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# The Good Father: African American Fathers Who Positively Influence the Educational Outcomes of Their Children

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**Theodore Ransaw**

**ABSTRACT:** African American men are not commonly thought of favorably as fathers, especially in regard to their children's education. Using an adapted qualitative version of the quantitative fathering involvement scale, which is based on engagement, accessibility, and responsibility, this study investigates how 9 African American men attempt to be good fathers as well as what they do to help their children in school. The findings suggest that African American men can indeed be good fathers and positively influence their children's educational outcomes. The interviewed African American fathers' parental strategies included the following: 1) continuing the fathering role into and after college, 2) conspicuous use of communication, and 3) concentrating on being a good role model. The implications for researchers is that the fathering involvement scale may be a viable lens to support objective perspectives of fathers.

On July 9, 2008, President Obama spoke about the need to have a national conversation on responsible fatherhood and healthy families. The Responsible Fatherhood and Healthy Families Act, announced June 19, 2009, would provide grants to promote economic opportunities for low-income

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parents, reverse federal funding cuts from child-support programs, repeal a \$25 child-support fee charged to parents, require all collected child support to be paid to families, address unpaid child-support debt, expand the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC), and create career pathways that require a good education (S. 1309, 2009). President Obama, as reported by NPR, said, “We need [men] to realize that what makes you a man is not the ability to have a child—it’s the courage to raise one” (Martin, 2009). This is an especially important policy initiative for African American males for two reasons.

The first is that, since it is a proposal created by an African American, it counters negative stereotypes about Black males and Black fathers. Prior to President Obama’s presidential election, most media portrayals of African American men in movies and television tended to show them involved in criminal activity (Miller & Maiter, 2008). Black fathers have been historically described as ineffective (Frazier & Frazier, 1993) and as contributors to a negative pathology of poor parenting (Frazer & Frazer, 1993; McLoyd et al., 2000; Moynihan, 1965). Additionally, Dates and Stroman (2001) assert minority families are typically not portrayed accurately by the media. Smith, Krohn, Chu, and Best (2005) report that there is little in the social science literature about the relationship between African American men and their children and that literature seems to reflect the public’s view of African American fathers as financially irresponsible, hypermasculine, and uninvolved. Because of the media’s positive portrayal of President Obama as a father, “44% of Black males have seen more African American men spending time with their children” than before (Chiles, 2009).

The second reason the Responsible Fatherhood and Healthy Families Act is influential is that it encourages fathers to be engaged and responsible, especially in regard to their children’s education. Boys with an engaged father have fewer behavioral problems during their early school years and are slightly more socially advantaged than children with less engaged fathers in their preschool years (Aldous & Mulligan, 2002; Howard, Lefever, Borkowski, & Whitman, 2006). In addition, daughters with an involved father are more likely to have higher academic achievement than those who do not (Leman & Sorensen, 2000). Furthermore, father involvement has a protective effect against criminality for both sexes (Coley & Medeiros, 2007) and school-aged children of involved fathers are more likely to achieve higher academically than those of non-involved fathers (Nord & West, 2001). These research streams are not surprising. After all, parents are the first teachers and fathers are parents too. In fact, according to Compton-Lilly (2002), fathers make great teachers!

President Obama has stated, “I have not missed a parent-teacher conference since I’ve been president, and I didn’t miss a parent-teacher conference

when I was a candidate for president and Michelle goes to all of those activities. We stay in constant contact with their [Malia's and Sasha's] teachers" ("America's Teachable Moment," 2010, p. 124). President Obama has offered the world an alternative narrative of African American men as fathers that includes them being responsible, engaged, and accessible, which is a positive depiction of African American fathering involvement. This study addresses the question of whether there are any other examples of African American fathering involvement and describes what these involved fathers do.

## STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The proposed Responsible Fatherhood and Healthy Families Act of 2009 has yet to be passed. However, on June 15, 2011, the White House kicked off a Strong Fathers, Strong Families initiative, encouraging companies and organizations to offer discounts for fathers who take their children to places like the zoo, the park, bowling, sports games, etc. (Strautmanis, 2011). This initiative is evidence that President Obama is showing support for fathers and not just seeking media opportunities. What is more impactful about President Obama, though, is that he truly appears to be a good father. And what is a good father? A man who is an involved and influential figure in a child's life is a good father. Regardless of political perspectives, President Obama shatters stereotypes that view African American fathers as un-involved and uncaring.

