

SUCCESSFUL AFRICAN AMERICAN CHILDREN'S PERSPECTIVES

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Abstract

African American adolescents that are raised in a single parent family can be successful and have positive perspectives to be model citizens. Adolescents that have frequent visits with the parent that lives outside of their home had an effect on how the adolescent acted. A brief survey of African American children growing up in a single parent family (1925-present) was conducted. Through a survey of the literature, it becomes evident that most research conducted on the successes and perspectives of African American adolescents growing up in a single parent family is incomplete at its best and unsubstantiated at its worst. There are many examples and models of African Americans raised by single parents to succeed.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this paper is to provide a discussion of the literature on African American children's perspectives and successfulness living in a single parent family. The single parent family has become too common a family structure to bring up African American children because of drug and alcohol addictions, imprisonment, abandonment, poverty and death of the African American males (Green, 2009 p6). However, many African American children in both the 20th and 21st centuries have been raised and are presently being raised in single parent families and have become very successful. Many families have learned to adapt to this unexpected living arrangement. The qualities and successes of this living arrangement have not been given the credit it is due. Although these families are considered dysfunctional because it is not the traditional family arrangement or the ideal family, many children's successes and perspectives are positive and focused.

It is clear that the full-time job of parenting ideally involves more than one parent. Yet the reality is that many children grow up in homes that do not have two parents present. Currently, children living in an African American female single parent household far out number the African American male and other nationalities that live in a single parent household. (Cain, Combs-Orme, 2005)

STATEMENT OF PROBLEM

Raising a child in a single parent household can be successful: What are the qualities of such families? What are the characteristics of successfulness? Additionally, what are the overall qualities of this family arrangement and who else in society is supporting these families to be successful?

PURPOSE OF RESEARCH

Research supports that many children that are raised in single parent families are just as successful as those that are raised in a two parent family. The purpose of this research was to determine whether or not research supports this perception for African Americans and if so, to what extent?

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE PROBLEM

Comprehensive study show that children raised in single parent families can be as successful as those raised in a two parent family. While research-based and anecdotal evidence indicate that these children do just as good as any other child but the extent of impact has not yet been measured.

ASSUMPTIONS

For the purpose of this paper, it is assumed that all research and review of the current literature is accurately reported. It is also assumed that the researchers reported in the literature will make recommendations on how best to use the research available.

DELIMITATIONS OF THE RESEARCH

The research was conducted through the University of Wisconsin Platteville (Platteville, WI) and Karmann libraries (University of Wisconsin-Platteville) over a period of SEVENTY (70) days. Primary searches were conducted electronically through EBSCO Host with ERIC and Academic Search Elite. Key search topics included “what are the qualities of raising a child in a single parent household,” and “what are the characteristics of successfulness.”

METHOD OF APPROACH

A review of literature related to research, studies, and anecdotal evidence in various areas involving the successfulness of children raised in a single parent family, and the qualities of such families overall will be conducted. The findings will be summarized and recommendations made.

CHAPTER TWO

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The traditional Western model of the family includes two married parents and their children (the model nuclear family). However, not all families can or want to model themselves after this norm. In fact statistics indicate that only 10% of United States. Families can or want to model themselves after this norm. Thus, in order to properly research and study parenting, we must ask who exactly provides love and support to children. The one parent family has become the model family to bring up African-American (Hereafter AA) children. In AA families, marital status and extended kin networks are significant variables in the study of parenting. The cultural-variant perspective views AA families as different, yet more organized than multigenerational families. (Cain, Combs-Orme, 2005).

It has been well noted and documented that AA children growing up in a single parent family are very successful when they are given the role of choosing success over incarceration. Most Black children have to tend to their siblings as well as themselves while the parent works to provide for them. This is another obstacle that has been placed on AA children. Not only do they have to survive the peer pressure but they also have to take control of the family while the one parent is away. Some AA children choose to work hard in school and after school in order to accomplish their goals while others take the easy road of selling drugs and being incarcerated in trying to be successful.

Growing up is difficult for AA adolescents. (Hereafter AA adolescents) There are many obstacles and issues for these young minorities. One of these issues is learning how to live within a single parent home. During the early 1900s many AA males left their families for a better way of life and never returned. (Green,2009). Many AA adolescents' perspectives and successfulness formerly and presently depend on the co-caregivers/maternal grandmother's extended family relationships and many programs in the community such as churches, Boys and Girls Club, sports, YMCA, and Big Brother/Big Sister. The relationship between the co-caregiver and the AA female appears to have a huge effect on the quality of parenting provided by the mother (Cain, Combs-Orme, 2005).

