

Love a Son, Raise a Daughter: A Cross-Sectional Examination of African American Mothers' Parenting Styles

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ABSTRACT

The primary focus of this study is to answer the question: "Do African American mothers 'raise' their daughters but 'love' their sons?" This element of Black folklore has been around for more than two decades, but it has little empirical evidence (Randolph, 1995). Indirect support for the belief is found in studies reporting that parents are more permissive with children of the opposite sex (Williams, 1988). As part of a larger four-year longitudinal project examining socialization and personality development in African American families, 94 mothers and their 7-year-old (n=26), 10-year-old (n=26), 13-year-old (n=23), or 16-year-old (n=19) daughters or sons were videotaped while discussing a topic upon which they disagreed but were directed to come to a consensus. Four raters assessed these dyads on the degree of warmth and control exhibited by the mothers. In addition, the children were examined to discover whether there were gender differences in the way they behaved with their mothers. While no evidence was found for the mothers behaving differently with their sons, there was clear evidence that boys behaved differently than girls with their mothers.

FACULTY MENTOR

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James Telesford, as a research assistant and Honors student for the past two years, has shown himself to be a serious, bright, and highly motivated researcher. In my capacity as his research mentor I exposed James to my data set that investigated African American (AA) family socialization practices. James carved out data to investigate whether mothers "raise" their daughters but "love" their sons. This element of AA parenting folklore has been in existence for more than two decades, but it has never been empirically verified. The research procedures required mothers and their children to interact with each other while being videotaped. James' thesis is unique in that interactions among African Americans are seldom studied and even more rarely videotaped. Most of the existing literature was collected via paper and pencil survey instruments, often retrospectively. James' research should do much to enlighten psychologists and other professionals' understanding of AA family communication. This can itself lead to greater appreciation for strengths within the AA family and to improved interventions when addressing problematic issues.



AUTHOR

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James Telesford is a graduating senior with a double major in Psychology and Sociology. His broad research interests include racism, discrimination, stereotypes, and institutional influences on cognition. Currently, he is completing his Honors thesis for the University Honors Program. His thesis focuses on African American mother/child dynamics, specifically, examining the stereotype that the "African American mother 'loves' her son but 'raises' her daughter." He hopes to further pursue his research in graduate school. He thanks his faculty mentor for her unwavering support and guidance, and his parents for their unconditional love and support.

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There are clear inequities between racial groups with regard to enrollment in higher education. For example, European Americans between the ages of 18-19 are much more likely than African Americans to be enrolled in college (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2005). While these inequalities are evident between races, there are also more subtle disparities within racial groups that should not be ignored. These within group differences are particularly striking with regard to gender. In 1967, an estimated 22% of African American males were enrolled in college, while only 15% of African American females were enrolled (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2005). In contrast, the U.S. Bureau of the Census (2005) reported that 35% of African American males were enrolled in college, while 45% of African American females were enrolled. In a mere 40 years, a significant shift has been observed, such that more African American females are now enrolled in institutions of higher learning than are African American males. Indeed, it has been demonstrated that more African American males are incarcerated in the prison system than are enrolled in colleges (Western & Petit, 2005).

Since the publication of the Moynihan report (1965), the African American mother has been blamed for the break down of the African American family and has been considered the primary cause for all that ails the community. Indeed, a folk saying has emerged in the African American community that the mother “loves” her son, but “raises” her daughter – implying that this difference in parenting has produced the high incarceration rate of Black men.

