

Intergenerational Support and Reciprocity between Low-Income African American Fathers and their Aging Mothers

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Abstract:

This chapter explores men's perceptions of a vital relationship in their lives: the one they have with their own mothers. It examines how men are socialized at early ages into parenting behavior, and the roles that their mothers play in “teaching” them to be fathers. It addresses: unfolding reciprocity between aging mothers and their adult sons, with a focus on shared residency and household responsibilities; kin work, through care offered by paternal grandmothers, which helps to secure involvement of nonresidential fathers; and exchange of financial, emotional, and social support. The chapter concludes with implications for family policies, and work with African American fathers in community-based programs and interventions.

Keywords: African American males | mothers and sons | parenting behavior | aging mothers | fatherhood | social support

Article:

If you’ve got your mom, it’s like, “OK, I’ve got my ace” ... I made a lot of mistakes because I had no father around, but they wasn’t mistakes because I had moms and my sister. (Lamont, age 28)

African American fathers in low-income urban communities often have been characterized as marginal participants in the lives of their children and families (Allen & Doherty, 1996; Burton & Snyder, 1998; Marsiglio, Amato, Day, & Lamb, 2000). Recent studies have begun to examine paternal involvement and the substantial barriers to these fathers’ participation as providers and caregivers. These studies of involvement are often focused on how men’s individual attributes and perceptions, or fathers’ fragile relationships with children’s mothers, may lead to lack of involvement (Carlson & McLanahan, 2004).

In contrast, using a strengths perspective (Barnes, 2001), we can explore a broad range of family strategies and forms of social support that help to establish and maintain fathers' involvement. In this study, we explore men's perceptions of a vital relationship in their lives—the one they have with their own mothers. As paternal grandmothers, these women contribute to children's well-being. Do they help to promote their sons' involvement as well, and if so, how?

Background

Transitory Fathering

Most studies with national survey data on low-income minority fathers support the finding that low-income fathers are challenged to remain involved with their children (Coley, 2001). Results from the Fragile Families study, based on national data from over 4700 unwed couples, show that most fathers were highly involved at the birth of their children and that involvement was enhanced when they had a positive attitude toward fathering, a committed couple relationship, and stable, full-time jobs (Carlson & McLanahan, 2002; Johnson, 2001). Twelve months after the birth of children, however, multiple disruptions—including relationship conflict and financial instability—contributed to union dissolution (McLanahan, Garfinkel, & Mincy, 2001; Waller & McLanahan, 2005). Although some studies indicate that nonresidential fathers make efforts to provide and care for their children (Danziger & Radin, 1990; Stier & Tienda, 1993), they generally lack the resources to successfully fulfill provider and caregiver roles.

Unwed or divorced fathers' involvement with their children decreases when they move out of the household and terminate their relationship (Lerman, 1993; Lerman & Sorensen, 2000; Seltzer, 1991). Nonresidential fathers' involvement is especially enhanced by both quality and quantity of father-child interactions (Amato & Gilbreth, 1999), consistent financial contribution (McLanahan, Seltzer, Hanson, & Thomson, 1994; Mincy, Garfinkel, & Nepomnyaschy, 2005), an amicable relationship with the mother of the child (Coley & Chase-Lansdale, 1999), and voluntary relinquishment of a street-oriented lifestyle (Nelson, Clampet-Lundquist, & Edin, 2002). In Kathryn Edin's (2000) study of marital beliefs, single low-income mothers report that potential partners often are untrustworthy and unprepared to commit to long-term relationships due to sporadic employment and involvement in illegal activities.

However, the assumption of father absence may mask transitions of men in and out of the home, a pattern especially common for young Black families (Mott, 1990). Multiple sets of children complicate men's parenting responsibilities (Manning, Stewart, & Smock, 2003). African American fathers often spend less time living with their biological children and more time with nonbiological children, although some findings suggest that they become more involved with biological children as those children age (Eggebeen, 2002). These patterns point to the centrality of role flexibility in dynamic family relationships, as well as to cycles of engagement and disengagement of low-income African American fathers with their children (Jarrett, Roy, & Burton, 2002).

Support From Paternal Kin Systems

In general, men's involvement in their children's lives can encourage other paternal kin to commit time and money toward children's well-being (Stack, 1974). Recent qualitative studies of fathers in Trenton, New Jersey (Waller, 2002) and multiple urban sites in the South and Midwest (Hamer, 2001) illustrate how kin systems may be resources by which fathers can give meaning to their roles and can secure involvement with their children. In particular, as Richardson shows in Chapter 5 in this volume, fathers may be able to create social capital for their children by connecting them with motivated kin and caregivers (Marsiglio et al., 2000).

