

# Married Black men's observations of fathers' teachings about husbandhood

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## Abstract

It is important to investigate the ways in which sons learn about marriage from men, including biological fathers, male relatives, and social fathers. This study's purpose is to explore Black sons' observations of fathers' teachings about husbandhood. Semistructured interviews were conducted with 52 married Black men who participated in the Pathways to Marriage project in 2010. Findings highlighted developmental pathways and family processes related to modeling husbandhood, demonstrating trust and commitment, managing conflict, protecting and providing, displaying teamwork and partnership, showing love and affection, and imparting beliefs and values. Implications and recommendations for future studies are also discussed.

Fathers are salient for socializing sons with respect to gender roles (Harris, 2002; Leidy, Schofield, & Parke, 2013; Thomas, Krampe, & Newton, 2007). Fathers exhibit behaviors that serve as blueprints for sons' learning about gender roles, and sons' gender role socialization is fostered through relationships shared

with fathers (Bronstein, 1988; Courtenay, 2000; Morman & Floyd, 2006; Sanders, 1996; Shelton-Wheeler, 2013). Moreover, as Halloran (1995) concluded, sons' recollections of social roles and experiences in childhood and adolescence are useful for learning about male gender socialization. Gender role socialization is significant to attend to because it constitutes an important source of learning about relationship skills, behaviors, and attitudes (Bryant & Conger, 2002).

Black sons may learn about gender roles in ways different from adult children from other racial groups. In Black families, biological fathers, as well as social fathers in extended families and community networks (e.g., grandfathers, stepfathers, uncles, pastors, coaches, mentors), serve as gender role models and critical sources of information about family values (Connor & White, 2006; Marsiglio, Day, & Lamb, 2000; Parke, 2004a, 2004b; Parke & O'Neil, 2000; Richardson, 2009; Townsend, 2002; Wallace, 2007). We define a social father as a male relative or a man in a community who models fathering behaviors and invests in children similar to a father (Jayakody & Kalil,

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2002). Sanders (1996) underscores the importance of families connecting with father figures to promote sons' development. Relationships with extended male family members and other men in communities may be especially important for sons whose biological fathers are absent due to inconsistent involvement (e.g., challenging work schedules, physical ailments, mental illnesses, relationship stress with co-parents/mothers), abandonment, or death.

In this study, sons commented on how father figures influenced their understandings of marriage. Sons mentioned a range of father figures (e.g., biological, step, grandfather) without interviewers prompting their responses. We initially considered sons' experiences with biological fathers separate from father figures (e.g., stepfathers, grandfathers) and social fathers (e.g., pastors, mentors, coaches). However, early in our analyses, we could not tease out the different relationships and their impact on sons' lives. Consistent with the importance of extended networks and the role of the village in Black families, it was not fruitful to explore the influence of biological fathers independent of other father figures and social fathers (Marsiglio et al., 2000; Parke, 2004b; Parke & O'Neil, 2000; Richardson, 2009; Townsend, 2002; Wallace, 2007). For example, sons often described how biological fathers and mothers' husbands/partners influenced their learning about husbandhood. We contend that other males in extended families and social networks were important to provide positive role models for all sons. These positive role models were especially beneficial for sons who had less involved fathers or fathers who modeled behaviors and attitudes that the sons questioned.

We assert, as other scholars have also noted, that investigations should include a wider range of fathers who foster gender role socialization (Parke & O'Neil, 2000; Richardson, 2009). We do not adopt a definition of fatherhood that focuses on marital ties and biological relation, but rather advocate for a broader conceptualization that focuses on the significance of other fathers and thus employ a flexible definition of father involvement (Marsiglio et al., 2000). By attending to the influential role of social

fathers, we do not discount the significance of nonresidential and residential biological fathers. Instead, we assert that biological fathers are important to consider, as are social fathers, in understanding the complex family ecologies that sons are reared in (Jayakody & Kalil, 2002). Henceforth in this article, we inclusively refer to all biological fathers, social fathers, and other father figures as "fathers."

Studying how fathers influence sons' learning about marriage is significant for several reasons. First, forming a long-term union such as a marriage is an important developmental task in adulthood (Bryant & Conger, 2002; Rauer, Pettit, Lansford, Bates, & Dodge, 2013). Family scholars posit that marriage represents the most important life course event for men, who often adopt new roles and responsibilities when they become husbands (Nock, 1998). Second, the family context provides sons with experiences that shape relationship skills, behaviors, and attitudes. Early interpersonal experiences with fathers reflect opportunities for learning gendered behaviors and promoting sons' capacity to experience relationship success in adulthood (Bryant & Conger, 2002; Hill, 2002; Hosley, Canfield, O'Donnell, & Roid, 2008). Third, a number of scholars have focused on understanding retreat from marriage (McLoyd, Cauce, Takeuchi, & Wilson, 2000). According to recent estimates, one third of Black men in the United States were married; this proportion is fewer than Hispanics (44%), Whites (53%), and Asians (58%; U.S. Census Bureau, 2012). Despite the shrinking proportion of married Black men over time, we argue that it is important to study men who have succeeded in marriage. Adults still hold marriage in high regard and marriage affords men unique benefits and advantages (Blackman, Clayton, Glenn, Malone-Colon, & Roberts, 2005; Edin & Reed, 2005; Marks et al., 2008). Therefore, attention to the underpinnings of marriage is worthy of scholarly attention (Biddle, 1986; Rauer et al., 2013).

This study is new and innovative. To our knowledge, this study is the first to systematically analyze married Black sons' observations of their father's teachings about husbandhood.

