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# Just Doing What They Gotta Do: Single Black Custodial Fathers Coping With the Stresses and Reaping the Rewards of Parenting

Roberta Coles

Marquette University, [roberta.coles@marquette.edu](mailto:roberta.coles@marquette.edu)

# Just Doing What They Gotta Do: Single Black Custodial Fathers Coping With the Stresses and Reaping the Rewards of Parenting

**Author:** Roberta L. Coles; *Marquette University, Milwaukee, Wisconsin*

**Abstract:** *For single African American custodial fathers, parenting stress is exacerbated by the cultural expectation that Black fathers are “normally” absent and by the clustering of stresses that Black men are more likely to encounter. This sample of African American fathers have used a repertoire of problem-focused and cognitive coping strategies, including some that are frequently considered “culturally specific.” Twenty Black single custodial fathers are interviewed and their narratives are analyzed for concepts and thematic categories related to stress and coping. Their narratives indicate that certain strategies are avoided because (a) these strategies are not available to them and (b) they desire to present themselves as independent and competent, thus resisting stereotypes and building a sense of efficacy.*

A large body of literature focuses on stress and coping related to normative life events. “Normative events” are those that are ubiquitous, expectable, and relatively short-term (McCubbin et al., 1980). Such normative events have included the transition to parenting, child launching, retirement, and death of a spouse. However, it is questionable whether these life changes are best approached as discrete and normative events. In practice, these life *transitions* would be more accurately understood as processes that involve continuous emotional and practical adjustments.

Although parenting is normative in the sense that it is an expected—quite often a desired—stage in most people’s developmental life cycle, the transition to the parental role may nevertheless arrive at a culturally nonnormative time, be attendant to other nonnormative, even traumatic, events, or be adopted by persons not normally associated with the parental role. Early parenting, nonmarital parenting, and primary parenting by men are all forms of parenting that are often perceived as nonnormative.

Even under the most normative of circumstances, parenting itself is a coping conundrum, simultaneously producing stressors that beg for coping mechanisms and emotional rewards, such as love, creativity, and a sense of competency and satisfaction, that can be summoned as coping resources. Under nonnormative conditions, daily parenting stresses and coping responses can be exacerbated by ecological factors, including the availability of social support,

parental occupation and income, and neighborhood resources.

To further explore parental stress and coping under less than normative conditions, this article examines an understudied parental population: Black single custodial fathers. Single Black custodial fathers barely exist in the cultural mind. African American fathers are frequently assumed to be nonresident fathers, or if they happen to coreside with the child, it is assumed they must be coresiding, in a married or cohabiting state, with the mother as well. I posit that in the case of these fathers, their stressful parenting environment was exacerbated by this very view that their parenting is in a sense nonnormative; American culture does not expect men, especially Black men, to be full-time lone parents.

Moreover, their parenting is rendered more stressful by the larger social context of diminished life conditions that Black men disproportionately experience (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2006). These conditions include, but are not limited to, higher rates of under- or overemployment and poverty, residence in neighborhoods with concentrated poverty, complex paternity, and various losses such as health, divorce, and widowhood. Hence, as suggested by McCubbin et al. (1980), McCubbin and Patterson (1983), and Smith and Smith (1981), these fathers' parenting is accompanied by a clustering of stressors, both in the transition to parenthood and in the subsequent parenting activity itself. Consequently, I suggest that this produces a paradox in which these fathers' parenting stress is on one hand aggravated but simultaneously perceived by the fathers to be a means by which they can compensate for and cope with the risks and losses in their own lives. Exploring the fathers' perception and management of stress, this article describes the coping strategies fathers used and suggests reasons they may not have adopted certain strategies—even culturally specific strategies—to the extent expected.

## **Parenting Stress and Perception**

Parenting generally has been found to be stressful for mothers and fathers (Belsky, Spanier, & Rovina, 1983; Miller & Sollie, 1980; Ventura, 1987). Hawkins and Belsky (1989) also found that married fathers were more stressed when mothers were employed because fathers then must increase their involvement in child care activities and for which they are less prepared. Not unexpectedly then, single parents, who frequently have no partner to rely on for household chores and who must parent both sons and daughters, have been found to have higher levels of stress than married parents (Grzywacz, Almeida, & McDonald, 2002). Single parents' life changes occur with more severity and greater frequency (McAdoo, 1982), and they are more

likely to experience chronically distressing conditions (Olson & Banyard, 1993). Single parents experience more task overload (no personal time, foregoing sleep and leisure) in addition to pervasive financial concerns (Shaw, 1991), and Smith and Smith (1981) found that single parents' biggest stress was loneliness.

Similarly, Bauserman (2002) found divorced parents with sole custody more stressed than those who share custody. In addition, the presence of coparenting conflict, which is more frequently found among single fathers (Richards & Schmege, 1993), produces high levels of stress (DeGarmo, Patras, & Sopagna, 2008; DeLucci, 1995). Divorced single fathers, in particular, are often not prepared for the greater parenting responsibility (DeGarmo et al., 2008) but are nevertheless no more likely than single mothers to use outside help in chores or cooking (Risman, 1986; Smith & Smith, 1981).

One study found single fathers, compared with single mothers, to be less stressed despite their lack of preparation. Richards and Schmege (1993) concluded that single fathers may have been less stressed overall because they are less disclosing and have fewer financial problems. However, even this study found that single fathers were more stressed than mothers over their *identities* as fathers. The fathers in Richards and Schmege's study reported being treated as oddities by outsiders. Smith and Smith (1981) also found that their single father respondents felt they had to prove themselves capable of caring for children alone. Hence, in addition to the daily tribulations of parenting, single fathers' stress is exacerbated by their parental identity.