Many single, low-income African American mothers struggle to rear their sons and promote their positive development into adulthood (Boyd-Franklin & Franklin, 2001) (see also Chapter 5 in this volume). Paternal kin—especially mothers—may help to set explicit role expectations for fatherhood (Johnson, 1998, 2001; Roy & Vesely, 2009; Stack & Burton, 1993). Paternal grandmothers provide low-income fathers with a safe home base from which to parent in violent and risky communities (Roy, 2004). In interviews with fathers, Hamer (2001) suggests that men “seemed to feel emotionally closer to their mothers than any other women in their lives” (p. 94). In her study, men reported that their mothers held high expectations for their parenting, encouraging them to spend time with children and to serve as role models. Mothers were their sons' primary confidantes about parenting and intimate relationships, and they could provide financial support and job contacts as well.

We know little about how kin members, especially men's own mothers, shape men's parenting roles. Men's mothers, for example, may be particularly effective when men themselves have few resources to secure positive involvement with their children. Moreover, few studies have explored how these relationships evolve and how reciprocity may emerge between adult sons and their aging mothers. In this qualitative analysis, we consider how men's involvement with their children is shaped by the support and expectations of their mothers. We analyze life history interviews with 85 low-income African American fathers in Indiana and Illinois, asking the following questions:

- 1 How do relationships between fathers and their aging mothers unfold over time?
- 1 How does the participation of grandmothers help to secure their sons' involvement as fathers, when so many of these men are challenged by lack of employment opportunities, incarceration, or dissolved relationships with children's mothers?

Methods

Sample and Research Sites

For this analysis, we draw from interviews with 85 low-income African American fathers across three different projects. In each project, the first two authors worked as facilitators of curriculum for parenting programs in addition to serving as researchers. The first author worked in a fatherhood program in a community college in Chicago for 3 years as a caseworker and researcher. While working with more than 400 fathers, he conducted life history interviews with 40 participants. Both authors facilitated weekly life skills workshops for incarcerated men in a work-

release facility in northern Indiana. They interviewed 40 participants, 10 of whom were African American fathers. Finally, the second author facilitated programs for young men in a community-based fatherhood program in Indianapolis, where he interviewed 35 African American fathers.

Each participant was considered to be low income on the basis of total income or eligibility of his children for public assistance. Men's efforts to become more involved with their children through parenting classes and co-parent counseling and their desire to access employment training and placement and educational, housing, and drug treatment referrals distinguished them in some ways from their peers. Aside from their interest in these programs, however, the participants were no different demographically from other fathers enrolled in the program or from other low-income African American men in their communities.

Men in this pooled sample varied in age: 46% (n = 39) were 24 years or younger (primarily the participants of the Indianapolis program); 28% (n = 24) were between 25 and 35 years of age; and 26% (n = 22) were 36 years or older. Of the total sample, 49 of the fathers (58%) were incarcerated or formerly incarcerated, and 51 of the participants (60%) had completed high school or earned a general equivalency diploma (GED). Only about one-third of the men were employed in full-time jobs at the interview; the majority were unemployed or underemployed.

More than half of the men in the study (53%, or n = 45) lived with their mothers or grandmothers and not with their children. These men tended to be younger fathers, although older fathers also frequently returned to their mothers' households. Well over three-quarters of the participants were noncustodial fathers who did not live with their children on a daily basis. Just under half of the sample (41%, n = 35) had only one child, while 28 fathers (33%) had two children, and 22 (26%) had three or four children.

Data Collection

Each of the three programs offered voluntary parenting classes on a weekly basis. The research team recruited active participants during these sessions. We explained to fathers that we were conducting research on paternal involvement, and if they agreed to participate, they signed written consent forms.

Multiple methods were used for data collection. First, we took detailed ethnographic field notes of interactions between fathers, children, program staff, and ourselves at the program site. This technique provided data on ecological processes, barriers, and supports for men's parenting and the making of meaning in fatherhood roles spanning many weeks. During 2-hour sessions at the program site, we conducted retrospective life history interviews to gather more insight into men's relationships with extended family members. Interviews were recorded on audiotapes and transcribed, and interview and field note texts were coded using QSR N6 software (QSR International, Cambridge, Massachusetts). Pseudonyms and ages of participants were noted.

