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## The Retrospective Roles of Black Women in the Coddling of Black Boys

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### ABSTRACT

This study reports the secondary analysis of a theme that emerged from a larger study on Black women's perceptions of Black men's depression. This emerging theme was concerning the role of Black women in rearing Black boys. Eight focus groups with Black women ( $N = 46$ ) were used to further explore this theme. Our secondary analysis identified three subthemes, including the (a) presence (or absence) of fathers in parenting Black children, (b) Black women's role in coddling Black boys, and (c) Black women's role in "raising" Black girls. Study implications include the contextual lens that underscores parenting variations within Black families.

### KEYWORDS

Black children; coddling; gender differences; parenting; raising and rearing

From birth, children are socialized to look and perform in ways associated with their biological sex. While cultural differences exist within this socialization, research on families across various racial and ethnic backgrounds suggests that the gender of a child plays an important role in the socialization and differential parenting he or she receives (Mandara, Murray, & Joyner, 2005; Mandara, Varner, & Richman, 2010; Raley & Bianchi, 2006). How children perceive their experiences of differential parenting due to gender and whether those experiences have lasting residual effects has not been thoroughly examined. Furthermore, literature is limited on the culture of parenting in African-American communities broadly, and particularly regarding gender socialization. This study attempts to address this gap in the literature by highlighting the experiences of African-American women who have witnessed, as children and/or perpetuated as adults, the culturally normative approach of "raising" Black girls and "coddling" Black boys.

### *Gender socialization for girls and boys*

Extant studies on parenting and early childhood suggest that boys and girls are parented differently in American culture, yet this knowledge is based primarily on the perspective of parents and caregivers (Laible & Carlo, 2004).

Research also suggests that gender role theory can help explain differential parenting strategies used by mothers and fathers; specifically, how a mother's role may be designated as the family caregiver, while the father's role may be the provider and disciplinarian (Lamb, 2004; Levant, Richmond, Cruickshank, Rankin, & Rummell, 2014). Such traditional and patriarchal family structures imply that boys are socialized to be authority figures in the home, and to exclude themselves from more nurturing roles. In contrast, girls may be socialized into more nurturing and caregiving roles and responsibilities. Boys may also navigate gender structures that by default place them into more ascendant roles that are unoccupied by girls. Existing literature suggests that women are often the caregivers of the family and participate in more domestic duties such as cooking and cleaning (Lachance-Grzela & Bouchard, 2010), and thus, assign similar duties to the younger women and girls in their families. For example, a review of the chores that adolescents perform found that daughters do more household chores than sons (Bianchi & Robinson, 1997).

These gender-based parenting styles are also noted in studies from the emerging adulthood and adolescent literature. In a study that examined the relationships between late adolescents' perceptions of their mothers' and fathers' parenting styles with respect to their own emotional adjustment, late adolescents perceived their mothers as demonstrating more permissive (i.e., lenient) parenting and fathers as demonstrating more authoritarian (i.e., domineering) parenting (McKinney & Renk, 2008). In the same study, male adolescents also reported receiving more permissive parenting relative to their female siblings. The pressures to raise and socialize children in ways that are aligned with societal standards for each gender may lead mothers and fathers to differ markedly in their approach to raising boys and girls. Beyond the challenges that arise when studying variations in parenting styles by gender, other complex factors that may influence parenting practices, such as race and culture, should be examined in the context of shaping gender roles and norms.

### ***Gender socialization for black girls and black boys***

Historical race and gender ideologies reinforce differences in how Black boys and girls are parented, while also characterizing differences in gender socialization as a means of protecting and enhancing the well-being of children reared within these racial and economic constraints (Hill, 2001). Research on the intersection of race, gender, and parenting has underscored the deleterious experiences and mental toll of living in low socioeconomically resourced communities for African-American families. African-American families are undoubtedly mindful of how race and gender will shape their children's opportunities for success as they attempt to prepare Black boys and girls

for adulthood. Specifically, some scholars (Fischer & Shaw, 1999; Hill, 2001; McHale et al., 2006) suggest that Black parents consciously express higher expectations for their daughters in comparison to their sons, after acknowledging the many obstacles and dangers their sons will likely endure during their lives; oftentimes, occurring through expressions of their masculinity. In this context, parents may feel the need to protect their sons from the adverse effects of society's macro- and micro-aggressions against them, due to their gender positioning. Society's fear of Black men (Smith, Allen, & Danley, 2007; Welch, 2007) often means that Black fathers and mothers demonstrate hypervigilant parenting behaviors in raising their sons; a process of constantly acclimating them to potential challenges that they may face while navigating a harsh society (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2009).

