

Parental Support and Psychological Control in Relation to African American College Students' Self-Esteem

by

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine perceived parental behaviors (i.e., support and psychological control) in relation to African American college students' self-esteem using a mixed methods approach comprised of paper pencil survey, online survey, and three focus groups. Participants were recruited from Pan African Studies classes, general education course, Black Student Union, Black Graduation Club, and a psychology department subject pool. The results from both survey data ($n = 426$) and focus group data ($n = 426$) indicated that (1) perceived support by mothers and fathers was related to higher self-esteem, (2) perceived psychological control by mothers was related to lower self-esteem, and (3) that perceived behaviors by mothers were more influential than fathers. One gender difference emerged in the quantitative analysis; support by fathers was more related to male students' self-esteem than female students.

Keywords: African American, emerging adult, college student, self-esteem, parental behaviors

Many theorists have postulated that African Americans in the United States should have low self-esteem due to racism, prejudice, and discrimination (see Twenge & Crocker, 2002 for a discussion). Yet, African American youth and college students generally report higher self-esteem than other ethnic groups (Gray-Little & Hafdahl, 2000; Twenge & Crocker, 2002). Therefore, "generalized others" (Mead, 1934), such as people who discriminate against African Americans, may not have as much influence as "significant others" (Cooley, 1902), such as parents, in the development of African Americans' self-esteem (Twenge & Crocker, 2002). This may be especially true for African American families given the strong kinship bonds (Hines & Boyd-Franklin, 1996) and strong value of family (Hunter & Davis, 1994; Hurd, Moore, & Rogers, 1995).

In support of these ideas, a small handful of studies have found that perceived parent-child relationships are important to African American adolescents' mental health (Taylor, 2010) and self-esteem (Bean, Bush, McKenry, & Wilson, 2003). In a seminal article from over 30 years ago, Smith (1980) suggested that more research needs to address how African American parents can promote self-esteem in their offspring. Yet, relatively few studies have still addressed this area of scholarship with African American samples. In general, findings in non-African American samples or in ethnically diverse samples indicate that parental warmth, support, and responsiveness are associated with better youth developmental outcomes (e.g., self-esteem); while harsh, intrusive, and psychologically controlling behaviors by parents are negatively related to youth adjustment (Peterson, 2005; Stolz, Barber, & Olsen, 2005).

However, less attention has been given to the period of emerging adulthood when individuals assume roles involving greater responsibilities, attain greater independence from their immediate families, and begin intense exploration of their identity (Arnett, Kloep, Tanner, Hendry, & Tanner, 2011). According to Manns (1997), African American parents continue to have an effect on their offspring during adult years. Even less attention has been given to these relationships in African American college students. Finally, most studies still focus on maternal behaviors, and if fathers are included, separate analyses are conducted for reports about mothers and fathers (Amato & Fowler, 2002; Plunkett, Ainsworth, Henry, & Behnke, 2011; Ruiz, Roosa, & Gonzales, 2002).

The purpose of this study was to examine perceived parental behaviors (i.e., support and psychological control) in relation to African American college students' self-esteem using a mixed methods approach comprised of paper pencil survey, online survey, and focus groups. In addition, this study adds to the growing scholarly literature on fathering by examining contributions of mother figures and father figures in the same analyses. This research can also provide insight into a population (i.e., African American emerging adults) that has not been studied extensively in the self-esteem literature. Hopefully, the results will guide future research and improve community-based programs (e.g., parenting skills training) that focus on African American families.

Self-Esteem in African American Emerging Adults

Self-esteem refers to the self-evaluation of one's worth, adequacy, and approval (Rosenberg, 1979). Numerous studies have found that African American adolescents and emerging adults have higher self-esteem than other ethnic groups (Adams, 2010; Gray-Little & Hafdahl, 2000; Hughes & Demo, 1989; Rosenberg, 1979; Zeigler-Hill, 2007). A meta-analysis by Twenge and Crocker (2002) indicated that this difference is stronger for female African Americans than male African Americans of typical college-age, and that when looking across all adults, male African Americans have slightly lower self-esteem than male Whites. Yet, African American males identify a strong sense of self as important (Hunter & Davis, 1994). Unfortunately, many African Americans are exposed to environments full of risk factors (e.g., racism, poverty) that can result in detrimental outcomes, such as low self-esteem or increased risk of depression (Repetto, Caldwell, & Zimmerman, 2004; Williams, Stiffman, & O'Neal, 1998). However, high self-esteem can be an important resiliency factor for African Americans to help them cope with and overcome obstacles (Mann, Hosman, Schaalma, & de Vries, 2004) and to improve mental health by buffering negative environmental stressors (Compas, Hinden, & Gerhardt, 1995). Thus, it is imperative to identify antecedents of self-esteem in African Americans.