Family proximity and residence in the rural South are primary considerations for the election of maternal grandmothers as the co-caregivers in single-mother, AA families. Maternal age is also associated with co-resident co-caregiving with grandmothers. Often the youngest AA mothers are more inclined to parent with assistance of their mothers due in part to reduced options (Cain, Combs-Orme, 2005)

It is clear that parenting is a fulltime job yet the reality is that many children grow up in homes that do not have two parents, especially in the AA

community. There are nearly 50% of AA children born outside of marriage and that live at some time in a home without one parent or the other (Cain, Combs-Orme, 2005). Current research on parenting practices in the AA community is limited due to an absence of longitudinal research, a severe lack of attention to intragroup variability; a disregard for the inherent diversity in the AA community; and a minimization of the staggering effects of economic deprivation, racism and social stratification on processes and functioning in the AA home. Society has made a lot of negative statements about children growing up in a single parent family. There is a tendency for a negative research model approach. That is, there is academic encouragement to document the unfavorable outcomes of African American children growing up in single parent families. (Cain, Combs-Orme) rather than researching the favorable as well. Much research focuses on single AA female and young AA mothers parenting with the assistance of their mothers aka co-caregivers and maternal grandmothers. Historically, African-American parents have relied on extended family networks and significant others such as co-caregivers, maternal and paternal grandparents, other relatives, neighbors and church. The role of the AA female is once again the focus as revealed by Langston Hughes, Richard Wright, Malcolm X and the strong female role in the life of Barack Obama (Green, 2009).

AA single parents have an obligation to their children to raise their character; their ideology and their mannerism in order for them to obtain success. Some AA children fall short of their goals but they turn their life around and become model citizens. The partial biographies that follow focus on the role of significant others in helping the individuals described become successful. More detailed biographical information is widely available and is not discussed in this paper.

Langston Hughes

Langston Hughes, considered by many as the post lauret of the Harlem Renaissance, is an interesting example of the concepts discussed in this paper. Langston Hughes was abandoned by his father at the age of five and by his mother too. His father abandoned the family by leaving the country and his mother left him in the care of his maternal Grandmother so that she could pursue a career in acting. After the death of his grandmother, Hughes mother returned home and remarried. Throughout high school, Hughes lived with his mom, stepfather and stepbrother. Hughes' biological father abandoned the family, as did his stepfather. (Green, 2009) Hughes grew up being very critical of his biological father, who abandoned him. Hughes believed that his father traveled down the incorrect path by denying his racial identity. At the age of 17, Hughes

stated that he hated his biological father for calling him a “nigga” after he was late picking him up. The negative perspective he had of his father was that his father did not like being AA and that he never felt being AA in a White society would be an advantage living in the U. S. Hughes perceived how to look past the downfalls of his biological father from his maternal grandmother. His grandmother taught him not to be ashamed of his identity as an AA man and to use whatever talents and skills he had to manifest them in the country where he was born. (Green ,2009). As in Hughes situation, the same scenario is still paramount in the AA single parent family today; the rapport between the co-caregiver/maternal grandmother and the AA mother appears to have an effect on the quality of parenting provided by the mother. (Cain, Combs-Orme, 2005) Hughes tended to listen to his maternal grandmother. This moved him toward a concern with race, gender and economics. (Green, 2009) Today, his work is a respected body of literature including his poetry that is so highly respected in America today. His poetry speaks well to the nature of race in America. For example, in the poem entitled “Let America be America Again.” Hughes was explaining that America was still very much divided towards AAs like himself and that AAs will never be treated fairly. During Hughes’ life many of his themes were reflected in the blues and jazz. In contemporary American the themes are repeated again in the AA rap music of many Artists most notably Lil Wayne,

Kanye West, Jay-Z, 50 cents, Lil Kim the late Dolla, Notorious Big and Tupac. All are or were successful and grew up in a single parent family.

Richard Wright

Another well known successful AA adolescent that grew up in a single parent family and was abandoned by his father at the age of five is the well known author Richard Wright. Wright's perception of successfulness appeared to be negative when he stated that being born AA and male and developing into AA manhood is often in America a dangerously, paralyzing journey (Green, 2009). Wright tended to have had mixed emotions about his father's abandonment of his family. Wright feared his father but to get rid of the void of the relationship he once had with his father when visiting with him he would provoke anger in him. Wright for several years suffered a feeling of emptiness and anger. He perceived every man that came into his mother's life and his as being selfish and only thinking of themselves. Wright blamed that his father's failures stemmed from a racist society represented by the fact his father remained chained and fastened to a plantation that he attempted to leave by abandoning the family and moving to Memphis. Wright continued to say mean things about his father calling him a "snag a tooth" old AA peasant who lacked understanding and failed as a father and a husband. Wright felt that when a father abandoned his family the oldest son had to assume the role of the father. Many of these children feel that there are barriers and obstacles; however, they must not let this stand in the way of their development. Wright depicted the anxiety

that fatherlessness had on him as the older son and the only child of woman embittered by her failed marriage with his father. (Green, 2009).

