

Social Father Presence: The Experience of Being Raised by Black Social Fathers

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Abstract

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 25 Black/African Americans who had social fathers, to understand why they recognized certain men as their fathers or father figures, how they were affected by their social fathers, how they compare their relationships with their social fathers and their biological fathers, what difficulties they had with their social fathers given that they were not their biological fathers, and how, if at all, their relationships with their social fathers changed over time. Coding revealed several dimensions of their experience being parented by Black social fathers. Participants' reasons for recognizing men as their social fathers included engaging with them in collective activities, having their consistent presence, and having meaningful communication with them. The most important affects social fathers had on participants included influencing their values, and providing them knowledge about manhood and relationships. The most common factor participants identified as differentiating their social fathers from their biological fathers was being personable/emotionally present. The challenges they encountered related to their social fathers' non-biological father status, included challenged authority and limited time and attention. Participants' relationships with their social fathers changed over time with regard to distance and relationship maturation.

Introduction

What does it mean to be present or absent? The word *absent* refers to a lack of presence or being away, whereas *presence* is being located in a particular place. Absence may also be used to identify a state of inattentiveness or distraction, while presence can also refer to being focused or aware. Black children experience a variety of fathering types. Yet, current research on Black fathers has generated a great deal of awareness about notions of father absence, with frequent references to father *absent* homes and the *fatherless* children who live in them. This *absence paradigm* can have a tendency of focusing primarily on family structure and household composition in efforts to explain Black children's relationships to their fathers (White & Cones, 1999). Such research has given insufficient attention to family organization, father-child relationships, and how well Black fathers meet children's needs for social and emotional security (White & Cones, 1999). Fathers may be absent from homes, yet have varying degrees of presence in their children's lives. The terms, absence or non-residence are often assumed to be indicators of fathers' levels of involvement with their children, this may be true for some fathers and a vast overgeneralization for others. This is in part because the idea of absence, often ignores the role of non-resident fathers (Franklin, 2004). African American fathers are often involved in their children's lives regardless of their residential status at higher levels than other ethnic groups (Doyle, Clark, Cryer-Coupet, Nebbitt, & Goldston, et al., 2015). Non-custodial parentage is inappropriately assumed to indicate irresponsibility in ways that do not reflect some families' realities (Coles, 2009). Not only are non-resident fathers ignored, so are non-biological fathers.

Seventy-three percent of African American youth are born to unwed mothers and 67% will spend some part of their childhood living in a single-parent household, compared with 23% of the general population (Parent, Jones, Forehand, Cuellar, & Shoulberg, 2013). Moreover, divorced and unmarried parents are likely to spend some time entering and exiting romantic relationships. Consequently, it is estimated that one third of children in the United States will spend some time living with a *social parent* (non-biological parent) during their childhood; others may be parented by non-resident social parents (Coleman, Ganong, & Fine, 2004). *Social fathers* can be resident or non-resident stepfathers, mothers' romantic partners, grandfathers, uncles, and many other family associates who demonstrate parental behavior and act as fathers or father figures to a child (Letiecq & Koblinsky, 2004). This social trend calls for a reappraisal of the notions of *father absence* and *fatherlessness* in light of the involvement of social fathers. Stereotypes of fathers as uninvolved, Black children as fatherless, and lack of research about the impact of Black social fathers, may generate a kind of absence or distraction, and inattentiveness in the research community with regard to the range of fathering experiences that Black children have. This particular investigation is about the experiences and perspectives of Black people who were raised by Black social fathers. Given the presence of Black social fathers in Black children's lives, it is important that the research community studies the ways they impact Black children's lives. Lack of research about how Black people are affected by social fathering, can leave the mental health and social service community ill equipped to anticipate the challenges they are likely to encounter and effect the way of sustaining healthy relationships and resolving unhealthy ones. Empirical research on the impact of different kinds of social fathers on Black people can provide a knowledge base for effective family advocacy of different types, including family therapy.

Literature Review

There is little research on the impact that social fathers have on children, and less on the impact of Black social fathers on Black children. Generally, social father involvement has been linked to child outcomes such as less behavioral problems, better overall health, greater school readiness, and better cognitive skills (Letiecq, 2010; Hattery, & Smith, 2014). Coley (2003) investigated the role of biological and social fathers in the lives of low-income adolescent African American girls. This research highlights that the mere presence of fathers in daughters' lives is not the most important factor, instead, it is the quality of the daughter-father relationships which is most central. Coley (2003) found that 65% of her sample of 302 girls had someone who fulfilled a primary fathering role, including biological (41%) and social fathers (24%). Among girls who identified the presence of biological fathers, most reported stronger attachments to social fathers compared to biological fathers (Coley, 2003). Coley (2003) found that the more father-daughter relationships were characterized by anger and alienation, girls experienced increased amount of problems in school. When fathers are inaccessible and lack responsiveness to daughters, daughters may disengage emotionally.