## AFRICAN AMERICAN FATHERS

Part of the impetus behind the negative perceptions of African American fathers may lie in false views that are not inclusive of alternative models. Because of social and economic conditions, African American men may not initially be able to support a family financially, but they are likely to contribute in other ways, such as childcare, helping with homework, and providing cultural support and monitoring (Cazenave, 1979; Coley, 2001; Hofferth, 2003; Rivera et al., 1986; Walker, Reid, & Logan, 2010). Additionally, the high unemployment rate of Black men in the United States and their high criminal accusal and conviction rate, combined with an imprisonment rate that is seven times higher than White males between the ages of 20 and 39, has produced more absentee African American fathers than those in other ethnic groups (Dyson, 2007). Furthermore, because of socioeconomic conditions, African American men are more likely to be unemployed temporarily. All of these factors have combined to support the stereotype that African Americans are poor husbands and fathers (McLoyd et al., 2000; Taylor, 1977).

However, African American men are also more likely to be involved in teaching their children how to deal with economic conditions by stressing cultural capital as a resource to combat discrimination (Coley, 2001; Roopnarine, 2004). Additionally, in married, working African American families, 40% of fathers changed diapers, 77% played with the baby, 68% disciplined children, 49% helped children with homework, and 49% often took children to the doctor and dentist (Cazenave, 1979). In fact, many middle-class African American men place more importance on being a husband than on being a provider (Cazenave, 1984). This may mean the value of nontraditional perceptions of fatherhood may have gone unnoticed in previous research on African American fatherhood. In fact, Harris (2002) suggests that non-African American fatherhood influences may be rejected and even defined by embracing alternative ethnically inclusive ideas. Marsiglio, Amato, Day, and Lamb (2000) assert that quality parenting skills based on cultural influences, combined with a positive relationship with the mother and informal economic provisions, are the keys to positive outcomes for children of African American families.

These studies have particular significance for African American fathers who are happily involved with their families. For African American fathers, satisfaction with the parenting role was associated with higher cognitive and receptive language scores for their children (Black et al., 1999) and informal child support was related to cognitive stimulation in the home (Greene & Moore, 2000). Therefore, in regard to the education of their children, African American fathers must be understood within the context of economic conditions and role strain, educational attainment, self-knowledge, family experiences, religiosity, age, and area of residence (Bowman & Forman, 1997; McLoyd et al., 2000; Sullivan, 1993). This echoes other studies that assert that joblessness is difficult for African American fathers and may alienate them from their families and children (Bowman & Forman, 1997; Bowman & Sanders, 1998; Ellis, 2009; Wilson, 1987). These are all culturally based economic factors that are often barriers to African American men becoming involved with their children's educational outcomes.

This viewpoint of a good father based on his ability to provide has negatively affected research and perceptions of African American males, who have been increasingly rendered underemployed as well as unemployable due to economic issues related to social class, gender, and race (Price-Bonham & Skeen, 1979). African American women, who have traditionally been recruited as home care professionals, have not suffered in employability as much as men. African American women are outpacing men in many areas related to educational outcomes, earning 70% of the master's degrees awarded to African

Americans and comprising 61.7% of African American enrollment at the nation's 50 highest-ranked law schools (Milloy, 2011). As more Black and White women are working outside the home and earning income comparable to men, the traditional role of "breadwinner" needs to be reinterpreted. The result, research suggests, is that men have been encouraged to include fatherhood as a major life role of masculinity (Price-Bonham & Skeen, 1979). This has caused both Black and White men to face challenges contradictory to traditional masculinity, in the form of blurred boundaries, as they struggle to keep up with the times (Williams, 2009).

Fathers have expressed tension as they try to fulfill the breadwinner role while simultaneously striving to become a more involved parent (Hatter et al., 2002). The challenge to fill these two roles is considered a barrier to fathering involvement (Freeman, Newland, & Coyl-Shepherd, 2008). Williams's (2009) research has stressed that behavior problems in children, fatigue and exhaustion from work and parenting, unpaid work in regard to taking care of children, informal learning (being involved in play and sports), and formal learning, such as religion, are significant concerns for both Black and White middle-class men. In addition, these new bounds of fatherhood leave many men feeling vulnerable and unsure of their nature and purpose in the world (Whitehead, 2002).