If this statement holds true, it has important implications for both incarceration rates and enrollment rates on college campuses. Perhaps it is the lax parenting style that the mother exhibits toward her son that fails to prepare him for society. He thus ends up incarcerated rather than enrolled in college. The converse of this is that the mother’s instructive and controlling style toward her daughter is the reason for the corresponding higher college enrollment among Black women. While this statement has often been expressed, it has received sparse attention in the research literature. Indirect support for the belief is found in studies reporting that parents are more permissive with children of the opposite sex (Williams, 1988), and that cross-sex parenting emphasizes non-contingent or “unconditional” love, whereas same sex parenting emphasizes performance-conditional love (Jones & Berglas, 1978). Thus, the focus of this paper is four-fold. First, we will review the literature regarding African American mothers, sons,

and daughters. Second, we will examine whether or not African American mothers treat their children differently. Third, we will examine if the children themselves behave differently when interacting with their mothers. Finally, we will determine if there are any discrepancies in the way that the mother and children interact with each other with respect to the age of the children.

The African American Mother

The African American mother faces truly unique challenges. She must contend with both racism and sexism (Cauce et al., 1996). Everyday, she is faced with negative stereotypes about her race and gender on television and in magazines and newspapers. In addition, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2002), African American females are more likely than any other group to face economic challenges.

Besides economic, racial, and gender based difficulties, the African American mother faces the difficulty of imparting an Afrocentric ideology within a Eurocentric culture. Whereas a Eurocentric cultural view focuses on individualism, materialism, reason, and differences, an Afrocentric cultural view stresses community, spirituality, affect, and similarities (Kambon, 1998). These differing cultural views often come into conflict. For example, when a successful African American executive must work Sundays in order to pursue individualistic and materialistic goals, she may give up spirituality by not attending church and thus lose the sense of community that the church provides through fostering affective growth within her family.

African American Mothers and Sons

Without a doubt, the African American mother is extremely important to the African American son. For instance, research has shown that a positive, supporting relationship with his mother negatively correlates with a son’s likelihood of exhibiting internalizing, anxious, depressed, and/or withdrawn behavior (Murata, 1994). With the increasingly Black female single-parent family condition (Smith & Smith, 1986), Black mothers are left with the challenge of teaching their sons how to become men. While the literature on this topic is sparse, Lawson Bush (2000) has attempted to show how Black mothers accomplish this goal. One way in which they do this is by telling their sons stories

of how their ancestors dealt with their hardships (King & Mitchell, 1990). Another technique is by instilling guilt within their sons by explaining to them how behaviors that are not consistent with good morals and principles upset and disappointed them (King & Mitchell, 1990).

Some researchers have found that parents support and validate their African American sons much more so than daughters, and this is done possibly to protect them from the threats of discrimination in the real world (Smetana, Abernethy, & Harris, 2000). Others have shown that when caring for their chronically ill sons, African American mothers perceive them as being frail and less healthy; the mothers are thus more likely to limit their sons' involvement in certain activities, such as sports (Hill & Zimmerman, 1995). The concern with protecting their sons from the cruel world of discrimination may be one explanation for why the African American mother "loves" her son – at least to the extent that such "love" is centered around "protection."

African American Mothers and Daughters

On the other hand, African American mothers are shown to interact with their daughters in very different ways than they do with their sons, yet have similar goals in mind. Mothers are trying to protect both sons and daughters from covert and overt societal discrimination. However, for sons, mothers shelter them from discrimination by providing validation and support (Smetana, Abernethy, & Harris, 2000), and explaining how ancestors have dealt with it (King & Mitchell, 1990). For daughters, they try to teach them how to handle discrimination by being strong and independent (Hill-Collins, 2001).

While it is definitely difficult for a mother to teach her son how to become a man, teaching a daughter to become a strong, independent woman contains diametrically opposed concepts. On one side, the daughter is supposed to identify with the mother to learn the roles of her gender. On the other side is the patriarchal society of the United States, where men are often valued over women. As a result, the daughter may be motivated to resist identifying with the mother in order to conform to the conventional view of femininity (Hill-Collins, 2001).

The Hill and Zimmerman (1995) study discussed previously showed that, when caring for their female

children with Sickle Cell Disease, mothers were more likely to allow their daughters freedom, see them as healthier, and see them as better able to handle the physical pain of disability than their sons. These startling contrasts existed even though no known gender differences exist within those afflicted with Sickle Cell Disease (Hill & Zimmerman, 1995). This emphasis by mothers on self-reliance toward their daughters may explain why African American mothers are seen as "raising" their daughters.

