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Working With Urban, African American Fathers: The Importance of Service Provision, Joining, Accountability, the Father-Child Relationship, and Couples Work

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Working With Urban, African American Fathers: The Importance of Service Provision, Joining, Accountability, the Father–Child Relationship, and Couples Work

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Urban, African American fathers have been a difficult population for social workers and other helping professionals to effectively serve. This article, based on interviews with front-line African American service professionals at a father-focused program, who also participated in writing this article, provides information about and suggestions for working with young fathers. Providing father-friendly service, joining with fathers, holding them accountable for their behavior, and addressing their relationship with their child and the mother of their child through couples work are suggested, along with other interventions.

KEYWORDS *African American fathers, fathers, urban African Americans*

For social workers and other helping professionals, some populations have historically been harder to reach than others. Such difficulties are frequently the result of a combination of factors ranging from structural impediments (e.g., location of services, language match between provider and family, history of service provision to that population) to professionals' understanding of the population (see, e.g., Johnson, 2010b). This article, though acknowledging

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the structural impediments, attempts to increase family social workers' understanding of one historically underserved and misunderstood population, urban, African American fathers.

The difficulty of engaging and serving this population, particularly young fathers, is well documented (Jones, 2006). Their need for services often begins at an early age. Homicide is the leading cause of death among African American male teenagers (Kunjufu, 2001). African American males are more apt to be involved in the child welfare system and to "age out" of the system without being adopted or reunited with their parents (Harvey & Hill, 2004). African American males in their twenties are much more likely to be incarcerated than White or Hispanic males of the same age (Lewis, 2010). Such challenges would make it problematic for any man with a similar background to readily engage with social service delivery systems. Men's histories may make it difficult for them to participate in programs such as job training, parent education, and couples relationship building that are designed to help them maximize their potential. This article, based on interviews with front-line workers, spells out challenges and offers suggestions for providing services to this population so their potential can be realized.

LITERATURE REVIEW

For African American fathers in an urban area, race, poverty, gender, and the fathering role are intertwined. According to Jordan-Zachery (2007), "The burdens of slavery and racism led African-Americans to unique definitions of marriage, family and parental responsibility. Racial and gender stereotyping produces marked inequalities in economic resources and social status across groups" (p. 88). Racism, limited job opportunities, and assumptions about minority men can combine to make economic as well as interpersonal success difficult. For years, according to the National Urban League (2004), African American men were the most likely group of men to be unemployed. In 2007, the unemployment rate among Black men in Baltimore was almost twice as great as among the general population (Jordan-Zachery, 2007). In 2009 and 2010, when the interviews for the current study took place, the job market was worse (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2011). Unemployment can take a toll on romantic and parenting relationships.

Help seeking and the ability to be helped are not only influenced by race, but also by gender. Men of all races are socialized to be the breadwinner in the family (Rasheed & Rasheed, 1999) and when their ability to earn an income is placed at risk, their self-esteem can decline. Men's socialization makes it difficult to ask for help (Lindsey, 2010). Men do not want to appear weak; it is not "macho" (Greif, Finney, Greene-Joyner, Minor, & Stitt, 2007; Jones, 2006). Help seeking is connected to vulnerability (Addis & Mahalik,

2003), something that may be dangerous for men to display (U.S. Department of Justice, 2009). Compared to women, sitting still and engaging in conversation can be difficult for men, given their higher rates of attention deficit disorder (Derks, Dolan, Hudziak, Neale, & Boomsma, 2007). With these characteristics, a treatment process whereby a man accepts a helping relationship, sits still for a discussion, listens, and provides a response that is meaningful to him can be elusive.

Fathers seeking involvement in their children's lives may run into personal, social, and professional roadblocks. They are often perceived, regardless of race, as being ineffective parents and peripheral to the emotional life of the family (Rasheed & Rasheed, 1999). Fathers may be stereotyped as harsh disciplinarians on the one hand or soft and acting like "Disneyland dads" on the other. Problems in terms of their economic viability and their parenting abilities can persist if they enter fatherhood at too young an age (Pears, Pierce, Kim, Capaldi, & Owen, 2005). Fathers often lose contact with their children after the breakup of the parenting relationship, leaving children to be raised by single mothers in increasing numbers (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2008). Furthering the disrespect that fathers receive, child welfare workers have been found to favor mothers over fathers when it comes to placement options (Franck, 2001).