The concept of identity stress proffered by Thoits (1991) and Burke (1991) would help to explain this latter finding. Individuals usually maintain several identities—as fathers, workers, brothers, and so on—that are arranged in a hierarchy of salience and value to the individual. According to Thoits, individuals of lower status (women, racial minorities, low-income individuals) will likely have fewer identities to call on as multiple sources of fulfillment, and they are more likely to experience more frequent threats to those identities. The more an individual receives feedback from others that is incongruent with or threatens a valued identity, the more stress he or she will feel, and his or her sense of esteem and efficacy will be reduced (Burke, 1991). Therefore, men whose father identity is their main or sole identity will feel stressed by societal feedback that suggests they are incapable of parenting. Or if their fathering identity is threatened by loss of their children, through loss of custody for instance, they will also feel more stressed.

Although stress is often treated as an event and measured as a stressor, stress is a matter of perception. Hill's (1949) classic  $ABC = X$  model proposes that stress  $X$  is the product of

A (an event and related hardships) interacting with B (the person's crisis meeting resources) interacting with C (the definition made of the event). In other words, stress is not inherent in any event itself but is a function of the cognitive response of the individual or family to the event. The meaning the person attaches to a stressful situation is critical to determining the severity of the stress. Explanations that aid the family in making sense of what, why, or how an event happened help to render stress less irrational, more acceptable, and understandable (McCubbin et al., 1980). Attributing positive meanings to a stressful situation is associated with resilience (McCubbin, McCubbin, & Thompson, 1995; Walsh, 1998). Many quantitative studies may effectively measure the perceived *degree* of stress but not the *meaning* attached to the situation; how family members make sense of occurrences and how they appraise the environment, their available resources, and the necessity to overcome the undesirable situation remain relatively unexplored (however, see Dill, Feld, Martin, Beukema, & Belle, 1980; Elder, Eccles, Ardel, & Lord, 1995).

Several studies indicate that what is perceived as stressful varies across cultures and races (Colby, 1987; Naughton, 1997). For instance, studies on caretaking (of children or elderly or ill relatives) across racial groups find that African American caregivers (mostly women) experience less stress in caregiving than do White caregivers (Hinrichsen & Ramirez, 1992; Horwitz & Reinhard, 1995; Mui, 1992). In addition to relaxed caregiving strategies and dispersing the workload among a greater number of caregivers, researchers attributed the lower stress levels to stronger religious views and the perception of the caregiving role as an ideal rather than subsidiary role. Grzywacz, Almeida, and McDonald (2002) investigated work-to-family stress spillover among White and Black parents with and without children. They found that Black parents had higher levels of positive family-to-work spillover and lower levels of negative spillover in either direction than did White parents. The authors speculated that the lower levels of stress might be attributed to more extended family support or less stressful jobs, as the Black respondents in their study perceived their jobs as less demanding than did White respondents.

### **Responding to Stress—Coping**

Over the years, coping has been viewed as a personality trait, such as “hardiness” (Kobasa, Maddi, & Courington, 1981), or as a style, such as Africultural (Constantine, Donnelly, & Myers, 2002). More recently, coping theory has defined coping as *ongoing* cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage external and/or internal demands that are *perceived* as taxing a person's resources (Lazarus, 1993). Contemporary approaches also acknowledge that any

coping strategy may be adaptive or maladaptive, depending on the context, the person, and the measure and modality of the outcome. That is, for instance, particular strategy may have a positive moral outcome but simultaneously a poor social or physical outcome (Lazarus, 1993).

Although the literature distinguishes a number of cross-cutting typologies, the simplest and most common coping categories are problem-focused or cognitive-focused strategies. Problem-focused strategies involve actions taken to modify a threatening situation. These can include actions designed to modify the individual's own behavior. Cognitive-focused strategies are attempts to moderate or eliminate unpleasant emotions or to reframe the situation in a positive light. These almost always involve changing the individual, the "victim" of the stress, or his or her perception. Cognitive strategies can involve avoidant strategies (Mattlin, Wethington, & Kessler, 1990)—fantasy, wishful thinking, denial, withdrawal, substance abuse, suppressing one's emotions—or stress reduction through relaxation, joking, or positive reappraisal.

Often, this categorization entails assumptions about the utility of these strategy types. When stressful conditions are resistant to change, it is assumed that emotional strategies will predominate. When stress is appraised as controllable, problem-focused strategies will prevail. Cognitive strategies are seen as having short-term utility, a means of reducing anxiety before moving to a problem-focused strategy (Auerbach & Gramling, 1998), whereas problem-focused strategies appear to be more effective long-term in reducing stress (Aldwin & Revenson, 1987).

Although the literature theoretically recognizes that the relationship between coping and stress is bidirectional, that is, that coping is not just a response to stress but can also produce stress, the research frequently focuses solely on the unidirectional relationship between the stressor or the stessee and the coping strategy. Or research often aims to predict which type of stressor elicits which coping strategy or what kind of person adopts which coping strategy. They ask the questions "Do low-income people use different strategies than middle-income?" (Judge, 1998), "Do women use different strategies than men?" (Jordan & Revenson, 1999), or "Do Black Americans cope differently than Whites?" (Gomel, Tinsley, Parke, & Clark, 1998).

Because the latter question is relevant here, I should point out that as mentioned earlier, the literature has identified the use of large informal networks of social support (extended family and friends; Ross & Aday, 2006; Utsey, Bolden, Lanier & Otis, 2007) and religiosity (praying, spiritual beliefs; Shorter-Gooden, 2004) as primary strategies within an Africultural coping style (Constantine, Donnelly, & Myers, 2002). (Constantine, Donnelly, & Myers, 2002) the strategies of using large informal networks of social support (extended family and friends; Ross & Aday, 2006; Utsey, Bolden, Lanier, & Otis, 2007) and relying on religiosity (praying, spiritual beliefs;

Shorter-Gooden, 2004). Although many of these studies have largely relied on female respondents (Christian, Al-Mateen, Webb, & Donnatelli, 2000; Shorter-Gooden, 2004; Taylor, Hardson, & Chatters, 1996; Utsey, Ponterotto, Reynolds, & Cancelli, 2000), the findings have frequently been generalized across gender.