Parenting in Relation to Self-Esteem

Early theorists contended that conceptions of self are developed from the reflected appraisals of significant others (Mead, 1934), often referred to as the “looking glass self” (Cooley, 1902). A key setting for the evaluation of an African American’s self-concept to occur is the family (Smith, 1980); thus it is reasonable to suggest that emerging adults’ views of self are partially linked to perceptions of interactions with their parents. It is likely that mothers may play a more important role in their children’s development because of the strong parenting identity that mothers often have in African American families (Hines & Boyd-Franklin, 1996). More specifically, mothers often serve the roles stereotypically assigned to both mother and father in many African American families, especially in single-parent households (McAdoo, & Younge, 2009).

African American families often demonstrate supportive family patterns (McAdoo, & Younge, 2009). Supportive behaviors by parents (e.g., warmth, nurturance, physical touch, verbal affirmations) communicate to their offspring that they are valued and loved, ultimately resulting in higher self-esteem (Barber, Maughan, & Olsen, 2005; Peterson, 2005). Numerous studies have found that perceived supportive gestures by mothers and fathers are related to increased self-esteem in male and female adolescents (e.g., Bámaca, Umaña-Taylor, Shin, & Alfaro, 2005; Plunkett, Henry, Robinson, Behnke, & Falcon, 2007). Although the sample was small, Bean, Bush, McKenry, and Wilson (2003) found that mothers’ support was significantly correlated to African American adolescents’ self-esteem, but fathers’ support was not. However, Cooper (2009) found that perceived support from mothers as well as fathers were significantly related to African American girls’ self-esteem. High levels of support by African American mothers have been identified in some studies (e.g., Tamis-LeMonda, Briggs, McClowry, & Snow, 2008); which may partially account for African American’s high self-esteem. Also, studies have found that supportive gestures by parents are related to better psychological adjustment of college students (e.g., Holahan, Valentiner, & Moos, 1994).

African American parents have sometimes been characterized as authoritarian (McAdoo & Young, 2009). A key component of an authoritarian parenting style is parental psychological control (Barber & Xia, 2013), which has been linked with lower self-esteem. Parental psychological techniques (e.g., guilt, shame, love withdrawal; Silk, Morris, Kanaya, & Steinberg, 2003) may not meet children’s emotional needs and can convey rejection, ultimately leading to lower self-esteem. Thus, it is not surprising that research has found an inverse relationship between perceived psychological control by parents and youth self-esteem (Bean & Northrup, 2009; Frank, Plunkett, & Otten, 2010; Shek, 2007; Silk et al., 2003). Psychologically controlling behaviors may be especially hurtful to African Americans when they may already be experiencing rejection, prejudice, and discrimination outside of the family.

However, it is also possible that psychological control may not be as detrimental in African American families because some parents may use this strategy to prepare their offspring for challenges associated with environmental micro-aggressions. Bean et al. (2003) found that psychological control by fathers was strongly and inversely related to African American adolescents' global self-esteem, while psychological control by mothers was not significantly related to global self-esteem in a small sample of African American adolescents.

Given the literature cited above with adolescents, it was hypothesized that perceived support by parents would be significantly related to the self-esteem of African American college students, while perceived psychological control would be negatively related to self-esteem. Given the differences in self-esteem between male and female African Americans, as well as some mixed findings regarding contributions of mothers and fathers, this study examined contributions of mothers and fathers to the self-esteem of male and female African Americans.

Methodology

The institutional review board at the university approved this study prior to data collection. Quantitative (self-report surveys, online surveys) data and qualitative (focus group) data were used in this mixed methods study (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004; Johnson & Turner, 2003). Using multiple data collection strategies and types of data can provide additional insight into the research questions and hypotheses (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004).