Similarities do not end there. Although fathering involvement is still influenced by changes in the labor market (O'Brien & Shemlit, 2003), both Black and White men identified love for and validation from the love of their children as important and said they enjoy their children's achievements, including educational success (Williams, 2009). This research is also supported by findings from as early as the late 1970s, in which fathers reported that having someone to love and who loves in return, having someone to take care of, and being respected as a father are a few of the best things about being a parent (Price-Bonham & Skeen, 1979). It would seem that, among males, feelings of love and affection seem to outweigh the negatives associated with fatherhood.

Today, one in three children in the United States do not live in the same home as their biological father ("Bayh, Davis Introduce Legislation," 2009). However, this growing trend is not just in the U.S. For example, 8% of French families, 9% of Swiss families, and 10% of British families are stepfamilies (Teachman & Tedrow, 2008). Japanese speakers even borrowed the term "step-family" from English because there was no word for it in Japanese (Nozawa, 2008). It is no longer solely biological fathers picking up and dropping off the kids at school, but stepfathers as well. All involved fathers, both stepfathers and biological, seem to struggle with the economics of parenting, which is especially so for African American fathers.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Connell's (2005) definition of hegemonic masculinity argues that specific groups of men are privileged more so than others based on power structures such as race, gender, ethnicity, and social classes. This means that masculinity of groups that are not privileged, such as fathers of African descent, require study within their own cultural constructions. This is based on the idea that hegemonic masculinity is often defined by idealized notions of masculinity of White, heterosexual, and economically successful men (Connell, 1995). Consequently, hegemonic masculinity is a suitable frame in which to define and examine African American fatherhood.

According to Padilla (2004), the model American in the United States is used to compare not only behavior, but also White middle-class male measures of intelligence and educational outcomes. As Padilla notes, White, middle-class male overgeneralizations of the "norm" exaggerate the differences between ethnic groups and direct unrealistic evaluations of deficiency toward any other group that is not White, middle-class, or male (as cited in Banks, 2004). In other words, Black male identity is often created in *comparison to* and in *opposition of* White males. This comparison is also used for the model of fatherhood. Even White males who are not middle-class often have trouble identifying with other White males who are (Roediger, 2005). This, in turn, affects conceptions of masculinity and the embodiment of fatherhood for any group that is the "other." Despite these influences, "Most men have an exceptionally impoverished idea about what fatherhood involves, and indeed, active parenting doesn't even enter into the idea of manhood at all" (Hearn, 2004). From this point of view, hegemonic masculinity rarely affords opportunities for masculine forms of childcare, such as male nurturing, the capacity for men to show emotion, or the ability of men to influence other child-rearing outcomes, such as educational success.

## METHODOLOGY

This study utilized a qualitative interview process. The main research question was, how do African American fathers perceive their fathering involvement in regard to their children's educational outcomes? Three main interview questions were explored and possible follow-up interview questions were used as an instrument based on Rubin and Rubin's *Qualitative Interviewing* (2005).

### Participant Recruitment

Since African Americans typically attend Black churches (Wilcox & Gomex, 1990), interviewee recruitment took place in four separate religious, faith-based

institutions, as these represented likely places to find intersecting groups of African Americans with different levels of education, occupations, and incomes. Second Baptist, First African American Methodist Episcopal (Methodist), St. James (Catholic), and Muhammad Mosque 75 (Nation of Islam) were the intended sites for participant recruitment. These sites were selected from neighborhoods in southern Nevada with a high concentration of African Americans (*Las Vegas: Ethnicity Stats as of 2000*, 2011). According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2010), in 2000, African Americans were 9.7% of the total population in Nevada and 7.5% of the total population in Las Vegas. Many African Americans attend faith-based institutions, which include religious community centers.

Research suggests that African Americans in the U.S. are more likely to attend religious services than any other ethnic group (“A Religious Portrait of African-Americans,” 2009). Additionally, African Americans typically attend churches in which most members are Black (Wilcox & Gomex, 1990). This meant that using local religious organizations for participant recruitment facilitated the widest intercultural range of Social Economic Status (SES), class, and education levels of African American fathers. The interest and response to the idea of researching African American fathers by officials at each institution were so enthusiastic that participants were recommended to the researcher, who did not have to advertise or recruit interviewees. The participants were selected from snowballing recommendations.

### Site of Research

The interviews and video clip reflections were conducted in the participant fathers’ homes, at coffee shops, a library, and a community center office. Community centers are particularly known to be socially influential in urban areas (Vidal, 2001). Although a significant component, religion is not the focus of this study. African American religious institutions are vehicles of empowerment and serve as counter narratives to prejudicial social conditions and as sources of resistance to cultural assimilation (Ammerman, 2005). Therefore, it is likely that any sample of African Americans from most any local network location will likely include African American fathers who attend a religious institution.