Protocol questions addressed the size of their extended families, reciprocity between members, and socialization to fatherhood. Men discussed common interaction with family members and indicated where the interactions occurred. Major life events such as changes in family structure, residential movement, and shifts in paternal involvement across multiple families were plotted on

calendar grids using techniques found in Freedman, Thornton, Camburn, Alwin, and Young-Demarco (1988). The grids provided precise documentation of important transitions in father involvement, including family deaths and physical health problems, dissolution of intimate relationships, and the beginning of fatherhood. We also used a range of methods to enhance the trustworthiness of data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Credibility and dependability of the data were enhanced by triangulation of multiple sources and methods as well as prolonged engagement in the field. Discussions with individual participants after the interviews were used to validate initial understanding of the influence of kinship systems on men's parenting.

We adapted a constant comparative method of analytic induction from basic elements of grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Although we did not solicit specific information about men's relationships with their mothers, we noted how frequently and extensively participants discussed the past and ongoing influences of their mothers on their own development as adults and as fathers. For this analysis, we paid attention to men's descriptions of childhood and adolescence; early socialization to fathering; the role that their mothers played in child care and negotiations with "babymamas" and maternal kin; and arrangements that allowed adult sons and aging mothers to exchange financial, emotional, and social supports.

Our own backgrounds and experiences influenced each step of data collection and analysis. As a middle-aged White male academic, an African American male graduate student, and an African American female undergraduate student, we were collectively in good positions to debate and check each other's assumptions and interpretations of men's relationships with their mothers. Prolonged time in the field allowed us to build rapport in personal interactions during classes, program celebrations, and home visits. Although we advocated for paternal involvement in the programs, we encouraged men to tell us about their own experiences and perceptions outside the program sessions.

Findings

The Stone: Young Men's Reliance on Mothers

After my great grandma died, then my grandma was the stone. Now she died, and my mama will be the stone. It passes on. My mama isn't even the oldest one, but all of her sisters say she's the responsible one.

—Bird, age 21

Each of the 85 men in these studies developed distinct relationships with their mothers. We first examined relationships between young men and their mothers during youth and adolescence. Next, we explored how mothers socialized men to be parents prior to the birth of their children and how they promoted their son's roles as fathers after the birth of those children. In the final section, we describe the emerging reciprocity between many younger and middle-aged fathers and their aging mothers. We found generally that more than half the men had stable, consistent interaction with their mothers over time. A little more than one-fourth saw significant change in their interaction, and about one in five had little to no interaction with their mothers.

Men reported that their own fathers' movements in and out of the household affected early relationships with their mothers. Well over one-third of the men lost their own fathers by the age of 3 to death, divorce, or departure; the majority of participants had longer resided with their fathers by age 13. Only one-third of all men in the sample had fathers who were involved consistently over the course of their lives (Roy, 2006). Their mothers soon became single parents with limited resources to rear their children, and their sons often became the oldest males in the households, repositories of great hope and reminders of their fathers' presence. Joe, a 41-year-old father, had always lived with his mother. After his parents' divorce when he was 25, his presence in his mother's household was reassuring. "I was the oldest, I looked a lot like my father," he said. "She thought I was my dad sometimes. She would do that."

Parents' breakup or divorce led to important changes in men's early lives. Mothers tried to minimize the effects of family transitions on their sons. As Malcolm, a 35-year-old father in Chicago noted, his parents' separation taught him lessons about perseverance through tough times:

I watched [my mother] go through a lot of financial problems as a single parent. It was my experience of emotional hurt watching my mother, due to separation from my father, that led me to believe that the best thing for a father and mother is to stick together.

Mothers also struggled to stabilize their households on a single income, and when they lost their jobs, they needed to rely on support from family members. Often, men were sent to live with their relatives, usually their grandmothers. Although most men developed close bonds with their grandmothers, this transition proved jarring at times. Remy was an only child and was "real tight with my Mom, but when my grandmother took me, everything started going downhill. I felt like I was taken away from my Mom, like I wasn't accepted, wasn't loved. I was all by myself and everybody was against me."

Men were struck by the dedication of their mothers to extremely demanding and often demeaning jobs. From an early age, many of the men recalled their mothers' intensive activity in the kitchen as they helped to "cut up celery, green peppers, or onions for dinner." These single mothers often maintained two or more jobs to pay for their children's needs. Curt, a 39-year-old father from Chicago, recalled how his mother built computer boards for almost 20 years, until the plant closed; she then processed Styrofoam cups for another 25 years. Isaiah recognized both the stressors and limits of his mother's parenting:

I was 13, running the streets and climbing out of windows. My mother would be asleep because she was working two jobs so she could send us to Catholic school. That's the reason I can't sit around and do nothing with my kids.

With mothers piecing together resources paycheck to paycheck, many men learned survival skills at an early age. Tamal, a 20-year-old father from Chicago, noted that there were always money troubles in the household, but he learned to be a responsible man in the process.

