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## Perceptions, Identities, and Involvement: Black Fathers' Perspectives on Aspects of Fatherhood

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PERCEPTIONS, IDENTITIES, AND INVOLVEMENT: BLACK FATHERS'  
PERSPECTIVES ON ASPECTS OF FATHERHOOD

By

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I dedicate this project to Black fathers. Your lives and your roles as fathers' matter. I hope this project empowers you on your fatherhood journey. To my father, thank you for your invaluable presence in my life. You are the inspiration for my research.

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## **ABSTRACT**

Father involvement is critical for youth's development across their lifespan (Barton, Kogan, Cho, & Brown, 2015; Doyle, Clark Goings, Cryer-Coupet, Lombe, Stephens, & Nebbitt, 2017; Passley, Gerring, & Gerson, 2007). Thus, researchers indicate the importance of understanding factors that impact father's involvement. A father's perception of fatherhood and father's identities are two factors that significantly influence father involvement. Additionally, several contextual factors have been highlighted in prior research as impactful of father involvement. However, initial research on fatherhood was conducted primarily with White fathers, therefore informing fatherhood norms based on the experiences of White men. Scholars have advocated more research on fathers of color and an emergence of literature on Black fathers has surfaced. This study aimed to contribute to the fatherhood literature by understanding Black fathers' experiences in constructing their perception of fatherhood and developing their father identities. Of extant literature few studies have sought to understand how father perceptions, identity, and involvement inform each other and change over time. Thus, this study sought to address this gap in the literature. Additionally, 48% of Black children are raised in single-parent homes (United States Census Bureau, 2018). This study aimed to gain insight on fathers from various family of origins experiences on constructing their perceptions, identities, and involvement. A phenomenological qualitative design was utilized to address the aims of this study. Participants in this study included 30 Black fathers who completed semi-structured focus groups. Qualitative results revealed numerous themes encompassing fathers' perceptions, identities, and involvement. Implications for clinicians, researchers, and program developers are discussed.



# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

Prior literature suggests that Black fathers' perceptions and identities as fathers have significant impacts on father involvement (Bright & Williams, 1996; Doherty, Kouneski, & Erickson, 1998; Wilson, Henriksen Jr., Bustamante, & Irby, 2016). However, few researchers have sought to understand these constructs collectively, and the influence of contextual factors in shaping fathers' perceptions, identity, and involvement over time, particularly among Black fathers. Given the established link between father involvement and positive child well-being (Barton, Kogan, Cho, & Brown, 2015; Doyle, Clark Goings, Cryer-Coupet, Lombe, Stephens, & Nebbitt, 2017; Passley, Gerring, & Gerson, 2007), coupled with the empirical need for more research on Black fathers (Connor & White, 2007; Hall, Livingston, Henderson, Fisher, & Hines, 2007), it is important to gain a better understanding of fatherhood, father identity, and father involvement of Black fathers. This study seeks to bridge this gap in literature.

### **Background**

Research on fatherhood has changed dramatically over the last four decades (Lamb, 2000). Fatherhood research in the past was primarily comprised of studies examining fathers' roles as economic providers, moral guides, nurturers, and sex-role models (Marsiglio, 1993) and assessing the concept of fatherlessness (Earl & Lohman, 1978). Although fathers were primarily conceptualized as the protectors and economic providers for their families, perceptions of fathers have evolved over time to encompass the multifaceted nature of fathering (Perry, Harmon, & Leeper, 2012). Much of the research on fathers' roles and perceptions, however, has been conducted with White fathers. Furthermore, most of the father involvement research is quantitative. Less is known about how Black fathers conceptualize fatherhood and how their

father identities are constructed. Qualitative research is needed to capture the experiences of Black fathers. Additionally, Black fathers have been subjected to negative cultural images in early research on fatherhood (Marsiglio, 1993; McAdoo, 1986). Understanding how Black fathers perceive fatherhood and how their perceptions inform their father identity and involvement is critical for advancement of the literature.

Black fathers have often been portrayed as “deadbeat dads” or inadequate financial providers in research and the media, producing a negative portrayal of Black fatherhood and identity (Abdill, 2018; Hunter & Davis, 1994; Marsiglio, 1993). Prior to the 1980s, research on Black fathers was centered on the absence of Black fathers opposed to their presence (Cazenave, 1979; Reynolds, 2009). Black fathers have been depicted in a pathologizing nature that enhances negative stereotypes of them. Evaluations of Black fathers have been provided based on Eurocentric norms. Moreover, the prevalent use of deficit and matriarchal models that emasculate Black fathers contributed to distorted images of Black fathers (Cochran, 1997). These negative depictions are not limited to Black fathers, rather they encompass the unfavorable views of Black families in general (Moynihan, 1965).

Fatherhood scholars have sought to shift the narrative of Black fathers to be more representative in nature (Abdill, 2018; Cochran, 1997; Coles & Green, 2010; Connor & White, 2006; Connor et al., 2007). However, current fatherhood literature emphasizes the need for more adequate studies of Black fathers that encompass how father involvement is impacted by sociodemographic context (Castillo, Welch, & Sarver, 2011; Edin & Nelson, 2013). Accompanied with sociodemographic context, sociohistorical factors and structural barriers (e.g., slavery, Jim Crow laws, mass incarceration, employment inequalities) have impacted the role of Black men in Black families (Goodman, 2018; Hattery & Smith, 2014; King, Harris, & Heard,

2004). Therefore, research on Black fathers' views fatherhood and their roles, within the context of aforementioned factors, is needed to embody scholar's suggestions for comprehensive understanding of Black fatherhood. Additionally, Black fatherhood is often conceptualized as an aspect of manhood (Morrell & Richter, 2006), however this study sought to extrapolate these constructs because fulfillment of manhood and fatherhood perceptions can entail different processes. Furthermore, the prominent study of matriarchy in Black families, while relevant because of the structure of many Black families, further perpetuates the perception of absent Black fathers and minimizes their role in Black families. This is important because research indicates that fathers' beliefs about fathering and their roles in their children's lives are salient constructs that influence their involvement (Bright et al., 1996; Coles, 2002; Diemer, 2002; Doherty et al., 1998). Thus, studies seeking to understand Black fathers' perceptions of fathering and their father identity are imperative for understanding Black fathers' experiences with fatherhood and for the improvement of social policies and programs that impact Black fathers and families (Hall et al., 2007). Culturally appropriate frameworks and culturally sensitive research approaches also are needed to provide representative depictions of Black fathers.

Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (1994) was used as a guide for understanding how contextual factors influence fathers' perceptions, identity construction, and involvement with their children. Understanding these fatherhood constructs by exploring proximal processes which occur within the 5 ecological systems allowed for an in-depth understanding of both immediate (e.g., family of origin, relationships with child's mother) and structural systems (e.g., culture, socioeconomic status, religion) that shape perceptions, identity, and father involvement. Furthermore, this theory accounts for the changes over time which allowed for the primary investigator (PI) to explore the evolution of fathers' perceptions, identity

construction, and involvement through various sociohistorical time periods and climates (Bronfenbrenner, 1994).

## **Purpose**

Fatherhood more so than motherhood is shaped by contextual factors (Doherty et al., 1998; Marsiglio, 1993). Prior literature establishes that contextual factors such as family of origin, religion, culture, relationship with the mother of their child, incarceration, and social class impact aspects of fathering (Castillo et al., 2011; Coates & Phares, 2014; Leath, 2017; Perry & Bright, 2012; Varga & Gee, 2017; Wilson et al., 2016). Thus, this study aimed to contribute to fatherhood literature by assessing how fathers perceive that their perceptions of fatherhood, father identity, and involvement with their children are shaped by various contextual factors. A purpose was to gain in-depth knowledge of the meaning fathers ascribe to fatherhood, father identity, father involvement, and how these constructs influence each other over time. Additionally, almost 50% of Black children are raised in single-mother homes (United States Census Bureau, 2018); therefore, an aim of this study was to learn if there are differences and similarities in fathers' perceptions of fatherhood, identity construction, and father involvement among fathers who grew up in single-parent households versus two-parent households. An underlying purpose of this study was to contribute to Black fatherhood literature and programs aimed to promote Black fatherhood by attaining descriptive results that can inform future research and fatherhood programs. Scholars indicate that fatherhood programs can best serve Black fathers by developing programs that are catered specifically for Black fathers and hosting programs in culturally relevant spaces (Connor & White, 2011; Lee, Hoffman, & Harris, 2016; Smith, Tandon, Bair-Merritt, & Hanson, 2015). This study included a diverse sample to build off of previous literature that has focused on specific sub-populations of Black fathers (e.g.,

nonresidential fathers, low-income fathers). This study aimed to build upon existing research (Billingsley, 1992; Connor et al., 2006; McAdoo, 1993) by using ecological frameworks to understand how father's perceptions, identities, and involvement are influenced by multiple systems. Therefore, it is beneficial to continue to understand how fathers perceive aspects of fatherhood in order to tailor programs to fathers and provide relevant content to aid them on their fathering journey. Furthermore, findings from this study can provide insight to clinicians about how fathers conceptualize themselves. Clinicians could gain insight on how to incorporate and engage Black fathers in family therapy which is vital given the apprehension that Black men have about therapy (Cruz, Pincus, Harman, Reynolds, & Post, 2008). Results could inform clinicians about how fathers perceive their roles and give value to those roles in various family structures, as well as being informed of systemic factors relevant to fathering. In addition to clinicians being able to validate fathers, this study aimed to validate and empower fathers who have to deal with the double consciousness of being Black in our society (Du Bois, 1903) and who are often viewed negatively.

## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW

Fathers presence in their children's lives is invaluable. Father involvement impacts children's development and well-being (Barton et al., 2015; Doyle et al., 2017; Passley et al., 2007). Furthermore, father involvement has been associated with positive educational, behavioral, and social outcomes (Alleyne-Green, Grinnell-Davis, Clark, & Cryer-Coupet, 2015; Baker, 2014; Black, Dubowitz, & Starr Jr., 1999; Cooper, 2009; Coley, 2003; Curtis, Grinnell-Davis, & Alleyne-Green, 2017). To advance fatherhood literature, scholars should seek to understand father's perspectives on various fathering constructs that shape and influence their involvement. Prior research indicates that father's perceptions of fatherhood and father identity influence their involvement (Bright et al., 1996; Doherty et al., 1998; Wilson et al., 2016). However, much of the early research is quantitative and has been conducted with White fathers. Scholars advocate for more research on how Black fathers conceptualize fatherhood (Connor et al., 2007) to include their identities, and involvement which is imperative for understanding of Black fathers' experiences. This study aimed to build upon existent Black fatherhood literature through a qualitative study design. In addition to exploring father perceptions, identities, and involvement, qualitative consideration of cultural factors that influence those constructs is necessary in order to gain comprehensive understandings of the nuances involved with fathering. Prior scholarly works addressing fatherhood in the Black community have been able to provide rich descriptions of aspects of fatherhood through the use of qualitative methodology, thus supporting the use of a qualitative study design for this study. Additionally, this study contributes to the literature by addressing limitations in sample (e.g., focus on low-income, nonresidential,

inner-city, unmarried fathers), and therefore aimed to gain in-depth insights from a diverse sample of fathers.

Among Black families, 48% of children are raised in single parent homes (U.S. Census Bureau, 2018). One common assumption associated with single parent households is that Black fathers are not involved with their children because they do not share the same residence (Doyle et al., 2015). The emphasis of the findings from the fatherless studies were that Black men are absent and thus children being raised by Black women experience adverse child outcomes (Connor et al., 2007). From this, birthed an image of Black fathers as “deadbeats” or inadequate. These negative images have been translated from research to media, depicting Black fathers negatively (Edin et al., 2013; Hunter et al., 1994). This is problematic for Black fathers and families given that research informing these images, policies, and programs were conducted from a cultural deficit approach (Cochran, 1997; Hall et al., 2007). Research utilizing a cultural deficit framework does not account for contextual factors that impact Black fathers and their involvement. Therefore, researchers have suggested the importance of utilizing culturally informed frameworks. Thus, this study aimed to utilize one to explore how father’s perceptions, identity construction, and involvement are influenced by contextual factors (e.g., family relationships, socioeconomic status, incarceration, culture, historical events, social climate).

### **Fatherhood**

The concept of fatherhood is broadening to include the multifaceted nature of fathering. Fathering has historically been conceptualized as a father’s ability to provide economic stability for their families (Marsiglio, 1993; Perry et al., 2012). Their ability to be an economic provider was what solidified and represented involvement with their children. This conceptualization of fathers, their role, and their involvement was primarily representative and constructed from

studies of middle-class White men. This conceptualization does not account for sociohistorical and structural factors that impact fathers of color (e.g., Black fathers). Researchers are calling for the study of Black fathers within a social climate that is urging for the involvement of fathers through social policies (e.g., child support and welfare) and responsible fatherhood programs based on responsible fatherhood frameworks (e.g., Doherty et al., 1998). However, responsible fatherhood is subjective to fathers' perceptions and can change based on sociohistorical contexts. Therefore, studies are needed to build upon previous literature to continue to increase our understanding of how Black fathers perceive fatherhood, how they construct father identities, and how their perceptions and identity influence their involvement. Prior literature has examined these constructs separately, but limited studies have sought to understand how these constructs are interrelated in addition to studying the evolving nature of these constructs. Utilizing qualitative methodology allows for in-depth understanding of fathers' experiences with fatherhood (e.g., views of fatherhood, identity construction, and involvement).

### **Father Perceptions, Identity, and Involvement**

Black fathers' perceptions and father identity significantly influence their involvement with their children (Doherty et al., 1998; Hammond, Caldwell, Brooks, & Bell, 2011; Julion, Gross, Barclay-McLaughlin, & Fogg, 2007). A few researchers have explored fathers' perceptions of fatherhood with the purpose of understanding fathers' motivations for parenting (Coles, 2002; Hammond et al., 2011). For instance, Coles (2002) studied single Black fathers, exploring their motivation for choosing to parent-full time and gain custody of their children. With a sample of 10 fathers, results suggested that fathers' perceptions of fathering were a primary motivator preceding their choice to parent their children. Fathers indicated that they had a duty to raise and provide for their children. Additionally, fathers reflected on their family of



origin relationships and referenced their relationship with their fathers as a guide for them in the process of parenting. Results were important in developing a new narrative about Black fathers; however, the study was conducted with a specific sample of Black fathers (i.e., single-parent fathers with full custody of their children). Furthermore, results of Coles' study do not speak to how perceptions are constructed or shaped by father's identity or involvement. This is important because research suggests perceptions are important to understand involvement. The current study aimed to build upon Coles (2002) work.

Julion and colleagues (2007) provided evidence of fathers' perceptions influencing their involvement in their study with Black fathers. They sought to understand fathers' perceptions of what an involved father entailed. Fathers in their study perceived that their involvement expanded beyond financial involvement to include engagement in multiple father roles (e.g., teacher, caretaker). Findings also indicated that fathers' perceptions shaped their involvement as evidenced by fathers engaging in activities with their children that were representative of their perceptions. For example, fathers who perceived that fatherhood included being a nurturer tended to be emotionally engaged with their children and showed physical affection. Julion and colleagues' (2007) study, however, was limited to nonresidential fathers. Thus, more research is needed to explore fathers' perceptions of fathering to include their identity and involvement with a diverse sample of Black fathers. This current study aimed to help fill this gap.

Another study conducted by Beaton and colleagues (2003) found that fathers' perceptions of fathering were influenced by family relationships (e.g., family of origin, relationship with mother of child). Additionally, their study found that fathers' beliefs about their father identity were significantly associated with their family relationships and their family's perceptions of what their father identity should be. Findings from their study highlighted the importance of

contextual factors, such as family of origin and mother-father relationship quality, in the study of fathers' perceptions of fathering and how fathers' identities are constructed. Although their findings were significant, this quantitative study was conducted with a majority White sample and did not include other contextual factors that are important to different racial groups of fathers, such as socioeconomic status or culture. Qualitative research would be appropriate for providing context for these quantitative findings and for understanding Black fathers' perceptions and the contextual factors that influence their perceptions.

Taken together, findings from these studies suggest that fathers' perceptions are influenced by their relationships with their own fathers and that fathers believe fatherhood encompasses more than being a financial provider (Beaton, Doherty, & Rueter, 2003; Coles, 2002; Julion et al., 2007). However, the limited research on Black father perceptions has been conducted primarily with non-resident fathers. This is understandable given the rates of Black children growing up in single mother headed households, however, it does provide a need to determine if there are differences in father's perceptions of fathering among fathers from different family of origins.

Within the father identity research, much of it has been conducted in terms of exploring masculinity and exploring the provider role in relation to masculine principles (Cazenave, 1979). Diemer (2002) explored the construction of the provider role among 7 Black men and found that the ability to provide was a central theme among all participants. This study contributed to the literature because instead of focusing on how Black men lacked provider attributes, the researcher gave voice to participants who were able to articulate how they used external resources (e.g., educational attainment) to circumvent structural barriers that would otherwise limit opportunities for them to become economic providers. Similarly, the current study aimed to

elevate the voices of Black fathers and empower them. Additionally, this study builded upon prior literature by unearthing various father identities opposed to fostering a study around a specific identity (e.g., breadwinner or role model).

Few studies have focused on father identity specifically, and how Black fathers construct father identities. Of the studies that have examined father identities, findings indicated a common theme: father relationships with their fathers is a significant determinant of father identity (Gordon, Nichter, & Henrikson Jr., 2012; Roy, 2006). Fathers either embodied what they saw their fathers do or aimed to fill emotional voids by being different than their fathers. These studies conveyed the importance of accounting for intergenerational patterns and relationships within Black father identity research. Roy (2006) also suggest that the study of father identity be sensitive to sociohistorical context. Thus, future research should not only examine how fathers construct their identities and the sources that inform their identities, but also how their identities have changed depending on time and context.

