



National Stepfamily
Resource Center

AFRICAN AMERICAN STEPFAMILIES



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INTRODUCTION

The following module will highlight information on the studies of African American stepfamilies

Provided by theoretical assumptions and early evidence that may exist in the development of the stepfamily based on ethnicity



CONTINUED GAP IN RESEARCH

Reviews of the literature:

“knowledge of African American, Latino, and other ethnic stepfamilies remains woefully inadequate.” (Coleman, Ganong, & Fine, 2000).

“Greater attention is needed to variation in stepfamily experiences across groups defined by age, gender, *race, ethnicity*, or social class.” (Sweeney, 2010).



PREVALENCE OF STEP RELATIONSHIPS AMONG NONWHITE POPULATIONS

The demographic studies provide information on experiences with divorce and remarriage.

- African Americans are at greater risk for divorce and less likely to remarry

BUT, this doesn't necessarily mean that African Americans are less likely to experience stepfamily living:

- Higher Birth Rates
- First marriages involve children from previous partners
- Data from a recent report on Florida households indicates 55% of African American married couples with children (compared to 39% White) were stepfamily couples (Karney, et al., 2003).

Higher cohabitation rates



EMPIRICAL RESEARCH ON STEPFAMILY DEVELOPMENT AND DYNAMICS

Most research has predominately used white, high-resource samples

Ethnic background has been dealt with in three ways:

1. Not considered in analyses
2. Controlled in analyses
3. Not a primary focus of the study



STUDIES OF AFRICAN AMERICAN INDIVIDUALS AND FAMILIES

- Few family science studies of African Americans consider race and parental status as predictors of adjustment and relational satisfaction

In those that do:

- Black stepfathers report higher relationship quality and have positive fatherlike identity compared to White stepfathers (Marsiglio, 1992).
- Beliefs about responsibilities - African American adult stepchildren thought more help should be given to parents than White stepchildren (Ganong & Coleman, 2006).
- Patterns of involvement are similar for black stepfathers and biological fathers (Fagan, 1998).
- Fatherlike involvement among Black stepfathers (Hurd & Roger, 1998).
- Benefits for African American girls from presence of stepfather (McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994; Moore & Chase-Lansdale, 2001).

Among 4 large samples of African American youth in 2-parent families – little to no differences on well-being indicators (Adler-Baeder, et al., 2010)



EXPECTED VARIATIONS IN STEPFAMILY NORMS: AFRICAN AMERICAN STEPFAMILIES

Historical conditions have shaped an array of unique and distinct cultural elements within African American families that may be supportive of stepfamily formation.

Some issues salient to white families may not be relevant to African American families

- Support of multi-parental models

The “attenuation hypothesis” suggests African American children are more accustomed to life transitions (McLoyd, et al., 2000).



CHARTING THE COURSE - FAMILY INTERVIEWS WITH AFRICAN AMERICAN STEPFAMILIES

Interviews over the past several years with African American stepfamily members have confirmed many of these assumptions:

- Ease of adjustment; acceptance of stepparent as other parent
- Father involvement a benefit
- Labels/names are inclusive



IMPLICATIONS AND CONSIDERATIONS

1. Recognize prevalence of complex family structures
2. Be aware and utilize inclusive terms for family members
3. Detailed research on the processes of African American stepfamily formation is still lacking; however, indications are that adjustment to stepfamily living may be comparatively easier among African Americans.



FUTURE RESEARCH

- It is imperative in this area of study that we begin to fill the gap:
 - Beliefs, meanings, and roles
 - Positive relational patterns
 - The role of gender and extended family members
- Consider differences within racial and ethnic groups
- Informed practice currently relies mostly on theory and the limited empirical studies of African American stepfamilies.
- Practice will be best served through expansion of the empirical understanding of African American stepfamily processes and development over time.

