

A Review of Childrearing in African American Single Mother Families: The Relevance of a Coparenting Framework

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Abstract Clinical research on African American single mother families has focused largely on mother-child dyads, with relatively less empirical attention to the roles of other adults or family members who often assist with childrearing. This narrow definition of “family” fails to take into account the extended family networks which often provide support for African American single mother families and the influence of these other adults on maternal parenting and youth adjustment. Our review integrates the literature on the role of extended family members, highlights the strengths and limitations of this work, and proposes the use of theory and methods from the coparenting literature to guide future study in this area. The relevance of the study of coparenting for family-based intervention efforts targeting African American youth from single mother homes is addressed.

Keywords African Americans · Single parent families · Nonmarital parenting · Development · Outcomes

Over the past two decades, researchers interested in children and families have broadened the scope of their work beyond Caucasian, primarily middle class, families to families from other racial/ethnic groups, as well as families from more diverse socioeconomic backgrounds (e.g., Guerra, Huesmann, Tolan, Acker, & Eron, 1995; Lobato, Plante, & Kao, 2005). This shift has perhaps been no more apparent than in the growing body of literature on African American children and families (e.g., Kilgore, Snyder, & Lentz, 2000; Wilson, 1986). Although some of the work on African American families has included two-parent and middle income families (e.g., Brody, Stoneman, & Flor, 1996; Smetana & Metzger, 2005; Wills, Gibbons, Gerrard, & Brody, 2000), the predominance of studies has focused on low-income African American families and, even more specifically, those who are headed by single mothers (see Murry, Bynum, Brody, Willert, & Stephens, 2001 for a review). The focus of child and family researchers on African American single mother families stems in part from an awareness of

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the growing number of African American children being raised in single mother homes (U.S. Census Bureau, 2005), a phenomenon attributed to the disproportionate rates of pregnancy among African American girls, but also declining rates of marriage and rising divorce rates in the African American community (see McLoyd, Cauce, Takeuchi, & Wilson, 2000 for a review).

As family researchers, we have responded to the growing number of single mother-headed families in the African American community by often narrowing our definition of “family” to “dyad,” most typically the mother-child dyad (see McLoyd et al., 2000 for a review). Research on African American mother-child dyads has largely relied upon self-report methods, with fewer studies incorporating observational methods, often considered the gold-standard in family research (McLoyd et al., 2000). Moreover, this work has been largely risk-focused (Murry et al., 2001), with the predominance of research highlighting the stressors associated with single mother families (e.g., poverty, neighborhood risk, compromised parenting) and, in turn, their negative impact on African American youth. Accordingly, the “lens” through which we have viewed African American single mother families has been far too narrow, with little attention to the broader extended family networks within which the dyads that we study are likely to be embedded. In turn, our research to date has largely overlooked a potential strength of African American single mother families, the involvement of other adults and family members who assist with childrearing.

We review the theoretical and empirical literature on the role of other adults and family members in the African American community who participate in childrearing in single mother homes. Given that sufficient quantitative data is lacking to conduct a meta-analysis, the review is qualitative, including anecdotal and theoretical accounts and qualitative studies highlighting the central role of these other adults, as well as the growing, but still relatively sparse, literature that has used quantitative methodology.

Scope of the review

The information for this review comes from several sources. First, we include information from the most recent census data in order to highlight the changing face of the African American family, with particular attention to the growing number of African American single mother families. In addition, we turn to historical and anecdotal accounts of the African American family with the aim of highlighting the tradition of the extended family within the African American community. Finally, we review qualitative and quantitative research which has examined the role of extended family members in the health and well-being of youth from African American single mother homes.

