Emerging from the Daddy Issue:  
**A Phenomenological Study of the Impact of the Lived Experiences of Men Who Experienced Fatherlessness on Their Approach to Fathering Sons**

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Abstract

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Chairperson: W. Edward Bureau

Perceptions about fatherhood and the importance of the father role have changed significantly over time. This phenomenological study explored how experiences of father absence or paternal apathy impact behaviors among men and exert influence over their ability to effectively father their sons. It examined participants’ views on the meaning of transitioning to manhood in a father-absent household, the intersection between fatherhood and masculinity, and the impact of their history of fatherlessness on their approaches to fathering. The researcher drew on the phrase “Daddy Issue” to describe the “lack of emotional and psychological balance” (Gibbs, Blackman, Painton, & Willwerth, 2007, p. 3) and depression of cognitive performance (Chapman, 1977) associated with the experience of fatherlessness, the abuse of a paternal relationship, or paternal undependability.

Existing studies on fatherlessness are predominantly quantitative with few qualitative studies investigating outcomes of resiliency and restoration of those who experienced fatherlessness. The researcher’s worldviews as a pragmatist, social constructivist, and advocate (Creswell, 2007) place importance on the youth experience that may shape men’s adult lives. The thoughts and feelings of 36 adult males were evaluated through the theoretical lens of Paternal Involvement, the Masculinity-Fatherhood Linkage, and Resilience.

Thirteen of those men participated in semi-structured individual interviews, while 24 participated in two separate focus groups. Analysis of the data captured yielded thematic clusters that led to textural descriptions of participants’ experiences. From these textural descriptions, a structural description of the essence of fathering sons after experiencing fatherlessness was derived. The key findings in this study centered on the modeling of fatherhood, the perceived impacts of father absence, beliefs about the transition to manhood, the intersections between masculinity and fatherhood, and the pursuit of emotional closure. These findings were the foundation of practical recommendations as well as suggestions for future exploration into tangential phenomena.
This Ed.D. Dissertation Committee from The School of Education at Drexel University certifies that this is the approved version of the following dissertation:

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David Ricardo Inniss

Committee:

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Dr. Ed Bureau

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Dr. Holly Carpenter

______________________________
Dr. Michael Marion

Date
Dedication

This work is dedicated to my sons, Jalen Omari Hinman-Inniss and Nico Ajani Khalil Hinman-Inniss. Upon your birth, I wrote a personalized father-son contract outlining all I committed to being for you. My only prayer is that I fulfill these words to you and that someday you will grasp the extent of my efforts to provide you with a model worthy of emulation.

In accordance with my personal values and my commitment to true fatherhood, I do hereby enter into this contract with Jalen and Nico on this 24th day of March in the year 2007

1. I will love, honor, and respect your mother
2. I will love you unconditionally at all times
3. I will nurture and protect you from danger to the best of my abilities
4. I will provide for you, ensuring that you are always appropriately clothed, well fed and have a roof over your head
5. I will teach you how to ride a bicycle, throw a ball, and fly a kite
6. I will read to you
7. I will make sure that you attend schools that give you the greatest opportunity to excel
8. I will partner with your teachers to help you as much as I possibly can with school
9. I will be candid with you about my mistakes in life so that you can avoid the pitfalls that I fell into
10. I will reveal to you, in a non-boastful manner, the characteristics that I have that helped me overcome many challenges and achieve a level of “success”
11. I will help you to define success in terms that are suited to you
12. I will assist you in anyway possible to help you achieve that success described above
13. I will be a tough disciplinarian at times, but this is out of love, and based upon my desire to fulfill everything else in this contract
14. I will never strike you
15. I will play with you
16. I will laugh with you
17. I will empathize when you cry during tough times, support you and show you that you can recover from any knock down
18. I will be strong enough to provide guidance but mild enough to encourage you
19. I will be firm enough to instill discipline, but flexible enough to show the value of tolerance
20. I will be attentive enough to recognize moments when I can potentially wound you and courageous enough to do what it takes to avoid them
21. I will be fearless enough to be wild in a Godly way and transfer that wildness to you my little boy

Signed: [Signature]
Date: 3/24/2007, 11/29/2008

This work is also dedicated to Louis Wardell Johnson, my father-in-law, who passed away before he could witness the completion of this research and the only man to ever hug me and utter the words, “You have done well, Son!”

Finally, this work is dedicated to the boys and men who are still dealing with the aftereffects of paternal abandonment or paternal apathy. My only hope is that this work may alter the course of life for one fatherless boy that he may someday stand up and declare that fatherlessness in his family will stop at him!
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I would also like to thank all the participants in this study who really displayed strength through their vulnerability. The candor and richness of the way you described your experiences were nothing short of amazing.

