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Keywords

single mothers, resilience

SPECIAL SECTION

WOMEN AND DEVELOPMENT, PART 2

The Lived Experiences of Resilient Single Mothers Who Raised Successful Black Men

Angie D. Wilson

This transcendental phenomenological study (Moustakas, 1994) describes the lived experiences of resilient mothers who raised successful Black men in absent-father homes. The 8 themes that captured the essence of the participants' experiences are explored in detail. The author provides recommendations for counselors, public school administrators, and community organizations providing services to single mothers and their children.

Keywords: single mothers, resilience

According to Holland (2009), "American women in general are exhibiting nontraditional behaviors regarding the family life cycle that may be based on various cultural attributes, diverse sexual life styles, personal experiences, varying belief systems, availability of birth control, and workforce participation" (p. 170). Not only is the percentage of American women exhibiting nontraditional family-life behaviors increasing, but the number of Black women taking on these nontraditional roles appears to be increasing rapidly at the life-cycle stage of coupling and marriage. Holland (2009) noted that a significant number of Black women are having children out of wedlock while still pursuing higher education. Conversely, a large majority of today's Black households are headed by single mothers (Rowe, 2007). Given the prevalence of households led by single mothers, it is necessary to identify characteristics of single mothers who have raised successful Black men in these households. However, a description of events that commonly occur in Black female-headed households in conjunction with the success of their sons who matured into successful members of society is missing from the current literature.

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CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Resiliency is a term that has been described in the following three waves: (a) resilient qualities; (b) resilient process; and (c) most recently, innate resilience (Richardson, 2002). The first wave attempted to identify qualities that assist people in overcoming difficult situations and adversity through research from a transcendental phenomenological (Moustakas, 1994) perspective to identify common themes and traits. In other words, resilient individuals may often exhibit strong support systems, self-efficacy, and self-esteem. In the second wave, attempts were made to discover how resilient qualities or traits are obtained. According to Richardson (2002), resiliency is obtained through life experiences and a person's ability to be outside of his or her comfort zones. The third wave represents an innate resilience in which one strives toward self-actualization and a spiritual connection. Resiliency is the lens through which this research is gleaned and is a common thread embedded in the lives of single Black mothers who raised successful sons.

REVIEW OF RELEVANT LITERATURE

In research pertaining to single Black mothers, poverty levels are typically addressed (Brodsky, 2000; Brodsky & DeVet, 2000; Haleman, 2004; Jones, Zalot, Foster, Sterrett, & Chester, 2007; Woody & Woody, 2007). Conversely, Holland's (2009) research differed by focusing exclusively on single, Black, college-educated mothers. In particular, the women in Holland's study listed a variety of reasons for remaining single, namely higher expectations, aspiring to achieve personal and professional goals, having poor past intimate relationships, and experiencing violence and/or disrespect in previous relationships. The following is a discussion of two major struggles (i.e., emotional difficulties and employment issues) and two sources of support (i.e., extended support systems and religion) for single mothers raising young Black sons.

Struggles

Emotional difficulties. A single mother's responsibilities can create emotional difficulties, including low self-efficacy or depression (Jackson & Scheines, 2005), embarrassment (Haleman, 2004), and a host of other issues (Kotchick, Dorsey, & Heller, 2005). According to Jackson and Scheines (2005), single mothers who are employed tend to experience fewer emotional difficulties than those who are unemployed, which is directly associated with a sense of high self-efficacy. In addition, Jackson and Scheines found a correlation between single mothers who displayed depressive symptoms and their relationship with the child's father, which, in turn, had an indirect effect on the amount of time that fathers spent with their child(ren).

Participants in Haleman's (2004) study stated that being Black adversely affected their emotional well-being as single mothers. According to Turner

(2007), parental satisfaction is affected by single motherhood and employment status, with an increased chance for single mothers to experience depressive symptoms and chronic stress. Finally, unemployed single mothers who lack extended family support tend to be more likely to face psychological distress, environmental stressors, and chronic stress (Kotchick et al., 2005).

Employment issues. Hilton and Desrochers (2000) found that inadequate employment circumstances and financial hardships only added to the stress and difficulties faced by single mothers. Whereas single fathers demonstrated a combination of more employment stability, higher education levels, and better work shifts, a single mother's lack of education and employment stability led to economic and household strain. Conversely, Turner (2007) found that single employed mothers reported lower amounts of stress than their unemployed counterparts. According to Haleman (2004), higher education has been determined to be the main key in reducing poverty and creating more successful outcomes for single mothers and their children. In addition, employed single mothers reported less depressive symptoms, more structure in their lives, and a larger social network. Essentially, domestic responsibilities and the lack of an education can impede a single mother's desire to participate and compete in the workforce. Thus, for single mothers to be given a fair chance at upward mobility in the workplace, equal opportunities in relation to discrimination must improve (Haleman, 2004; Hilton & Desrochers, 2000).