Quantitative coping measures frequently fail to investigate the social contexts of stress or the whole person, who has particular intentions, beliefs, plans, and social connections, not only a class, gender, and race. As Lazarus (1993, p. 236) has noted, frequently what is missing from the research and “what is needed most is a description of what the person is thinking ... in an effort to cope.” My intention here is to provide unique information about the experiential and subjective aspects of the perception and management of stress among a population about which little is known. Because narration—how one perceives and formulates one’s story—can itself be a form of coping (Blenkinsopp, 2007), I investigated how men *talk* about parental stress and coping and identified the coping strategies they use.

## **Method**

Combining qualitative narratives with demographic data, this research focused on the fathers’ decisions to parent, their parenting experience, and the perceived outcomes for fathers. A purposive sample of 20 fathers was obtained by word-of-mouth recruitment mostly in the Midwest, through various local organizations, such as community centers, parenting resource centers, churches and mosques, Web sites, university students, and the fathers themselves.

Fathers were admitted to the study on the basis of their self-identified race and custodial status, the latter defined as the child residing with the father at least 4 nights per week. Custody could follow divorce, adoption, widowhood, or a nonmarital birth and could be arranged formally (through the court) or informally (by the parents or family without court intervention).

Fathers were asked to fill out a questionnaire eliciting demographic information about themselves and their children and addressing their family background, existence and proximity of support systems, distribution of household labor and child care, the ranking of various parental and behavioral goals, and a limited number of measurable outcomes for child and father. On completion of the questionnaire, fathers were asked if they wanted to continue to the next stage, a 2- to 4-hr semistructured interview with the primary researcher. Interviews were conducted at a mutually agreed on location, usually the father’s home; however, two interviews were conducted online and one was conducted by phone.

The interview included questions designed to explore more deeply the motivations and

factors influencing their choice to parent full-time, the perceptions of their identity and how others view them, the meaning and enactment of various parenting roles and behavioral goals, and satisfaction with and outcomes of the choices made. For example, fathers were asked “Which of your identities is most important to you?” “How do people respond to your identity as a father?” “How well prepared were you for the parenting experience?” “What have been the most difficult aspects of parenting?” and “To whom do you turn to for advice?”

All interviews, but the online ones, were audiotaped and transcribed verbatim. Transcripts were compared with the audiotapes for accuracy. Using a grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) approach, in which theory is developed inductively from data and no hypotheses are proposed or tested, narratives were repeatedly read to identify reoccurring concepts and patterns. These were developed into emergent thematic categories using a constant comparative procedure in which concepts are compared among all interview narratives and resulted in coded concepts being grouped into meaningful categories (Goulding, 1999), which were then coded for their relationship to the overarching categories of stress and coping.

Interviews of these 20 men occurred from the end of 1999 through 2005. A set of 10 interviews was conducted first and then a hiatus occurred while the author published preliminary studies and sought extramural funding. The second set of 10 interviews was then conducted. Because the sample size is small and nonrandom, findings should be viewed as descriptive and suggestive rather than statistically significant.

### **Profile of Fathers and Children**

In terms of age, education, and income, these men are not the stereotypical low-income, teenaged fathers on which much of the literature on Black single fathers is based. Although their ages ranged from 22 to 76 at the time of the interview, most of the fathers were in their 30s and 40s and only one father was a minor when his first child was born. As to education, all fathers had at least a high school degree at the time of the interview. Those with a terminal high school degree tended to be located at either end of the age range. Eight had a bachelor’s degree and three had a graduate degree, and some of those degrees had been completed since taking custody. Overall, these fathers represent a more highly educated group compared with Black men nationally.

In regard to income, three fathers had incomes below \$15,000; one of those fathers was disabled, one was retired, and one had a previous felony record and was having difficulty finding sustainable employment. However, six fathers had incomes exceeding \$50,000, which put the group’s average income higher than the national average for Black men.



Although this sample has above-average income and education for Black men, focusing solely on these common measures may mislead one to dismiss financial stress as salient, as income alone may camouflage job instability and multiple employment. In this sample, the higher income results in part from the fact that seven fathers work multiple jobs. Five of them work a full-time job *and* at least one part-time job; one father worked a full-time and three part-time jobs. Nor is the sample's higher income and education reflective of the fathers' roots. Most fathers described themselves as coming from lower- or working-class backgrounds. The majority (12) came from single-mother, single-income homes. Therefore, these fathers' current socioeconomic status may not be a good indicator of learned behaviors or habituated ways of seeing that likely affect an individual's assessment of a situation and the options available.

Wealth is usually a better indicator of lifestyle options, as it includes home ownership and other assets that lend security to one's situation. In this sample, 40% of the fathers owned their homes (two had been fortunate to inherit homes that had been in the family a generation or two), which is lower than the national average of 47% for Black families.

Eight fathers had been married to the custodial child's mother. The majority (12) had never been married to the mother, although a few had cohabited with her. One had been married before but not to the custodial child's mother, and another was an adoptive father.

These 20 fathers had a total of 36 custodial children, 21 girls and 15 boys. The custodial children ranged in age from infancy to young adult at the time of the interview. Five custodial children were in the infant-through-preschool age range, 17 were 5 to 11 years old, 10 were teenagers, and 4 were young adults living at home.

Half of the fathers had custody of one child, six had custody of two, two dads had three children, and two had four. The length of custody ranged from 5 months to 16 years, but the majority had had custody for 5 or fewer years. Five had had custody for less than a year. The majority of fathers (15) had custody of their children through court appointment. One of those was an adoption. Nine of these fathers also had the mother's consent, and about five fathers had fought the mother or other family members to obtain custody. Of the remaining five fathers, two had taken custody informally, usually with little to no resistance from the mother. The three formerly married widowers "inherited" sole custody.

### **Clusters of Individual-Level Stressors Among the Fathers**

Although determining correlations among stressors, stressees, and coping strategies was not an objective of this study, I did note patterns of significant individual-level stressors among

this small group of fathers. By significant I refer to nonnormative stresses, such as loss of spouse or partner through divorce or widowhood, loss of job, debilitating health problems, legal problems (such as crime or custodial battles), or children's behavior problems severe enough to require outside intervention. This is not an inclusive list of stress-inducing experiences but rather a list of those derived from analysis of the interviews. I only tallied stresses that involved them, their children, or the process of becoming a custodial father, although some of them were affected by stresses related to their siblings or parents as well. And I also excluded general daily stresses, such as juggling job(s) and family responsibilities, arguments with children, disciplinary issues, etc., that are an integral part of most parenting.