Coley (2003) theorizes that social fathers may be able to develop more warm relationships with children due to their not being expected to take on all of the responsibilities that biological fathers are and not being constrained by typical adolescent-parent difficulties. In addition to impacting education, health, and behavioral outcomes, social fathering can also affect mother-child relationships. Parent, Jones, Forehand, Cuellar, and Shoulberg (2013) investigated the role of coparents in African American single parent families. Coparents are adults or family members who engage in child-rearing. Social fathers, a category of coparents, can help mothers provide warmth, support and monitoring for their children. Outcomes of their parenting typically depend on the quality of their relationships and high quality coparenting was found to be associated with higher quality mother-child relationships and less problem behavior from youth (Parent, Jones, Forehand, Cuellar, and Shoulberg, 2013).

Although mothers' romantic partners frequently find themselves in the position of being social fathers, several other social father types have received minimal attention from the research community: uncles, coaches, and grandfathers. Richardson (2009) investigated the roles that uncles play as social fathers in the lives of African American male youth in the inner city. He found that they play socially supportive roles, especially in the absence of biological parents. In some cases, particularly when biological fathers are not present, uncles, a vital part of the family system, sometimes step in and help to foster positive development and usher Black youth into adulthood by providing effective and instrumental support (Richardson, 2009). Black male coaches have a long tradition in the Black community, serving as father figures for Black youth, particularly Black male youth. Richardson (2012) investigated the role that Black male coaches play in the lives of Black male youth and single parents in high risk neighborhoods. Black male coaches were found to be a critical source of social capital for Black male youth, guiding them toward positive outcomes and reducing involvement in crime and delinquency. Richardson (2012) found that basketball was a safe-haven and a buffer from violence for many Black males in high risk neighborhoods. In his study, sports participation exposed Black males to adults, it was a prosocial means for them to acquire respect and academic enrichment in the forms of SAT preparation, visits to colleges and universities, homework assistance, and drug/violence prevention workshops. Coaches themselves taught values such as social responsibility, respect for elders, hard work, self-control, and anti-drug use and anti-violence attitudes (Richardson, 2012). According to Nobles (2006), elders hold a special position in African American families. As he states, "They represent the keepers of the family's heritage and the repository of the family's heritage and the repository of the family's history and accordingly have been given respect for their insights and guidance in matters of the family" (Nobles, 2006, p.176). Black grandfathers are an integral part of that extended family network. In many different African philosophies, there is the belief in the closeness between children and grandparents, as children have just come from the same spiritual world that the elder will soon transition to (Hill, 2014). Furthermore, Black grandfathers make important contributions to healthy Black families (Smith, 2010).

The present study is an attempt to add to the current literature on Black fathers by exploring how Black people are affected by the presence of social fathers . It is important to explain how Black people come to experience Black social fathering and how they negotiate challenges in those relationships. The main question guiding this investigation is “What are the experiences and perspectives of Black people who have had social fathers in their lives?”. The primary sub questions guiding this study are:

1. How do participants come to recognize non-biological fathers as fathers or father-figures?
2. How are participants affected by the experience of social fathering?
3. How would they compare their relationships with their biological fathers to that of their non- biological fathers?
4. What, if any, difficulties do participants encounter with social fathers given their non-biological father statuses?
5. How, if at all, do participants’ relationships with their social fathers change over time?

Method

There are many different models for approaching the study of Black families. This investigation is conceptually guided by the Africanity model of investigating Black families. Nobles, Goddard, Cavil, and George (1987) define the African American family as “a particular set of biological, spiritual, physical and behavioral patterns and/or dynamics as a distinguishable entity, as defined by the traditional and contemporary African worldview” (p. 5). Black people’s experiences with social fathering are situated within this historical and contemporary unfolding. The Africanity model is an Afrocentric theoretical approach designed to guide both the study of African American families and research applications and projects for the advancement of Black family life. The Africanity model places the principles that determine the basic nature of African American families at the center of its analysis of Black family life. One of the basic assumptions of the Africanity model is that the Black family cannot be understood unless it is studied in a way that respects the special dignity and value of being Black (Nobles et al., 1987). This particular model guides research in examining the confluence of historical, cultural, and contemporary factors and their effects on the experiences of Black families, in this case, Black fathers. The ultimate function of the Africanity model is to explain how the African worldview manifests itself in contemporary African American families and how it is affected by contemporary social factors such as racism, economic conditions, and other social structural factors. Given that Black people’s experiences with social fathering is rooted in pre-colonial African familial traditions that continue to influence their fathering experiences in the American context (Hill, 1998), the Africanity model is best suited to contextualize the present investigation.

This study is also guided by Robert Hill's Holistic/Solutions Framework for studying Black families. Hill (1998) presents a theoretical framework for enhancing "knowledge of the status, structure and functioning of African American families" (p. 15). Similar to the Africanity model, Hill explains that many studies of the Black family are insufficient as a result of their ahistorical character. A holistic perspective on Black families must look at how their characteristics developed over time. A holistic perspective must also take an ecological perspective that examines how societal, community, family, and individual-level factors affect the structure and functioning of Black families. Not taking into consideration the impact of multi-level factors leads to a deficit outlook on African American families. Hill identifies five characteristics that have contributed to the survival, stability, and advancement of Black families: (1) strong achievement orientation, (2) strong work orientation, (3) flexible family roles, (4) strong kinship bonds, and (5) strong religious orientation. Hill (1998) also emphasizes the importance of identifying problems that threaten the advancement of African American family functioning, while identifying multi-level solutions to address those problems that build on and enhance African American cultural strengths.