Support

Extended support systems. The support of an extended family and loved ones is crucial to a single Black mother's success (Brodsky, 2000; Cherlin, 2006; Green, Furrer, & McAllister, 2007; Holland, 2009; Johnson-Garner & Meyers, 2003; Jones et al., 2007; Kotchick et al., 2005; Woody & Woody, 2007). The extended family and support system consist of a larger family that plays a key role in the well-being and care of the single mother and her children (Jones et al., 2007). In the Black family, for example, it is widely acknowledged and understood that the extended family goes far beyond biological relatives; rather, support consists of neighbors, friends, distant relatives, and those individuals whom the family can trust (Jones et al., 2007). Single mothers depend on this support to assist them emotionally and in other aspects of single parenthood (Green et al., 2007).

According to Kotchick et al. (2005), single Black mothers who have little or no support from loved ones experience greater depression and emotional difficulties. However, all of the women participating in Holland's (2009) study reported having a strong extended family that supported and assisted them in attending college and helped with their duties pertaining to single motherhood. This aspect alone contributed greatly to single mothers being able to achieve a higher educational level as well as to eliminate stereotypical images related to poverty within the Black family.

Religion. For the majority of Black families, spirituality and church communities are considered to be kinship or extended families (Brodsky, 2000; Ledford, 2010). Brodsky (2000) also maintained that personal and parenting values are affected by religious beliefs. For example, religion provides a means for single mothers to cope with the everyday stressors of racial discrimination and also plays a pivotal role in the lives of single mothers who later become successful and resilient individuals (Brodsky, 2000; Ledford, 2010).

In summary, the absence of fathers negatively affects their children and the single mothers, who must nurture the children alone. As discussed, low self-esteem, depression (Jackson & Scheines, 2005), and embarrassment (Haleman, 2004) are only a few of the emotional problems faced by Black single mothers in addition to the lack of suitable employment opportunities, which adds to the tension (Hilton & Desrochers, 2000).

METHOD

This topic was selected because the contributions made by the single mothers who raised successful Black men have been overlooked in the literature. Providing information and insight into the lived experiences of these women can help strengthen resources for single mothers raising young men. Although researchers can make assumptions regarding single mothers and parenting successful Black men, I was unable to locate a study dedicated to this topic. A qualitative approach was found to be the best way to study a phenomenon that is often overlooked (Creswell, 2007); therefore, I studied this area by conducting paired interviews with a small sample of single mothers and their sons. For the purpose of this article, I will focus on the results from the mothers only.

Participants

First, an application for permission to conduct this research project was made with the institutional review board (IRB). Upon approval from the IRB, a search for paired participants consisting of single Black mothers and their successful sons who grew up in absent-father households was conducted.

To acquire the sample, criterion sampling (suggested by Miles & Huberman, 1994) was used by posting bulletins in public places located in Houston, Texas (i.e., religious and community centers, mass e-mail listings, social networking websites, and announcements at professional meetings). Participants contacted me based on their interest in the study. Eligible participants were or had been single mothers raising Black men in absent-father households, and their sons had to meet the criteria of success used for this study. For this study, success was defined as having completed high school or its equivalent without facing any major legal issues and being currently self-employed, employed full time, in the military, or in college.

Instrument

Because of the qualitative design of this study, a small number of participants was appropriate (Giorgi, 2008). Seven mothers participated in the interview process. In addition to these interviews, a demographic questionnaire was used as another method of data collection. Based on a review of the literature, open-ended, grand tour, and semistructured questions were formulated and adapted (Carson, 2004; DeBell, 2008). Participants were asked grand tour questions to obtain information regarding their own particular experiences. According to Spradley (1979), using grand tour questions constitutes an emergent quality of the interview process to result in subsequent questions. As a basis for interview conversations, studies pertaining to single mothers and children from absent-father homes (Carson, 2004; Cherlin, 2006; DeBell, 2008; Holland, 2009; Jackson & Scheines, 2005; Wilson & Henriksen, 2012) were reviewed to construct the following semistructured questions for the single mothers participating in this study:

1. What was your relationship like with your child’s father before his birth?
2. What are your beliefs, thoughts, and ideas concerning single motherhood?
3. What was your situation like as a single mother raising a young man?
4. What kind of man did you think your son would grow up to be?
5. What are some words you would use to describe your son now?
6. How do you and your son view your mother–son relationship?