### **Divorce From Child's Mother**

Five fathers had been married and then divorced, with the divorces ranging from amiable to hostile. The most complicated was that of Dominic. He and his wife had had an on-again, off-again dating relationship, in part because his wife was White and her family was unsupportive of their relationship. They married subsequent to their first son's birth. After about 2½ years, Dominic's wife became pregnant by another man. Dominic left for a few months, but then his wife called to say her extramarital relationship had ended. So they reunited and eventually had a third child. However, right before she was born, Dominic underwent a kidney transplant, which his body rejected. During that time, when he was so sick he could hardly walk, his wife left him, taking their two daughters. After two days she returned the girls, the younger of whom was still being breast-fed. With help from his mother, uncle, and preteen son, Dominic survived that period, and 4 years later, now in good health, he remains the custodial father of three children, one of whom is not biologically his.

### **Death of Child's Mother**

Three fathers had been married and then widowed by their wives' premature deaths. A fourth father, James, had not been married to the mother but, on her death, assumed custody of their daughters after a court battle. Although the daughters had stayed with him regularly and he had declared paternity at the time of their births, he had to resort to court battles to fight "in-laws" to obtain custody. James describes it this way:

[A]ll her sisters and brothers, her mother and father—I was in court with them on this issue. When the judge ruled in my favor ... he said, "You can't take these kids away from him." The family didn't want me to have the kids, because they said I didn't have a wife and I wasn't able to raise two daughters by myself, but I was determined.

## **Complex Paternity**

Five fathers had other biological children of whom they did not have custody. In three cases, the noncustodial children were older children of different mothers, and in two cases, they were the younger children of different mothers. Seven fathers were caring for, in some capacity, other non-biological children, such as younger siblings, children of former or current girlfriends, or friends of their children. In four cases, these children resided with them, and in the remainder the fathers spent time with them and/or helped them financially.

These complex paternities had financial repercussions as well. Most of the fathers had paid child support, at least sporadically, and/or had been involved with their noncustodial children, usually by taking them to or coaching their sporting events, enrolling them in extracurricular activities, and/or by paying for various necessities. Some fathers were still having child support arrearages garnished from their wages and income tax returns to compensate the State for the mothers' previous welfare receipt. In fact, two fathers were still paying support for the children of whom they currently had custody. The fathers hesitated to halt payments, fearing either the mother would be angered or the courts would reverse the custodial arrangement.

## **Health Problems**

Four fathers' custody was accompanied by serious health problems. One father was disabled as a result of a combination of obesity, diabetes, and joint replacements. Another father had had a kidney transplant, and a third father was elderly, with deteriorating health. One father's child had several years of health problems because of premature birth.

## **Legal Issues**

Seven fathers had experienced legal conflicts that required court action. Four fathers endured court battles to obtain custody, and at least two of those fathers still faced future court hearings and were worried about the imminent possibility of losing custody. Three fathers had spent time in juvenile detention or jail. One father had committed felony theft and was imprisoned in a Huber facility while he had sought custody, and his current employment was limited. And Calvin, father of a preteen daughter, had been arrested because of his attempts to see his daughter against the mother's will when he was noncustodial. He says that during that year he was an "emotional wreck. I was depressed, and I would have these impulses. I mean, suicidal, to be honest with you. And the only way I felt to stop that, to stop me from taking that next step is that I would reach out and try to see my daughter."

## **Job Related**

At least six fathers had lost or were about to lose a job subsequent to custody or were

significantly underemployed. This excludes the seven fathers currently multiply employed, essentially substituting one type of stress for another. Job loss often accompanied one or more other stressors. For instance, one widower quit his job to care for his three children, one of whom had chronic health problems. Two fathers experienced job loss due to health problems. And as previously mentioned, criminal records hindered employment for two dads.

### **Children's Behavior**

Four fathers had children with at least temporary bouts of problematic behavior. One father's son had disruptive behavioral problems because of extended foster care experience, and one father's daughter temporarily experienced eating disorders. Another father's teen daughter and her friend had committed a one-time credit card fraud, but she confessed the crime to her dad. Furthermore, this father's older son had recently moved out of the house without explanation or information of his whereabouts. The father, who had had sole custody of his children for 15 years, attributed his gray hair to those two incidents.

Another father, whose daughter had been on drugs and in trouble with the law, said dealing with her situation was the first time he had ever been depressed.

[My daughter] wanted to be able to not have a curfew and do what she wanted. And at 13, I know she's going to have some bad experiences, but that's what she chose. You know, I was depressed and the last one and a half years, I've been through pure hell with her, you know, but I finally came to the realization that she's going to do what she wants to do. All I can do is love her and show support of the positive things she does and not support the negative things.

### **Discrimination**

Six of the fathers recounted specific incidents of discrimination, based either on race or sexual orientation, involving either themselves or their children. More common among their complaints was "diffuse discrimination," that is, cultural messages that denigrated their identities as Black males or single fathers.

### **Residence Transitions**

Seven of the fathers had moved once since taking custody and five had moved twice, for a variety of reasons. These reasons included job changes, obtaining another bedroom for the custodial child, and securing better neighborhoods. Although moving in itself can be a stressful adjustment, presumably some of these moves lessened other stresses. Nevertheless, in some cases, not moving was also associated with stresses related to the lack of neighborhood safety. For instance, one father described his neighborhood experience as such:

I grew up in this neighborhood. It's fine. I guess it's as safe as any [city] neighborhood, but it's not the suburbs. I don't look at it as a stress-free environment. It is very stressful. I don't plan on living here all my life. I do not like getting out of my car, looking around to make sure nobody's going to jack me ... getting out looking around to make sure nobody's going to jack me when I come out of my school building. I mean, that's stressful.... The inner city is violent. There's no two ways about it.