Given the linkages between marriage and well-being of individual and family (Blackman et al., 2005), it is important to learn about how sons are socialized for marriage. The literature is also scant in documenting the marital experiences of Black men and exploring research questions about normative male development in the context of families (Hurt, 2013; Marks, Hopkins-Williams, Chaney, Nesteruk, & Sasser, 2010; Marks et al., 2008; Murry, Block, & Liu, 2016). Further, although earlier investigations examined how fathers influenced sons' marital and dating behaviors (e.g., Hosley et al., 2008; Willis & Clark, 2007), these studies did not explore family process. Broderick (1993) defined family process as "the psychosocial interior of the family" (p. 4). Family processes refer to the complex ways in which families function, which affects development (Bronfenbrenner, 1986; Cummings, Davis, & Campbell, 2000). The survey methodologies used only permitted scholars to *infer* processes; an inductive approach like qualitative inquiry can illuminate family processes related to marital socialization. In addition, family scientists have petitioned for new research regarding the complex ways fathers from varying racial backgrounds might influence sons' learning about marriage and their development (Parke, 2004a; Parke & O'Neil, 2000). Moreover, it is more significant to learn about *how* fathers influenced sons, *how* sons overcame some difficult experiences to develop positive relationship attitudes and orientations, and *how* fathers interacted with their spouses rather than simply to note whether events occurred in families of origin or not (Busby, Gardner, & Taniguchi, 2005; Day & Lamb, 2004). In these respects, this study makes significant contributions to the marital literature (Marks et al., 2010; Parke & O'Neil, 2000).

This descriptive study's purpose is thus to answer the following research questions: What did married Black sons learn from their fathers about husbandhood? How did sons describe these observations and teachings? Which processes were involved in sons' learning about husbandhood? These questions were explored using a sample of 52 middle-class Black men.

### Background

As Hill (2002) noted, gender is a critical consideration in family life and child development. Unfortunately, scholars have not consistently attended to the influential role of gender in studies of Black families. One reason for this deficiency is that, historically, Black men's family roles were biological rather than psychosocial. Because Black men have often been unable to protect and provide for their families in the same way as men from other racial and ethnic groups, they have often been regarded as being irrelevant to the family unit (Hill, 2002; Parke, 2004a). In contemporary times, persistent inequities exist that negatively impact Black men's abilities to fulfill family responsibilities; these include lower rates of employment, fewer years of achieved education, and poorer health (Marsiglio et al., 2000). The consequences of structural inequalities are reflected in instabilities in Black marriage trends and Black children's living arrangements (American Fact Finder, 2011).

Such demographic changes in Black family living arrangements must be critically considered because fathers are nestled within family systems. Parke (2002) stressed the importance of considering how family structure and race influence fathers' involvements with children. According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2012), 72% of Black children lived in single-parent homes, compared to 42% of Hispanic children and 25% of non-Hispanic White children. Historical data suggest that, on average, a Black child born in the early 1950s spent only 4 years living in a single-parent home; for a Black child born after 1980, that figure nearly tripled to almost 11 years spent dwelling in a single-parent home (McLoyd, Hill, & Dodge, 2005). These demographic trends highlight increasing complexity of living arrangements for men and children and underscore the importance of fathers' roles and involvements (Marsiglio et al., 2000). Fathers who are married to children's mothers have more interaction with their offspring (Leidy et al., 2013); conversely, when children are reared in single-parent households, the ways in which boys learn about marriage is altered. When fathers are absent (e.g., inconsistent

involvement, abandonment, death), Black parents commonly rely upon men from extended families or social fathers (e.g., stepfathers, grandfathers, uncles, mothers' partners, pastors, mentors, coaches) to socialize offspring with respect to gender roles and enhance children's well-being (Jayakody & Kalil, 2002; Leidy et al., 2013; Mandara, Murray, & Joyner, 2005; McLoyd et al., 2000; Parke, 2004b; Townsend, 2002).

Scholars agree that considerable cognitive development occurs early in childhood through parent-child interaction (Bronstein, 1988; Thompson, 2006). Fathers help support both daughters' and sons' gender role development (Hoffman & Kloska, 1995; Musick, 1993). For example, as it relates to daughters, through consistent experience with loving and protective father figures, daughters are more likely to develop positive attitudes and healthy interactional styles with males. Without these positive experiences, daughters are more at risk for developing attitudes and behaviors that might challenge the formation of healthy romantic relationships (Musick, 1993). Concerning sons, fathers are especially important to their development of self-concept, and father's absence from sons' lives puts sons at increased risk of poor developmental outcomes (Harris, 2002). Fathers model masculine behaviors for boys to follow and sons' gender role socialization is cultivated through relationships with fathers (Bronstein, 1988; Courtenay, 2000; Daly, 1993; Shelton-Wheeler, 2013).

Two developmental theories guided this study. First, social learning theorists stress the significance of social experiences and context for learning and emphasize the importance of parents as chief socialization agents for marriage (Bryant & Conger, 2002). Sons' learning about husbandhood may, in turn, impact the trajectory of their marital relationships in adulthood (Morman & Floyd, 2006). As applied to the current study, sons learn gender roles, gendered expectations, and scripts for navigating marital relationships by watching their fathers' behaviors and listening to their attitudes, a process known as observational learning (Biddle, 1986; Daly, 1993). Sons are attuned to the consequences of behaviors as it relates to reinforcements and punishments,

which may influence how motivated a son is to model a behavior (Thomas, 1979).

Second, according to the risk and resilience framework, adverse childhood experiences place sons at risk for long-term developmental challenges (Luthar & Cicchetti, 2000). This framework helps explain why some sons succumb to risky situations while others do not (Murry, Bynum, Brody, Willert, & Stephens, 2001). In resilience, individuals display positive adaptation (e.g., model healthy marital behaviors) in spite of experiencing risk early in life (e.g., father absence, domestic violence). Protective factors (e.g., support from stepfather, grandfather) include resources and relationships that positively modify such risk effects and help to manage stressors and major life events (Amato, 1999; Luthar & Cicchetti, 2000). Lastly, how a son attributes meaning to a stressor in his life—regarding it as successful adaptation or troubling failure—impacts later adjustment (Rutter, 1983).