Additional questions emerged to delve into more specific details pointed out by the participants.

Data Collection

Although the primary source of data included the spoken words of selected participants, other sources of communication (i.e., body language and facial expressions) were used to obtain additional information. By focusing on the participants’ words and testimonies, I was given the opportunity to present their life experiences, which lessened the possibility of bias or preconceived notions (Morrissette, 1999; Osborne, 1990). Regarding data collection, I made field notes and kept a journal about the interview process. In addition, field observations were included (e.g., body language, facial expressions, physical reactions). A combination of both nonverbal and verbal components was provided along with a detailed description of the participants’ reactions regarding the questions asked. In other words, semistructured interviews helped to answer the research question: What are the lived experiences of single Black mothers who raised successful Black men?

Data Analysis

The final step in conducting a transcendental phenomenological study is to conduct an analysis of the collected data, in which all of the interviews are transcribed and verified for accuracy by a second-party researcher. Moustakas (1994) modified Van Kaam's (1959, 1966) method for analyzing phenomenological data by using a set of seven specific steps. Data were analyzed by using Moustakas's (1994) adaptation of Van Kaam's (1959, 1966) interview analysis process to account for an overall understanding of the phenomenon.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness of the data was an important aspect of this study. Creswell (2007) emphasized the importance of validation strategies and techniques when conducting qualitative research. First, I was aware of reactivity, described as cases in which participants alter their responses because they are subjects of a research study (Onwuegbuzie, 2003; Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2007). However, the possibility of reactivity occurring may have been exacerbated given that some participants may have been referred by acquaintances. Each participant was asked to review the summary of findings and was given the opportunity to review the interview transcript. In qualitative research, this process is referred to as member checking and is considered the most accurate measure of confirming the participants' experiences and establishing integrity (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Maxwell, 2005).

Data were collected in numerous ways to appropriately use triangulation (i.e., demographic questionnaires with an open-ended prompt, interviews, field observations and notes, and using field experts). Low-inference descriptors (Johnson, 1997) were used by selecting verbatim quotes that highlighted the participants' thoughts, feelings, and experiences. Thick descriptions (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2007) were used during the reporting of the results to capture the true essence of the themes.

PARTICIPANT PROFILES

Pseudonyms have been used throughout this article to maintain confidentiality of the participants. The mothers ranged in age from 44 to 57 years. Regarding marital status, two mothers were married, three were single, one was divorced, and one was widowed. The educational attainment ranged from a high school diploma to a master's degree; one had completed high school, three had some college experience, one had a bachelor's degree, and two had master's degrees. Excluding one woman, every participant was gainfully employed; however, the mother who was unemployed had recently experienced a layoff because of the economy. All participants identified themselves as Christians and willingly discussed their viewpoints related to faith and religion. Finally, household incomes ranged from approximately \$30,000 per year to over \$90,000 per year.

Brenda

Brenda is a 49-year-old married Black woman with two children, the eldest of whom, John, was raised in an absent-father home. She began dating John’s father in high school and gave birth to John when she was 19 years old. However, John’s father was not actively involved in his life because of poor decisions and experimentation with illegal substances. Faced with the challenges of single motherhood, Brenda completed some college and began a career as an entrepreneur. John was born before Brenda’s marriage to her current husband; however, she was a single mother until John was a sophomore in college. When asked what it was like to raise a son in an absent-father home, Brenda replied, “Raising my son was easy; there was so much family support that I didn’t even feel the effects of an absent father.” When asked which words describe his mom best, John’s response was, “strong-willed, leader, humorous, and resilient.” Similarly, Brenda used the words “passionate,” “smart,” “charismatic,” and “dramatic” to describe John.

John is a 30-year-old Black man who is married, holds a bachelor’s degree, and owns a public affairs firm. He grosses an annual household income in excess of \$90,000. When asked about his religious beliefs, he described himself as a “faithful church attendee and active in ministry.” In describing what it was like growing up in an absent-father home, John replied, “I grew up in a fatherless home but I didn’t feel fatherless. I had tremendous role models that served as a support system.”

