

## Loss, Survival, and Redemption: African American Male Youth's Reflections on Life Without Fathers, Manhood, and Coming of Age

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### **Abstract:**

Using an interpretivist approach, this article explores young African American men's (N= 20) reflections on coming of age and the meanings of father loss. Based on focus groups, the authors found that it was through autobiographical narratives of loss, survival, and redemption that young men positioned themselves ideologically and constructed the type of man they wanted to become. These emergent narratives reflect the complex ways young men worked out the meaning of father loss and the defining intragenerational and intergenerational lessons about manhood learned from their relationships with fathers and others. Within these narratives, young men also constructed both wanted and unwanted possible selves and evoked the discursive tropes of respectable manhood and deadbeat daddies.

**Keywords:** Black youth | African American youth | masculinity | manhood | fathers | Transition to adulthood | gender ideology

### **Article:**

African American male youth and their involvement in a litany of ills—ranging from school dropout to incarceration—have captured the American sociological imagination. Yet it is a visibility that is painfully unrevealing. Indeed, it is difficult to begin to write about the experiences of African American male youth and men without engaging the dominant discourse of the dilemmas of Black manhood (Duneier, 1992; Hunter & Davis, 1992; Ross, 1998). The young men we spoke to are acutely aware of their visibility and vulnerability and how, in Du Bois's (1969) words, they are viewed “through the revelation of the other world” (p. 45). As one teenager candidly told us, “They think we come out the womb labeled, with an orange jump suit on and a number on our back.” Although the risks associated with being Black and male are alarming, these social facts do little to help us understand what it means to come of age negotiating this social terrain. In this article, we displace the “other world” interpretation to listen to what young men have to say about their lives and what they have experienced. Using an

interpretivist approach, we explore the meanings, everyday practices, and the language and discourse of young urban African American males who are beginning the transition to manhood. As described by Schwandt (1994) this approach privileges an “abiding concern for the life world of lived experience, for the emic point of view, for understanding meaning, and grasping the actor’s definition of the situation” (p. 118). When we began this project, our primary interest was in getting a textured view of men’s conceptualizations of manhood. However, it quickly became evident that our dialogues with young men were exceeding our initial research aims and expectations. We then followed young men’s emergent narratives about fathers, manhood, and coming of age. It is a compelling story about loss, survival, and redemption.

To share, to transmit, and to interpret what was told to us, we believe it is important that we position ourselves in the writing of this text in a way that is different from what the conventions of positivist scientific writing would dictate: We strive to get behind our informants rather than out in front of them. We explore here a story that we did not seek; but it is a story these young men chose to share with us. We ask ourselves, for example, how did we really come to get and understand our findings? More aptly, how did we come to understand the story told, and how can we do it justice in the retelling. Hunter and Johnson (2003), in their discussion of methodological and analytical approaches to the study of African American families, suggest insights from Black southern telling traditions. They write the following:

A story once told has been given over for the retelling. While the integrity of the plot and narrative may be maintained, the next telling is necessarily infused with the insights that come from listening and making connections to one’s own lived experience and wisdoms—it is a blending of insights. To do this and to do it well; you must respect the storyteller and the story told. (p. 19)

In reporting on this project, we consciously reflect the inductive nature of this study and write in a narrative style that privileges and preserves the subjectivities of the young men who talked to us; as a result, their voices appear throughout this text. To reflect the evolution of this work, we begin with a discussion of the method, followed by the analysis and interpretation of the emergent narratives, and we conclude with a discussion of the implications of this study for research and programmatic efforts.

## **“I AM JUST SPEAKING FROM WHAT I HAVE SEEN”: INTERROGATING MANHOOD AND COMING OF AGE**

### **METHOD**

We entered a dialogue with young men in which we expressed commitment to let their words speak for themselves and to represent them with dignity. In return, what they shared were thoughtful reflections about their lives, their becoming men, and their aspirations. As one young man told us, “Most of us, we done been through a lot. I’m just speaking from what I have seen and where I am coming from.” We conducted four focus groups with participants who varied in age, education, social class, and family background. Two of our focus groups were composed primarily of young men aged mid to late teens that resided in the same community and grew up

in single-parent families. In these two groups, participants were looking forward to the transition to manhood, wrestling with understanding its meaning, and making sense of what has happened in their lives. They are the focus of this article. It is in these groups that the dialogue about manhood, fathers lost, and the web of social relationships that shepherd boys into manhood converged to provide a view of coming of age Black, urban, and male that is largely absent from social research, media images, and political discourse. But there is nothing romantic here: These young men have been affected by the economic and social dislocations experienced within urban communities, surrounded by street life, and have witnessed the ravages of the drug trade, the drug wars, and the war on drugs. They have seen their brothers, fathers, and peers incarcerated, or worse. They have also made their own mistakes along the way, including dropping out of school and coming up against the criminal justice system. We found these young men possessed a kind of wisdom that comes from seeing so much and recognizing that, as one young man stated, “you’re going to make a mistake on your journey, in life.” As Gwaltney (1980) reminds us, in his classic anthropological work on Black folk thought, “Black people are building theory on every conceivable level . . . people not only know the trouble they have seen, but they have profound insight into the meaning of those vicissitudes” (p. xxvi). Indeed, the young men we spoke with were engaged in a conscious journey to become men, one step at a time. As one young man shared with us: “I like go by percentages when you trying to be a man.”

## **PARTICIPANTS**

We held the aforementioned two focus groups at a local community recreation center between April and June 2002. The recreation center served as the physical location for the provision of social services for these youth and their families. Three cofacilitators, including two African American women and an African American man, led the groups. The facilitators had research, clinical, and community-based experience with African American families and youth. A member of the research team formerly served as a community worker in the recreation center from which we recruited participants. This member also established an ongoing relationship with youth by interacting with them in the recreational and sports programs available at the recreation center. All focus groups included at least one facilitator with clinical and/or counseling experience as a master’s level social worker or mental health counselor. The discussion sessions, which ranged from 75 to 90 minutes, were audiotaped and later transcribed.