Malcolm X

On the other hand Malcolm X lost his father at the age of seven when his father was murdered. His father did not abandon him. Malcolm X aka Malcolm Little and Malcolm Shabazz while growing up and into early adult life was a pimp, a hustler and involved in other aspects of an unseemingly life. But in prison Malcolm X changed and after prison he became a preacher under the influence of the NOI aka the Nation of Islam. He acquired a great admiration for the Honorable Elijah Muhammad. In deed he was his surrogate and spiritual father. Malcolm X gained most of his perspectives of an AA male from Mohammed. (Green,2009). Even as Malcolm X moved away from the NOI and the racial divisions associated with the NOI view of Islam and after his experience in Mecca, his sense of self, racial and common humanity was rooted in Muhammad. The famous actor Ossie Davis caught the importance of Malcolm X's life expressing in part in his funeral eulogy that "he was our manhood."

Barack Obama

President Obama's caregivers/respondents and his stepfather were the people that he looked to for guidance. Obama's father was an African from Kenya and he accepted his

father's culture for what it was. However, Obama's father's struggle came from not being accepted into Obama's White mother's family. (Green , 2009). Obama can only recall meeting his father for the very first time at the age of ten. Obama did not grow up with his father; therefore, he knew so little about him. While growing up Obama mainly knew only his White mother's side of the family. Obama learned about the AA male through friendships that his mother had established with other AA males that included his stepfather (his stepfather was present in his life during the time he lived in Indonesia). (Green, 2009) When Obama was younger he gives credit to his Indonesian stepfather for teaching him about manhood. Obama said that neither his White mother nor his maternal grandparents taught him about his father's culture. (Green, 2009) Obama most clearly attributes his sense of his AA roots to the AA churches in Harlem. His education at Columbia University was critical to his development as a man.

When Obama moved to the south side of Chicago, he states that he could confront his own feelings about his absent father. While transitioning into manhood he learned about the Civil Rights and the Black Power Movements. Obama states in his book *Dreams of My Father* that these are movements where AA males became leaders in their communities but what is next? These two historical movements Obama believes had a lot to do with the AA male as a whole establishing roles and gaining respect. (Green, 2009).

Although Obama said that he knows very little about his father's culture, he said that his white maternal grandfather who he refers to as Gramps took him to bars and card games with him. During these outings Obama noticed that the men that his "Gramps" hung out with were AA like himself. Obama then started to realize the difference between being black and white. Obama said that his white "Gramps" had choices but Black men had none.

Throughout his book *Dreams* Obama states that when he did meet his biological father at the age of ten that he was with him for thirty days but this certainly was not enough time for him to learn about himself as being AA. Obama's mother always told him not to blame his father because he tried and she was the one that wanted the divorce. The biographies provide insight into family and the individuals discussed. The insights of the individuals provide a view of how success in life is reached.

CHAPTER THREE

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

The brief biographies of Hughes, Wright, Malcolm X and Obama are examples of the resiliency of the men and the role of the single parent family. Of course, Obama is something of a different story because of his White as well as AA roots but all of these men developed resiliency and a sense of self that is a model for others. They did so, in part because of good role models most often a mother or grandmother.

African American males from single parent families are more likely to drop out of school, become delinquents, commit crimes, and turn into repeat offenders. The main Reason for many single parent families is due to divorce. Next to divorce, are unwed mothers . Children's successes and/or failures cannot take all of the blame for children's failures or successes. Many children fail living in intact families too. Many researchers argue that single-parent families do not cause children's behavioral problems nor does Single - parenthood cause social problems of children. Researchers state that children of single parents do not "automatically" drop out of school, get arrested, abuse drugs, or suffer long term emotional distress (Persaud, Gray, Hunt, 1998).

An adolescent that is living in a high-conflict marriage or one in which a father is angry and withdrawn often times have worse long-term problems that children in single-

parent families. AA males consistently rank their mothers as excellent single- parents. The AA male and female described their mothers as very good parents. When their fathers abandoned them most children said that their mother was there for them and that she is their best friend (Persaud, Gray, Hunt, 1998).

Of course, it is important to link the literature and the famous AA to everyday life. As the author of this paper I informally conducted interviews with four adolescents. My four recent face- to -face interviews with children/adolescents growing up in a single parent family were not the same as Hughes, Wright, Malcolm X and Barack. One person stated that his mother was always there for him and his siblings. His perspective was that his mother kept him and his siblings very busy whereas they did not have much time to focus on not having their father around. He also said that his mother kept them involved in sports and other extracurricular activities so that they would not get involved with the wrong group of people. Another person that I interviewed said that she stayed focus as well and that there was lots of love in her single parent family home. She said she is now attending UW-Madison and majoring in law.

In another interview, it was mentioned while growing up in the projects, a low income apartment mainly for unwed mothers, in the City of Milwaukee, it was revealed

that many adolescents became successful because they lean on one another to have fun, be involved in sports, and to just “hang out” together

I believe that along with literature of famous AA adolescent and the everyday life of AA adolescents while growing up in a single-parent family that there are many obstacles that these children are faced with. I feel that since these obstacles are there, that these children/adolescents try harder to be successful because of all the negativity that they are faced with in life.

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