

Low-Income African-American Fathers and their Feelings toward Fatherhood: In their Own Voices

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Abstract

Negative stereotypes of African-American fathers suggest that they are uninterested in, uninvolved with, and uncommitted to their children (Julion et al, 2007; Kismann, 1997; McAdoo, 1997). The research that exists on African-American fathers suffers from several limitations. It focuses more on their roles as breadwinners (Dubowitz et al, 2006; Rasheed & Rasheed, 1999) than on other roles they might play in their families (e.g., caregiver, teacher) and is based on information collected largely through mother's reports rather than from fathers themselves (Cabrera et al, 2000; Shears et al, 2006; Tanfer & Mott, 1997). The feelings that African-American fathers have toward fatherhood are not often represented in this research nor have they shaped a public narrative about African-American fatherhood. This study examines how African-American men perceive the role of fatherhood. The study is framed by Identity Theory which posits that individuals identify with the roles they occupy in life and act accordingly (Stryker, 1980). For the purpose of this study, I draw on qualitative data that were previously collected for the HAPPI father study. Fifteen fathers were randomly selected and the responses to four open-ended survey questions were reviewed and analyzed for themes and commonalities. Findings from this study will challenge the negative stereotypes of African-American fathers and highlight the diversity within this group.

Background and Nature of Study

Negative stereotypes are often placed upon African-American males as fathers. They have been viewed as absent or uninvolved (Coley, 2001; Connor & White, 2005) in the daily lives of their children. Low-income African-American fathers are cast as uninvolved by the media, society, and current public policy (O'Connor, 2006; Roy, 2005) and have been invisible in the study of child development, characterized negatively as "deadbeat" dads (Cabrera et al, 2000; Coley, 2001; Connor & White, 2005). This negative characterization has stemmed from the idea that African-American men are often unemployed (Coley, 2001; Connor & White, 2005) and the status of unemployment leads to the assumption of financial irresponsibility in the lives of their children (Coley, 2001; Connor & White, 2005). This negative characterization has also stemmed from the myth that African-American men are

undependable, prone to engage in violent, corrupt behaviors, and/or physically absent due to abandonment or incarceration (Fiske, 2003; O'Connor, 2006).

Low-income African-American males face barriers to parenting because of racism, oppression, financial problems, and the belief that African-American fathers do not matter (Dubowitz et.al, 2006). These barriers include the limited opportunities that African-American men are given and their lack of positive role models (Fiske, 2003; O'Connor, 2007). Many African-American fathers have grown up in single parent, female headed households within impoverished settings of the inner city (Anderson, 1999; O'Connor, 2007). African-American men often lack an appropriate adult male role model and grow up with a skewed sense of what it means to be a father (Fiske, 2003; O'Connor, 2007). African-American men frequently hear the negative stereotypes that surround them in society and fall victim to the stereotypes by self-fulfilling the prophecy.

This African-American father has fallen victim to the negative self-fulfilling prophecy and in a qualitative study expressed his views on being African-American in society. He felt as though the color of his skin immediately led to negative stereotypes of him as soon as he stepped outside of his home. This father's portrayal of society's perception of him is depicted here in his own words:

When you get up in the morning and walk out that door, you catch hell soon as you walk out that door, just because of this [pointing to skin color] and you a Black man. Mistaken identity... that's how it goes (Julion et. al, 2007).

Negativity reaches this father immediately once he enters society. According to this father, the psychological stress associated with being an African-American male (Julion et.al, 2007) negatively affected his daily life and his ability to properly parent his children.

Although these negative depictions and stereotypes of African-American fathers exist, they are often misleading. The confusion about fathering in the black community stems from misunderstanding the definition of what a father is or is not (Connor & White, 2005). The majorities of black men accept the breadwinner role (Connor & White, 2005) and understand their responsibility as a father to provide for their children. Most African-American men receive strong messages about providing for their families and the idea of fatherhood as an aspect of masculinity (Allen & Doherty, 1996). Research is characterizing these men negatively without diving deeper into the lives of the African-American father.

A deeper understanding of what it means to be a father in the African-American community can not be gained unless these negative depictions of African-American men are challenged. This study will explore how low-income African-American males identify with their roles as fathers and examine the feelings they have toward fatherhood. The study will be based on Identity theory and utilize a sample of low-income, biological, and residential African-American fathers to examine the feelings that these fathers have toward fatherhood.

Inquiry Questions

The study will revolve around a sub-sample of inquiry questions, which are as follows: a) Do African-American men perceive the role of being a father as beneficial or costly? b) Do African-American men receive satisfaction from being a father? c) How do African-American men feel about fatherhood?

Significance

This study is significant because African-American fathers are portrayed negatively in the media and in society. They are viewed as ineffectual and peripheral to the functioning of their families (Dubowitz, et.al, 2006; Rasheed & Rasheed, 1999). Findings from this study will show that some African-American fathers are committed to being fathers for their children and that not all African-American fathers fit this stereotype. Previous studies show that African-American fathers are more likely to be involved in social activities, play, and physical interactions (Shears et. al, 2006) with their children than Caucasian fathers. A study from a sample of low-income African-American fathers (Cabrera et al, 2004) showed that there are fathers who care about their children, are involved and present in their lives, and are making every effort possible to provide for them financially and emotionally (Dubowitz, et.al, 2006).