However, for Black girls, while the implications for race may be similar to those of Black boys, the intersection of race and gender often results in being perceived differently by a majority society, thereby resulting in dissimilar forms of socialization by their parents (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2009). For Black girls, there is a "duality of identity" (DuBois, 1999) that takes shape as a result of both gender and cultural socialization. On the one hand, Black girls may be socialized to be nurturing and domestic, and to adopt a caregiving orientation. But Black girls may also be socialized via the norms associated with contemporary Black female culture (e.g., Black feminism) to engage in more androgynous behaviors that entail stoicism, strength, persistence, and goal-striving. An example of this can be seen in a study by Mandara and colleagues (2005), which found that some Black mothers require more of their female children (in terms of responsibilities in the home and behavioral compliance) than their sons. However, this socialization stands in contrast to broader cultural expectations for Black girls to develop into women who are intrinsically "strong," resilient, and independent.

The "strong Black woman" persona portrays Black women as psychologically indestructible, as well as indispensable in the Black home and community (Harris-Perry, 2011; Wyatt, 2008). Relatedly, a more recent study underscores how some Black boys are not held to the same social, behavioral, and academic standards as their sisters within Black families. Mandara and colleagues (2010) examined outcomes for 1,500 Black adolescents sampled from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth and reported that overall, Black boys who were not first-born were assigned fewer chores, exhibited more behavioral issues, argued more with their mothers, were less cognitively stimulated, were not held as accountable for decision making, and exhibited lower academic achievement than their Black sisters. While parenting style and differential socialization specifically accounted for the lower achievement (Mandara et al., 2010), it is clear that different socialization experiences for Black boys and girls influences, at least in part, outcomes for these children over time (Mandara et al., 2010). Also noteworthy is how the contrasting

expectation that Black girls develop into Black women who are both stereotypically strong and all-encompassing in their responsibility to the family unit is limiting to the healthy development of both Black boys and girls.

### ***Cultural and contextual perspectives***

The guiding cultural and contextual perspectives we used to further our understanding of “raising” Black girls and “coddling” Black boys stem from the aforementioned studies that suggest Black parents have high expectations for their daughters when compared to their sons (Fischer & Shaw, 1999; Hill, 2001; McHale et al., 2006). However, our interest in this phenomenon is fueled within the context of the long-term effects that such treatment at an early age will have on the mental health and well-being of adult Black men. Though Black parents constantly make adjustments to the parenting styles they use for Black boys so that they are prepared to navigate a harsh society (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2009), the mental health implications of these parenting decisions have yet to be explored. By relation, Black women’s participation in (and oftentimes sustainment of) the “coddling” treatment that Black boys receive speaks to Black women’s “duality of identity” in at least two ways. First, as Black girls are “raised” to be masterful at navigating both gender and cultural pathways, this may place Black men in vulnerable mental and emotional positions over their life course, due to the challenges that they may face navigating their gender and cultural identities (Nickleberry & Coleman, 2012; Watkins, 2012). Second, the role that Black women have in perpetuating and sustaining the “coddling” of Black boys may influence mental health outcomes for these Black men over the life course and as their own gender and cultural socialization evolves. The long-term effects of the gender socialization of Black boys are clearly an area of study that is in need of further inquiry.

### ***Rationale for the current study***

Research on the conditions of gender socialization in Black families and how this process influences differential approaches for parenting Black boys and girls has yielded modest and mixed results. Given the scarcity of scholarly context on this issue, the current study investigated the experience of gender socialization and differential parenting practices for Black boys and girls from the perspective of adult Black women. In order to address this issue, we conducted a secondary analysis of qualitative data from a larger, existing project. Thereby, the current study is a follow-up to one of the overarching themes reported in the original qualitative study which focused on Black women’s perceptions of depression experienced by the Black men in their lives (Watkins, Abelson, & Jefferson, 2013). The theme that emerged from

the original study was the idea that Black parents (particularly Black mothers) tend to employ different parenting strategies in raising their sons when compared to raising their daughters. To examine this theme more closely, this study reports on a deeper analysis of the larger study's data to understand the position that Black women hold in the gender socialization and parenting practices for Black boys and girls.