Millie

Millie is a 53-year-old Black woman who is divorced with two children, both of whom were raised in an absent-father home. Although Millie was married to Anthony’s father for 7 years, during which the two children were born, the marriage ended in divorce as a result of incompatibility. Millie stated that although Anthony’s father was not actively involved in his life, the father did provide financial support the few times she asked for it. Millie attained a master’s degree and is in her 30th year of working as an educator and is preparing for retirement. Her annual household income ranges from \$70,000 to \$80,000. When asked about her religious beliefs and preferences, she identified herself as African Methodist Episcopal. Upon further questioning related to raising a son in an absent-father home, Millie replied, “There was absolutely no problem being mom and dad.” When Anthony was asked which words described his mom best, he stated, “determined,” “resilient,” “praying,” and “beautiful.” Similarly, Millie chose the words “kind-hearted” and “considerate” to best describe Anthony.

Anthony is a 28-year-old father of one who has a master’s degree and is employed at a railroad transit company with an annual household income ranging from \$80,000 to \$90,000. When asked about his religious beliefs, he described himself as a Christian Methodist. Upon further questioning, Anthony stated that growing up in an absent-father home “can be trying at times, and you feel lost. With a strong mother and support system, I made it and I continue to

make it.” He also disclosed that he viewed himself as the “man of the house” when growing up because he had a younger sister. He enjoyed mowing the lawn and taking care of other duties around the house to help his mom and make their lives easier.

Sheila

Sheila is a 44-year-old single mother with five children, all of whom were raised in an absent-father home. One month following our initial interview, Sheila was awarded her high school diploma, which she was excited to receive after being out of school for 30 years. Sheila explained that she became pregnant with Mark at the age of 14 and quit school to work and care for him. She stated that Mark’s father denied fathering him and therefore refused to assist her either financially or emotionally. Sheila currently works as a staff member at a psychiatric facility. When asked about her religious beliefs, she stated:

Religion played a big role; I don’t think I could have done it. God helped me and gave me the instructions on how to raise them and gave me the energy. . . . I couldn’t have did it without him.

When asked about raising a child in an absent-father home, Sheila replied, “It was hard at first but it got easier as they got older.” Mark used the word “giving” to best describe his mom. During our interview, Mark conveyed to me several stories about his mother’s giving nature and helping others in their community. By the same token, Sheila described Mark as a “great son.”

Mark is 28 years old, has a bachelor’s degree in education, attended college on a football scholarship, and is currently employed as a teacher and coach. Shelia and Mark have an annual household income that ranges from \$60,000 to \$70,000. Mark stated that he left his dream job as an assistant director of a community service organization located in another city to assist his mother with raising his younger siblings. In particular, his younger brother was having behavioral problems, and he wanted to support his family as much as possible. Mark described himself as a Christian and added that being raised in an absent-father home was “a growing process that took a lot of work and shaped me into a person that I am comfortable with.”

Melba

Melba is a 54-year-old Black woman who is married with three children from a previous marriage, all of whom were raised in an absent-father home. Melba and her eldest son, Chris, volunteered to participate in this study. Melba was married to Chris’s father for 4 years. The marriage ended in divorce because of infidelity on his part and a lack of communication. Despite Chris’s father not being active in his life, Melba stated that he did

pay child support on a consistent basis. Although Melba has some college experience and certifications, she is currently unemployed and searching for employment. Her annual household income ranges from \$30,000 to \$40,000. When asked what it was like to raise three boys in an absent-father household, she responded,

It was great raising my three sons. Everything was good; I taught them how to read, write, and spell before they started school. They learned how to keep things organized. It was a struggle when they became teenagers. I did the best I could; teen years for boys is when their fathers should be in their lives.

When Chris was asked which words would describe his mom best, he said “kind-hearted,” “caring,” “loving,” and “forgiving.” In turn, Melba used “ambitious” and “nonchalant” as words to describe Chris.

Chris is a 30-year-old, married father of one who has a bachelor’s degree in mechanical engineering and is currently pursuing a master’s degree. He is employed as an engineer earning an annual household income exceeding \$90,000. When asked about his religious beliefs, he described himself as a Christian Methodist. Chris stated that “growing up in a fatherless home was a challenge. It was tough at times. My childhood was often unstable. Happiness came and went. It could be described as a roller coaster.” He added that “it was financially challenging and very tough to depend on one income. Emotionally and physically my mom never got to rest, relax, or do for herself. She had no support and no one to help her.”

