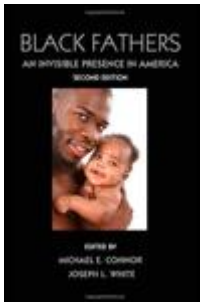


Beyond Baby Daddy: A New (Better) Understanding of African American Fatherhood

A review of



Black Fathers: An Invisible Presence in America (2nd ed.)

by Michael E. Connor and Joseph L. White (Eds.)

New York, NY: Routledge, 2011. 290 pp. ISBN 978-0-415-88367-2. \$39.95,
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Reviewed by
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One does not need to be a scholar to notice a significant problem plaguing many African American families—missing or absent fathers. Research shows that among various ethnic and racial groups, African Americans evidence the highest rate of fatherless homes (Tucker & Mitchell-Kernan, 1995). These statistics only add to the glut of stereotypes that are attributed to African American fathers.

Unfortunately, the impression that many people hold of African American men, fathers in particular, is by and large negative. The image of African American fathers did not begin with the singing group the Temptations, but “Papa Was a Rolling Stone” portended a serious and growing problem. Many of the early studies on African American fathers revealed perceptions of irresponsibility (Parke, Power, & Fisher, 1980), lack of involvement (McAdoo, 1993), and deviance (Rasheed & Rasheed, 1999). More recent scholars (e.g.,

Cabrera, Ryan, Mitchell, Shannon, & Tamis-Lemonda, 2008), however, are attempting to present a very different picture. More recent investigations into understanding African American fatherhood convey that these men are excited and proactive about being engaged in their children's lives.

Nonetheless, negative stereotypes associated with African American fathers are ubiquitous. Unfortunately, however, any understanding of the factors that have contributed to the current situation that many African American fathers find themselves in is superficial, at best. In the second edition of *Black Fathers: An Invisible Presence in America*, Michael E. Connor and Joseph L. White attempt to shed light on some current and historical factors that contribute to the plight that African American fathers now encounter. Readers of this edition are informed that in no way are the editors or contributors to this text attempting to make excuses for the bad behavior of some fathers; rather, the intent is to provide some context to better our understanding and to present a much more balanced view of African American fathers.

In providing historical context, as one might surmise, the book immediately discusses the practice of slavery. Although some readers may dismiss the impact of slavery on the psychological and behavioral functioning of some African American fathers today, the inclusion of this history establishes the underpinnings of a system of discrimination and oppression that disproportionately affects this specific demographic. For example, one of the practices that were encouraged by slave owners was the breeding of African American fathers in an effort to increase the slave labor force.

Although slavery was early "social policy," the editors discuss a much more recent social policy that also exerted deleterious effects on African American families and fathers: Low-income, mother-headed families who sought assistance through the Aid to Families with Dependent Children program were informed that they would be penalized, in effect, should a man be discovered to be residing in the home. This policy most certainly had a devastating impact on the composition of African American families and fathers' roles in those families.

In addition to providing historical context for many of the challenges facing African American fathers, *Black Fathers* also includes several chapters in which various contributors describe their relationships with their fathers. This inclusion is especially helpful because not all of the accounts provided by these writers are sanguine. Whereas some of the contributors write of growing up in two-parent homes, several discuss not having their fathers present physically—and sometimes emotionally. Though the home environments were not always ideal, each of the contributors generally framed his or her experiences in terms of lessons learned and how the situation fostered a sense of resilience. This reframing of experience is one of the many strengths of the text.

Another strength of *Black Fathers* is the inclusion of first-hand accounts of men who were on the journey of being or becoming new fathers. For those who are already fathers, the retelling of experiences with newborns is sure to bring about a chuckle and a fond memory.

For those who are on the journey to becoming a father, the concept of universality should lend a sense of hope that one is not alone and should persevere.

Besides the anecdotal evidence of the importance of fathers for African American children, Connor and White also include several chapters pertaining to studies that investigated the influence of African American fathers on a range of outcomes. For example, one chapter addresses the impact of African American fathers on gender role development; another speaks to African American fathers' influence on educational aspirations. Both chapters are very well written and discuss research that sheds light on these two very significant issues confronting African American adolescents.

As a clinically trained psychologist, I was glad to see the addition of therapeutic strategies for working with African American adolescents. The chapters addressing successful approaches with African American men (Chapters 14 and 15) are insightful and provide the reader with excellent sources (e.g., Davis, 1999).

By and large, *Black Fathers*, much like the earlier edition, is a tremendous contribution to the literature on African American men. The book easily engages and challenges the reader to expand his or her understanding of this demographic group (provided the reader is not completely culturally encapsulated).

However, the text is not without its shortcomings. Although Connor and White state in the preface that "no attempt was made to cover all types of fathers" (p. x), conspicuously absent from the discussion of Black fathers is any chapter on fathers of biracial children. This omission is especially dubious, given the significant number of African American fathers of biracial/multiracial children (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2000). Furthermore, this exclusion is also questionable given the discussion earlier in the text of slave owners fathering Black children. Several scholars (e.g., Lusk, Taylor, Nanney, & Austin, 2010) have written about the challenges facing biracial youth, and the absence of one's father is certain to exacerbate those challenges.

Many readers of *Black Fathers* will find the text a very easy read. Most prospective audiences (e.g., psychologists, social workers, graduate students) will find the information contained in the book enlightening. However, for those persons who have been culturally encapsulated, the text may not completely serve its educative purpose.

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