There is both political and social emphasis on encouraging father involvement because of their influence on child well-being (Barton et al., 2015; Doyle et al., 2017; Passley et al., 2007). Father's role in enhancing children's educational development and social competence is significant. Numerous studies also have documented the effects of father involvement on youth's academic advancement (Baker, 2014; Black et al., 1999; Cooper, 2009; Curtis et al., 2017; Downer & Mendez, 2005; Ransaw, 2014). Father involvement produces lasting behavioral impacts on children across their lifespan (Alleyne-Green et al., 2015; Barton et al., 2015). Moreover, Black father's presence in their children's lives influences children's psychosocial outcomes (Coley, 2003; Doyle et al., 2017; Passley et al., 2007).

Taken together, it is evident that Black fathers' presence is significant for youth developmental outcomes. The effects of father involvement can be demonstrated across children's life span as indicated by numerous studies of all age ranges (e.g., studies collecting data on preschool age children to studies of adults recounting the impact their father had on their lives). The literature indicates that regardless of the family structure, fathers have an integral role in Black families. Although that role has been subjected to unfair depictions in the media and prior literature, the prominence of their role cannot be denied.

The relationship between Black fathers' involvement and youth outcomes is strong, however, one of the major limitations of this body of quantitative research in this area is that varying aspects of father involvement are often assessed via only mothers' reports. This can be problematic because mothers often report lower levels of involvement compared to fathers (Coley & Morris, 2002). Parenting conflict and father's residence also are contributing factors to discrepancies in mother's and father's reports. More research accounting for father's experiences is needed. However, Black fathers can be a hard population to reach given the history of maltreatment of Black men in research (Cochran, 1997). Thus, qualitative studies may provide the opportunity for researchers to not only gain in-depth perspectives of Black fathers' involvement and how their perceptions of involvement are constructed, but also establish rapport and connect with fathers. As previously mentioned, Black fatherhood scholars have provided rich depictions of Black fatherhood through qualitative methodology, which provides context for quantitative findings. Therefore, the use of a qualitative study design was advantageous for accomplishing the aims of this study.

Future directions to advance the literature on Black fatherhood include understanding how Black fathers perceive fathering and how they construct their identities. Employing

qualitative methodology allowed the researcher to explore and understand how fathers' perceptions and identities are constructed. This study aimed to understand how fathers' involvement with their children is impacted by their perceptions of fatherhood and their identities. Furthermore, this study sought to learn if there are differences in perceptions, identities, and involvement among fathers from different family of origins given the prevalence of family of origin influencing all three constructs in previous studies. Another aim of this study was to understand how fathers' perceptions, construction of identities, and involvement are shaped by contextual factors to include changes overtime. Prior research indicates that there are several contextual factors that impact each of these fathering constructs. Although this study did not examine each of these contextual factors individually, it is imperative that the primary investigator is aware of factors that may influence how father's perceptions, identities, and involvement are constructed and enacted.

### **Contextual Concepts that Impact Black Fathering**

This study sought to contribute to the literature by qualitatively assessing fathers' perceptions of factors that influence their views of fatherhood, father identity, and father involvement. Although it was anticipated that key themes would emerge from the data analyses, extant research points to key contextual factors associated with fatherhood. Those factors are discussed in this section.

**Mother-father relationship quality.** The mother-father relationship is a salient predictor of father involvement. Higher levels of relationship quality are linked with more father involvement (Perry et al., 2012). On the contrary, poor relationship quality is associated with less father involvement (Ryan, Kalil, & Ziol-Guest, 2008). This provides reason for researchers to assess for mother-father relationship quality in Black father studies. Researchers suggest that

relationship quality coupled with the mother-father relationship constructs are important to consider, particularly in co-parenting relationships (Varga et al., 2017). Much of extant research has been quantitative. Qualitative research is needed to understand the nuances of mother-father relationship quality and how that influences fathers' views on fatherhood and their involvement.

Relationship quality impacts fathers of all relational statuses. Mother-father relationship quality has been found to mediate the relationship between residential status and marital status on Black father involvement (Coley & Chase-Lansdale, 1999). This suggests that the mother-father relationship can influence fathers' involvement regardless of whether fathers reside with their children or are married to their children's mother. Perry, Harmon, and Leeper (2012) assert that among unwed fathers, mother-father relationship significantly influences father involvement. Fathers are more involved with their children when they received higher levels of maternal support. Additionally, mothers serve as gatekeepers between father's and children for various reasons across multiple contexts (Ransaw, 2014; Roy & Dyson, 2005). Research demonstrates that gatekeeping impacts how fathers are involved with their children and is often shaped by the mothers' beliefs on what fathers' roles are (McBride, Brown, Bost, Shin, Vaughn, & Korth, 2005). This research highlights the role of mothers on father involvement.

Due to mass incarceration of Black men, several quantitative studies have also examined how the mother-father relationship impacts involvement of fathers with incarceration histories (Coates et al., 2014; McLeod & Tirmazi, 2017; Roy et al., 2005). Fathers are removed from family life when they are incarcerated, and the mother-father relationship is a significant factor that determines how they are re-integrated into the family. Researchers assert that fathers who receive higher levels of support and have a moderate level of mother-father relationship quality are more involved with their children (Coates et al., 2014). McLeod and Tirmazi (2017) found

similar evidence to demonstrate the importance of mother-father relationship among fathers who have been involved in the legal system. They suggested that fathers' degree and extent to which they are engaged with their children are significantly influenced by the co-parenting relationship, supporting prior literature. Fathers have to navigate the process of conflict and support with their children's mothers in order to be involved with their children (Roy et al., 2005).

**Socioeconomic status.** Socioeconomic status has a substantial impact on Black fathers' involvement with their children and their engagement in various father identities. Fathers are often conceptualized as being breadwinners and financial providers for their family (Kinnenberg, 2007). However, due to the employment, education, and wage inequalities that Black fathers face, one must account for SES when studying fatherhood and how sociohistorical factors impact fathers' ability to gain and maintain employment (Hall et al., 2007; Pattern, 2016). Researchers indicate that fathers with higher levels of education are more likely to experience positive engagement with and increased accessibility to their children (Nord, Brimhall, & West, 1997; Ransaw, 2014). Furthermore, previous quantitative studies found that level of income influenced their engagement with their children (Blair, Wenk, & Hardesty, 1994; Castillo, Welch, & Sarver, 2013). Specifically, for Black fathers, education and employment have served as barriers to them fulfilling fatherhood roles (Hall et al., 2007). Hall and colleagues highlighted ecological factors that impact Black fathers as a means of encouraging clinical practitioners to use culturally relevant practices when working with fathers. Economic factors were addressed in-depth to emphasize how Black fathers face significant economic challenges due to systemic barriers that can create difficulty in attaining the provider role that society has ascribed as the essence of fatherhood. Ecological factors addressed by Hall and colleagues suggests the need for studies that seek to understand how Black fathers construct their identities within various economic

contexts that influence how their identities are constructed and their enactment of those identities through involvement. Qualitative research is appropriate for understanding how fathers perceive that their economic context shapes the construction of their identities and how they are involved with their children.

Moreover, policies (e.g., child support) that do not acknowledge the structural barriers impacting Black fathers further inhibit fathers from being able to be involved with their children and engage in father roles. Despite the socioeconomic inequalities that Black fathers contend with, research indicates that Black fathers find methods for circumventing structural barriers that would otherwise limit opportunities for them to become economic providers and engage with their children (Diemer, 2002). The roles of fathers are becoming more diverse in nature to encompass more caretaking roles (Johnson & Young Jr., 2016; King et al., 2004). Goodman (2018) captured the multidimensional nature of fatherhood by redefining the meaning of fatherhood with 10 nonresidential fathers. From Goodman's study fathers indicated that their roles have evolved to be more than an economic provider. Goodman (2018) sought to learn the lived experiences of Black fathers and aimed to reshape the narrative that has long been associated with fathers through use of phenomenology. The current study builds upon the literature and is a contribution to the field by including a diverse group of Black fathers and exploring how fathers' perceptions, identity construction, and involvement are shaped within various contexts.

**Family of origin.** The breadwinner and financial provider roles are heavily associated with fatherhood and saturated within fatherhood literature. Black fathers report that the importance of being a provider is instilled in them from their fathers or social fathers (Gordon et al., 2012; Roy, 2006). Research indicates that fathering practices, beliefs, and identities are



transmitted between generations (i.e., intergenerational fathering; Brown, Kogan, & Kim, 2018). Fathers are informed by their fathers' engagement in various parenting practices and behaviors. Furthermore, Black fathers indicate that their experience with their father or lack thereof motivates them and shapes their perceptions of the father they aspire to be and the type of involvement they desire to have with their children (Gordon et al., 2012, Roy, 2006; Wilson et al., 2016). Intergenerational parenting practices speak to the importance of assessing for family of origin relationships when investigating Black father involvement. Brown and colleagues (2018) conducted a quantitative study with 132 Black fathers that examined the relationship between fathers' relationship with their father and their involvement with their children. They found that higher levels of relationship quality between fathers and their biological fathers was associated with higher levels of father involvement. These results suggest that fathers' relationship with their father influences how fathers are involved with their children. The current study sought to build upon this literature through a qualitative approach that explored father's perceptions of how family of origin and intergenerational transmissions influenced aspects of fatherhood (e.g., perceptions, identities, and involvement). In addition to intergenerational transmissions, Leath (2017) conducted a case study with a Black father to understand the process of intergenerational change. Leath's findings indicated that fathers seek to change generational patterns by being the father that they did not have. This finding is supported by prior literature (Gordon et al., 2012; Roy, 2006; Wilson et al., 2016).

The rates of Black children growing up in single parent homes, coupled with the significance of intergenerational fathering, provide the need for understanding the sources that influence father's perceptions and construction of their identities for fathers whose fathers were not present in their lives. Furthermore, it would be beneficial to understand if there are

differences in fathers' identities and perceptions of fathering among fathers that come from single-parent homes versus two-parent homes. Understanding differences could provide more comprehensive conceptualizations of Black fatherhood among a breadth of fathers.

**Incarceration.** Incarceration is a critical factor that impacts fathering and affects the structure of Black families. Mass incarceration of Black males is a prevalent social issue in America and has garnered the attention of scholars examining Black fatherhood. Black men are overly represented in U.S. prisons (Hattery et al., 2014). There is a 29% chance that at any point in a Black man's life he will experience prison (Miller, Browning, & Spruance, 2001).

Fathers with histories of incarceration are less likely to engage in parenting behaviors than fathers who were never incarcerated (Perry et al., 2012). Children whose fathers have incarceration histories experience significantly worse behavior problems, particularly boys (Perry et al., 2012). However, researchers provide evidence that fathers experience barriers during re-integration with their families that impact their ability to be involved. Fathers are likely to experience difficulty transitioning back into families due to maternal gatekeeping, cutting off ties with their family to minimize pain of separation, or lack of financial contribution due to inability to secure employment (McLeod et al., 2017). Fathers experience inequalities in ability to locate jobs, gain steady income, and receive fair treatment in professional and public spaces (McLeod et al., 2017). Additionally, research examining the impacts of incarceration on Black families indicates the burden placed on mothers and extended kin, as well as the presence of an integrational cycle of prison (Hattery et al., 2014). Children are more likely to be involved with the legal system if their father has been incarcerated, due to the stress and economic hardship that families experience when fathers are removed (Hattery et al., 2014). Despite substantial incarceration rates research provides evidence that Black fathers are involved (Coates et al.,

2014; Roy et al., 2005). However, the extent and degree of involvement is impacted substantially by incarceration history. The high rates of mass incarceration of Black men and intergenerational cycle of legal involvement provide reason to understand how incarceration can serve as a barrier to involvement. Furthermore, it is imperative that we understand how incarceration influences father's perceptions of fatherhood and their father identity, especially upon reintegration with their children.

**Culture.** Culture is relevant when exploring aspects of Black fatherhood because the level and type of involvement and the identities that fathers engage in can be influenced by culture (Dancy Jr. & Wynn-Dancy, 1995; Hofferth, 2003). For example, research has demonstrated that Black fathers are engaged in child rearing practices such as parental monitoring, warmth, control, and responsibility (Hofferth, 2003) compared to White and Hispanic fathers. The rationale for the roles they fulfill include the social and neighborhood contexts that Black children are developing in and the need for Black fathers to engage in parenting practices that prepare and protect their children from unfavorable life experiences. Additionally, researchers demonstrate that religiosity and spirituality are prominent components of Black culture that influence Black fathers and their parenting (Dancy Jr. et al., 1995; Letiecq, 2007). The church is a primary agent of socialization. The church is a space where elders in the community can pass their wisdom and knowledge of Black family values down to younger members. The common transmission of knowledge regarding family roles and values associated with those roles (e.g., intergenerational parenting) occurs within churches and among elders in Black families. Intergenerational parenting can be considered as cultural practice in Black families (Hofferth, 2003). Therefore, we must consider and seek to understand culture and

religion as contextual factors that could influence father's their perceptions, identities, and involvement.

### **Theoretical Framework**

In some qualitative research, such as that conducted for this dissertation, theory is incorporated to inform the qualitative research process (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Integration of theory provides context for the central ideas and concepts of the qualitative study, in addition to guiding the setting in which the study should take place. That said, because the identification of theory is important in guiding research, an ecological perspective guided this study. As such, it is described in this section.

### **Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Theory**

Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory was used as a guiding framework for understanding of father perceptions, identity, and involvement in Black families. There are several key propositions and concepts in the adapted version of Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory that guided the primary investigator in studying the constructs of fatherhood (e.g., father perceptions, identity, and involvement).

The first proposition is that human development occurs through interactions between the developing individual, as they are evolving, and objects, symbols, and other individuals in the environment in closest proximity to them (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). These interactions are complex given the changing nature of individuals and their environments and the exchange of influence between the two over the lifespan. Fathers are continuously developing as they age and gain experience in fathering.

Within this proposition is a key concept--proximal processes. Proximal processes are defined as the consistent interaction between the developing individual and their immediate

environment over time (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). The key premise of proximal process is its enduring nature. An example of this would be fathers' perceptions continually being shaped by their interactions with their parents, children, and partners. Proximal processes can impact developmental outcomes more substantially than environments which could aid in understanding how significant immediate interactions impact fathers in addition to societal norms and structural barriers (i.e., macrosystem factors).

Another key element of Bronfenbrenner's theory is the interconnectedness among systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). This can be conceptualized through the 5 systems of ecological environments. The developing person is central to these environments because their perceptions of their environments have to be considered when examining their development. These systems are comprised of the micro-, meso-, exo-, macro-, and chronosystems. Ecological systems theory posits that one has to understand the context in which someone develops in order to understand that individual. Additionally, emphasis is placed on the interrelatedness of each system and how they influence each other. This study drew upon ecological systems theory to understand the reciprocal nature of fathers' identities and involvement and how they are influenced by their perceptions which are shaped by multiple ecological systems (e.g., family of origin, culture, social policies, relationships with mother of child, incarceration, and occupation; Castillo et al., 2011; Coates et al., 2014; Leath, 2017; Perry et al., 2012; Varga et al., 2017; Wilson et al., 2016). This study gained in-depth perspectives of fathers' identities and how fathers' enactment of their identities is influenced by their perceptions. Enhanced understanding of these concepts allows us to also explore how the development of father perceptions and identity reflect the manner in which they are involved with their children.

The chronosystem signifies change over time which is pertinent for the study of Black fathering as well because it suggests that fathers' perceptions, identities, and involvement shift as the contexts around them change. Ecological theory facilitates exploration of those changes and their impacts on the constructs of interest. Furthermore, ecological theory was appropriate for the study of Black fathers being that this theory posits that we should consider religion, social structures and classes, and ethnicities to further understand cultural and subcultural beliefs, resources, and knowledge (Rosa & Tudge, 2013).

### **Justification of Theoretical Fit - A Cultural Appropriate Approach**

Utilizing Bronfenbrenner's theory (1994) to promote understanding of Black fathering is beneficial for several reasons. The emphasis on the environment that an individual develops in is important to the understanding of father identity, perceptions, and involvement. Exploring the influence of the 5 systems provides opportunity to better understand how multiple environments shape father identity, perceptions, and level of involvement. Coupled with the systems, is the emphasis on proximal processes which are significant interactions occurring between fathers and individuals or symbols in their immediate spaces. A focus on proximal processes can promote our understanding because we can investigate how mother-father relationships, family of origin relationships, and father-child relationships shape fathers' developing identities and perceptions. Additionally, researchers can explore environmental contexts outside of the immediate environments such as social structures and cultural beliefs. Bronfenbrenner's theory helps to explain the relationship between frequent and consistent interactions and environmental systems that influence the constructs of interest. Furthermore, this theory strengthens the study of Black fathering due to the emphasis on context and time. Researchers could gain a deeper

understanding of how father identity, perceptions, and involvement is consistent or changes over time and factor in sociohistorical events that may influence those changes or consistencies.

### **Setting for Study**

Prior researchers suggest that the role of culture is prevalent in the developing of Black fathers (King et al., 2004). Fathers ideas of fatherhood, father identities, and their involvement are shaped by cultural beliefs and experiences. Due to the salience of culture, this study was conducted in two locations that are staples in Black culture. Specifically, this study took place in churches and barbershops. The church serves multiple purposes in the Black community (Brown, 2008). It is a haven, a source of socialization, a place for coping, an institution for education and mentoring. The church is an integral source of support for many African Americans (Bagley & Carroll, 1998; Franklin, Boyd-Franklin, & Draper, 2002; Taylor & Chatters, 1988). Given the significance of the church, the primary investigator (PI) of this study saw fit to include local churches as a location for conducting focus groups. Additionally, being that the church is a source of support, it fits well with the aim to empower Black fathers.