All participants were compensated \$10 for their involvement in the focus groups. These groups were a part of a larger multiphase project that examines young African American men’s conceptualizations of manhood and their perspectives on the transition to manhood. We selected the focus-group format because of our interest in getting at diverse and textured conceptualizations of a complex social construct, and we were interested in the dialogue young men would have about manhood, a concept that is both abstract and personal. We explored (a) the meanings of manhood, (b) the agents that young men felt influenced their perspectives, and (c) what participants saw as their desired and undesired selves, as men. We also discussed their views on any unique challenges they faced as young Black men, how they thought others (i.e., White people, society) viewed them, and what they thought people did not understand about them and/or their experiences as young Black men. We used probes to facilitate elaboration or clarification of responses. We also attempted to ensure that diverse perspectives, when present,

were aired. In addition, we supported a free dialogue by following up on issues and questions raised by the group and by asking questions that were sparked by the group dialogue.

The groups included 20 African American adolescent and young adult men, whose ages ranged from 15 to 22 ( $M=17.8$ ,  $SD = 1.8$ ). The participants resided in a large southeastern city and lived in a mixed income public housing community. We recruited participants via connections to a local community recreation center that was centrally located in the young men's neighborhood and heavily attended by youth, particularly for basketball. Most participants (92%) had less than a high school education and were currently in school or had returned to complete their high school education or GED. Two participants were fathers, both of whom were currently 18 years old or older. The majority of respondents (91%) grew up in households without fathers (either biological or step). All indicated that it was their mothers who raised them, with 38% indicating growing up with extended kin and a few indicating these relatives were also responsible for raising them. The participants' socioeconomic backgrounds, based on mothers' occupation alone, were largely in the lower-income to working-class bracket. However, a few mothers (2) were employed in professional or technical fields. Fathers' occupations, when reported, included blue-collar work (e.g., factory, construction), itinerant employment (e.g., job to job), or incarceration.

## **ANALYTIC STRATEGIES**

In our initial analysis of transcripts from the larger study, it became apparent that father loss was an important source of influence on young men's perspectives about being a man. Narratives of father loss emerged across all of our focus groups; however, its salience and position within the group dialogue varied. In our group, with primarily young adults, discussions of father loss ceded to tales of their own struggles to meet standards of manhood, their mistakes, and the evolution of their perspectives on masculinity and manhood. For our college student group, most of whom grew up with fathers (biological or step) actively involved in their lives, narratives of father involvement took center stage. It was the adolescent focus groups that engaged in the most extensive dialogues about father loss, reflecting both the developmental period and the shared experience of growing up with fathers who were either absent or who moved in and out of their lives. This, in itself, was not surprising, but what was unexpected were the ways the young men drew lessons from their absent or intermittent relationships with fathers. We do not suggest here that the father is not an important source of influence on a boy's emergent masculine identity but rather that the participants seemed to be talking about father absence and gender ideologies in ways that are not represented in the developmental and family studies literature. Hence, we decided to look more closely at the theme of father loss.

Having narrowed our focus to the adolescent focus groups and the theme of father loss, we conducted an analysis of the transcripts that began with identifying text that related to respondents' discussions of manhood and fathers. We read these dialogic texts with the understanding of the importance of "concrete experience as a criterion of meaning" (Collins, 1990, pp. 208-209) in core Black cultural traditions and its importance in validating knowledge claims as a symbolic vehicle for theorizing and for creating new meanings (Gwaltney, 1980). First, we identified two interconnected strands of dialogue: (a) ideological perspectives about fatherhood and manhood and (b) autobiographical reflections on fathers and others who

influenced them as young men. We found that young men tended to connect their ideological discussions of manhood both to their own experiences with fathers and to other people who were influential in their lives. Second, we identified different autobiographical narratives about experiences with and without fathers that participants used to develop and express ideological positions on manhood and create a sense of their own possible selves—both wanted and unwanted (Markus & Nurius, 1986). Third, because these autobiographical narratives were used to establish and validate an ideological position, we also looked at what participants' perspectives were about manhood and fatherhood, which served as both the ideological backdrop for participants' critiques of fathers and acknowledgement of nonfathers who were important influences in their lives. Using previous work on Black manhood as a guide (Duneier 1992; Hunter & Davis, 1994) and our ongoing work in the larger study, we identified broad themes that reflect ideologies about manhood. Unexpectedly, we also found that young men used some of the language reflected in the public discourse on absent fathers and responsible fatherhood (e.g., “deadbeat daddies”).

In sum, we asked participants to tell us something about what they thought “being a man” means. What they also told us was something about the type of men they wanted to become. As it happens, father loss was an important interpretative bridge between ideology and identity. Through a process of review and analysis, the research team arrived at a consensus about the narratives of father loss.

## **NARRATIVES OF LOSS, SURVIVAL, AND REDEMPTION**

African American males coming of age in urban low-income communities are faced with the challenge of distressed communities, limited job and recreational opportunities, and public school systems that are underfunded and too often fail to adequately prepare students. Furthermore, adolescent boys must navigate and survive assaults from the police, community violence, the drug trade, and the war on drugs. As one young man told us,

These days and times, especially, the era we're living in, it's a lot dealing with being a man, like all types of things coming towards you: police, selling drugs, sex, and diseases; it's all types of things that you've got to go through as far as being a man, growing up.

To be sure, there is much warranted concern in Black communities about joblessness, the lure of the underground economy, and youth based definitions of masculinity that emphasize high-risk masculine behaviors (Anderson, 1999; Majors & Billson, 1993).