Gretta

Gretta is a 50-year-old Black woman who is single with two children, both of whom were raised in an absent-father home. In addition, her elderly mother resides in the household. Gretta completed some college courses and has been employed for 28 years as an executive administrative assistant at the same agency earning an annual household income ranging from \$70,000 to \$80,000. Gretta stated that she and Nathan’s father began dating in their later years of high school, and she gave birth to Nathan at the age of 20; however, the relationship ended when Nathan’s father was unable to transition into a family lifestyle and his role as a father. Eventually, he was incarcerated, and Gretta raised two biological children (Nathan and her youngest son) and also an adopted nephew. Gretta identified herself as being a Catholic and further reported that having a religious foundation was important. When asked what it was like to raise children in an absent-father home, she replied,

I grew up without a father so I knew it was going to be a struggle. I mentally prepared myself to do what I needed to do in order to make sure my sons were prepared for the harsh world for a Black man.

Nathan used the words “friend” and “superwoman” to best describe his mother, whereas Gretta described Nathan as “kind-hearted,” “giving,” and “hard working.”

Nathan is a 30-year-old man who is engaged to be married, has some military experience, and has a number of information technology certifications. Currently, he is employed as a technical trainer for a large medical corporation earning an annual household income that exceeds \$90,000. When asked about his religious preference, he replied, “Christian, Jesus Christ is my Lord and Savior.” Growing up in an absent-father home affected Nathan in several ways, as evidenced by his statement, “I felt left out.” He also asked himself, “Why didn’t my father want to be more involved in my life, why did he do drugs, and why didn’t I have the manly mentor I needed in growing up?”

Jenine

Jenine is a 56-year-old, single Black woman who raised one son who grew up in an absent-father home. She received a full college scholarship after graduating seventh in her high school class out of almost 500 students. Throughout our interview, she spoke about the importance of education and of parental involvement in a child’s learning process. Currently, Jenine works as an account specialist at an energy company, with an annual household income ranging from \$50,000 to \$60,000. During our interview, she also stated that she and Jeffery’s father met in high school and began dating later in life. Although Jeffery was born when Jenine was 28 years old, she and Jeffery’s father lived together but never married. Jeffery’s father experimented with illegal substances, had an unstable employment history, and engaged in infidelity. Their relationship ended when Jeffery, who was 3 years old at the time, said, “Momma, don’t let him come back.” Jenine stated that her strong Christian values and church family played a huge role in her life. When asked about life as a single mother, she replied,

My son needed a role model, and as a woman I couldn’t be both. I gave him what I could, but as a growing young man he needed male guidance and wisdom, so I made sure he had a lot of interaction with good men. I kept him involved in sports and church. We prayed together, and I used other parents’ mistakes to improve my own [decisions].

Jeffery described his mother as being “strong,” “encouraging,” and “fearless,” and Jenine described Jeffery as a man of “purpose,” “blessed,” “a leader,” and “mighty.”

Jeffery is now a 28-year-old, married man with no children who attended college on a football scholarship and earned a bachelor’s degree. He currently

works as a junior high school math teacher with an annual household income ranging from \$40,000 to \$50,000. When asked about his religious beliefs, Jeffery responded that he was a Christian, and said, “I was raised in a non-denomination church [that] gave me an open viewpoint about Christ.” Upon further questioning about growing up in an absent-father home, he stated, “I don’t feel as though I missed anything. However, knowing what I know now, I wish he would have helped out more.” For Jeffery, having an idea of what a man should be would have helped him in formulating his own identity.

Katherine

Katherine is a 57-year-old Black woman who raised her two boys alone until she married after her youngest son, Terrence, went away to college; since that time, however, she has become a widow. As a single mother, Katherine attended college and obtained a bachelor’s degree in education in addition to a master’s degree in educational administration. She currently serves as an administrator in a large school district earning an annual household income ranging from \$70,000 to \$80,000. While attending college, Katherine met and eventually married the father of her children, a divorced single man who also had children of his own. According to statements made in our interview, she assisted him in raising and caring for his sons as if they were her own through 7 years of marriage. After her husband’s career as a professional athlete came to an end, however, he began to abuse alcohol and became physically and verbally abusive. As a result, Katherine went from being a stay-at-home-mom to an educator to provide for her two sons. During divorce proceedings, Katherine requested full custody of her husband’s two sons from his previous marriage; nevertheless, she was denied because she was not their biological mother. Although her ex-husband once had a successful athletic career, he neither provided child support nor became actively involved in their sons’ lives. She did, however, receive support from her extended family.