Living with my mom is more like I know how to hustle and survive. My mom taught me how to take care of a household. If you were down and out, you had to come up with an idea to pay the bills and feed your family.

These lessons in survival, perseverance, and responsibility stayed with men and influenced the ways in which they thought about their own roles as parents. They admired how their mothers persisted through adverse conditions. For example, mothers not only held down employment, but they pursued education. Charles, an older father in the work release facility in Indiana, related, “In my mother’s house, it was work or school, one or the other. I remember my mama getting her GED, her nursing license, her working in hospitals in East St. Louis, the VA hospital in Chicago. My parents fell out when my father wouldn’t buy her a robe when she graduated from high school.” Many mothers provided the men with their only positive role models. Lamont reported, “My mom was the only one that was there, as far as motivation, understanding, discipline, whatever.”

Joe saw many of the same traits in his mother. However, he noted that his mother was overburdened as the sole parent in his family. “She emphasized education, even though she didn’t know about that. She gave me enthusiasm, a way to be willing to try to achieve and deal with this society in which I live. But the stress of the family got to her.” Holding together a strained marriage was one of the sources of mothers’ stress, and they often sought relief and distraction from conflict in family and work life. For example, Alfred recognized that “My father was a rolling stone, always in the fast lane with me. My mother used to go out and drink, but I think that she earned that, because she used to work two jobs to take care of us.” A small number of men, particularly younger fathers, were not reared by and never knew their mothers. They emphasized how stress drove their mothers away from family life and toward dependence on alcohol or drugs.

The most common experience that men noted in their discussions of growing up was their mothers’ efforts to protect them from violence and the influences of street life. Mothers kept their sons physically close to them at young ages. For Muhammed, this meant that “I was a mama’s baby, stuck with her, if she had to go to the store or something. When people tried to snatch her purse, I was there, and that was not going to happen.” As men became adolescents, their mothers grew more vigilant in keeping them on the path of positive behavior. Isaiah remembered how his mother came to his neighbor’s house “to talk, talk, talk to make me come home. She looked like she was going to cry, so I went home. I told her I was smoking cigarettes, but she said she didn’t care, just to come home.” The presence of gangs outside of the house caused mothers great concern as well. For example, Nelson recalled, “I been around gangs but knew how to get around it. I knew I couldn’t get involved because I loved my mother too much. I remember the Chicago riots in ’68, the snow of ’67. My mother must have kept me away from all of that.”

With hindsight as adults, men realized that their mothers took tough stances in their interests. Earl, a young father in Indianapolis, reported, “My mother was the meanest lady on the block. We always had to be home when the streetlights came on. We had chores and had to get good grades. But she wasn’t necessarily hard on us, just stern. It taught me responsibility, gave me a work ethic.” Men reflected back on these protective relationships, and they found that their mothers were the primary influences on their lives. Chris, a young father in the work-release facility, emphasized how mother–child relationships are unique. He said, “I would go everywhere she went, and I would protect her no matter what. Fathers may come and go, but mothers are always there.”

This closeness was tested in adolescence, particularly when young men left their mothers' households. For many mothers, one strategy of protecting their sons was to send them away from dangerous urban communities. When Wesley, a young Chicago father, ran into trouble with local gangs and law enforcement, his mother suggested that he move to the South to live with his sister. "I got into trouble," he recalled, "And she was like, 'You have to leave.' She didn't kick me out, but she said it was best to leave." For other men, the search for independence led them away from their mothers. Akida, a 19-year-old father in Indianapolis, felt that he may have been "too close" to his mother.

My mama was overprotective of me. Me and her was like brother and sister. I started to run away because I couldn't deal with my mama's rules. I was 15 when I moved out; she wrote me a check for \$150 and sent me on my way.

In summary, mothers were usually the most consistent and prominent adults throughout men's childhood and adolescence. Men described the difficult challenges that their mothers faced as single parents carrying multiple jobs; they also noted how mothers tried repeatedly to protect them from violence, racism, and negative influences in urban communities. Men's respect for their mothers grew with hindsight and with their assumption of fathering roles.

Securing Fatherhood Through Kin Work

I only saw my oldest daughter when my mom would try to bring her down on the holidays, so she could spend some time with me. My oldest daughter always knew who her dad was because my mom has always been there when I wasn't able to be there.