As previously noted, prior reviews of the literature have focused on the diversification of the family literature (McLoyd et al., 2000), as well as the psychosocial adjustment of African American youth from single mother homes (Murry et al., 2001). The current review builds upon these important works by focusing on a particular aspect of the African American single mother family, the childrearing assistance provided by extended family members and other adults who we will refer to throughout as nontraditional “coparents.” Several standards were selected in order to enhance the rigor of this qualitative review. First, the research design, whether qualitative or quantitative, had to examine within-group variability among African American single mother families, rather than between-group differences between intact and single parent African American families or African Americans and other racial/ethnic groups. In addition, our review focused on those studies that considered the involvement of another adult (≥ 18 years), in addition to the African American single mother, in parenting. Although

one exception to this was the inclusion of the research examining the role of the biological fathers of children being raised by teen mothers, who may also have been under the age of 18, our review does exclude research that examines the impact of sibling relationships on the adjustment of African American youth from single mother families. Although sibling relationships have been shown to be important influences on youth adjustment (e.g., Brody, Kim, Murry, & Brown, 2003; Brody et al., 2004), we were interested in the processes by which single mothers negotiate childrearing with other adults, family members, or others who may be assisting her with parenting. Finally, we focused on only those qualitative and quantitative studies published in peer-reviewed journals. Although many other accounts of African American single mother families exist in the literature, limiting our search to peer-reviewed journals increased the likelihood that a relatively high degree of rigor characterized the research.

Our search for publications was initiated with a search of several relevant databases, including PsychINFO and other social science databases. Studies that examined African American single mother families and met the aforementioned criteria were identified for review. Additional articles were also selected by using the reference lists from the articles that appeared in the initial search, as well as searches of the authors appearing the initial list of articles.

Based on our review of the literature, a theoretical model to guide our understanding of the role of extended family and their potential role in our clinical intervention and prevention efforts with African American single mother-headed families will be offered. Central to this model will be a discussion of the literature on “coparenting,” or the processes by which two parents successfully negotiate childrearing responsibilities (e.g., Belsky, Putnam, & Crnic, 1996; Coiro & Emery, 1998). Notably, the coparenting literature provides an established framework to guide researchers interested in elucidating the role of extended family members as potential nontraditional “coparents” in African American single mother families. Accordingly, the studies that have examined coparenting in African American single mother families will be reviewed, the limitations of these studies discussed, and future research directions elucidated.

African American single mothers and their extended family networks

The important role of extended family networks in the African American community has been extensively documented in the literature (e.g. Boyd-Franklin, 1989; Franklin, 1997). Historians point to a connection between the strength of African American extended family networks and African values and customs regarding families (e.g., Johnson & Staples, 2005; Sudarkasa, 1997). In particular, African societies define the family broadly, consisting of not only the nuclear family, but also extended family members, such as aunts, uncles, cousins, and grandparents (Johnson & Staple, 2005; Sudarkasa, 1997). This wider inclusion of family members means that a larger number of people have a role in the care of individuals, including assuring the health and well-being of children.

Despite the separation of family members that resulted from slavery and its customs, both census data (U.S. Census Bureau, 2005) and research (e.g., Johnson & Staples, 2005; Sudarkasa, 1997) highlight the ongoing importance of extended family members in the African American community generally and in single mother families in particular. The most recent census data suggest that African American single mothers are more likely to reside in the home of a relative, including a grandparent, aunt or uncle, or siblings, as well as non-relatives and friends, than are two parent families (U.S. Census Bureau, 2005). Even

when African American single mothers do own or rent their own homes, they are more likely to invite other family members, as well as non-relatives, to reside with them, than are those mothers who are married.

In part, the tendency for single mothers to reside with other adults and family members may be a function of socioeconomic status (U.S. Census Bureau, 2005). Nearly a quarter (22%) of African American single mothers fails to complete high school. Of those who do earn a high school diploma, only one-third goes on to attend college or to earn a college degree. As a consequence, about half (48%) of African American single mothers are living below the poverty threshold, with many lacking adequate health insurance and most relying on some degree of public assistance to take care of their children. Accordingly, the tendency for African American single mothers to reside with other adults and family members may be, at least in part, a practical decision necessitated by finances; however, a growing body of qualitative and quantitative research suggests that relationships with other adults who live in the home, as well as those who do not, serve other valuable roles as well.