Identity Theory

Identity theory is a social psychological theory that is based on the principles of structural symbolic interactionism (Stryker, 1980). It links attitude of the self, or identities, to role relationships and role-related behaviors of identity (Desrochers, Andreassi, & Thompson, 2002). Identity theorists state that the self has an abundance of identities and each of these identities takes on a certain role (Stryker, 1968; Stryker & Burke, 2000). Identity salience is a vital aspect of identity theory (Burke & Reitzes, 1981). The salience that is attached to our identities influences how much effort we put into the roles that we occupy and how well we perform in the roles (Burke & Reitzes, 1981).

Identity theory examines the self and how the self attaches meaning to the roles it occupies (Carter, 2007). Identity theory also examines how identities are implanted within social structures and how these social structures influence what it means to be an individual (Carter, 2007). It explores the meanings that people create and maintain for themselves and others (Carter, 2007).

The self can be conceptualized in terms of different identities and each identity is tied to a different part of the social structure (Stets, 2006). According to Stryker (1980) who is the originator of Identity theory, an identity is an “internalized positional designation” for each of the various roles that a person occupies in society (Stets, 2006). The idea that people have role identities developed from this (Stets, 2006). A role identity is the meaning that people attach to themselves while participating in a role (Stets, 2006).

According to Identity theory, if questioning, “Who am I”, a father would most likely respond by saying “I am a father” because this is a role that he occupies (Desrochers, Andreassi, & Thompson, 2002). Assessing the identity of a father means assessing the importance of being a father or identifying oneself as a father (Maurer, Pleck, & Rane, 2003). While assessing the identity of a father, the male must also assess the importance of being a caregiver, teacher, or any of the other set role expectations associated with being a father (Maurer, Pleck, & Rane, 2003).

Summary of the Study

In this study, Identity theory will be used to examine how low-income African-American males identify with their roles as fathers. The expectation is that most men will identify with the parenting role. Upon transitioning to fatherhood, African-American men occupy the role as father as they begin to identify themselves as fathers. Through this new identity as a father, African-American males begin to change their behaviors, view the ways in which they approach life differently, and set higher expectations for themselves. Being a father “means” something to them. By taking on the role as father, these men realize that they have bigger responsibilities and recognize how these responsibilities have begun to shape their lives. They understand the importance of being a father and attach a high level of identity salience to the role. They put much effort into the role of father and perform well at their role.

The remaining chapters will discuss how literature shaped and formed the study. They will also discuss the research design and methodology used to conduct the study. The findings, conclusions and implications for future research will be discussed in the final chapter.

Societal Perceptions of African-American Fathers

African-American fathers have been portrayed as uninterested in, uninvolved with, and uncommitted to their children (Julion et.al, 2007; Kismann, 1997; McAdoo, 1997). These stereotypical views have been supported by the media’s representation of single, non-resident African-American men (Julion et.al, 2007; Mincy & Sorensen, 1998, p.44). The 1998 movie, “He Got Game”, directed by Spike Lee depicts a single, non-resident African-American father negatively. Denzel Washington stars as, Jake Shuttleworth, the father of a phenomenal high school basketball player. Shuttleworth is serving time in prison for killing his wife in a violent family feud and is released on parole to convince his son, Jesus, to sign with the governor’s alma mater university (Lee, 1998). In this movie, Washington is depicted negatively as a murderer who is using his son’s stardom to his own benefit. Washington has been away from his son since he was 12 years old because of murdering his wife and is released on parole only to convince his son to make a pressured decision. This negative depiction of Washington as a father can lead to the interpretation that all African-American men are “deadbeat” dads.

African-American men have been viewed as “deadbeat dads” (Julion et.al, 2007, p.596; Mincy & Sorensen, 1998, p.44) and “child support scofflaws,” fathers who fail to pay child support and consciously violate the law by doing so (Julion et.al, 2007, p.596; Reichert, 1999, p.3). Some of these men have been misinterpreted as uninvolved and absent fathers who fail to support their children financially. The development of social policies has stemmed from views that do not reflect the experiences of African-American non-resident fathers (Curran, 2003; Julion et.al, 2007). These social policies do not encourage support for helping African-American fathers engage in their children’s lives (Curran 2003; Julion et.al 2007).

African-Americans fathers are often given the short end of the stick. African-American men have been viewed as financially irresponsible (Coley, 2001; Connor & White, 2005) in the sense that they are unemployed and unable to provide economic means for their children. These supposed financial barriers have caused the belief that African-American fathers contribute to the development of their child in less measurable ways such as helping with homework and preparing meals (Dubowitz, et.al, 2006; Johnson, 1998). African-American fathers who do not live with their children have been portrayed as emotionally unattached from them (Coley, 2001; Dubowitz et.al, 1999; Gavin et.al, 2002; Rasheed, 1998). Studies have shown that non-resident minority fathers visit their children less, are less engaged, and pay less child support than non-resident Caucasian fathers (Cabrera et.al, 2008, Hofferth, 2003; King, Harris & Heard, 2004). Little research has reviewed why African-American fathers have this financial irresponsibility and why they are less involved. The obstacles faced by African-American fathers are not often depicted or reflected upon in parenting research.

African-American Fathers and the Obstacles They Face

The obstacles that African-American men face are not taken into consideration in research. Their children are being raised in neighborhoods that are unsafe because of crime and poor quality housing (Dubowitz et.al, 2006; Rasmussen, Aber, & Bhana, 2004). In a qualitative study, African-American fathers of adolescents stated that a part of guiding their children was to teach them about street culture (Dubowitz et.al, 2006). One African-American father who lived in a low-income dangerous neighborhood stated:

You got to be much more strong and hard on your kids now than back in the old days... I show my kids from my youngest boys to my daughters, I say, ‘That’s a crack head. That’s a prostitute. (Dubowitz et.al, 2006).