Katherine described herself as a Christian Baptist, and, when further asked what it was like to raise boys in an absent-father home, she replied, “At times, raising a son in an absent-father home was challenging. Therefore, I surrounded my sons with positive male role models from family, church, and athletic coaches.” As a tribute to his mother, Terrence’s reply was that she was “great” and “excellent.” In addition, he reminisced about the giving and caring mom she is who should serve as a role model for all mothers. When asked to describe Terrence, Katherine stated, “He knows what he wants and he doesn’t mind making the sacrifices to get what he wants.”

Terrence is 29 years old, married with no children, attended college on a football scholarship, and has a bachelor’s degree. He currently works as a criminal investigator for the U.S. government, is a gifted poet, and serves as a director for a nonprofit organization. His annual household income exceeds \$90,000. Terrence maintains that his inspiration for poetry developed from childhood. Subsequently, he has published a book of poems that includes one for his father and one for his

mother. The poem written for his father expresses his longing for a father figure, and the poem dedicated to his mother expresses appreciation for all that she has done for him. When questioned about his religious beliefs, he described himself as a Christian, and, when asked about his experiences growing up in an absent-father home, he stated, “It made growing up a thoughtful situation because you try to answer questions that someone else has the answer to. However, I made a pact with myself to do better and be a better father once I have children.”

RESULTS

What are the lived experiences of single Black mothers who raised successful Black men? The paired interviews yielded findings that included eight themes that captured the essence of the female participants’ experiences: (a) emphasizing the importance of education, (b) having discretion with intimate partners, (c) dealing with financial struggles, (d) forming a healthy attachment style, (e) finding support through extended family, (f) embracing religion, (g) respecting the fathers, and (h) having a desire to help others.

Emphasizing the Importance of Education

Consistent with related literature regarding successful single men, most of the mothers who participated in this study emphasized education. One mother discussed her regrets about not pushing her son to attend college; however, she still acknowledged the importance of education. Warde (2008) found that most Black men who complete bachelor’s degrees have a worldview instilled in them concerning the importance of education. The mother who spoke about her regrets regarding failing to reinforce the importance of education stated,

I regret not pushing college. I always felt like if I got them through high school, I did my part, but looking back on it I should have done more. I should have pushed more and I should have also pushed my younger son more. He got into college and started working.

Another participant stated that she and her children’s father had different viewpoints regarding education: “His views on education were totally different from mine. My view is that there is no choice; you need to go to school, you need to be educated, and there is no choice. There’s no choice.” She also revealed that, after divorcing, she made the decision to remove her children from private school because of financial issues and lack of financial support from her children’s father. While discussing the importance of education, one son chimed in and commented about his mother and her viewpoints concerning education:

My mom had in her head that if there was something new that we were learning in class she would get a book [about the new topic]. That’s

why I hated to tell her we were learning something new because she had a book for everything. I remember three digit division. . . . She would stay up with me during late nights at a young age learning new concepts and doing homework.

Several mothers made an attempt to complete their own education or pursue higher education. However, balancing work, school, and raising children with little or no support from the fathers was difficult. Often, this resulted in the mothers having to focus on their parenting role and their employment to provide for their children. For example, one mother mentioned that she dropped out of school at age 14 to find a job that would enable her to support her son. She added that she had always wanted to earn a high school diploma. With the assistance of her son, she was finally able to locate an online program that allowed her to earn a high school diploma instead of a general equivalency diploma.

Having Discretion With Intimate Partners

Another theme that emerged during the interviews was having discretion with intimate partners. The mothers discussed the sacrifices they made regarding their dating lives. Some stated that they chose to refrain from dating, whereas others disclosed that they were discreet about dating. They discussed not allowing men to visit them at their homes and only introducing intimate partners to their sons during serious relationships. Two of the mothers married after their sons left home for college, but they informed their sons about their partners after marriage had been discussed. Several sons remarked on their mother's decision to be discreet when dating, and many sons stated that they hoped that their mothers would find suitable partners. In particular, one son shared his feelings of uneasiness regarding his mother getting married during the time he was away at college. However, he added how grateful he was to learn from his mother's husband and that he was happy she now had a partner and a mate. Regarding his mother dating discreetly, another son stated,

I didn't see a whole bunch of men running in out of my house, that didn't happen. . . . To my mom's credit, she didn't even let me know when she was dating. She called me and she said she was getting married, at that time I was a sophomore in college. Even though she'd been dating my stepfather for [a] year, it was never anything that I saw in the home and I was not a part of it. For both of them, because of where they were in their spiritual walks, which just wasn't something that I was exposed to ever. I think at the end of the day that had a tremendous effect.