Father presence has a meaningful influence on childhood development. In African American families, a supportive father-child role has been found to enhance development in very young children (Kelley, Smith, Green, Berndt, & Rogers, 1998). Fathers' involvement has also been tied to children's better behavior, stronger cognitive skills (Black, Dubowitz, & Starr, 1999), and to more responsible sexual behavior during the teen years (Dittus, Jacard, & Gordon, 1997). Academically successful African American men have been significantly aided by their fathers' involvement when they assist in monitoring school work and social relations (Hrabowski, Maton, & Greif, 1998). Thus, providing better services to these fathers can reap many benefits.

METHOD

Study Sample

Six front-line employees (participants) of the Center for Urban Families (CFUF) were interviewed individually for up to 90 minutes to gain the participants' practice wisdom in engaging and serving young fathers and their families. They are African American and have been working with African American men for between 5 and 25 years. They range in age from their twenties to their fifties and have high school, undergraduate, and graduate degrees in human services management, law, and social work. Some have personal histories similar to the fathers with whom they are working. The CFUF was founded more than a decade ago to provide parenting services

for fathers and workforce development services to low-income men and women. Since its inception, CFUF has initiated a three-week job training program, STRIVE Baltimore, the Baltimore Responsible Fatherhood Project, and a couples component. Couples services focus on developing communication, conflict resolution, parenting, life management skills, career and family planning, and financial literacy. Recently, CFUF has provided technical assistance to governmental agencies and community and faith-based organizations across the nation. CFUF's organizational philosophy, Family Stability and Economic Success (FSES), is based on setting high expectations for clients regarding work ethic, education, employment, and training. Clients are also held to a high standard of personal behavior with family and community.

Interview Guide

An interview guide, devised by the first author and one of the participants, was approved by a university's Institutional Review Board. The participants were asked these questions during the interviews: "What should social workers and other professionals know about working with these fathers?" "To what extent are these themes part of your work: religion; work; being a father to sons or daughters; the father's relationship with his own father, mother, or grandparents; the view of women; the father's relationship with agencies such as child welfare, justice, schools, and substance abuse organizations?" "Are there specific ways that they view 'the system' that affect service?" "To what extent are these themes relevant to all low-income fathers?" "How important is the match between the practitioner and the father in terms of: race; gender; class; religion; and age?"

Other research has used methods similar to those undertaken for this article. O'Donnell, Johnson, D'Aunno, and Thornton (2005) interviewed child welfare workers to learn their perceptions of working with fathers. Greif and Bowers (2007) used participatory research methods (e.g., Nelson, Ochoka, Griffin, & Lord, 1998) whereby respondents who were interviewed about their experiences with kidnapping could read and change what was written about them before it was published. Allowing participants to be coauthors combines methodologies. Reliability of the data is further established by having someone other than the participants codesign the original questions and take the lead in constructing meaning from the interview data, a form of cross-checking the data (Padgett, 2008).

Padgett (2008) noted one limitation of this research approach; "community-based participatory research (CBPR) requires adjusting to a new ethos of sharing control with community members" (p. 193). Such sharing may result in a loss of methodological rigor and in reaching conclusions that are not empirically based. In addition, having the interview data emanate from one organization opens up the possibility for a "group think," resulting in an unintended bias on the part of the participant sample.

Data Analysis

Each individual interview was coded for common themes. Following the interviews, a draft of an article with the themes was presented to the participants for validation and clarification during a group interview lasting 90 minutes. As a group, the participants discussed their impressions of the population they served. The new information gained at this reflective stage was added to the themes and the participants had another chance to consider a draft of this article. Each participant approved this final version and participated in rewriting it. By interviewing experienced practitioners and having them serve as coauthors, it was hoped that a population that is seldom heard from, those on the front lines, would provide new insight and concrete advice for reaching a population that is in need of family-based services.