This father felt obligated to teach his children survival skills because of the harsh environment that they lived in (Dubowitz et.al, 2006). He could not hide the truth about the neighborhood that his children were growing up in. He had to inform his children about the dangers of their environment so that they were aware of anything that they encountered. This is the harsh reality that some African-American men and their children face daily.

Paternal involvement from their own fathers is often a factor in African-American men's ability to parent and is often an obstacle. One African-American father traced his difficulties in life to his inability to live up to his own fathers standards (Roy, 2006). During an interview one African-American male stated that his father worked at night and was never around during the day (Roy, 2006). He could not differentiate from his father "being there" (Roy, 2006, p.13) or "just visiting" (Roy, 2006, p.13).

Roy also found that in some instances, fathers who experience failure will project it on their sons. This causes the son to begin to lower his expectations of his father. In return, when the son becomes a father he lowers his expectations of his own parenting (Roy, 2006). In cases where the male's father was never around, he had to rely on his own instincts to parent. Without the presence of a father, some of these men began to rework their father's identities to fit their own (Roy, 2006). They take on the role of their father and assume "I am my father's son". They become absent in the lives of their own children because absence is all that they know. Parenting is strongly influenced by childhood relationships with their own father (Dubowitz et.al, 2006) and because of this men who never had a relationship with their father continue a cycle. Their father was not around for them and in return they are not around for their own offspring.

In a qualitative study, some African-American men revealed the obstacles they faced to paternal involvement. A study that examined African-American teenage fathers revealed that this group of men viewed their youth and money as an obstacle to paternal involvement (Paschal, 2006). These fathers wanted to enjoy their youth and the reality of being a father could not coexist with their identities of being a teenager (Paschal, 2006). Fatherhood and adolescence were mutually exclusive concepts to them (Paschal, 2006). For example, one African-American teenage father stated:

I love my child, I really do, but I got to be true to myself. How am I going to be a good father for him if I don't do what's right for me? How am I going to do right for him if I don't do right for myself? (Paschal, 2006).

This teenage father could not grasp the idea of being a father and a teenager all at once. In his eyes, he was still young and *he* was his first priority. Once he was able to obtain his personal goals he could then focus on his child.

During interviews with another group of African-American teenage fathers, it was discovered that these fathers viewed the mother of their child, their family, their friends, and social institutions as obstacles to their paternal involvement (Allen & Doherty, 1996). Family and friends were often hostile of the couple and the mother of their child was often hostile toward the father (Allen & Doherty, 1996) in ways that were not openly discussed. This set of fathers felt as though social institutions such as schools and hospitals hindered rather than assisted in their efforts to care for their child (Allen & Doherty, 1996). The social institutions did not offer these fathers access to the resources, such as daycare, that they needed to be better fathers.

Although these negative depictions of African-American fathers exist, research suggests that not all African-American fathers are uninvolved with their children. There are African-American fathers who care about their children, are committed to them, and are involved in their lives. African-American fathers have had a critical role in the development of their children. These men are stepping up and taking responsibility for their children.

African-American Fathers: Not As Bad As They Seem

The role of the father has been perceived as unimportant in early research (Dubowitz et.al, 2006; Lamb, 1975). Current research shows that paternal involvement may influence future development and behavior in children by improving the quality of the home through financial contributions, support, or nurturance (Black et.al, 1999). Fathers may make contributions to the family and to their children's development through relationships with their child (Black et. al, 1999). Research has shown that there are beneficial effects of father involvement on cognition among infants and preschoolers and reduced risk among teens (Black et.al, 1999).

Supportive father-child play has been noted to improve development in young children (Dubowitz et.al, 2006; Kelly et.al, 1998). Studies on African-American fathers show that their involvement has been linked to fewer behavioral problems and better cognitive skills in their children (Black et.al, 1999; Dubowitz et.al, 2006). A study that was conducted on African-American non-custodial fathers found that they stressed the need to spend time with their children, disciplining, and serving as a teacher, role model, and economic support (Dubowitz et.al, 2006; Hamer, 1997). Although some African-American men have been perceived as absent or uninvolved (Cabrera & Mitchell, In-Press; McAdoo 1993; Smith et.al, 2005) others have been noted to be responsible for their own children and for children that are not their own (Boyd-Franklin, 2003; Dubowitz et.al, 2006).

Most African-American men receive strong messages about being able to provide for their families and perceive the idea of fatherhood as an aspect of masculinity (Allen & Doherty, 1996). The majority of African-American fathers accept the role as breadwinner for their children (Connor & White, 2005) and many African-American men take pride in being able to provide financially for their children. Studies show that African-American fathers spent more time in the care giving role and were more likely to engage in the physical care, feeding, and soothing of their infants than Caucasian fathers (Housaain et.al, 1997; Shears et.al, 2006). In a standardized measure of paternal involvement, Caucasian fathers scored lower than African-American and other minority fathers (Cabrera et.al, 2008). Minority fathers were still noted to be romantically involved with the mother of their children and this explained the large variation in involvement between Caucasian and minority fathers on this measure (Cabrera et.al, 2008).

African-American men identify with the fatherhood role like any other group of men. Fatherhood is seen as a major adult role in the lives of men (Deinhert,

1998). It is a critical point in a man's life and it is central to the father's psychological growth and well-being (Connor & White, 2005). Men begin to form parent-child attachments and once their child is born, men experience changes in self-perception (Deinhert, 1998). They invest a great deal of themselves in their children (Deinhert, 1998).