Against the backdrop where the majority of Black family households are single parent (U.S. Census Bureau, 2002), there is also public angst about how growing up without fathers is implicated in the troubles of Black male youth, including school dropout, violence, crime, incarceration, early paternity, and problematic masculine identities (Ross, 1998). There is a voluminous literature that examines the effect of single-parent families on African American children's wellbeing (Coley, 1998; Demo & Cox, 2000; Marsiglio, Amato, Day, & Lamb, 2000). However, we know little about how growing up without fathers is interpreted and felt, or how these perceptions may shape the gender ideologies and the self-defined personhood of young

people as they come of age. It is in memoir and other autobiographical media, including rap, that African American male youth and men have reflexively interrogated the loss of their fathers and of relationships unfulfilled (see for example Awkward, 1999; Datcher, 2002; Jones, 2002; Pitts, 1999; Shakur, 1995).

In the lyric memoirs of hip-hop and rap music, young Black men have most visibly explored the meanings of father loss. Tupac Shakur (1995), in his classic ode to his mother, "Dear Mama," remembered having "no love for [my] father 'cause the coward wasn't there. He passed away and I didn't cry, 'cause my anger wouldn't let me feel for a stranger." Nas, another prolific artist, talked about his appreciation for his father's presence; it is an appreciation drawn against a backdrop of fatherless children. In "Papa was a Player" (Jones, 2002), Nas related, "So many kids I knew, never knew what Pop was. That's why I show my pop love." Like the memoirs of middle-aged Black men, hip hop also deals with the legacy of father loss and the struggle to be better men than their fathers were. In a classic piece, Ed O.G. & the Bulldogs reminded the hip-hop generation to "Be a Father to Your Child" (Anderson, Ayers, & Whiting, 1991). This song speaks of both the importance of being a responsible father and the ultimate reward of your child's love and appreciation. More recently, in his musical account of the birth of his children, "Joy" (2003), Talib Kweli Green expressed his appreciation of his own children and the trial of being a responsible husband and father.

Narratives of loss, survival, and redemption have historically been embedded in African American expressive culture and folk thought. These narratives reflect legacies of individual and collective struggle, an understanding of the frailties of human nature, and the potential to be "made over" (Gwaltney, 1980; Levine, 1977). Gwaltney (1980), writing about core Black culture and the epistemologies at its heart observed the following:

Principled survival in a familial and community context, complicated by the iron consistencies of caste, is preeminently an analytical process. It demands a virtuosity at option sorting and general improvisation which often places a premium on profound thought.

It is through autobiographical narratives that these young men positioned themselves ideologically, created cautionary tales, and constructed the type of man they wanted to become. We identified six major narratives: (a) There are some things only a daddy can teach you; (b) if he could have taught you anything, he would be here; (c) my daddy came back to me; (d) my momma, that's my momma and my daddy; (e) everybody got somebody; and (f) I will be the man my father was not.

The emergent narratives tell us something about the different ways young men interpret the loss of their fathers and the inherent contradictions in the lived experience without them. Within these narratives, young men also construct wanted and unwanted possible selves and evoke the discursive tropes of respectable manhood and deadbeat daddies. However, these narratives are neither about understanding fathers' stories nor about what they may have faced in actualizing the standards of manhood to which their sons now subscribe. Often told with humor, these narratives do reveal sons' deep sense of loss, of disappointment, muted anger, and the hope to be more than their fathers could be.

Below, we presented the emergent narratives as a linear dialogue; however, we did so not to reflect the order in which they were spoken but rather to capture the progressive interrogation and interpretation of the meanings of father loss, which was both individual and collective. Although distinctive, the narratives also overlap and flow into each other, reflecting the dialogic processes in which they emerged. The dialogic processes—which together created a collective story, yet allowed members to tell their own story and to offer alternative interpretations—include (a) point (i.e., narrative) and counterpoint (i.e., counternarrative), (b) individual biographical reflections that weaved in and out during the group discussion, and (c) collective affirmations of an individual's interpretative position.

## **THE MEANING(S) OF FATHER LOSS**

I think it makes it difficult just growing up. Your dad supposed to be there to teach them [sons] how to do certain things.

*There are some things only a daddy can teach you.* There was a sense of loss, of missing the lessons that fathers could teach about how to navigate boyhood and the transition to manhood—indeed, how to be men. One participant talked about not having a father around in the following way:

I think it makes it difficult just growing up. Your dad supposed to be there to teach them how to do certain things. So you know by me being with my mom, I mean in certain circumstances she can teach me some things, but [she] can't teach me what my daddy tells me from growing up, be man, you know what I'm saying.

We asked what are some of the special things that dads can teach. The responses were about women, how to approach a man on a job, basketball, and about society. As was said with some humor, "I can't talk to my mama about sex. Some things you just can't do." Yet it was difficult for participants to articulate the lessons or things only a father can teach. Perhaps, as was so often said, there is a lot that goes into being a man. As one young man suggested,

Your dad can teach you about being on your own. Your moms can teach you, but your dad can break it down better and also how to take on responsibilities. It's the little stuff that your mom teach you but your dad could do better. It's the little stuff you got to look out for.

Expressing a similar sentiment, another participant explained that the experience of being a man confers advantages to fathers in teaching sons about being a man. He explained,

Because a dad, you know, he guides you, because, you know, he teaches you the step by step of how to be a man and stuff. A woman, she can't give you that guidance because she's not a man, she's a woman. So I feel that, you know, stuff like he was saying, little steps. As being a man, he can give you the right steps and the right ideas.

