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Group-Based Transmission of Fatherhood Among Intergenerational African-American Fathers: A Case Study

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Abstract

Problem: Nonresidential fatherhood contributes to the fact that over 70% of African-American children grow-up in homes without their biological fathers. In the absence of gender-specific parental guidance, African-American young men who become fathers may lack paternal-parenting preparation.

Methods: This secondary data analysis describes the verbal exchange of fatherhood perspectives among four experienced fathers and one adolescent father who participated in a pilot of group-based fatherhood intervention. Qualitative descriptive case study methodology guided by Social Learning Theory was used to explore the transmission of fathering perspectives between fathers.

Findings: Qualitative thematic analysis affirmed that adverse emotional and psychological distress may be avoided with positive parenting preparedness. Culturally-specific group-based bidirectional learning can transmit fatherhood knowledge and skills to adolescent nonresidential fathers and this new perspective can contribute to adolescent well-being.

Conclusions: There is a need to investigate channels for African-American adolescent boys, young men and fathers to engage in cultural-congruent paternal modeling in the event that their biological father or other social father role models are absent from their lives.

Keywords

Father; Fatherhood; African-American; Modeling; Parenting; Involvement; Bidirectional; Case study

INTRODUCTION

Fatherhood is one of, if not the most, daunting roles a man can encounter at any stage of life. The transition into the role of father may be particularly intimidating for men who face psychosocial stressors that can impact their overall wellbeing (Sansiriphun, Kantaruksa,

Klunklin, Baosuang, & Liamtrirat, 2015). One reason the transition into fatherhood may be perceived as stressful is that the diffusion of paternal roles from one generation to the next may be interrupted or nonexistent. Factors that can potentially disrupt the transmission of paternal role models between generations include (1) fewer fathers living in the same homes with their sons which subsequently reduces paternal learning opportunities (Vespa, Lewis, & Kreider, 2010); (2) minimal access to paternal and child health resources (Salinas, Smith, & Armstrong, 2011); (3) limited exposure to highly experienced skilled fathers (Smith, Tandon, Bair-Merritt, & Hanson, 2015); and (4) underexplored alternatives for transmitting paternal learning, such as group-based parenting interventions (Julion et al, 2016; Stahlschmidt, Threlfall, Seay, Lewis, & Kohl, 2013). The absence of a positive paternal role model can impede sons' abilities to become positive and effective fathers (Paschal, Lewis-Moss, & Hsiao, 2011).

During the course of child rearing, it is presumed that sons will gain paternal-parenting skills-sets from their fathers (Julion, Gross, Barclay-McLaughlin, & Fogg, 2007). However, over 30% of American children are born into single-mother-headed households, and over half of African-American (AA) children grow up in homes apart from their fathers (Langley, 2015; US Census Bureau [Census], 2010). African American fathers express a desire to be positively involved in their children's lives (Stahlschmidt et al., 2013) however deficits in paternal-parenting resources often relegate them to the sidelines as secondary caregivers. Further this marginalization of AA fathers can lead to lower levels of positive paternal involvement (Julion, et al, 2007) and impact their psychological well-being.

In the United States, AA fathers who want to be involved with their child/children can be constrained by several negative societal influences that can impact fathers' parenting practices such as unemployment, incarceration, poverty, and exposure to dangerous living conditions. Unemployment rates for AA men (14%) are higher than White men (6.7%) (US Bureau of Labor Statistics [BLS], 2013). One in 13 AA men in their 30s is incarcerated, a rate that is greater than non-AA men (Vogel & Porter, 2015). Rates of poverty in AA men (26%) are higher than non-minority White fathers (14%), (Macartney, Bishaw, & Fontenot, 2013; Minton & Zeng, 2015). Exposures to neighborhood crime (e.g., robbery, aggravated assault) for AA men are four times higher than for non-Hispanic White men (Mauer, 2011). These factors can constrain opportunities for young AA fathers to receive gender-specific parent training.