## Method

Sons were recruited to the Pathways to Marriage Project using a sample from a larger longitudinal study called the Program for Strong African American Marriages (ProSAAM; <http://prosaam.uga.edu/>). ProSAAM was a 5-year randomized trial of 393 couples designed to examine the effect a culturally sensitive marital enrichment program on strengthening married and engaged couple relationships (Beach et al., 2011). In 2010, the first author secured approval from Institutional Review Boards at the University of Georgia and Bowling Green State University. Of the couples who participated in ProSAAM, 155 men completed their 3-year follow-up by December 1, 2009, and thus were eligible to participate in the current study. Recruitment brochures were sent to the men who were still enrolled in ProSAAM after the completion of their 3-year follow-up interview. The brochure requested that they enroll in this smaller study on pathways to marriage. In total, 109 men were mailed recruitment brochures, and 52 sons agreed to enroll in the project. This recruitment process has been described in greater detail elsewhere (Hurt, 2013).

The sample comprises 52 Black sons who resided in Georgia; no sons were excluded or lost through attrition. On average, sons were middle-aged (mean age = 43, range = 27–62) and middle class (mean individual income = \$30,000–\$39,999, range = ≤\$4,999 to ≥\$70,000 per year; household income = \$50,000–\$59,999, range = ≤\$4,999 to ≥\$70,000 per year). Most sons received some education at a college or a technical school (range = less than high school to advanced degree). Most sons attended a church (90%; 1 respondent = no religion, 4 respondents = no response). Most sons fathered two biological children (range = 0–7; 1 respondent = no response) and dwelled in a home with two children (range = 0–3; 1 respondent = no response). Sons were legally married for an average of 14 years (range = 2–35), and most sons were married once (73%; range = 1–4 marriages). Most sons reported being very happy in their marriages. In response to a question regarding degree of happiness taken from the Marital Adjustment Test (Locke & Wallace, 1959), 15% reported being perfectly happy, 42% very happy, 23% happy, and 10% somewhat happy. Eight percent of the sons noted being very unhappy (1 respondent = no response). One son was separated from his wife; all other sons were living with their wives (98%).

Sixty-two percent had parents who lived together continuously throughout their childhoods (parents married:  $n=28$ ; parents cohabiting:  $n=4$ ). Thirty-eight percent had biological parents who were not partnered for one of several reasons, including breakup ( $n=13$ ), divorce ( $n=4$ ), or death ( $n=3$ ). Parents' relationship status did not consistently reflect who had reared the sons. Most sons (73%) lived in a two-parent living arrangement with biological parents or stepparents ( $n=36$ ) or grandparents ( $n=4$ ); 23% were raised by single mothers ( $n=10$ ) and grandmothers ( $n=2$ ).

### *Procedures*

Sons were interviewed in their own homes or in another private setting (e.g., office, church sanctuary) to ensure confidentiality.

Two married, college-educated Black men served as interviewers. Both men were experienced with the sample, having worked on the ProSAAM project in other capacities. Each son was interviewed one time by one interviewer. Because of the sensitive nature of the interview protocol and to help build rapport, interviewers and sons were matched on race, gender, and marital status (Cooney, Small, & O'Connor, 2007).

Semistructured interviews were conducted to allow for the discovery of the variability in the sons' experiences as well as exploration of how fathers impacted sons (Parke & O'Neil, 2000). In adopting this qualitative approach, sons were provided the opportunity to recount their childhood experiences in their own words, to describe meanings and subjective views, to give voice to previously unexplored aspects of fathers' teachings about husbandhood, and to talk about how they rose above tribulation (Busby et al., 2005; Parke, 2004a; Parke & O'Neil, 2000; Richardson, 2009). To meet this goal, we operated within a constructivist or interpretivist paradigm and focused on understanding how sons viewed their own social realities (Creswell, 2003). We adopted a phenomenological approach for data collection and analysis. In a phenomenological study, the focus is on describing "the common meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a phenomenon" (Creswell, 2013, p. 76). As applied to the current study, phenomenology was used to record the sons' observations of their fathers' teachings regarding husbandhood and the meanings they attached to these encounters.

The two interviewers completed one training session. They participated in extensive training with the first author, learning interviewing techniques and the ethical collection and handling of interview data, and reviewing study goals, the interview protocol, and the background for each question. A semistructured style of interviewing was used to gather the sons' perspectives and to record novel narratives about the sons' lives. Although interviewers used the questionnaire protocol as a guide, they were encouraged to allow the conversation to flow naturally and give the sons an opportunity to share experiences that

might not be related under a more formal line of questioning. All interviews were documented using digital recorders. An experienced transcriptionist transcribed the recordings, and undergraduate research interns checked the recordings against the transcripts for accuracy. Most interviews lasted 2 hr in duration, and each son was paid \$75 for completing an interview.

The first and third authors searched the transcripts for references using words like father (e.g., grandfather, stepfather), dad, papa, and parent. Consistent with a data reduction approach, these two authors selected only transcript segments pertinent to the current analyses (Huberman & Miles, 1994). Transcript segments commonly reflected answers to influences on sons' understandings about marriage (i.e., Who taught you to be a husband? What was the greatest influence on the kind of husband you are? What inspired you to marry your wife? What was the greater barrier that you had to overcome in getting married?). All 52 sons discussed their fathers; these data emerged naturally from the conversations between interviewers and sons.

Guided by our theoretical framework, we attended to specific behaviors and attitudes that sons recalled fathers modeling. Drawing on tenets of social learning theory and processes reflective of observational learning and vicarious reinforcement, the authors generally wondered about which experiences influenced the sons' learning about marriage. The authors attended to sons' observations of fathers' behaviors and attitudes and consequences of father's actions and beliefs as well as sons' motivations for modeling these aspects in their own marriages. Consistent with a risk and resilience perspective, the authors were also interested in learning how fathers operated as risk and protective factors for the sons. We also considered the heterogeneity in the sons' experiences attributable to the presence or absence of risk and protective factors. Beyond this, the authors had no anticipated hypothesized relationships in mind while analyzing these data. The authors focused only on exploring themes emerging from the data; inductive reasoning guided the analyses.

