

## Parenting and Parent-Child Interactions in African American Families:

### A Synopsis

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Family is defined as a functional group living situation in which opportunities exist for at least economic and instrumental cooperation, informal communications, and reciprocated social and emotional obligations among family members (Wilson, 1989). Family interaction and living provides the context for physical maintenance, familial affection, and social control of family members. Lee (1977) argues that although the universal presence of family does not imply universal structure, the family almost always includes an association of both sexes of adults and dependent children. All families have kin structures in which a primary function is the nurturant socialization of children. It is the well being of children that is central to the development of family.

As a naturally occurring entity, family is influenced by the larger social context of its existence (Myers, 1982; Wilson, 1989). A family's various relationships, roles, and household compositions, including a sundry of consanguine, affinal, and fictive bonds, reflect its relativistic nature (Petersen, 1969; Wilson, 1989). Unlike the traditional nuclear family composition involving a husband and a wife, who are the mother and father of their children (Schneider, 1980), the structure and composition of the African American family can vary according to the presence or absence of persons who are parents, children, and/or other adult or child family members (Martin & Martin, 1978; Reid, 1982; Wilson, 1989). From a child's perspective, there is nearly an equal likelihood that the child will live in a single-parent family (41% of African American children) as in a dual-parent family (40% of African American children). The remaining percentage of African American children live in a household involving their parent and another relative (18% of African American children; Beck & Beck, 1984, 1989; U.S. Census Bureau, 1995).

Put another way, if we are to understand the African American family in a relevant cultural context, then we must expect a sundry of familial living arrangements that goes beyond marriage, parentage, and children to include other adult and child shared-resident situations. For example, Billingsley (1968) described 27 different combinations of family structure and composition; while Kellam, Adams, Brown, and Ensminger (1982) found 81 different variations of structure and composition. Thus, an important goal of this research project was an examination of the influence of the African American extended family on familial interaction patterns and on parenting behaviors.

Procedural paradigm. The research design involved two levels of family structure, one-parent or two-parent family units, and two levels of grandmother's domicile, living with the family (i.e., presence) or living at least 10 miles from the family (i.e., absence). Accordingly, the 64 families that participated in the project consisted of grandmothers, parents, and children between the ages of 7-14. The families completed self-report measures that assessed their perceptions of parental behaviors, family environment, and familial support network. Also, the families were video-taped while conducting a regular evening meal. The video-taped meal sessions were later coded for frequency of interaction and for 3 adult and 3 child oriented behaviors. The parental behaviors are: (a) supporting, which refers to the expression of affection and approval; (b) controlling, which refers to the exertion of parental authority and protectiveness; and (c) punishing, which refers to the withdrawal of approval and delivery of scolding or spanking. Children's verbal behaviors are coded for responses to adults. These categories include a) maturity as characterized by the child responding appropriately to adult conversational behavior; b) effectance which involves the child initiating a conversation with an adult; and c) tractability which is characterized by the child responding to adult control or punishment categories.

Reports on the Perceived Parental Behaviors. Wilson (1984, 1986) reported on the perceptions of parents' and grandmothers' performance of the four basic parental behaviors as a function of family structure and grandmaternal domicile. Specifically father's and grandmother's proximal and frequent contacts predicted their perceived involvement with children. Grandmothers perceived themselves and were perceived as performing support, demand, control, and punishment tasks to a greater degree when they shared residence with their single daughters than in the other conditions. Also, grandmothers not living with the family perceived their single adult daughters as using less controlling and punishing behaviors than in other conditions. Fathers of sons were reported as using more support and control behaviors as opposed to the fathers of daughters (Wilson, 1986). Interestingly, whereas grandmother's presence in the family did not affect the perception of fathers, her absence did affect her involvement with the children of her single adult daughter. Moreover, Tolson and Wilson (1990) suggested that adult and child family members perceived more familial moral-religious emphasis and less organization in homes with two or more adults present, than did respondents from one-adult households.

However, the role that the nonmaternal adults play in childcare is not clear. That is, Wilson and associates (Wilson, Tolson, Hinton, & Kiernan, 1990; Wilson, Tolson, & Kiernan, 1989) reported that mothers were nominated for more than 60% of the childcare and household tasks. In addition, Wilson, Kohn, Curry-El, Do, Hinton, and Underwood (1995) found that family structure negatively predict mothers' perceived satisfaction with supportive assistance in childcare and household tasks. Although the precise nature of nonmaternal adult roles is not entirely clear, this study suggest that the importance of nonmaternal adults lies in the provision of emotional support of the mothers in their childcare roles.

Structure of Family Conversations. In separate analyses using a multiple-case analysis procedure (Wilson & Tolson, 1986), and a factorial contrast procedure (Wilson, Hinton, Tolson, Simmons, Staples, Askew, & McKim, 1990), it was observed that adult-child interactions could be categorized according to the number of adults and children present. Families were coded for the frequency with which each family member spoke. Three categories of family interactions emerged from these analyses: (1) the single adult-multiple children family had an asymmetric interaction pattern in which children directed their conversation to mother and not each other; (2) the multiple adult-only child and single adult-only child families displayed a more egalitarian conversation pattern in which the child had equal opportunity to converse with adults; (3) the multiple adults-multiple children families had egalitarian conversation patterns, although children had less opportunity to talk with adults and spent less time talking to each other.

In another analysis, Wilson, Hinton, Solomon, Smith, Phillip, Boyer and McElroy (1991) indicated that families with differing familial structures do utilize different amounts of nurturant and control behaviors. However, family structure effects were only found for marital status (single or married) but not for grandmother's residence (presence or absence in the family household). Specifically, single-parent families displayed more control behaviors and higher control/nurturant ratio than did the other families. Moreover, Children living in households with two or more adults displayed greater use of maturity and effectance behaviors when compared to their counterparts living in single-parent households. Also children directed more of their interactions to mothers than to either fathers, grandmothers or other siblings (Wilson, Hinton et al., 1990; Wilson & Tolson, 1986). Moreover, members of single-parent family structures indicated that the absent father continued to participate in childcare tasks, albeit a significantly lower frequency than when the father is present in the household. Hence, a greater level of vigilance was required of a single mother rearing several children alone than was required of parents in the other family types (Wilson, Hinton et al., 1990; Wilson & Tolson, 1986).

Therefore, these data challenged previous findings regarding African American family life

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