One alternative approach to support adolescent fathers attainment of paternal-parenting skills may be to expose these young men to mature males who are respected and perceived as acceptable substitute father-figures and mentors (Smith et al., 2015). In this mentoring context, social learning may occur between the father-figure or social father and the adolescent male. Social fathers may be male relatives or non-relatives who fulfill emotional, financial and socialization role modeling responsibilities. Scholarly work has begun to emerge that illustrate the benefits of social fathers serving as surrogate fathers; individuals who can step in to impact the well-being of children when the child's father is not involved or nonresident (Bzostek, 2018). Consequently in the AA communities where single parenthood rates may be high social fathers can influence the intergenerational transmission of paternal parenting knowledge and skills (Brown, Kogan, & Kim, 2018). Ultimately, the

adolescent father can decide to imitate the mentor-father's parental style or blend what he has learned into his own fathering skillset (Bandura, 1977, 1999).

In 2015 approximately 71% of AA male births were to unmarried AA mothers (Centers on Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2017), which may leave boys without paternal-parenting models (Taylor, Larsen-Rife, Conger, Widaman, & Cutrona, 2010). There may be a tacit but invalidated assumption that paternal parenting parallels maternal parenting and that strategies to support maternal parenting readily translate to fathers. In light of the positive contributions fathers make to the overall well-being of their children (Stahlschmidt et al., 2013), explicit attention to the culturally congruent gender-specific transmission of fatherhood among AA nonresident fathers and their sons is warranted. Gender-specific transmission of fatherhood between father and son can be beneficial to fathers (Tuffin, Rouch, & Frewin, 2010), and result in increased self-esteem and self-gratification because fathers are helping to contribute to a positive living legacy (Lemay, Cashman, Elfenbein, & Felice, 2010). Little empirical evidence confirms the benefits of paternal transmission of fathering. Even so, we hypothesize that the benefits to the child may include mental health and cognitive development, social behavior and the potential for the son to become a good father (Brown, et al., 2018).

This study is a qualitative descriptive case study design to explore the audio-recorded verbal exchange of fatherhood perspectives among five intergenerational non-residential fathers who participated in a pilot of a group-based fatherhood intervention (PGFI). Secondary sources of data included (1) audio-recordings of the verbal-exchange between fathers and (2) fathers' weekly written responses to practice assignments given at each PGFI session. Two research questions guided the study: (1) How does an adolescent, novice father learn to be a father in the absence of his biological father; and (2) How did the viewpoints of older experienced AA fathers (30–57 years of age) influence the adolescent (18 years of age) father's perspectives?

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Bandura Social Learning Theory

Albert Bandura's social learning theory (SLT) guided this qualitative case study (Bandura, 1977, 1999). In SLT, Bandura asserts that individuals can learn from one another as the learner identifies attributes in a behavior and then, decides whether the model is agreeable and subsequently imitates the agreeable behavior (Masciadrelli et al., 2006). The learner then focuses on the intended behaviors to model, retain the observed behavioral information and theoretically demonstrates replicates or repeats the learned behavior in future events (Fryling, Johnston, & Hayes, 2011). This case study focuses on the social learning opportunities and relational conditions that were presented to the youngest, novice father participant in the PGFI study. Since bidirectional learning is a component of SLT, we also considered whether the older fathers learned from the novice father (Redko, et al., 2016). Bidirectional learning is considered the reciprocal (two-way) knowledge exchange between involved collaborators (Redko et al., 2016).

METHODS

Case study design

We followed the case study design approach described by Yin (2014) in order to illuminate the existence and impact of intergenerational AA social fathers or models (Sandelowski, 2010; Yin, 2014). According to Yin's framework (2014), this single case approach allows for the flexibility to report on fathers' lived experiences.

Participants

The study was implemented in a large urban area. Fathers were recruited via advertisements in AA community neighborhood organizations. Five fathers responded to the recruitment efforts, four agreed to participate and the youngest father was invited by one of the older fathers. All fathers provided informed written consent. The PGFI was approved by the Institutional Review Board.

Data collection

The first data source consisted of 12 digital recordings of approximately two hours of discussion in response to video vignettes of AA paternal-parenting scenarios. At the end of each two-hour weekly PGFI sessions, the fathers were asked to practice the strategies they learned from that week's session in real life. The written retorts of their practice experiences and reflections on paternal parenting served as the second qualitative data source for this case study.