### Participant Selection

Semi-structured interviews were used to collect data on fathers’ perceived views on changing roles of masculinity and their influence on their children’s educational outcomes. Participants were informed that all interview materials would be kept in a locked drawer for no more than three years and each was given a consent form to sign and told that participation was voluntary



Table 1

*Participant Demographic Data*

Name	Age	Education	Income	Rating
George	51	Master's	100 + K	7
Heathcliff	42	Bachelor's	50–100 K	10
Carl	40	No college	25–50 K	7
James	46	Bachelor's	50–100 K	5
Fred	39	No college	25–50 K	0
John	47	No college	25–50 K	9
Michael	42	Bachelor's	25–50 K	7
Robert	47	Bachelor's	25–50 K	8
Julius	37	Associate	25–50 K	7

Note. All fathering quality rating scores were participant self-reported on a scale from 1 through 10.

and could be terminated at any time without penalty. Each participant was also given a code number and, later, a pseudonym.

The data were based on either biological African American fathers or African American stepfathers who were between the ages of 18 and 52. Nine African American fathers living in an urban community in the Southwest U.S. were interviewed and information from two was discarded because they exceeded the age limit. Three of the remaining fathers were from a Methodist church, two were Sunni Muslims, two were Nation of Islam Muslims, one was Catholic, and one was Baptist. Two were single fathers and one was also a grandfather. The majority of the fathers earned between \$25,000 and \$50,000 a year and most rated themselves as a seven out of ten as a father. Finally, most of the fathers had at least two children living in the home.

### Instruments

There is only one known fathering involvement scale and it is quantitative (Finley & Schwartz, 2004). However, a qualitative adaptation of it was used to

Table 2

*Parental Living Status*

Name	Children in home	Biological	Grandchildren	Married
George	2*	2	1	Y
Heathcliff	2*	1	0	Y
Carl	4	2	0	N
James	4*	2^	0	Y
Fred	7*	5	0	Y
John	1	0	0	Y
Michael	5	5	0	Y
Robert	1	2^	0	N
Julius	4	4	0	Y

Note: \* Indicates a child in the home that is in college and ^ indicates a child who has lived in the home, but is currently attending college and living outside the home.

help formulate discussion questions based on themes from the quantitative fathering scale.

*Fathering Involvement Scale*

Fathering involvement comprises three components. Part one is direct interaction (or engagement) with the child in the context of caretaking, play, or leisure. Part two is accessibility (or availability)—being physically and/or psychologically available to the child—and part three entails responsibility—assuming responsibility for the child's welfare and care, including organizing and planning their lives. This model has proven to be the most accepted definition of father involvement, which is directly related to his feelings and society's perceptions toward masculinity (Pleck & Pleck, 1997).

Although the definition of fathering includes any male fathering influence, the research design was restricted to African American biological fathers and African American stepfathers between 18 and 52 years of age for a more detailed analysis that includes grandfathers as well as children who live in the home and out. The

majority of the fathers lived with their children in the home and, with the exception of one, all of the fathers maintained communication with their children outside of the home as well as provided financial and emotional support. The one father who did not have contact with his child did not because of restrictions by the mother.

At the start of each interview, the IRB procedures were clearly outlined, including mentioning a follow-up meeting where participants would have the opportunity to look over the transcripts of our conversation to check for accuracy, make corrections, or engage in a “member check” at the end of the study (Merriam, 1998). Member checking is a “way of finding out whether the data analysis is congruent with the participants’ experiences” (Curtin & Fossey, 2007, p. 92) and is best conducted when the interpreted pieces are presented as themes and patterns that emerge from the data and not just from transcripts alone (Creswell, 2009). Interviews did not begin until each of the participants signed the interview and audio interview forms. At the beginning of each interview session, participants were made aware of the purpose of the study and its goals, that the researcher was looking for information on what African American fathers do to help their children’s educational outcomes.

Huitt (2003) defines educational outcomes as part of the learning process related to academic achievement and output. School achievement output is most commonly thought of in terms of cognitive development, test scores, and grades. However, Huitt (2003) also includes parental influences that foster character and self-esteem, having access to technology (such as cell phones) in the home, and enforcing good study habits—including restricting television until homework is done—in his model of the student learning process.