Qualitative research documenting the role of extended family networks

Much of the research on African American extended family networks has been qualitative, utilizing ethnographic methodology such as immersion within communities, observation of families, and interviews with family members (Trickett & Oliveri, 1997). Findings from this body of ethnographic research to date suggest that extended family members contribute to childrearing in African American single mother families in a variety of ways, whether through indirect pathways, such as financial assistance, or through more direct childrearing activities. Reflected by one mother in Jarrett and Burton's (1999) ethnographic work, she noted that childrearing was a "joint effort" with her own mother, who assisted with transporting the son to school and caring for him while his mother was at work (p. 180). In addition to extended family members, ethnographic work also highlights that financial, emotional, and instrumental support to African American single mothers often comes from non-relatives, such as friends and neighbors, sometimes referred to as "fictive kin" (Boyd-Franklin, 1989). As an example, one African American single mother in a prior qualitative study recounted how her female friend provided support in numerous ways, including providing a place to stay, meals, and financial assistance when necessary (Jefferson, Jarrett, & Allen, 2001). Ethnographic research has also highlighted the role of biological fathers, as well as other men who may or may not be biological relatives, in the lives of African American youth from single mother homes. As reflected by one 16-year-old male in a prior study by Burton (1995), "T is not my baby . . . To be with her, I work in the day care center . . . I feed her, change her diapers and play with her. I buy her clothes when I can . . . Her mother and her family appreciate what I do . . ." (p. 168).

Notably, qualitative research and, in particular, ethnographic methods have provided a lens through which to view the involvement of extended family members in the daily lives of African American single mothers and their children. As highlighted above, this work suggests that extended family members, as well as non-relatives, are involved in a variety of aspects of childrearing, from providing economic support to assisting mothers with specific childrearing responsibilities. Building upon this qualitative work, quantitative researchers have also begun to examine the quality of the relationships that African American single mothers have with other adults and family members who are assisting them with childrearing and the impact of this involvement on maternal and youth adjustment.

Quantitative research on extended family involvement and teen mothers

A primary focus on the role of extended family members has been on the adjustment of the teen mothers themselves, with somewhat less attention to the adjustment of their infants and young children. Typically, this work examines the impact of the involvement of the child's biological father, as well as the child's maternal grandmother (i.e., the teenage mother's mother). However, other individuals have been identified as providing childrearing assistance to teenage mothers as well, including paternal relatives, grandfathers, boyfriends, and friends (e.g., Gee & Rhodes, 2003; Davis, Rhodes, & Hamilton-Leaks, 1997). In general, a higher degree of childrearing assistance provided by these other adults and family members is associated with better outcomes for the teen mother (e.g., Gordon, Chase-Lansdale, & Brooks-Gunn, 2004; Voight, Hans, & Bernstein., 1998). These inconsistencies, however, seem to be accounted for, at least in part, by the quality of the teen mother's relationship with the individual assisting her with parenting.

As previously noted, research has shown that African American maternal grandmothers tend to be highly involved in raising the children of their own teenagers (Apfel & Seitz, 1996; Gee & Rhodes, 2003); however, findings have been mixed. While some research suggests that grandmother involvement is not associated with the adjustment of the teen mother (Davis & Rhodes, 1994), other work suggests that grandmother involvement is associated with better outcomes, including greater psychosocial adjustment, educational attainment, and better parenting (e.g., Davis et al., 1997; Wakschlag, Chase-Lansdale, & Brooks-Gunn, 1996), and still other work suggests that grandmother involvement may increase, rather than decrease, stress for teen mothers (Voight et al., 1998). Similarly inconsistent findings were found when the association between grandmother involvement and outcomes for the child was examined (Black & Nitz, 1996; Leadbeater & Bishop, 1994). Importantly, the quality of the relationship between the teen mother and her own mother may at least partially explain these conflicting findings. That is, when the relationship is positive, grandmother involvement may be perceived as helpful and associated with better outcomes for teen mothers (Gee & Rhodes, 2003). However, when relationship problems are present, grandmother involvement may be viewed as intrusive and controlling, increasing stress for teen mothers and, in turn, compromise her parenting (e.g., Bogat, Caldwell, Guzman, Galasso, & Davidson, 1998; Davis, 2002).