Quantitative Data

Procedures. Self-report data were collected from African American college students at one comprehensive university in Southern California through an online and/or paper survey. Participants were recruited from two Pan African Studies classes, a junior-level general education course, two undergraduate student organizations (i.e., Black Student Union, Black Graduation Club), and a psychology department subject pool. The researchers and trained research assistants collected, coded, entered, and verified the data. The online survey was created at PsychSurveys.com. Participants in the subject pool were generally freshman or sophomore students enrolled in introductory psychology courses (one is a general education course which comprised most of the subject pool sample); they were given participation credit in their class. Differences between the two formats (i.e., online and survey) were examined on the key variables in the study using a MANOVA. No significant differences were found ($F = 1.45, p = .15$); the univariate analyses were also not significant. Additionally, no significant differences were found on age ($t = -1.42, p = .16$), classification ($t = -1.41, p = .16$), or gender ($Chi^2 = 2.58, p = .28$). Thus, the data were combined.

Sample characteristics. Data for this study came from 608 African American college students with 40.6% male participants and 59.4% female participants. The ages ranged from 18-26 years ($M = 19.7$) with 43.4% freshmen, 22.0% sophomores, 19.6% juniors, 14.8% seniors, .2% graduate students. Most participants (95.1%) were born in the United States, while the remaining were born in 12 different countries. Most parents (85.8%) were born in the United States with the remaining originating in 31 different countries. The participants came from households where the biological parents were never married (29.1%), married (28.0%), divorced (22.9%), remarried (9.7%), separated (6.4%), with the remaining “other” or missing. The predominant family forms reported were single-mother families (46.4%), two-parent, intact families (27.5%), and stepfather families (13.0%), with the remaining from other family forms (e.g., adopted, grandparents, birthfather only). Participants were asked to report their primary mother figure and primary father figure: Most participants (i.e., 79.9%) reported their biological mother was their primary mother figure, while 73.5% reported their biological father was their primary father figure. The remaining participants reported other parent figures (e.g., stepparent, grandparent, adopted).

Measurement. Descriptive characteristics of the participants were measured with standard demographic questions. Means, standard deviations, and Cronbach’s alphas for each scale are presented in Table 1.

Positive esteem and self-deprecation were measured with the 10-item Rosenberg (1979) Self-Esteem Scale. Sample items follows: (a) “I feel that I have a number of good qualities” (positive esteem) and (b) “At times I think I’m no good at all” (self-deprecation). Response choices follow: *1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = agree, and 4 = strongly agree*. Evidence exists that the Rosenberg Self-Esteem scale is sometimes better as two separate factors, especially with non-White samples (e.g., Farruggia et al., 2004; Owens, 1994; Supple & Plunkett, 2011; Supple, Su, Plunkett, Peterson, & Bush, 2013). Positive esteem was created by averaging the five positively worded items, while self-deprecation was created by averaging the five negatively worded items. Using the current data, positive esteem and self-deprecation correlated from $-.59$ to $-.61$, indicating the two dimensions of self-esteem only shared 35-37% of the same variance. Thus, the two dimensions were both examined in the analyses.

Two subscales were utilized from the Parental Behavior Measure (Peterson, 1982; Plunkett et al., 2011) to assess participants perceptions of parental support and parental psychological control. A 4-item parent support subscale was used to assess the degree to which college students perceive their mothers and fathers to be emotionally supportive, warm, and nurturing. A sample item follows: “This parent seems to approve of me and the things I do.” The 6-item psychological control subscale measured the degree to which emerging adults perceived their mothers and fathers to use manipulative techniques such as guilt, shame, and love withdrawal to impose authority. Sample items follow: (a) “This parent is always finding fault with me”, and (b) “This parent will not talk to me when I displease him/her.”

Participants' response choices for both subscales were: *1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = agree, and 4 = strongly agree*. The participants in the study were prompted to respond to each item twice, once for their identified mother figure and once for their identified father figure. More specifically, the items about their mothers were on a separate page from the items about their fathers. This separate pages format was used based on results from Plunkett et al. (2011) that found that asking about mothers and fathers on separate pages instead of on the same page results in significantly more distinction (i.e., lower correlations) between mothers' and fathers' behaviors.