Connor and White (2005) pair fatherhood with the term "fatherneed". Fatherneed is the physical, psychological, and emotional force that pulls men to children just as it pulls children to men to shape, enrich, and expand each others lives (Connor & White, 2005; Pruitt, 2000). Fatherneed is central to a father's growth and happiness. Fatherneed allows fathers to be changed by their children (Connor & White, 2005). The reciprocal transition between father and child stimulate their development and allow them to move forward with their relationship in life (Connor & White, 2005; Pruitt, 2000).

What Has Been Research's Focus?

Little research has investigated African-American fathers and their feelings toward fatherhood. Research has focused instead on their roles as the breadwinner (Dubowitz et.al, 2006; Rasheed & Rasheed, 1999) as well as African-American father's ability to provide financially for his family. This has led African-American fathers to define fatherhood in terms of being able to provide financially for their children. Half of the fathers in a qualitative study involving teenage African-American father's defined fatherhood primarily in economic and provider terms (Paschal, 2006). These men defined fatherhood in terms of "Doing what I have to do," which was defined as providing for their children financially and being self-sufficient (Paschal, 2006). African-American fathers have been led to believe that providing financially for their child is the key to fatherhood.

Much of what is known about fathers is obtained through mother's reports (Tanfer & Mott, 1997; Shears et.al, 2006). There are several concerns regarding the quality and utility of information obtained from mothers about the role of fathers in their children's lives (Cherlin & Griffith, 1998; Shears et.al, 2006). Reports from mothers can often be misleading. Information obtained from the mother can be collected during a period when the mother is dissatisfied with the child's father. This dissatisfaction can cause emotions to get in the way of the mother's accurate interpretation of paternal involvement.

The majority of research on paternal involvement and father-child relationships has come from married or divorced Caucasian fathers (Hawkins & Palkovitz, 1999; Julion et.al, 2007; McAdoo, 1997) who are often middle-class. The differences between the lives of African-American men and Caucasian men limit the effectiveness of this knowledge for African-American fathers (Julion et.al, 2007). These two groups of men have differing educational backgrounds, economic status, and employment opportunities (Hijjawi, 2006; Julion et.al, 2007; Roy, 2005). These two groups of men are living separate lives and the lives of one group can not be generalized to the other.

Research and policy interests increasingly focus on non-residential biological fathers (Jayakody & Kalil, 2002). Much of the research found during this literature review focused on non-residential fathers. The ways in which these men view paternal involvement and their roles as fathers can not be generalized to all fathers. These men do not reside in the same household as their children and have differing views on their involvement and roles as fathers than residential fathers.

Summary of the Literature Review

Focus has been placed on the negative depictions of African-American men as fathers. The image of African-American fathers being uninvolved, absent, and uncommitted (Julion et.al, 2007; Kismann, 1997; McAdoo, 1997) to their children continues to persevere over time. The obstacles that these men face to fatherhood are not often contemplated. They are raising their children in unsafe environments (Dubowitz et.al, 2006; Rasmussen, Aber, & Bhana, 2004) and are obligated to educate them about street culture and with the skills needed to survive (Dubowitz et.al, 2006).

African-American men are often raised without fathers. The absence of their own fathers has attributed to their inability to function as parents (Roy, 2006). Many African-American men enter into fatherhood early. The fact that they are still experiencing youth has taken away from their ability to parent (Paschal, 2006). In their minds, they are unable to properly raise a child because they are still developing themselves.

Social institutions are not offering programs that will assist African-American fathers in becoming better parents. The mother of their child, family, and friends are often standing in the way of African-American fathers and their involvement with their children (Allen & Doherty, 1996). The people and places in which they obtain the closest relationships are not willing to help these men become better fathers. Therefore, where are they to turn?

The role of the father in the lives of their children is extremely important and can not be ignored. Studies show that fatherhood is a critical point in a man's life as well as in his child's (Connor & White, 2005). Paternal involvement from African-American fathers has been known to contribute to the development of their children's cognitive, language, and behavioral skills (Black, Dubowitz, & Starr, 1999; Shears et.al, 2006). Fathers are more likely to be involved in social activities, play, and physical activities (Shears et.al, 2006) with their children. Even though this is the case, little research has focused on the feelings that fathers have toward fatherhood.

The majority of the research on fathers has been obtained from mother reports (Tanfer & Mott, 1997; Shears et.al, 2006). The feelings that mothers have towards the father of their children and how they perceive their paternal involvement is taken into account. The feelings that fathers have toward their children and how they perceive their paternal involvement has slightly been ignored.

Another large body of father research has been obtained from Caucasian fathers (Hawkins & Palkovitz, 1999; Julion et.al, 2007; McAdoo, 1997). This research can not be generalized to African-American fathers because they lead entirely different lives from Caucasian fathers. Research and policy often focuses on non-residential fathers (Jayakody & Kalil, 2002). Not all African-American fathers reside in different households as their children. The research and policy that focuses on these non-residential fathers can not be applied to all fathers.

Research Goals and Expectations

In terms of role identity, the expectations of the current study are that African-American males will identify with the parenting role and attach themselves to the role of fatherhood when they become fathers. They understand the significance of being a father and identify themselves with the role. Upon evolving into fathers, African-American males change their ways, step back, and re-evaluate their lives. They begin to set goals for themselves and for their children. The child begins to shape their lives and they put a lot of effort into being great parents. These men recognize their roles as fathers and perform well at their role. They are involved in the lives of their children by providing for them, caring for them, and loving them.

