & Wong, 2009). Findings in the current study suggest that similar work with African American families may be fruitful.

Efforts to support father-child relationships may have implications not only for the health and well-being of fathers and children, but may also serve to promote fathering in the next generation, thereby helping to disrupt the intergenerational cycle of father absence that is prevalent in some families.

Consistent with some existing models of family therapy (e.g., Liddle & Schwartz, 2002), relational schemas may also be an effective point of intervention. Clinical work that alters men's attitudes and beliefs about close relationships may serve the purpose of promoting positive father-child relationships or blocking the transmission of negative parenting practices across generations of fathers. The focus on relational schemas may be especially beneficial for young fathers who face the challenge of navigating the transition to parenthood while also entering into new intimate relationships with romantic partners and other important social figures in emerging adulthood. As such, young fathers could accrue multiple benefits from developing adaptive schemas of close relationships that spill over into interactions with children, romantic partners, and others. Taken together, the present study supports the utility of developing policies and programs designed to meet the needs of fathers in general and young, African American fathers in particular. Further, this work provides suggestions for future clinical applications that may act on the mechanisms responsible for transmitting fathering across generations.

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Figure 1.
Hypothesized model for intergenerational transmission of fathering in young, African American Men

Figure 2.

Results of full model (boys and girls) controlling for all covariates.

Note: Standardized coefficients are presented first; p-values are presented in parentheses; * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics for All Study Variables

Variable	Range	<i>M (SD)</i>			<i>t</i>
		Total	Boys	Girls	
Father Involvement	0 – 24	18.16 (6.10)	19.32 (5.32)	16.89 (6.68)	2.32 *
Relational Schemas	6 – 24	14.45 (3.48)	14.30 (3.38)	14.60 (3.61)	.49
Relationship with Biological Father	3 – 12	7.02 (3.40)	7.24 (3.38)	6.77 (3.44)	-.78
Relationship with Social Father	3 – 12	8.61 (2.83)	8.49 (2.76)	8.74 (2.94)	.38
Relationship with Mother	5 – 20	17.28 (3.24)	17.35 (3.50)	17.19 (2.92)	-1.54
Adverse child experiences	0 – 13	2.26 (2.13)	2.32 (1.97)	2.19 (2.30)	-.35
Working hours	0 – 80	16.77 (19.29)	18.25 (20.26)	15.14 (18.20)	-.92
Self-regulation	20 – 40	34.20 (4.73)	34.08 (4.76)	34.33 (4.72)	.30
Residential Status (0=non-resident; 1=resident)	0–1	.56 (.50)	.58 (.50)	.54 (.50)	-.54

* $p < .05$

Table 2

Bivariate Correlations among Study Variables

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Father Involvement	-							
2. Relationship with birth father	.30**	-						
3. Positive Relational Schema	-.30**	-.23**	-					
4. Relationship with social father	.08	.07	-.18	-				
5. Relationship with mother	.13	-.09	.01	.23	-			
6. Adverse child experiences	-.07	-.10	.23**	-.15	.00	-		
7. Residential status	.09	.08	-.05	-.10	.07	-.06	-	
8. Working hours	.13	.11	-.07	-.01	.04	.20*	.07	-
9. Self-regulation	.18*	.02	-.29**	.10	.18	.02	.08	.07

*
 $p < .05$ **
 $p < .01$