Qualitative Data

Procedures. Participants were recruited by visiting Pan African Studies classes and asking for volunteers for the study. Permission from instructors was obtained prior to visiting the classes. Thus, the sampling method began as a purposive, convenience sample, and eventually developed into snowball sampling (Goodman, 1961). A script that explained the purpose of the study and the format of the proposed focus group was shared with the prospective participants. The prospective participants were invited to attend one of three focus groups, to be held on three different occasions at a convenient location on campus. After participants selected the most convenient day to attend, the focus groups were structured with group one having six females, group two with four males, and group three consisting of two males and three females. Upon arrival, the participants were given a survey instrument and a consent form to complete. The focus group was moderated by the second author of this study. Each focus group took approximately 75 minutes to complete and was audiotaped and videotaped. The questions in the focus group asked the participants to describe the behaviors their mother and father figures engage in, whether or not these parental behaviors impacted their self-concept and self-esteem (if so, how?), and which parent seemed to impact their self-esteem the most.

The second author, with the assistance of trained research assistants, transcribed and typed the content of each focus group. Using Glaser and Strauss (1967) grounded theory approach, data analysis was an ongoing process in the study. Content analyses of the protocols were conducted by two coders. Lincoln and Guba's (1985) method of categorizing data to establish emergent and organizing constructs was incorporated. An important strategy of categorizing the data involved sorting the data into broader themes and issues. Specifically, each coder was asked to evaluate pertinent data individually by reading and re-reading the protocols several times in order to identify the most endorsed themes. In line with Maxwell (1996), the coding categories were developed inductively during the analysis. Coding was thus a way of fracturing the data to allow for comparison between the categories as well as within the categories.

Sample characteristics. Data for this study came from 15 African American college students with 46.7% male participants and 53.3% female participants. The ages ranged from 18-24 years ($M = 20.0$). The participants came from households where the biological parents were married (26.7%), never married (13.3%), divorced (26.7%), remarried (13.3%), separated (6.7%), deceased spouse (6.7%), and grandmother household with no biological parent (6.7%). When participants were asked to report their primary mother/father figure, 86.7% reported biological mothers, and 92.7% reported their biological fathers. The remaining participants reported stepparents or grandmother.

Results

Quantitative Data

Bivariate correlations. For both of male and female African Americans, Pearson correlations (see Table 1) indicated (1) perceived support by mothers and fathers was significantly and positively related to positive esteem; (2), perceived support by mothers and fathers was significantly and negatively related to self-deprecation; (3) perceived psychological control by mothers and fathers was significantly and negatively related to positive esteem; and (4) perceived psychological control by mothers and fathers was significantly and positively related to self-deprecation.

Table 1
Pearson Correlations (Men Below the Diagonal and Women Above the Diagonal)

	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Positive esteem	1.00	.58**	-.17**	-.06	.31**	.20**
2. Self-deprecation	-.64**	1.00	.27**	.22**	-.20**	-.16**
3. Mothers' psychological control	-.27**	.32**	1.00	.44**	-.39**	-.06
4. Fathers' psychological control	-.14*	.28**	.28**	1.00	-.21**	-.06
5. Mothers' support	.36**	-.39**	-.46**	-.15*	1.00	.38**
6. Fathers' support	.22**	-.20**	-.20**	-.01	.30**	1.00
Men's M	3.34	1.77	1.98	1.68	3.46	2.88
Men's SD	0.49	0.69	0.61	0.67	0.60	0.97
Women's M	3.36	1.72	1.90	1.68	3.54	3.11
Women's SD	0.57	0.62	0.65	0.65	0.61	0.95

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$ (two tail)

Structural equation models. A path analysis was conducted in EQS 6.1 with mother and father support predicting positive self-esteem and self-deprecation, as well as mother and father psychological control predicting self-esteem and self-deprecation. Robust methods were utilized to address issues with minor issues of non-normality but results showed minimal differences between maximum likelihood and Robust maximum likelihood methodologies. Hence, maximum likelihood results were used. To evaluate model fit, SEM literature recommends using the Satorra-Bentler Scaled χ^2 the Comparative Fit Index (CFI \geq .95), and the Root Mean Squared Error of Approximation (RMSEA \leq .06) (Hooper, Coughlan, & Mullen, 2008; Hu & Bentler 1998; Kline, 2011; Tabachnick & Fidell, 2012).