The participants for this study were recruited through paper and electronic advertisements at two universities; one on the east coast and one on the west coast of the United States of America. Recruitment tools included a Facebook ad, paper advertisements, and recruitment at Black student organizations' events at both Universities. Only people who provided consent were allowed to participate. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with participants for an average time of 25 minutes per interview.

Interviewees were asked to respond to several questions to explore their experiences with Black social fathers. Interviewees were asked when and how they came to recognize non-biological fathers as fathers or father-figures. They were also asked about the most significant effects that social fathers had on their lives. Participants also answered questions about challenges they faced in their relationships with their social fathers and how their relationships developed or changed over time. Interviewees were asked several probing questions to glean more explanation and clarity. The transcripts of the interviews were subjected to latent coding. Latent coding refers to coding for the deeper meanings that lie beneath the surface of a text. This type of coding requires some inference and interpretation on behalf of the researcher. As a result, the researcher often has to examine and reexamine the entire interview transcripts to determine whether certain response patterns are present. Respondents' answers were subjected to open coding based on their responses to each question. This allowed the researchers to create preliminary categories that reflected their patterns of thought about their experiences with social fathers. Subsequently, the responses were subjected to axial coding, which allowed the researchers to identify any patterns in the participants' attitudes that exist between or across the preliminary patterns of responses or categories.

Codes were established for attitudes or beliefs expressed by three or more respondents; those expressed by less than three were not considered significant. To establish inter-coder reliability in this process, all three researchers conducted this analysis separately. Next, the researchers combined their analyses, looking for co-occurring themes. Ultimately, the strongest or most frequently represented responses were identified, while the weaker ones were eliminated. The result of this process was a meaningful framework representing their perspectives.

This study includes a sample of 25 people, 13 females and 12 males, who identify as African American/Black and report having experienced the presence of a social father between adolescence and adulthood (ages 10 and above). The ages of the participants range from 18 to 63. Thirteen of the participants had a college degree or higher, 8 had some college, and 4 had a high school diploma or equivalent. Sixteen participants had no children, while 9 had children. Twenty-one participants were single, while 4 were married. All of the participants self-identified as Black/African American. However, four participants identified as Black/African American in combination with another race, ethnicity, or nationality using the following designations: Afro Caribbean, Black/Jamaican, Nigerian/American, and Black/Latino.

Results

All of the participants were asked to describe their relationships to their social fathers. Eight participants identified their step-fathers, 3 were mothers' romantic partners, 6 were participants' grandfathers, 4 were family associates (family-friend, neighbor, and pastor), 3 were uncles, and 1 was a participant's older brother. Participants were asked to identify the approximate age at which they began to recognize their social fathers as fathers or father figures. Excluding those who grew up with their social fathers from birth, the ages ranged from 5 to 20 years of age. However, the average age at which the participants began to recognize their social fathers as father figures was 11.5.

Relationships with Biological Fathers

In this study participants were asked to describe the relationships they had with their biological fathers. Their responses were designated into five categories: limited, inconsistent, conflictual, positive and functional, and non-existent. Those who described their relationships with their biological fathers as limited (6 out of 25 or 24%) frequently spoke about their biological fathers as only concerned with making financial contributions and/or with checking on their safety. Those who described their relationships with their biological fathers as inconsistent (5 out of 25 or 20%) explained that their biological fathers were in and out of their lives, unreliable, sometimes positive and other times not. Some participants described their relationships with their biological fathers as conflictual (2 out of 25 or 8%); involving physical and verbal abuse.

Other participants described their relationships with their biological fathers as positive and functional (7 out of 25 or 28%). These fathers were active and consistently involved in their children's lives, coordinating parenting with their children's mothers and with social fathers. Lastly, 4 out of 25 (16%) participants explained that they did not have a relationship with their biological fathers.

Reasons for Identifying Men as Fathers

Participants in the present study were asked to explain why they began to recognize certain men in their lives as fathers or father figures. Their answers include collective activities, consistent presence, and meaningful communication. Each of these response patterns is explained in the sections that follow.

Collective activities. Ten out of 25 participants (40%) explained that engaging in collective activities with male figures led them to identify these men as fathers or father figures. The activities they engaged in represented bonding moments that, over time began to establish the men as fathers in participants' eyes. For example, in response to questions about why they began to identify certain men as their fathers or father figures, some participants responded as follows:

He was the main person who would drive me to school. He would always have conversations with me, do different activities with me, take me to the zoo, museums, do recreational things, to the park. (male, interviewee #7, Duane)

He was in my life every day and he was the one to take me to school, pick me up from school...uhm take me with him to the hardware store, he was just in my everyday life. He was involved, that's why I looked up to him as a father figure. (female, interviewee #10, Julia)

I think it had to do with uhm him tutoring me... at first it was like here and there he would help us out with like studying and then it became an actual class and I think from there it solidified my like thinking that he really did care about my life uhm because like obviously education is important and I think in African cultures it's very like it's very prioritized and so seeing him take uhm uh invested interest in me doing well uhm from like a genuine concern helped me to uhm...see him as a... father figure. (female, interviewee #15, Mbali)

Participants who expressed this perspective mentioned that certain men in their lives engaged in activities with them, such as fishing, taking them to athletic activities, helping them with homework, taking them to the doctor, the zoo, and other outings. Consistently engaging in these activities together made participants feel cared for and prioritized. These experiences gave participants a sense that the men took a genuine interest in them and their well-being. Moreover, some participants explained that these were the kinds of activities that they associated with father-son actions. Participants who expressed this perspective did not differ based on any demographic characteristics.