Similar to studies focusing on maternal grandmothers, the findings on the involvement of the child's biological father and the adjustment of the African American teen mother have also been inconsistent. It is important to note that paternal involvement, relative to maternal grandmother involvement, is relatively low among infants born to African American teen mothers (Gee & Rhodes, 2003) and tends to decrease over time (Gee & Rhodes, 2003; Leadbeater & Way, 2001), potentially accounting for why some studies find no effect of involvement on mothers (Gee & Rhodes, 2003; Voight et al., 1998). Several studies, nonetheless, have documented the positive influences of involvement of the child's biological father on African American teen mothers, including more effective maternal parenting (Crockenberg, 1987), greater life satisfaction (Unger & Wandersman, 1988), lower psychological distress (Thompson, 1986; Thompson & Peeples-Wilkins, 1992), and higher levels of self-esteem (Thompson & Peeples-Wilkins, 1992). In contrast, other studies have reported the negative influences of biological father involvement on African American teenage mothers, including adverse effects on maternal parenting skills (Shapiro & Mangelsdorf, 1994), increases in psychological distress (Gee & Rhodes, 2003; 1999), heightened levels of conflict (Leadbeater & Linares, 1992; Leadbeater & Way, 2001), and lower levels of maternal academic achievement (Unger & Cooley, 1992). Inconsistencies have also been reported across

studies examining father involvement and child outcomes (Furstenberg, Brooks-Gunn, & Morgan, 1987). Similar to studies with grandmothers, such inconsistencies have been attributed, at least in part, to the quality of the relationship between a teen mother and the child's father (Gee & Rhodes, 2003).

The importance of the aforementioned literature on teen mothers cannot be overstated, particularly the pattern of findings suggesting it is the quality of the relationships with maternal grandmothers and biological fathers, rather than the presence or absence of these individuals alone, which most consistently predicts mother and child adjustment. However, given the broad range of circumstances contributing to the rise of African American single mother families, the relevance of the literature on teen mothers to the extended family circumstances of African American single mothers more generally is questionable. Most notably, one might imagine that the dynamics of a teen mother parenting with the assistance of her own mother, who is concurrently attempting to still parent her own daughter, or the child's biological father, who is likely still a teenager himself, would be very different than an adult mother parenting with another family member or adult. Accordingly, some attention has been given to the relationships between extended family members and young adult and adult single mothers.

Extended family involvement and young adult and adult single mother families

Relatively few quantitative studies have examined childrearing assistance given to young adult and adult African American single mothers and much of this work has been conducted by our research group (e.g., Forehand & Jones, 2003; Jones et al., 2005a; Jones, Forehand, O'Connell, Brody, & Armistead, 2005b). In this research, young adult and adult (range = 28 to 40) single mothers of youth (mean age = 11 y.o., $SD = 1.85$) were asked if there was another adult or family member who assisted them with childrearing and, if so, to identify the most important person. Although only 3% of mothers failed to identify another adult or family member who assisted with childrearing, the majority identified the child's maternal grandmother (31%) or biological father (26%). Others identified a maternal aunt (11%), the child's older sister (11%), as well as diverse group of other relatives and non-relatives, such as friends and neighbors (Jones, Shaffer, Forehand, Brody, & Armistead, 2003). Sample sizes of these subgroups of individuals who have been referred to as nontraditional or non-marital "coparents" were too small to examine if their relation (e.g., grandmother, biological father, friend) to the mother or child moderated the impact of involvement. Moreover, the quality of the relationships that these single mothers had with their nontraditional coparents was associated with both maternal and child adjustment (Jones et al., 2003; Jones et al., 2005a). African American single mothers who reported experiencing greater conflict regarding childrearing issues with their nontraditional coparents had children who reported greater internalizing and externalizing difficulties than mothers who reported less conflict. In part, the link between mother-coparent childrearing conflict and child adjustment was shown to be mediated by maternal depressive symptoms (Jones et al., 2003). Mothers who experienced greater conflict with their coparents regarding childrearing greater depressive symptomatology, relative to mothers who experienced less conflict, which, in turn, negatively affected child outcomes.