Using Identity theory, the study will explore how low-income, biological, and residential African-American fathers identify with their roles as fathers. These men occupy the roles as fathers and allow fatherhood to be the social structure in which they are implanted. The study examines what it means to be a father and explores how being a father influences their feelings toward fatherhood.

As previously stated, this study will revolve around a sub sample of inquiry questions, which are as follows: a) Do African-American men perceive the role of fatherhood as being beneficial or costly? b) Do African-American men receive satisfaction from being a father? and c) How do African-American men feel about fatherhood?

The goal of this study is to examine the feelings that African-American fathers have toward fatherhood. Based on the Identity theory's assumption that an individual will identify with the role that they occupy (Stryker, 1980), the *first expectation* is that African-American men will identify with the parenting role. The *second expectation*, based on the assumption that the role a person occupies contributes to their behavior (Burke & Reitzes, 1981), is that African-American fathers will attribute fatherhood to making them a better person. Guided by Identity theory, the *third expectation* is that African-American fathers will attach importance to the father role and act accordingly by being responsible for their children.

Method

Participants

To address the research questions, I drew on data that was collected from the HAPPI Father Study (Cabrera, et.al, 2005) by Dr. Natasha Cabrera. The term “HAPPI” is an acronym for Healthy Attachment Promotion for Parents and Infants (Cabrera & Mitchell, in press; Jones-Harden, 2004). The HAPPI Father Study consisted of 53 fathers (biological and father figure) and their toddlers who were enrolled in Early Head Start programs in Washington, DC (Cabrera & Mitchell, in press). These men were recruited from a study involving mothers and their children who were participating in an intervention program (Cabrera & Mitchell, in press; Jones-Harden, 2004).

Four out of the 53 fathers were not included in the study because their monthly incomes were two standard deviations above the sample mean ($M = \$2204.71$, $SD = \$2495.95$) (Cabrera & Mitchell, in press). The majority of the 49 remaining fathers were African-American (94%) and employed (78%) (Cabrera & Mitchell, in press). The majority of fathers were still romantically involved with the mother of their child (27% married, 31% cohabiting, 16% visiting) (Cabrera & Mitchell, in press). The remaining fathers were no longer in a romantic relationship with the mother (12%) or were relatives of the child's mother (7%) (Cabrera & Mitchell, in press). The majority of the participating fathers (76%) were residing in the same household as their child (Cabrera & Mitchell, in press).

The ages of the fathers ranged from 17 to 58 years old (Cabrera & Mitchell, in press). Roughly 29% of the fathers has less than a high school education; 51% graduated from high school; and 20% had some college education and beyond (Cabrera & Mitchell, in press). The average monthly incomes of the fathers were low ($M = \$1,407$, $SD = 1,237$) (Cabrera & Mitchell, in press). The children's ages ranged from 4.4 months to 36.3 months ($M = 20.8$, $SD = 9.2$) (Cabrera & Mitchell, in press). More than half of the children were male (55%) (Cabrera & Mitchell, in press).

Procedure

For this study, a sample of the 49 fathers was randomly selected. The study consisted of data that was collected from 15 fathers. Of the 15 fathers used for this study, 6 were currently married; 7 were never married; and 2 were divorced. Approximately, 4 of the fathers had some college education or beyond; 6 had graduated from high school; and 5 had not completed high school. Thirteen of the fathers indicated that their race was African-American; and 2 were other. Of the 15 fathers, 3 had one biological child; 3 had two biological children; 1 had three biological children; 3 had four biological children; 1 had seven biological children; and 4 had two children who were not biologically their own.

During the initial HAPPI father study, participating fathers were interviewed and videotaped with their children at a time and place that was convenient for the

family (Cabrera & Mitchell, in press). The interviews were held in a private area and the interviewer read all of the questionnaire and response items aloud and recorded the father's verbal responses (Cabrera & Mitchell, in press). The items from the interview were collected from national studies involving fathers such as the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study, the Fragile Families and Child Well-Being Study, and the Early Head Start Research and Evaluation Project (Cabrera et al, 2004; Cabrera & Mitchell, in press).

For the purpose of this study, qualitative data from the baseline interview was used. The father's responses to four open-ended questions that were located in Section 4.6 (Positive Aspects of Parenting) of the baseline interview were reviewed and analyzed. Unlike the majority of the questions in the baseline interview, the open-ended questions allowed the participants to express their opinion rather than choose from selected responses. After reviewing the answers to the questions, I looked for themes and commonalities across the responses regarding how African-American men reported feeling about fatherhood. I look for similarities and differences among the fathers' responses. The major themes that resulted from the participant's responses were then summarized

The open-ended questions that were used for this study reflected on what fatherhood had been like for the father. The study analyzed four open-ended questions, which were as follows: a) What are the primary feelings/emotions, both positive and negative, that you associate with fatherhood? b) What do you view to be the primary benefits of fatherhood? c) What do you view to be the primary costs of fatherhood? d) Overall, do you view fatherhood to be a positive or negative shaper of your life and why?

The answers to the questions provided the foundation of the father's feelings toward fatherhood. I reviewed all of the fathers' responses to the questions, located themes within the responses, and organized them according to those themes. The themes were organized around the questions and summarized as follows: a) Associated feelings with fatherhood b) Benefits of fatherhood c) Costs of fatherhood d) Positive or negative shaper of father's life. After summarizing the themes, I examined how they related to the study about father's feelings toward their role as a father.