To address poor fit in the baseline models, Wald and LaGrange tests were used for eliminating and adding paths. For all groups, the path from father psychological control to positive esteem was eliminated as recommended by the Wald test and the correlation path between the errors of positive esteem and self-deprecation was added as recommended by the LaGrange test. After model modifications, final fit indices showed excellent fit and are shown in Table 2. Using the entire sample, results indicated excellent model fit: $\chi^2(1) = 0.067$, $p = .812$, CFI = 1.0, RMSEA = .000.

For main path associations, positive esteem in African American college students was significantly predicted by mother support ($\beta = .26$, $p < .05$) and father support ($\beta = .11$, $p < .05$) suggesting higher scores of parental support reflected higher scores of positive esteem in African Americans. For self-deprecation, significance was identified across all four predictors; father psychological control ($\beta = .16$, $p < .05$), mother psychological control ($\beta = .15$, $p < .05$), mother support ($\beta = -.15$, $p < .05$), and father support ($\beta = -.11$, $p < .05$). Results for self-deprecation suggested that mother and father psychological control contributed to higher scores of self-deprecation and lower scores of positive esteem in African American emerging adults. Overall, the independent variables of this sample explained 12.4% of the unique variance for positive esteem and 14.2% of the unique variance of self-deprecation.

In order to establish configural invariance for gender, the same model was tested looking at male and female participants separately. Results indicated excellent fit for both male participants ($\chi^2(1) = 1.307$, $p = .253$, CFI = .999, RMSEA = .038) and female participants ($\chi^2(1) = .30$, $p = .583$, CFI = 1.00, RMSEA = .000). Following establishing configural invariance, a multiple group model was tested comparing both male and female subgroups with all factor loadings, variances, and covariances constrained (see Figure 1). The fit of the constrained model indicated factorial invariance for gender: $\chi^2(21) = 34.89$, $p = .029$, CFI = .977, RMSEA = .050. When accounting for gender, the independent variables explained 15.6% of the unique variance of positive esteem for men (10.7% for women) and 20.7% of the unique variance of self-deprecation for men (11.1% for women).

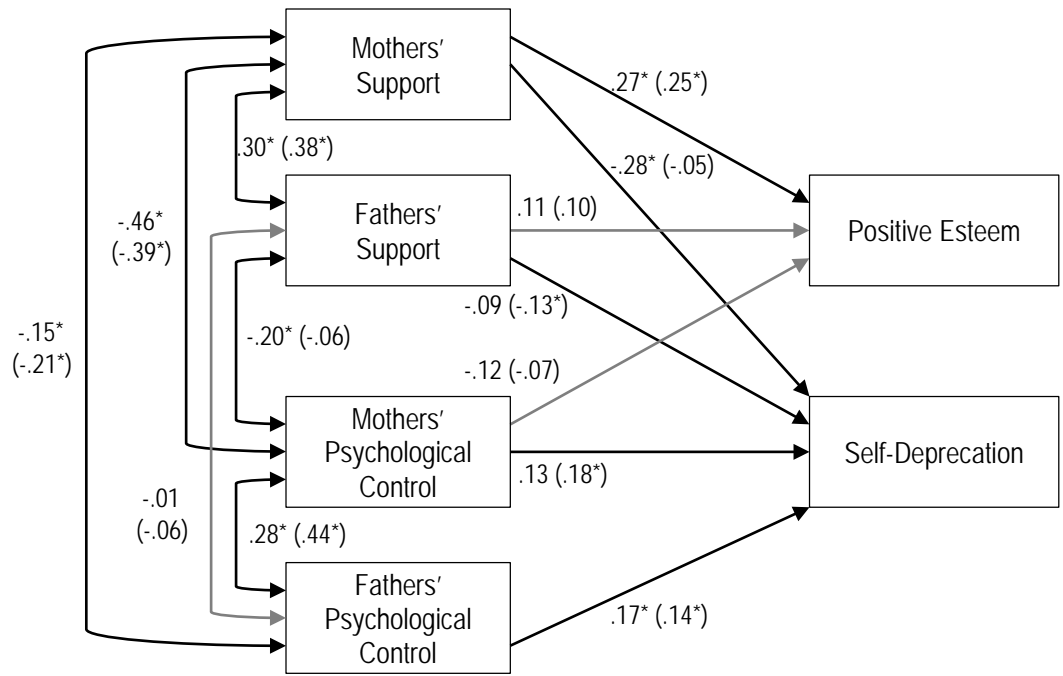


Figure 1. Path analytic model of perceived parenting and self-esteem of Black college students. Parameter estimates shown are standardized regression coefficients with parameters for women and men (in parentheses). * $p < .05$. $\chi^2(1) = 0.067$, $p = .812$, CFI = 1.0, RMSEA = .000