The main interview questions based on engagement, availability, and responsibility were used in combination with Rubin and Rubin’s *Qualitative Interviewing* (2005, p. 143). While transcribing the interviews, vocalized pauses such as “uhh,” “umm,” and “ooh” were left out. This qualitative study of African American fathers recognizes the cultural “power and privilege within masculinities, and recognize[s] that masculinities are complicated and multifaceted and may even be contradictory” to other forms of dominant masculinity (Wedgwood, 2009, p. 336).

## FINDINGS

### Theme I: Guidance

#### *Blueprint*

“I take my son with me everywhere. If there is a place I shouldn’t take him, then I probably shouldn’t be there either!”

The quote above from 42-year-old, father of five, Michael underscores the theme of wanting to set a good example. The interviewed fathers wanted to be a mentor and role model and to “give a visual picture to not waste time,” according to 42-year-old, father of two, Heathcliff. In other words, the participants wanted to model good examples by providing their children with a blueprint of what a good father should be. That included not arguing in front of their children with the child’s mother, providing good examples for their daughters of what to look for in a male, and showing boys appropriate ways to behave. One father, Michael, has a rule that no one can eat dinner until he gets home and others also used family dinnertime as a strategic way to model appropriate fathering behavior and to instill the importance of family.

More than anything, the fathers wanted their children to see that they had a strong male in their lives. Although the fathers tried to model what it meant to have religion in their lives, most did not force or push it on their children. In addition, they tried to model self-sufficiency and confidence in life and in school. The fathers with college degrees (all except two) not only helped their children with their homework and with advice in elementary through high school, but also continued to mentor their children when they were in college, often involving them in their academic lives and even, in one case, showing what college was like while they were going to graduate school. They also bought clothing with their college alma mater’s logo so that their children knew that “Daddy ain’t playin’,” according to Michael, when it comes to education. One father, Heathcliff, said, “What I like best is that they [my children] know who I am!” and he practices what he preaches—a father who went to college and got a good job and now takes his children with him to work. Finally, the African American fathers interviewed in this study expressed that they did not want to be seen as hypocrites.

### *Structure*

“I pin their ears back!”

This section on structure begins with this antiquated term for an aggressive or stern talking-to, utilized by 37-year-old, father of four, Julius, because Julius applied the phrase repetitiously as part of his role as a father. In the words of Robert, a 47-year-old, father of one, “consistency brings out values, reassurance, peace of mind, and focus.” Most of the fathers had strict television policies and all had a rule that required children to do homework before anything else, with the exception of having a snack. The participant fathers frequently said that they were strict, often more so than their children’s teachers. One

father even has his children take pictures of their homework on their cell phones so he can verify it is done when he is at work and unable to check in-person. The participant fathers also helped to establish and enforce rules for their households and held their children accountable for doing their chores. Doing homework routinely was a part of the household rules and making sure that their children have strong educational foundations, including educational environments such as zoos and museums, were also part of their family routines. For many of the fathers, structure was their way of providing stability and support to their children in a way their own fathers failed. Many of the fathers saw structure as being supportive and resisted being labeled as disciplinarians. John, a 47-year-old, father of one, saw his structured routine of asking how his son did in school and how the teacher treated him that day as an opportunity to give gentle advice, instead of discipline.

### *Advice*

Heathcliff uses opportunities like drive time as teachable moments, on subjects such as dealing with kids who distract his children by talking in school, and George, a 51-year-old, father of two and grandfather of one, sees himself as a “dispenser of knowledge and wisdom about life choices” to his oldest daughter. Carl, a 40-year-old, father of four, on the other hand, makes sure that his children know how to add correctly so they can double-check their paychecks when they get jobs. All of the participants gave advice to their children who were going to college or trade school or thinking about doing so. In fact, Robert consistently forced his son to listen to National Public Radio (NPR) on the way to school so that he would have the cultural capital necessary to talk to adults and to carry on a conversation. It paid off: one of his son’s college interview questions was, “Do you listen to NPR?”