Consistent presence. Seven out of 25 participants (28%) explained that experiencing the consistent presence of certain male figures led them to identify these men as fathers or father figures. Participants who expressed this view, had responses like the following:

I used to always spend time with him. I was just always around him, wherever he was I was. (male, interviewee #4, Romel)

And my uncle, he would make time to spend with myself or my cousins. He would take us all out as a group. That was our time with him. And so I always respected him because he took the time and he made time to be with us despite us not being his kids. He didn't have his own kids until I was in my 20s, and so it was just kind of taking us under his wing as his nephews and nieces even though he didn't have children. I always respected him for just being that person at that time of my life. (male, interviewee #6, Naymar)
He was just there for me a lot, like a when my father couldn't be there. (female, Interviewee #21, Grace)

Participants who recognized men as father figures for this reason, expressed their respect and appreciation for having a consistent male presence in their lives. They expressed a variety of factors that enhanced the importance of having a consistent male presence. For example, some participants explained that the lack or inconsistent presence of their biological fathers made having consistent male presence more important. Others explained that they appreciated being able to rely on the presence of these social fathers, who they saw as being a routine part of their everyday lives. More than half of the participants who expressed this view had children of their own.

Meaningful communication. Six out of 25 participants (24%) described how the specific kinds of communications they had with certain male figures led them to identify these men as fathers or father figures. For example, some of the views of the participants who expressed this understanding are as follows:

Well he shared a lot of scripture with me. He would teach me principles and show me the importance of being responsible and diligent. He would like... things like instill in me that when you work hard, people respect that and admire that. (male, interviewee #9, Martel)
The woman in my life, they taught me how to treat a woman but you couldn't teach me how to be a man. So my uncle kind of filled that void. (male, interviewee #12, Larry)
Just in the amount of effort he put into trying to teach not only me, but me and my brother, uhm trying to teach us trying to show us the tools that we would need to be successful, safe uhm it just felt like everyday with him was another effort on his behalf to show us how to be good people in this world, to be uhm caring, considerate, loving, uhm and I just feel like that's exactly what you would expect a father to do or a parent in general, is just take on that role of guidance and trying to raise this child. (female, interviewee #16, Angela)

Participants in this category appreciated learning important life lessons, values, and principles in meaningful conversations from certain men. These communications were a significant reason they would identify these men as fathers or father figures. Having these conversations, made social fathers appear to be nurturing, open, and enlightening. Participants found conversations they had with their social fathers to provide them with valuable knowledge that they would use to be successful and make intelligent choices in their everyday lives. There were no other significant themes identified, however, there were some less significant reasons provided by participants. Two participants explained that they began to look at men in their lives as their fathers or father figures after they established legal guardianship over them. Two other participants explained that they had recognized men in their lives as fathers because they believed what mothers can do is limited, and the men in their lives offered a presence and influence that was unique because they were men. For example, interviewee #17, a female, Mariah, responded to the question about why she identified her social father as her father by stating, "I mean you cannot replace... there's a lot of trends happening in society with trying to replace the father or trying to ignore the impact of a father uhm or rewrite his script, you can't, it's written in our DNA, a...a...a kid even if even if they don't know how to articulate it, uhm, even if even they, if you don't know how to articulate it, you crave mom and dad and...uhm...whoever and I feel like men have this uniqueness about them, men have this uniqueness about them that even if it's not my dad stepping in, my paternal, my real dad stepping in, if there's another male that steps in to meet that emotional, psychological, uhm need on a practical level then...then...then you're good, you know I think that's about as much as I have to say".

Most Important Affects on their Lives

Participants in the present study were asked to identify the most important influences that men in their lives as fathers or father figures had on them. Their answers include values, adulthood/manhood, and relationships. Each of these response patterns is explained in the sections that follow.

Values. Eleven out of 25 participants (44%) in this category described the most important effects of their social fathers as instilling within them values, such as education, discipline, family, spirituality, etc. Examples of participants who expressed learning these lessons are:

Definitely his help in my academic like like journey (*interviewee: uh uhm*) because uhm my dad and him are both very influential, my dad really has always like education will get you really far in life and he used to say it too... Yeah I think so like him like, ah yeah... being there to help me academically, all my SATs and encouraging me. (female, interviewee #15, Mbali)

Uh..Good influences would probably be, you know, work ethic, you know, and trying to do my best in everything that I possibly could do. (male, interviewee #14, Kerry)
It showed me that hard work and determination there is no factor for excuses, uhm when you come from nothing and there may not be as much access the...the willpower to do research, to create your own resource to get where you need to go to has shown that there is no reason that you can't do what you need to do so it's probably what pushes me to do what I do. (female, interviewee #23, Monica)

Participants who mentioned shaping their values as the most important effect social fathers had on them, identified a range of principles. Participants mentioned values such as spirituality, hard work, educational attainment, and value for and commitment to family. Those who identified values as the important influence, explained how they were shaped by these lessons from their social fathers and carried them throughout their lives.