In addition to churches, barbershops are another cultural space where men can have conversations amongst other men. The barbershop provides a space where one can learn and grow with people that look like you and can relate to your experiences (Alexander, 2003). The barbershop fosters connection and kinship; it is a safe cultural space where fathers can be their authentic self. In addition to being a safe space for expression, barbershops also provide accessibility to a diverse group of Black men (Luque, Rivers, Gwede, Kambon, Green, & Meade, 2011). Barbershops have been referenced as the Black man's country club, being that it is one of the few spaces where Black men can congregate and freely express themselves while also participating in a cultural exchange of information about a diverse range of topics (Brawner,

Baker, Stewart, Davis, Cederbaum, & Jemmott, 2013). Thus, this setting was fitting to explore fathering constructs in an element where Black fathers feel comfortable and validated. Hennick (2008) suggests that utilizing culturally relevant spaces enhances focus groups and increases participants' comfort with sharing their experiences.

### **Current Study**

Research provides evidence that fathers are integral figures in children's development across their lifespan. Fathers' presence in their children's lives has been associated with numerous positive outcomes including academic, social, and health domains (Brown, McBride, Shin, & Bost, 2007; Hawkins, Amato, & King, 2007; Jethwani, Mincy, & Klempin, 2014; Knoester, 2003; Sarkadi, Kristiansson, Oberklaid, & Bremberg, 2008). The involvement of fathers is imperative for children's well-being. Early research conceptualized fathers' involvement as being an economic provider. Current fatherhood research has expanded beyond viewing fathers solely as providers, however there is less research specific to Black fathers. This study aimed to build upon the literature by focusing on Black fathers' perceptions, identities, and involvement.

### **Research Questions**

This study sought to address the following research questions:

1. What are fathers' perceptions of fatherhood (e.g., perceptions of roles, identities, and involvement)?
2. How do fathers' perceptions of fatherhood and their father identity influence their father involvement?
3. How do fathers perceive that contextual factors (e.g., family of origin, religion, culture) inform their perceptions, identities, and involvement?



4. To what extent are there differences in perceptions, identities, and involvement among fathers from different family of origins?

Findings from this study can provide insight for clinicians on how to incorporate and engage Black fathers in family therapy which is of key importance given that engagement of Black men and fathers in therapy can be challenging (Cruz et al., 2008). Current programs for Black fathers lack in appropriate content that caters to the needs of Black fathers and are often inaccessible to Black fathers (Lee et al., 2016; Smith et al., 2015). Program developers could use findings from this research in conceptualizing programs to appeal to diverse groups of Black fathers. Fatherhood programs aim to promote responsible fatherhood; however, findings from this study suggest “responsible fatherhood” is subjective to individual fathers. This qualitative study provided opportunity for fathers to express their beliefs about aspects of fatherhood. Furthermore, fathers described their perceptions of fathering and father identity which provides insight on what responsible fatherhood is for them. Program developers could use the findings from this study to empower fathers by creating programs that are informed by fathers’ perceptions of fatherhood.

## CHAPTER 3

### METHODS

#### Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study was to understand how Black fathers learned to be fathers. Essentially, this study aimed to understand Black fathers' *perceptions of fatherhood*, their experiences forming their *father identity*, and their *involvement* with their children. Gaining in-depth knowledge of these constructs provided rich description of how Black fathers conceptualize fathering and how those conceptualizations are displayed through engagement in various father identities and involvement with their children. Research indicates that Black fathers' perceptions and father identity significantly influence father involvement (Bright et al., 1996; Doherty et al., 1998; Wilson et al., 2016). However, limited research has examined the changing nature of these constructs, and how contextual factors shape fathers' perception, identity, and involvement over time, particularly among Black fathers. Father involvement is associated with positive child outcomes (Barton et al., 2015; Doyle et al., 2017; Passley et al., 2007); thus, it is important to understand Black fathers' experiences with fatherhood, including their perceptions, identity construction, and involvement.

Through a phenomenological approach, the primary investigator (PI) explored fathers' experiences with constructing their perceptions, identities, and involvement (Stapleton & Wilson, 2017). Furthermore, this study aimed to provide fair depictions of Black fathers by exploring their lived experiences of forming their identity and understanding how their perceptions and identities influence their involvement with their children. Black fathers are often painted with a broad brush that portrays them as "deadbeats" or pathologizes them for lacking as breadwinners in early research and the media, even though extant research demonstrates that

Black fathers are as involved as fathers of other races (Castillo et al., 2011; Coles et al., 2010; Connor et al., 2006). Thus, an underlying contribution of this study is to provide a realistic description of Black fathers. The primary investigator hoped to elevate the voices of Black fathers and empower them as fathers through the sharing of their experiences.

### **Research Questions**

This study sought to address the following research questions:

1. What are fathers' perceptions of fatherhood (e.g., perceptions of roles, identities, and involvement)?
2. How do fathers' perceptions of fatherhood and their father identity influence their father involvement?
3. How do fathers perceive that contextual factors (e.g., family of origin, religion, culture) inform their perceptions, identities, and involvement?
4. To what extent are there differences in perceptions, identities, and involvement among fathers from different family of origins?

### **A Phenomenological Qualitative Approach**

A phenomenological approach was employed to understand fathers' perceptions of fatherhood, their experiences in forming their father identity, and involvement with their children. Specifically, this study utilized Moustakas's transcendental phenomenological approach (Moustakas, 1994), with which there was an emphasis on understanding participants lived experiences. This method provided the primary investigator with the opportunity to gain detailed knowledge of the experiences of Black fathers by exploring their interpretations of their lived father experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Understanding the meaning or nature of a

phenomenon (e.g., fatherhood) is central to phenomenology. Thus, this approach was fitting for understanding the meaning fathers ascribe to fatherhood, their identity, and their involvement.

Additionally, phenomenology seeks to capture the common experiences of individuals with a particular phenomenon, which depicts the essence of that phenomenon (Creswell, 2007; Merriam et al., 2016). Black men can be reluctant to participate in research due to a history of oppression, mistreatment in research (e.g. Tuskegee experiments), and misrepresentations of Black men and families in research due to cultural deficit and pathologizing frameworks (Cochran, 1997; King et al., 2004). As such, scholars (e.g., Cochran, 1997) suggest implementing a group approach to collect data, such as focus groups, as a remedy for difficulty with participation and recruitment of Black men. Allowing fathers to share their experiences among other fathers may provide them with the opportunity to be heard and supported. Consistent with other research on underserved populations, this study utilized focus groups to capture the experiences of a diverse group of Black fathers (Farnsworth & Boon, 2010; Hammond et al., 2011; Julion et al. 2007; Pollack, 2003). Furthermore, Rodriguez and colleagues suggest that focus groups are a culturally sensitive approach for qualitative data collection with marginalized populations (Rodriguez, Schwartz, Lahman, & Geist, 2011). Focus groups allow for both individual and group level data analysis by exploring fathers' experiences with the fatherhood constructs while simultaneously examining group level consensus of perceptions, identities, and involvement coupled with understanding contextual factors that shape aspects of fatherhood (Cyr, 2015).

The PI sought to understand the fatherhood phenomenon, from a specific group (i.e., Black fathers), thus focus groups were appropriate (Ravitch et al., 2016). Focus groups provided the opportunity for learning how father perceptions, identities, and involvement are developed

and constructed among a group of fathers (Ravitch et al., 2016). The PI conducted the focus groups in barbershops and churches which are culturally significant locations for Black fathers (Alexander, 2003; Brown, 2008; Luque, et al., 2011) as mentioned previously. Utilizing these locations gave the PI first-hand experience of understanding how context can influence father's perceptions, identities, and involvement. Wilkinson (1999) indicates that focus groups are advantageous for observing participants within a social context (e.g., focus groups) as they provide their perceptions on the research topic of interest, coupled with the opportunity for researchers to analyze group interactions and experiences. Additionally, fathers' experiences surfaced naturally being that the settings for the study were culturally safe spaces. Krueger and Casey (2000) assert that focus groups provide the opportunity to gain more information from participants than individual interviews because participants can interact with each other and provide insight on each other's' responses. Commonalities among participants can be observed through group interaction and sharing of participants lived experiences which encompasses phenomenological methodology. Taken together, focus groups were a culturally sensitive (Cochran, 1997), and methodologically appropriate (Ravitch et al., 2016) approach to answering the research questions.

## **Participants**

**Recruitment.** Approval from the Florida State University Institutional Review Board (IRB) was obtained (see Appendix A). Recruitment strategies included visual and verbal advertisements. Visual advertisements included physical flyers and electronic flyers that were distributed to churches, barbershops, community facilities, and college campuses. Electronic flyers were posted on social media platforms. The flyers contained pertinent information to the study and informed fathers of the opportunity to engage in a study that sought to understand their

lived experiences of fatherhood. Utilizing physical and electronic flyers enhanced the breadth of participants that were recruited because each platform increased the reach to participants and aided in diversifying the sample of fathers.

Verbal advertisements involved the primary investigator speaking at various agencies (e.g., churches and barbershops). The primary investigator provided detailed information about the study. Engaging in verbal advertisements provided the PI the opportunity to connect with fathers and establish rapport, which was imperative given that this population can be difficult to study due to history of maltreatment in research and society (Cochran, 1997; King et al., 2004; Moynihan, 1965). Furthermore, the PI was able to address any questions that fathers had about participation in the study. The PI also implored connected members in the community to recruit through word of mouth and refer fathers to participate in the study. Employing connected members of the community to help recruit fathers was appealing to fathers since they were referred by someone they knew and trusted. The PI offered incentives for participation in the study. Refreshments were provided to participants of the focus groups. Each participant also received a \$10 gift card as compensation for participating in the focus group.

**Sampling criteria.** This study aimed to include fathers who identified as Black or African American. Phenomenological studies typically range between 5 and 25 participants (Creswell, 2007); therefore, this study aimed to attain an overall sample of at least 18 participants. Purposive sampling was utilized to select fathers for participation in the study (Merriam et al., 2016). To be included in the study, fathers had to be at least 18 years old and speak English. Participants provided written consent for participation in the study in order to be included. Fathers had at least one child who was one year old or older to participate. One of the research questions for the study was to learn how father involvement is influenced by

perceptions and identity, therefore requiring that fathers had a child that was at least one allowed the researcher to understand their level involvement with their child and the extent to which it was impacted by their perceptions and identity. This study only included biological fathers. Social fathering has become a relevant topic within father involvement literature (Barton et al., 2015); however, the PI was interested in the experiences of biological fathers. Residence is a salient indicator of father involvement thus resident and nonresident fathers were included. Similarly, this study aimed to include fathers of all relational statuses being that mother-father relationship quality impacts father involvement and mothers' beliefs of fathers' role influence fathers' attitudes about fathering (Beaton et al., 2003; Coates et al., 2014). To solicit understanding of fathers from different family of origin household types, this study recruited participants from each household type (e.g., single-parent and two-parent).

**Sample characteristics.** Thirty fathers participated in this study. All of the fathers in this study identified as Black or African American and were biological fathers. Participants ranged in age from twenty-nine years old to seventy-three years old. Educational attainment varied; thirty-three percent received a high school diploma ( $n = 10$ ), 13% percent received a vocational degree or associate degree ( $n = 4$ ), fifty percent of the participants obtained bachelor's or graduate degree ( $n = 15$ ), and one participant preferred not to answer. Sixty-seven percent of participants were employed (full time  $n = 19$ ; part time  $n = 1$ ), twenty-three percent were retired ( $n = 7$ ), 3% were unemployed ( $n = 1$ ), and 7% of participants reported other for their employment ( $n = 2$ ). Income levels ranged from below \$25,000 ( $n = 1$ ) to above \$100,000 ( $n = 6$ ). A majority of the participants were married ( $n = 21$ ). Forty percent ( $n = 12$ ) of fathers were residential and thirty-three percent ( $n = 10$ ) of fathers were non-residential. Twenty percent ( $n = 6$ ) reported that some of their children lived with them and some of their children did not. The remaining 7% preferred

not to answer. Seventy-three percent of participants ( $n = 22$ ) were raised in two-parent homes, twenty percent ( $n = 6$ ) were raised in single-parent homes, and 7% ( $n = 2$ ) reported other for their family of origin.

*Table 1. Demographic information*

<i>Variable</i>	<i>n (%)</i>
<b>Age</b> ( $M = 42.67$ ; $SD = 12.66$ )	
<b>Education</b>	
Less than high school	0
High school diploma	10 (33.3%)
Technical/vocation degree	1 (3.3%)
Associate degree	3 (10%)
Bachelor's degree	10 (33.3%)
Master's degree	4 (13.3%)
Doctorate degree	1 (3%)
Prefer not to answer	1 (3.3%)
<b>Annual income</b>	
Less than \$25,000	1 (3.3%)
\$26,000-\$50,000	13 (43.3%)
\$51,000-\$75,000	3 (10%)
\$76,000-\$100,000	5 (16.7%)
More than \$100,000	6 (20%)
Unsure/prefer not to answer	2 (6.7%)
<b>Residential status</b>	
Child(ren) lives with father	12 (40%)
Child(ren) do(es) not live with father	10 (33.3%)
Other (please specify)	
Prefer not to answer	6 (20%)
	2 (6.7%)
<b>Family of Origin</b>	
Two-parent	22 (73.3%)
Single-parent	6 (20%)
Other (please specify)	2 (6.7%)

( $N = 30$ )

## **Procedures**

With Florida State University Institutional Review Board and dissertation committee approval, the PI began the recruitment process. Screenings were conducted by the PI, based on inclusion and exclusion criteria, to determine the eligibility of participants. Once eligibility was determined participants were informed of the date, time, and location of the focus group. The PI



discussed informed consent (see Appendix B) with each participant as they arrived for the focus group. Each participant had to provide written consent in order to complete the demographic survey and participate in the focus group. To maintain confidentiality, participants were given pseudonyms and were referred to by their pseudonym on all study materials. Participants completed the demographic survey after the content portion of the focus group concluded. The researcher had laptops available for the participants to complete the demographic survey on Qualtrics.

To ensure quality of the data, focus groups generally include 4 to 8 participants (Bolderston, 2012; Ravitch et al., 2016). This study recruited 30 fathers to participate in 4 focus groups. The 30 participants comprised a sufficient sample that allowed for the researcher to conduct a phenomenological study, as well as achieve saturation which is a common method for ensuring sufficient sample size in qualitative data (Saunders et al., 2018). Focus groups were conducted at local barbershops and churches. Enhancing trust is vital for conducting focus groups with Black men (Cochran, 1997; Julion et al., 2007). Julion et al. (2007) suggest that utilizing co-facilitators who have experiences relevant to the topic of the study or experience working with the targeted sample is beneficial for facilitation of focus groups. Thus, to increase trust, the focus groups were co-facilitated by a community leader who also was a Black father. The co-facilitator has experience working with Black men and fathers in multiple domains. Additionally, he had the ability to relate to participants being that he is a father, thereby creating opportunity for in-depth responses from participants. According to Krueger and King (1998) relatability also increases the likelihood that participants will feel comfortable discussing their genuine thoughts and experiences regarding fatherhood strengthening the study being that the PI is neither a man nor a father. The PI met with the co-facilitator prior to conducting the focus

groups to discuss study protocol, review focus group facilitation best-practices, and review the focus group questions. The co-facilitator participated in pilot testing to ensure his level of comfort and familiarity with the study procedures.

Focus groups were recorded utilizing audio recording devices. Content of the focus groups were transcribed after completion. Audio recordings were uploaded to an encrypted file along with transcriptions of each focus group on a password-protected computer. Transcriptions of the focus groups did not include any identifying information of participants and used pseudonyms for names that were mentioned. Written notes or memos from group interview were stored in locked in a drawer in the researcher's office. Analysis of the data began after the focus groups were transcribed.

**Data collection.** Data were gathered through focus groups. Father perceptions, identity, and involvement were assessed using a phenomenological approach. Focus groups were conducted between December of 2019 and January of 2020. The focus groups ranged from 1 to 2 hours depending on the content shared and the number of participants. The questions for the group discussions were derived from the research questions and were semi-structured. The semi-structured nature of the questions allowed the PI and co-facilitator to follow the path of the participants' responses (Ravitch et al., 2016). Furthermore, other questions emerged based on the content shared, thus use of a semi-structured focus group allowed the PI to ask follow-up questions. See Appendix C for sample focus group questions. The PI participated in pilot testing of the questions to make sure the questions asked were assessing the concepts of interest.

Participants were asked to complete a demographic survey after the completion of the focus group. The demographic survey was composed of questions related to the following: age, race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, number of children, age and sex of children, father's age at

the birth of their first child, relationship status, and family of origin household type, history of involvement with the criminal justice system. See Appendix D for the demographic survey.

The focus groups were conducted in barbershops and churches. The barbershops and churches were embedded within Black communities. The setting of the study was vital for fostering a safe and natural setting that allowed for fathers to feel comfortable in sharing their experiences. Each focus group had its own character, however, the camaraderie among fathers was evident in all focus groups. Fathers shared how beneficial it was to have a safe space where they could connect with other fathers while also being heard as they shared their perceptions of aspects of fatherhood. The connections observed through fathers' conversations highlights one of the key advantages of focus groups; analyzing group interactions and shared meanings of father perceptions, identity, involvement (Wilkinson, 1999). Additionally, each focus group was co-facilitated by a Black father. The co-facilitator was able to gauge verbal and nonverbal cues to ask to follow up questions that were relevant to the content being shared. Furthermore, the co-facilitator could relate to Black fathers as they were sharing experiences of what it is like to be a Black father in our society and offer comfort and assurance in a manner in which the primary investigator could not. This relatability allowed fathers to delve into a deeper realm of personal communication in which fathers described joys, fears, and vulnerabilities. Conducting this study in culturally relevant spaces with a culturally representative co-facilitator led to fruitful experiences with participating in research as evident by numerous fathers sharing their appreciation for this research forum being hosted. Although, assessing utility of culturally relevant spaces was not an objective of this study, the positive feedback from fathers provides support for the advantages of providing fatherhood programs and interventions for Black fathers in spaces that allow them to be open and transparent about fatherhood.