This line of research also suggests that the quality of African American mothers' relationships with their nontraditional coparents may buffer youth from the sociodemographic risks which are often associated with single motherhood. For example, children whose mothers reported higher quality relationships with their nontraditional coparents evidenced fewer psychosocial adjustment difficulties in the context of neighborhood risk than children who

lived in similarly risky neighborhoods, but whose mothers reported lower quality relationships (Forehand & Jones, 2003). The quality of the mother-coparent relationship has also been shown to buffer the effects of neighborhood risk on maternal parenting behavior (Jones et al., 2005b). African American single mothers who resided in riskier neighborhoods were more likely to appropriately heighten their monitoring behavior in the context of better relationships with their nontraditional coparents than in the context of poorer ones.

Importantly, research on young adult and adult single mothers builds upon both the aforementioned qualitative literature and the literature with teen mothers to suggest that extended family members and other adults are integrally involved in the lives of African American single mothers and their children, regardless of maternal age. The research with young adult and adult African American single mothers highlight that other adults in addition to grandmothers and biological fathers are centrally involved in parenting youth from single mother homes and the quality of the mother-coparent relationship is associated with her parenting behavior, as well as her child's adjustment, and also may afford a buffer for children against other risk factors. The contributions of this work notwithstanding, our ability to draw clinical implications from the findings are limited to a large extent by our measurement of the mother and coparent relationship. That is, two broad domains of the coparenting relationship were assessed, support provided by the coparent for the mothers' parenting efforts, as well as conflict between the mother and coparent regarding childrearing issues. What we do not know, however, is what behaviors that the coparent engaged in that made mothers feel more or less supported or the issues that were associated with childrearing conflict. If we agree that extended family members and other adults are serving critical roles in African American single mother families, then one possibility is that such individuals should begin to be included in family-based prevention and intervention programs targeting African American youth. However, the development and implementation of such programs depends on a better understanding of the processes by which two parents who are not married negotiate childrearing successfully. Accordingly, the "coparenting" literature may offer an established framework for investigating such processes.

"Coparenting" as a framework for the study of childrearing in single mother families

Interest in the study of "coparenting," or the processes by which two adults work together in their role as parents to negotiate childrearing, can be traced to the advent of family systems theory and the subsequent increase in attention to triadic (e.g., mother, father, child) interactions, rather than dyadic (e.g., mother-child) interactions alone (Minuchin, 1974; 1985). Coparenting is conceptualized as a triadic, or whole family, level of analysis within the family system (Belsky et al., 1996). Thus, the construct of coparenting is typically characterized along varying dimensions of supportive interactions, or the extent to which two parents support and reinforce one another's parenting activities, as well as unsupportive interactions, or the level of inconsistent parenting, amount of conflict, and extent to which parents undermine one another's parenting efforts.

Initially, coparenting research focused on European-American parents who were divorced or in the process of divorcing (e.g., Ahrons, 1981; 1983). Prevention and intervention researchers were interested in identifying the processes that characterized the parenting efforts of divorcing parents who potentially had very negative feelings for one another, but managed to successfully parent together. Not surprisingly, divorcing parents who were more supportive of one another's parenting efforts and goals, despite their feelings for one another, had children who adjusted more favorably to the divorce (e.g., Coiro & Emery, 1998).

Subsequently, researchers turned their attention to intact or two-parent Caucasian families and the processes by which married parents successfully parented together (e.g., McHale, 1995; 1997). Not surprisingly, children whose parents evidenced more support for one another's parenting efforts, and less conflict regarding parenting goals and values, evidenced fewer difficulties.