Influencing the Black Mother

As most social interactions require the engagement of both parties, with one party responding to the other, it may be the children themselves that are behaving differently toward the mother. Indirect evidence for this idea comes from Cowan and Avants (1988) who found that: 1) sons were more likely to use **Autonomous Influence** strategies with their mothers (e.g., telling or asking the mother if they could do what they wanted to do), and 2) daughters were more likely to use **Anticipating Noncompliance** strategies with their mothers (e.g., crying, persistence, anger, begging, and/or pleading). Thus, the researchers concluded that the son might have more influence over the mother by using self-sufficient strategies during persuasion, whereas the daughter may have less influence and must anticipate their mothers' noncompliance. However, this study was conducted on a Caucasian sample and thus may not be representative of a Black behavior.

Preliminary Exploratory Questions

The present study investigated several research questions. First, we examined if males, in contrast to females, behave differently when interacting with their mother. Second, we examined whether or not mothers, when interacting with younger and older children, differentially express affection and guidance. Finally, we examined whether or not Black mothers "love" (show more affection towards) their sons and "raise" (express more guidance for) their daughters." In sum, are there gender differences and/or age differences in the way mothers' parent, and/or the way children interact with their mothers?

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Methods

Participants consisted of 94 African American mothers and their children. The children were 7 (n=26), 10 (n=26), 13 (n=23), or 16 (n=19) years of age. 44% of the sample consisted of male children, while 56% were female children. The participants were drawn from a larger four-year longitudinal project examining socialization and personality development in African American families.

The mother-child dyads were videotaped while discussing a moral dilemma upon which they disagreed but about which they were directed to come to a consensus. Four trained raters then viewed the videotaped interactions and assessed these dyads on the degree of warmth and control exhibited by the mothers, and warmth and independence exhibited by the children. The ratings form consisted of 51 items rated on a 5 point Likert-type scale, with 0 indicating the behavior was “not at all characteristic” and 4 indicating that the behavior was “completely descriptive” of that item. The form was divided into three sections: 20 descriptors for only the child’s behavior, 19 descriptors for only the mother’s behavior, and 12 questions about the interaction as a whole.

Results and Discussion

Inter-rater reliability was assessed using Chronbach’s Alpha to determine the extent to which the four raters agreed on the interactions they were viewing. Results indicated that the raters were reliable in assessing the dyads, as alpha had a range of .72 to .91. Next, a 2 (gender: male and female) X 4 (age group: 7, 10, 13, and 16) multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) with the child and mother descriptors serving as the within-subjects variables was conducted to examine the exploratory questions.

Exploratory question one was “do males in contrast to females behave differently when interacting with their mothers?” Several main effects resulted for gender differences in the way children were perceived as behaving. Daughters were seen as significantly more initiating, assertive, happy, talkative, warm, loving, stubborn, and challenging than were sons when interacting with their mothers (See Table 1).

A significant interaction effect resulted for child’s description as stubborn with gender by age, ($F(1, 3)$

Child Descriptors		
	Sons	Daughters
Initiating	1.47(1.37)	1.88(1.33)
Assertive	1.67(1.48)	2.12(1.49)
Happy	2.13(1.14)	2.70(1.08)
Talkative	2.10(1.28)	2.74(1.18)
Warm	2.23(1.12)	2.80(1.08)
Loving	2.31(1.17)	2.84(1.08)
Stubborn	.51(.99)	.77(1.22)
Challenging	.44(.92)	.68(1.12)

Mother Descriptors		
	Sons	Daughters
Comfortable	3.02(.82)	3.22(.75)
Relaxed	3.05(.84)	3.26(.73)
Happy	2.36(1.06)	2.68(1.06)

Note. All nonsignificant descriptors were omitted; N=308.