## **Analytic Strategy**

Data analysis was guided by transcendental phenomenological principles. The primary investigator examined her beliefs, assumptions, and biases in an attempt to become aware of her experiences with the fatherhood phenomenon (Creswell, 2007). The purpose of engaging in this process was to separate the participants' experiences from the PI's experiences. This is a key principal in transcendental phenomenology, called bracketing (Creswell, 2007).

Focus groups were transcribed upon completion. NVivo 12 software was utilized for the coding and analysis of transcripts. The primary investigator and co-facilitator completed the focus groups, but a team of trained coders, under the direction of the PI, complete coding. Each coder, including the PI, completed Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI) for social and behavioral sciences. Prior to coding, coders were taught the steps of the coding process.

Horizontalization of data was used to code the transcriptions. Horizontalization entailed depicting participants' experiences by identifying significant statements mentioned in the focus group (Creswell, 2007). Coders compared their codes to ensure reliability and made sure they were coding similar statements. Codes (i.e., significant statements) were converted into themes. Themes portrayed fathers' experiences through use of textural descriptions. Themes also captured the context in which fathers experienced the three constructs (i.e., father perceptions, identity, and involvement). This is known as structural descriptions (Creswell, 2007). The textural and structural descriptions were analyzed to formulate the "essence" of fatherhood. This involved the researcher focusing on the commonalities and consensus among father's experiences of fatherhood (Creswell, 2007).

To enhance validity, a father in each focus group verified the results of each focus group. Fathers confirmed interpretations from the content of the focus groups matched their reflections

of their experiences. This process of validation is known as triangulation and helped to ensure that interpretations were accurate reflections of participants' experiences (Creswell, 2007). The written findings of the study incorporate feedback from participants.

**Bracketing/reflexivity.** As mentioned previously, it was essential for the PI to bracket her beliefs and assumptions regarding fatherhood because her beliefs could have shaped the research process (Creswell, 2007). The PI is a Black female in her mid-twenties. She is a doctoral student in a Marriage and Family Therapy program. She was raised in a two-parent home in the southeast of the United States. Her father is a very influential figure in her life. He was raised in a single-parent home, which sparked the PI's interest in fatherhood and her assumptions about fatherhood. Her primary research and clinical interests focus on Black fathers and families. The PI completed memos throughout the study process to help ensure trustworthiness and bracket her interpretations of the data. Engaging in this process fits within the systemic nature of the analytic process and is critical when analyzing focus group data (Krueger, 1998).

## CHAPTER 4

### RESULTS

The purpose of this study was to gain in-depth insight of Black fathers' perspectives on aspects of fatherhood. Those aspects include fathers' perceptions of fatherhood, their father identities, and involvement with their children. This study aimed to understand both the factors that influence fathers' perceptions, identities, and involvement and the context in which fathers' perceptions, identities, and involvement are constructed. Exploring differences and similarities of aspects of fatherhood among fathers from different family of origins was an underlying aim of this study. Semi-structured focus groups were conducted in barbershops and churches to provide a natural and culturally safe setting for fathers to share experiences in constructing their perceptions, identities, and enacting their perceptions and identities through their involvement with their children and families. The setting for the focus groups unearthed natural and rich discussions between fathers that allowed them to feel heard, empowered, and connected. Each focus group was co-led by the primary investigator and a trusted community leader, who was also a father, to enhance the depth of fathers' responses. This study was guided by research questions that aimed to address the purpose of the study. Multiple themes emerged capturing the essence of Black father's experiences with fatherhood.

#### **Fatherhood is Multidimensional**

Fathers' perceptions of fatherhood were primarily discussed as what they believed it means to be a father and what fatherhood entails. As fathers shared, they expressed perceptions of roles, identities, and involvement that depict their beliefs of fatherhood. Fathers' perceptions of fatherhood are centered around being present. Fathers reported that their identities change as their children change and the roles they engage in are endless. Involvement is described as being

active and engaged with their children. Both fathers from single-parent homes and fathers from two-parent homes were on the same accord regarding their perceptions of fatherhood. Taken together, fathers chronicled fatherhood as multidimensional.

**Responsibility.** Fathers believe that being a father means being responsible for your children and your household. Numerous fathers described how their lives changed the moment their children were born and a sense of responsibility for and obligation to their children emerged. One father shared:

It [becoming a father] really did open up a whole new world in regard to me coming out and being more responsible, realizing my responsibilities, that I had children.

Understanding that everything that I used to do had to stop and had to change. Whether it be gradually or whatever the case may be, but it did have to change. -Tremaine

Another father described a conversation with his brother about responsibility and stated:

But I told him, I said, you know the responsibility level when you started having your family, you have kids it just changes. It's not about you anymore. I was trying to explain to him, I'm like, everything that you do, everything that you say, every action, everything; they're watching. -Zen

Fathers elaborated by describing specific responsibilities of a father as expressed in this quote:

“I'm responsible for feeding them, responsible for clothing them, responsible for protecting, and reliable, to connect the word daddy.”-Ali. Fathers described their responsibility as a lifelong commitment. One father stated: “Like I said, when I took the responsibility of being a dad, I knew it was a job that I couldn't resign from. That's not a job that I ever retire from.”-Zacariah.

Fathers believe that being an active part of their children's lives will last as long as they are

alive. Their roles and involvement may shift as their children get older, but they are committed to being fathers for life as emphasized in the quote above.

Fathers also expressed an additional sense of responsibility in raising their children to know who they are and helping foster a sense of identity in their children. Especially, when describing their responsibility of helping their sons understand what it meant to grow up and become a Black man in this world. One father shared:

Now you've got kids. You've got responsibilities. You've got to raise them up with a sense of who God is, who you are, who they're going to be in society. Who they are as Black men in society and the things that they're going to face. -Kyle

**Ethnic Racial Socialization (ERS).** As fathers shared more details about their responsibilities, they started reflecting on their responsibilities, as Black fathers, of raising Black children. In the process of reflecting, they began to describe ethnic racial socialization practices. Fathers discussed how their awareness of what it is like to be in this world as a person of color influences the roles they take with their children (e.g., protectors and educators) and involvement (e.g., having conversations about race, financial literacy, and being active listeners with their children). A father shared:

I think we have to, as an educator, give our children the totality of what it means to be Black if you're Black in America. Because if we don't do that, then we missed the context of what it means. -Jamari

Fathers also were vulnerable in their discussions and expressed some of their fears about having those conversations and raising Black sons and daughters. One father described his worry when he said:



So that fear, right? That we, that uncertainty, that's one thing that I think makes my job [fathering] more important. Right? So, what I mean by that is, I don't want to make this a Black White thing, but our son is six, right? So that fear is in me. Right? To raise a young Black guy in this world. So that's what that fear, that uncertainty, makes my job with him that much more important. -Carlos

Fathers expanded on their realities as Black men and the worry they experience by explaining how the context (e.g., neighborhood, systemic barriers, racial profiling, incarceration rates) that they raise their children in influences the conversations they have with their children and their perceptions on the father roles they should engage in. For example, fathers learned from their neighborhood context how important conversations about safety, racism, and interactions with authority would be with their children, especially for those fathers who were raising their children in certain regions of the United States. One father shared:

So, when I started having kids, one of the... my thing was to get them some place safe and grounded. I think we stayed in one house for about 17, 18 years and then we've been here almost 13 years. So, they moved twice in their lifetime and both times it was our house... That was coming to (state) because again, in having sons, part of fathering is to try to keep them safe. When you're living in a place and the teachers are telling you, "I can't teach him, and I'm scared of them. There's too many of them. They're too wild, they're too bad." The police are telling you, "if we can, if we come out, we're probably going to kill one of them, take them to jail for nothing they did or somebody else." It's like, how you do that? I couldn't send him to public school because that's the way the public school teachers felt. Then if you sent them outside to go skate or go to the park... it was like, that was in keeping them safe. -Cameron

Other fathers discussed the gravity of systemic barriers, such as incarceration and child support, and their impact on father involvement and fathers' sense of self-concept. They indicated that it was their responsibility to be transparent with their children about these barriers. One father discussed lessons he shared with his children and grandchildren related to how they will be perceived in society and systemic barriers that people of color must deal with, especially men (e.g., fathers).

I'm going to be 73 in the new year. Right? My thing is teaching my grandkids and my great grandkids situations of what they have to deal with in this society now. We still have a problem with the White, Black situation, you know, police killing Black kids and so forth like that. I'm a retired law enforcement. My thing has always been, if he's not doing something fully criminal, why are you putting him through the system. Why are you giving this kid a number and putting them through the system? Now he can't get out and get him a decent job. Why are you taking the husband's driver's license for child support and he can't get to work? How's he going to make that money to take care of those children? You either took away his responsibility of being to do what he has to do. -  
Phil

As fathers shared their experiences of engaging in ERS with their children and being honest about their worries, other fathers were able to experience a sense of relief in knowing that many fathers had similar concerns and feelings. The discussion around being Black fathers and raising Black children, although heavy, provided opportunity for fathers to share strategies for navigating cultural and systemic challenges. One father expressed his gratitude for this space for Black fathers to share their experiences because he was able to gain comfort despite his worries.

He stated:

And the last thing on that with you two guys were speaking up. I'm glad I made it here this morning because God blessed me because I always was worried. My challenge, same thing, was fear and worrying too much about them. You know what I mean? And what you said from what you spoke of, know this is what you're planting [into your children]. No matter what's growing over here or over there. Don't be concerned with that. And that's something I needed right now at this moment. So, I appreciate that. -Zaire

**Flexibility/adaptability.** Fathers believe that fatherhood requires them to be flexible as it pertains to their identities and involvement. Fathers indicated that their identities should change and adapt based on the needs of their children and families. Additionally, fathers emphasized that their involvement with their children changes based on their children's developmental stages. Some of these roles (e.g., educator) were highlighted as fathers described their responsibilities and ERS practices. However, fathers further described their identities and involvement in terms of flexibility (e.g., adapting and evolving). A father captured this by stating:

You have to be flexible when parenting kids because like you said, through each age stage, they're going to require something different from you, so you can't be just that square. You got to sometimes be that circle, be that rectangle. You're going to have to be able to be flexible so that you can give that kid what I like to say a holistic approach or a better opportunity to be a holistic person. -Kenny

Fathers provided in-depth descriptions of their identities. In describing their identities there were no differences among fathers from different family of origins. All fathers indicated that they believe their identities change based on their children's age and needs. Fathers assert that they could be educators, nurturers, counselors, analysts, coaches, consultants, friends, and

much more as their children grow through different stages of life. One father captured this by simply stating: “And then as a role of the father, it varies based on the age of your children.”- Nathaniel. Another father discussed his role and identities from the perspective of a father with young children. He shared:

I know for me I would also say being a provider, but then also being someone who's stable, so being that stable person for my kids, so every day, I'm there. Every morning, every event, at school, when they get home, when they're excited for something, being that person who's stable and constant for them. I have kids. My oldest is eight and my youngest is five, so they're fairly young, so I operate in that role, I want to be that constant figure. -Jesse

Another father expressed his role as his children ventured into adolescence:

I think for me, it's [father role] more an encourager and a coach because especially during the adolescent years, guidance is so important because of the way we develop as individuals, so I would say a coach and an encourager and just making sure that the child is afforded an array of opportunities, so they get a pretty full picture of what life is all about.-TySean

David (father) elaborated by sharing:

And so, I think as an educator you have to tell, you have to inform them of the context of why we are where we are. And then you have to tell them or at least try to help them navigate where they are, and then into the future. So, I think as a parent you have to evolve with your children. Because there is a point where you are the parent. Then there's a point where you're the coach and then you're the point that I think that you can become friends when you get a little bit older.

One father recalled a conversation with one his children about his role in their life over time and he stated: "I'm going to be here for you, but my role in being there for you is going to change after a certain age. You know, I'm going from provider to now coach and then advisor."-Omar As mentioned previously, fathers believe that fathering is a lifelong commitment, and these quotes highlight their commitment, as well the evolvement of their father identities.

Coupled with flexibility in their identities, fathers discussed flexibility in their involvement. In order to fulfill their perceptions of being present fathers, fathers believe they must be flexible and adjust to the phase of life their children are in. Furthermore, fathers emphasized that modifying the manner in which they were involved with their children was necessary in order to connect with their children. Several fathers described how they sought to understand their children and changed how they were involved in order to enhance their relationship with their children. One father described how he had to change his preference for communication to match his son's if he wanted to be able to communicate with his son and interact with him as he finished high school and was transitioning to college. He shared:

I think it [involvement] depends on whether they're in their [development]. When they're younger, then they need to see you. They need to hear you; they need to see you. Like it or not, our son's a millennial, I think. Might as well tell you. Right? So, he likes his texting thing. I remember when it first started, I don't like to text, man. I don't dig texting. I like talking... And so, I think it just depends on where they are. And then you have to use the platforms because he likes to text. I don't. I mean, you know, if I don't text then I don't communicate... So, I have to, as an educator, evolve and instead say, okay, man. I don't like texting. That's how they catch communications, how they all communicate. -  
Jimmy

Akin to other fathers, this father discusses how fathers have to evolve in order to remain present in their children's lives, demonstrating that aspects of fathering change over time. Another father shared a story of how his son grew to have different interest than him and he described how he desired to learn more about his son's interests in order to maintain his relationship with his son.

He stated:

I agree with what they're saying. My youngest son, which is now 17 and 6'1". Yeah, yeah. About 10 years old or seven years old, somewhere around there I realized that he didn't want to play sports anymore. He played football when he was younger, but he decided he didn't want to play sports. Now all of us [father and his family] play ball. I played baseball. My son, my oldest son was a football player, he ran track. He [youngest son] was interested in animals. So, I had to go out as they were saying, I had to go out and find, I said, okay Lord, I want to keep a relationship with him. What do I do? So, I actually connected with as these two know [pointed to two fathers in the focus group], Dr. Hamlin who's actually a veterinarian. And when I sat and spoke with Dr. Hamlin, he said these are some of the things that we are interested in. Because my son was interested in insects and plant life and animals and turtles. -Kelvin

This father's dedication to learning about animals, so he could relate to his son, depicts many of the fathers' in this study's sentiments of being involved in everything that their children are involved in. Similarly, other fathers shared their journey of wearing many fathering hats to meet their children's needs, and as they were reflecting the primary investigator could hear the joy in the voices of fathers who had transitioned to becoming their children's friends and becoming consultants to their children who were now seeking their opinions on navigating through life and parenthood.

## **Visualization/Representation**

Another theme that surfaced from father's perceptions of fatherhood was importance of visualization and representation. Fathers discussed representation and how exposure to active fathers changed their perspectives on what it meant to be a father. Fathers discussed cultural representations of Black fathers through television (e.g., The Cosby Show). They shared that seeing engaged Black fatherhood through The Cosby Show was helpful because they were able to see visualization of an active father, especially if they grew up in a single-parent home. One father shared:

Then for me, it's those TV shows when I was growing up what the dad role was in those shows...You think about those shows similar to those and what those dads did. Of course, you know they're scripted, so somebody wrote them, but they permeate what you envision somehow what you should do as a dad as some kind of wise when you think about it. -Leon

Younger fathers discussed how even in music, some artists are demonstrating engaged fathering through their lyrics and lifestyles. One father expressed:

Even the rappers now, sorry, the rappers and the athletes and even media. Your favorite rapper, they have their kids in the studio, they talk about, they have them in videos, so even the knuckle heads that are doing the crazy stuff, they have their kids right there with them. -Malachi

**Community.** In addition to cultural representations of Black fathers through television and music, fathers discussed community as a form of representation. Fathers expressed that seeing engaged Black fathers showed them how to be involved and empowered them to be active because it contradicts the visual depiction of Black fathers that is portrayed in society. Fathers

emphasize the significance of exposure and how perception can be influenced by exposure, thus having spaces where Black fathers can see other Black fathers who are present and engaged is a positive influence and encouraging for fathers. One father reflected on the power of visualization as he shared how his perceptions of a father shifted because he was able to see active fathers in his community. He said:

I think it's personal for each one of us because of the community that you build around you build yourself, so as a Black father, if you put yourself or you build a community where there are positive black fathers around you, then your perception of who or what Black fathers are is different compared to if you were just out there by yourself and you did not have other Black fathers to rub elbows with and converse and just interact with. Then your perception would be different of Black fathers. For me myself, I have built a community where I see active Black fathers, where I see Black men who are being present, who are being there who have been the provider in their family. -Delbert

Another father discussed how community was a vital part of his life. His community allowed him to learn from other fathers in his neighborhood. He expressed:

I came up in a neighborhood where we had a neighborhood that could help raise our community, so forth and so on. Unfortunately, I didn't have a father home when I came up. I had a mother and grandmother home and pretty much, grandmother kind of ruled the roost but there was a lot of values that I learned in life during that time because there were a lot of fathers in the neighborhood that didn't mind stepping up to the plate and doing the things that needed to do to help you through a lot of life experiences and stuff like that. -Lavelle



Furthermore, fathers indicated that they had other men (e.g., mentors, uncles, brothers, friends) in their lives who also helped them learn to be fathers and influenced their father identities and involvement with their children. Fathers reported on how influential these relationships were because they believe that “you are who you are around” meaning, fathers had engaged fathers around them and saw what it looked like to be an engaged father. One father shared how he learned to be a father from his mentors and family members. He stated:

I have mentors and I have older, what I call, brothers and sisters who are family who are husband and wife and they raised their family, so I've watched some of the things that they've done and tried to implement that in my family because it seem to prove and be successful for them, so try it. -Darius

Fathers also shared the importance of being connected to social circles (e.g., friends, family, mentors) that demonstrated and promoted fathering. They expressed that being exposed to active fathers let them know that despite how Black fathers are portrayed in society, there are “good fathers” that exist, and they could be one of those good fathers. One father shared:

Like this young man was saying, most of the guys that I know, they take care of their children. I see them pushing strollers, I see the whole shebang, wife, they are doing different schedules, whatever the case may be. The man is involved in raising their children. -Jamal

In addition to reflecting on the importance of their communities and social networks in molding them as fathers, fathers also formed their own community in each forum. It was fascinating to watch fathers share their experiences and give advice to other fathers. Fathers encouraged each other and validated each other’s experiences. This sense of community and

camaraderie among fathers was displayed as one father was sharing some of the challenges, he experiences in connecting with his child due to generational differences. He stated:

For me, it's [challenge of fathering] just this generation. It's been, it's hard they just didn't grow up like I did. It's different. For me, every day is me trying to understand their generation. That's the hardest part. I understand mine. I understand where I'm coming from and all this stuff...it [children; generational patterns] changes so quick, so fast and I'm blinking my eye. If you don't catch it quick, they often run, and you can't stop them. It's like full speed. -Tyrell

Another father responded to this father and shared:

Where you are right now, you got all that wealth in your head and you try to get into those kids, you're going to do it because you don't see what they see. What they see is the sum total of your experiences. And so, all you have to do is continue to deposit the sum total of your experiences in them and love them and teach them and they'll grab it. You'll know when they grab it, when they sit in the classroom alongside of somebody else, children who don't have the sum total of your experiences and you'll see the difference that you've made in your children when you compared them to the others and vice versa. But I think we need to be more creative. Let all the excuses go and just get it done. Like Nike. Just do it. -Jerome

Community is an integral part of Black culture and fathers expressed this, as well as the exchange captured above, highlighting a need for community and social support for fathers as they enter fatherhood and continue to evolve as fathers. Fathers articulated belief in the power of having a community around them during their fathering journey and desired more safe spaces to

have nonjudgmental conversations about fatherhood. One father shared a reflection that exemplified the importance of programs and forums for Black fathers when he said:

A lot of shared experiences [in this forum]. And that's one thing I noticed too when I was talking to a friend about this [fatherhood]. When we were growing up you had friends for every occasion. You had your workout friends, your basketball friends, you had friends for every occasion, but as you started getting a little older, sitting around and talking like this, amongst different age groups. Young, middle, and old and you can share what you've learned with them. They can bring you up to speed on what's happening now. You can tell them what was going on and how to prepare for things. That's important, forums like this, need to happen a little bit more often...it's rare to have these conversations [about fatherhood], I really enjoyed it. -Duvel

### **Family of Origin**

Fathers shared that their upbringings influenced their perceptions of fatherhood and shaped their identities and involvement. Although fathers from single-parent homes and two-parent homes shared similar perceptions, the experiences that informed their perceptions is where they differed. Fathers from both family of origins reported that their mothers and fathers were integral figures in impacting them as fathers. One father shared his perspective on his mother and other women (e.g., grandmother and aunts) that raised him when he said: "This is a forum for the fathers. I understand, but I have to give credit to females because I was raised in a house full of women. And the things that they taught me made me a better person today." -Malik. Fathers expressed that various aspects of their upbringing (e.g., discipline practices, religious practices, financial practices, encouraging educational attainment, showing affection, how their fathers treated their wives if they were married, involvement) influenced them as fathers.

Although mothers were influential, fathers primarily reflected on their relationship with their fathers.

Fathers' relationships or lack thereof with their fathers influenced their perceptions on what it meant to be a father. Fathers believe that you can learn from the both presence and absence of your father. One father played a song, "Color Him Father", that he thought depicted his father and provided imagery on what it meant to be a father. Several fathers later referenced the song because it resonated with them and their perceptions of being a father. One father expressed:

I was fortunate as far as a father, to have, my heavenly father give me the best earthly father I could have ever had. You know, I'm telling as far you all, as a role model of what it actually means to be a man... I had an example and you know, it kind of gets me there [emotional] because he was real good. -Draymond

Another father shared:

My dad who's right there, he did a good job. Some of this stuff [parenting practices] I didn't agree with or didn't understand, but once I had one [child], I was like, ah, I see what you were saying. So, I have a different understanding of what he was trying to teach me, hopefully, I can teach and pass along some of that stuff and put my own little swag on it. -Ahmad

Most fathers who had relationships with their fathers provided emotionally charged reflections about their fathers and were often grateful for how their father helped them become the fathers they are. They indicated that their goal as a father was to embody the great qualities of their fathers and learn from other qualities. One father smiled as he shared: "I just think my

dad did a wonderful job and molded me, and you know, just teaching me about life during my upbringing. And I really appreciate him for that. I really do.” -Devon

Fathers who did not have relationships with their fathers expressed great resilience. They refused to carry on generational patterns and wanted to be present in their children’s lives. They recalled how they felt as children, growing up and not having their father there, and vowed to ensure their children never knew that feeling or experienced that void. Fathers shared stories about how they used their fathers as a learning experience on what not to do. One father shared how his father’s absence motivated him. He stated:

So, when you don't have somebody to... like, generational, you don't have generational encouragement, you don't have generational knowledge to be passed down...I didn't have a lot of examples growing up, my dad was never there, but it's also a motivation. Make you say, "okay, there's one thing I'm not going to do is be an absent dad.” -Quentin

Leroy (father) shared:

Because I didn't have a father, he definitely shaped what I thought or my ideology on what a father was because it was everything he wasn't, so I started out life as an adult. I'm going to do this. I'm going to be this person. I'm going to have this role because he wasn't there, and I felt a void there. I felt like I needed to fill that void in my kids' life, so for me, I will say, and I've said this, my mom knows it and even when I did meet my father, I was adamant to share I thank you for not being there because now I get a chance to know what not to do and I can avoid that.

Although fathers shared voids they felt, that was not the main point of their reflections on how their fathers impacted their perceptions of fatherhood. Fathers were adamant about changing

family patterns and being a better example for their children than they had. This speaks to another perception that fathers have pertaining to fatherhood, making the next generation better.

### **Improving the Next Generation**

Fathers expressed that fathering entails making the next generation better. Fathers believe that they learned from their fathers and used their experiences to improve their children's experiences. Fathers know their children are watching them and want to be a good example for them to mimic. Fathers believe they can contribute to the next generation by educating their children, loving their children, being a good example, and giving them experiences, some never had, and motivating their children to do even better than them when they create their own families. A father stated: "When you educate then you force them to learn and you empower them because I feel like each generation should get better."-Thomas

Another father expressed:

Being a father is everything to me. I just feel like I'm one of them dads where I just want my kids to be 10 times better than me, but it's up to me. I feel like it's up to me to steer them in that direction. Right? I got to be their father, right? In some ways I got to be their friend, but I also got to be their protector, as well. And I got to be there to teach them right from wrong as they navigate through the world. -Terry

One father reflected on how rewarding it is to improve the next generation when he stated:

I think one of the joys that I get is, those conversations where we have father and son conversations. Whether it be things that I've told them in the past that now have come through, that they're experiencing, so some of what I told them must've had some wisdom attached to it. Because it's guiding them and moving them in the right direction so that gives me a (pauses) to have that experience, we're not separated and all that other kind of

stuff. We come together, they call me, I call them, get a "son, how are you doing?" "oh man, life is good dad, let me tell you about this." And you can sit down and have [conversations] the lines of respect are there, but it's a different kind of camaraderie. Y'all [him and his sons] talking like you boys and all this other kind of stuff and I love that. It's nice, it's free, we just chatting. -Brandon

Fathers also discussed the perception of Black fathers, in society and their own community, as a motivating force to improve the next generation by defying stereotypes. Fathers perceive that the view of Black fathers is primarily negative and does not capture the diversity of fathers within the Black community. One father shared:

I think that Black fathers, Black people have always had a magnifying glass over their lives. And the small percentage of the Black males that does not exhibit fatherhood is not the reflection of the Black community. And so, media has stereotyped us for such a long time that put us out different such a long time, but they don't see focus groups like this. They don't see brothers in the church. They don't see brothers in their family working every day. They don't see the man that works hard to put his children through college. They don't see the single father that doesn't have a woman in the house. -Devonte

Fathers expressed how it was up to them to change the narrative by being active fathers and hoping to be a positive example for other fathers to follow. One father simply stated: "It is up to me to change the future."-Oscar. Other fathers elaborated on shifting the narrative and one shared:

And that's what... we have to start breaking down those stereotypes about how they think we are. And to me that's very damaging to us because a lot of times we rely on the media. Just like we watch the news for your weather report. -Jamal

Another father stated:

And that's [negative stereotypes of Black fathers] not a reflection of who our community is. And so, what that really means is those that are fathers need to learn how to speak up, how to be a representation on the job, in the church, and the community. Do what John said used to be done. We need to bring those old values back. And I think that will it bring to light who we are. -Josiah

Fathers acknowledged that they were not naive about the statistics of Black fathers that are absent, but they discussed sociohistorical factors and systemic challenges that can contribute to father absence within the Black community. A majority of the conversation regarding systemic barriers emerged as fathers were discussing ethnic racial socialization practices, however systemic barriers were mentioned as fathers discussed how Black fathers are perceived. One father shared:

I think a lot of the systemic issues, you know, kind of contribute to how exacerbated it's [father absence] become in black communities. I think that's part of why statistically and in general, the error or the opinion of black fatherhood is, well they're not there. All of them are players. All of them mistreat women. All of them is this. All of them are that it was always baby Daddy drama. I think that's contributed, but there are a lot of good black fathers out there. We see it here [in focus group]. -Terry

**Learning from the Previous Generation.** In addition to improving the next generation by changing the narrative of Black fathers, fathers discussed learning from previous generations to enhance the emotional connection between them and their children. Fathers reflected on their experiences with their fathers and then thought about their experiences as a father thus far and expressed how the times (e.g., sociohistorical context) you are living in impacts fathering. For



example, in recalling differences in fathering among generations fathers described the times they were being raised in and how that contributed to lack of affection and emotion from their fathers. They provided narratives about how their fathers were dealing with Jim Crow laws, racism, and being degraded but still had to come home and be active parents to them and their siblings. However, fathers believe that with today's generation, they have to listen to their children, show affection and love to their children, so their children are not looking for love in other places. A father discussed his way of showing love was to listen to his daughters and be there for them so they would not seek validation and affection from other men. He said:

I love raising my daughters. I think one of the main things that I've been to them that's really like made an impact on their lives is just to listen. So, for me to just listen to even just how the day is going, you know? Hey, what did your friends say to you today? What are you dealing with, with your friends? What are things said about you at school? How do you feel emotionally as a young lady? You know, just shaping that in them and giving them the experience of having a man pay attention to them without an agenda. That's important to me because I don't want them to feel like that, they have to view a man for validation. -Jason

Another father discussed trying to be different than his father by demonstrating love to his children and finding balance in multiple roles. He expressed:

It's hard for me to express love to my children sometimes because it was hard for my dad to express love to me, even though I know he loves me, I do embrace him. He said we love each other. And then I've always heard, I am not your friend I'm your father. Well, I want to teach my kid that I can be both if I'm balanced. -Benjamin

Fathers perceived that being a father entails being love and showing love which was a form of involvement that some of their fathers struggled to engage in. Fathers shared their determination to learn from their childhood experiences and believe it is their job to make sure their children know they are loved. One father was describing his perceptions of involvement and shared: “That means spending time being present, and of course I’m going to say love your kid, but I’m going to say actively love your kid.”-Shaquille. This quote illustrates the depths of involvement to include emotional engagement and affection. Another father was reflecting on his experiences with his father growing up as he described how his love meant being involved in every part of his children’s lives. He shared:

So, it [his childhood] made me kind of overbearing and overprotective over all my children, you know, to make sure that they know every day that I love them, that I’m present and everything. It put me more into their affairs also, which is kind of good and bad because I was involved with everything even when they didn't want me to, you know what I mean? -Anthony

## **Faith**

Throughout fathers’ discussion of aspects of fatherhood, faith and religion presented as significant themes. Fathers discussed their faith as a guide for them in learning how to parent. When describing their experiences with constructing perceptions, identities, and being involved, faith was present in fathers’ responses and dialogue between each other. Conversations regarding faith informing fathering practices was evident in focus groups occurring at the churches and at the barbershops. Bible verses were referenced when discussing their perceptions of fatherhood and father identities. Majority of fathers believe that how they identify is based on their faith.

Fathers quoted several scriptures when referencing their identities. Most commonly, as expressed by one father:

When you look at it through a spiritual standpoint and you can just take the 23 Psalm if you want to, the shepherd concept of where you watch over them [your children], you protect them [your children], all of those things that a good shepherd does. I would say being the shepherd or the person that watch over them [your children] and protect them [your children] and those kinds of things would probably be what I would say would be the most important role that I think a father plays. -Chris

Another father shared: “And for me and being a priest, provider and protector of your home and making sure everything that's in order to the best of your ability.”-Shawn

Fathers also spoke about how they relied on their faith to cope with parenting and put their hope in God. One father expressed: “You put God first, you put God first in your life, and everything else will work itself out.”-Jaylen. They reported that they would pray and seek counsel from other men of their faith. Additionally, fathers discussed how they felt it was important to teach their children about their faith so that it could be a guide for them to as they navigated through life. One father shared:

Because one of the things I really wanted to instill in them is to ask questions. I don't want them borrowing their faith from me. If they're not asking questions that challenge my thinking, then they're just copycatting. I want them to have their own faith, their own relationship with God to where they're actually not leaving their brains at the door, you know, when it comes to the Bible and that kind of stuff. -Cedric

References to faith have been woven throughout the themes thus far. Fathers believe that their faith is an integral part of their parenting that they learned from their parents and their culture.

## Challenges of Fatherhood

As previously mentioned, fathers expressed challenges that were associated with fathering. Although fathers were committed to meeting their children where they were, developmentally, in order to be involved, they expressed how the process of adapting and adjusting in their involvement could be challenging. One father captured the challenge when he shared:

The other day my child wanted to watch YouTube and play a game called the wow something where you got to watch something, but you got to challenge yourself not to say wow when you watch. So, I said, "well why are you watching it when you can just do that yourself?" And he doesn't get that. My other son pays people to give their opinion about something on YouTube, 20 dollars a month. I don't get it but that's what we like to do. -JayShon

This father and other fathers, as previously mentioned, discussed the challenge of generational differences and trying to understand their children's generation when it is different from theirs. One father shared his struggle in understanding his son due to generational differences and differences in experiences. He shared: "One of my biggest distractions [challenges] is how do I get my son, when my core values collide with what he's actually dealing with in the world today?" -Chappell. Fathers would often provide each other with advice and share their experiences to aid fathers in overcoming challenges.

There were a few single-parent fathers in the focus groups and one challenge they discussed was raising their daughters. Fathers expressed that as their daughters reached various developmental stages, they struggled because they did not share the same experiences as their daughters. One father stated: "Sometimes it's having a female explain to your daughters the

different cycle of things that they will have to go through. That shouldn't have to come from me.

That's a challenge of being a single parent. How do I explain this to my daughter?" -Freeman.

Another father described how he would reach out to his mom for help. He shared: "My mom was coaching me, with my daughter most of the time. Hey, this is what you need to do. This is how you deal with a little girl and you got to figure it out."-Quentin.

**Time management.** Fathers discussed time management as a challenge because they were trying to find balance between providing for their family and giving their children the time, they deserve. Prior literature indicates that socioeconomic status (SES) can be a potential barrier to father involvement, especially when considering fathers managing fulfillment of the provider role and being engaged fathers (Castillo et al., 2013; Kinnenberg, 2007; Hall et al., 2007). These findings were highlighted as fathers described their challenges in managing multiple roles (e.g. provider, teacher, playmate). One father shared:

Yes. Time management because you have to work to provide but you still need to find the balance to... like I struggled because mine are in school and I sell cars. So, I work, 10, 11, 12 hours a day and I get home. They might need homework but keeping them up until 10 or 11 to do the homework, that isn't no good in school, so trying to find that balance. And then you still want to get outside with them, do activities, vacation, so I think time management. Learning how to juggle all that is, it's a challenge. -Deon

Another father shared:

I think my biggest challenge is just making sure I give each one enough of my time. Because you're working all week. You come at home and then when you do get home, after you eat that piece of chicken, there go my son, Dad. Let's go play the video games. There goes my daughter, Dad, you'll read this book with me. So, my biggest challenge is,

once again, it's about balance, right? They know mom isn't going to run outside in the yard with them. Right? So, it's all on me. So, my biggest challenge is I just hope that I give them all the right amount of time. -Kevin

Fathers were aware that SES impacts opportunities and mobility, but they believed strongly in their duty to provide and be active and did not express that SES would hinder that. Fathers shared more about desiring to build off of their parents and do better in order to give their children experiences and opportunities that were not granted to them. One father described how rewarding it was to foster life experiences for his children that he did not experience. He said:

To give your child some of the experiences that maybe you didn't have, because when we were kids, we didn't get to do a lot of things that I made sure that I introduced my kids to, so for me, that was most rewarding because I wanted them to develop and have a full idea about this world around us. Just to be able to give them maybe some of the opportunities that I didn't have was the most rewarding thing. -Darius

**Mother-Father relationship.** Fathers discussed relationship dynamics as they discussed aspects of fathering. Their discussion of the mother-father relationship primarily came up as they expressed what they wish they would have prepared for prior to having children. Fathers shared how they wished they would have been prepared for learning how to parent with their wife or child's mother. Particularly, for fathers who were not married to their children's mothers, they discussed challenges associated with navigating that relationship when they had different parenting styles from their child's mother. One father described his experience of co-parenting with a woman that was raising their child differently than he wanted to. He shared:

I think that's one of the things that really set Black fathers back. It's that when they enter that realm that they didn't know about fatherhood, when they are trying to co-parent, with somebody that has a whole totally different outlook view, whether it's good or bad vs. yours. Because I had, my first child, I had a child with a person that I shouldn't have even sat next to on the bus. That's basically how we were not compatible. With the exception of that one thing...After we have a daughter and it's like, wait... oh no, this thing doesn't work. And you see it, but now it's got all these other strings attached to it and all these other... and I'm telling my son, you have no idea how it is to take your child to somebody [child's mother] and drop them off... and you would never do that with your other, with your, I would never take my child over there. But when we co-parent, I have to. -Bobby

Even among married fathers, fathers felt that there was a steep learning curve associated with learning how to be on the same page with their wives about how to parent their children.

