

African American Stepfamilies

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Slide 1: Introduction.

Hello. I'm Francesca Adler-Baeder, Associate Professor of Human Development and Family Studies and Extension Specialist for the Alabama Cooperative Extension System. I also coordinate the National Stepfamily Resource Center.

Slide 2:

The following module will highlight information on the study of African American stepfamilies and provide information from both theoretical assumptions about and early evidence of differences that may exist in stepfamily development based on ethnicity.

Slide 3: Continued gap in research

Although we have seen an increase each decade in the numbers of studies focused on stepfamilies, the summary of each of the two past decade reviews of the stepfamily literature included the observation in 2000 that, "knowledge of African American, Latino, and other ethnic stepfamilies remains woefully inadequate" (Coleman, Ganong, & Fine, 2000, p. 520) and in 2010 - "greater attention is...needed to variation in stepfamily experiences across groups defined by age, gender, race, ethnicity, or social class (Sweeney, 2010). It is unclear why this remains an important gap, particularly given the prevalence of the stepfamily experience among many minority groups.

Slide 4: Prevalence of step relationships among nonwhite populations.

Demographic studies provide information on African-American adults' experiences with divorce

and remarriage. We know that risk of divorce is greater for African American adults.

Remarriage is less likely, however (Teachman & Tedow 2008). This, though, does not mean that AA individuals are less likely to experience stepfamily living. There are several points to consider.

Because of higher birth rates, it may be that African Americans who remarry may be more likely to bring children into a remarriage. Second, it is likely that the numbers of first marriages involving children from previous (unmarried) partners increased more rapidly among more disadvantaged groups and minority groups. Currently, over 70% of African American children are born to nonmarried mothers (Martin, et al., 2009). A recent state survey conducted in Florida (and replicated in 2 other states) showed that among African-American married couple households with children, 55%, compared to 39% for White married couples were a stepfamily (Karney, et al., 2003). That is, one or both reported having a child from a previous relationship, either marital or nonmarital. In addition, scholars note that cohabitation rates are higher among African Americans and therefore, nonmarried stepfamily living may be a common experience among African Americans (Cherlin & Fomby, 2004).

Slide 5: Empirical Research on Stepfamily Development and Dynamics

We recently examined published studies of stepfamilies from the past decade and a half and find most use predominantly white, high-resource samples. Only 12% used samples that contained 25% or more non-white participants. Typically, however, ethnic background was dealt with in 1 of 3 ways: (a) not considered in analyses (simply ignored), (b) controlled in analyses, or (c) not a primary focus of the study. In fact, a study that included a large proportion of ethnic minority young adults considered it a “limitation,” stating their findings may not be “generalizable to “traditional” American stepfamilies (Schwarz and Finley, 2006).

Since the majority of studies of stepfamilies include predominantly white samples, are we to interpret that what we know about stepfamily development and stepfamily dynamics accurately describes African American stepfamily member experiences? Another area of research provides some clues.

Slide 6: Studies of African American individuals and families.

By virtue of their prevalence, it is highly likely that samples of African American individuals and families contain a significant proportion of subjects who have “step” relationships. It was therefore, our expectation that perusals of these family studies would reveal “hidden” empirical information about AA stepfamily experiences and development. Although not an exhaustive search, we examined a number of recent studies focused on African American couples, children, fathering, and parent-child relationships and found, unfortunately, that most do not report stepfamily status and if they do, most do not consider this variable in their research questions and analyses.

Only a few studies of fathers consider race and parental status as predictors of adjustment and relational satisfaction. Black stepfathers report higher levels of relationship quality with stepchildren and perceptions of a positive fatherlike identity than White stepfathers (Marsiglio, 1992). Another recent study of beliefs about responsibilities of an adult child to stepparents or parents who have remarried found that African Americans thought more help should be given than whites (Ganong & Coleman, 2006).

Another study of black fathers shows their patterns of involvement with stepchildren (that is, their levels of responsibility, accessibility, direct interaction and play) to be similar to biological fathers and higher on some measures (Fagan, 1998). Similarly, another study finds that black stepfathers are involved in fatherlike socialization of their stepchildren and participate

actively in racial socialization and spiritual/moral teachings (Hurd & Roger, 1998).

There is also some evidence that adolescent girls in African American families may benefit from a stepfather's presence in comparison to African American adolescent girls in single-parent families. Studies show that onset of sexual activity and rates of teenage childbearing were lower among those with stepfathers (and comparable to those in biological 2-parent families (McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994; Moore and Chase-Lansdale., 2001). And a recent study of adolescent well-being across 4 large samples of black youth find little to no differences in well-being indicators between those in stepfamilies and those in nuclear families (Adler-Baeder, et al., 2010).

These studies provide some nuggets of information and indications that differences may exist in stepfamily experiences based on ethnicity. What remains to be discovered is information on relational processes and stepfamily development across time in nonwhite stepfamilies.