Procedures

Each author independently reviewed the 12-digital audio-recordings and the participants' written practice assignments at the conclusion of the PGFI (Sandelowski, 1995, 2000). The first author [CG] typed the recordings into abridged transcripts and stored the data within Microsoft Excel 2010™. Each author listened to the recordings for reoccurring phrases, statements, and words used by the older fathers. A second review of the audio-recordings was performed to focus on the phrases, statements, and words of the youngest father for emergent themes. The purpose of the repeated reviews was to capture the lived experiences of these fathers and ensure the abridged transcripts maintained close adherence to the data (Sandelowski, 1995, 2000). All participants were assigned pseudonyms to preserve anonymity.

Analysis

The coding strategy was intended to elicit meaningful clustering of consistent themes shared among the participants. Since the intent of the PGFI was to evaluate the fatherhood intervention, the themes were influenced by the topics of each individual session. Table 1 describes the three major content areas of the fatherhood intervention. The narrative data were coded separately and then compared by both authors for reoccurring keywords, phrases, uniform set of ideas, and emergent themes that were developed over time (Sandelowski & Leeman, 2012; Yin, 2014). The authors held weekly meetings to confirm

coding and to reach consensus on the themes. Discrepancies in coding were discussed to reach consensus.

RESULTS

The results are presented in themes influenced by PGFI topics within the context of bidirectional transmission of fathering between older fathers and an adolescent father. Table 2 summarizes selected participant demographic information for the pilot sample. Ages ranged from 18–55 years old; all five fathers lived apart from at least one biological child between the ages of two and five years old. No children were fathered within the context of a marital relationship. At least one father remained in an intimate partner relationship with his child's mother, three maintained cordial relationships, and the other father described a contentious relationship with his child's mother. Participating fathers reported diverse levels of involvement with their nonresident children; three reported frequent involvement and two noted infrequent involvement.

The bidirectional learning process involved exchanges of fathering experiences between the group participants, teaching moments from the experienced fathers integrated with the lessons from each group session for the novice father. Theme 1 included lessons learned by the novice father and theme 2 comprised lessons imparted by the novice father, Darick (pseudonym) to the experienced fathers. For each theme 1 sub-theme, Darick determined which fathering skills he would employ and which he would reject. The primary lesson imparted by the novice father in theme 2 was how experienced fathers' behavior and communication styles can contribute to difficult maternal relationships.

Theme 1: Fatherhood lessons learned by the youngest, novice father.

Staying on track.—"Staying on track" refers to fathers' ability to maintain balance or manage life events while being active in their children's lives. The experienced fathers shared their difficulties in staying on track and meeting the expectations of their children's mothers. After the group discussion, Darick voiced optimism about staying on track: *"It's hard...but I know if I get my education ... it's for her [his daughter] in the long run ... No matter what you go through and no matter the obstacles, you have to overcome those things to be the best father."*

Co-parenting.—In one session, the video scene used to illustrate co-parenting challenges began with a mother admitting to "being a jerk" at times to get revenge on her child's father for not providing resources for their child. She described being a jerk as not allowing the father to see his child if he had not provided her with financial support. Following the video, participants were asked "How are your interactions with the mothers of your children different or the same as the mother in the video scene?" The experienced fathers divulged how most of them had reached a verbal agreement with the mother of their child(ren). One father shared how he took the initiative to obtain structured court ordered co-parenting arrangements. Darick shared his perspective related to spending time with his child: *"Every time I get off football practice on Fridays ... her mother she got a job, so I go pick her [daughter] up and take her there. We'd just sit there and watch her mother work."* This

discussion helped Darick recognize that his co-parenting responsibilities afforded him additional opportunities to spend time with his daughter.

Being a good father.—The fathers were asked “What are the characteristics that make someone a good father?” By group consensus the experienced fathers, endorsed the concept of “being a Cosby dad.” Fathering characteristics associated with the television character Heathcliff Huxtable from the *Cosby Show* meant that fathers were available or “being there” for the child; providing financially; and disciplining as well as nurturing or showing love to the child. Darick asserted his own “Huxtable-ism.” *“If you tell your child they are the best at doing the activities they like, they are going to work hard and get better and better...In my mind she’s my priority. I go to school for her...She’s the first thing...and I know when I am set, my family is set...So it’s her, me, and my family.”* Darick’s take-away from the discussion was that in order to develop into a “Cosby dad,” he had to prioritize his child and consider her as a source of motivation.