As mentioned earlier, family stressors are seldom isolated or even randomly occurring events, but rather a series of continuing events that tend to pile up over time. This finding is particularly true for low-income and/or minority families, who often lack resources and the attendant control over their environment, and for racial minorities, who experience institutional racism and chronic racially related stressors in their daily lives (Masten & Garmezy, 1985).

Although each father's situation is unique, in the aggregate the complexity of their situations illustrates that father custody is frequently not straightforward. A clustering or an accumulation of stresses often accompanied their parental situations. Thus, in total, 15 fathers had experienced at least one of the above stressors, 14 fathers had experienced at least two of the stressors, 10 fathers had experienced at least three, 4 at least four, 3 at least five, and 2 had experienced six stressors. Only 5 fathers had not mentioned any of the above stressors.

### **Problem-Solving Coping Strategies**

Although this article is largely intended to explore fathers' perceptions and articulation of emotions, experiences, and values related to stress and coping, I did note the coping strategies used by these fathers. I did not provide them with a list of strategies to choose from; rather, I derived this list inductively from the stories they told when asked open-ended questions about how they "managed" or "dealt with" their various stressors. The fathers often used what the literature would call planful problem solving, although no particular strategy was used in a consistent manner among a majority of fathers. Many fathers were versatile in strategizing, calling on a repertoire of available coping strategies that seemed appropriate to the situation.

### **Formal Counseling**

Three fathers, all with high income, sought formal counseling. In two cases the counseling was for daughters—the previously mentioned daughter with eating disorders and the daughter using illegal drugs. The father who had been sentenced to jail for breaking restraining orders to see his daughter had used counseling for himself.

### **Spiritual Support**

Despite the common view that church attendance and prayer play a strong role in the Black community, that pattern did not show up in this respondent pool. Of the 20 men, 6 said that neither they nor their children were religious or attended church. Two more had their children attend church, but they themselves did not. Six attended church themselves but their narratives did not express strong religious belief or indicate that their beliefs played any role in managing life's problems. Only 4 fathers regularly attended church and articulated a belief system on which they called to deal with difficult times. Even then, spiritual strategies were not used in isolation. For instance, Conrad, a father who took sole custody of two daughters after a tumultuous divorce, said that his spiritual beliefs supplemented his social support system:

I do feel satisfied; I feel very grateful to an almighty, to a supreme being. Spirituality does come up because, believe it or not, it's a part of all the things I feel have happened to me. I still am blessed and I'm so grateful for a number of things, including the children's mother, who might not have felt that I would still be standing. Because let's face it most men again, would probably have cashed in right now. That isn't really what I was about, to prove to anybody that I can do something. I was again doing what I felt necessary to get done under these circumstances. I had my two sisters and one or two close friends who I could turn to and who kind of help me through it. And I'm not a zealot, but I think that the level of spirituality that I have—I do go to church—did not hurt.

### **Public Assistance**

Only two fathers were currently on public assistance of some sort. Billy, who had diabetes and hip replacements, was receiving disability benefits, and Theo, a young father of a 2-year-old daughter, was receiving housing subsidies. The better-than-average income levels of the group meant that most fathers did not currently qualify for public assistance. A couple of fathers could have used assistance in the past but chose not to.

### **Social Support and Assistance**

Social support is often an ephemeral coping category encompassing emotional support, advice, material aid, and services. The traditional view of Black families is that they are embedded in extended families, pool their resources, exchange practical help, and call on those kin for coping. This set of respondents exhibited those ties to some degree but not to the extent expected. Most of the fathers felt they could call on family members for advice, and most did from time to time. When they did, it was usually sisters and mothers to whom they turned, for pragmatic medical advice, ideas about behavioral expectations and discipline, or just for someone to talk to. About six fathers received occasional help, in the form of babysitting, some meals, and small financial loans. Only two or three of the fathers received a lot of help, mostly in

the form of daily child care while they were at work. Fathers receiving the most support tended to be those who were younger, had young children, and who resided in close proximity to family members.

Several fathers worked at schools or community centers and turned to colleagues knowledgeable about child development for advice. A few turned to sources that are not normally addressed in many studies on coping; one father used an Internet chat site, for instance. He asked all the women on the site whether they thought his 13-year-old daughter's use of makeup was acceptable. Of course, he received a range of answers, but then he weeded through them and worked with those most congruent with his own values and parenting style. Three fathers mentioned using Bill Cosby (actually the character Cliff Huxtable in *The Cosby Show*) as a role model and resource for ideas about how to respond to various situations. One father, in particular, said he tried to manage his child's misbehavior with Cosby's sense of humor.

### **Countering the Lack of Control—Cognitive Coping**

Cognitive mechanisms appeared in the fathers' narratives as well, particularly when they perceived a lack of control over their environment, or when problem-focused options were beyond reach. Preventing oneself from ruminating on unproductive or stressful thoughts is a stress reduction strategy. Fathers accomplished this through "distracting activities or movement" and/or through "positive reappraisal."

#### **Distracting Activities and Movement**

Keeping the body moving and the mind preoccupied with imminent activity derails stressful thoughts. Occasionally, fathers mentioned specific activities they used as a form of "therapy," to keep their minds off the stressful situation or to relax themselves. Redmond, whose teen daughter had been in juvenile detention recently, buried himself in work, for instance. And Rubin, father of a 9-year-old son, was about to be laid off from his job; he confesses,

For me, baking is therapy. When I can't run or do anything like that, I bake. When I have emotional baggage, I could open a bake shop with the stuff that's been on my mind; lately, I've been cranking it out. [As a matter of disclosure, the author benefited from the father's current round of "therapy," as she ate a slice of his homemade German chocolate cake during the interview.]

These actions provide fathers a perception of moving determinedly toward an end goal even though they may feel little agency to shape the situation. They frame their actions as doing what the situation *requires* of them. Hence, the verbs *doing* and *going* are often prefaced by the

imperatives *gotta* and *have to*. Tracy's narrative exemplifies this: When asked if he would have taken custody if he had not been employed, he answered:

If something [had] happened, you gotta do what you gotta do. You know, if something happened to his mother that means I would just have to do what I had to do. I would have had to take him.