One father shared:

Our biggest challenge is the fact that my wife and I, we have different experiences, different values from home. And then we bring it to the table trying to raise this daughter and this child and she has a certain way how to do it. I have a certain way of how to do it, and then there's conflict. But when the conflict comes in, when the chips fall then we go back to the table, said your thing didn't work, mine did. And so that was the greatest challenge even though I'll be married 41 years this next Monday. -Al

### **Interrelatedness (Perception, Identity, and Involvement)**

Fathers perceive that being a father means being present in their children's lives and they also believe their identities and roles shift as their children progress in life. Fathers reports of expression of their perceptions and identities through involvement were congruent. The

interrelatedness of these three aspects of fatherhood emerged and it appears that they influence each other. Fathers indicated that their perception of involvement meant being engaged in every part of their children's life (e.g., school, extracurricular interests, social circles). One father embodied these sentiments as he shared:

Involvement does not mean that you go to work, and you come home and then you're just there. No. It means actively being present in every component of their life, grade wise, teacher-wise, even best friends with them, so if they want to go have a sleepover or if they want to do this, you have to be there. You can't be like, "Oh, that's just the girls," because my baby girl wants dad to be there, so you have to be every ... There's no stone unturned for involvement you have to be. -Lee

Another father shared:

On top of education I think, too, is for me just being present. I think it is very important for my kids to wake up every day and they see me. Right? I'm not in and out. I'm not a part-time dad. I'm a full-time dad. -Tyrone

One father expressed how he was involved in everything his children were involved in. He stated:

If my kids were taking martial arts, that was something I decided to do, Taekwondo or something like that or karate, but almost every other sport that my kids play or any other thing they was involved, be at the Boy Scouts. If they were going camping, I was going camping with them. If they were doing something, a field trip going to St. Augustine, I was on the field trip with them, so it was whatever they were involved in. Like this brother said, whether it was school, whether it was sports, whether it was church, whatever it was, I was just there and was something that I wanted to do. -Zeke



Other fathers described being involved through listening to their kids and being aware of what their children are dealing with. One father described how his perceptions of his role as a protector informed how he wanted to be involved with his children. He discussed how being aware of what was going on with his children allowed him to be their protector because he was engaged in different aspects of their lives.

I think really out of being that protector, making sure your kid is safe, but even in that with that being the foundation, I just want to be there when (paused) I want to know what my kids got going on because as a public educator, I see so much that kids do and how kids come so close to some situations that they could not get themselves out and their parents don't have a clue. I want to be there because I want to protect my kids, so being that engagement of my perception. -Trey

Fathers elaborated on how they enacted identities through their involvement. One of the most prominent identities mentioned was an educator. Fathers believed that there were no limits on what they should be teaching their children. Fathers described wanting to teach their children about financial literacy, understanding how to deal with racism and discrimination, importance of education, and relational lessons that could help them when they started dating, got married, or had children. Several fathers shared that teaching their children was a vital to their involvement with their children. One father shared a proud moment in teaching his daughter math. He shared:

Any time you teach him something, whether it's a word or walking. My daughter is 11. I remember I got a video on my phone from four years ago, and she came home. She like, "dad, I'm tired of this school, it's boring, I know everything" I said, "you not dividing". She said, "can you teach me?" I said yep and I taught her, I was so proud. I got some

skittles and I taught her to divide today and next day she went to school, they still weren't on division, so she was very happy. She was bragging to all her friends. But it makes you feel good. Whenever you trying to teach them whatever they need to know in life, it's pretty cool. -Jonathan

Another father shared his experiences in teaching his children financial lessons that would help them in the future. He stated:

But I teach them, I show them things. I'll go down a lot. Like whether it's mutual funds, whether it's stocks, whether it's taxes or whether it's assets, liability, I'm teaching them those things that I learned my parents didn't teach me. But it's like I got to teach you these things because that's what society is talking about. So, I go, I showed her [his daughter] how to buy a car. I took her to the dealership. I had everything set. She did the paperwork. I was just watching through the process. My son, he wants to buy a house. He needs credit. Okay, credit rules the world. So, I was teaching him three or four years ago this is how credit works. You want a house, you got to have this credit. You got to make sure you're building it. -Sherrod

This quote also highlights the process of fatherhood being lifelong, because this father's children were older, but he was still active in teaching them and helping them accomplish their life goals. Similar to father identity, fathers indicate that the ways that they are involved with their children should be adapted as their children grow and evolve.

## **Summary**

In summary, these qualitative results provide in-depth answers to each of the research questions. In terms of research question one, fathers' perceptions of fatherhood are multidimensional. Fathers perceive that fatherhood entails a sense of responsibility to their

children that involves them being willing to adapt and adjust their beliefs on their roles, identities, and involvement as their children age. Their identities encompass their perceptions of who a father is, but also reflect their children's needs. These results indicate that fathers embody an array of identities (e.g., educators, protectors, consultants, coaches, and confidants). Results of research question two suggests that that the manner in which they are involved with their children represent their perceptions of fatherhood as well as their identities. Furthermore, these results indicate that father perceptions, identities, and involvement all influence each other over time and are impacted by numerous contextual factors. Fathers described how shifts in their perceptions led to changes in identities and roles they fulfilled which ultimately influenced how they were involved with their children. Furthermore, fathers were able to expand on contextual factors that informed their perceptions, identities, and involvement which addresses research question three. In regard to research question four, the results from this study highlight similarities, more so than differences, among fathers from different family of origins as it relates to their experiences with constructing their perceptions, identities, and how they are involved with their children. The primary difference between fathers of different family of origins were how various contextual factors shaped their experiences in learning how to be fathers.

Taken together, from content (e.g., textual descriptions) and context (e.g., structural descriptions), fathers perceive that fatherhood is a lifelong journey in which they want to be present in each stage of their children's lives. These results provide the essence of fatherhood, selflessness. Despite challenges they may encounter, fathers are willing to evolve in their perceptions, identities, and involvement to meet the needs of their children, exemplifying selflessness. The results of this study indicate that fathers are aware of contextual factors that have impacted their lives but consciously choose to make their experiences advantageous for

their children by learning and growing from their experiences. Additionally, these qualitative findings highlight the importance of programs, forums, and interventions for Black fathers that are culturally sensitive. Collectively, fathers expressed how valuable the experience of participating in focus groups was, from the information they learned, to the connection garnered from shared experiences, and advice they received from one another.

## CHAPTER 5

### DISCUSSION

Black fathers have an invaluable role in their children's lives as evidenced by prior literature that indicates both positive and negative child outcomes due to father presence or absence (Alleyne-Green et al., 2015; Baker, 2014; Cooper, 2009; Curtis et al., 2017; Doyle et al., 2017). To further understand father's involvement, researchers have sought to explore fathers' perceptions of fatherhood and the identities they embody. Both, father perceptions and identities are influential in shaping father involvement. However, prior literature has not examined the reciprocal nature of these aspects of fatherhood (e.g., perceptions, identity, and involvement) as well as how these aspects of fatherhood evolve over time. Furthermore, it is important to consider various contextual factors that inform Black fathers' perceptions and shape their identities and involvement. Thus, an in-depth understanding of these factors is necessary in order to have a comprehensive view on Black fathers' experience in learning to become fathers and fulfillment of their perceptions of fatherhood. Additionally, research indicates that 48% of Black children are raised in single-parent homes (United States Census Bureau, 2018). Given the influence of family of origin on father's perceptions (Gordon et al., 2012; Roy, 2006; Wilson et al., 2016), it is important to determine if there are differences or similarities, among fathers of different family of origins, regarding aspects of fathering. Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory was utilized to interpret how numerous systems (e.g., contextual factors) influence aspects of fatherhood.

The purpose of this study was to gain in-depth understanding of fathers' perceptions, identities, and involvement. Specifically, this study explored how aspects of fatherhood to include perceptions, identities, and involvement, were constructed and shaped by various

contextual factors over time. This study also sought to determine differences and similarities, as it pertains to aspects of fathering, among fathers from different family of origins. To address this study's aims, semi-structured focus groups were conducted to allow for rich discussion and sharing of experiences from a diverse group of fathers. The analyses of this study were guided by phenomenological principles and involved a systemic coding process. Findings of this study, implications, strengths, limitations, and future directions will be discussed in this chapter.

Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory (1994) was utilized to conceptualize fathers' development of their perceptions, identities, and involvement. Bronfenbrenner (1994) posits that development occurs through interactions between the developing entity and their environment. This theory supports the importance of proximal process in shaping human development. Findings from this study support this notion. For example, fathers' interactions with their fathers and mothers influenced their development as fathers to include their perceptions, identities, and involvement. Bronfenbrenner's theory suggests that fathers' perceptions, identities, and involvement are continually being developed based on the interaction's fathers' have with their environment (e.g., family relationships, work dynamics, societal norms or barriers). Findings from this study align with Bronfenbrenner's key propositions and highlight how fathers are evolving as their environments are changing. This study also captures fathers' perceptions of how ecological systems (i.e., micro-, meso-, exo-, macro-, and chronosystems) shape aspects of their development over time. Fathers provided narratives describing their development and shared the various context in which their development occurred. The findings of this study indicate salient environmental systems that inform Black fathers' perceptions, identity, and involvement.

## **Fatherhood is Multidimensional**

Fathers in this study described their perceptions of fatherhood. Their perceptions encompassed the meaning of a father coupled with their beliefs about father identity and involvement. Fathers perceive that fatherhood involves being present for your children. Fathers explained to be present entails responsibility for their children, fostering a sense of identity in their children, and preparing them to navigate through life. Fathers' shared that their identities portray their perceptions of being a present father. Fathers described numerous identities, but the commonality among their descriptions was the emphasis that their identities reflected their children's needs. Fathers believed that being present means they are attentive to their children and their needs (e.g., physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual); thus, their identities are catered to their children more so than identities that others have ascribed to fatherhood. This is significant because fatherhood is often associated with financial and disciplinary roles (Kinnenberg, 2007; Marsiglio, 1993; Lamb, 2000). However, these findings support prior literature that suggest fatherhood is evolving to include nurturant and caretaking roles (King et al., 2004; Goodman, 2018; Perry et al., 2012). Fathers in this study described the multidimensional nature of fatherhood. Although multidimensionality is not a new concept within fatherhood literature, this study is unique in gaining insight on layers of the multidimensionality of Black fatherhood through use of a diverse group of fathers and exploration of fathers' development within various context.

**Responsibility.** Responsibility was described as an essential characteristic of fatherhood. Fathers shared that from the moment they knew they were going to be fathers, their lives changed. Fathers depicted their process of realizing they were going to be fathers and emphasized how responsibility was a primary thought when conceptualizing fatherhood.

Responsibility meant duty, obligation, and commitment to their children and families. A sense of duty and obligation is supported by previous literature (Coles, 2002). Fathers in this study further elaborated in sharing how accepting responsibility meant shifts in their world view. Fathers discussed how their world view now included their children and their thoughts and actions were determined based on the best interest of their child. This was highlighted by numerous fathers as they described everything they did had to be with their children in mind.

Fathers in this study emphasized responsibility for their children as a lifelong commitment. They described their responsibility across numerous domains. Within the physical domain, fathers viewed responsibility as providing for their children (e.g., clothing, shelter, food, financial resources, and safety). Prior literature of fathers as providers supports these findings (Diemer, 2002). The mental and emotional domains encompass fostering an open relationship with their children in which they listen to their children, empower them, support them, and love them. Fathers expressed that connecting with their children mentally and emotionally was a responsibility they did not want to fail in because that meant their children would look for emotional connections in other places, seeking validation and understanding. Coupled with connection, fathers articulated responsibility for fostering a sense of identity in their children. Fathers perceived that fatherhood means helping their children develop and supporting them as they figure out their purpose in life. The spiritual element of responsibility was depicted as fathers instilling faith-based values in their children. Fathers desired for faith to serve as a guide for their children, just as it has served as a guide for them. These findings support previous literature in father's sense of responsibility to their children (Coley, 2003; Hofferth, 2003), however these qualitative findings provide in-depth insight of the layers of responsibility that govern fathers' interactions with their children. An additional layer that is specific to fathers of



color (e.g., Black fathers) is responsibility for preparing their children for managing life as person of color.

**Ethnic Racial Socialization (ERS).** Ethnic racial socialization (ERS) is commonly practiced by marginalized populations (Hughes, Smith, Stevenson, Rodriguez, Johnson, & Spicer, 2006). ERS practices entail parents preparing their children for encounters with racism, discrimination, and prejudice (Hughes & Johnson, 2001; Umaña-Taylor, 2016). Fathers in this study explained engaging in ERS as a normative practice within Black culture. Their engagement in ERS stems from their perceptions of responsible fatherhood, which includes the safety of their children. Fathers in this study described taking on roles of educators and protectors as they recounted conversations they had with their children about systemic barriers, the importance of education to circumvent those barriers, and how to handle encounters with authority (e.g., police).

Fathers described that engaging in ERS practices was two-fold. They believed it fulfilled their perception of responsibility, but it also created a sense of worry. Fathers in this study were transparent and demonstrated courage by sharing vulnerabilities surrounding ERS practices. Fathers chronicled their experiences of operating through life as Black men and fathers, and therefore voiced concerns for their children because they know how challenging life can be, for persons of color, given the presence of institutional racism, systemic barriers, and social injustices in our society. Coupled with these concerns, fathers also discussed geographical location and neighborhood characteristics as factors that influenced the types of conversations they had with their children regarding race and safety (Hofferth, 2003). However, in fathers sharing their engagement in ERS, fathers underlying fears and worries surfaced. Fathers fear that their children will experience similar experiences as them, especially their sons. They expressed

being unsure of how to handle the fear of the unknown. The PI could feel the gravity of how systemic barriers and racism impact fathers as they recalled conversations they have with their children. They also illustrated how these contextual factors can impact a father's self-concept and can serve as barriers to fathers being involved. Their descriptions support Hall and colleagues (2007) findings of economic barriers that can impact fathers and Rogers and colleagues (2015) findings on the impact of systemic barriers on Black men's perception of their masculinity. These results provide reason for culturally informed clinical interventions that acknowledge experiences of Black fathers and families while also aiding in providing healthy coping for their fears and worries (Reynolds & Gonzales-Backen, 2017). Additionally, fathers in this study served as sources of support for each other as they expressed fears and worries. Fathers were able to connect with each other and console each other because they understood what it means to be Black fathers in our society. The natural support that emerged from the focus groups highlights a need for accessibility to support groups and availability of programs for Black fathers.

**Flexibility/adaptability.** Flexibility and adaptability are evident throughout fathers' perceptions of fatherhood. Fathers are not restricted to the rigid masculine characterizations of fatherhood. Fathers have broadened their roles and involvement with the purpose of being available to meet their children's needs (Goodman, 2018). The results of this study indicate how fathers are willing to embody numerous identities (e.g., nurturer, educator, coach, and advisor) as their children reach various developmental stages. As their identifies shift, the manner in which they are involved is also shifting to reflect the identity they are portraying (Julion et al., 2007). Fathers delineate that flexibility in fatherhood requires them to adapt based on their proximal interactions with various contextual factors. Fathers' emphasized that their parenting styles were

reflective of systemic influences such as dynamics within their families (microsystems), their jobs, schools, or children's schools (mesosystems), societal culture (exosystems), systemic barriers and policies (macrosystems), and time (chronosystem).

Fathers conveyed that adjusting their beliefs was essential for them to establish and maintain connected to their children. Fathers had to learn how to mesh their world with their children's worlds. This was exhibited in the form of engaging in technology more (e.g., texting, gaming, online videos) and sharing in new extracurricular activities with their children (e.g., martial arts, biology, and animals). Fathers did not want their relationships with their children to remain stagnant, thus they evolved as their children evolved. These findings can be conceptualized through Bronfenbrenner's emphasis on change over time (e.g., chronosystem). Fathers shared how their perceptions of identities, roles, and involvement associated with fatherhood was modified to meet their children's needs. The maturation of fathers was captured as fathers provided stories of how their identities and involvement changed as their children progressed from toddlers, young children, adolescents, young adults, to adults. These results further support fathers' perceptions, that fatherhood is a lifelong commitment which requires them to adapt and evolve.