### Theme II: Feelings

#### *Affinity*

The fathers interviewed all showed a willingness to demonstrate their love for their children. Protecting against unsavory suitors for their daughters, cooking on the grill, or just being present when their children needed to talk were all activities in which these African American fathers participated. The interviewed fathers also went to their children’s schools to talk to their teachers to show that they cared about their education and spoke with their children’s coaches or coached the team themselves. In addition, the fathers also visited classrooms and even volunteered for playground duty. They wanted to be contributors not only to their children’s education, but to their personal growth as well. “I want to make my child

understand the world, but yet she doesn't have to experience [the bad things in] the world," George said. Michael even stopped smoking marijuana as a strategy to get closer to his daughter when she objected to his lifestyle. These expressions of involvement as affinity-seeking behaviors have a way of connecting children to their fathers and are also a method of bonding.

### *Bonding*

"Whispering in the child's ear when they are born helps to soothe them and gets them to stop crying," Robert said. Fred, a 39-year-old, father of seven, further noted that a father who witnesses the birth of a child and then holds him/her establishes a "bonding presence; interaction and engagement and caring for one another creates closeness." Presence in the delivery room signaled the first emotional bond for most of the fathers, which can be so strong that children may fear disappointing their father in school or even walk away from bad situations because they know their father is coming to pick them up. James, a 46-year-old, father of four, said, "My son and I are best friends." According to John, "I can sense when something is wrong. I can sense when his feelings is [sic] hurt. I can tell when he wants to talk. And that's a special father and son bond." Fathers are close to their daughters, too. They reported buying tampons and Pamprin for them and even helping to build floats during homecoming week in high school. These fathers felt so close to their children, regardless of gender, that it was impossible for them to decide if they had a stronger bond with their daughters or their sons.

### *Emotion*

The participants discussed a variety of emotions during their interviews, including happiness, joy, fear, and, most of all, love, in regard to their children. Describing when the mother of his children became pregnant, George noted, "I was very emotional when she got pregnant [in high school]. That was a really tough one because there was joy and frustration, disappointment all wrapped up into one." He also expressed regret that he was not more patient with his daughter and wanted her to know that "there was nothing that she could do that would cause [his] love to stop." Carl was so emotional discussing the circumstances surrounding his daughter's brain tumor, he cried during the interview.

Some of the emotions expressed during the interviews were from joyous occasions. James laughed when he told the story of when his son made a three-point shot in basketball and how he was so shocked that he just stood there a few seconds while the game kept going on around him. The fathers reported that graduations, birthdays, and accomplishments, such as singing the national

anthem, awards for performance on the job, and winning talent shows, were sources of great joy for them. “The children come to me for comfort or a hug and tell me that they love me or a hug and a kiss when I walk through the door; Daddy! Daddy!” according to Fred. As a single parent, Carl especially enjoys the cards he gets on Mother’s Day from his children.

### Theme III: Challenges

#### *Struggle*

In addition to all the benefits of fatherhood the participants discussed, they also shared their feelings about the challenges they have faced. In what follows, the fathers talked about different struggles they have encountered as involved fathers. “I do try to balance it all. Sometimes it works out; sometimes it can be a challenge. I have a superhero complex, trying to be the mighty Thor and save everybody,” Carl said while talking about his experience with his daughter’s brain tumor, reflecting the helplessness he felt during the ordeal. However, after he described the steps he had to go through to get his daughter readmitted to school after her absences from her illness, he exclaimed, “I did my job!” Carl’s daughter is now in college.

James, Heathcliff, and Michael asserted that their sons had trouble dealing with peer pressure and applying themselves and other fathers reported they also felt helpless when their children were sick. In addition, participant fathers, such as Carl, Michael, Fred, and Robert, discussed the legal challenges they had to go through for custody, visitation rights with their children, and separations from their wives. Robert also detailed his thoughts about wanting to “give his son choices because there are so many things that can limit African American males.” Fred agreed with that assessment, saying that “being an African in America is a struggle.” However, none of the fathers expressed resentment toward the struggles of fatherhood. As Julius noted, “It can be challenging, but I am still the man in this house when it all boils down to it.”

#### *Communication*

While some fathers used the phone to communicate during long-distance separation, Carl used his phone to check in on his children and tuck them into bed virtually when he had to work late at night. Most of the fathers used traveling to and from school as times to communicate, either when walking or, as Robert and Fred put it, during “drive time.” All of the fathers reported some type of restriction on television, which was a method of communicating that education is more important than the media.