Similarly, Cameron, the father with a felony fraud record, had taken custody of his two children when the mother was charged with neglect. Cameron served 9 months in a work-release Huber facility after he secured placement of his two children. His mother cared for the children during that time. It was then he realized that the mother of the children no longer wanted to participate in the parenting, and he would be on his own as a parent. He remembers,

I really didn't feel overwhelmed until I figured out that the mother was ... that she didn't want anything to do with [the kids]. And it just made me feel like, like I was alone in it, but still I felt that I had to do what I had to do. It got hard..., but I got over it and figured I'm gonna have to do this. I was stressed; I can say I was stressed out. I don't know, I guess the kids kept me motivated; they helped me get over it. This is a big responsibility, and I just accepted it. I just kind of kept to myself about it, you know. I didn't really talk to people about it.

Cameron's view illustrates well the paradox of parenting. He felt overwhelmed when he first realized he would be parenting two children alone, yet the children themselves provided the motivation needed to overcome the stress and accept the responsibility to "just do it" so to speak.

As stated earlier, fathers convey a sense of having little control over the larger situation, so doing what is necessary requires donning mental blinders, preventing oneself from analyzing the situation. Acting without much contemplation, without expecting change, becomes the modus operandi. Asked whether he had concerns for the future, Alex responded, "I just take it day by day. I just take care of what's necessary. I don't really think about it."

In the fathers' narratives, inactivity is potentially dangerous because it signals lethargy or creates opportunity for depression. Tracy explained his breakup with the child's mother:

I think I did do the right thing for myself at the time, because she wasn't doing anything. She wasn't going anywhere. And I wanted to do some things. She had no motivation. She was draining my motivation, you know.

When asked what he would look for in a wife, he continued this theme of activity:

You know, I just want her to do something to keep her mind, to keep her



sanity. Because more and more I think it's hard to stay sane out here.

Note that Tracy is unclear whether he wants her to work, volunteer, take up a hobby, or clean house. It seems as if it does not matter, but he suggests that *doing something* is essential to both her and his mental health.

### **Positive Reappraisal**

When fathers did allow themselves to think about their stress, it often took the form of reappraising the situation. Several fathers stated that they made a habit of taking a negative situation and transforming it to something positive, by seeing the good in it or by using it as a learning situation. Contemplating the possibility of soon losing his job, Rubin said, "See, I always take anything negative that happens to me, and I try to find something positive out of it." Similarly, Tracy, the father who had been in a detention home as a teen, said that while he was detained, his father took his sisters and moved to California, leaving Tracy in the Midwest by himself. He hid his pain from others and tried to stay positive and focused.

I'd come back out [of my room at the detention center], and they would see me smiling and the same cheerful personality.... So there's always negative things around. And I always try to find the bright side to it. No matter what the situation is, I can't just be negative. I just gotta stay positive and stay focused on what I want to do.

Theo spoke similarly of the experience with his father. Rather than wallowing in self-pity, he tried to distinguish himself by having a positive attitude and learning from it.

Well, my father not being there—A lot of people take their father not being there when they were young as a bad thing. But I just took the good out of it and took what he did do and took what I'm not going to do like him. And it definitely made me a better father. It made me say, "I'm not going to do this to my child."

In the act of reappraisal, fathers transform themselves rather than the trials that happened to them (where they lack control), thereby giving themselves agency.

### **Why Not More Planful Coping?**

Although these fathers took problem-solving actions, such as working extra jobs, getting counseling, securing social support, no one strategy was used by a majority. My point here is not to conclude that there *should* have been more use of planful strategies. Instead, my intent here is to use the fathers' words to explain why certain strategies were not used more.

## Doing It Myself—Social Support Issues

Social support from family was not as available as it is often presumed to be among African Americans. Twelve fathers had little or no family support of the pragmatic kind. As noted earlier, some of the fathers had been interviewed after they had had custody for many years, but also many of the fathers had taken custody later in life of more recent children. This resulted in their having fewer surviving or healthy family members to call on. A few of the fathers had moved for professional reasons or to relocate to more child-friendly communities, and they were no longer in close proximity to family members and had not yet built up a support network of friends. In addition, as mentioned earlier, many fathers had been reared in single-parent families by mothers who had worked hard, sometimes several jobs, to rear their children. Several fathers had siblings or parents with financial or legal problems. Fathers wanted to avoid burdening these family members. Tracy explains:

Of course, I think to run to my mother sometimes, but I haven't because of other things that my other brothers and sisters are putting her through. My brother's back in jail.... And my sister, she had a problem with her husband. First person she called—my mother. [My mom] calls me and tells me all these things—"How the siblings is driving me crazy." So I try to be strong.

Moreover, fathers' narratives were laced with a strong desire for autonomy. Fathers prided themselves in going it alone; managing tasks alone is associated with a sense of competence. For instance, asked if he gets help from family or friends for chores around the house, Tracy remarked,

Sure I could get help from people if I wanted. But I don't ask unless I have to. Mother taught me ... independence, you know, how to take care of myself and just be independent. Not depend on anyone else. She taught me that. Like I might ask my mother to do something. But, like I said, my mother has taught me so well that I don't have to ask somebody to help me wash clothes. I can do that myself. The dishes ... I can do mostly all the stuff myself.

Similarly, Redmond suggests that social support is available, but he chooses to forego it: "I call my sister occasionally for advice, but I have a strong autonomous streak in me. I'd rather do it myself." Antoine suggests that his decision to handle tasks alone is due to his intense involvement. His need for help passes before he can ask, which results in a sense of competence.

So never in my mind did I have like a doubt or think, "well, I don't know if I

can do this by myself.” It’s like, “just do what you can.” It was just like, “OK, I have to do this by myself.” So I feel competent. I get caught up in doing what I’m doing, and by the time I can even contemplate whether I should ask someone how to do it, it’s just done.