### **Visualization/Representation**

Fathers in this study discussed the impact of visualization of fatherhood through multiple platforms (e.g., television, music, and athletics). They emphasized how important visual representations were for them in learning to become fathers. Fathers most often referenced the Cosby show, particularly those who grew up in single-parent homes, for being able to understand various components associated with fatherhood. Additionally, younger fathers shared the impact of seeing rappers and musicians promote fatherhood in their music as well as in social media

posts that picture their children with them. These positive images of Black fathers are significant because they contradict the popular portrayal of Black fathers as absent or “deadbeat dads” (Edin et al., 2013).

Fathers were aware of the perceptions of Black fathers; however, they chose to share how their personal experiences and interactions with other fathers shed light on active Black fathers. For instance, numerous fathers described the prevalence of community in shaping their perceptions of fatherhood, father identities, and father involvement. Fathers, regardless of family of origin, discussed having communities (e.g., neighborhoods, friends, family, physical spaces, social fathers) around them that displayed fathers who were involved with their children (Barton et al., 2015). Some fathers expressed how mentors and other community father figures were influential in guiding them as they learned to become fathers (Gordon et al., 2012). Coupled with mentors and social father figures, fathers lamented on the notion of surrounding yourself with fathers that you desire to emulate. Essentially, they described being a part of friend groups that encouraged being present for their children and were able to grow as fathers by being a part of friend groups that challenged them to grow as fathers. The visualization/representation theme is supported by Abdill’s (2018) study in which she explored the mesosystem level of interaction and its’ influence on Black fatherhood. Her study was focused on providing representative depictions of low-income, urban fathers, in which she found community has a significant impact on Black fathers. This study captures the influence of community as a form of representation that can empower fathers. Even more powerful than fathers sharing the importance of community was the physical display of community in each focus group. Fathers became a community of support for each father as they described their experiences with aspects of fatherhood. In particular, as fathers detailed challenges, fears, or experienced emotional moments, fathers

provided validation and consultation as they shared their own insights on fatherhood with each other.

The significance of representation and visualization is an important finding from this study that should be utilized when fatherhood programs and interventions are being developed. Fathers are exposed to negative images of themselves and acknowledge the portion of Black fathers that are absent, however given the magnitude of representation there should be more focus on providing opportunity for fathers to see positive visualizations through fatherhood programs and increased community spaces for fathers to be supported.

### **Family of Origin**

The influence of family of origin on father's perceptions, identities, and involvement was evident as fathers described how their relationships with their mothers and fathers informed their parenting. These results are supported by prior literature on the impact of family of origin on Black fathers (Brown et al., 2018). Although fathers grew up with their mothers in both family of origins, more of their perceptions of fatherhood were shaped by their fathers. Fathers emphasized that they used their upbringings in deciding which generational patterns they wanted to continue, or break based on their fathers' presence or absence. Fathers who had relationships with their fathers were often grateful for the lessons they learned from their fathers. The primary investigator could feel the invaluable nature of these relationships as fathers shared emotionally charged reflections of their experiences with their father and how that molded their perceptions of fatherhood. These findings suggest the importance of having involved fathers regardless of whether they are residential or nonresidential fathers. More efforts of dissemination of fatherhood research through programs and workshops could be fruitful in the movement of increasing father involvement.

Previous literature indicates that fathers whose fathers were absent are motivated to fill voids from their father's absence by being present for their children (Leath, 2017; Roy 2006). This study's findings support extant literature. Fathers who did not have engaged fathers were just as involved as fathers who were raised with their fathers. Fathers emphasized that they could learn from their father's absence and as mentioned previously, visualization and representation of other involved Black fathers provided them with encouragement that they too could be involved fathers. The passion that fathers shared about being active fathers despite growing up without an active father was inspiring to hear. Prior literature indicates that fathers often feel a void along with other negative emotions when discussing absent fathers (Roy, 2006). Fathers vowed to ensure their children did not share the same emotional voids as them by being there for their children throughout every stage of life.

### **Improving the Next Generation**

Similar to the importance of community in helping fathers learn to be fathers, they perceived it was their duty to make the next generation in their communities better, starting with their own children. Their perception of making the next generation better was expressed as integral to fatherhood and influenced their identities and involvement. Fathers described themselves as role models, educators, and confidants because they know their children are looking at them as examples of how they should carry themselves. Some of these identities are consistent with Julion and colleagues' findings (2007). Fathers desired to spend time teaching their children and engaging in various activities with their children to encourage them and convey to them that they can strive to be better than their parents. Furthermore, fathers desire to change the narrative of Black fathers by being positive and influential figures for their children so their children also feel empowered to defy stereotypes.

**Learning from the previous generation.** As previously discussed, family of origin is a significant contextual factor that influences aspects of fatherhood (Beaton et al., 2003; Wilson et al., 2016). However, fathers from both family of origins expressed how important it was to learn from the generations before them to improve their children's experiences with their fathers. As they described their desire to learn from the previous generation, they also shared that improvements are accompanied by challenges. Aside from differences in family structure, fathers of both family of origins shared similar challenges. For instance, fathers who were raised with their fathers disclosed struggles of learning how to love their kids and making efforts to be affectionate because they were not accustomed to their fathers displaying affection. Fathers raised in both households expressed how a lack of affection and love growing up inspired them to want to be better than their fathers and be emotionally available for their children. They described how sociohistorical context (e.g., slavery, civil rights era) impacted generations of fathers in their families (Billingsley, 1992) and how Black men generally were not affectionate but demonstrated their love through providing for their children's basic needs. Fathers also communicated how difficult it must have been for their fathers to be degraded and face overt racism and still have to come home and be a father. Therefore, fathers understood why their fathers may not have been emotionally available, yet they reflected on how they longed for that and aimed to improve as fathers by being engaged in every aspect of their children's lives.

These qualitative results indicate the importance of accounting for contextual factors, such as social climate, in the study of Black fathers because it can significantly impact fathers' identities and involvement. Additionally, fathers conveyed how they have learned along the way through trial and error; however, fatherhood programs and clinical interventions could focus on

enhancing the quality of father-child relationships and assisting fathers in being emotionally present despite the need for emotional toughness in navigating life as a man of color.

### **Faith**

Faith is a cultural component of Black communities. The presence of faith served as a guide for most fathers. Findings in this study suggest that fathers' perceptions of fatherhood, their identities, and their involvement were informed by their faith. Fathers in each focus group referenced biblical scriptures as they described the identities they embodied and how they were involved with their children. Interestingly, despite the difference in settings, fathers who participated in focus groups at barbershops, mentioned their faith equally as much as fathers who participated at the churches. These results suggest that program developers could market to churches and barbershops to recruit diverse fathers to participate in programs. Furthermore, the content of fatherhood programs could include elements of faith.

In addition to faith being a guide for fathers, fathers shared that their faith is a source of coping and hope (Brown, 2008). As previously mentioned, fathering can be emotionally taxing, thus fathers explained how they would use their faith to cope. Fathers described attending church and praying as coping mechanisms for handling challenges that arise during fatherhood. The results highlight the importance of healthy coping for fathers and the potential for integrating faith into clinical interventions for fathers and their families.

### **Challenges of Fatherhood**

The results from this study highlight various challenges that fathers encounter. One of the prominent challenges fathers described was their interactions with their children. Fathers in this study narrated struggles of connecting with their children due to generational differences. Fathers depicted the social era they were growing up in and how their children are growing up in



different times. For instance, fathers discussed the advances in technology and how their children are more consumed with being online and gaming whereas in their generation they preferred in person communication and activities. Despite differences between fathers and their children, fathers emphasized it was their responsibility to adapt in how they interact with their children in order to create and maintain connection with their children. Additionally, fathers in this group ranged in age and younger fathers were able to provide advice to older fathers about creative ways to be involved in with their children and aim to understand their children's world. Previous literature indicated several barriers and challenges to father's involvement to include SES, incarceration, residence, and mother-father relationship quality (Castillo et al., 2013; Perry et al., 2012; Varga et al., 2017). The results of this study build upon this literature by revealing challenges that are specific to father-child relationships. Furthermore, these results feature fathers' adaption in father identities and involvement as their children develop.

**Time management.** Another challenge was exposed as fathers were discussing potential barriers to father involvement (e.g., socioeconomic status (SES) and incarceration). Fathers acknowledged how incarceration is a systemic barrier than can impact fathers but none of them disclosed this as a personal barrier. Although this was not a barrier for fathers in this study, this contextual factor is important to account for given how prevalent incarceration rates are for Black men. Similarly, fathers in this study were aware of the impact of SES on involvement. The provider identity is often associated with SES in fatherhood studies (Cazenave, 1979; Diemer, 2002; Hall et al., 2007); however, this identity was not as salient of an identity. When the primary researched probed fathers about providing, fathers said providing was an innate part of fathering, it was second nature. They expressed that providing is an aspect of responsibility because they are obligated to ensure that their children are provided for. As fathers shared their

perceptions and experiences, it appeared as if fathers' will supersede the potential barriers of SES. Additionally, fathers communicated how they learned from their parents and if their parents struggled financially, they knew they did not desire the same for their children. Fathers aimed to create better opportunities for their children and better opportunities for themselves to be involved and not hindered by the restrictions of income as mentioned in prior literature (Pattern, 2016).

Albeit SES was not as prominent of a barrier among fathers in this study, fathers discussed the challenge of time management. Fathers described their day to day schedules and depicted the challenge of work-family balance. Fathers indicated competing priorities, providing for their family and being emotionally and mentally available to engage with their children and spouse or significant other. Fathers shared that their perceptions entail being involved with their families, but it could be a struggle to manage their time equally between family members and maintaining energy to be active with their families. The challenge was illustrated as fathers recounted memories with their children and having children in different phases of development. For example, fathers shared how one of their children would need help with homework while the other would want to go out and play, and they struggled with balancing educator and playmate roles. Even though SES is important to consider and can impact father's life opportunities and their children's life opportunities, it may be beneficial to help fathers with time management. Coupled with time management workshops, fathers also need spaces (e.g., therapy or fatherhood forums) where the feelings they carry about experiencing difficulty with balance can be normalized and validated.

**Mother-Father relationship.** Fathers often reflected on various aspects of fathering depending on the content being discussed. One reflection that emerged across each focus group

was preparation for changes in relationship dynamics upon the birth of their children. The results of this study suggest that fathers experienced challenges in navigating relational dynamics with their wives or children's mother as they learned to become fathers. Most commonly, fathers characterized their challenges as differences in parenting styles and behaviors. Fathers expressed a need for the next generation of fathers to be aware of the relational aspects involved with having a child and emphasized that new fathers should make sure the mother of their children is in agreement with them as it pertains to raising their children. Despite challenges, fathers did not express that their wives or children's mothers inhibited them from being the fathers they desired to be. Fathers elaborated on how they figured out how to manage relationship challenges with time and learned how to compromise with the mother of their children. These results provide context for prior literature that highlights mother-father relationships as a barrier to involvement (Roy et al., 2005; Ryan et al., 2008). This study's findings contribute to the literature by capturing the nuances involved in father's relationships with the mother of their children. These findings provide reason for family therapy for fathers and their partners. Learning to navigate relational dynamics should be incorporated in fatherhood programs and interventions. Additionally, fathers indicated that learning to co-parent would be helpful prior to the birth of their child, therefore programs and interventions could target parents who are expecting as a preventive intervention to circumvent future challenges related to lack of awareness of parenting styles.

### **Interrelatedness (Perceptions, Identity, and Involvement)**

Fatherhood is multifaceted; roles of fathers and their involvement with their children have developed over the years. This study supports prior literature's claims that depict Black fathers as being more than breadwinners (Abdill, 2018; Johnson et al., 2016). From this study

one can gather that fathers perceive they have crucial roles in their children's development. Fathers believe perceptions, identity, and involvement change over time and that each of these aspects of fatherhood are exemplified differently based on several contextual factors. During each focus group, fathers reiterated that they had to adapt their perceptions, identities, and involvement to suit their children's needs. The interrelatedness of these aspects of fatherhood was reflected in fathers recounting how their perceptions informed various identities and forms of involvement, however as their children aged and they realized that their children required different forms of involvement, the identities they embodied changed as well as their perceptions on how they need to be present. These results contribute to the field because they highlight the need for fatherhood programs and interventions across the lifespan. Bronfenbrenner's chronosystem posits the necessity for accounting for time. Results from this study indicate that not only do father's perceptions, identities, and involvement influence each other but they also change over time and are changed based on context (e.g., social climate/time period, neighborhood context, relational structures). Furthermore, fathers indicated that each system influences other systems (i.e., micro-, meso- exo- and macrosystems.). Fatherhood programs and interventions must cater to these changes and provide content that is relevant to where fathers are.

### **Implications**

Mental health professionals and program developers could utilize findings from this study and previous findings on Black fatherhood to inform clinical practice and program development. For mental health professionals, it is essential to create a safe environment and establish rapport with Black fathers. Prior literature indicates that it can be difficult to engage fathers in therapy given the history of maltreatment of marginalized populations (Cruz et al.,

2008). Therefore, clinicians should be aware of personal biases in order to create a therapeutic environment that encourages Black fathers to share their world view and experiences. Although this study was not clinically focused, the primary investigator is a therapist and sought to create safety and trust in the environment by utilizing a culturally safe space, being transparent about the purpose of the focus group, and integrating a co-facilitator that shared knowledge of participants' experiences. Clinicians are not expected to replicate this research process, but they could implement some aspects such as creating a safe cultural space through use of language that relates to fathers and teaming with clinically competent colleagues or supervisors, who may be experienced in working with Black fathers and families, as necessary. Mental health professionals would also benefit from utilizing a systemic framework in conceptualization and treatment of Black fathers and families (Hines & Boyd-Franklin, 2005). As highlighted in the results of this study, Black fathers engage in systemic processes and are impacted by multiple systems, thus, to understand fathers in totality and provide effective treatment, professionals should incorporate systemic interventions. Couple or family therapy could be helpful for fathers in enhancing their relationships with their children and relationships with the mother of their children. Learning how to navigate various relationship dynamics was a challenge for fathers that could be addressed in couple and family therapy. Coupled with systemic interventions, given the influence of faith it may be beneficial for clinicians to allow fathers to incorporate their faith into their therapeutic work. Lastly, but of great importance is advocacy of mental health services for this population. Fathers within these focus groups experienced cathartic moments in the sharing of their fatherhood experiences that appeared to be therapeutic for them as they expressed various emotions. Fathers could benefit from mental health services because fathering, although rewarding, is taxing. Thus, fathers could use a safe space similar to these focus groups to release.

Program developers could use fathers' perceptions of aspects of fatherhood to create programs specific to Black fathers. The content of those programs could utilize the insight gained from this study to build upon fathers' perceptions to improve their roles and involvement with their children. Additionally, developers should be aware of various contextual factors that influence fathers and aim to circumvent or address any barriers. Fathers discussed facing numerous challenges and the results of this study could provide potential topics to be addressed within programs. Programs should provide fathers with resources that aid in them fulfilling their perceptions of responsible fatherhood.

Fatherhood programs could also benefit from including fathers in the construction of programs. Fathers in this study discussed how forums would be advantageous and briefly discussed logistics for implementing forums in their communities, thus program developers could benefit from fathers' ideas, especially as they pertain to accessibility and availability. From this study, it is clear that community is important, therefore fathers could help in identifying culturally relevant or safe locations for fatherhood programs. Representation is important for this population, therefore, including fathers in the development of programs could assist in recruitment and retention because fathers are able to visualize someone who they can relate to. Furthermore, connection through mentorship could be beneficial for fathers. Fathers within each focus group acted as mentors in providing advice and normalizing other fathers' experiences and feelings. Fathers expressed gratitude for the space and the connections established during each forum. Therefore, mentorship could be an essential component of fatherhood programs. Finally, fatherhood programs should seek to empower fathers.

## **Strengths**

This study encompasses several strengths. First, the sample of this study was diverse, which addresses a gap in the literature. The sample included diversity in residence, socioeconomic status, marital status, and age. Prior literature has primarily focused on low-income or nonresidential fathers, however, recruiting a diverse sample allowed for the researcher to understand that there are similarities in aspects of fatherhood among fathers of different backgrounds. Although generalizability is not a goal of qualitative research, this study sought to provide representative narratives of Black fathers. The use of focus groups provided the opportunity for natural and in-depth discussions to occur among fathers. Focus groups also were a strength of this study because it helped with addressing potential concerns in recruiting from this population.

The second strength of this study was the setting of the focus groups. The focus groups occurred in barbershops and churches. The intent was to provide a natural setting for data to be collected. Additionally, the primary investigator (PI) aimed to convey cultural sensitivity due to prior experiences of maltreatment. The PI desired to conduct this study in a culturally relevant and natural space to ease any anxiety or apprehensiveness that could come from participating in a research study (Cochran, 1997; Rodriguez et al., 2011). The PI was transparent with participants and disclosed the purpose of the study, in addition to what would happen with the results from this study. The primary investigator welcomed conversations about the research process with participants in an effort to increase trust and increase likelihood of fathers sharing open and honest experiences regarding aspects of fatherhood. Furthermore, the study included a co-facilitator in each focus group. This strengthened the study because fathers were able to connect with the co-facilitator as a fellow father and Black male. The co-facilitator also

understood fathers' experiences and was able to assist in guiding the flow of the discussions to complement the participants verbal and nonverbal cues. Furthermore, the co-facilitator could ask questions in a nuanced manner in which the PI would not have been able to, thus allowing for deeper discussion on various aspects of fatherhood to include vulnerabilities. Use of a co-facilitator strengthened the quantity and quality of responses provided by fathers.

Another strength was the use of a systemic analytic process. Analyses were conducted through a step-by-step process. This process allowed for multiple levels of analysis by the primary investigator and team of coders. Utilization of a team of coders helped to prevent coding bias. Additionally, implementing a step-by-step process for coding and including multiple coders increased replicability as each coder compared codes with the rest of the research team. Furthermore, the primary investigator did not present herself as an expert on fathers' experiences and solicited fathers help with the analysis. Four fathers reviewed the primary investigator's interpretations of the data to ensure that her interpretations were accurate reflections of their experiences. This helped to protect the quality of the data as well as preserve the relationship between the PI and the participants because she honored the plan that was discussed with participants.