KEY FINDINGS FROM THE INTERVIEWS

The results of the interviews can be classified into two broad categories: (1) responses that describe the situations of the fathers, that is, what a practitioner should know about the fathers, and (2) suggestions for how to work with fathers.

The Situations of the Fathers

Four major areas emerged that social workers and others should know about when the fathers arrive for service.

FEW SERVICES EXIST SPECIFICALLY FOR AFRICAN AMERICAN FATHERS

Fathers feel social services are established to serve women and children and are not father friendly. With few welcoming access points, fathers often come in through a “punitive” door, different from women’s points of entry. For example, if a young woman and man become pregnant, she seeks financial aid and health assistance; he feels there is no place for him to go. She will get financial assistance and prenatal care and he will be saddled with debt. His entry into the service system is around money and accountability. Sometimes a father is approached at the hospital or by an agency early into his parenthood and asked to release his custody rights to the child. He often does not read what he signs and then finds he is either committed to child support or closed out of his child’s life. These interactions reenforce fathers’ feelings about agencies not being father friendly. Many fathers believe that society is racist and agencies reflect a level of racism in dealing with them.

MEN'S PRESENTATION

To survive in their neighborhoods, fathers must develop a "tough guy" demeanor. One participant said, "You need a poker face on the street to show toughness. If I open up to you, I am showing weakness and you can take advantage of that." That demeanor is not dropped when fathers are talking to a nurse, a social worker, or a judge. Drugs and alcohol are often used as a survival technique to cope. Fathers may feel hopeless or desperate and may sell drugs to establish a more financially stable lifestyle. Violent behaviors are often related to their lifestyles. Lead poisoning histories may affect the way fathers present themselves, their ability to process information, and to understand the nuances of the contexts in which they live.

FATHERS AND THEIR CHILDREN

Although the stereotype is that fathers do not care about their children, all of the participants paint a different picture.

We see adult men here cry because they have no relationship with their children. Some have too many kids with too many moms and they cannot manage them with little income. How do they handle it? They ignore it. Even with a desire for change, what is the pathway?

Fathers are often teenagers who had no contact with their own fathers. Visiting their children is painful because it brings up their own loss. To cope with it, they stay away. Another participant stated, "Fathers want to be part of their children's lives but a lot of relationships are short-term and there are no strong bonds or commitment levels." This theme reappeared during the group interview. "These young men are in such need of fathering themselves," one participant said, "that it drives everything they do. The absence of the father is always there in their life." "Fathers also come to believe that if they cannot bring cash when they see their child, they should not come at all," stated another participant, who added it was hard to stay involved if that is how you are seen and how your father was seen.

The father's relationship with his own parents is central to understanding his parenting. One participant said, "A lot of guys hate their fathers and, when they say that, we see it as a cry for help as they didn't know their father." One spoke about the substitutes that the fathers seek for absent fathers. "With father absence, we have children who have no contact with their fathers, aren't recognized by their fathers, and can't manage and process their feelings. These feelings do not go away in adolescence. The gang family may replace the other family."

FATHERS AND WOMEN

Although fathers are often disparaged, mothers and grandmothers are revered, even if they have struggles with drugs. A cycle is set up, according to one participant, where men respect their mothers, devalue their fathers, and come to believe that they, too, have little worth when it comes to being a parent. The father's relationship with the mother of his child is a central theme. Fathers want access to children and have to work with the mother to get contact. When the father does not have cash or other forms of support, the mother may block access. Many fathers did not have significant relationships with the mothers before they became pregnant and have no foundation now on which to build a relationship. If they did have a relationship, it may have been built on a dysfunctional foundation. They experience the "Baby Mama drama" every time they want to visit their child. This term refers to the number of hoops men feel they have to jump through just for visitation. As one participant said,

What marriage did they ever see growing up? They are missing rudiments of relationships from their own parents. They get in and out of relationships and don't know about commitment and monogamy. Some set standards at marriage for commitment to the women. But most men say they can't stay faithful. What is a healthy relationship to them? Everyone screams; yelling is normal and yelling keeps the men from hitting.

Suggestions for How to Work With Fathers

Five major areas emerged that helping professionals should consider when offering services to the fathers.