Related to the concerns about the lessons only fathers can teach were lessons lost about being a Black man. A young man suggested, “Mom can teach you some stuff, but she can’t teach you anything about being a Black man. [She] don’t know what we goes through as a man.” He later stated that you can learn from other Black men because “your Black men out there on the streets. And it’s easy for women— some women—I ain’t going to [say] all women, but its easier for them than for a Black man.” However, the narratives of lessons lost did not go unchallenged nor was it expressed without some ambivalence, as was illustrated by group members’ questioning the potential contributions of their fathers and acknowledging the role of their mothers and their hardships. Responding, in part, to the dissension on this point, the aforementioned participant argued further with some caveats:

But your dad can teach you how to approach a man when you are going for a job, if they know. Some can, some can’t. You can’t say all Black men, because some of them know more. But they can teach you things like that.

Although the participants affirmed the idea that “guys really need [fathers] along the way as [they’re] growing up,” there was a tension between the narratives of lessons lost and reflections about what fathers missed in their lives, the crises fathers created when they were present, feelings of abandonment, and disappointment about fathers who were still in the streets.

*If he could have taught you anything, he would be here.* Although there may have been a consensus that one could learn valuable lessons from fathers, whether participants felt that their own fathers were appropriate teachers was another matter. Reflecting on his father’s absence and lessons about manhood, a participant offered, “Yeah, because, I, me, myself, it’s not my father [I learn from]. Like he said, my father, he leave. He ran away. That’s not being a man.” Young men’s critiques of fathers, biographical and rhetorical, are informed by standards of respectable manhood. Duneier (1992), in his ethnographic study of older Black men, argued that standards of respectability and responsibility are central tenets of Black manhood that are defined within the framework of core Black cultural traditions (cf. Gwaltney, 1980). Not unlike the middle-aged and older men that habited Slim’s table at Valois, on Chicago’s south side, the young men we talked to expressed notions of manhood that were bound to the issue of respect—being worthy of it, having it for oneself, and treating others with it. Indeed, as one participant explained: “Being a respectful Black man is being with your family first of all. Second of all, you know, respect for your wife. Third all, keeping your household in order.” Taking care of and caring for (or trying to) one’s family is about meeting “one’s responsibilities as a man.” For some sons, their fathers were unworthy teachers because they violated these standards of respectability.

As young men talked about fathers who had abandoned them—who, for whatever reasons could not meet their responsibilities—what fathers had lost was not simply a chance to impart gendered lessons, but their sons’ respect as well. Viewing his own father as falling short of the standards of respectability, a participant unsympathetically called his father’s manhood into question:

Your mom, she can teach you a lot more than your daddy. Because while your daddy ain’t around she can just tell you pointers like, “this is how you treat a real woman.” If your [daddy] was a man, he would have



really come home, he would come home. His mind ain't set to come home. She can teach you about a man, about [being] a man because she done went through it. Your mom could teach you more than a Black man can. That's why he ain't here now. Because he don't know the responsibilities of a Black man.

Continuing a dialogue about the responsibilities of fatherhood, a participant gave us his view of the type man he feared becoming:

[Say] that you've got a son or daughter somewhere. Maybe like the kid ain't got no respect for you and just look at you like, "yeah, that's my father." But he won't talk to me. You know what I'm saying? You're not a man if they [your children] just feel that they can't respect you. They should respect you.

*My daddy came back to me.* The course of young men's relationships with their fathers can be complex. Whereas some of our participants did not know their fathers and had no relationship with them, others had experienced varying levels of contact with their fathers while growing up. Relationships with fathers were sometimes seen as irreparable, as one young man shared: "I don't have my dad no more. I mean we can't help him. He's still out there in the street." But fathers can and do return to their son's lives, seeking forgiveness for past hurts and another chance to be fathers. When fathers return during their child's adolescence, they face sons who are on the verge of manhood. One teenager, whose father was recently released after 10 years of incarceration, reflected on its impact: "I'm fixin' to be grown in a couple more years and he missed out on all the times with my brother." He further discussed his father's desire to be involved in his life:

You know my dad. He was just talking to me one day. He was like, "I'll still be there for you." But I mean, you know what I'm saying? He can be there for me to help me, you know, but as far as being my dad, he can't do that no more because he [was gone the last 10 years]. He come to a point where, you know, he just say, "Oh, wait till you get older."

Another young man talked about his father's return and the difficulty of moving toward forgiveness and reconciliation for both father and son:

My daddy came back to me. He came back like 3 years ago. When he first walked into my door, he had a pair of shoes in his hands, thought that could make up for everything that he done. You know what I'm saying? He ain't come back to me and say, you know, "Sorry. I'm sorry I sent you through all these court trials. I'm sorry for not being there." He didn't do that. My dad just came back with a—with a pair of tennis shoes. I didn't see my dad again for another 2 years. So he just came back to—he let me know he was still alive. That's how I see it. Last year, me and my daddy started talking. Like I called him and we done got closer. But it's still like that's just a friend of mine. He's not my dad.

But he's my daddy. But he is a friend.

When fathers attempted to resume their roles, they encountered sons who wanted to know what type of daddy their fathers could be now, now that they were almost men. Perhaps most painful for these sons was the lack of their fathers' acknowledgement of what had been lost. The reality then, for most of the young men we talked to, was that their mother was the sole parent who raised them.

## **SURVIVING THE JOURNEY FROM BOYHOOD TO MANHOOD: THE ROLE OF MOTHERS, "OTHERFATHERS," AND MENTORS**

Everybody got somebody.