A final strength is the qualitative design of this study. This qualitative study provides context for previous quantitative research and allowed for fathers to express the depths of their fatherhood experiences. This study was able to capture the multidimensional nature of fatherhood as well as the evolvment of fathers across time. The qualitative design of this study serves as a strength because it elevated the voices of fathers who are often silenced and oppressed. Fathers felt validated in sharing their stories, thus future research should aim to continue to explore fatherhood, while also empowering fathers on their fatherhood journey.



Moreover, this study was valuable to the participants in this study because they were able to express aspects of fatherhood that are important to them, chronicle their experiences, and indicate challenges they encounter which allows for scholars, mental health professionals, and program developers to provide relevant resources and support.

### **Limitations**

Based on the research epistemology, research questions, and group of interest (i.e., Black fathers), focus groups were determined to be the most appreciate method of data collection. Although this study contributes to fatherhood literature, it is not withstanding limitations. First, the size of each focus group could have been smaller to create opportunity for more individual in-depth responses. Smaller focus groups could grant more time for fathers to elaborate on their experiences. However, the larger size of the focus groups could have provided comfort for fathers in feeling as if the focus group was not focused on them and their experiences solely. Additionally, fathers were able to reflect on each other's responses and respond to each other which led to fruitful discussions. The size of the groups allowed for a diverse group of fathers to gather and provided opportunity for fathers to realize they shared similar fatherhood experiences with fathers from different backgrounds. Another limitation was the composition of a few demographic questions. Some of the questions could have included more answer choices. For instance, the question about family of origin only included two answer choices (e.g., two-parent home and single-parent home). These answer choices did not capture the variety of responses that were discussed in the focus groups. Due to the qualitative nature of the study fathers were able to discuss how there were periods of their life in which their family structure changed and how other extended family were instrumental in their upbringing. Lastly, despite the key advantages of using focus groups, particularly with underrepresented groups such as Black

fathers, there are potential limitations regarding data analysis. Wilkinson (1998) emphasized that a key potential issue of focus group data analysis occurs when the researcher does not describe the coding and analytic process in order to address differences between one-on-one interviews and focus group data. This study protected against this potential issue by identifying, describing, and implementing a systematic coding scheme, guided by phenomenological principles, which was applied across each transcript for the focus groups allowing for clear and consistent analysis of group patterns. However, future research should seek to build upon this study by conducting one-on-one interviews to conduct individual level analyses of fathers' experiences with aspects of fatherhood.

### **Future Directions**

Findings from this study suggest several future directions for future research. Although there were not many present, there were a few stepfathers who shared their experiences with their biological children and stepchildren. In sharing their experiences, they discussed a few challenges. Additionally, several fathers mentioned being raised by their mother and stepfather. Future research should seek to understand the process of Black fathers forming relationships with their stepchildren. Specifically, more research should assess how fathers are navigating insertion into a system that already exists as it pertains to learning and establishing roles and boundaries within the family system. Another direction to advance the Black fatherhood literature would be to examine the utilization of culturally safe spaces for programs or clinical interventions. Barbershops have often been the setting for health-related prevention and intervention by scholars due to the openness and trust that Black men associate with barbershops (Brawner et al., 2013; Luque et al., 2011; Releford, Frencher, & Yancey, 2010). It would be beneficial to determine the usefulness of these spaces for fatherhood programs. Lastly, as evident

in the results of this study, fathers carry emotional loads. Future research regarding culturally appropriate therapeutic interventions to help fathers in dealing with the stress and worries that accompany fatherhood and that also come with being a Black man would be beneficial for the progression of fatherhood literature.

Fathers in this study shared their experiences with various aspects of fatherhood. They provided insight into their worlds as Black men and fathers. One aim of this study was to uplift Black fathers and elevate their voices and their stories. Thus, the researcher saw fit to conclude this dissertation with a father's voice. Black fathers expressed their desire to be involved with their children and Solomon captures this in the quote below:

I had both parents in my house...But I didn't think about how I grew up when it was time to start my family as much as the desire in me to (start a family) and the joy of having a family and the love of my children, I think it was my driving factor. I just wanted to be close to my kids and what was my family. And I knew that I could give them better than what I experienced growing up through giving all that I had because I realized that my parents gave all that they had, that's all they had in their finances and their mental ability. So, I just duplicated the same, just trying to give them all I can.

# APPENDIX A

## IRB APPROVAL

FLORIDA STATE UNIVERSITY  
OFFICE of the VICE PRESIDENT for RESEARCH



### APPROVAL

September 9, 2019

Shar'Dane Harris  
[REDACTED]

Dear Shar'Dane Harris:

On 9/4/2019, the IRB reviewed the following submission:

Type of Review:	Expedited (7)(a) Behavioral research; (7)(b) Social science methods
Title:	Real Talk: An In-Depth Discussion of Black Father's Identity, Perceptions, and Involvement
Investigator:	Shar'Dane Harris
Submission ID:	STUDY00000341
Study ID:	STUDY00000341
Funding:	None
IND, IDE, or HDE:	None
Documents Reviewed:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Demographic Form.pdf, Category: Survey/Questionnaire;</li><li>• Focus Group Questions.pdf, Category: Survey/Questionnaire;</li><li>• Flyer for study.pdf, Category: Recruitment Materials;</li><li>• hrp-502-consent-document-template-IRB-updated.pdf, Category: Consent Form;</li><li>• Script for Verbal Advertising.pdf, Category: Recruitment Materials;</li></ul>

The IRB approved the protocol, effective from 9/4/2019. You are advised that any modification(s) to the protocol for this project must be reviewed and approved by the IRB prior to implementation of the proposed modification(s).

Federal regulations require that the Principal Investigator promptly report any new information related to this protocol (see Investigator Manual (HRP-103)).

In conducting this protocol, you are required to follow the requirements listed in the Investigator Manual (HRP-103), which can be found by navigating to the IRB Library within the IRB system.

Sincerely,

Human Subjects Research Office  
humansubjects@fsu.edu

## APPENDIX B

### IRB CONSENT FORM

**Title of research study:** Real Talk: An In-Depth Discussion of Black Father's Identity, Perceptions, and Involvement

**Investigator:** *Shar'Dane Harris*

**Key Information:** The following is a short summary of this study to help you decide whether or not to be a part of this study. More detailed information is listed later on in this form.

#### **Why am I being invited to take part in a research study?**

We invite you to take part in a research study because we are interested in understanding Black fathers' experiences with creating their father identity and fatherhood perceptions. Additionally, this study seeks to gain rich knowledge of Black fathers' involvement with their children.

#### **What should I know about a research study?**

- Someone will explain this research study to you.
- Whether or not you take part is up to you.
- You can choose not to take part.
- You can agree to take part and later change your mind.
- Your decision will not be held against you.
- You can ask all the questions you want before you decide.

#### **Why is this research being done?**

This study aims to provide representative depictions of Black fathers by exploring their lived experiences of constructing their identity and assessing for the degree to which they are involved with their children. Black fathers are often painted with a broad brush that portrays them as deadbeats or pathologizes them for lacking as breadwinners in research and the media. These depictions can shape social policies and inform fatherhood programs. Thus, it is important to have studies that provide accurate and representative depictions of Black fathers to inform policies and programs.

#### **How long will the research last and what will I need to do?**

We expect that you will be in this research study for an in-person focus group that will last 75 minutes to 90 minutes.

You will be asked to complete a demographic questionnaire prior to the focus group beginning. Upon completion of the demographic questionnaire, you will begin a focus group discussion with the primary investigator and other participants. The focus of the discussion will be related to your father identity, perceptions of fatherhood, and father involvement. The content of the focus group will be recorded with an audio recording device. You will only have to complete the focus group once. The primary investigator (Shar'Dane) will contact you, with your permission, after the focus group has been transcribed to get your feedback on interpretations from the discussion to ensure they are accurate reflections of your experiences.

Please note the focus group will be confidential and will be held confidential to the maximum extent allowable by law. All participants of the focus group will be informed that what is discussed during the focus group is confidential. Any identifying information will be kept separate, with only exception being the transcription of the focus group.

More detailed information about the study procedures can be found under ***“What happens if I say yes, I want to be in this research?”***

**Is there any way being in this study could be bad for me?**

This study has a few risks. First, if during the focus group, you disclose suicidal or homicidal intent, or there is suspicion of child abuse or endangerment, the primary investigator is mandated to report this to the local police department at the time of disclosure; anonymity will not be maintained. Second, you may feel uneasy sharing information about yourself, such as demographic information and relationships with your child(ren). If you feel uneasy you may choose to withdraw from the study at any time.

More detailed information about the risks of this study can be found under ***“Is there any way being in this study could be bad for me? (Detailed Risks)”***

### **Will being in this study help me in any way?**

We cannot promise any benefits to you or others from your taking part in this research. However, possible benefits include a gift card for completion of the focus group. Additionally, your contribution will help improve understanding of the unique experiences of Black fathers and can help improve resources available to fathers in the local community.

### **What happens if I do not want to be in this research?**

Participation in this research is completely voluntary. You can decide to participate or not to participate. Your alternative to participating in this research study is to not participate.

**Detailed Information:** The following is more detailed information about this study in addition to the information listed above.

### **Who can I talk to?**

This research study is being conducted by Shar'Dane Harris who is the primary investigator, Department of Family and Child Sciences, Florida State University. Shar'Dane Harris will be working with a faculty advisor, Dr. Lenore McWey.

If you have questions, concerns, or complaints, or think the research has hurt you, contact Shar'Dane Harris via email (@my.fsu.edu) or phone (###-###-####) or Dr. Lenore McWey via email (@fsu.edu) or phone (###-###-###).

This research has been reviewed and approved by an Institutional Review Board (“IRB”).

You may talk to them at 850-644-7900 or [humansubjects@fsu.edu](mailto:humansubjects@fsu.edu) if:

- Your questions, concerns, or complaints are not being answered by the research team.
- You cannot reach the research team.
- You want to talk to someone besides the research team.
- You have questions about your rights as a research subject.
- You want to get information or provide input about this research.

### **How many people will be studied?**

We expect about 20 people to participate in this research study.

### **What happens if I say “yes” to being in this research?**

If you agree to participate in this research study, the primary investigator will determine your eligibility to participate in the study. To be eligible to participate in this study, you must be: a) 18 years or older and b) have a biological child at least one year in age, c) and identify as either



African American or Black. If you are deemed eligible you will be informed of the location, date, and time of the focus group. You will be asked to complete an online demographic survey through Qualtrics prior to the focus group beginning. Informed consent will be provided to you prior to you gaining access to the demographic survey. You have to provide your consent to participating in the study before you complete the demographic survey. If you do not have access to technological devices (i.e. computers and smart devices) you will complete the demographic survey upon arrival for the focus group.

Once you arrive for the focus the primary investigator will discuss informed consent with you and the other participants prior to the focus group beginning. After hearing and reading the consent form you will need to voluntarily provide written consent to continue with the study. You have the option to withdraw from the study at any point.

The focus group will be recorded with an audio recording device. You will only have to complete the focus group once. Please note content from the focus group will be confidential and will be held confidential to the maximum extent allowable by law. Any identifying information will be kept separate, with only exception being the transcription of the focus group.

The primary investigator will contact you, with your permission, after your interview has been transcribed to get your feedback on interpretations of the focus group discussion to ensure they are accurate reflections of your experiences. This will conclude your participation in the research study.

### **What happens if I say “yes,” but I change my mind later?**

You can leave the research at any time it will not be held against you.

### **Is there any way being in this study could be bad for me? (Detailed Risks)**

This study has a few risks. First, if during the focus group, a you disclose suicidal or homicidal intent, or there is suspicion of child abuse or endangerment, the primary investigator is mandated to report this to the local police department at the time of disclosure; anonymity will not be maintained. Second, you may feel uneasy sharing information about yourself, such as demographic information and relationships with your child(ren). If you feel uneasy you may choose to withdraw from the study at any time.

Additionally, this study is being completed as a focus group which means you would be answering questions and discussing different subjects with other fathers. Therefore, you would have to be open to other fathers knowing your father experiences. However, the benefit to this is the potential for being able to relate or connect with other fathers based on common experiences. You may also be able to learn from other father's experiences just as well as another father is able to learn from your experiences.

### **What happens to the information collected for the research?**

Efforts will be made to limit the use and disclosure of your personal information, including research study, to people who have a need to review this information. We cannot promise complete secrecy. Organizations that may inspect and copy your information include the IRB and other representatives of this organization. Additionally, if you disclose suicidal or homicidal intent, or there is suspicion of child abuse or endangerment, we are mandated to report this to the local police department at the time of disclosure; anonymity will not be maintained.

Identifying information will need to be kept linking the demographics form and the participant's data. After completion of the study, all identifying information will be destroyed. The data will be kept for 3 years after the study is completed. Only the primary investigator will have access to the data. We may publish the results of this research. However, we will keep your name and other identifying information confidential.

### **What else do I need to know?**

If you agree to take part in this research study and complete the focus group, we will enter your name in a drawing for one of several \$10 gift cards as compensation for your time and effort.

**Signature Block for Capable Adult**

Your signature documents your permission to take part in this research.

---

Signature of subject

---

Date

---

Printed name of subject

---

Signature of person obtaining consent

---

Date

## APPENDIX C

### FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS

Father Perceptions	Father Identity	Father Involvement
Different fathers give different meanings to being a father, what is your meaning?	What do you feel your roles are as a father?	What do you envision when you think of an involved father?
<i>Describe what it is like to be a father?</i>	How would you identify yourself as a father (e.g. provider, caretaker, teacher, etc.)?	Tell me about how you spent/spend time with your child when they were growing up?
<i>Tell me what fatherhood entails?</i>	<i>Provide me with a story or example of you as a provider, caretaker, teacher, etc.</i>	<i>What types of activities do you engage in with your children?</i>
	Which identity is the most important and why?	
Who or what informed your perceptions on what fatherhood is?	Does your role as a father stay the same for all of your children, particularly if you have children of different sexes?	Did the way you were involved with your child change as they aged?
<i>How does religion, society, culture influence/inform your perceptions of what a father is?</i>	<i>If it does differ tell me about a situation that highlights those differences in roles.</i>	<i>Did the amount of time spent together change?</i>
What do you feel is challenging about being a father?	How did your relationship with your father influence-- <i>the roles that you engage in or your identity?</i>	How did your perception of fatherhood shape your involvement with your child?
What is rewarding about being a father?	<i>If they grew up without dad how did other relationships (mom, uncle, mentor, etc.) influence—the roles that you engage in or your identity?</i>	How does your identity as a father shape the way you are involved with your child?
		What other personal experiences influence how you are involved with your child? (i.e. upbringing,

		religious practice, relationship with child's mother, involvement with incarceration etc.)
	Has your identity/roles change at all from the time your first became a father until now?	How does your housing arrangement influence your involvement?— <i>nonresident fathers</i>

\*Probing and follow-up questions are italicized

## APPENDIX D

### DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONNAIRE

1. How old are you?  
\_\_\_\_\_
2. What is your gender?
  - Male
  - Female
  - Other (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_
3. What is your racial identity?
  - African American or Black
  - Biracial (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_
  - Other (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_
4. What is your highest level of education?
  - Less than high school
  - High school diploma
  - Technical & vocational degree
  - Some college
  - Associate's degree
  - Bachelor's degree
  - Master's degree
  - Doctorate/J.D. degree
5. What is your relationship status?
  - Single
  - Non-committed relationship/dating
  - Committed relationship/partnered
  - Engaged
  - Married
  - Divorced
  - Widowed
  - Other (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_
6. How many children do you have?  
\_\_\_\_\_
7. What are the ages of your children?  
\_\_\_\_\_
8. How old were you when your first child was born?  
\_\_\_\_\_

9. What is the residential status of your child?
- Your child lives with you
  - Your child does not live with you
  - Other (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_
  -
10. Which family household type did you grow up in?
- Single-parent
  - Two-parent
  - Other (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_
11. What is your employment status?
- Unemployed
  - Part-time
  - Full-time
  - Retired
  - Other (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_
12. What is your annual estimated income?
- Below 25,000
  - 26,000 to 50,0000
  - 51,000 to 75,0000
  - 76,000 to 100,000
  - Above 100,000
13. Have you ever been incarcerated?
- Yes
  - No

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## **BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH**

Shar'Dane Harris is from South Carolina. She completed her doctorate in Marriage and Family Therapy at Florida State University. Her research interests include Black fatherhood (e.g., identity, perceptions, involvement, parenting practices), father-child relationships, and mental health outcomes and coping strategies for underserved populations. She has presented research at local and national professional conferences. Shar'Dane was selected as a finalist for the Florida State University Three Minute Thesis Competition. She has served as a member of the Graduate Student Advisory Council for the College of Human Sciences. She has published several articles in peer-reviewed journals and NCFR reports. Shar'Dane is actively involved in the community and aims to use the knowledge she acquired from her doctoral program to benefit those in her community. One of her most significant accomplishments while completing her doctorate was hosting a Women's Empowerment Conference in August 2018. The conference educated 100 women on mental, physical, relational, and financial health and wellness. The conference provided opportunity for women to connect with local professionals and gain resources for attaining holistic wellness. Shar'Dane is also a therapist who utilizes research and evidenced based practices to inform her clinical practice. Shar'Dane's career aspirations include using both, her clinical and research expertise, to positively impact her community through clinical services and implementing community-based interventions to serve individuals, couples, and families as it relates to mental, emotional, and physical health.