Fathers are important!—This subtheme referred to the fathers’ perspectives that there are three broad categories of fathering: participating, providing, and performing. More specifically the experienced fathers expressed that performance went beyond fiscal responsibility and included nurturing behaviors such as “being there” to support the child emotionally in recreational activities (sports, dance recitals, or social engagements) or in stressful situations (fights, arguments, or being injured). Darick commented on the hardships he endured while interacting with his daughter’s maternal grandparents who perceived his performance as inadequate. According to Darick, they referred to him as a “*dead beat*” and a “*thug with no real-life goals*.” Darick stated that he often felt “*worthless after each visit with his daughter in her [daughter] grandparents’ home*.” The older fathers reassured Darick that as he continued on the path to reaching his educational goals, he “*would become an even greater father*.”

Fathers are teachers.—“Fathers are teachers” refers to guiding children and teaching them to be team players. After watching a video scene that simulated a young child not being a team-player and being disobedient to his father, Darick asked the older fathers: “*When is the correct moment to discipline your child?*” The older fathers offered “*It’s not just thinking about what to do right in the moment, but also think about the lasting effects of what I teach my children*.” To guide Darick’s query about the timing of discipline, the older fathers shared the importance of considering each moment as a teachable moment that can contribute to the growth and development of children.

It is worth it to take responsibility.—The group discussed fathering responsibilities that may be best resolved in the court systems. Several experienced fathers voiced hesitancy regarding court involvement. Darick’s viewpoint as an adolescent AA father was that fathers are viewed in a negative light and not given equal parenting rights because the courts tend to favor the mothers. One father in the group who had a court-ordered co-parenting arrangement offered the following perspective: “*When fathers hear courts, they go crazy, but once the judge gives you the child support order, your next question ought to be, when do I*

see my child?” Thus, this father believed that men should not fear the courts, but rather use it to their advantage to protect their paternal rights.

Theme 2: Fathers’ bidirectional learning: Fatherhood lessons imparted by the youngest, novice father: It was clear that all the fathers in the group gained knowledge from one another. Darick imparted his adolescent experiential knowledge and fathering perspectives by helping the older fathers recognize how their behavioral interactions with their children’s mothers and their access to their children were intertwined. One of the home practice activities for the fathers instructed them to attempt to have positive communication with the mothers of their children. Richard, an older father, noted that when he attempted to improve his communication with his children’s mother, more controversy ensued. Darick pinpointed that the specific delivery of Richard’s message regarding a woman’s role in the household contributed to ineffective communication. According to Darick, “*The woman doesn’t need to cook and clean all the time...it is your responsibility to make sure you eat, your family eat, and ensure the bacon gets on the table.*”

During a role-playing exercise conducted during the group session, an older father described his frustration with his child’s mother, who tried to leverage contact with his child in an attempt to resume their romantic relationship. Darick reminded the older father that by keeping the lines of communication open there was a better opportunity to remain connected with his child. Darick’s response during this activity was “*I want that bond with my child ... I don’t want the relationship with the Mom! It’s like a math problem ... it takes steps ... to get what you want.*” The older fathers admitted that this perspective helped them value the import of investing time to interact with their children’s mothers to maintain a bond with their children. Throughout the PGFI, group discussions often focused on the merits of Darick’s perspective and the group interchange. In the process, fathering skills flowed back and forth between the fathers.

DISCUSSION

This qualitative descriptive case study explored the audio-recorded verbal exchange among African-American (AA), nonresident fathers (one adolescent novice father and four adult experienced fathers) and their written retorts to practice assignments. The fathers voiced their perspectives about their experiences and the stressors of fathering and fatherhood. It is presumed that young men and fathers will garner parenting skills from their gender-specific, biological parent models. However, in some family structures, father role models may reside in separate households with limited to no access to their sons. Becoming a father is a major change and challenge in a man’s life and lack of proper training or preparation may contribute to psychological distress (Huang, Hung, Huang, & Yu, 2018). Adolescent AA fathers can be particularly vulnerable to this distress when they are mentor deficient (Huang, et al., 2018). The investigators learned that a group-based fatherhood intervention served as an essential training ground for an adolescent father. This positive gender-specific, bidirectional learning environment exposed him to fathers who represented diverse ages, economic status and relational status with the mothers of their children.