Though the original study used grounded theory to broaden our overall understanding of Black women's perceptions of Black men's depression, the current study attempts to delve deeper into a divergent theme that emerged from the original study. Specifically, participants reported that their roles in the lives of Black men were not limited to their adult relationships at the time of the study; rather, their roles were initiated while Black men were still Black boys. It was during this discussion that participants expounded on the dynamics of their individual families, and Black families, overall. As this topic was not addressed in the original study protocol, an additional level of analysis was necessary to dissect this concept further (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2013). As a result, the research questions guiding the current study are as follow: "What family dynamics do Black women perceive to have an influence on Black men early in their lives? What about these family dynamics perpetuate the health behaviors of these men over the life course?"

## Methods

### *Study design*

The current study reports the findings from a secondary analysis of the larger, original study, titled "Black Women's Perception of Black Men's Depression." The aim of the original study was to obtain in-depth information from Black women about their experiences with depression in Black men (Watkins et al., 2013). Inductive reasoning was the guiding methodological paradigm for the original study because there are certain characteristics of qualitative research that make it appropriate for seeking depth of understanding, viewing social phenomena holistically, and providing insight into the meanings of decision and actions. Our decision to use qualitative methods was also because they are iterative rather than fixed, emergent rather than pre-structured, involve respondents as active participants, and define the investigator as an instrument in the research process (Ulin, Robinson, & Tolley, 2005).

Qualitative inquiry suggests that if theory is to be grounded in data, the data must first be located and analyzed inductively (Watkins & Gioia, 2015). With qualitative methods, the researcher utilizes open-ended collection methods and human interaction as the primary instrument. In this study, focus groups were our data collection method. Focus groups provide an

appropriate opportunity for eliciting in-depth representations of participants' thoughts and behaviors. Furthermore, focus group participants often thrive in synergy, building off of the contributions and interactions of other group members (Ulin et al., 2005). The original study used focus groups to capture the perceptions of Black women about Black men's depression. Specifically, the study investigators were interested in learning about ways in which Black women interacted with and responded to the depressive needs of the Black men in their lives.

Though the purpose of the original study was to discuss their experiences with, and knowledge and attitudes about, Black men's depression, one of the overarching themes was that of the role of Black women in the healthy lives of Black men. Specifically, this theme emerged from the Black female participants who candidly discussed their experiences with Black men and boys. These conversations were oftentimes about intimate partner relationships, family relationships (e.g., father, brother, and uncle), and frequently, raising Black boys. Focus group participants discussed their knowledge of parenting differences in the ways they were raised compared to the boys in their families. The women offered accounts in which their mothers (and sometimes fathers) made clear distinctions in how certain family-related matters were handled based on whether the parents were dealing with their sons or their daughters. The aim of the current study was to further explore this concept.

### ***Recruitment and participant characteristics***

The study team posted flyers in locations that were frequented by Black women in the area (e.g., laundromats, schools, churches) and recruited participants both in person and through snowball sampling (Watkins & Gioia, 2015). Recruitment efforts in the original study yielded a total of 46 ( $N = 46$ ) Black female participants (see Table 1). Data from all participants were used in the current study. Sixteen participants were between the ages of 26 and 35 at the time of the focus groups. Sixty-seven percent had never been married and 70% had either a college degree or some graduate or professional school training. Forty-three percent of participants were employed full-time and 33 of the participants (78%) reported that they had been depressed at some point in their lives. Focus groups were held at a local community college and included between four and 10 participants. The original study identified income differences with regard to the depression experiences of Black men as reported by Black women. Therefore, two groups were held for three household income brackets (less than \$19,999; between \$20,000 and \$59,999; over \$60,000) and a "mixed income" group of women from all income brackets.