Manhood/adulthood. Ten out of 25 participants (40%) mentioned teaching them lessons about manhood/adulthood as one of the most important effects that social fathers had on them. For example, some of the views of the participants who expressed this understanding are as follows:

For the most part, teaching me about adulthood and what to expect, what to...it's hard to say, it's so much. Trying to get one specific thing on anything like that, teaching me what it is to be a man, to have a family, and what then to do. (male, interviewee #4, Romel)

Uhh...just teach me how to be a black man in Oakland. You know, because it was rough growing up in my neighborhood. And a lot of things that men experience women cannot relate to. So as you come to age as a adolescent's becoming a man, you know you be out in the streets and only men can relate to certain things. They can only share experience man to man, so women couldn't teach me that. (male, interviewee #12, Larry)

I think it would just go back to those lessons that he thought of always being warm, and always being loving, and always being caring and always being willing to help someone else... it's like kinda natural for when I'm interacting with young people, not only just in my family, but just in general, to be like show that same sort of love and support I guess. (female, interviewee #16, Angela)

Participants who identified lessons about manhood and adulthood as being among the most important affects social fathers had on them were mostly males, but not exclusively, i.e. seven males versus three females. These participants talked about how to navigate their environment (neighborhoods and other social settings) as men and to take on the responsibilities of men. They mentioned being taught how to make intelligent decisions in situations that young men are likely to encounter. These lessons included instructions about how to be good family members, relationship partners to women, and models of positive manhood. Others in this category mentioned lessons about what it means to be an adult in society.

Relationships. Eight out of 25 participants (32%) noted that the most important effect their social fathers had on them was the advice they gained about how to have healthy romantic and social relationships in general. For example, some of the views of the participants who expressed this understanding are as follows:

I would say he has had a profound effect on my dating life and my social life. For example, I tell people all the time when you've had not only a father, but a father and a step-father, especially as a young woman who is interested in dating men, you become very aware of your worth and little things that affect you because early on in my life my dad showed me everything and my step dad took me out and showed me how I should expect to be treated as I get older. I think that's one of the biggest influences, like... I don't accept anything other than great from people as far as.. like.. treatment, because my parents treated me so well, and they taught me how to treat people well. (female, interviewee #2, Jazmine)

Oh my gosh like because of him I feel like I have avoided a lot of like uhm relationship decisions that railroad a lot of young people, I didn't get involved in drugs, and sex prematurely , and uhm I had sense of my value and my worth because he was this guy paying attention to me but it wasn't to take advantage of me but it was to build me up uhm so I really feel like ...he really changed the trajectory of my future, uhm...I was able to focus...I was given the wisdom to steer away from things that would side track me and to focus on going to college and you know building healthy relationships with girlfriends and guy friends and I think just his presence and his wisdom helped me to do that. (female, interviewee #17, Mariah)

He's shown me what a man is supposed to be, and what I should look for in my future. (female, interviewee #22, Kimberly)

Participants who identified lessons about relationships as the most important affects social fathers had on them were mostly females, but not exclusively, i.e. seven females versus one male. These participants explained that their social fathers helped to provide them with examples of how they should be treated and treat others in relationships. Their social fathers taught them to respect and value themselves and to treat others with the same respect to maintain healthy relationships. Some mentioned that their social fathers were models of how men should conduct themselves in relationships.

Difference Between Biological Fathers and Social Fathers

Participants were asked whether or not their experiences with their biological fathers were different from that of their social fathers, and if so, how. Only one theme emerged from the analysis of participant responses: personable/emotionally present. Their responses are described in the sections that follow.

Personable/emotionally present. Twelve out of 25 (48%) participants reported that their social fathers were more compassionate and emotionally supportive of them. The quotes below are examples of their sentiment:

I would say that my uncle was more supportive. Because my dad... is really weird about emotion. So my uncle could tell me "your smart" or "it's good that you're going to college" Whereas my dad got a card for my graduation and said that you're smart, your successful, but that was a card saying it and not him, and then he'll put his name on it. (male, interviewee #1, Teddy)

I'd say my biological father was probably more tumultuous. More.... Biological I'd say he had that traditional protestant work ethic, without the protestant... more conservative approach....more traditional... versus the compassion. (male, interviewee #3, Antoin)

There's a lot of different ways, I think to summarize it the way I interact with my biological father is more of like a check in, like I'm okay, hey dad I'm okay, like just so you know I'm okay. And uhm I think with my grandfather it's of like uhm hey papa I'm thinking about joining the peace corp, what do you think, and he'll say I think that's a great idea, I think you can totally do it, what are your plans, and I'll say I wanna be a part of the health initiative, dah dah dah dah... yeah I think that's like the main difference....grandfather's biggest concern is that I thrive and that I'm happy, and I think my father's biggest concern is that yes I'm happy but I'm safe, I'm okay, I'm just minimally like descent. (female, interviewee #16, Angela)

Participants who expressed this opinion regarded their social fathers as more broadly supportive than their biological fathers. They felt that their social fathers were concerned with their psychological, social, and physical wellbeing, whereas they perceived their biological fathers' concerns to be more limited and concerned with issues such as discipline and safety. These participants also noted that they viewed their social fathers as more emotionally present and compassionate than their biological fathers; frequently encouraging them, motivating them, and empathizing with their feelings. It must be noted, however, that a few participants (2) saw their social fathers as more disciplinarian than their biological fathers who were more trusting of them. Other participants (2), although in the minority, saw their biological fathers as easier to talk to and get along with compared to their social fathers.