Over the course of the PGFI, the older fathers consistently uttered the phrase, “Let me school you...” as a precursor to their responses to the young father. The phrase “school you” is defined as “to teach a lesson” (Oxford Dictionary, 2016). The term “schooling” is urban slang usually used by an older adult AA males and refers to “schooling” a younger AA male in teachable situations to capture their attention and make a point. Thus, schooling serves as a way for an older person to provide necessary guidance to a younger person. During the group sessions, the older fathers “schooled” the youngest father Darick, whose reciprocal responses, influenced the older fathers. The bidirectional learning process involved exchanges of fathering experiences between all the group participants, teachable moments from the experienced older fathers (schooling), integrated with the content delivered through the PGFI.

The themes and subthemes that emerged from this case study strengthen the literature on the importance of tangible models of positive paternal-parenting for young and novice fathers (Lemay, et al., 2010). This study also contributes to the literature by supporting the importance of social fathering conducted in a group setting. For fathers to make a meaningful impact on the lives of their children they must maintain a consistent and positive presence. The fathers in this case study noted that their attempts to be positively involved with their children were often met with maternal, familial and societal constraints. These minority paternal-specific constraints contribute to psychological distress for fathers; constraints that have been under examined in empirical research. Thus policies, programs and father-centric interventions directed towards fathers, particularly adolescent AA non-resident fathers are essential (Julion et al., 2016).

Darick’s participation in this fatherhood PGFI confirmed the value of providing adolescent fathers with culturally congruent and gender-specific fatherhood resources that are sensitive to the intersections of gender, age, race, and social economic status. Darick’s exposure and interaction with a group of fathers with diverse fathering experiences afforded him access to a network to which he may not have availed otherwise. Interactions with a culturally congruent group of fathers (Comstock, et al., 2008) helped Darick become confident in his ability to be a “good father,” offered tangible skills, strategies for interacting with his child’s mother and afforded him concrete skills he could use when interacting with his daughter (Julion et al., 2012).

In the current qualitative descriptive case study, the older fathers and the youngest are bidirectional learning collaborators. Bidirectional learning occurred when the opportunity arose for two-way knowledge exchange in the PGFI sessions. In general the older fathers shared their experiential knowledge as long-time, nonresidential fathers with the novice nonresidential father. In turn the novice, who had been a father for six months, shared his approach to fatherhood. The exchange of knowledge was considered to be completed when both the experienced and novice fathers declared acceptance of one another’s points of view (Redko et al., 2016). Over the course of the sessions, Darick began to comprehend the importance of his paternal role in his child’s life and that he must capitalize on opportunities to interact with his daughter in ways that are specific to a fathers’ strengths. Darick learned the critical and distinct contributions that fathers make to their children’s growth and development differ from the maternal impact on growth and development (Stahlschmidt et

al., 2013). Fathers' parenting styles help to bolster self-esteem and confidence (Stahlschmidt et al., 2013) and that may improve a child's social behavior (Salinas et al., 2011). Being a positively involved father also contributes to men's maturity and self-sacrifice and confers psychological benefits (Julion et al., 2016).

Fathers repeatedly expressed the importance of and desire to make themselves better for the benefit of their children and for themselves. This case study illustrates that each participant in the group, having had limited experience with a residential father or strong social father, had a drive to learn how to make themselves better for the well-being of their children. Group-based bi-directional learning allowed Darick and the experienced fathers to accumulate a wealth of tangible paternal-parenting knowledge that informed alternative perspectives to counter stressors and provided concrete strategies to be a positively involved father.