Given the importance of coparenting for predicting child and adolescent adjustment, research on Caucasian families then focused on predictors of which parents experienced and maintained successful coparenting relations (e.g., Stright & Bales, 2003). With regard to sociodemographic factors, a higher level of education has been associated with more stable levels of coparenting support than lower levels of education (e.g., Stright & Bales, 2003). Parental psychosocial variables are predictive of the quality of the coparenting relationship as well. Parents with fewer psychological problems are more likely to have coparenting relationships that are initially more positive, and stay more positive over time, than parents with psychological problems (e.g., Belsky, Crinic, & Gable, 1995). Finally, parents who experience lower levels of stress enjoy more positive coparenting relations (e.g., Belsky et al., 1995).

Although leaders in the coparenting field have highlighted that coparenting is a construct of relevance to diverse (Feinberg, 2002) and single parent (Van Egeren & Hawkins, 2004) families, far less attention has been devoted to the role of coparenting in African American families generally or single mother families in particular. Importantly, ecological risk/protection theory (Murry et al., 2001) suggests that bidirectional associations between risk and protective processes at the individual, family, and community levels influence child and adolescent adjustment. In doing so, this perspective can be used to explain why some African American families and children succumb to challenges, while others do not. Of particular relevance to the utility of the coparenting construct for the study of African American single mother families, the ecological risk/protection framework discourages researchers from viewing any family context as homogeneous, recognizing that both strengths and weaknesses exist within and across various types of families. According to this model, researchers who define family structure solely in terms of marital status may be overlooking an important moderator of youth outcomes.

Consistent with an ecological risk/protection perspective, one organizing framework for the future study of coparenting in African American single mother families is presented in Fig. 1. Specifically, we propose that nontraditional coparents and the quality of the mother and coparent relationship may have both direct and indirect effects on youth adjustment. That is, nontraditional coparents may influence youth directly via factors very similar to those which have been established for mothers, as well as fathers, including psychosocial adjustment, parenting style, and the quality of the coparent-child relationship. Similar to research showing that fathers have unique contributions to child adjustment over and above mothers (Gottman, 1998; Parke, 2002), nontraditional coparents may contribute unique variance to the psychosocial adjustment of youth from single mother families as well. Coparents who are well-adjusted, who parent effectively, and who have a warm/supportive relationship with the child will likely promote youth health and well-being, while those with deficits in these areas could exacerbate the effects of the risks to which many children from single mother families are exposed.

Coparents may also influence youth indirectly through the construct of coparenting. That is, the quality of the mother-coparent relationship with regard to childrearing is likely determined by both the mothers' and coparents' psychosocial adjustment, individual parenting styles, and, perhaps, individual relationships with the child. Youth whose mothers have more cooperative and positive relationships with their coparents are likely to have more favorable

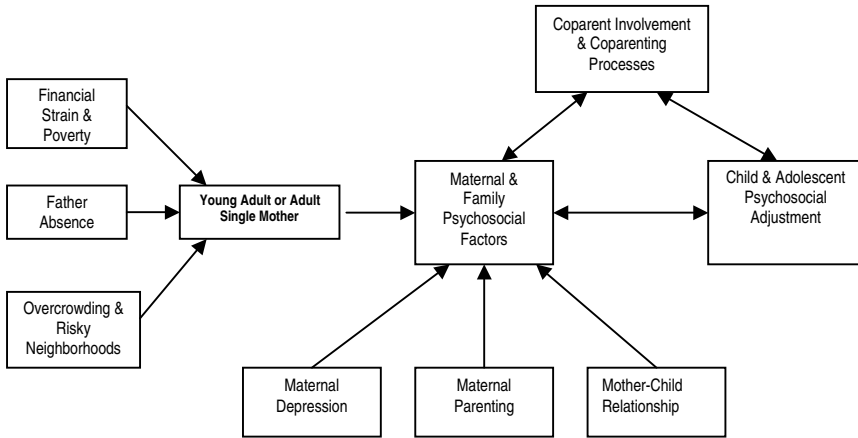


Fig. 1 A theoretical framework highlighting the proposed main and interactive effects of coparenting in the African American single mother family

adjustment outcomes than those youth whose mothers’ relationships with their coparents are characterized by conflict and disparagement. Additionally, the individual characteristics of the coparent and the quality of the coparenting relationship may also moderate the link between maternal characteristics and parenting. That is, it is feasible that a positive relationship with an involved and well-adjusted coparent could buffer the risks often associated with single mother families, including sociodemographic risks, as well as compromises in maternal parenting. Moreover, a positive coparenting relationship may strengthen the positive effects of mothers who are involved and invested in their child’s lives, despite the stressors of single motherhood.