### *Media*

The participants all expressed some level of mistrust of the media in relation to its effect on their children. "The media tells lies through vision," said Carl. In addition, Carl also felt the media "separates the parent's power; [it] wants the child to be as much [of] a consumer as the parent." Fred also agreed with that point of view, asserting that, because of the media, "it's hard to raise a child without [the protection of] a mother or father." The interviewed fathers concurred that hip-hop videos and the girls in them set bad examples and do not impart family values. However, Julius said, "The media shouldn't take the place of a father or family." For that reason, Fred downloads all of the movies for his children, which they can watch anytime they want, but they are not allowed to watch television without his approval. "I've noticed that the less television watched, the production of the household goes up," Fred said.

### DISCUSSION

The study confirmed previous research that asserts that African American fathers are equally or more likely to help with homework (Gray & Anderson, 2010), share in the housework, provide guidance and love, spend quality time with their children (Newton, 2005), be supportive (Bartz & Levine, 1978; Grief, Habowski, & Maton, 1998), discipline their children (Cazenave, 1979), advise their children on issues of minority oppression, and provide a sense of ethnic identity than White fathers (Coley, 2001; Roopnarine, 2002). In addition, the majority of the fathers interviewed in this study drove their children to school. The participant fathers also helped their children academically in other ways beyond just homework, such as providing tutoring and college prep courses when their children needed them; taking their children to libraries, parks, museums, and zoos; assisting their children with school projects; assigning reading; and having them do unrequired schoolwork during the summer. Additionally, the interviewed participants in this study valued the importance of being a good father, which paralleled the scant positive research on African American fathers (Smith et al., 2005). They used prayer, family dinners, and reading from religious texts as fathering tools to establish a positive family life (Palkovitz & Palm, 1998).

Honestly and openly, the African American fathers in this study seek affinity with their children and attempt to make them feel secure (Fagan & Iglesias, 1999; Gee, 2004; Ninio & Rinott, 1988). They also shared that their children were sources of inspiration, as outlined by Gray and Anderson (2010) and supported by Barnett et al. (1992). Lerman and Sorenson's (2000) research suggests that a father's emotional investment in their children helps to relieve



work-related stress and allows them to work even harder (Gray & Anderson, 2010). These findings also support research that suggests nurturing is a natural instinct in men (Connor & White, 2006)—including African American men. Surprisingly enough, this level of emotion and nurturing was not restricted to a father's biological children. None of the fathers interviewed in this study referred to their children as stepchildren or themselves as stepfathers, except when asked at the beginning of the interview.

In fact, four out of the nine fathers were stepfathers, some of them living with the mothers of their stepchildren and likely to have had a child or children with them to solidify their family, as suggested by Stewart (2005). All of the interviewed fathers reported not treating their biological children and stepchildren differently. This may be the reason why the participants did not report any gender bias with their stepchildren in the interviews, as proposed by Marsiglio (1991). That does not mean that the fathers reported that their sons and daughters did not have different behaviors. Carl and Michael reported their daughters are influenced by the media, especially hip-hop videos, and are aware of brand names, supporting research that suggests marketing creates contradictory and divergent cultural expectations that conflict with parental expectations (Courtney, 2008; Stokes, 2007).

The interviewed fathers seemed not to agree with research supporting the idea that boys have two types of masculinity: academic achievers or athletes (Connell, 1996). Heathcliff's youngest son not only won an award for being on the honor roll, he is also a starting quarterback for his youth football team. However, Heathcliff's oldest son and Julius's son both were reported to have trouble dealing with peer pressure and focusing in school. This is likely an indicator of Kunjufu's (1988), Brozo's (2005), Archer and Yamashita's (2003), and Buck's (2010) research that asserts that academics are uncool, unmasculine, and outside the norms for Black boys. Carl, Fred, and, to some extent, Heathcliff counter the negative impact of peer pressure on their sons' academic performance by emphasizing the idea that education is an equalizer for African Americans. This affirms research by Alfaro, Umaña-Taylor, and Bámaca (2006) that asserts that a son's academic motivation in school is related to his father's academic support and value he places on education. Furthermore, Tatum (2005) suggests that when a Black boy's literacy is targeted toward his interests, he breaks the negative stereotypes associated with "acting White" (Obama, 2004), which is reflected in Fred choosing books for his son to read for 30 minutes a day. Since all of the fathers interviewed reported that their sons were doing well in school, except for Julius, who indicated that his son lacked direction and focus, the interviews seem to confirm Nord and West's

work (2001) that suggests that school-aged children of involved fathers are more likely to achieve higher academically than those of non-involved fathers.