Table 2

Fit Indices and χ^2 Difference Tests

Models Tested	Adjustment to model	χ^2	χ^2 probability	df	χ^2 difference	CFI	RMSEA
M _{men}		83.12	< .001	1		.68	.614
M _{men2}	Eliminate father psych control to positive esteem	80.43	< .001	2	2.69	.67	.435
M _{men3}	Add path between errors of positive esteem and self-deprecation	1.31	> .001	1	79.12	.99	.038
M _{women}		114.95	< .001	1		.66	.612
M _{women2}	Eliminate father psych control to positive esteem	115.26	< .001	2	0.31	.67	.432
M _{women3}	Add path between errors of positive esteem and self-deprecation	0.30	> .001	1	114.96	1.00	0.00
M _{combined}		195.55	> .001	1		.67	.610
M _{combined2}	Eliminate father psych control to positive esteem	195.61	> .001	2	0.06	.67	.430
M _{combined3}	Add path between errors of positive esteem and self-deprecation	0.06	< .001	1	195.55	1.00	0.00
M _{invariance}		230.29	> .001	22		.65	.190
M _{invariance2}	Eliminate father psych control to positive esteem	230.34	> .001	23	0.05	.65	.186
M _{invariance3}	Add path between errors of positive esteem and self-deprecation	34.91	< .001	22	195.43	.98	.047

Qualitative Analyses

The focus group discussion revealed several insights regarding parental influence on the college students' self-esteem. The responses centered around two major themes: (1) support (or lack thereof) from the parents, and (2) intrusive parenting characterized by parental psychological control.

Support by parents and offspring's self-worth. Consistent with symbolic interactionist perspectives, several participants in this study stated that when their parents (or parent figures) were supportive, they were more likely to view themselves as competent individuals who were capable of functioning effectively and excelling in society. Specifically, when asked, "What kind of behavior from your parents make you feel better about yourself or worse about your yourself," participants in each of the focus groups identified specific strategies that their mother or grandmother (i.e., primary mother figure) used to support them. As Tasha stated:

"My mom, she's like a cheerleader. She's like 'Oh good job! You did good!' Or just out of nowhere she'll be like, 'Tasha, you're awesome!' She's always really sweet and encouraging. It makes me feel good. Sometimes, when she just says it for nothing, I'm like 'Ahh, you're just saying that.' But if she says it, and I really deserved it, and I actually did something, I'm like, 'Okay, cool, I deserve it.'"

In this quote, Tasha is not only saying that her mother's support made her feel good, but that she also internalized the positive accolades. An additional subject, Daniel, also reiterated this theme when he stated:

“My mom does tell me that she loves me all day, each day, and I know she means it. ... She said that she loves me no matter what, and it does not really matter how I chose to live my life. My mom is amazing! I felt so good to be who I am and not have to apologize.”

Further, another student, Jackie stated: *“She [my mother] is super encouraging. She always wants to know what project I am working on and she wants to see what I am doing. She wants to show people at work what I am doing.”* Another example is David, who shared his view of how his mother encourages him to be better: *“Oh, my mom is like the other voice in my head. So whenever I want to do something or I am inspired to do something, she is the one who tells me – think about it. My mom, she encourages me by the fact that she is smaller than me and she is still the mom and the dad in the family and she has been there for me during all these years. She encourages me to be better than what I am.”* The same theme emerges when the primary mother figure was the grandmother. Another participant, Denise stated: *“Whenever I do good I like calling my Grandma. ‘Cause it doesn’t matter what I do. I could be like ‘I did this!’ and she’ll be like ‘Oh, that’s so great!’ She just gives me like a good feeling all throughout the day just because I called her.”*

Although most comments focused on the mother, participants in two focus groups cited strategies that both parents practiced to show support and encouragement. Study subject Sharon stated: *“When I came back [from an internship in Africa] and I shared my story and my accomplishments and everything, my mom was just like the proudest parent ever. My dad...I don’t know that he really understood ‘cause he didn’t ask as many questions as my mom. Even now, they don’t understand exactly what I did, but they still are encouraging me.”* Further, Jason explained how both his parents were encouraging which enhanced his self-esteem:

“My mom, she is very joyful over everything. I could say that I learned how to tie my shoes and she will go like, ‘OH!’ And, my dad will go like, ‘it is cool!’ That means he is super happy. They [mother and father] encourage me in the way that they give me their opinions. My mom always tells me that I will be something great and that I have a great future. Stuff like that makes me continue to do the things that I am doing. And my dad, he says the same things...My dad always compares me with other kids, but I try to let my ego not get too large.”