Findings

This study is framed by Identity theory which posits that individuals will identify with the roles they occupy and behave accordingly. For example, men who identify with the role of being a father are more likely to act in a way that fulfills that role. In our culture, an involved father provides for his children economically and emotionally. Fathers in our culture play out many roles including economic provider, teacher, moral guide, caregiver, and provider of nurturance and emotional support. Applying this theory to African-American fathers, we expect that African-American men who identify with being a father will articulate what being a father means and how it has influenced their lives.

The results of this study are based on select sample of African-American father's responses to open-ended questions about fatherhood and the meaning of it for themselves. Fathers were asked to respond to the following four questions:

"What are the primary feelings/emotions, both positive and negative, that you associate with fatherhood?"

All the fathers included in this study responded positively and expressed good feelings and feelings of stress, love, and happiness. These complex feelings and emotions are generally felt by all parents. One father described his feelings this way:

Positive: Good feeling that I'm doing something to make a better world. Put a positive image because there are a lot of negative images. Negative: Aren't any. No appreciation of what I do. Don't get support all the time about good job. Sometimes it hurts no praise for my hard work. (36 years old)

This father associated a positive feeling with fatherhood. He felt as though he was doing something as a father to make a better world. He wanted to put a positive image out there for this child because he is aware of the many negative images of fathers in society. At times, he felt as though he didn't receive any appreciation for all that he did as a father and it hurt him because he received no praise for his hard work. Research suggests that parents who receive social support are able to be more positive parents than those who do not. It maybe the case, as this father says, that fathers, especially minority fathers, may get little social support to be better parents.

In addition to positive emotions about being a father, fathers often felt stress related to their role as fathers. Even though father's admitted that fatherhood could be stressful, they felt committed to providing support and love for their children. One father explained the stress and the joys of fatherhood this way:

Stress, patience, understanding, communication. Able to give solutions to children's problems. Try to give good advice in order for them to follow in the right direction and stay focused on life's goals. Knowing that you'll be able to share some love with someone and they'll be able to give it back. (42 years old)

This father is reflective and understands that fatherhood takes a lot of work. Despite this, he knows that he has to be there for his children and make sure that they follow the correct path in life. He knows that he can give his child love and his child will return the love.

"What do you view to be the primary benefit of fatherhood?"

The fathers felt as though fatherhood was very beneficial to them as persons. It gave them the opportunity to give things to their children that were not given to them by their own fathers. Fatherhood allowed them to be a good role model for their children and to be a better person. This father expresses what he views as the

primary benefits of fatherhood:

Learning how to be a father. Teaches you to be a better person, opens your sensibility to other human beings. Understanding of parenting. Very responsible. Impacting their lives. You could call it a role model. (36 years old)

This father is learning how to be a father while he is adapting to his fatherhood role and suggests that you learn to be a good father in “the job”. Fatherhood is making him a better person and he is beginning to understand the feelings of other people. He understands that he has to be responsible to be a parent and that he is making an impact on his children’s lives. He is aware that he has to try to be a good role model for his children.

Other fathers felt that watching their own children do well in life was a primary benefit of fatherhood. They gave their children love and could often see themselves in their children. This father expresses what he views as the primary benefits of fatherhood:

Sharing love with my children. Watching them be successful in life. Watching my influence through them project into their own children. Keeps me grounded. Keeps me out of trouble. (42 years old)

This father expresses his love for his children and points to the reciprocal nature of parenthood. Being a good parent can lead to having successful children and this in turn can encourage parents to try harder. The father quoted above enjoyed watching his children achieve and could see the influence that he had on their lives. His children kept him from getting into trouble. They kept him grounded and level-headed. Being responsible for the well-being of your children can then encourage men to be more responsible, more caring, and perhaps take fewer risks.

Other fathers said that satisfaction was a primary benefit of fatherhood. They were taking responsibility for their children and teaching them. This father puts it this way:

Satisfaction. Achievement. Taking care. Teaching. Fulfillment. Satisfaction when you help a child. (50 years old)

This father feels nothing but satisfaction and fulfillment from fatherhood. He views being able to teach his children and take care of them as an important benefit of fatherhood. Fatherhood brings him a sense of achievement and fulfillment. These positive feelings are important because they can be powerfully motivating men to do the “right thing” by their children.

“What do you view to be the primary costs of fatherhood?”

This question is important because it asks fathers to consider both the joys of fatherhood, but also the challenges. As we can read from the quotes below, some fathers recognized that fatherhood could be costly. These men understand the cost and what they have to give up to fulfill their roles. It also appears that given the joys

they experience, they are willing to pay the cost. In their own words:

Giving up livelihood. Lifestyle has changed. Don't go out with buddies. Self-time consuming. It costs me time. Costs a lot of attention. (36 years old)

Oh my God. Day care, child support, and rent. Those are the three majors. College of course. Less time for myself. I had to restructure my goals and my plans. (42 years old)

One father acknowledges that he had to give up a lot for his children. He can no longer go out with his friends anymore because his children are now his main responsibility. He realizes that children require a lot of time and attention and he has given up his prior lifestyle to provide that. Another father clearly articulates the major costs of fatherhood to him. Fatherhood did not allow him to have much time for himself. He had to re-evaluate his dreams to suit the needs of his children. He realized that life was no longer only about him. He had other human beings to be responsible for. These responses suggest that fathers are aware and recognize that being a father takes a lot of personal sacrifice, commitment, and selfless devotion. Putting children's needs before theirs, these men are invested in their children, appreciate the cost, and are willing to pay it.