## CONCLUSION

Referencing the research question, how do African American fathers perceive their fathering involvement in regard to their children's educational outcomes?, the answers are they see themselves as men of guidance, full of emotion, and able to overcome challenges; able to do whatever is necessary to educate their children despite media influences and social constraints; and accessible, engaged, and responsible fathers. The interviewed fathers all demonstrated the use of planning and forethought in their fathering abilities as well. While not earth shattering in concept, the interviewed fathers simply practiced good parenting. Since few studies address African American men as good fathers, research that does describe Black males as good fathers is significant.

Combined, the results suggest that the interviewed African American fathers utilized the following three most-reported methods to help their children's educational outcomes: 1) continuing their fathering role into and after college, 2) conspicuous use of communication, and 3) being a good role model. Fathers still give educational as well as life advice to their children, even when they are in college, and conspicuous use of communication was shown in at least two ways. Firstly, fathers made use of drive time with children to and from school as an excellent way to check-up on homework, to discuss problems in school, and to administer advice. Secondly, they used cell phones to check-in with children, say goodnight when working late, to display affection, and provide other forms of nurturing. Finally, while turning off the television may not seem to be a novel idea, for African American fathers, who are more likely to suffer from disparaging media depictions of them as both men and fathers, television regulation may provide opportunities for alternative and positive examples of African American masculinity to their families. This, in turn, can be a crucial link to providing children the emotional and psychological capital necessary to persuade them to take education seriously. This reflects previous research that masculine identity has been shown to have a strong relationship to educational outcomes (Benjamin, 2001; Harris & Harper, 2008). In other words, at least from this sample, a good father—one who is involved—can make a positive difference in the educational outcomes of their children.

## Limitations

The method of sample selection may have biased this study's findings, given that fathers who are engaged in organized religion are more likely to be

encouraged to become involved fathers (Petts, 2009). However, fathers may also seek supportive organizations, such as faith-based institutions, because they already affirm their attitudes about fatherhood. Regardless of any perspective about the role religion plays for the fathers in this study and their participation in faith-based institutions, a study similar to this using a sample of non-religious fathers may yield additional heuristic results. A second limitation is the potential for social desirability bias, given that the fathers were reflecting on and discussing their own fathering experiences.

### Recommendations

Interviewing grandfathers and great-grandfathers would provide a more robust and thorough examination of the historical influences, challenges, and changes in fatherhood not just from a grandfather's perspective, but from a more experienced paternal viewpoint. One could argue that an involved grandfather is a fathering figure. For example, in one of the interviews discarded due to age, a grandfather commented that one of the problems with media is they provide children with reasons to be disobedient because they support the opinion that spanking is abusive. In conclusion, duplicating this study with other racial groups that include intra-group perspectives may provide heuristic value in learning from cross-cultural experiences.

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## APPENDIX A

### Main Questions

#### *Availability/Accessibility*

Since your CHILD(ren) was born, how many months have you lived in the same household as him/her? How do you feel your household presence affects your CHILD(ren) in getting a good education?

#### *Responsibility*

How often in the past month, did you take or pick up your CHILD(ren) to/from school? What other ways do you help with your CHILD(ren) in school?

### *Engagement*

In a typical day when you are with your CHILD(ren), how much time do you spend helping with homework? Do you have any other practices you do on a regular basis that help your CHILD(ren) in school?

#### Data Coding and Analysis

##### *Level 1. Open Coded Definitions*

The questions and answers from the interview transcripts were categorized into the categories fathering involvement, engagement, accessibility, and responsibility, previously defined by Lamb, Pleck, Charnov, and Levine (1985, 1987).

##### *Level 2. Data*

Next, items, words, and phrases that seemed meaningful and pertinent were underlined and then highlighted. Interesting and pertinent terms included grandfather, father, kin, structure, blueprint, advice, religion, mom, gender, pray, affinity, mentor, teach, bonding, struggle, communication, model, and media.

##### *Level 3. Codes*

The resulting interesting and pertinent terms were then sub-coded into nine categories: blueprint, structure, advice, affinity, bonding, emotion, struggle, communication, and media.

##### *Level 3. Themes*

The nine codes of blueprint, structure, advice, affinity, bonding, emotion, struggle, communication, and media were analyzed to see if any patterns emerged. The remaining codes were placed into three overarching themes of guidance, feelings, and challenges.

##### *Level 4. Testing the Themes*

After testing the themes of guidance, feelings, and challenges against the overall theme of fathering involvement, each was found interrelated with the original definitions of engagement, accessibility, and responsibility

# africa

## T O D A Y



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