Only one participant (i.e., Brenda), in all three focus groups, cited the father as the only parent giving encouragement: *“My dad, every time I do something good, he will cheer me... My dad cheers me up, so it balances out my mom.”* In each of these responses, the mother figure gave encouragement and/or unconditional approval which made the emerging adults feel good about themselves and/or their accomplishments. Only three participants mentioned supportive gestures by fathers as influential on their self-esteem.

In contrast, college students who saw their parents as low in support were likely to perceive and internalize symbolic meanings that they were low in competence, and thus question their sense of agency and efficacy. In each of the focus groups, participants discussed lack of support by parents as detrimental to their self-worth. When talking about her parents, Sheila stated:

“I’ll bring home an ‘A’ or something, I think after a certain point, they were just like, ‘Oh, okay.’ You know, it’s not really like ‘Oh! You know, congratulations!’ Sometimes it makes me feel like I’m not doing enough and that I have to do more to please them so that I can get a reaction. It’s so disappointing when I call home and I let them know I got an ‘A’ and I don’t get the reaction. It kinda’ gets me, like, okay I got an ‘A’, but is it ‘cause I didn’t get an ‘A+’? Or is it because, you’re not interested? Or are you too busy right now? So, I do question myself a lot, and wonder how do I get a reaction from my parents, to where they’re overly excited and act like I think parents should act. I’m conflicted in a way. On the one hand I get really disappointed in myself that maybe I didn’t get an ‘A+’. I didn’t reach what I think that I should have reached for them. And on the other hand, I know that I did good so I have to cheer myself up. Like, I know I’m doing good, but is it good enough for them?”

Daniel had a similar story when talking about his parents:

“For me, it gets to the point where sometimes I don’t even go to them [my parents] anymore for approval...I think from age fifteen, ‘til now, it’s just like my parents kind of come at me like ‘Why would we praise you for something that we expect of you.’ So if we expect you to do good in school, we expect you not to go to jail, we expect you not to get nobody pregnant, I’m not gonna’ congratulate you for not having a baby tonight ‘cause I expect you to not have a baby. I’ve just come to terms with the fact that that’s just the way it is.”

Michael elaborated the same theme: *“I really never got the encouragement. I mean, it was more taking their negativities and shaking them off. They make me feel, I do not know. Like, I can’t do enough, I should have never happened. But, there are moments where they make me feel like I am part of the family. But, the majority of times, they make me feel like if they wish I can change myself. And it hurts!”* Thus, the lack of support perceived by these respondents seems to undermine their view of self.

Psychological control by parents and offspring’s self-worth. Participants in each of the focus groups cited at least one parent using psychological control (e.g., manipulative techniques) to persuade them to behave in certain ways. For example, Brenda stated:

“My mom, honestly, can be the person who can turn me from doing back-flips to me just crying cause she’ll just be like ‘Okay you got an A. Okay, I get A’s. Everybody gets A’s. But, what did you do to get that A? I don’t have to be your cheerleader. You do this for you. You’re not getting that A for me. You’re getting that A for yourself. So you need to be happy for yourself.’ And I was devastated. I, mean, sometimes, it gets to be a love/hate relationship, just how my mom is. Some days I love her, some days I really hate her. Not hate her, but I just get really upset.”

Daniel describes how his mother uses guilt to gain compliance:

“When I don’t do what she asks, I’m often times guilty, or I naturally feel guilty because she asked me to do something and I didn’t do it. She’ll say, ‘You know what happened last time I had to take matters into my own hands.’ Cause there was an incident when she told me to put something in the attic and I wouldn’t do it and she climbed up herself and fell. And it’s always, you know, a guilt trip, like, ‘Well it’s okay, I guess I’ll just find a way to do it myself.’ And I’ll be like ‘Okay, mom. I’ll just do it.’”