Table 1. Means (SD) for Descriptor Variables by Child’s Gender

Child Descriptors				
	7-Year-Olds	10-Year-Olds	13-Year-Olds	16-Year-Olds
Happy	2.82(1.02)	2.26(1.05)	1.96(1.16)	2.44(1.21)
Loving	2.89(1.03)	2.41(1.12)	2.30(1.27)	2.60(1.16)
Dependent	1.73(1.14)	.98(.81)	.86(.99)	.83(.94)
Initiating	1.35(1.27)	1.52(1.32)	1.56(1.30)	2.42(1.32)
Assertive	1.75(1.51)	1.54(1.40)	1.81(1.44)	2.53(1.46)

Mother Descriptors				
	7-Year-Olds	10-Year-Olds	13-Year-Olds	16-Year-Olds
Concerned	2.68(1.18)	2.75(1.02)	2.91(.92)	2.36(1.14)
Assertive	2.64(1.08)	2.38(1.30)	3.00(1.14)	3.21(.92)
Comfortable	3.31(.67)	2.97(.86)	2.68(.88)	3.33(.66)
Warm	3.42(.74)	2.95(.85)	2.70(.88)	2.83(1.17)
Caring	3.43(.73)	3.13(.81)	2.93(1.06)	2.82(1.10)
Happy	2.91(.95)	.10(.44)	.16(.63)	.09(.43)
Loving	3.44(.73)	3.20(.78)	2.91(1.12)	2.81(1.09)

Note. All nonsignificant descriptors were omitted; N=308.

Table 2. Means (SD) for Descriptor Variables by Child’s Age

=3.88, $p < .01$; see figure 1), such that 16-year-old girls were perceived as more stubborn than 16-year-old boys. A second significant interaction effect was found on the child’s description as challenging with gender by age ($F(1, 3) = 3.23, p < .05$; see figure 2), such that 16-year-old girls were

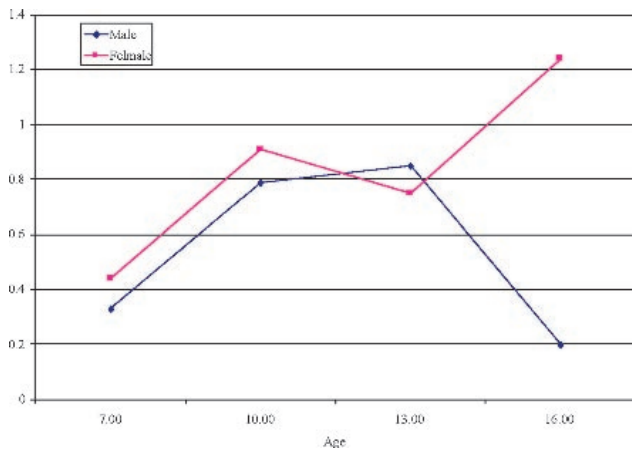


Figure 1. Interaction effect for “stubborn” as a function of the child’s age and child’s gender.

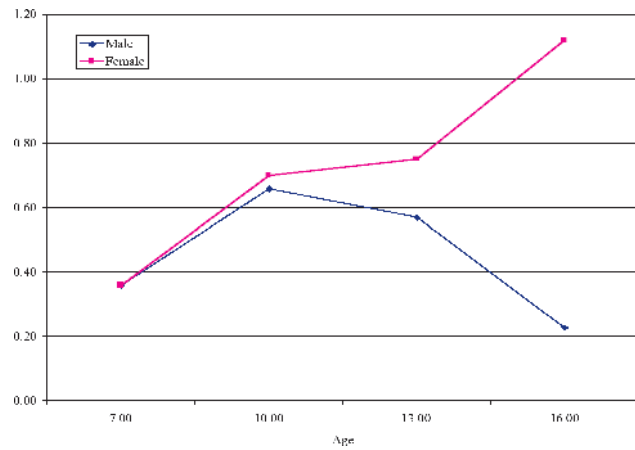


Figure 2. Interaction effect for “challenging” as a function of the child’s age and child’s gender.

also perceived as more challenging than 16-year-old boys.