**Table 1.** Characteristics of the black women who participated in the focus groups ( $N = 46$ ).

Variable	<i>N</i> (%)
<i>Age</i>	
20–25	14 (30)
26–35	16 (40)
36–45	7 (15)
46–55	7 (15)
56+	2 (4.4)
<i>Relationship status</i>	
Married	8 (17)
Living w/ partner	1 (2.2)
Divorced	4 (8.7)
Widowed	1 (2.2)
Never been married	31 (67)
More than one status	1 (2.2)
<i>Education</i>	
Less than high school	1 (2.2)
High school diploma	3 (6.5)
Some college	8 (17)
College degree	12 (26)
Some graduate or professional school	16 (35)
Graduate degree	16 (35)
More than one category	1 (2.2)
<i>Kinds of training</i>	
Therapy counseling	4 (22)
Direct health care	3 (17)
Public health	4 (22)
Social work	2 (11)
Other	5 (28)
<i>Work status</i>	
Employed full-time	20 (43)
Employed part-time	3 (6.5)
Unemployed	4 (8.7)
At-home mother	1 (2.2)
Student	9 (20)
Other	3 (6.5)
Multiple categories	6 (13)
<i>Ever been depressed</i>	
Yes	33 (72)
No	10 (23)
Maybe (not sure)	3 (6.5)
<i>Ever clinically diagnosed with depression</i>	
Yes	12 (26)
No	32 (70)

## **Data collection**

### **Focus group questionnaire**

The project team developed the focus group questionnaire to guide the discussions and to address the following topics:



- (1) general knowledge about depression,
- (2) personal experiences with Black men who were depressed,
- (3) the unique aspects of depression in Black men, and
- (4) talking with Black men about depression while also discussing the barriers and facilitators to men's seeking treatment for depression; the role of social support networks, and stigma surrounding mental illness for Black men.

Prior to the start of the original study, the focus group questionnaire and protocol were tested with a group of African-American female staff and students at a major Midwestern university. We called this the pilot group or "mock" focus group that allowed us to test our focus group questions and the data collection procedures before beginning the full study.

### ***Procedures***

The principal investigator (a trained focus group moderator) and two assistants (matched for race and gender) conducted the focus groups with Black women about depression in Black men. All groups were audio- and video-recorded to capture the discussions held as well as the mannerisms of the women during their interactions. The two assistants captured field notes that focused on the questionnaire content as well as the group dynamics. The average length of the focus group was approximately 90 minutes. All focus groups were held at 6:00 p.m., so dinner was served, and participants each received a \$25 honorarium.

### ***Protection of human subjects***

The principal investigator ensured that all phases of the study were performed ethically. At the beginning of each focus group, the moderator discussed the purpose of the study and the subject matter of interest. Participants were informed of the procedure used, the type of questions they would be asked, and their rights as participants. After providing this information, participants were asked if they understood and if they would be willing to participate. Participants were then assured that all identifying or personal information would remain confidential throughout the entire process to protect their privacy. After the study protocol (participants' rights, confidentiality, and informed consent) was addressed, the moderator obtained permission to audio- and video-record the discussions and then proceeded with the focus group questions. There was minimal risk to study participants and the institutional review board at a major Midwest university reviewed and approved the project.

### **Data management and analysis**

The analysis team consisted of two research assistants (one of which helped take observational notes during the focus group sessions), one research staff member, and the principal investigator. Once focus groups were completed, the audio recordings were transcribed by a professional transcriptionist and the transcripts and audiotapes were analyzed by the project team (supervised by the principal investigator). Videotape recordings were reviewed by the principal investigator only to interpret body language and gestures that seemed relevant to the discussions captured by the audiotape recordings. As only minor edits were made to the study questionnaire after the mock focus group, it was included in the final data analysis.

The focus group data were put into a Microsoft Word table by one member of the analysis team, and included eight column headings: transcript number, income group, questionnaire section, question asked, participant's response, notes, code, and theme. Development of this all-inclusive "data table" was the first step in our analysis process. After this data table was created, the analysis team used a data reduction technique developed by the lead investigator, which involved using this all-inclusive data table to produce shorter, more concise data tables. This "rigorous and accelerated data reduction," (or, RADaR) technique (Watkins & Gioia, 2015) involved reviewing the all-inclusive data table and making notes about areas of commonality and overlap across groups or between participants and then generating opinions about the relevance of certain quotes and the intersection of concepts.

The all-inclusive data table then underwent a reduction process by removing rows of data that did not help to address our research questions: "What family dynamics do Black women perceive to have an influence on Black men early in their lives? What about these family dynamics perpetuate the health behaviors of these men over the life course?" For this study, three iterations of the data reduction table were created, and each signified a more concise and concerted presentation of the data. Next, using the information derived within our data tables, and guided by our two research questions, we analyzed the original study data using constant comparative techniques (Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2007, 2008; Watkins, 2012). Research project team meetings were used to employ multiple coding in order to furnish alternative interpretations and thereby encourage new insights and all potential competing explanations to the text. As noted by Barbour (2001), multiple coding encourages thoroughness in interrogating the data at hand, providing an account of how an analysis was developed, and ultimately addresses the issue of inter-rater reliability. Last, the coding procedures employed for this analysis allowed segments of raw text from the transcripts to be identified

and compared to other segments, and analyzed for embedded meaning. Meaningful text segments were then used to identify categories, concepts, and subthemes relevant to the original study and the research question for the present study.