*Momma, that's my momma and my daddy.* It was common for young men to indicate that mothers taught them about being a man. Participants discussed the role of mothers as important influences on their ideologies about manhood and their development as young men. In addition, the narratives about mothers were informed by the challenges they faced raising a family on their own. It is a struggle that most of the participants who talked about their mothers identified with. The narratives about mothers do evoke iconic images of the strong Black woman even though it is a portrait of mothers that has its own costs for Black women (Collins, 1990). What this image represents, in part, is sons' greater awareness of their mothers' struggles. Unlike the hardships their fathers may have faced, they knew the troubles their mothers had seen. As illustrated by a participant who discussed his father's leaving, "my mom, she had five kids. My daddy left when I was about 1, 2 years old. And my mom's been taking care of us since. It was hard for her as a Black woman." Speaking about his mother and other women who are making it alone, he further commented, "That's a strong Black woman. Because she is keeping house. She is paying the bills by herself." One participant who had renewed his relationship with his father talked about his perceptions of the roles of his mother and father and the evolution of his perspective:

I give my daddy the utmost respect, but its like, we went through so much for him, you know what I'm saying? So when it came down to the point when I got older, it's like, my momma, that's my momma and my daddy all in one. My daddy is just somebody I talk to whenever I need a man to talk to or somebody like that. But outside of that, my mom, that's my daddy and my momma.

The view of mothers filling the roles of both mother and father suggests an awareness of the duality of mothers' parenting responsibilities and speaks to the point of view that mothers provided the things that both a mother and father should. Although it was debated whether mothers were able to teach about men's experience, participants did acknowledge that mothers could teach about character, morality, and maturity—all of which are seen as part of being a man. Below, a son talked both about his admiration for his mother and what she has taught him about being a man:

Facilitator: Have you thought about who influenced your ideas about manhood? Who are the people or things that you guys have looked to?

Group: [Several mentions] Moma.

Anthony: My mother likes [sic]—a mother and father to me. She's doing everything. So she really [is] like my idol right there.

Facilitator: How does she show you how to become a man?

Anthony: Like raising me right. Raising me the way most people want to be raised. She will tell me what's right and tell me what's wrong. You know certain things. Like [he] was saying earlier, like, if you know these things, you know what I'm saying, that one way, I mean, part of being a man, [is] knowing right from wrong.

Sons viewed mothers as role models, both for what they were able to accomplish and for how they handled their sons when they were growing up, particularly, how they acted as disciplinarians. The following participant talked about what he learned from his mother and how she became a model for him:

I set goals like, okay "I want to graduate from high school. After that, I want to go to college. After that, I want to do something to make me a man." Like my moma say, she always expressed to us, "get your education." Now she got a master licensing in barber. So she's going to get a shop soon. She set goals for herself. That's how I learned. When you set goals and want to do, that's what you're going to do.

There was also repartee regarding mothers, particularly how strict they were. Talking about the rebellion of White teenagers and the leniency of their parents, a participant argued that

because, you know a Black kid, [mothers] are going to put you in your place like they're supposed to—such as that Columbine shooting [a Black kid's not going to do that] because they've got to deal with their mom after that, you know [laughter in room].

Without fathers, young men also turned to others to guide them. Speaking to their common experiences within the group, one participant offered, "everybody got somebody" to teach them about being a man.

*Everybody got somebody.* As young men developed their thinking about manhood, the type of men they want to become, and preparation to actualize their ideals, they looked to the men and women they respected, and were influenced by what they were taught and what they observed. Collins (1990), discussing Black motherhood, described shared parenting with "othermothers." She wrote, "African and African American communities have also recognized that vesting one person with full responsibility for mothering a child may not be wise or possible" (p. 119). This study, as well as other ethnographic studies, suggests there is also a layer of otherfathers in Black communities that are important for the development of children and youth—particularly for males without fathers in their lives (Anderson, 1990, 1999; Stack, 1974).

Without fathers to turn to, young men most often talked about the layer of otherfathers, which included brothers, brothers-in-law, grandfathers, uncles, and male mentors. As one young man

commented, "I grew up around my granddad and uncles in the family. And I learned [about being a man]. I teach myself. I can go around people and pick up on something I need to know." According to Elijah Anderson (1990, 1999), these natural mentors are called "old heads" in some urban Black communities. They assist and guide boys in the transition to respectable manhood. Referring to what he learned from these types of natural mentors, a young man explained as follows:

The older generation to me I can talk to. I can talk to a whole bunch of people. I don't really think I can talk to somebody my age or younger. Because this older people been through the same thing and do the same thing that we do now. That's how we learn.

Reflecting on his father's abandonment, a participant described the role his brother-in-law plays in his life,

The only person I can say I look up to towards showing me how to be a man is my brother-in-law. He might be a little crazy [laughter], but he give good advice. He tries to keep me from doing bad things and keep me out of trouble. [I] look up to him being a man.

Another described his relationship with an older brother:

He always been there for me. He'd give me knowledge to tell me how things were going, on life. Like what he going through and whatever to let me be ready. So when it's my turn, you know what I'm saying, be around that age, I'll be prepared, you know. Know how to hustle. I'm not saying hustling just to make money. I mean hustling to make a little business happen or whatever.

Young men turned not only to older males but also to women and sometimes to peers. Discussing his relationship with his grandmother, a participant shared,

I call and talk to my grandma, that's the person I talk to more than anybody, because she understands me more than anybody else. She is always talking to me about being a man and stuff like that, [be] involved in church. And me taking big steps and stuff like that.

Although these young men most often sought out someone older for advice about being a man, they did indicate that sometimes they talked to their friends about "what we should be doing and what we're not doing. And [we] talk about when we mess up." When asked for an example, the response was,

Oh like, one person do something like no one is supposed to do. We will talk to them about that: "Why did you do that? It was stupid what you did." We try to make sure he don't do that no more. Sometimes they'll get it. Sometimes they don't.

## **PATHWAYS TO REDEMPTION: COMING OF AGE, MANHOOD, AND INTRAGENERATIONAL AND INTERGENERATIONAL LESSONS**

I don't want to be like my father because, like, he left. And so, that makes me work harder to achieve my goals to become a man.