NEED FOR A RANGE OF SERVICES

Although other specific clinically based interventions should be applied, basic service components need to be provided to address long-standing structural and societal issues that affect the fathers. Fathers need job training, parent education, educational support, and ex-drug abuser support groups. As many agencies (criminal justice, education, substance abuse) with whom fathers have interacted have been punitive, some men believe they have the right to respond antisocially. CFUF offers itself and its services in a more collegial, less adversarial way to sharpen the differences between themselves and other agencies.

JOINING WITH FATHERS AND THE PRACTITIONER ROLE

Participants believe that establishing a relationship is the most important step. Without a relationship, participants are convinced the fathers will

not follow up on referrals and will not attend sessions, whether they are job training-related or focus on interpersonal change. One participant said,

Allow him to get to know you and express himself; let him talk about his views, values, aspirations, and how he feels as a first time dad... Guys get crippled and they learn to cope by shutting down. The worker has to not put pressure on them. You have to gain their trust. Once they know you care, they open up but it is hard to expect them to (given their history).

Participants recommended treating young fathers with respect, empathy, and a nonjudgmental attitude about their past and present behaviors. Getting the father in the door is the first step. Having a yellow pad of paper, writing notes, and filling out forms can be impediments to the relationship. The relationship cannot seem like therapy. Fathers already feel stigmatized, and attending therapy is another form of stigma. They are called program participants and not clients. Therapy cannot be the goal, according to one participant; fathers must be given something tangible. Fathers perceive systems as adversarial to them and not helpful. Outreach and working outside the office setting, including making home visits, is one way to connect. "Home visits help develop relationships."

To do this type of joining, social workers must be comfortable working with men and have worked through his or her issues in advance. The worker should anticipate and be prepared to handle fathers' disclosures of abuse and violence. A feminist agenda should not be pushed, one participant said. Although the worker needs to be able to explain the mother's situation to the father so he can understand what she is dealing with as a single mother, the worker should avoid aligning only with the mother's position.

According to some participants, the worker's race and gender can be a barrier. Some believe that African American men are best suited to work with young African American fathers. Others believe that anyone can form a relationship by seeking common ground. Although matching race and gender may be helpful, matching class may not be. One participant said, "If the person serving them is one paycheck away from them, it won't work. You have to dress like you are successful." In relation to the age of the practitioner, the participants said that some men need a peer and others need a father figure. With religion, a few participants described the difference between a religious orientation and reaching out to the fathers' spiritual side. They work with fathers from different faiths and, similar to Sheafor and Horejsi (2007), try to connect with the father's life force, the "spirit of a man," without placing that work in a religious context.

CHALLENGING THE FATHER TO CHANGE

Once a relationship has been established with the father, he must be challenged to change, a basic social work engagement strategy.

Practitioners need to tap into the person, build trust, get to know him. You need to dig in to help them. Society has been tough on them and they have been tough on themselves by getting into criminal activities. Due to criminal activities they have lost time and are not always in touch with themselves. You have to help them with that.

Another participant said, "As the relationship builds, you can hold the father more accountable. Low income men are looking for an orientation to time and attendance; they need structure. You give and demand respect and must hold them to time expectations." To reach them while challenging them to change, one participant tells fathers,

I am here as an example and as a support system. I must know who he is and who I am; we need to talk to each other without an application (for service) between us. I can say to him, "I know someone who went through that and here is how he handled it."

The need for trust and respect were reiterated in the group meeting, with the caveat that building trust and respecting the father does not mean that the worker has to agree with the father. The FSES philosophy frames the interaction, the father is respected but is still confronted about his behavior and taught specific ways to change his behavior. In addition, the worker has to avoid being caught between helping the father and other service providers' demands. This can be a sensitive balance to strike but is important for the father's well-being.

Safety measures have to be discussed for the father's benefit. If he is in a gang, the father should be confronted about that and taught other ways to deal with violence. Given the complexity of working with gangs, specialized training may be needed (see, e.g., Venkatesh, 1999). The practitioner, in the service of trying to help the father avoid violence, can get caught in it. If the practitioner is wearing the wrong color clothing on home visits, violence can occur because he may be seen as being aligned with a particular gang.