## Results

This study was a secondary analysis of an existing qualitative study, and additional details of the original study are reported elsewhere (Watkins et al., 2013). A theme from the original study data emerged around the recurring notion that in many Black families, Black girls are “raised” and Black boys are “coddled” during childhood and young adulthood. Our secondary analysis of the original study focused on this theme and revealed that focus group participants engaged in lively discussions that expounded on their understanding of how Black children are parented differently depending on their gender. In this secondary analysis of a major theme from the original study, we identified three subthemes that inform how Black women in the original study perceived gender socialization and gender-based parenting differences with the Black families in which they had been embedded or to whom they had been exposed (Table 2). The three subthemes were (a) the presence (or absence) of

**Table 2.** Study concepts (subthemes), the gender affected by the concept, and the meaning.

Research Questions: What family dynamics do black women perceive to have an influence on black men early in their lives? What about these family dynamics perpetuate the health behaviors of these men over the life course?

Concept (Subtheme)	Gender Affected	Meaning (As described by study participants)
The presence (or absence) of fathers in parenting Black children	Female	Having a father present in the home influenced the participants' expectations for the men they chose to date as adults
	Female	Not having a father present in the home resulted in girls leaning heavily upon adult female family members for support
	Male	For Black boys, not having a father present in the home meant that they may not have had another adult male family member to lean on for support
Black women's role in the coddling of Black boys	Female	Men who were coddled as boys continue to be coddled by the girls and women in their lives; coddled boys have trouble assuming responsibilities as adults, causing conflict in their relationships with Black women
	Male	Being coddled as a Black boy meant that as these boys develop into coddled men, they do not possess the skills needed to care for themselves and others
Black women's role in “raising” Black girls	Female	Being “raised” meant that as these girls develop into women, they possess all the skills needed to care for themselves and others
	Male	Black girls who were “raised” tend to perform more work and household responsibilities as adults, causing conflict in their relationships with Black men

fathers in parenting Black children, (b) Black women's role in the coddling of Black boys, and (c) Black women's role in "raising" of Black girls. Each subtheme is discussed next.

### ***The presence (or absence) of fathers in parenting black children***

Our analysis first revealed how focus group participants emphasized the role of fathers in shaping differences in parenting practices for Black boys and girls. Throughout the focus group discussions, the influence of the presence (or absence) of Black fathers became a topic of great debate. For example, having a father present in the home was paramount for one participant, as she explained her childhood experiences with her father as positive and meaningful for her development into a woman. In our discussion about the role of fathers in the lives of their daughters, this participant noted,

I love my dad... my dad was, like, the best thing I've ever known in my life... and a lot of times when I was dating (especially when I was a little bit younger and really starting to get [into] serious relationships) I [would] think... "You're not like my dad." And I'm like, "What do you mean you won't go fill up my tank before work?"... It's like you have these high expectations of what a man is supposed to be and then time after time it's... disappoint[ing]... but you know that person may not have had a father, so they don't know what it's like to be a—you know, husband or boyfriend...

Notably, a few participants reported that their fathers' presence influenced the types of male partners they selected as adults; however, this was not consistent across groups, because although many participants reported that their fathers were present during their childhood, several of them discussed how the absence of their fathers in the home negatively affected them as well as the boys in their families. For instance, one participant explained the significance of being supported by the women in her family, with whom she could be emotionally vulnerable. This participant acknowledged that many Black men do not have these types of relationships with a Black male adult during their own childhood. She stated,

... There's usually no father around so [Black boys are] told they're the man of the house when they're seven [years old]. So they're taught at a very young age to really, like, hold in their emotions and—um... kind of go from there. So I think they're not able to form any type of real trust in other men or any connection with other men because they lack someone being able to talk to them about whatever they're going through... and a lot of their emotional support ends up coming from women.

To this point, several participants noted how they have witnessed Black women stepping in to serve as role models for Black boys due to the absence

of father figures in their homes and in the broader African-American community. For example, one participant noted,

I think that we set some things up in [Black men]... as children, and [then as] they get older they haven't had that father figure... if you check with White men and [ask] who do you remind [yourself] of, a lot of them will say "Well, you know, my father," but the majority of Black men will say "My mother," because that was all that they had...