Dealing With Financial Struggles

One of the primary themes that emerged from all seven mothers sharing their personal experiences involved financial struggles. Not only did these women have to endure economic difficulties because of a lack of child support, but

many did not complete college and did not earn enough money to support their families. One of the women reported receiving consistent child support from the children's father, whereas the other six women received little or no financial support. According to Hilton and Desrochers (2000), financial hardships add to the difficulties that single mothers face. Failure of the fathers to pay child support is an issue also identified by Carson (2004).

Nevertheless, the participants in this study did not blame their children's fathers for the financial hardships they endured; rather, they worked multiple jobs and received financial support from extended family and friends. During the interview, one mother commented:

Most of the time, I knew, I always set my goals. For example, "this year I need to get new carpet," or "this year I have a junior [in high school] and I am going to have a senior [in high school]"; I knew that I needed this amount of dollars. So I knew that I needed this amount of jobs and that is what I did. I planned a strategy and I knew exactly how I was going to get it, and most of the time it involved having a second or third job.

Forming a Healthy Attachment Style

A theme that was not found in the literature reviewed was the attachment style of the mothers. The mothers who participated in this study spoke freely about wanting the best for their sons and wanting them to live their own lives. They desired that their sons would lead productive lives with families. Furthermore, they did not want their sons to miss out on opportunities because of worrying or being fearful for their mother. One mother stated, "I have never been clingy," whereas another said that she would not want her son to pass up a job opportunity by not moving to another state or city. Another mother stated,

When he got married, just like any other thing, you realize he has taken another step in his life. I am blessed to see the different levels that he has gone as far as his life. I am very proud of the young man that he is. I always said that I never interfere in his life. I like to hear from him just to know he is okay, and he likes to hear from me.

Finding Support Through Extended Family

Every female participant in this study spoke about the importance of family support; this has been documented in the literature related to single mothers, as mentioned earlier (Brodsky, 2000; Cherlin, 2006; Green et al., 2007; Holland, 2009; Johnson-Garner & Meyers, 2003; Jones et al., 2007; Kotchick et al., 2005; Woody & Woody, 2007). They talked about their siblings, parents,

church members, neighbors, friends, and coworkers who became a part of their extended family/support system during the process of raising their children. Not only did these single women receive emotional support from their extended families, but financial support and child care often was provided by family and support members (e.g., coworkers, friends, church members).

According to the literature, the support of extended family and loved ones is crucial to the success of the Black single mother (Brodsky, 2000; Cherlin, 2006; Green et al., 2007; Holland, 2009; Johnson-Garner & Meyers, 2003; Jones et al., 2007; Kotchick et al., 2005; Woody & Woody, 2007). The findings were consistent with those of Holland (2009), in which support from grandparents was found to be a strong contributor to the success of single mothers. One mother recalled her experiences with a group of neighbors who were also single mothers:

It was six of us [single mothers]. Four of them were nurses, I was an educator, and the other was an assistant. We supported each other. In the morning they had to leave to go to work early, they would bring their children to my apartment. I would make sure they were ready for school. We all helped each other.

Another participant also acknowledged that she received support from her parents when they helped to raise her son during the early years while she moved to a larger city to get established. She noted,

I never really identified with the term “single mother” because I found that people always used it as a crutch, as if they were handicapped, so I think my idea of single motherhood is that there is always a support system. I don’t believe that people are ever alone.

Embracing Religion

Religion was also a theme revealed in the study, wherein every mother identified herself as a Christian and discussed her faith in God. One mother even cried when speaking about her faith and the faith of her son:

When I hear him [speak about his faith] sometimes I think to myself “yes” because I know that he lives his life by faith. That for me is the most successful thing I have seen him accomplish. I am very proud of him for that.

According to Brodsky (2000), parenting is affected by religion. The findings of the present study are also consistent with those of Ledford (2010), who found that single mothers are affected emotionally, spiritually, and financially through their involvement with religious support systems. For example, one

mother stated, “On the journey, He [God] always placed people there to make it easier for me,” whereas another stated that she gave her children the option of going to early or late church services, but, either way, they were expected to attend church every Sunday. She also adamantly suggested that having a strong spiritual foundation is important for children and families:

Giving children a good spiritual foundation is the key. A spiritual foundation is very important because then they know there is a plan for their life and the plan is not small. There is someone [God] who can help them to accomplish that, but they’ve got to be in His will.

Another mother spoke about religion in relation to her personal spirituality and strong belief in God. When she discussed financial difficulties and hard emotional times, she pointed out that prayer and her spiritual connection with God helped her through problematic concerns. She also spoke about the importance of teaching children about God.