One participant offered words of advice about confronting men.

You have to challenge these men to change; if you are weak in your stance, you will be ignored. They come from a dog-eat-dog world. You need to confront them about their behavior. You have to get them into a position where they are open and are willing to consider change. You have to support them without hand holding. You ask them what they were thinking when they did such and such. You tell them they

have to turn themselves in, get an attorney and deal with this. I will write a letter of support for you and be there for you.

This same participant described going with a father to an agency and making a positive presentation. Dressing well is encouraged, as is speaking nicely and not getting angry if, for example, the receptionist is unresponsive. Personal contacts can be helpful. If the practitioner picks up the phone while the father is there and makes a connection, that concrete assistance can cement the relationship. Role-playing with the fathers about what to expect when they go to agencies is one suggested activity. He added, "Working with them is not always easy. They get easily bored and may not make the connections between what you are doing and what they need. Concrete financial advice is one way in."

This same participant related that anger is an issue in the African American community and the fathers have to learn how to control their anger.

You have to model; guys can't model what they don't see. We are asking men to be men and many have not seen men acting maturely. An African American man cannot be angry; showing anger hurts their cause as it is perceived as a threat.

Working cognitively with the fathers is one way to help them cope in the present and in the future when on their own. One participant advised,

Agencies are not trusted. But we tell them to bring your head above the water. Read what the agency is handing you and figure out how to deal with them. We look at the child support record on the computer and tell them to deal with it.

TREATING THE FATHER-CHILD RELATIONSHIP

Because many of the fathers have few role models for being a good parent, they need specific suggestions about how to fulfill their roles. Most fathers love their children and are hurt by not seeing them. This pain should be acknowledged as, when it is commented upon, the father's role as a caring parent is reinforced. The practitioner needs to bring out the nurturing side of the father so that he can connect positively with his children. Fathers should be encouraged to show love by being consistent and setting appropriate expectations for their child. They should be discouraged from being punitive. They are advised to tell their children they are proud of them and to engage them in sports and other activities. The notion that they can only be a part of their child's life if they provide money needs to be

addressed by encouraging fathers to interact with their children in a variety of ways.

Fathers also need to gain insight into how they were raised. They are asked in workshops if they are satisfied with how their father parented them. They grade themselves as a father. The fathers are told that they have to work through any parenting baggage that prevents them from being a nurturer. Self-reflection is a key part of the clinical work. "They have been carrying the father loss around for a long time and do not see how it affects their parenting," said one participant during the group interview.

Fathers are encouraged to not place any legal dispute between themselves and their children and to try and connect with them. This advice is not meant to circumvent a custody order but rather to not let court-related matters discourage a parenting relationship. The focus is on helping fathers look at what is best for their children and not get trapped in ongoing disputes with the mothers of the children.

Although the African American community has placed a high value on fathers interacting with sons, fathers also play an important role in the lives of daughters. One participant tells young fathers, "Girls are having sex with guys because they have no father in their life. Is that what you want for your daughter?" This same participant said that fathers should "date" their daughters to show them how they should be treated by men in their lives. In this scenario, the father would take the daughter out to breakfast or lunch, open the door for her, and hold her chair when she is seated. This respectful treatment will teach the daughter what she should expect from other men in her life. Fathers are warned that daughters will pick men like them so they need to act in a way with women that will be a role model for what the daughters should seek in a man. Fathers are also encouraged to talk about sex with their daughters in an age-appropriate way and to not shy away from age-appropriate hugging.

TREATING THE FATHER–MOTHER RELATIONSHIP

Just as fathers are asked to reflect on their upbringing in relation to their father, they are asked to connect their relationship with their mother with the relationship they have with the mother of their child. Couples counseling is central to the work whether they are still in a relationship with the mother of the child. The social context often heightens the difficulties between parents: men and women have few role models for how to interact adaptively and women's economic status is often more stable than men's. One participant spoke of the value of female staff at an agency when working with a couple so the practitioner team can role model how couples can negotiate issues. Women often receive financial and other support from agencies and have a brighter future with job training and education than men (e.g., Roberts, 2010). Furthering the role imbalance, some men are accustomed

to being taken care of by their mothers and are looking for the same caretaking by the mother of their child. These power differentials can affect couple counseling.