According to our focus group participants, the presence or absence of fathers in the lives of Black children is immeasurably influential on Black children's development and also determines the degree to which it is necessary for mothers to assume the role of a father figure for their child.

### ***Black women's role in the "coddling" of black boys***

The second subtheme that emerged from our analysis was the idea that Black women perpetuate the "coddling" of Black boys. The term *coddling*, used by participants, refers to the type of indulgences identified and reported by Mandara and colleagues (2010) in which later-born Black boys are not held accountable for social, behavioral, and academic standards expected of their sisters and older first-born brothers. Several focus group participants recognized that the absence of residential and custodial fathers might lead Black women to play a more centralized role in the lives of their sons. Specifically, women grappled with feelings of frustration with the lifestyle choices made by their sons' fathers that left those men physically and emotionally unavailable to parent. Yet, participants also recognized that in many cases, they were largely responsible for coddling the boys in their families. Oftentimes coddling as a parenting strategy can be learned and perpetuated by other female members of the family. One participant explained it this way:

... [First] they were the "little man"... and [then] we put them on a... pedestal. There was only one in my family [growing up], my brother. [Now] I have one son, my sister has one son, and it's certain things that we do to them that create "a monster," I say.

The "monster" this participant referred to was described as a young Black man who was unable to adequately care for himself as an adult as a result of a pattern of caregiving in his family; whereby female relatives allowed him to routinely eschew responsibilities that were critical to his development into a young man. Another participant concurred by adding that young Black men face steep obstacles to safety and success in American society; some Black families overcompensate by reducing accountability for boys in an attempt to buffer negative societal exposure. Though the intent of such behavior on the part of parents and caregivers is likely intended to be protective, it can be harmful for the boy's development, as one participant noted:

I'm, like, the only person in my whole family who has a brother and my [entire] life he was completely coddled. [They would say things like], "Oh, you know, he's a Black man, he's gonna have problems in life so we have to do everything we can to make him feel special." You know, stuff like that. So I definitely think that that was a hindrance to him versus helping him. . .

In addition to using coddling as a means to overcompensate for harsh societal realities outside the home, women in these focus groups also reflected on coddling as a counterbalance to having a nonresidential or non-custodial father and the adverse effects of missing out on that influence for Black boys. Participants openly discussed their roles in perpetuating a coddling caregiving style and the consequences of allowing the Black boys and young men in their lives to sidestep responsibilities that could help to shape their character and prepare them for independent living. For example, during one of the focus groups, a participant discussed her attempt to "undo" the coddling by giving herself "permission" to allow her brother to take accountability for his actions. She noted the following:

. . . My brother's seven years younger than I am and my mother and I absolutely raised him to be this person. . . . But we had to realize about six years ago is that we had to let him fall [because] he had never fallen. We had overcompensated for his father [so much] that anytime he looked like he was teetering, one of us was right there to make sure he never fell. And he married [a] Black woman and has a beautiful 7-year-old son and he is now divorced because he couldn't make the transition from us taking care of him to him being responsible for his [own] family. . .

A participant who expressed it in a more direct manner further illustrated this point:

. . . I think that. . . we as Black women, we can cause some damage in our. . . boys because we make 'em these momma boys and. . . we rob them of being able to grow into being [a] man. And so they're always a boy, it makes them a reckless husband, makes them an undependable, unreliable man and just not fit for society.

During one of the focus groups, a woman reflected on her experience with a depressed man in her life that experienced some type of stress at work. This participant explained that in her estimation, because this man was coddled as a child, he would use his stressful job as an excuse to mistreat the people in his life. As a result, our participant expressed that she felt that this man did not feel the need to assume responsibility for his behavior or consider the feelings of others. She explained:

. . . He uses his job as a means to define who he is and so he hides behind the job. But then he mistreats other people, and he uses his job as the excuse. . . . [I often] speak about him, and others—just the dysfunction. . . and how men are coddled as little boys as opposed to being raised like the females and, you know, forced to accept responsibilities. . .

The women in our focus groups noted a recurring pattern in their observations of, and relationships with, Black men in their lives who they perceived to have been coddled. They reported that Black mothers insulated Black boys from the age-appropriate responsibilities and experiences that would contribute to their maturity and development; likely in an effort to shield them from harsher realities outside the home that they would face by being both Black and male.