*I will be the man my father was not.* Consistent with an Afrocentric epistemology (Collins, 1990; Gwaltney, 1980; Mitchell & Lewter, 1986), these young men place much faith in what they learn from other people's lives and their own mistakes. Across and within generations, lessons were passed on about mistakes made, and of triumphs and of failures. As one young man explained, "By being a teenager, you've got to educate. Take good notes on people that you think are doing the right thing." When we asked what people did not understand about young Black men, a participant offered, "We're learning from our mistakes—mistakes not only made by you [us], but close friends, cousins, and family." For the young men who felt their fathers fell short, the goal was to strive to be the men their fathers were not. As one young man explained,

I personally, like I, don't want to be like my father because, like, he left. And so, that makes me work harder to achieve my goals to become a man. So I don't want to do the same, having made the same mistakes they made.

Another expressed, "Like not having my father and stuff. Like I learned from that, I always do think about when I have kids." As young men thought about how their lives were unfolding, they did not want to become "no deadbeat parent." Indeed, they felt that being a deadbeat daddy is the antithesis of respectable manhood. Below is a segment of a larger dialogue about the importance of being there for your family in every way you can:

Tyree: Basically, if you, like my man said, put yourself in a situation where you have a kid and you don't pull up to the bumper and don't want to take care of them and you know it's yours, then that is not being no man right there; that sucks for real.

Michael: Like they said there's a lot of deadbeat daddies out here, and that's not right. I picture myself, if I have a kid, I want to be with my baby mother. You know what I'm saying? Make it work out. If it's not working, let's try to make it work. Because . . .

Jamal: You gotta be there for your child.

Tyree: It's not right. That's—like that's part of being a man.

It is with a sense of irony that we note that the language of the responsible fatherhood movement (Curran & Abrams, 2000) emerged in the dialogue of urban Black male youth, a population for whom irresponsible fatherhood is viewed as endemic (Coley, 2001). Although the young men we talked to did not use the discourse of "deadbeat daddies" to indict their own fathers, it is a discursive symbol for an undesired self—that is, the father or the man they do not want to become.

Growing up within the context of the Reagan and Bush years, these young men's communities were deeply affected by economic recession, job loss, and the explosion of the underground drug economy. Hence, there were several references to the impact of the underground drug economy and the war on drugs (with respect to incarceration) and its legacy for their communities and families. Coming of age within this era, these young men developed a sense of the power of redemption and the possibilities for change that inform their aspirations for themselves. The lives and experiences of others can and do serve as cautionary tales, providing a model of what young men do not want to become and challenging them to interrogate and articulate what being a man means. A participant vividly illustrated this process as he discussed how his views of manhood were shaped by the legacies of the underground drug economy:

My momma had a boyfriend. I grew up around a bunch of no good, trifling, drug dealing ass people. My mom's boyfriend, he sold drugs. His brother sold drugs. He was around me 24/7. So I grew up with that lifestyle with that on my mind. I'm saying that's the way you're coming in when you've got the fast money not taking care of your responsibility and stuff like that. It all came to a downfall when everybody started going to jail. That's when you learn stuff. That's not being a man. That's being stupid. It's a lot of stuff, man. That's basically how I learned what being a man means.

Mentors sometimes passed on lessons that grew out of their own redemption with the caveat "Do what I'm doing now, not what I did." A respondent discussed his admiration for his grandfather, who is now a small business owner. He explained,

Granddad started in drugs and all that kind of stuff. You know, I'm saying, he took me to rehab. He came out of rehab. He's got his own business. He go to church. He's the kind of person you can ask him about anything. He started at the bottom. He changed. Grandpa told me, "Just don't do drugs. When you do drugs, you are going to end up like me." He told me to just keep my head up high. Stay focused. He said, "Do what I'm doing now, [not] what I did in the past."

At other times, mentors sought to pass on what they could not actualize in their own lives. With humor, one teenager talked about his older brother,

Like he in jail. Telling me right from wrong and stuff. And when he is around, he try to keep me in line. Even though he is in jail a lot, he try to tell me what to do. What's good for me to do. What's bad for me to do. He been there and done that. So he should know.

Despite young men's sense of loss and disappointment about their relationships with fathers, they aspired to be what their fathers could not. Part of the struggle as they began to make the transition into adulthood and manhood was to learn from their own mistakes and those of others and to strive to be better. The eldest member of one of the focus groups, the lone survivor of his middle school basketball team and himself a gunshot victim, challenged the younger members,

Each one of us in here can better ourself, and that would be an accomplishment. Everybody makes mistakes. Because you made a mistake don't mean you ain't nobody. You know what I'm saying, you still can grow up to be somebody.

To be sure, these young men have seen a lot, but the charge for themselves is to learn how to step up and be men. It is recognized as a journey, “a step process. It's all from childhood to your manhood. I think your manhood started at birth—you learn from birth.” Our participants talked about a sense of integrity and strength of self, a core sense of responsibility, and connections and obligations to family, community, and race, and a sense of faith as measures of manhood. It is a vision that parallels what has been found in other investigations of core Black cultural conceptions of manhood and standards of respectable manhood (Akbar, 1991; Allen & Connor, 1997; Duneier, 1992; Hunter & Davis, 1992, 1994). It is the desired self, the possible self that young men want to actualize. As one participant told us, he thinks about the type of man he wants to be every day, yet he is becoming aware that one is not always able to actualize one's aspirations, which reflects an understanding of the challenges and barriers that may lie ahead:

I want to be the type of man that take care of my own. If I have a good job, and I know I can get a good job, I want to get that job. If I got a wife, I need to take [care] of my wife. I'm going to take [care] of my wife. Take care of my home. Understand? Take care of myself. I just want to be the type of man that is there for people who need me. That's always been in my mind, the type of man you want to be. But you don't always be the man you [want] to grow up to be. You know what I'm saying?