### *Analyses*

The authors' experiences with observations of their own fathers' teachings about husbandhood shaped their perspectives on the data (Daly, 1993). Thus, in the interest of transparency, the authors' backgrounds are presented (Carlson, 2010). All authors were born in the United States and raised by continuously married parents throughout their childhoods. Biological fathers influenced the authors' views on marriage. All authors are married and are highly educated. The first and second authors earned doctorates and the third and fourth authors earned bachelor's degrees. All identify as racial minorities; the first, second, and fourth authors are Black, and the third author is biracial, of Latino and White heritage.

The first, second, and third authors collaboratively analyzed the transcript segments; data selection and condensation were carried out. Several themes emerged from the transcript segments. Each author practiced inductive coding and independently examined data, compared and contrasted data segments, and then attached codes to data themes. These analytical procedures involved iterative sequences of reading and reviewing data segments, classifying and verifying data themes, and drawing conclusions and interpretations from the data (Creswell, 2013; Huberman & Miles, 1994). The authors used tables to organize data themes. To record the data analysis process and establish credibility, each author created independent audit trails and included his or her other reflections about the data to document his or her work and minimize the challenges associated with different scholars analyzing the data in dissimilar ways (Carlson, 2010; Huberman & Miles, 1994; Saldaña, 2013).

The first, second, and third authors met at four data retreats via Skype, at which the authors compared and contrasted their analytic notes (Saldaña, 2013). The authors grouped sons who noted common experiences. Thematic categories were revised and streamlined three times in response to these discussions, and the authors reconciled any differences in assigning the data to thematic categories, achieving a consensus with no unresolved

analytic differences among them (Saldaña, 2013).

After the sons were assigned to data themes, the authors examined each case to determine whether any factors related to the sons' demographic characteristics (e.g., age, income, religion), marital quality and duration, and family structure accounted for their responses (Huberman & Miles, 1994). We found no discernible patterns in the data. Finally, because the data were collected in 2010, it was not feasible to conduct member checks with the interviewers and ask them to reflect on their earlier interactions with the sons from prior years and subsequently comment on the validity of the findings.

## Results

To protect respondents' identities, all sons quoted are referred to using pseudonyms. We convey how frequently data themes occurred and describe the data using percentages. The frequency of sons' responses may not equal the number of sons (noted by subsample size) across themes because sons frequently shared more than one response. Sons described eight processes that reflected what they observed of their father's teachings regarding husbandhood—model husbandhood, demonstrate trust and commitment, manage conflict, protect and provide, display teamwork and partnership, show love and affection, impart beliefs and values, and learn on one's own.

### *Model husbandhood*

Seventy-six percent of sons recalled general observations from fathers. Sons ( $n = 24$ ) praised fathers ( $n = 6$ ) for being good husband models. In one example, referring to who taught him to be a husband, 32-year-old Patrick said, "I have to say my father, he definitely instilled in me a lot of things as far as what you need to do to take care of everyone and that type of stuff." In another case, 37-year-old Cedric viewed his stepfather as his primary model for being a husband. He said: "My stepfather, yeah [he and my mother] got married when I was [young]. My biological father was never in my life very much, but I

had a pretty good childhood." For other sons, extended family members were key husband mentors. As in 35-year-old Eddie who was mentored by male relatives. He offered, "My father passed when I was in [grade school]. I learned my characteristics about being in a marriage from my uncles."

Five sons received guidance from men outside the family such as pastors, mentors, and coaches. Thirty-four-year-old Chris learned about being a husband from his pastor. He said:

Honestly, I mean [my pastor] calls me his son, and I call him my dad. He's the only dad I have known. I just watched him and the way he treated and interacted with his wife, the way he treated and interacted with his daughter. So that was my example.

Other sons ( $n = 16$ ) recalled negative models. Of these men, sons ( $n = 12$ ) recalled witnessing marriages troubled with difficulties. Thirty-three-year-old Quentin recalled challenges he observed firsthand in his parents' marriage:

My dad, at one time, he was addicted to drugs. There was a little spousal abuse during my childhood with my mom and dad. But like I say, they would always, you know, talk about it, get counseling, and things would continue. Just seeing that situation and saying that I would never be that type of husband when I grew up. And I guess right there, you know, seeing that stuff at a young age, it gives you something that I don't want to live the way that my parents did. I want to try to do something better.

In another example, 46-year-old Calvin shared this:

[My mother] was the backbone of the household. She tried to keep everything in perspective, and like I said, Monday thru Thursday [things would be] hunky dory. But Fridays and Saturdays, [my father would] get that paycheck and go to drinking that moonshine. That's the only bad thing right there. There's no getting around it.

But my dad was a great dad. He was a great father and a great man and everything, but everybody's got a fault. And I'm not trying to sugarcoat his stuff, but his fault was drinking. That was his fault. Other than that, I mean, he was just a regular dad. He just liked to steal the show on the weekends. "It's my show. It's the weekend show." Then on Sunday, he [would] recuperate back to normal. You could talk to him.

Other sons ( $n=4$ ), after witnessing unhealthy marriages or relationship separation, talked about ways in which they attempted to learn healthier ways of approaching marriage. For example, 53-year-old Charles remembered this about his father:

I don't think my father was a good example as a husband. I kind of looked at him and I said, "No, that ain't the kind of husband I would want to be." You know, 'cause he was so abusive to my mom. He was unfaithful to her, and he definitely wasn't an example that I would follow, you know. I always ask couples who have been married 25 or 30 years, "Man, how did you do it?" You know, what's the secret to it? And most of the guys that I asked were spiritual guys. They told me, "Man, it's just a God thing. You just gotta get out of the way and let God do His thing."

In summary, three fourths of the sons affirmed the significance of general models of husbandhood in their discussions about marital socialization. Another 37% focused on demonstrations of trust and commitment.