### **Being Stronger Than Therapy**

For many of the fathers, therapy simply was beyond their financial means. However, a number of the fathers’ narratives suggest that they are less disclosing, less inclined to talk to others about their situation or stress (see Cameron above). Rubin, the father who was about to be laid off, indicated that keeping one’s problems to oneself is a sign of strength. “I’ve been having [the job layoff] in my brain for the past couple weeks and I guess that’s one of the things I got from my uncle [who acted as a social father to Rubin]. And that’s he didn’t show people emotions ... he was always the pillar of strength. And even to the end—he had cancer, cirrhosis of the liver—but he never let anyone know.”

Raymond, the father who adopted his son from foster care, eventually concluded that suppressing his emotions was increasing his stress. But note his worry that revealing his parental stress would confirm outsider views that he could not be a successful single parent. He also felt guilt for his anger, an emotion he thought contrary to what a parent should feel. He states,

Like I said, the first three weeks was just hell. I actually thought why did I do this [adopt his son]? Everybody told me this was going to be hard. And I said to myself, “No I can’t go back and say I can’t do this.” Everybody would have said, “I told you so.” So, you know, it was really, this first three weeks that were hard, and then I think the point where it changed is where I just said “That’s it!” I just blew [to a friend on the phone]. I just needed to vent. I hadn’t been doing that. I was just struggling through it all. And I hadn’t just been able to blow. I discovered it was OK to feel anger toward him. And then I started using different tactics.

Finally, a few fathers belittled psychological analysis, seeing those explanations as excuses justifying not doing what needs to be done. For instance, when I asked Rubin why he thought more single fathers do not take custody, he said, “Some men can come up and tell you, ‘Well, financially I couldn’t do it. Emotionally, I couldn’t handle it.’ Lalalalalala—all that psychobabble. When it comes down to it, it’s just a decision you make.”

### **Avoiding the Stigma of Public Assistance**

In conjunction with the desire for autonomy, most fathers prided themselves in having avoided public assistance and sometimes pointed out that their own single moms had also avoided it by working more than one job. Redmond took custody of his son first and then a year

or so later his daughter. He was employed at the time but not making much money. After he had custody of the children, he returned to school and earned his master's degree and at the time of the interview was making more than \$50,000. But he spoke of his financial situation during the early years of custody:

The first year I had [custody of] Redmond Jr., I was making \$6 and something an hour, which was enough to get by. I was living with (my son's friend) Josh's parents. We were both staying with them, and I was paying them rent. And then I moved up here, upstairs to this house, and I got Carla [Redmond's daughter] that following spring.... So I went down to Human Services, and asked about some aid. And they looked at my life with a microscope and then they said they'd give me \$125 a month, which I told them wouldn't even pay my rent.... So I went and applied for my taxi license. So I supplemented my income driving a taxi. And I never looked back. I never got a food stamp or rent assistance or nothing. I raised the kids without any aid from the state, while paying child support for my [older] twins.

Pride in having refrained from public assistance was reflected in Rubin's narrative as well. His own single mother worked two jobs to support four children. She died at age 40 (when Rubin was 17). Rubin views his mother as a model for his own parenting, but he recognizes that what he admires about her may also be the very thing that prematurely ended her life.

Well, what I learned from [my mom] is just, you know, never give up. Keep going at it. I mean, she worked two jobs and finished raising four kids by herself. And she could have easily gotten on welfare. Easily. But that was never an option for her. And I guess sometimes I look back on her and I say, well, it may have been why—I mean, she probably worked so hard, worked herself to death, really.

In research on rural families in Northern California, Sherman (2006) concluded that rural families' lower use of welfare could be explained by stigma avoidance. Sherman argued that the social environment of rural families affords them less anonymity and more moral scrutiny than urban families. The narratives of these fathers, although urban, suggest that although they did not perceive themselves to be under *individual* scrutiny by family and neighbors, as mentioned above they were aware of being under *public* scrutiny as a group, as Black men, particularly as Black fathers. In addition to their desire to be independent, their reluctance to tap into public assistance may have been part and parcel of a desire to avoid the stigma associated with public assistance, build moral capital, and challenge societal stereotypes.

### **Countering Stereotypes**

Many of the fathers perceive that they are viewed as unusual, that they inevitably represent men and African Americans, and that their outcomes will be publicly assessed in light of those two social categories. Cameron, a young custodial father of four biological children and one nonbiological child, lamented the stereotypes of Black men:

You see it in the papers. They expect that Black men will be in jail. It's like they expect us to be dead or in jail by the time we are 25. I don't think they write us in. I don't even think they include us in, but I just deal with it. I mean the battle is bigger than me to try to change, you know. So I just do what I got to do. Just to get by.... So I just do what I gotta do.

His words—"the battle is bigger than me"—convey a sense of lack of control. The negative cultural view of Black men dwarfs his ability to fight it, so he applies the imperative—"just do what I got to do"—to the areas of his life where he does have agency.

Conrad, who has had ongoing battles with his former wife and knows it would be easier to relinquish custody of his daughters, said "I'm going to go down fighting because others are watching me. You see, I'm being judged here, you know."

Likewise, widower Antoine's comments reveal that successful parenting reaps not only personal satisfaction but public kudos. Being judged competent and successful as a father by others is an essential part of the parenting reward.

People always ask me, "Where is your daughter?" [I say,] "I have her" and everybody is like "You do?" I guess they think I'm not going to deal with that.... So I would say for me I think it has been rewarding because I know I can take care of her and I'm going to take care of her and I do a good job at it.... And then people from the outside, they see you doing it and say "OK, it can be done." Not only can it be done but you can do a great job and the child can grow up to be a respectable person and be successful.

These fathers are acutely aware that they are being watched and evaluated. They feel that they stand as representatives of, sometimes role models for, single fathers and particularly single Black fathers. Consequently, for some fathers, participation in this research was an effort to resist those stereotypes. Several men said they were eager to participate because they were aware of the stereotypes of Black fathers as absent or irresponsible; they wanted people to know that "not all Black men abandon their children." When fathers' avoidance of social support, public assistance, and counseling was by choice, their substitution of individually oriented strategies helped them to garner needed self- and public esteem.