Respecting the Fathers

Possibly, the women’s religious beliefs and values assisted them in not speaking ill words about their children’s fathers, which was the next finding regarding the lived experiences of the resilient single mothers who raised successful Black men. None of the mothers who participated in my study spoke ill words of their children’s fathers. However, they were able to discuss their experiences and share their viewpoints concerning the fathers’ involvement in their sons’ lives. This was also a finding that was revealed in previous research (Carson, 2004; Wilson & Henriksen, 2013), although those studies included only male participants and not their mothers. One mother in this study said the following:

I always told him that I would never speak ill about his father regardless of the situation. Because if I loved him enough to have a child, I could never speak anything negative never. He had his shortcomings and so did I, and this is the way it is. And my mother was the same way; even though my dad has shortcomings, she never spoke ill of him. She always said that “you could grow up and see for yourself.” That’s what I did.

Although the spoken words of mothers regarding the absent fathers were few, it is important to recognize that the participants provided information by choosing to avoid disrespectful and harsh terms regarding their children’s fathers.

Having a Desire to Help Others

Finally, a finding related to the lived experiences of single Black mothers was their desire to help others. Whereas some of the women made the decision to

help others based on the professions they chose, others wanted to help others because they had observed friends, family, and even strangers who were in need. One mother noted that she invited a family from another country to live in her home because they were homeless. Another mother spoke about her volunteer tutoring services for children who were struggling with mathematics. A majority of the mothers assisted family members. For example, out of the seven mothers, three stated that their mothers and/or fathers had lived with them at some point, and one disclosed that she took care of her ailing parents toward the later stages of their lives. She admitted that this was difficult because both her mother and father were living with her under the same roof, yet they had divorced years earlier. She also stated that she took care of her sister and nephew because her sister was also a single mother. Although she, her sister, her son, and her nephew resided in the same house, she freely acknowledged that she cared for her nephew as if he were her own son.

In summary, all seven of the women who participated in this study demonstrated resilience in their ability to use their resources and raise successful men, even while faced with a host of difficult life circumstances.

Limitations and Delimitations

This research was limited to participants who met the criteria of being a single Black mother who has raised a successful man and who was willing to participate in the study. Gender and ethnicity were controlled based on the sampling procedures used to obtain participants. This study was also limited to the self-report data of participants. Finally, collected data were transferable on a case-by-case basis and limited to only those individuals who actually participated. This study was delimited to focusing on participants representing churches, professional organizations, and social networking sites within Houston, Texas. In addition, this study was delimited to single Black mothers and their successful sons. In other words, this study is not generalizable to any other parent-child combination.

DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

First, incorporating activities to strengthen the mother-son relationship may be helpful during family therapy sessions, as recommended by researchers who emphasized the importance of the bond between mother and son (Carson, 2004; Wilson & Henriksen, 2013). Second, activities for single mothers may help them to develop a healthy emotional state that is important to effective parenting, which can also decrease depression and improve the internal resilience of mothers. Third, it is recommended that school counselors who work with absent-father families can create a working relationship with single mothers by choosing to eliminate stereotypical labeling of children as being at risk simply because they are living in a home without the presence of a father. For example,

mothers who participated in this study stated that labeling their children created ill feelings toward educators, which evoked defense mechanisms regarding the services offered by school districts.

Also, programs geared toward creating a bond between mother and son should be implemented in communities, churches, and schools. Often, mothers are busy working two or more jobs in addition to dealing with daily stressors; therefore, quality time spent with their children can help to strengthen relationships and provide a bonding experience for both parties. Specifically, a program or activity that single mothers do not have to coordinate or plan would be a relief that would provide them with time to enjoy their children rather than worry about their daily duties.

Programs geared toward alleviating poverty and creating financial support for single mothers and their families who are in genuine need of assistance would be beneficial. According to Rivers and Rivers (2002), poverty is one of the main reasons for poor academic performance among young Black male students; however, they have the ability to excel if given the opportunity and resources required for advancement. In Haleman's (2004) study, single-mother participants reported feeling degraded and humiliated when seeking financial support. Furthermore, Rivers and Rivers found it important for single mothers to feel comfortable in seeking financial assistance, given that their children's educational success often depends on financial stability.

Finally, counselor education and social work programs can teach mental health professionals how to focus on resilience or strengths based on a positive perspective model rather than a deficit model. The information gleaned from this study could serve as a foundation for counselors who work with single mothers. Both children and single mothers are affected by absent-father homes; therefore, attempting to gain insight into their experiences can help to meet their individual needs in a helping relationship.

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