Other fathers felt that fatherhood did not cost them anything. These fathers said it this way:

Nothing much because I wasn't really the type that went out. We can usually take them with us. (22 years old)

Nothing. You actually gain. (40 years old)

For these men, being fathers did not change their lifestyle all that much. Although taking your children with you is one way to adjust to life with children, this could be a positive or negative thing for their children depending on where the young fathers are taking their children. Young men, in particular, may love their children but maybe unaware of what it takes to provide for them an environment that can promote their well-being.

"Overall, do you view fatherhood to be a positive or negative shaper of your life and why?"

Of the 15 fathers interviewed, all of them felt that fatherhood had been a positive shaper of their life. They articulate their feelings this way:

Positive. It has challenged me to be a better person. More responsibility. Financially smarter. More caring. More focused. (36 years old)

Positive. Keeps me grounded by being a father. Kept me out of a lot of adverse situations than if it had been just me. If I didn't have her or any of my kids...it helped me make better decisions. Before it was just me and it didn't really make a difference. (42 years old)

Both men viewed fatherhood as a positive shaper of their lives. They say that fatherhood has changed their lives for the better. Fatherhood has caused one father to be a more responsible person. He realizes that he can't be financially irresponsible now that he has children. His children have allowed him to be more focused in life and to care for someone other than himself. The other father acknowledges that his children have prevented him from getting into trouble and have kept him on the right path. He realizes that he can not act foolishly as he had before. He now has his children to think of.

Other fathers said it this way:

Positive. Not I try harder to accomplish things. Having her changed my life. (26 years old)

Positive. Stepping stone to prove yourself. Keep myself out of trouble. (28 years old)

Positive. It made me think more about being a father and taking care of kids instead of being on the street. Oh it's a positive because it's a good thing that I can see him grow up and be around more than the average father and I want him to look up to me when he gets old. (27 years old)

Positive. My children build my morale. They motivate me. Give me a lot of self-worth, self-respect. (33 years old)

In summary, these findings suggest that fatherhood has been constructive to all of these fathers. They want to be more than the average father. They are trying to achieve things in life so that their children will have a positive role model to look up to. Fatherhood is helping them to build their own character.

What were their feelings toward fatherhood?

Overall, the fathers in this study expressed a variety of responses about their feelings toward fatherhood. Fathers expressed feelings of satisfaction, love, and happiness. Fathers even expressed feelings of stress and the amount of hard work they had to put into being good fathers. Some fathers had mutual feelings, while others had entirely different emotions. Their responses sound honest, thoughtful, and show that these men take fatherhood seriously. They are committed and invested in their children. They love them and want to provide for them and protect them. Themes and commonalities found across the father's responses are expressed below.

Associated Feelings with Fatherhood

Of the 15 fathers, 11 of them associated happiness, love, and/or a good feeling with fatherhood. Some of these fathers were just happy to watch their children grow up and to be around them. Others felt as though they were making progress in their lives to create a better life for their child. Several fathers recognized the love and closeness they felt towards their children and were proud to be fathers.

Of the 15 fathers, four of them associated stress, hard work, and/or the feeling of doing something wrong with fatherhood. These fathers recognized that raising children was hard work and that it could be stressful. It takes a lot of responsibility. One father was afraid that he might do something wrong. These fathers don't want to steer their children down the wrong path. They want their children to have someone to look up to and not to make the same mistakes that they did as children.

Benefits of Fatherhood

Of the 15 fathers, four of them expressed that being a role model was a primary benefit of fatherhood. Children need guidance and someone to look up to. One father expressed that he let his children know about the trials and tribulations that he went through in life. His children showed him a lot of respect and he just felt good being a father. Another father expressed that he wanted his children to look up to him and because of this he had to stay healthy so that he could be around to be a role model.

All participants expressed that a primary benefit of fatherhood was that it made them a better person. They were able to share love with their child, teach them right from wrong, and feel the ability to care for another life. Their children brought satisfaction and fulfillment into their lives. They had to better their lives because they were now responsible for another life. One father expressed that he could not wait until his son was old enough to play sports. He wanted to be able to sit in the crowd and yell, "That's my son!" Watching his son accomplish something would make him a proud parent.

Costs of Fatherhood

Of the 15 fathers, six of them expressed that giving up their personal time was a primary cost of fatherhood. These fathers could no longer go and hang out with their buddies as much because they now had children to care for. They also found it difficult to find time for themselves. They had to restructure their lifestyle to accommodate their children.

Of the 15 fathers, four of them expressed that money and having to pay for expenses was a primary cost of fatherhood. These fathers recognized that raising children was expensive. One father acknowledged that he worked more and had less money for himself because the majority of his income was granted to his children. Other fathers acknowledge the expenses, such as daycare, child support, rent, pampers, clothes, and toys, that they had to allocate for their children.

Of the 15 fathers, four of them expressed that they gave up nothing. There were no costs to fatherhood. According to these fathers, fatherhood did not take anything away from their lives. One of the fathers expressed that he had gained from fatherhood and another felt as though work took away from his quality time with his children.

Positive or Negative Shaper of Father's Life

All participants expressed that fatherhood was a positive shaper of their lives. All of them felt challenged to become a better person. They felt as though they had to prove themselves, try harder to accomplish things, make better decisions, and be responsible. All of the participants realized that someone else depended on them and they had to be there.