### **Perceiving Parental Stress**

I would argue that fathers perceived their parental situation as less stressful than would be expected given their social and individual situations. In addition to these esteem-producing strategies described above, taking custody was viewed as a strategy to cope with losses or stresses stemming from their own childhoods. Three quarters of these fathers came from single-mother homes, and many saw their fathers only two to three times during their childhoods. In some cases, father absence was due to never-married fathers who just disappeared. In a couple of cases, their fathers had died at an early age. Even several fathers from two-parent homes said their fathers were distant, not nurturing. At least eight of the fathers mentioned that their choice to take custody was consciously intended to compensate for their own fathers. Typical of several fathers' narratives, Dominic, the divorced, custodial father of three children, said, "I saw dad very very irregularly throughout my childhood.... I [took custody] to be more than he was. When I thought of my father, I didn't want any of that."

Antoine lived with his father in a married-couple home for half of his youth but nevertheless felt distant from his father. Today he has custody of his daughter through widowhood. He explained his choice to parent on his own, rather than allow other family members to take his daughter,

I think I wanted to break the cycle, for all of the things I didn't have as a kid growing up; I wanted to make sure my daughter has all of that.... That's all I wanted to do, is kind of do things differently. The relationship I had with my dad—I wanted to make sure that I had a different relationship with my daughter. I guess a better relationship.

Furthermore, several fathers viewed their parenting as rescuing them or at least making their lives significantly better. One of the youngest fathers, Theo, explained:

A lot of things changed when I became a father, especially a single parent. It was a change for the good. Because I would be doing other things that I probably shouldn't be doing.... It put me in perspective. I'm no longer living recklessly.

Likewise, Tracy, who has custody of one of his two sons, says

These two guys ... are the reason I live, you know. Because without them ain't no telling what I'd be doing. There's no telling.... And I just think that if it weren't for those two, I probably wouldn't even be here myself. You know, I'd probably be in jail somewhere or probably dead.

This refrain suggests that parenting itself was a strategy of coping with an emotional gap they perceived in their own childhoods and, at least in hindsight, was seen as a strategy to prevent

more dire consequences for them and for their children as well as to counter stereotypes that would cast doubt on their ability to parent.

Although parenting produces its own stresses, such as financial and social constraints on parental freedom, child misbehaviors, the juggling of work and parenting responsibilities, these fathers had some additional stresses that were unique to their social location, such as instant parenting, multiple parenting, discrimination, and health issues. Yet for more than half of these fathers, parenting presented a desirable strategy to compensate for the wounds of fathering in their own childhood and as a means of improving their own life trajectories and hopefully that of their children. Moreover, they garner public rewards for doing something that appears to be rare. For those reasons, they may not have perceived their stress to be severe, or at least the meaning that parenting held for them outweighed the stress.

Relying on a repertoire of coping strategies, these fathers took proactive strategies, such as relying on support networks, when they could, but also relied on cognitive strategies, such as keeping themselves distracted, pushing themselves to do what has “gotta” be done despite the stress, and reappraising the situation as a learning experience. Using the latter strategies stems from multiple motivations and factors. As the literature suggests, it may reflect their perception that they lack control over certain global aspects, yet allows them to feel a sense of control over a limited arena of behavior. Still, their narratives also revealed other motivations and reasons for not using problem-solving strategies. Avoiding the stigma of certain strategies and stereotypes as well as creating a counterimage of independence and competence motivated some of their strategy choices. And pragmatically, sometimes certain strategies were just not available.

## **Implications for Research and Practice**

As a small qualitative study with a nonrandom sample, these fathers were atypical in a number of characteristics. For instance, their education and income are higher than average for Black men (though that is usually the case among single fathers), and they had custody of an unusual proportion of female children. Hence, the findings presented here are not generalizable to all Black single custodial fathers. Future research should seek a representative sample. Also, a comparative study would help determine to what extent the findings here are driven by gender and/or race. That is, as African American men, is their need to exhibit independence, autonomy, and a sense of competence, for instance, greater than for White single fathers or Black single mothers? Are these fathers compensating for their own lack of fathering to a greater degree than are single parents of other races or gender? Third, this study did not investigate the effects of

stress and coping on children's outcomes, nor did it look at stress and coping from the child's perspective. A longitudinal methodology comparing father's and children's narratives on stress and coping and measuring child outcomes would add depth to the literature.

As noted earlier, most research on coping has taken socioeconomic status and/or race into account by noting whether individuals of certain classes or races are more or less likely to use various types of coping strategies, not by exploring how the economic or racial context, or the meaning of that context, shapes the experience of stress or the efficacy of specific coping mechanisms. The context of poverty may give rise to a tolerance, even an expectation, for stress as a fact of life, or such conditions may lead to a sense that one cannot control anything beyond oneself, thus inhibiting proactive strategies to change situations. Likewise, when low-income fathers fail to access public assistance, is that a matter of preference or a lack of opportunity? Various forms of public assistance may not be as available to fathers as they are to mothers, and low-income fathers may be more reticent to seek public assistance than are mothers, either because their income is somewhat higher or because they prefer the stress of multiple jobs to the image of dependence that attends public assistance.

Similarly, although there has been an appropriate call for both researchers and practitioners to be more knowledgeable of and incorporate culturally specific coping methodologies (Townsend & Lanphier, 2007), scholarship and practice should refrain from homogenizing or essentializing racial groups. Within-group variation by gender, class, age, and unique circumstance must always be in the forefront of actual practice. The current literature would predict that African American fathers would call on family and spiritual support as coping resources. Although some of these fathers did, many did not, for lack of opportunity—either family members lived far away or were nonexistent—or as a matter of choice—either to avoid burdening their families or to construct their own sense of autonomy and competency.

Finally, particularly for practitioners, approaching Black fathers with the expectation, rather than surprise, that they are custodial would do much to allay their concerns about public scrutiny and would reduce the public perception that Black men parenting is nonnormative. It is, after all, in exploring the *meaning* attached to their parenting where we come to understand that the relationship between stress and coping is ultimately one negotiated from among competing desires, perceptions, resources, and environment.

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