### ***Black women's role in "raising" back girls***

The final subtheme identified in our study involved Black women's roles in perpetuating the "raising" of Black girls. During discussions about parenting practices in Black communities, our focus group participants recounted their experiences with the Black women in their lives who were assuming a disproportionate burden of family responsibilities due to nonresidential and/or noncustodial fathers. This absence often resulted in two different outcomes according to participants. First, a father's absenteeism left our respondents feeling unsure about the stability of marriage and also unequipped to teach their daughters how to love and care for a male romantic partner. One participant expressed this sentiment by stating,

I grew up with a single mom. I've never known what it is to have a father in my life so my perception about men is totally different... my mother never really taught me how to even interact with men. I kind of learned from bad experiences and got my own idea about it but you kind of don't know if you've never been taught. So if you don't know really how to treat a man and maybe give him the emotional support that he needs, you just don't know—it's not that you don't want to.

Another woman expressed a similar concern and reflected on changes that she wanted to make moving forward:

... Over the years I've really had to make a conscious effort to learn to be a wife and so that I can raise my daughters to be [wives]... a lot of times I just think that a lot of our Black women [are] in relationships but we're ill-equipped to be in these relationships...

According to our participants, the second outcome resulting from an absent father is the realization that their mothers and other female role models raised them to be strong, self-sufficient, and independent women. Oftentimes, participants felt that this was a reflection of what these women wanted for themselves in the absence of a male partner. Among the eight focus groups with Black women, several participants recalled situations where their mothers, aunts, or female cousins had to assume the responsibility of the "head of the household" due to the absence of the fathers in their homes. In many cases, this resulted in the women juggling several



responsibilities, from employment to child care. When trying to balance these various roles, the women would often seek more assistance and require more responsibility from their daughters than their sons. Ultimately, these behaviors are passed down from generation to generation. To this point, one woman noted the following:

... I've been married for 13 years next week and one of the hardest things that [I've realized] in dealing with Black men... is that I never saw a wife... I saw women, I saw heads of households, I saw people in charge and so I emulated that coming into [my] marriage... but I never knew how to emulate a wife.

As one participant noted, many Black families (particularly those with absent fathers and father figures) may adhere to this idea that "... mothers raise their daughters and they pacify their sons"; however, such behaviors are a major problem that negatively impacts Black families.

## Discussion

The purpose of this study was to further explore a divergent theme that emerged from the original study on Black women's perceptions of Black men's depression. Specifically, we sought to learn more about the influence of family dynamics (i.e., gender differences in parenting) on short-term and long-term health outcomes for Black men. Using secondary data from a prior qualitative study, we followed up on a tangential theme from this study by offering an in-depth analysis of how some Black women perceived differences in parenting Black boys versus girls, along with the psychosocial and behavioral consequences of those parenting decisions. The major subthemes that emerged from our secondary analysis included experiences from female participants that clearly articulate differences in parenting practices performed primarily by Black mothers. Although the original study sought to examine Black women's perceptions of depression in Black men, the findings from the current study add credibility to the age-old adage that Black women "love their sons and raise their daughters."

Without question, the experiences of participants in this study reflect that some Black daughters are taught to assume centralized family roles that condition them to become strong, self-reliant, and independent (Hill, 2001). Findings from our study support the notion that the quality of daughter-father relationships influences women's enactment of black femininity (Johnson, 2013). The women who participated in our focus groups reported that they expected their fathers to help them navigate within a society that is dominated by men. In many cases, their narratives identified fathers as vital sources of information about heterosexual interactions. A critical component of supportive fathering involves more than just being present, but also thinking critically about the kinds of



messages fathers convey to their daughters regarding the possibilities and paradoxes they will face as they evolve into womanhood (Johnson, 2013)

Absent, nonresidential, and noncustodial fathers were influential in shaping how boys and girls are differentially parented in some Black families, and how Black children view themselves, according to the participants in this study. Mandara and colleagues (2010) conducted one of only a few large studies linking poor adolescent behavioral outcomes for Black boys specifically to absent fathers. It is clear from the perceptions of the women in our study that they too were profoundly affected by absent fathers in that they often felt compelled by their own female caregivers to become the stereotypical “strong Black woman” in response to the unreliability of male parental figures during their upbringing (Abrams, Maxwell, Pope, & Belgrave, 2014; Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2009; Wyatt, 2008). As recounted by the women in our study, this also has some bearing on these women later in life, once they themselves become spouses and parents, raising Black boys.