Exploratory question two was “do mothers express affection and guidance differently across the age groups?” The MANOVA indicated that mothers behave differently with children based on their ages (See Table 2). Mothers were viewed as significantly more likely to be concerned when interacting with 13-year-old children than with 16-year-old children, perhaps reflecting the transition from puberty to young adulthood. More evidence of this shift to young adulthood is the fact that mothers of the 16-year old children were more likely to be viewed as assertive with their children than the mothers of 7 or 10-year-old children. Also, mothers were seen as much more comfortable around their 7-year-old children (presumably before puberty) and 16-year-old children (presumably after puberty), than with 10 and 13-year-old children (presumably during puberty). Mothers were rated as more warm, caring, happy, and loving toward their 7-year-old children than with other age groups. These latter results may indicate that children at the age of 7 require a more loving relationship. A second probable interpretation is that 7 year olds do not cause their mothers as much stress as do older children. Further, it was discovered that children at different ages interact differently with their mothers. Several main effects resulted with the child descriptors by the child’s age. 7-year-olds were viewed as significantly happier and more loving than 10 and 13-year-olds, but not 16-year-olds. 7-year-olds were also seen as more dependent than all other age groups. 16-year-olds were rated as significantly more initiating and assertive than all other age groups (See Table 2). These

differences most likely reflect the different developmental stages of the children.

The major exploratory question was “do mothers show more affection towards their sons than toward their daughters, and express more guidance towards their daughters than toward their sons?” Several main effects resulted with the mother descriptors by the child’s gender. Mothers were perceived as more comfortable, relaxed, and happy when interacting with their daughters (See Table 1). While these main effects do not support the notion that “African American mothers ‘love’ their sons, but ‘raise’ their daughters,” it does show support for the idea that mothers interact differently with children based on the gender of the child. However, there were no perceived gender based differences in the way mothers used control with their children.

The MANOVA resulted in a significant interaction effect for mothers as uninterested by child’s gender by child’s age, ($F(1, 3) = 2.92, p < .03$). Mothers were perceived as being more interested when interacting with their 16-year-old daughters than when interacting with their 16-year-old-sons. The previously reported finding that 16-year-old girls were significantly more challenging and stubborn than were boys may help explain mothers showing more interest when interacting with the girls. In addition, this shows support for the findings of other researchers that the Black mother socializes her daughter to be strong and independent (Collins, 2001). When the daughters are challenging and stubborn with their mothers, the mothers may positively reinforce these qualities by approaching the interaction with more interest.

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Limitations

One limitation to our study is that the task the dyads were required to complete may be biased toward eliciting certain behaviors from daughters over sons. Future research should design and employ tasks that are both gender balanced and engaging (e.g., sports, clothes, etc.). Another limitation is that this was qualitative data taken from participants in front of a video camera. The video camera may have skewed the behaviors of the participants such that they did not truly act, as they would have in a real world situation. Future research should also include self-report data on parent-child interactions that actually occurred in their lives. Despite these limitations, this study is significant in that it represents the first examination of how the child's gender affects the manner in which their mothers socialize African-American children.

Conclusion

With the ever-rising incarceration rates of young African American males, the growing gender disparities with regards to enrollment rates in college for African Americans, and these situations being blamed on the African American mother, it becomes extremely important to investigate the relationship that the mother has with her children. This study represents the first attempt at this. While no differences were found in the way that the mother uses control with her children, the mother did appear to have a more warm and guiding-producing relationship with her daughter. This finding runs contrary to the stereotype that the "African American mother 'loves' her son, but 'raises' her daughter." Further, it was found that the children themselves have different interactional patterns with their mothers. It was also discovered that there were age/developmental differences in the way that both the mothers and the children interacted with each other. Further research should investigate this important relationship, as well as further disentangle the variables of age and gender within the relationships.

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