

PREFATORY

Black Fathers' Parental Habitus as a Practice and Strategy in Home and Schools

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The role of Black fathers in home and school has rarely been examined except from a deficit perspective. *Black father parental habitus* is proposed as a strength-based framework which can help understand African American fathers' positive effects on children's lives and educational success. The goal of this article is to demystify African American fathers' participation in home and education.

Black Family Involvement and Academic Achievement

Findings from several scholars acknowledge the relationship between parental involvement and achievement (Barnard, 2004; Jeynes, 2003; McWayne et al., 2004). Overwhelmingly, their work suggests that academic achievement is significantly higher among children whose parents are actively involved in their education. But references to parental involvement and student achievement are most often focused on children in highly-educated, White, middle-class, 'intact' families (Polite & Davis, 1999).

Literature on Black fathers indicates that some Black fathers are absent from school-related involvement due to a number of societal forces that have undermined their role as economic provider. Negative stereotypes, educational challenges and residential circumstances can also hamper Black fathers' involvement in their children's lives (Davis, Reynolds & Jones, 2011). Perhaps for these reasons, the Black mother has often been the focus of prior research on the linkage between family support and academic achievement among Black youth (Rodney & Mupier, 1999). Few studies have examined the paternal side of the effect of parental involvement on student performance (Hofferth, 2001).

It is estimated that, in a typical year, more than one-third of all Black children will not see their fathers due to various circumstances (Mirande, 1991; Polite & Davis, 1999). High incarceration rates among African American men (Green, 1991) have caused a shift in parental responsibilities to Black women who, far too often, serve as heads of households (Gadsen & Hall, 1996). As such, Black women serve two primary functions: rearing their children and serving as primary providers (Mincy & Pouncy, 1997). National estimates suggest that 27 million children live apart from their fathers (Hernandez, 1993).

Since the early-to-mid 1980s, the role fathers play in children's well-being and academic development has been scant in parent research. Irregular and non-existing involvement patterns have resulted in deficit perspectives on Black fathers. Unfortunately, society is conditioned to stereotype Black families as consisting of a sole parent (the mother), while Black men are symbols of fatherlessness. This image has shaped the debate regarding "deadbeat dads" in the African American community, suggesting that Black men do not care about their children. For some Black men, societal barriers serve to limit the expression of their love for their children (the *expression* consisting of actions, behavior, involvement, etc.) as they negotiate their lived socio-cultural realities. A review of the literature on Black fathers reveals an unbalanced and incomplete record about their attitudes towards their children (Hofferth, 2001; Reynolds, 2010). But it is important to note that involvement should not be equated with commitment, as research has shown that the *love* a father feels for his children is a commitment that is not devalued by the numerous societal barriers he may face. As evident here, fathering and involvement patterns are complex topics.

Fatherhood and Involvement in Schools

Given the prevailing deficit language and perspectives in the literature concerning Black men, I strive to provide language and a framework that shift the discourse on Black fathers and their involvement to a strength-based perspective. In part, my work has been informed by Harper and Kuykendall's (2012) work on successful Black male initiatives. Their writing has aided in shifting the literature on Black men in higher education from a deficit focus, which perceives Black men as failures, to an anti-deficit (high-achieving framework) that highlights the triumphs of Black men in education. From this perspective, Black high-achieving men are used as the reference point to discuss challenges facing Black men. They are also extolled as a crucial source for insights and recommendations that can influence educational policy and practice. I propose we bring this paradigm shift to bear on Black fathers of K-12 children. This is a group of Black men who have also been overwhelmingly perceived from a deficit perspective.

My research extends the concept of *parental habitus*, which describes the ability of Black fathers to successfully provide natural provisions (i.e. stable environment conducive to learning and academic development) in the face of complexities and unpromising circumstances. When education researchers discuss *habitus*, there is an immediate connection to the work of Bourdieu (1976; 1977) on *habitus* and multiple forms of capital, namely, cultural and social capital. These terms were used by Bourdieu (1977) in *Cultural Reproduction and Social Reproduction*, where he defined *cultural capital* as forms of knowledge, skill, education, etc., in short any culturally advantaged information people have that gives them higher status in society. *Social capital* can be accumulated when people interact with other families in schools, workplaces, neighborhoods, local associations, and a range of informal meeting places.

Black fathers exhibiting *parental habitus*, provide their children with cultural and social capital, including attitudes and knowledge that will empower them to navigate educational terrains. However, I do not see the capital provided by them to their children as assuming a position of hierarchy, authority, or power, as typified in Bourdieu's work; nor communitarian focused as styled in Tara Yosso's (2005) work on community cultural wealth. Instead, *Black parental habitus* occupies a unique space in the sociology of education, one which: a) resituates a focus on capital from the receiver (the student) to the giver (the father); b) acknowledges the importance of the experiential knowledge Black fathers have in navigating hostile social landscapes; c) focuses on the individual exchange between fathers and their children; d) recognizes the unique challenges faced by Black children and their fathers in society; and e) considers high-achieving Black fathers' habitus as a way of being that fosters, expects, and is fueled by resiliency and critical agency.

Black parental habitus as a concept, practice, and strategy relevant to Black fathers is needed, as research has rarely documented specific strategies and practices among involved Black fathers. For example, Boyd-Franklin (1989), Clark (1983), and Ford (1993) noted that previous studies on achievement orientation told "little about what happens educationally in the homes of Black children" (p. 59), which makes it difficult for some policy makers and educators to understand how to nurture and teach Black children. Thus, an understanding and description of the role that African American fathers play for their children in the home will be of critical importance, and especially with respect to their sons.

In studying *Black parental habitus*, there are a number of domains that must be considered. High-achieving fathers teach their sons and daughters how to *manage responsibilities* in academic, personal, workplace, and familial realms. These fathers' help their children *strategize* on how to overcome barriers and become assets to their communities (i.e. religious and academic institutions). In so doing, they affirm the importance of using reason and experience to predict outcomes and consequences. Thus, they help their children gain *analytical* skills, which enable them to gain more control over their life trajectories, with an emphasis placed on the development of differentiated meta-strategies for problem solving. These fathers imbed in their children progressive values of social justice, respect for human dignity, and emotional presence. These *progressive values* serve as a life framework for future commitments. All of the aforementioned teachings (e.g., managing responsibilities, strategizing, theorizing, and progressive values) serve Black sons and daughters in both an educational context and in other socially stratified institutions (e.g., churches, political organizations, government, workplace).

One of the primary goals of this work is to give Black fathers a deliberative space to author their own experiences, to name the challenges that they have interacting with school officials, and to recognize the steps that they take to be active participants in their children's educational endeavors. The importance of centering involved Black fathers' voices within the social science discourse on parental involvement is critical, as these voices counter dominant master-narratives about Black paternal deficits. A strength-based examination of Black Parental habitus is an explanation for understanding why, despite every conceivable barrier, many Black men succeed in being highly engaged in the lives of their children, to magnificent mutual benefit.

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