#### *Demonstrate trust and commitment*

Thirty-seven percent of sons recalled how fathers demonstrated trust and commitment in marriage. Most sons ( $n=14$ ) reflected on models of long-term marriages. Of his father's marriage to his mother, 43-year-old Gene shared:

Stability [and consistency]. That's what I learned. I didn't have to worry about separation anxiety, one parent here and

one parent there through divorce. For me, the consistency [and] constancy of their relationship [was a] great learning experience for me in terms of how I [wanted to] become as a spouse as I got older.

In another example, 49-year-old Mark said:

My mom and dad, they showed us that marriage is supposed to be ordained forever. And so when I got married, I said when I get married I'm gonna be married 'cause this is what mom and dad taught me. They taught us that once you get married, this is it. There's no option.

Asked the greatest influence on how he thinks about marriage, 57-year-old Earl shared this: "My grandparents. Because of the solidity of their marriage, even with their problems they were solidly committed. I guess they didn't talk to me a lot to me about their relationship. It was just [me] observing them and how they [interacted]." Other sons ( $n=2$ ) focused on beliefs about commitment. Forty-eight-year-old Evan recalled his thoughts about commitment in light of being a child of divorce:

When I was younger, my parents got divorced. Like I said, my father was a reverend and they got divorced. So, one of [the] things I got to find out is why. If he's a reverend, why [did he] get divorced? [I didn't want] to do that. And so as I found out and learned, I [realized] it's more of an inward commitment, 'cause you're always gonna have obstacles. You have [to have the] fortitude to stick with it. If you're gonna say this is a commitment—a lifetime commitment—am I willing to do what it takes to keep the marriage? That's why I say it's an inward commitment.

Two other sons remembered how their fathers coached them about the characteristics of long-term marriage. Thirty-six-year-old Gary stated:

When me and [my uncle] sit down and talk, he said, "You know, marriage isn't



anything easy. I mean, it's something you have to work at. Believe me. Fifty-five years. Don't think that it has just been a glorious 55 years. [There] have been some up and down days. There was some days where we wanted to choke each other out. Some days where we just can't get enough of each other. As you get older, hopefully you'll reap from the information that I give you." I feel like he ain't never told me nothing wrong yet.

In one final case, 44-year-old Victor stressed the importance of trust in long-term unions. He said,

Without [trust] you don't have a relationship of any sort that you would call a relationship. It was innately important to me to be able to trust my wife. I saw what great relationships looked like with my mother and my father. He was in the [military]. It'd be months or years and he'd be gone. It's just [military] life. My mother [was] never anywhere close to violating that trust. [She] just never ever would have.

Demonstrations of trust and commitment were described by 37% of sons; a smaller proportion of sons explained how their observations of fathers managing conflict were important for marital socialization.

### *Conflict management*

Thirty-four percent of sons recalled how their fathers managed conflict. Among half of sons who observed poor conflict management, three sons shared examples of low-level conflict. For example, Victor recalled his father's approach when he said:

My father was in the [military]. So he didn't make suggestions. Everything he said was an order. Even if he didn't say it was an order, it was an order. And it was a standing order. [My mom] was graceful and she dealt with it. And sometimes they'd butt heads and I saw her learn how to deal with him in a graceful way without being confrontational. Because if you got into a conflict with my

father he was going to win. At all costs. And so early in my marriage that was my motive ... win at all cost. And so we would argue, and I would win. And then it'd take me a week to put her back together again to have a woman worth living with. But then I got to the point where [I was] like, this is crazy. This is the definition of insanity being lived out through me. So we had to come to a resolution to that situation.

Though some of the sons may have witnessed low-level conflict and poor conflict resolution skills among fathers, the opportunity to observe another father figure who practiced a different approach was beneficial. Consider 39-year-old Eric:

I never seen my granddaddy on my mama's side argue with [my grandma]. Even though she argued with him, but he wouldn't argue. He wouldn't say nothing about it. "Awwww, woman go on." Something like that. He wouldn't pay her no [mind].

Other sons ( $n=9$ ) remembered abusive and violent situations often attributable to substance abuse. Thirty-two-year-old Owen recalled this about his parents' marriage:

I think that God has changed him now, but my daddy used to be a drug addict. My mom used to be the one that my dad [would] beat up. One day, he had his knee on my mom's head because she was on the bed. I said I'm going in there, and I bust in the door. He grabbed me by my neck and he said, "If you do that again, I will kill you." And I said, "I don't want that kind of marriage." But let me tell you this, the strangest thing that I saw, I took it into my [first] marriage. My first wife [was] making me mad sometime because of what she [did]. I might hit her. I used to hit. I never beat her to death, but [I did] hit her. I only hit her one time, and when I [saw] myself do it, that caused us [both] to [say], "No, I don't want this marriage."

Owen's account is noteworthy. Though he did not want to enact the same behaviors his father modeled, he did exactly that when faced

with a difficult situation. As he reflected on the matter, he realized he did not want to continue along the same path and aimed for change.

Despite experiencing domestic violence, two sons were fortunate to observe other models and learn more effective means of conflict management. For instance, 55-year-old Shawn said:

My father died when I was [a child. Before he died], I saw a lot of abuse in my family. I prayed to God that I never would do some of things that my father did. I would say he didn't abuse them, but like if he come in the house mad at somebody else, he'll take it out on my mama. [My wife's father] took care of his family. They didn't suffer from that [abuse] and he never did go nowhere. He went to the university. He'll go to work and come home and work around the yard like a man's supposed to do. He [was] up to being a husband. He was just taking care of what [he's] got, [his] wife, and everything. I used to watch him a lot, the way he acted and he never was nobody but a man. He didn't curse so, you know, I respected him. I really did.

Fifty-five-year-old Forest offered this:

I basically watched how their marriage would work. My great grandparents were always a role model for me because no matter what, they were together. They were always taking care of business and being there for each other. However, my grandmother ... her husband would drink and get all upset and he would take her in the woods and whip her legs with a switch. I am like, "I would never want to be a husband like that." You know what I'm saying? It kind of crushed me to find out and see that kind of stuff happening. He was very abusive to her. So I didn't want any of that in my genes. So I would always wipe that out [of my head] and go back to my great grandparents, [the] perfect example for a husband and wife. So I learned how to be a husband, even a great husband and a better husband than my grandfather was.