Slide 7: Expected variations in stepfamily norms: African American stepfamilies

For African Americans, scholars have identified historical conditions that have shaped a unique legacy—of a communal-oriented philosophy, fluid family boundaries, movement of children between households, and shared parenting among multiple parents (kin and fictive kin). It is suggested that African Americans have a culture that has normed family patterns that are consistent with characteristics of stepfamilies (Crosbie-Burnett & Lewis, 1993).

It has been suggested that some issues salient to majority culture, white families – such as difficulties with norming the practice of parenting someone else's child or the parenting of a nonresidential child – may not be as relevant among African-American families. **African-American children**, as well as children from other cultures that support multi-parental models, **may be more accepting of stepparent presence and discipline attempts and less likely to**

experience loyalty conflicts (i.e., feeling “torn” between being loyal to the nonresidential parent if accepting/caring for the new stepparent). Thus, assumptions are that among African Americans **stepfamily adjustment may be comparatively easier and/or stepparents may move more quickly into parenting roles with little resistance.**

Consistent with these assumptions, empirical research also invokes the "attenuation hypothesis" that suggests that African American children may be more accustomed to life transitions and stressful life conditions compared to white children (McLoyd, et al., 2000) and therefore, may be better able to accommodate and adjust to a new stepfamily. Changes and transitions are viewed as "normative" experiences. Some support for this exists in studies of risks for children in post-divorce families (McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994). Researchers find that risks for AA children post-divorce are not as pronounced as those for white children.

Slide 8: Charting the Course – Family Interviews with African American Stepfamilies.

Our qualitative interviews over the past several years with African American stepfamily members - the biological parent, stepparent, and separately with an adolescent in the family confirms many of these culturally distinct assumptions. We are in the process of publishing this information in academic journals. Here, I'll provide brief summaries of information previously presented at recent research conferences.

Overall, three primary themes have emerged:

Ease of adjustment; acceptance of stepparent as other parent. Among African American stepfamilies, most exemplify the assumptions that stepparents move immediately into a parenting/disciplinarian role and share parenting across households and that children are accepting of this. In complex stepfamilies, both parents are stepparents to their spouse's children and both describe a fairly quick assumption of a primary role. Youth indicated this as well.

There were few reports that stepparents experience resistance by the children to this assumed parental authority. The “challenges” the adults noted were more general to parenting "active" children, rather than adjustment to the stepfamily structure.

Father involvement a benefit. Another consistent theme was the benefit both mothers and stepfathers saw for the presence of a father in the children's lives. In many cases, parents described minimal to no involvement of the biological father in the children's lives. Mothers emphasized the value of a male presence in the household for both daughters and sons. Several of the adolescents also mentioned their appreciation for having a father (their new stepfather) in their lives.

Labels/names are inclusive. African American adolescents typically use father-type names for stepfathers, often calling both their stepfather and biological father "Dad." Parents refer to their children as "children" rather than distinguishing stepchildren and also note that the children refer to each other as “brothers” and "sisters" from the start. Adolescents report this consistently as well.

Slide 9: Implications and considerations. Several points are worth considering for practitioners.

1. Recognize the prevalence of complex family structures among African Americans in your community and be prepared with specialized information on stepfamily development and processes.
2. Be aware of and utilize inclusive terms for family members. Advertising for a class for “stepfamilies” may not be successful among African American families. When working with a family, be sure to tune into the relationship "labels" family members themselves use.
3. Detailed research on the processes involved in stepfamily formation among African

Americans is still lacking; however, we have some indications that transitions and adjustment phases may be somewhat abbreviated. Therefore, specific challenges AA stepfamilies may be facing should be assessed rather than assumed.

Slide 10: Future Research

For researchers, this area of study is wide open and it is imperative that we begin to fill this gap. It would be beneficial to know more about how African American stepfamilies view themselves; the extent to which they conceptualize differences between stepfamilies and non-stepfamilies; the different meanings that family structure has among stepfamily members; their attitudes and beliefs and expectations about roles in stepfamilies; and congruence/incongruence among family members in these cognitions. We need to understand more about developmental and relational patterns that predict individual, couple, and family well-being. It is interesting that the few studies examining comparative risks by family structure cannot make the case that African American children are disadvantaged in the stepfamily structure. We need to understand more about that. It will also be interesting to know more about what role gender of the stepparent has in family processes and development as well as what role extended kin play in relational dynamics and adjustment in African American stepfamilies.

In future research, it will also be important to examine differences within racial and ethnic groups (Weaver, et al., 2001). Ethnic minority scholars encourage us to consider “country of origin, reasons for immigration, generation in the U.S., and skin color” (Weaver, et al., 2001, p. 924) and caution generalizing findings from studies of one subgroup to other subgroups within an ethnic group.

It is essential that we broaden our empirical base in order to inform our work with African Americans in stepfamilies. Here, I have shared demographic information, theoretical

considerations, and the limited empirical information we have on African American stepfamilies. Without developing the empirical literature; however, in relationship and marriage education; in parenting education; and in interventive and clinical work, we are relying on an incomplete research base when providing information to these families on assumed developmental patterns and recommended practices that predict positive outcomes. Practice will be served best through the broadened perspectives of individual scholars and the pursuit of collaborations between ethnic minority scholars and stepfamily scholars.