—Remy, age 27

Mothers played a central role in teaching their sons how to be fathers as well as in securing their involvement with their children through support, both emotional and instrumental. In the life history interviews, we asked each participant, "Who taught you to be a father?" A number of men (41%; n = 35) recognized their mothers' efforts to teach them to be fathers. Some men found these lessons in the day-to-day care and responsibility that mothers personified. Bird, a 21-year-old father, grew up in the housing projects in Chicago and struggled to put his gang affiliation and prison record behind him. He recalled how from the time he was age 3, his mother played a central role in his life after the death of his father, a former gang member:

I would give a Mother's Day and Father's Day gift to my mom. Because that was who was daddy and mama. Even when we was down and out, she loved the shit out of me. That's what love means.

Nelson also believed that his capacity for parenting was "inherited" from his mother. "I love kids, I love people. I think I got all of this father-learning from my mother. My mom showed me nothing but love, and I loved life, but my dad wasn't there."

As overburdened single parents under extreme stress, many mothers relied on their sons, even when they were quite young. Some men were expected to care for younger siblings, which resulted in early socialization to a parental role in their families. Tamal, the young Chicago father, indicated that the “10-year break between me and my little brother and sister” influenced the way that he thought about himself as an adult and potential parent. “I raised them,” he stated simply. Jordan, another young father from Indianapolis, explained, “I was the man of the house since I was little. I was watching my little brothers. It was illegal, but I grew up real fast, faster than any normal person. I was cooking, I was doing everything.”

With the birth of their own children, men drew on these lessons from being reared by their mothers. More immediately, their mothers became grandmothers—women who, in many ways, assumed responsibility for the intergenerational continuity of their families, not just their daily survival. Randy, an Indianapolis father, recalled this sense of legacy when he recognized the importance of his own grandmother in his life. He said, “She refused to let any child born into our family disappear [outside of the family].”

Paternal grandmothers performed a range of kin-work roles for the well-being of their grandchildren. From the earliest interactions, mothers helped their sons to negotiate relationships with their children. Paternal grandmothers were instrumental in defining paternity for younger fathers. Even in the face of new DNA tests that could establish biological ties between men and their children, the judgment of grandmothers carried weight in family relations. Bird’s mother heard rumors that his son had a baby, so she visited the hospital 2 days after the child’s birth “to see it on her own.” He recalled, “Once she saw the baby, there was no denying it. ‘Yea, that’s my granddaughter, that’s mine.’ She knew it.” As a gatekeeper for men’s paternity, paternal grandmothers gained some control over their sons’ pathways to fatherhood. Gerald, a 35-year-old father in Chicago, had a daughter with his girlfriend, who used cocaine. His mother “didn’t like my girlfriend at first, and she denied that it was my child.” When Gerald was at work, she called child protective services to report her son’s girlfriend and take custody of his child. He said, “I was very upset about that. My baby was only 5 months old. But now she looks like my mother, and my mother gets to keep her sometimes.”

Paternal grandmothers helped to negotiate conflicts between fathers and the mothers of their children. However, their kin work was focused on promoting the well-being of their grandchildren. As Bird related, “[My babymama] tried to get all tight with my mom, but my mom knows the routine. She’s like, ‘Ain’t nothing to talk about him. You want to talk about this shorty (baby), we can talk.’” Often, animosity between maternal and paternal families led men’s mothers to limit involvement. For Marcus, a young father in Chicago, whose girlfriend’s family had provided information to police that led to his arrest, “They were the reason I got locked up.” He added, “And my family, theirs, everybody was at each others’ throats.” As a result, he had not seen his daughter in many months. However, the involvement of paternal grandmothers usually helped to diffuse conflict between parents. Joe found that his family had earned the trust of the mother of his son. When his former girlfriend was incarcerated, Joe’s mother was chosen to be the child’s guardian.

My son has been with my mom for the last 3 years. His mother knew no other people who would be able to take care of the child to her satisfaction, but she knew

me and my family since she was 15 years old. She knew what kind of people we were and she felt safe since I was the father.

Men's mothers also played key roles by monitoring their grandchildren or by relaying information about their well-being. For many men who lived apart from their children due to separation or incarceration, this link was an important family lifeline. Will and the mother of his child were both young parents, and their relationship as co-parents and partners was fragile. He relied on his mother to play go-between, asserting, "I take one step at a time. Her family calls my mother, and my mother relays the message. If they want me to call, I'll call. If they don't ask me to call, I don't." For some men, these channels of family communication are well established. In these situations, paternal grandmothers could be more assertive and actively monitor their grandchildren. For example, Asante had just been released from prison, and he knew that "My babymama is straight, she's calling my mama everyday. Otherwise, my mama would be like, 'Girl, you better tell me about my granddaughter.' They let her know if anything goes wrong, and she'd let me know."