Sons who regarded their fathers as positive models for managing conflict ( $n=3$ ) reflected on the significance of open communication between husbands and wives. Forty-seven-year-old Richard said,

I was raised by my [great] grandparents, but whatever my [great] grandfather said that was it. There were very few times when my [great] grandmother went against what he said. ... When she did object, he would change his way of thinking. I think it really was just watching my great-grandmother and great-grandfather and how they interacted.

One son noted the importance of mutual respect in managing conflict. Forty-seven-year-old Elijah said:

But watching how my mom respected my dad, and how my dad treated my mom, he never did fuss or talk to her any kind of way. My granddad on my mom's side was basically the same way.

Two sons underscored their observations of fathers being even-tempered ( $n=2$ ). Fifty-eight-year-old Zachary described his experience as follows:

[My father] always had a cool manner, a cool temper, and he could put up with a whole lot. I noticed that so many things went wrong and so many people mistreated him when I was a kid. He was still cool-headed with that, and then I realized how he got a lot further and not blowing his cool every time something happened. All through my childhood I never saw them fighting, occasionally a little bit of an argument with words, not verbally abusive with words, but maybe a little bit of harsher tone about some things, but basically that was about it.

Over one third of sons detailed their observations of how other fathers managed conflict in their marriages. A much smaller proportion of sons reflected on the importance of husbands protecting and providing for families.

*Protect and provide*

Fifteen percent of sons detailed how their fathers protected and provided for their families. For 60-year-old David, the definition of husband was to support the family. He said, “Husband means a provider and sort of a spokesperson in a sense. Yeah, like the head of household. [I learned this from] watching my dad and seeing other married couples before I got married.” For most sons, their observations of how fathers protected and provided were very positive. For example, 44-year-old Donald praised his father in this way:

He was the classic provider. He did everything for us. Even though my mother worked, he was the “breadwinner.” He just looked out for us, protected us, and it seemed like everything he did was to that end—to provide for his family.

Though six sons reflected favorably on examples of providing and protecting, Gary offered something different:

What my dad would do, he would work Monday through Friday. He would come in, drop his paycheck off, [and] give my mom a large amount of money to pay the bills to buy us clothes or shoes or whatever. He would pack him a little black bag, and boom, he would be gone from Friday to Sunday night. I felt like he missed on some important parts of my life. . . . So I can’t say that he’s a positive role model other than, like I said, he showed me how, when he got done working, how you were supposed to provide for your family.

The need to protect and provide was noted among 15% of sons; another 12% identified displays of teamwork and partnership that contributed to their learning about marriage.

*Display teamwork and partnership*

Twelve percent of sons shared examples of how their fathers displayed teamwork and partnership. Two sons reflected generally on the importance of two mates working together in a marriage. Thirty-seven-year-old John recalled

advice from his grandfather about marital partnerships. His grandfather, who was married for [more than 60] years before he died, modeled the importance of partnership and building a life together. John reflected:

[He talked about the importance of being] equally yoked. I never understood what my grandfather meant by that until I met my wife. You should be equally yoked meaning, you find someone who has similar status, similar beliefs, and similar goals. Not exact same dreams, but we come in at the same level; we’re looking to grow together.

Three sons reflected on their observations regarding how a married couple worked together to manage a household. Thirty-seven-year-old Sonny recalled this:

My father passed [when I was a child], so I never saw what marriage was. I did have a few examples. I had a couple of aunts and uncles. I remember being 10 and watching them put a bed together. I never saw that at home. Because it was just me, my mom, and my brother. So, I was like, okay, that’s what it’s supposed to be. They had their little times that they were angry with each other, but when there was something that needed to be done, they could do it together. I always thought that a couple that could put a bed together could stay together. (Laughter)

Another son noted the importance of give and take in a marital partnership. David learned a very important lesson from his father. He asserted:

Sometimes you gotta give in. You don’t want to do it, but don’t let her know you don’t want to do it. I guess I learned that from being around my daddy. Yeah, I know some of the things that my mom wanted to do he didn’t want to, but he did it anyway. He said, “Son, sometimes you just gotta give in.”

We have reviewed the results pertaining to displaying teamwork and partnership as described among 12% of the sons. A similar

proportion of sons reflected on how fathers showed love and affection.

#### *Show love and affection*

Another 12% of sons observed how their fathers showed love and affection to their wives. Mark stated, "My dad never left home without kissing my mom. That shows a lot." Of his childhood, Elijah recalled this:

I noticed how a lot of [men in my family and community] would come down and open their doors up for their wives, as well as my dad. [I looked at] how they talked, how they smiled, how they communicated, how they shared. ... That was a real eye opener to me. So when I was young, I used to play around junk cars, pretended I had a wife or a date, and I would go open doors up and [practice like this].

James, a 31-year-old, recalled this about his father:

He's always taken my mom out on Friday nights and on trips. I've watched him do the whole "Yes dear" thing. He's been a good example for me, but also God has blessed me with just a strong community of men, and I've watched what they've done, opened doors and helped ladies get out of vans. It's kind of made me who I am. Now, the one thing my parents didn't do well is they didn't demonstrate the romantic aspect a whole lot. They went out all the time and they did events, but my dad wouldn't approach my mom and say, you know, in front of all of us and like say, "I love you" and that kind of stuff. My mom kind of started that way, but I think she kind of backed off a little when he didn't respond, you know.

In summary, these sons described the importance of showing love and affection. Witnessing how their fathers interacted with women or listening to how others recalled the absence of affection were key sources of information about this. Sons noted how fathers imparted beliefs and values.