Finally, I would like to acknowledge Winston Carlisle Inniss, my father and the person who imbedded in me a burning desire to better understand the complexities of fatherhood. This study has given me more understanding of your journey and for that reason alone, it was a success. My only prayer is that it is the first of many steps toward the emotional closure that, like the participants in this study, I seek.
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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Research

**Introduction to the Problem**

As of 2011, approximately 24.7 million children, the equivalent of 33% of all children living in the United States, resided in homes without their biological father. Of these 24.7 million, 20.3 million resided in homes without any male figures—biological, adoptive, or step—in the home at all (National Fatherhood Initiative, 2011b). In African American families, 57.2% of children are in father-absent households – compared with 30.3% of Hispanic children, 21.6% of Caucasian children, and 12.3% of Asian children (U.S. Census Bureau, 2005).

Perceptions about the father role have changed significantly over time. In the pre-19th century era, fathers were the primary parent and served as “the provider, moral guide, disciplinarian, companion, and teacher in the family unit” (Nord, West, & Brimhall, 1997, p. 3). The urbanization and industrialization that characterized the 19th century generated several dramatic shifts in how fathers and fatherhood as a whole were perceived. Gibbs, Blackman, Painton, and Willwerth (2007) referred to the 19th century as the era most responsible for the “marginalization of the father as a parent” (p. 2). Two centuries later, contemporary research acknowledges the role of father as one of the world’s most important leadership roles in the world (Rohner & Veneziano, 2001). Its importance has re-emerged in spite of the historical misrepresentation of fatherhood and anti-father rhetoric that infiltrated the discourse in American culture and institutions (Gibbs et al., 2007).
Industrialization created a major shift in work demands outside the home for men. As a negative consequence, the role of father as the primary parent suffered. Fathers were relegated to arbiters of discipline within the family (Pleck, 1998) and the paternal role was increasingly viewed as “the chairman of the board…of the enterprise called the family” (p. 355). Fathers’ disconnection with the family unit was manifested through both physical separation due to employment obligations and reduced time spent parenting. The separation, coupled with the burgeoning perception of the father role as that of family breadwinner created a family situation conducive to the rise of paternal apathy—a scenario in which the father is physically and financially present but emotionally absent to his children.

Perceptions about the role of father continued to shift throughout the 20th century. The post-industrial and post-world war periods were marked by worldwide economic phenomena like globalization and increased flow of information on an international scale. In the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, the importance of the father as the purveyor of “dutiful bread-winning” (Gillis, 2000, p. 231) resurfaced. These periods also evoked the social construction of a non-familial, transnational, business-focused masculinity. Through this new, pervading view of masculinity, a declining importance was placed on the role of fathers. Men were increasingly egocentric and demonstrated a declining sense of responsibility (Connell, 1998).

The declining perceptions about fatherhood and paternal responsibilities were reflected in the body of research conducted during the latter two decades of the 20th century. At this time, much of the research focused on the development and well-being of children. Initially, disproportionate attention was placed on the dynamics of the
maternal relationship with little attention paid to the relationship between fathers and their children. The near omission of issues related to fatherhood reflected a research bias that mirrored perceptions about the relative roles of mothers and fathers. The paternal role had declined to the point where fathers, by the turn of the 21st century, were considered to be peripheral, with little or no bearing on child development (Lamb, 1997).

By the turn of the 21st century, stimulants for deeper research into the roles of fathers surfaced. Increased participation of women in the work force, along with pervasive viewpoints about father-absence and its role in societal moral decay (Gillis, 2000) resulted in burgeoning literature as the 20th century closed and the 21st century commenced. Early research resulting from the increased scrutiny took on a rather binary view of fathering and posited that fathers were either good or bad (Furstenburg, 1985). Moreover, the initial exploration of father issues levied a disproportionate amount of attention toward negative examples of fatherhood, father-absence, and the popularized notion of the deadbeat dad (Gillis, 2000).