Challenges Related to Non-Biological Father Status

Participants were asked to describe any conflicts they may have had with their social fathers based on the fact that they were not biologically related. Their answers include challenged authority and time and attention. Each of these response themes are explained in the sections that follow.

Challenged authority. Eight out of 25 participants (32%) explained that their social fathers' non-biological father status intensified conflict between them. This conflict manifested as participants challenging their social fathers' authority. Participants who expressed this view, had responses like the following:

It's been times when I've lost my mind and yelled at him, "but your not my dad!" which I think that step children and fictive children are good at whenever it's convenient, they fail to realize all those times when their step-dad has said "yes". I was definitely like a spoiled little brat at one point in time. I was very terrorized by "no". So when my dad would tell me no or my step-dad would tell me no, I would say "well you can't tell me no because you're not my dad", I'm just going to ask my mom or ask my dad. (female, interviewee #2, Jazmine)

Our relationship changed, especially when I told my real father that he had hit me. One time he hit me on my face because I didn't look at him when he was talking to me. And I told my dad and my dad came and told him that he's not to put his hands on us anymore. So then he decided that he just wasn't going to talk to us at all. "Right. Okay. If I can't discipline you then, I have nothing to do with you." So then we live in the household with him where he just wasn't speaking to us... I want to say that the not biological dad now, he actually shows a little bit more concern in my life. He doesn't forget my kids' birthdays. He calls all the time asking how my children are doing. (female, interviewee #8, Indigo)

Because I wasn't his biological son per se and he had to go through my mom, I think a lot of principles and a lot of way of life got...I don't want to say convoluted but it was just kind of like he had to adhere to what my mom was saying for the most part of how she wanted me to be raised. And I know, some things that he did that he didn't necessarily believe in, I guess he got to a point where he just, "I'm going to superimpose my will upon you child."... So I think he...things like my mom wanted my hair to grow out long because she read somewhere that if you don't cut your baby's hair and you let it grow to the age of four or something like that... I was three or four, or something like that, and my mom tried grow hair out and he ended giving me a haircut and she laid the wood on him, you know what I mean, because that was just kind of out-of-pocket. He wasn't supposed to do that...so he would do stuff like that and I don't think my mom wanted me eating the pig and he would feed me [inaudible] pizza and bratwurst and pork rinds and all this stuff. So it was different things like that. (male, interviewee #9, Martel)

One of the reoccurring points of conflict that emerged in the relationships between some participants and their social fathers were the matters of values, rules, and disciplining. Challenges to social fathers' authority were sometimes between participants and social fathers, but other times between participants' mothers and social fathers. According to participants, some social fathers overstepped their boundaries by imposing rules, punishments, or actions on them that they or their mothers did not approve of.

Other times, participants explained rejecting legitimate monitoring and disciplining from their social fathers. In some cases, male participants reported having initial conflicts with social fathers because participants were being protective of their mothers and challenging social fathers' leadership. In the present sample, more females (6) than males (2) mentioned that they had challenged their social fathers' authority.

Time and attention. Eight out of 25 participants (32%) described having conflict with their social fathers due to receiving limited time, attention, and priority from them. The quotes below exemplify the conflict described by these participants:

As a child I resented the fact that he took up my mother's time. He was not very family orientated. It was mostly about him and my mother and the children came secondary. And it made me dislike him because of that and because of my dislike he picked up on that and so he disliked me. It was just an ongoing situation and like I said eventually we learned how to tolerate and be cordially to each other. (female, interviewee #11, Audrey)

My grandmother and grandfather had 15 kids, and they have over 100 grandkids, great grandkids, and great great grandkids. So, there's a lot of competition, competing for their time, their attention. And if anything, that would have been a challenge that...I mean, they really loved him because he always made time for all of his kids and his grandkids. So if anything would have been a challenge, it just would have been not being able to spend some quality time with him. But even to this day when I go down to see him, I'm able to spend quality time with him, so that was really never an issue. So I never really had any real challenges or problems with my grandfather. (male, interviewee #5, Lavelle)

Participants who described these challenges often felt that they received limited attention from their social fathers or from their mothers due to the presence of their social fathers. Some explained that their social fathers had children of their own or other priorities that caused them to have a limited amount of time. Some participants explained that this limited time and attention caused them to feel that they were a secondary priority. Four participants answered that there were no challenges related to the fact that their social fathers were not their biological fathers.

Relationship Change Over Time

Participants were asked how, if at all, their relationships with their social fathers changed over time. Their responses fall within two themes: distance and relationship maturation. Their responses are described in the sections that follow.