#### *Impart beliefs and values*

Ten percent of sons reflected on how their fathers shaped their beliefs and values about marriage. Two sons spoke about the importance of contributing to the marital relationship, persevering in difficult seasons, and being present in the family despite needing to financially provide as a husband and head of household. Michael, 44-year-old and the youngest child in his family, benefited from his father. He learned about the importance of both being present as a father and providing financially for the family. Michael said:

When my [older siblings] were growing up, my dad worked a lot. A whole lot. When he had down time, he spent that time away hunting or fishing and doing stuff like that. But he saw that he missed a lot with my [siblings]. So when I was young, I think he purposely planned to stay home more.

The previously mentioned fathers focused on providing financially for the family and being physically present in the home; another four sons noted the significance of not cohabiting or engaging in sex prior to marriage. In summary, 10% discussed how their fathers imparted beliefs and values. A few sons focused on how they learned about marriage on their own.

#### *Learning on one's own*

Three sons asserted that they learned about marriage on their own; they did not have the benefit of sharing a relationship with their biological fathers. In one case, his father died before he was born. Asked to describe the greatest influence on the kind of husband he is, 36-year-old Luke replied: "Well me myself, 'cause I never was too much around my father. So I learned myself." The interviewer asked for clarification by saying, "Okay, kind of a trial and error type of thing?" Luke responded, "Yeah."

In two other cases, the sons' fathers were alive but no longer in relationships with their mothers. In each case, sons referenced uncles as well as a mother's boyfriend who had a hand in their upbringing but did not counsel

them about marriage. Fifty-two-year-old Johnathan's comment highlights his engagement in lifelong learning, utilizing day-to-day marital experience to cultivate his understanding of marriage in the absence of strong fathers and prior socialization. Johnathan said,

Just the last few years, I was able to define it for myself because I grew up in a home where it was just me and my mom. Now I had uncles that I was involved with in my life. Like if I did something wrong, I might tell my uncle, and they would come [discipline me] or something like that. I mean they talked to me, too. Don't get me wrong. But as far as a father, I knew my father but I didn't know him, 'cause I never spent any time with him. My mother [was] never really married while I was a kid. But she had a guy that she stayed with. They was together about 15 years or something. Well, he talked to me, [but] basically, what I'm trying to get to is the marriage part, I didn't really understand marriage. I didn't understand 'til I started trying to see for myself what marriage meant.

In summary, three sons recalled learning about marriage on their own due to death or absence of fathers.

## Discussion

Using semistructured interviews, this study explored 52 married Black sons' observations of their fathers' teachings about husbandhood. This research advances our understanding about *how* Black men become knowledgeable about marriage as well as the processes involved in marital socialization. Black men shared their personal memories and first-hand accounts of both positive and negative reflections about fathers' teachings about husbandhood. Using this method allowed the men to provide context and speak about the meaning of their experiences and supports the utility of using an inductive approach with an understudied group to allow these insights to emerge from in-depth interviews. This study reinforces the existing knowledge that fathers who live with their children are often more

engaged in their sons' lives. Sons also found role models among social fathers in the community and male relatives in their extended families. These data underscore the significance of looking at more than the influence of biological fathers on sons' development; the data highlight the importance of other fathers including stepfathers, grandfathers, pastors, mentors, and coaches.

Perhaps most importantly, these findings call into question the traditional ways in which scholars have studied and measured fathers' involvement (e.g., focus on residential and biological fathers) in previous studies on Black men and boys (Marsiglio et al., 2000; Parke, 2004b; Parke & O'Neil, 2000; Richardson, 2009; Townsend, 2002; Wallace, 2007). Our study makes a critical methodological contribution to the marital literature; the results stress the need to consider more complex family ecologies and the influential role of multiple father relationships on sons' development and avoid missing the mark by only focusing on biological fathers in the home (Jayakody & Kalil, 2002). Along similar lines, our results illuminate the range of models that are key for socializing Black men about marriage and advance our understanding theoretically about how multiple father figures, not just residential and biological fathers, can jointly impact sons' learning about marriage (Biddle, 1986; Bryant & Conger, 2002; Daly, 1993). A few sons were fatherless because their fathers died early in their lives and, in such cases, we observed considerable variability in the sons' experiences.

Seventy-six percent of sons were embedded in families that provided them with opportunities to observe models of husbandhood throughout their childhoods. Sons described their fathers as being leaders, engaging in household activities, taking care of the family, modeling admirable husband qualities, and benefiting from quality relationships with wives. Prior work has highlighted the salience of such networks for boys' gender role socialization (Courtenay, 2000; Jayakody & Kalil, 2002; McLoyd et al., 2000; Richardson, 2009; Shelton-Wheeler, 2013), and this study enhances understanding of these concepts through the study of adult Black men. In discussing the significance of role models,

sons described witnessing aspects of marital relationships such as demonstrations of trust and commitment, such as ups and downs as well as stability and consistency in marriage. Sons also described fathers who were good and poor problem solvers. Sons outlined the importance of learning about protection and provision in addition to displays of teamwork and partnership and love and affection (e.g., kisses, dating, chivalry, open communication, mutual respect), as corroborated in earlier work (Marsiglio et al., 2000). Sons commented on fathers' teachings about beliefs and values (Marsiglio et al., 2000), and emphasized the significance of being present in the family, persevering in marriage, contributing to the union, and avoiding cohabitation and premarital sex prior to marrying (Wallace, 2007).

Because of the interdependence between fathers and sons, most sons witnessed at least one same-gender relationship model and described observing fathers who provided models for gender-related behavior and taught lessons about husbandhood (Halpern-Meekin, 2009). As sons reflected fondly on these husband models, sons witnessed the consequences of their fathers' actions on their wives, children, and the family unit. Consistent with tenets of social learning theory, this attention to outcomes taught them about whether the behavior was something they themselves would be motivated to model and reinforce in their own marriages (Biddle, 1986; Daly, 1993; Thomas, 1979). Indeed, in a few cases, sons recalled how they applied this learning to their own marriages. However, due to data limitations, all sons did not note how they used fathers' teachings in their own marriages.