## CONCLUSIONS

In this study, we turned our attention to young men who, on their journey to becoming men, reflected on the meaning of father loss. It is through autobiographical narratives that young men positioned themselves ideologically, created cautionary tales, and constructed the type of man they wanted to be. These emergent narratives tell us something about the different ways young men interpret the loss of their fathers and the inherent contradictions in their lived experience without them. The narratives speak to a loss of those lessons only a father can teach and the disappointment felt when men were either unable or too late to be fathers. They also reflect young men's survival despite the loss of their fathers, the role of their mothers, and finally, the redemptive charge to be the men their fathers were not. However, the narratives of loss, survival, and redemption that we highlighted should not be read as mutually exclusive or static understandings about young men's relationships with absent fathers but, rather, as representations of the complex ways young men work out the meaning of father loss and the defining intergenerational lessons learned from their relationships with fathers. If there is a common desire that came out of young men's experience of father loss, it is not to repeat the mistakes of their fathers.

To do this, the young men we spoke to took care to “take good notes on people that [they] think are doing the right thing.” They also looked to mothers, grandparents, uncles, brothers, in-laws, mentors, and others to better understand themselves, what being a man means, and how to

actualize these ideals. Not only did they learn from people who were “walking the walk,” but they also learned from their own mistakes and those of others.

## MEANINGS OF FATHER LOSS

Less than 40% of African American children reside in two-parent family households, and most will spend some part of their childhood years in households without fathers (Demo & Cox, 2000; U.S. Census Bureau, 2002). This qualitative investigation helps us to better understand what these demographic realities mean for African American males as they come of age. Young men’s narratives give us a window into the complexity of relationships with fathers, even with ones who are absent. There are many stories of life without fathers that young men interpret in a variety of ways. If we are to understand the impact of diverse experiences of fatherlessness, it is important to examine the course (e.g., from never knew fathers to intermittent relationship, changes in residential status and involvement, marital and relationship history with mothers), content (e.g., quality, closeness, conflict, respect), and meaning of sons’ relationships with fathers. In addition, the circumstances under which fathers move into and out of their son’s lives (e.g., incarceration, drifting away, substance abuse, never knowing son) are likely to shape how boys and young men interpret and experience father loss (Wade, 1994). This work also suggests that we need both analytic frameworks and practice models that can accommodate (a) the diversity of experiences of father loss and (b) variations in the course of father and son relationships, if we are to best address father absence in African American families.

In autobiographical texts, including memoirs, essays, and hip-hop music, African American men examine their lives without fathers, reflecting parallel themes of loss, survival, and redemption that we described in this article. For those working with Black male youth, the lyrics of rap music that explore sons’ anger and sense of loss is a place to begin to talk about adolescent and young men’s experiences growing up without fathers. When fathers reenter the lives of adolescent sons, they are likely to be met with feelings of loss, pain, and anger. When the reconciliation with fathers was discussed, it was sons’ perceptions of fathers’ lack of acknowledgment of what was lost that was a barrier to forgiveness and reconciliation. Moreover, whereas men may hope to reengage their role as fathers, they may find that it is too late to be dads. As one young man told us about his renewed relationship with his father: “He’s my daddy. But he is a friend.” Rap lyrics, as well as other autobiographical texts, may also be used to work with fathers who want to reestablish relationships with their children of any age.

Autobiographical texts may also be a useful vehicle for fathers who have experienced father loss to reflect on its impact in their own lives and on their fathering. Datcher’s (2002) *Raising Fences* and Pitts’s (1999) *Becoming Dads* are examples of African American men’s memoirs of coming of age with absent or distant fathers and their struggle to become men and good fathers. Several personal essays have also appeared in popular magazines that target Black audiences (e.g., *Essence*, *Ebony*). For researchers and practitioners, critical essays and memoirs about African American men coming of age (with and without fathers) provide analytic models to understand the interconnections between identity and biography. These works demonstrate that race, class, gender, and place are not vague social contexts within which individuals are situated but are sociological, cultural, and ecological influences that are interwoven into the life course and social identities (e.g., Awkward, 1999; Belton, 1995).



It is also important to note paternal incarceration as a special case of father loss. In 1997, 1.3 million American children had a parent in state or federal prison, and 43.8% of incarcerated fathers lived with their children before imprisonment (Johnson & Waldfogel, 2002). African Americans have been particularly hard-hit by the war on drugs, which has included mandatory and lengthy sentencing (Harrison, 1997; Johnson & Waldfogel, 2002). Programs that help fathers maintain relationships with their children and provide parent education, and prison policies that are family friendly are proactive steps to help preserve and strengthen families who are affected by incarceration

(see Harrison, 1997, for examples of implemented programs). When father loss via incarceration was discussed in our groups, it was the resumption of the father role after so much of a son's childhood had been missed that was a central tension. Hence, family support efforts that focus on the reintegration of incarcerated parents are needed in many urban communities hard-hit by the explosion in incarceration during the past 15 years.

## **BECOMING MEN WITHOUT FATHERS**

There are a number of social, economic, and demographic factors that have contributed to the decline in two-parent Black households (Tucker & Mitchell-Kernan, 1995). In addition, working-class and impoverished urban communities have been especially hard-hit by postindustrial declines in job opportunities (Bowman, 1990; Wilson, 1987), the underground economy and the crack and cocaine epidemic, and increased rates of incarceration and lengthy sentencing (Harrison, 1997; Johnson & Waldfogel, 2002). All are factors that undermine the formation and stability of two-parent family households and the parental involvement of nonresidential fathers. In the wake of the decline of the two-parent family as the predominant family type, there is a great deal of anxiety within African American communities about fatherless families—particularly the impact on the type of men boys will become (Brown & Davis, 2000; Bush, 2000; Wade, 1994). This study suggests there are varieties of sources—both male and female, and of diverse ages—that adolescents and young men draw on to develop their ideologies about manhood. Indeed, our participants referred to a web of social relationships, made up of kin and nonkin, which help to ensure that they are “doing the right things” and “staying out of trouble.” Many of these natural mentors are men who, in varying ways and contexts (formal and informal), are trying to shepherd youth into adulthood. These informal networks may go unrecognized and untapped by formal program efforts to support youth and other efforts to support families and communities. This is not to suggest that father involvement is not important to Black boys but rather to highlight the adaptive strategies that Black youth and families enlist as they manage father loss.