The increased focus on the nuances of fatherhood was further emphasized when President William Clinton issued an executive memorandum emphasizing the importance of fatherhood programs, policies, and research among government agencies (Clinton, 1995). Fatherhood studies circa 1995 revealed compelling correlations between father absence and financial stability (U.S. Census Bureau, 2003), substance abuse (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services [DHHS], 1993), emotional health (Gong-Soog & White-Means, 1993), educational achievement (Sandefur & Sandefur, 1994), involvement in crime (DHHS, 1988), and pre-mature exposure to sexual activity (DHHS, 1988). With time, more sophisticated studies on the negative consequences of
fatherlessness surfaced, providing greater support for the assertion that father absence was related to poor educational performance, early childbearing, and unemployment (National Center for Fathering, 2007; National Fatherhood Initiative, 2011a). The beliefs that fathers were necessary to avoid such consequences and that “fathers…contributed to the development of their children in a unique way” strengthened and became known as the essentialist view of fatherhood (Marsiglio & Pleck, 2005, p. 252).

Blankenhorn (1995) was one of many authors who took an essentialist stance and attributed much of societal moral decay to the issue of fatherlessness. He described fatherlessness as a “harmful demographic trend” that drove the “most urgent social problems, from crime to adolescent pregnancy…to domestic violence against women” (p. 1). Blankenhorn (1995) predicted a post-2000 American society in which working adults would be classified into two divergent groups along the lines of patrimony—the fathered and the fatherless. The former group consists of those who grew up with the “daily presence and provision of a father” (Blankenhorn, 1995, p. 2). They possess the benefits of psychological, social, economic, educational, and moral preparedness. On the other hand, members of the latter group demonstrate a paucity of development in these areas. The disadvantages believed to be encountered by the patrimonial have-nots spurred the emergence of fatherlessness as an issue of equity (Blankenhorn, 1995). Several scholars scrutinized the stance taken by Blankenhorn, challenging his narrow definition of father-absence as a purely physical concept (Marsiglio & Pleck, 2005). His disregard for psychological father-absence also constituted a major flaw upon which social scientists and child development intellectuals placed significant criticism. Other researchers further refuted the studies upon which essentialist claims were rooted, asserting that
simplistic comparisons between father-absent and father-present groups without accounting for the effects of other circumstances only served to trivialize a rather complex issue.

The increased volume of research into topics of fatherhood that occurred in the late 1990s continued into the early 2000s. However, as the body of research grew and policy implications became more apparent, concern with the phenomenon of fatherlessness reached parity with that of fatherhood itself. Marsiglio and Pleck (2005) emphasized the need for continued attentiveness among the research community on “the social construction of knowledge about fathering” as a means of further “promoting father-relevant social policies” (p. 250).

For the purpose of this study, fatherlessness is defined as a combination of physical and emotional distance between fathers and children. Such distance results from a continuum of paternal behaviors ranging from paternal apathy – which creates emotional distance from children – to outright paternal abandonment, which combines physical and emotional distance between a father and child. In this investigation, an individual is considered to have experienced fatherlessness if one’s father was emotionally and physically absent for five or more years when the individual was between the ages of 8 and 16. Exposure to fatherlessness is a human experience with a highly personal impact on individuals regardless of race or socioeconomic class, ultimately affecting their ability to father. The personal impact is often lost in the shadows of the consequences of fatherlessness primarily considered on a macrolevel. Indeed, some researchers still question whether the criticality associated with father-absence is warranted, asserting that it was merely a reflection of the historically cyclical
changes to the role of men in the family (Gillis, 2000). Regardless of the macro consequences, numerous men are products of father-absent households. Despite their experiences, they must still navigate the many complex dimensions of being an adult, being a father, and being male in a highly demanding society.

Statement of the Problem to be Researched

The experience of fatherlessness among men generates highly differentiated behaviors that exert influence over their ability to effectively father their sons and halt the generational perpetuation of fatherlessness.

Purpose and Significance of the Problem

The following segments describe the purpose statement driving this study and the significance of the problem of fatherlessness.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences, attitudes, and perceptions about masculinity and fatherhood among men who experienced father-absence. The investigation sought to understand how these experiences enabled or hampered the participant’s ability to break trends of father-absence in their family. It pursued broad, deep inquiry into the lives of unfathered men, some of whom appeared to have risen above the negative outcomes typically associated with not having a father and others who have struggled to cope with the consequences of father-absence in their lives. An analysis of factors like participant career progression, educational achievement, familial stability, emotional closure, and active fathering may provide insight into the lives of men who experienced father-absence. This study also explored the attitudes and
activities impacting the development of men who experienced fatherlessness into models of effective fathering and positive male citizenship (Renshaw, 2005) for their sons.