Interestingly, each of the illustrations of psychological control showed the participants discussing their mothers’ use of these intrusive behaviors.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine perceived psychological control and support in relation to African American emerging adults' self-esteem using a mixed methods approach with a sample of college students. The results from both the survey data and focus group data indicated that perceived parenting was related to African American emerging adults' self-esteem, but that perceived behaviors by mothers were generally more influential than fathers.

Consistent with studies on adolescents, perceived supportive gestures by mothers (e.g., praise, encouragement, physical affection) were positively correlated to men and women's positive esteem and negatively related to self-deprecation. In the path analyses, maternal support was still significantly related to positive esteem and women's self-deprecation, even when examined in the context of maternal psychological control and fathers' support and psychological control. In addition, supportive gestures by mothers were the most frequently cited parental behavior in the focus groups, which is consistent with research that found high levels of support by African American mothers (e.g., Tamis-LeMonda et al., 2008). Thus, when African American mothers reflected positive images to their offspring (e.g., encouragement, love), the emerging adults may internalize more positive views of self and engage in less self-deprecating thoughts. It is possible, these supportive gestures could possibly buffer negative environmental influences, thus future studies should directly examine whether support by parents (especially mothers) can buffer experiences of discrimination on self-esteem in African American emerging adults.

Although support by fathers was related to positive esteem and self-deprecation of men and women in the correlations, it was only significantly related to men's self-deprecation in the path analyses once entered with other parenting variables. Also, supportive gestures by fathers were only mentioned by three participants in the focus groups. It appears that fathers are important, especially for men, but in the context of mothers, they may not have as much influence for the female college students in African American families. The greater influence of supportive mothers than fathers may be partially due to African Americans having an increased likelihood of being raised in single mother families (Hoffman, Llagas, & Snyder, 2003; Thomas, Krampe, & Newton, 2008) and the high levels of maternal support reported in African American households (Tamis-LeMonda et al., 2008).

Perceived psychological control by mothers was detrimental to self-worth of the emerging adults in both the correlations and qualitative analyses. Intrusive strategies such as guilt inducing, shaming, and withdrawing love by mothers may reflect negative images, which are then internalized by the emerging adults. These hurtful messages may be especially impactful for African American emerging adults who may also perceive negative societal images. In the path analyses, perceived psychological control by fathers was related to male and female African American's self-deprecation; however paternal psychological control was not mentioned in the focus groups as related to self-esteem.

It is possible that African American emerging adults are more sensitive to psychologically controlling comments and gestures by mothers because mothers play an instrumental role in African American families that are more likely to be single mother households (Hoffman et al., 2003). Speaking of which, African American mothers in single-mother families may engage in higher levels of harshness, less permissiveness, as well as higher support; which has been referred to as “no nonsense parenting” (Tamis-LeMonda et al., 2008). The “no nonsense parenting” by residential mothers may be perceived as more impactful to their offspring’s self-esteem than non-residential fathers or residential father figures (e.g., stepfathers).

This study contains a number of limitations that should be noted. First, the cross-sectional and non-experimental design limits assertions of causality between parenting and self-esteem, thus longitudinal studies are recommended. Also, the sample is limited to African American emerging adults enrolled in higher education and in one geographic region; hence, larger more representative samples are encouraged. Additionally, it is likely that family form of the participants may influence the results, but the way the demographic questions were asked in the focus group data, it was impossible to know the family form. And finally, differences might emerge based on socio-economic status (SES) differences, so future studies should consider family form and SES as potential moderators. Despite these methodological limitations, this study represents a contribution to the literature as it uses multiple methods for data collection that all provide support that perceived parenting was related to the self-esteem of African American emerging adults.

The findings of this study, in conjunction with other studies, suggest important implications for psychologists, family life educators, and other mental health practitioners. First, parenting curriculums and experts should continue to emphasize the importance of parental support (for a review see Dore & Lee, 1999), even when the parents’ offspring are now emerging adults. As Smith (1980) stated over 30 years ago, more research needs to address how African American parents can promote self-esteem in their offspring. Also, professionals may want to teach African American emerging adults how to recognize supportive gestures by their parents. Since many parenting curriculums do not specifically address the potentially negative effects of psychological control, psychologists, practitioners, and educators should help parents recognize and minimize the use of psychologically controlling behaviors (e.g., guilt, love withdrawal, shame).

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