Developmental and family researchers have begun to empirically investigate the impact of social fathers and other natural mentors on children's development (Coley, 1998; Jayakody & Kalil, 2002; Zimmerman, Salem, & Maton, 1995). Together, these studies and others that highlight diverse parenting and child care systems are suggestive of the variety of social relationships that Black male youth may rely on (Hunter, Pearson, Ialongo, & Kellam, 1998; Marshall, Noonan, MacCartney, Marx, & Keefe, 2001). An important area of inquiry is to examine the broader network of adults that help guide, mentor, and parent Black male youth, and its influence on youth development and well-being. Zimmerman, Bingenheimer, and Notaro

(2002) found, in an ethnically diverse sample of adolescent males, that having a natural mentor had a compensatory effect on risks associated with problem behavior and compensatory and protective effects on risks associated with poor attitudes about school. This work suggests that we need to further describe and understand the network of social fathers, natural mentors, and otherfathers that Black youth may rely on. As we move beyond simple assessments of father absence, it is important to investigate the impact of otherfathers on the well-being of Black youth, particularly in urban and low-income communities where the ecological risks are increased.

Our investigation also underscores the role of mothers in their sons' successful transition to manhood and to adulthood. Although there have been a number of personal essays and memoirs recently published that explore (a) Black men's relationships with their mothers and (b) mothers' role in sons' development as men (see for example, Awkward, 1999; Brown, 1998; Brown & Davis, 2000), we know little about the specific dynamics of mother and son relationships in single parent African American families. Bush's (2000) qualitative investigation of Black mothers rearing sons to be men suggests that mothers view themselves as effective parents of boys. The lessons they tried to teach their sons about becoming men included ethical and moral principles, a sense of respect for self and others, a sense of spirituality and faith, and a strong sense of self and character. Although mothers interviewed by Bush (2000) felt that they could teach their sons vital life lessons, some worried about the unique lessons that only fathers or men could teach their sons. As one mother stated,

I am not a man. When it comes to identity, there is something that they lose. Not that they are a worse man or can't be a good man, they can't be a strong man, I just think it enhances the picture when there is a strong male role model. (p. 12)

It is important to begin to investigate how mothers parent sons effectively and any unique challenges that they face raising sons without fathers. In an empirical study, Zimmerman and colleagues (1995) found that African American boys who had high levels of maternal support mediated the risk of having violent friends. This is suggestive of what may be one of the components of effective parenting among single Black mothers. The extant literature suggests that program efforts that focus on Black male youth development, which tend to exclude mothers, should also consider ways to engage and support mothers' parenting efforts.

Despite the challenges faced by African American male youth in urban communities, there are a variety of adaptive styles and strategies present (Anderson, 1999; Billson, 1996; Majors & Billson, 1993). For the young men we talked to, the contemplation and exploration of the meaning of manhood and becoming men is not simply a question of what it is to be masculine but something more. As one young man shared with us, "It so many things, in so many ways, it is hard to put it to words." The perspectives on manhood expressed by participants are consistent with other work on Black manhood that highlight the importance of standards of respectability and finding manhood in one's humanity (Duneier, 1992; Hunter & Davis, 1992; Ross, 1998). However, we do not know what distinguishes the young men we talked to from peers with problematic masculine identities or whether these young men will actualize their hoped-for

selves. A larger investigation of Black male youth and coming of age that includes both quantitative and qualitative strategies is needed to address these questions.

This study has provided important insights into the ways Black male youth interpret and grapple with the meaning of father loss. However, this study was not specifically designed to explore father loss, and as in any small-scale qualitative investigation, we have a limited snapshot of interpretative experience. We focused on a small group of young men in which the demands of the developmental period and the common experience of father absence converged to create an energized dialogue about father loss. The larger project, on which this study was based, suggests that adolescent males may, in particular, be seeking ways to understand and find meaning in their experiences with nonresidential and absent fathers. If we are best to understand father and son relationships, it is critical to consider the diverse relationships that sons may have with their fathers through young adulthood. Even among our participants, designations of father absence do not explain the full range of father coresidence, involvement, and contact among boys living in single-parent households. To extend this work, it is also important to explore variations in how African American young men interpret growing up without fathers across region, residence (urban, rural), type of community, and social class. In addition, given the prevalence of single-parent households across race and ethnicity in the United States, it is also important to explore how White and other minority male youth interpret father loss and its influence on their views about manhood and coming of age.

Finally, there are many pictures drawn around the Black urban experience. It is a kind of folklore in which people's troubles become fodder for caricatured portraits of public and private life gone awry. We attempted to present a vision of coming of age Black and male that escapes much of our gaze in the social sciences and one that is lost in the barrage of media images and political discourse about urban problems. The young men who are the focus of this discussion are self-described survivors. They are beginning to make the transition to being men and preparing to make that big step. However, they also say that "being a young Black man, living in America, we've got a lot to deal with. We're up against a lot." Despite these challenges, they continue to court the American Dream, with all its imperfections and barriers to fulfillment (Hochschild, 1995). As one young man told us, "The main goal is to live happily ever after. Isn't that what you put in your stories? I just want the house, the wife, the car." However, it was a tempered optimism, when we asked if there is anything standing between you, as a Black man, and the American Dream, someone answered, "Prisons. Because they are building more prisons out here than they do houses for Black people."

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