Rather than continuing to rely on the tradition of defining families by marital status, we propose that researchers interested in the psychosocial adjustment of the growing number of African American youth being raised in single mother homes broaden the definition of “family” to include the other adults and family members who may be involved in parenting. By broadening our definition of family to include extended family members in general and nontraditional coparents in particular, we will have the opportunity to consider other predictors of youth outcomes and, perhaps, better predict which youth from single mother homes fare well despite the myriad of risk factors that have been well-documented in the literature. In addition, broadening our study of African American families beyond the mother-child dyad affords the opportunity to incorporate well-established and relevant literatures, particularly the coparenting literature. Rather than developing new theoretical frameworks and techniques for the study of nontraditional coparents, the coparenting literature offers state-of-the-field theory and methodology to guide our study of African American single mother families as well.

Utilization of the coparenting framework will also require more robust methodology than has traditionally been utilized in studies of African American families (see Murry et al., 2001 for a review). First, the research on the role of non-traditional coparents in African American single mother families has focused exclusively on mother-report of the quality of her relationship with her nontraditional coparent (e.g., Forehand & Jones, 2003; Jones et al., 2005a; Jones et al., 2005b). In contrast to the broader coparenting literature with European American two-parent families, the other adults or family members who mothers identified

as coparents have not been the focus of, or even included in, the previously mentioned work. Moreover, while children have been included, prior research has not considered their reports of the quality of the mother-coparent relationship or their perception of the nontraditional coparents' involvement. Given the triadic nature of the coparenting construct, assessment of the single mother alone ignores important contributors to the coparenting relationship, the coparent and the child.

Additionally, young adult and adult African American single mothers in prior research were asked about two relatively broad domains of the coparenting relationship: support and conflict regarding childrearing activities. State-of-the-field coparenting measures, however, include much richer assessments of the coparenting relationship, including division of childrearing labor and parental relationship quality (e.g., Belsky & Hsieh, 1998). Coparenting is now considered a multidimensional (rather than two-dimensional) construct, including more nuanced aspects of communication between parents, such as verbal sparring (e.g., hostility), conflict (e.g., arguing), and disparagement (e.g., undermining) (e.g., McHale, Kuersten-Hogan, Lauretti, & Rasmussen, 2000).

Finally, in addition to self-report methods, the broader coparenting literature includes observation and coding of interactions between married parents and children, which we did not include in our prior work on adult African American single mothers parenting with their nontraditional coparents. Observational methods have been notably underutilized in research on African American families in general (McLoyd et al., 2000), and the research on coparenting in African American families headed by a young adult or adult single mother is not an exception.

Theoretically-driven studies that incorporate both self-report and observational studies of coparenting, assess the coparent's involvement directly by including the coparent as well as the single mother and child, and follow the family over time will contribute greatly to our understanding of the processes by which African American single mothers successfully negotiate and navigate childrearing with their nontraditional coparents and the impact of such processes on youth adjustment. Given the well-documented difficulties associated with including fathers in research with intact families (Phares, 1995), there will likely be logistical barriers to overcome in our decision to include coparents in future research, including coordinating mothers' and coparents' schedules, transportation, and child care, particularly if the coparent does not live with the family and/or is involved in caring for multiple children. However, overcoming such barriers seems absolutely critical if we are to fully understand the range of potential familial influences on youth being raised by single mothers. In turn, the information garnered from this work will be critical to the development, enhancement, and implementation of family-based prevention and intervention efforts aimed at promoting health and well-being among African American single mothers and their children.

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