Relationship maturation. Thirteen out of 25 participants (52%) explained that their relationships with their social fathers improved over time. The quotes below exemplify the conflict described by these participants:

If anything, we have a slightly more open relationship about things because I am older and I can articulate things that may have bothered me when I was younger and he will receive things as coming from an adult and not coming from his kid. If anything, as I've gotten older we just have a stronger communicating relationship because we can communicate less and more effectively. (female, interviewee #2, Jazmine)

Yea, it grew, definitely. It grew into a more step-father bond. More of a step fathership bond I would say. Deep discussion. He was a contractor so I worked for him. Developed a deep relationship a lot of intellectual philosophical discussions, and discussions about the ladies, relationships. (male, interviewee #3, Romel)

Yeah it has developed a lot. I mean, he's able to come to me about really personal issues. Even in regards to like issues that he has with my mom, like he is able to come to me for that. He's able to kind of rely on me as to handle things as the man of the house, in certain situations. Especially when he travels back home to Africa, Nigeria. So we developed a lot in trust and in being closer. (male, interviewee #19, Rod)

Participants expressed that relationships with their social fathers matured in a number of ways. Some participants originally did not have good relationships with their social fathers and did not recognize them as their fathers. Yet, most reported that over time they became more accepting of them and their role. Other participants mentioned that as they grew older and became adults their social fathers were more open and vulnerable with them; frequently discussing personal and sensitive issues. Participants explained that as they grew older, their social fathers looked at them with more respect and engaged in more complex and intellectual conversations.

Distance. Nine out of 25 participants (36%) explained that their relationships with their social fathers grew more distant over time. The quotes below are examples of their viewpoints:

I'm in college now, but that distance is a big thing, and it's funny that you ask me because I've been like contemplating where did I come from and how did I get here. And I do look back to my uncle a lot on that. And maybe I'm not doing enough on my part to keep the relationship up. But then again I'm in college and I'm 500 miles away. I think that one thing that's changed is distance and proximity for sure. (male, interviewee #1, Teddy)

Yeah, kind of, because we ended up moving, so...we moved when I was around eight, so I didn't see him as much. We used to go over every weekend, but more when I got around 12 or 13, I just...I saw him less. And he got sick around when I was 12, so. (male, interviewee #7, Duane)

Oh yeah! I mean **inaudible** have to change, I mean you know we still close but we don't get to talk very much cause he doesn't live here anymore, he doesn't live up here anymore he lives in_____. Uhm and...let's see, whenever I see him it's great, but we just don't talk, I don't get to see him as much, I used to live with him for a bit of time too, him and_____, uhm that's his wife. Uhm so I mean as far as like change it's just...we don't talk as much. (female, Interviewee #25, Alicia)

Participants who expressed this change in their relationships with their social fathers did so for several different reasons. Some explained that as the romantic relationships between their social fathers and their mothers dissolved their relationships with their social fathers became more sparse and less frequent in contact. Other participants explained how they communicated less with their social fathers after going away to college or moving away from home. However, it is important to note that the majority, i.e. seven of the nine participants who expressed distance, had social fathers who were not their mothers' romantic partners, instead they were mostly grandfathers, uncles, and family associates.

Discussion

The pressures of racism and economic obstacles continue to challenge the families and relationships of people of African descent in the U.S. and around the globe. The Africanity model emphasizes the importance of examining how they have dealt with such pressures in historical and cultural context. Different versions or adaptations of pre-colonial African models of extended families continue to serve as a social safety net whereby Black youth continue to receive parental nurturing and support, and sometimes isolation or distress. Black social fathers are a cultural component of the African and African American extended-family tradition in the context of modern economic, racial, and political circumstances. Social fathering is also an example of flexibility in family roles and strong kinship bonds, two characteristics that Hill (1998) identifies as strengths that Black people have used to enhance the survival, stability, and advancement of Black families.

Analysis of this study's results revealed that Black youth identified men in their lives as social fathers when they were consistently present and/or engaged in collective activities (outings, working on projects together, etc.), and meaningful communication (discussions about life lessons, obstacles, values, etc.).

These relationship traits caused participants in this study to feel valued, prioritized, cared for, stable, and supported, a finding which is consistent with previous research on the stabilizing and nurturing effects of social fathers (Coley, 2003; Parent, Jones, Forehand, Cuellar, and Shoulberg, 2013). However, this study demonstrates that these factors are responsible for some youth identifying certain men as social fathers. Their engagement in meaningful communications and dual activities may lead to the development of emotional attachments. What this study reveals that some others have not explored is how these factors affect the way Black youth see their social fathers. Participants in this study explained that when social fathers were consistently present, and engaged in meaningful communications and collective activities with them they began to respect and appreciate them, and see them as reliable and enlightened men who they can learn from, depend on, and open themselves up to. The authors of this study theorize that participants in the present study may particularly have desired consistent presence, meaningful communication, and collective activities for a variety of reasons including their having limited, inconsistent, or non-existent relationships with their biological fathers, and their mothers may have been overburdened and unable to provide these engagements to a greater degree. Additionally, mothers may have intentionally selected men with these qualities, perceiving their children as lacking them. Conversely, social fathers may have identified consistency, meaningful communications, and collective activities as things that participants were in particular need of. Consistent with flexible family roles, many of these fathers may be becoming providers of the qualities that the children in their lives could benefit from.