Some paternal grandmothers cared for children and kept them overnight, which was an important resource for both fathers and mothers of children. Usually, paternal grandmothers served as "bridge" care during weekends, between work shifts, or on random days of urgent need. Isaiah's mother helped him to secure the third shift at a local factory.

I have to find daycare for my daughter right now, but my mother will watch her at night. I want to be there to help raise my grandkids, like my mom is there for me, helping me with my daughters now.

Paternal grandmothers were particularly important for young, first-time fathers. Bird kept his daughter for two weeks out of each month. He said, "They (maternal kin) bring my shorty over to my mother's house My mom works from morning until 6 p.m., then she comes back to let me go outside and get a breath of fresh air." Two older fathers, Nelson and Gerald, both relied on their mothers to keep their children during weekend days. "With the kids back in school," Nelson said, "we go to my mother's house on the weekends. I've been doing this for 3 years, since my wife passed." Gerald did not worry about transportation or arrangements. He noted that "My mother doesn't work on Saturday, and she goes to get April, my daughter. I get over to my mom's, and she's already there."

When paternal grandmothers keep their grandchildren, it also opens up a neutral space for men to visit with their children if they do not keep them independently (Roy, 2004; Roy & Vesely, 2009). When men served time in correctional facilities, their mothers played a pivotal role in keeping fathers involved in children's lives. At the work-release facility, Remy did not see much of his family, who lived in Michigan. He had to rely on his mother to transport herself and other family members to Indiana for visits. Without the support and initiative of their mothers, many men risked falling out of contact with their children over time.

Legal and policy staff members have begun to recognize the importance of paternal grandmothers to their son's involvement as fathers. With men's frequent movement in and out of jobs and their residential instability, child support courts often try to locate men at their mother's residences. When child support courts tried to find Doc, who had never known that he had fathered an 8-year-

old daughter, they first contacted his mother. He recalled, “The state came to my mama’s house with a warrant. Said they were going to lock me up—scared her to death.” Men’s mothers served as strong advocates for their sons in custody battles. Oscar’s mother supported him during a custody hearing and calmed him down when the court threatened to place his daughter “in the custody of the state.” Eventually, she took custody of her granddaughter, moving to Atlanta to raise her among family. Oscar said, “It was the first time when I felt like I really got to know my mom.”

It is important to recognize the balancing act that men faced in ceding some control over parenting by asking for their mothers’ support and guidance. In some situations, paternal grandmothers decided that their sons endangered fragile family relations and could not offer assistance in taking care of children. When Devon, a 23-year-old father in Indianapolis, decided to move out of his mother’s house and marry his new girlfriend, his mother and the children’s mother established joint custody and restricted his access to his children. Some men’s mothers made financial decisions without their input. When Wesley, a young father in Chicago, left a boot camp program, he was awarded \$2200 to establish a new life. When he returned to his mother’s house, he found that “she had spent all of the money on baby stuff for my sister’s baby. They were looking at me, and I was looking at them. My mama said, real soft, ‘I spent that money on the baby.’ I said, ‘That’s OK, Mom,’ but I couldn’t believe it.” For these men, the involvement of paternal grandmothers could curtail their own future as parents.

Reciprocity Between Aging Mothers and Adult Sons

[My mother] caught a bad cold. She was coughing, had fluid around her heart that choked her. If she ever wanted something out of me, she got it. She didn’t have to ask questions, I always did it. She could depend on me, and I could always depend on her, no question about it.

—Miles, age 31

Among the 85 low-income African American men in this study, mothers and sons engaged in a dynamic and often mutual exchange of financial, emotional, and social support. Lacking consistent employment, most men were not self-sufficient, which meant that their relationships with partners and their mothers were critical to their day-to-day survival and potential independence. Aging mothers often had secured resources that their sons could not.

For example, mothers’ willingness to share residence with their sons gave most fathers a clear “fall back” option. Cory, a 27-year-old father of two boys in Chicago, moved in and out of his mother’s house.

I’m living with my mother, been there for 27 years. She’s always there; she’d take care of me if something bad happened. I moved out of her house after high school, but I’d go back now and then. I’d stay with my girlfriend, too. I’d find rent money for my girlfriend and for my mom. I’d go back to my mother’s if I got into an argument.

Although a shared residence could require men to adhere to their mothers' rules, this safe refuge from gang activity, drug rehabilitation, re-entry from prison or jail, or the pressures of paying rent on little to no income was invaluable to many men.

These arrangements could, however, divide fathers' commitments and strain relations with men's partners and mothers of their children. Donnell, a young father of three sons, had two jobs and recognized this conflict as well. He said, "Adriana, my girlfriend, is jealous of the bond that I have with my family. She feels like she is competing with my family for my attention, especially my mother. I would do anything for my mother. And Adriana, she ain't even my wife." Donnell recognized that his family ties—and his continued relationship with his mother—were concrete and had real impact, whereas his bond with his child's mother seemed ambiguous and was likely to be short lived.