Discussion

Based on Identity Theory, the goal of this study was to examine the feelings that low-income African-American fathers have toward fatherhood. The findings support the expectation that some African-American men who identify with the parenting role feel committed and invested in their children. Upon transitioning to fatherhood, these men realized that they had to give up their old ways of behaving and thinking. There are several possible explanations. It could be that the fathers recognized the fact that they were now responsible for the life of another. In addition, it could be that the fathers did not want their children to live the same lives that they did. They wanted better for their children. The fathers recognized that it took a lot of time, money, and hard work to be a good parent. They were willing to pay the expenses and give up personal time to care for their children. These men genuinely loved their children and enjoyed being parents.

The findings paint a new picture of low-income African-American men: involved in their children's lives, invested, and committed to their welfare. Unlike negative stereotypes, the findings of this study highlight the diversity that exists in this group of men. Not all low-income African-American fathers are "deadbeat." The men in this study attribute fatherhood to making them a better person. All of the participants expressed that fatherhood was a positive shaper of their lives. Fathers felt challenged to become better men and acknowledged the strength they gained from being fathers. Fatherhood motivated them to do better. Some participants felt as though they had to prove themselves as men and be there for their children. Others wanted to try harder to accomplish goals in life and make better decisions for their child. They wanted their child to have a positive image to look up to and they wanted to be responsible. By occupying the role as father, these men changed their behavior and fatherhood was the contributing factor.

Finally, the findings support the expectation that African-American fathers will attach importance to the father role and act accordingly by being responsible for their children. All of the participants acknowledged that fatherhood was beneficial to them. The majority of the fathers wanted to see their children be successful in life. The fathers recognized that for their child to be successful they had to have someone positive to look up to. They were going to make sure that they were positive role models and able to instill good values in their children. One father acknowledged that he knew how important fatherhood was to the development of children. He recognized that raising children takes a lot of responsibility and he

wanted to be different than his own father. Some fathers admitted to paying for all of the necessary expenses, such as childcare, clothes, pampers, and toys, and giving up personal time to spend time with their children. These fathers recognized how important it was to devote quality time to their children and realized that they could no longer be selfish. They had to be responsible for their children.

There are several limitations to this study. A small sample size was a limitation of the study in that data from only 15 low-income African-American fathers was used. The participants are a select sample of low-income, biological, residential, African-American fathers. The small sample size does not allow findings to be generalized across a broad range of low-income African-American fathers or across cultures. Although this is the case, it is evident that this group of fathers has a close and loving bond with their children. These participants still held close relationships to the mother of the children and saw their children more than those who did not participate. This challenges the negative stereotype that all African-American fathers are uninvolved, absent, financially irresponsible, and “deadbeat” dads. While some fathers may be “deadbeat” dads, men in this study strongly identify with the parenting role and feel intense personal satisfaction about being fathers.

Another limitation of this study was the minimal amount of past research on low-income African-American fathers and their views on fatherhood. The majority of the research discussed the Caucasian male perspective on fatherhood and their paternal involvement (Hawkins & Palkovitz, 1999; McAdoo, 1997 as cited in Julion, et.al 2007). The opinions of mothers and their perceptions of paternal involvement also embodied a great deal of research on fathers (Tanfer & Mott, 1997 as cited in Shears et.al, 2006).

Difficulty in studying low-income families is also a limitation. Service providers frequently run into barriers when trying to reach out to low-income African American fathers (Dubowitz et.al, 2007). Some families may view the research as an invasion of privacy and may not feel comfortable providing data on their annual monetary income. Other families are generally hard to get in contact with in order to conduct the research. It is hard to track these families down and research must be done at their convenience.

Due to time and a small sample size, I relied on data that was previously collected. I was not able to ask about all of the feelings that African-American men have toward fatherhood. Overall, this select group of men held positive feelings toward fatherhood. All fathers may not feel this way. Longitudinal studies need to examine whether African American fathers’ early commitment to their children and belief in the importance of being a father translate into later behaviors that are beneficial to children. This could clarify the feelings that African-American fathers have toward their children at a variety of ages.

Another important direction that future longitudinal research could take would be to examine how African-American men’s feelings toward fatherhood effect the development and outcome of their children. More research needs to examine how the feelings that African American fathers have toward fatherhood

effect the development of their children as well as of themselves. For example, if African-American fathers have positive feelings toward fatherhood and reflect these feelings on their children, will their children develop into loving and happy individuals? If African-American fathers have negative feelings toward fatherhood and reflect these feelings on their children, will their children develop into angry and hostile individuals?

These men are low-income and because of this may have limited access and limited resources to always provide for their children (Julion et al, 2007). Even though these fathers appear to doing a great job as parents, they may benefit from a program that values the presence of father's in the lives of their children. Intervention programs need to be organized so that low-income African-American fathers have access to the resources they need to be better fathers. These programs need to recognize that these men are motivated to do right by their children and give them access to the resources they need to be better parents.

The findings from this study suggest that low-income African-American men have positive feelings toward fatherhood. They view fatherhood as a positive shaper of their lives. The findings also suggest that low-income African-American men view fatherhood as more beneficial than costly. In addition, the findings suggest that African-American men do not portray feelings toward fatherhood in the way in which they are negatively depicted. African-American men are not uninvolved, financially irresponsible, absent, and uncommitted to their children. Instead, these men are loving, responsible, present, and involved in the lives of their children. They want to be better people so that their children will have a positive image to idolize.

The focus in research has been primarily on *discussing* African-American fathers and not *listening* to their voices. The fathers in this study expressed fatherhood in their own words and their voices were heard. Hopefully, the African-American male perspective on fatherhood will be taken into account for future research.

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