According to one participant, the father's view of women changes depending on who she is. Many men lose respect for women as soon as they have sex with them but have great admiration for their daughters, sisters, and mothers. When issues arise with their partners, they do not work them out, as they have learned to cope by withdrawing and not negotiating. Domestic violence characterizes some relationships. One participant advised,

Practitioners need to look at the context in which domestic violence occurs before deciding what is okay and what behaviors need to change. Anger can be hard for men to process. Part of what we do in couples work is explain that women can't walk away from their children as easily as men can. It is important to validate for men that women are struggling with many of the same things.

Alcohol can lead to violence and must be treated. Couples have to compromise, learning how to disagree while seeing each other's side.

As to gender roles, one participant stated, "It is okay to be a Mr. Mom and be at home but you also have to be a breadwinner; that is part of manhood." For this participant, the roles are intertwined. The community needs to acknowledge the importance of men being breadwinners for their own self-esteem and for the benefit of the family. Success can be found from getting assistance with parenting. One father in the program became a better father, even though he remained caught up in the street life. His ex-wife allowed him access to his child because of his good parenting behavior; she overlooked, for the child's benefit, the street activities in which he was engaged.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

This article is an attempt to learn from front-line workers with many years of experience how social workers may more effectively serve young, African American fathers and their families. These workers' suggestions can pave the way for reconsidering how services and counseling are offered. Father-friendly service environments recognizing how fathers present themselves can set the stage for outreach. Understanding that fathers care about their children but do not know how to connect with them or interact with the women in their lives will further set the stage for relationship building. With offering services, a focus on joining and giving specific advice on how to interact with the mother and the child are key.

One way to consider family-based interventions is through the lens of existing family therapy models applied with cultural sensitivity. For example, Bowen Family Systems, with its focus on intergenerational patterns (Nichols, 2010), has been used in the past with African American families. Asking the father to draw a genogram would help him explore his relationship with his own father as well as other members of his extended family, but it should not be drawn too quickly, as African Americans are often loathe to share too much information too soon (e.g., Boyd-Franklin, 2003). Patterns of connection between his past relations with his father and his relationships with his own children should be made. By sharpening the focus on these relationships rather than the broader family, greater attention can be paid to them. Structural Family Therapy, with its emphasis on boundaries (Nichols, 2010), would also appear to be an apt approach to use when alliances are in danger of shifting between the parents and the children. By explaining how family boundaries can be considered, suggestions can be made that can shed light, for example, on parental hierarchy, whether the parents are together or separate.

The findings from the interviews are consistent with others writing about African American males. Johnson (2010a) notes the distrust that African-American men feel when seeking services and Lindsey (2010) notes the racism African American youth perceive and their lack of willingness to engage in treatment in general, especially if stereotyped. Dallas and Kavanaugh (2010) found that fathers are often unprepared for fatherhood because of a lack of connection with their own fathers. Despite this, and prevailing stereotypes of paternal disinterest, many show great concern for their children and wish to provide financially for them, as do the fathers described in this research. Bennett and Olugbala (2010) described similar coping strategies, including avoidance, acting out, and illegal behaviors to appear more masculine. They also suggest interventions be culturally sensitive.

Other agencies can apply CFUF's FSES philosophy of setting high standards and holding fathers accountable for their behavior. It requires dedication to the notions of joining with fathers, gaining their trust, advocating for them with other agencies, and holding them accountable for their behavior in job training, educational endeavors, parenting, and relationship with their partner. When services are offered, they must be couched in realistic, strengths-based terms. Underserved populations are understandably reluctant to engage. By focusing on these fathers' love for their children, they can be connected to concrete services like job training, as well as to social workers and others that can help them sort through their family relationships. Without current knowledge of this or any other population, helping professionals may rely on out-of-date impressions and beliefs. The authors are hopeful that this information can assist aspiring helping professionals and service providers keep current and make a difference in the lives of fathers, their children, and their communities. As one participant said, "You have to believe you can help."

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