Society often portrays AA, nonresident fathers as unwilling to be involved with their children, uncommitted to fatherhood and unimportant to parenting (Julion et al., 2012). The perpetual marginalization of nonresident, AA fathers exclusively into the role of financial providers must change (Threlfall, Seay, & Kohl, 2013). Policies and practices must be implemented relevant to clinicians working with AA families who are parenting from separate households. Regardless of fathers' residency status, child-health programs, supplemental nutrition programs, and institutions such as healthcare provider offices and schools ought to nurture and encourage father involvement as well as provide access to healthy psychological support as is often offered to mothers (Dunn, Cheng, O'Connor, & Bridges, 2004).

This case study illustrates that there are missed opportunities to support culturally-specific group-based bidirectional learning that can occur between adolescent and older AA, nonresidential fathers. The cultural connectivity that occurred during the group meetings allowed healing to take place under the auspices of mutually empathic, growth-fostering relationships (Comstock, et al., 2008). Nevertheless, there are some differences of thought about the willingness of men, more specifically AA men, to participate in group-based interventions. Caldwell and colleagues (2004) reported that men and fathers were positively engaged in group-based interventions designed to focus on positive father engagement (Caldwell et al., 2004). In contrast, Stahlschmidt, and colleagues (2013) reported that fathers may be unwilling to participate in group-based interventions. These differences in the literature illustrate the growing need for research focused on fatherhood interventions for AA, nonresident fathers (Lemay et al., 2010). There is also a need for group-based interventions implemented in familiar venues that are safe, confidential and designed to encourage bidirectional learning about positively engaged fatherhood (Julion et al., 2012). The interactions between intergenerational fathers facilitate mentoring, which can counter the disrupted transmission of fathering between generations.

The primary limitation to this qualitative case study design is that it examined a single case, with a small sample size that may not be generalizable to the larger population of AA fathers who may be learning to parent. To enhance generalizability, additional and larger group-based fatherhood interventions should be conducted, ones that are representative of AA

father demographics within the United States. Finally, since the purpose of the PGFI was to refine a fatherhood intervention, the questions as posed may have restricted the conversation. However, the guided questions focused the experiential sharing and created the bi-directional learning.

CONCLUSIONS

There is limited empirical research about relational-cultural bidirectional learning between intergenerational African-American (AA) nonresidential fathers who are not biological family. Our knowledge remains limited around the transmission of parenting from AA fathers or social fathers to sons who become fathers. Additionally, to our knowledge, there is no empirical evidence on the benefit of paternal-parenting transmission of fathering. More attention to understanding the mechanism of paternal parenting transmission is necessary to better understand the benefits of gender-specific transmission of fathering (Brown, et al., 2018). More resources that exploit the expertise of veteran fathers to positively shape the fatherhood journey of adolescent fathers are needed. The psychological wellbeing of both older and young fathers can be bolstered by intentionally providing intergenerational fatherhood training. Future research ought to focus on conducting fatherhood interventions studies that employ rigorous experimental designs targeting intergenerational diverse groupings of fathers.

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Table 1.

Building Bridges to Fatherhood Program 12 Session Units and Subtopics Program Session Topics (12 sessions)

Unit 1: Fatherhood (3 sessions)

- Your Children Need You
- A Journey, not a Destination
- Know Your Rights

Unit 2: Communication (3 sessions)

- Clear Communication
- Keeping Your Cool
- Problem Solving

Unit 3: Parenting (3 sessions)

- Understanding Your Children
- Nurturing Your Children
- Guiding Your Children

Closing Session to review the entire program

Feedback Session

Table 2.

Participant Demographics and Child Characteristics

Pseudonym	Gender	Race	Age	Marriage	Education	Parent presence	Total number of preschool aged children	Total number of children
Darick	M	AA	18-20	Never married	Some H.S.	1, 4	1	1
Malcom	M	AA	25-30	Separated	Master's degree	2	2	2
Richard	M	AA	45-50	Divorced	Bachelor's degree	1, 3	>4	> 6
Lemar	M	AA	25-30	Married	Bachelor's degree	1, 3	2	2
Phillip	M	AA	35-40	Unknown	H.S. diploma	1, 3	>2	> 5

Notes. Gender: M = Male; Race: AA = African American; Age = range (in years); Parent Presence: 1 = Lives with mom only, 2 = Lives with mom, father partially present, 3 = Father absent & alive, 4 = Father absent & deceased; Total number of children = number of children;