We also explored the flip side of reciprocity: how men supported their mothers as they aged. Sonny spoke directly of a transition in family relationships, when men can embrace adulthood and its responsibilities. "There's a time to branch out from your family, be your own man," he said. "You can't just keep going to mommy and daddy and saying 'Help me out.' You want to go and say, 'I want to help you out, too.'" Being "the stone" for one's mother was difficult, however. Sonny was an unemployed student with eight children, unable to support himself and reliant on his sister to care for his children. Other men were simply unable to be physically present to support their mothers. Charles was "in and out of jails" and could not assist his mother, who owned property in Indiana but suffered from Alzheimer disease. He regretted his incarceration, admitting "I ain't no good to her sitting in here ... It's fallen to my brother to be the good son, but he put her in a nursing home and ran up credit card debt for her."

Most men started with small gestures for their mothers. After Isaiah's mother gave him some church tapes to listen to, he began to write poetry and wrote a poem for her birthday. He recognized how central his mother's spirituality was to her health. "Every Sunday now I go to church with her, and she goes swimming and I pick her up and take her home," he said. "If she has to go somewhere during the day, I pick her up and drive her around."

After being single mothers for decades, most women continued to work past retirement age. Men realized that their mothers were worn down from years of financial instability and strained relationships. Jordan's mother was still in her thirties, but he lived with her as he tried to stabilize his own life as a young father. He was struck by the heavy burdens that she carried from work to home each day.

She's been through so much in her life, and she's like permanently depressed, stressed at all times, taking so many medicines. It's hard for me to deal with, but I have to. Sometimes she just comes home and says things, she doesn't mean it. My mother tries to help me, but I don't rely on her too much, because I don't want to put that extra pressure on her.

Some fathers reported that their mothers' depression and stress led to a reliance on alcohol or drugs. The ability to understand and empathize with their mothers made some men the most effective social supports in extended families. For example, Kelvin had three daughters who lived with his

wife. He had done time and kicked a drug habit, and he lived with his mother, helping her out as much as he could. “My mom is an addict. I ignore it, don’t let it bother me,” he said. “She’s been all right with me because I have been feeding her and buying her cigarettes. She talks to the air, she cusses people out, but that’s OK with me.”

As reciprocity developed over time, some men created intergenerational caregiving arrangements. Russell was an underemployed father of a teenage son in Chicago. His mother had helped to raise Russell’s son but had fallen ill in recent months. Russell moved his son and mother into the apartment next to his so he could monitor her health and help her out with daily routines. “My father’s passed, and she doesn’t like to sleep alone,” he said. “My son is the first grandson of my parents, and he is my mother’s favorite. I had a lot of help with him, and she needs to know where he is. So it works out for everybody.”

Ultimately, men’s sense of loss at their mother’s deaths or the weight of their mother’s absence when she was not involved reflects the complexity of mother–son relationships. Keith met his mother for the first time at the age of 20, when he walked into a department store and introduced himself to her. After initial joy and excitement, he realized that he could not retrieve the years without his mother’s involvement.

A lot of things came out ... why was my grandmother raising me, why had she never tried to contact me if we’d been living in the same town? There was a lot of envy. It all got to me, like I felt I was in a fake relationship with my mother, and it really, really made me angry ... After we had a cancer scare with her, I started to rethink religion, of how my next day is not promised. I tried to clean up my life. I got to the point of, why should I keep looking for a mother? No longer can she be my mother.

When mothers were active and supportive, their sudden absence could transform their sons’ lives. Leon, an older father of three sons in Chicago, recalled that he was quite close to his mother, closer than to his father. When he visited her at her home, she began to look “different, weaker.” At the same time that he lost a good job, she died of cancer, and Leon started using drugs. Miles’s mother and brother passed away within 4 months of each other. He became careless as a dealer, which he interpreted as a message from his mother.

When I was selling, I would never get caught. But then it seemed like every time I touched the stuff, I got caught. The police weren’t catching me, it was my mama giving me a warning. I am trying to keep it real, she was giving me a whupping. It brought me back to reality.

Men continued to turn—and to return—to their mothers for shelter, emotional, and material support, even in middle age, and mothers grew increasingly reliant on their sons as well as they aged. For some men, the relationship with their mothers was the single most significant bond with any other person, male or female, in their lives. The loss of their mothers, therefore, dramatically changed the lives and identities of many men in this study.