Participants in this study identified values-socialization as one of the most important influences that social fathers had on their lives. The values they identified; spirituality, loyalty to family, hard work, and educational attainment, were remarkably in alignment with the characteristics that Hill (1998), in his Holistic/Solutions Framework, defines as the cultural strengths of Black families. In these ways, the social fathers that this study's participants were exposed to were in cultural alignment. A contributing factor may also be because not all of the social fathers that participants were exposed to were primary caregivers, therefore, some social fathers may have been unburdened with responsibilities such as paying tuition and disciplining. This would give them more time than primary caregivers to focus on things like value socialization. Also, among the most important influences that social fathers had on participants' lives were their advice on manhood and relationships. Males in the present sample explained how their social fathers had lasting effects on their understandings on how to make intelligent decisions, and behave appropriately in relationships with women, while females explained how their social fathers shaped their expectations of men and how they should expect to be treated by other men. It may be that for similar reasons, when asked whether or not their experiences with their biological fathers were different, and if so, how, the most common response among the participants in this study who reported the presence of biological father, 14 out of 20 participants, was that their social fathers were comparatively more present and emotionally supportive to them.

This finding is consistent with Coley (2003), who found that among girls who identified the presence of biological fathers, generally reported stronger attachments to social fathers compared to biological fathers. Such findings highlight an important point, that the presence of social fathers play an important role in the lives of black youth regardless of the presence or lack of presence of biological fathers. Therefore, both youth who have the presence of biological fathers and those who do not benefit immensely from the presence of black social fathers.

Given that the youth in this study, on average, identified their social fathers as fathers or father figures around the age of 11, the emphasis on manhood and relationships may be consistent with natural adolescent development processes. Early adolescence (ages 11-13) is characterized in part by puberty, sexual interest, increased interaction with peers, and a developing interest in abstract thinking. During this stage, our participants may have been particularly receptive to gender and sexual socialization. Moreover, their social fathers may have identified them as in need of these messages.

Participants' challenges with their social fathers included them challenging their social fathers' authority and experiencing limited time and attention from them. Previous research has demonstrated that Black social fathers often experience frustration due to not knowing how far they can go with disciplining social children (McDougal & George, 2016). The present study demonstrates that the participants recall of challenging their social fathers' authority is largely due to their non-biological father status. Most participants who explained rejecting social fathers' authority, said that they were doing so because they wanted to get their way or because they didn't accept their social fathers' authority over them at the time. However, one participant in this study reported experiencing harsh physical punishment from a social father. The fact that most of the participants who reported challenging their social fathers' authority were female is related to previous research about fathers finding it more difficult to raise daughters compared to sons, due to their lack of gender familiarity (Green, 2010). However, there may be other factors that future research may explore.

Other participants explained that they experienced limited time and attention from their social father once they moved away when they have biologically related children. In cases where the social father is a romantic partner of the mother, in the event that the romantic partnership dissolves the relationship between those participants and their respective social fathers became stressed. The fact that some social father relationships are vulnerable to geographic location and the tenuous nature of romantic partnerships explains how the time and attention that social fathers can provide may become limited. Similarly, when participants explained the ways that their relationships with their social fathers changed over time, some mentioned that they had become more distant and removed due to moving away from home, remarriage, and other factors.

Yet, others reported that their relationships with their social fathers improved, became more substantive, open, trusting, and mutually respectful. This relationship maturation may be a natural part of parent child relationship development, however, it takes on a unique meaning for social fathers who often enter parental relationships under suspicion, mistrust, and often contempt due to their non-biologically related status.

In the tradition of Hill's (1998) Solutions Framework, the present investigation offers information that can be used to construct culturally relevant services to improve the wellbeing of families like those of the participants in this study. The present study's findings are important with regard to mental health and other service providing. This research can provide important knowledge for social fathers and other parents about the positive effects that they can have on Black children's self-confidence, educational attainment, professional lives, and family lives. This research can also be instrumental in helping Black social fathers to form healthy relationships with non-biologically related youth. Moreover, this data can help families to avoid the kinds of negative effects and outcomes that may come as a result of the some of the missteps outlined by some participants in this study. For example, when social fathers come into Black children's lives, it is important that they develop clear understandings about their disciplinary limits and any parental boundaries or expectations they are being held to regarding discipline or socialization. In addition, this research suggests that families who bring social fathers into their children's lives may want to guard against the possibility of depriving their children of time and attention as a consequence of a social father's presence. This research clearly reveals the kinds of qualities that Black youth look for in non-biologically related fathers and father figures, which can be informative and helpful to families as they go about identifying who they choose to bring into the lives of their children. Using this information to shape culturally tailored interventions for Black families, can help them better use their strengths to maintain healthy functioning in spite of racial-economic pressures on their relationships, such as racism, racialized gender discrimination, and racially disproportionate rates of unemployment and underemployment.

Future research may focus on the interaction of social fathers in context through ethnographic observations. Observing Black social fathers at home or during activities with their children may provide insight that one-on-one interviews might not. Research on Blacks social fathers may also benefit from larger quantitative studies that could capture a wider range of social fathering experiences and identify how those experiences relate to youth educational and mental health outcomes. Lastly, to add to the current literature, it is important for future research to interview the mothers of Black youth who have had social fathers in their lives, their perspectives on why they permit the presence of certain men in their children's lives, how they go about deciding which men to permit to have presence in their children's lives, and their perspectives on how they and their families are affected by social fathers.

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