The idea that women are not adequately equipped to raise boys to become men has been debated in the literature. For example, Lawson’s (2004) literature review examined the roles that Black women have in the development of manhood and masculinity in Black boys and found that Black mothers were not only effective at teaching their sons how to be respectable and responsible adult men, but also “successful at teaching them lessons that many contend as essential to the relationship between young boys and men, such as, sexuality, surviving in an anti-Black male world, and knowing himself with respect to his story, purpose, and mission in life” (Lawson, 2004, p. 382). Studies have shown that some Black mothers privilege their sons’ perspective and overcompensate for their sons’ inadequacies, while not affording daughters similar treatment (Hill & Zimmerman, 1995). Very reminiscent themes were identified in our current study. The longstanding parenting patterns within some Black families focusing on the cultivation of daughters and the coddling of sons have impinged upon many Black women’s experiences and expectations of mothering, forming and maintaining romantic partnerships, and assuming equitable family responsibilities over their life course.

### ***Implications for social work practice***

This study has practice implications for social work clinicians working with Black single mothers and Black boys of single-parent households. Specifically, clinicians can be increasingly aware of the underlying deep cultural rationale for parenting practices that may seem, on the surface, to be counterproductive to the development of Black boys and adolescents. This cultural awareness might be funneled into parenting interventions that encourage accountability

and boundary setting for Black boys as well as more equity in responsibilities assigned to Black girls. Likewise, acknowledging the role of societal barriers in shaping problematic social trajectories for Black males, such as low educational persistence and attainment, disproportionately high juvenile delinquency and adult incarceration, and absent fathering would be beneficial (Johnson, 2010; Watkins, Hawkins, & Mitchell, 2015).

Our investigation contributes to the small but growing body of knowledge on perceptions of gender differences in parenting within some Black families and the potential consequences of such strategies. With renewed national policy attention (The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, “My Brother’s Keeper: Creating and Expanding Ladders of Opportunity for Boys and Young Men of Color,” 2014) to the academic, social, and behavioral development of Black males, particularly in adolescence and young adulthood, our findings could inform the level and degree to which interventions should be specified for maximum impact. Specifically, the experiences of the women detailed in this study might complement and contextualize future examinations of early fatherhood interventions, mentoring and community-based support programs for both Black boys and girls, and initiatives to support healthy relationship-building skills and confidence among adolescent Black girls being raised by single mothers. Similarly, given social work’s interest in improving the mental health and well-being of Black men over the life course (Johnson, 2010; Watkins et al., 2015) delving deeper into the roles of Black women will be an important aspect of this inquiry that will inform both research and practice.

### **Limitations**

As with all research studies, a few limitations to the current study warrant acknowledgment. First, the purpose of the original study was to examine Black women’s perceptions of depression in Black men, while utilizing the women as a secondary source. For the purposes of this article, the original data were analyzed and additional subthemes emerged from a tangential theme from the original study. Therefore, these findings must be interpreted in that context. Since the purpose of focus groups is to provide in-depth information about a phenomenon under study, it was not our intent to generalize these findings to a larger population. We do, however, believe that the rigors of our methods allow these findings to be transferable (Ulin et al., 2005; Watkins, 2012) to community settings that include Black women with characteristics similar to those of the women in our sample.

Second, some of the women who participated in the low-income focus group discussions were college students. Therefore, our findings may not be particularly reflective of how non-college-educated Black women from our geographical setting would respond. Finally, the information that we

analyzed regarding how Black men were raised came directly from Black women. Given the secondhand nature of this information, there are certain biases that must be considered, and we understand that while our study provides interesting information on retrospective parenting practices applied to Black boys and girls, it does not provide a firsthand account of these parenting differences from the children themselves. Barring these limitations, our study makes valuable contributions to examining the complexities involved in parenting practices and the gender socialization that occurs with boys and girls within Black communities.

## **Conclusion**

To date, research that explicates gender socialization in Black families and how this process affects Black boys and Black girls is sparse and has yielded mixed results. This underdeveloped area of research led to our examination of how the socialization of Black boys and girls occurs, using retrospective secondary data from a qualitative study with Black women regarding their perceptions of depression in Black men. The current study serves as an in-depth examination into how Black women think about and express their feelings about family dynamics, gender socialization, and parenting practices in the Black community and has implications for social work research and practice.

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