Discussion and Conclusion

In this analysis of life history interviews with 85 low-income African American men, we found that supportive kin systems may be among the most vital resources to promote paternal involvement with children. Men's evolving relationships with their mothers set the tone for their own development, not just as children or adolescents, but as fathers, partners, workers, and middle-aged adults.

Program Implications for Work With Low-Income Fathers

This description and examination of evolving relationships has implications for social work in local programs. A pathological perspective may emphasize risky behavior of individual fathers as gang members or unemployed workers, or gender conflict in couple formation. In contrast, our use of a family strengths perspective locates positive and often overlooked adaptive strengths of African American families. With this more comprehensive view, we can identify how extended families aid each other and support paternal involvement. Among many African American fathers and their families, role flexibility and kin work become salient strategies for crafting family networks (Jarrett et al., 2002). Caseworkers who look behind absent fathers or failed relationships may identify resources in an extensive web of paternal kin members. This study suggests that there may be potential in intergenerational programs that extend parenting classes, counseling, and related supports to paternal grandmothers.

Social workers also should recognize the long-standing nature of these family relationships. With the limited involvement of fathers in many sons' lives, mothers provide the earliest model for parenting. However, mothers' influences do not end with adolescence. Men's bonds with their mothers may become their most consistent lifetime relationship, shaping their adulthood roles as fathers, partners, workers, and caregivers. The relationships are dynamic and complex; as the analyses suggest, there may be negative consequences in mother-son relationships that are close and supportive as well as in those that are distant or nonexistent. If caseworkers promote marital relationships, for example, without also acknowledging and supporting mother-son relationships, paternal involvement may be jeopardized, particularly if paternal grandmothers help to secure men's involvement through care work, advice, and related support.

Finally, these findings suggest that the constraints of local neighborhood are not simply problems in fathers' lives. Men and their mothers faced similar challenges: drug use and dealing, unemployment and underemployment, lack of education, and resulting depression. Moreover, ecological constraints, including gang presence, police patrols, and poverty in general can directly shape capacities in and functions of kin systems over time (Marsiglio, Roy, & Fox, 2005; Roy, 2004, 2006). Social workers who approach these ecological constraints as threats to family relationships may be able to more effectively promote any kind of adult involvement in children's lives.

Policy Implications

There are a range of policy options that would help young African American fathers to gain a foothold in the labor market and, in doing so, contribute to the well-being of their children and

even their own mothers. Pilot projects in career and technical education, school-to-work programs, and career academies, as well as a potential national apprenticeship model, would all benefit such fathers (Edelman, Holzer, & Offner, 2006). Poor jobs could be recrafted through raises in the minimum wage, wage subsidies, and a childless Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC), allowing work to actually “pay” (Edelman et al., 2006).

These recommendations, and other recent reports on poor Black fathers (Mincy, 2006) tend to focus policies on individual fathers and to ignore family contexts for secure paternal involvement. Few social policies promote closer adult–youth relationships among low-income African American young men. Such policies would be critical for men who are embedded in and turn to kin networks as they transition into parenthood and through fragile relationships and short-lived jobs. Intergenerational programs could capitalize on family strengths and bolster interfamily support options (Barnes, 2001) for child care or material assistance.

The participation of the aging mothers of disadvantaged men becomes even more central for policy makers concerned with paternity establishment and child support programs, as well as re-entry guidelines for incarcerated fathers. Innovative social policies that offer long-term investments in intergenerational relationships would enhance the abilities of both mothers and sons to help each other through difficult challenges. For example, community youth systems, such as Youth Opportunity or Harlem Child Zone (Edelman et al., 2006), could offer a range of intergenerational parenting courses for fathers who live in their mothers’ households. In effect, the alternative—separation of men from involvement with their children through lack of jobs or incarceration—may place greater strain on all family members, including paternal grandmothers, who become the last available option for caregiving in stressed families.

Many low-income fathers have little to contribute financially to their children, which makes any social capital they can provide even more valuable. In this way, social policy initiatives should recognize the place of paternal grandmothers as central social capital links for low-income fathers and their children. Instead of punitive measures that force young teen mothers to live with their own mothers in order to receive assistance, programs can provide financial or material incentives for the consistent involvement of maternal and paternal grandmothers in the lives of co-parents and grandchildren. Men’s mothers may confirm and legitimize men’s paternity status. Caregiving and close relations with paternal grandmothers also may contribute to children’s well-being and sense of belonging to a family legacy (Roy and Burton, 2007). Perhaps most significantly, paternal grandmothers may be key facilitators of men’s involvement with a child or multiple children when fathers attempt to “play the pivot point” and bring together children in different households.

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