Not all sons' recollections of their father's teachings about husbandhood were positive. Some sons viewed their fathers as poor husband models; this was often attributable to father absence, substance use, domestic abuse, infidelity, and ineffective conflict management. In recounting these experiences, sons described how these observations were defining moments for them in their lives. They were negatively impacted by the consequences of their fathers' actions. Thus, sons rejected their fathers as husband role models and were not

motivated to repeat the behaviors given their own individual characteristics or marriage goals (Biddle, 1986; Daly, 1993; Thomas, 1979).

Adopting an inductive approach and utilizing qualitative inquiry, the authors were able to trace the influential role of fathers, which operated as both risk and protective factors, and altered sons' understandings about marriage. Here, sons described how the ways in which they learned about marriage changed because of such intervening factors. Sons were fortunate to absorb different marital scripts and gendered expectations from others like fathers, grandfathers, stepfathers, and pastors who were successful in marriage (Biddle, 1986; Sanders, 1996). These father figures devoted themselves to the sons and served as protective factors, which potentially altered the course of sons' marital trajectories by modeling husbandhood, building up their confidence with respect to being husbands, and enriching their understandings of marriage and providing models and reinforcements of healthy marriage and lessons about maintaining marital ties. Father figures operated as "lifelines" to the sons by providing them with unique opportunities to grow and promoting internal shifts in values and beliefs that led to positive pathways rather than negative outcomes (Cairns & Cairns, 1994). These insights support and reinforce core tenets proposed in the risk and resilience framework and social learning theory (Biddle, 1986; Daly, 1993; Luthar & Cicchetti, 2000; Thomas, 1979).

Perhaps some fathers had more human capital (e.g., knowledge, skills) and social capital (i.e., resources cultivated by relationships characterized by commitment and trust that fosters emotional support) to invest in sons (Coleman, 1994; Marsiglio et al., 2000; Parke, 2004b). Fathers, especially as related to grandfathers, may have also matured and engaged in generative fathering, underscoring the salience of fathers' efforts to prepare sons for marriage and serve as strong mentors and role models (Connor & White, 2006; Dollahite & Hawkins, 2014). In summary, because sons were mentored when fathers were more mature and had more human capital, sons likely benefited developmentally (Taylor, Giarrusso, Feng, &

Bengston, 2006). These results underscore the importance of risk and protective factors and support from “the village” in raising sons and helping sons rise above tribulation in their lives. Illuminating such complexities and intervening factors in the sons’ lives makes a unique contribution to our understanding about marital socialization.

The study has several notable limitations. First, data collection was limited to one point in time and depended on possibly inaccurate respondent recall. Also, the topic of mothers’ roles in socializing sons with respect to marriage was outside of the scope of this study. In addition, although the sample was necessarily small to support collection of rich data, the sample was also nonrandom. Moreover, the findings *may* not be representative of Black men dwelling in other parts of the United States, Black men raised in other kinds of households, or to sons of other racial and ethnic backgrounds, socioeconomic statuses, or sexual orientations. The sample also included middle-class sons who had achieved some level of postsecondary education and were highly committed to marriage; these experiences may have aided the sons’ preparation for matrimony (Marks et al., 2008; Marks et al., 2010). Finally, the high percentage of religious affiliation in the sample may be explained by the sample being recruited from Georgia, where such affiliation is more common than in other areas. However, no one refused to take part in the larger ProSAAM study despite the eligibility requirement that couples be willing to pray and be prayed for (i.e., this criterion excluded no one from participation) and this sample therefore cannot be viewed as religious (Beach et al., 2011).

Despite these limitations, our results further validate the importance of Black fathers (inclusive of biological fathers and social fathers) in preparing sons for marriage through teaching and modeling. Sons observed their fathers in a myriad of roles, and as adults they made conscious decisions about behaviors to emulate or not emulate, in part as they considered the consequences of fathers’ actions as husbands. From managing conflict to demonstrating commitment, fathers influenced how these sons approached marriage. The findings also

underscore the significance of male relatives in extended family networks as well as social fathers (Parke, 2004b). This study is the first to directly investigate this issue using a sample of married Black men. By focusing on sons’ observations of their fathers’ teachings about husbandhood, these findings help to generate new hypotheses about ways in which fathers teach sons about marriage and contribute to and extend the literature on men’s marital socialization (Biddle, 1986). In addition to fostering new research, these results would be useful to marriage therapists and laypersons who desire to strengthen marriages and enhance marital socialization to promote healthy unions. Professionals engaged in marriage enrichment and therapy can encourage participants and clients to think more beyond what they learned from residential biological fathers to other, perhaps more effective, marriage models.

Furthermore, sons identified certain risky behaviors as “negative.” Attention as to whether these characteristics were repeated in the sons’ own marriages was outside the scope of this study and unknown for the full sample of men due to data limitations. As such, the unanswered question is whether sons who were exposed to negative husband role models will, in turn, model these same behaviors in their own marriages and for their own sons. Future studies should investigate this matter. Additional research is also needed to explore how sons influence fathers’ teachings about husbandhood. Consistent with a transactional model, sons and fathers mutually affect one another (Leidy et al., 2013). Also, it should not be overlooked that sons observed mothers in marriage as well as learned about marriage on their own—from media, popular culture, and other sources. Greater scholarly attention is warranted in these areas.

The health of society and social structures influences men’s capacities to take care of and support their families. Social and cultural conditions shape lives, and structural forces such as rates of employment, education, and incarceration have long influenced marriages, morbidity, and mortality in the Black community, and hence, father involvement (Marsiglio et al., 2000; Wallace, 2007). Because structural inequities undermine Black men’s health

and well-being, as well as their ability to form and maintain marital unions and parent children, scholars should continue to collaborate with policy makers and legislators to address these disparities (Chambers & Kravitz, 2011). In addition, interventions and educational programs focused on cultivating healthy marriages and promoting long-term benefits of consistent husbandhood could use the insights developed in this study to strengthen their approaches and effectiveness.

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