Significance of the Problem

Paternal modeling is critical in teaching boys and young men the behaviors necessary for good fathering and responsible male citizenship in society (Renshaw, 2005). Men who experienced father absence lack such modeling and are prone to negative effects ranging from external behavioral impacts manifested in the form of anger and violence to internal impacts in the form of depression, low self-esteem, and lack of self-assurance. Renshaw (2005) suggested that the father-son bond is one that has been “neglected, understudied, and often undervalued” (p. 7), with the father role being “rarely consciously taught by a father to a son” (p. 7). Such father-son modeling requires almost daily interaction and close observation of both positive and negative behaviors (Renshaw, 2005).

Successful emergence from the plight of living without a father or living with poor paternal relationships benefits the subject and also has significant impact on future generations. The “reproduction of fatherhood” (Townsend, 1998, p. 363) is a concept suggesting that fathers typically father in the way they were fathered. In other words, the model of fathering or the lack thereof to which an individual is exposed can significantly impact the type of father they themselves become; this is a crucial concept supported by numerous other authors. The lack of a father creates a “hole in the soul” (Jampolsky & Jampolsky, 1996, p. 85) – a yearning for the absent father that impacts every aspect of a man’s life (Jampolsky & Jampolsky, 1996). Often, men who experience life without a
father attempt to address this by placing extreme effort into trying to be different from their fathers. Invariably, they attempt this with little success. As a result of the “reproduction of fatherhood” (Townsend, 1998, p. 363), failure to address this “hole in the soul” (Jampolsky & Jampolsky, 1996, p. 85) may result in the transference of negative outcomes to the lives of those in subsequent generations.

Most of the literature to date focuses solely on the numerous negative outcomes originating from father-absence (Larcher, 2007). Researchers in various disciplines such as psychology, sociology, ethnic studies, education, and anthropology have contributed to the contemporary assertion that fatherhood is an essential subsystem of the family and of society as a whole. As alluded to earlier, much of the existing research on fatherlessness emphasizes the hopelessness and despair associated with father-absence. The body of research is somewhat skewed toward quantitative studies from which generalizations are made about fatherlessness as it relates to crime; violence; social, cognitive, and emotional impairment; and sexual promiscuity (Larcher, 2007). Notwithstanding the potential for tragic outcomes from paternal absence, relatively few studies have discussed outcomes of resiliency and restoration of those who successfully emerged from the grip of fatherlessness to become models of male citizenship. One does not have to look very far to find numerous examples of men who have beat the proverbial odds and have risen to levels of prominence and notoriety despite their experiences with paternal absence. President Barack Obama and former President William Clinton are two of the more well-known examples, but there are numerous others who succeeded in turning around the potential catastrophe of the unfathered experience into lives generally accepted as productive.
Relatively few qualitative studies have been conducted that highlight the feelings, thoughts, and perceptions of fatherless males. The lack of qualitative insight precludes a thorough understanding about the life experience of these unfathered men, leaving a gap in the collection of information that could influence policy generation, program creation, or the direction of research on issues of fatherhood or fatherlessness. Also, whereas previous literature primarily focused on the differences between men who come from father-absent homes and those who come from father-present homes, very little has been done to gain a deep understanding of the differences present among those who were commonly exposed to father absence. This study uncovers key contributors to the highly differentiated behaviors and outcomes among the unfathered and sheds some light on the factors and circumstances enabling the necessary elements of a healing process. The norms, perceptions, beliefs, and approaches to fathering are assessed to identify how the perpetuation of fatherlessness can be halted at the current generation.

In addition to supplementing the existing literature and gaining an understanding of the generational downstream impact of unaddressed fatherlessness, the justification for this study also lies in the pervasiveness of father-absent families throughout the U.S. The telling statistic that 20.3 million children in the U.S. lived in households that were void of any male figure (National Fatherhood Initiative, 2011b) indicates the risk of continuation of the fatherless phenomenon beyond this generation of fatherless children. The findings from this study may provide qualitative insight that can inform and influence the design of programs and policy to address both the needs of adult males who experienced fatherlessness and those of children currently living in father-absent households.
Another important contribution of this study will be its potential to influence how adolescent males who experienced paternal absence can best be served in the education system. Some potential education system beneficiaries of the findings of this research include mothers, extended family, counselors, administrators, teachers, and coaches. Additionally, policy makers at the local, state, and federal levels may perceive this research as a means of gaining access to the mindsets of those impacted by fatherlessness. Findings may influence changes in how single mothers and extended family interact with fatherless sons, how counselors address any possible behavioral shortcomings observed in fatherless boys, how administrators levy disciplinary action toward fatherless male students, how policy makers structure educational guidelines affecting fatherless adolescents, and how youth program providers structure their services and delivery of benefits to fatherless recipients.

Adolescent boys experiencing fatherlessness are more likely to become teenage parents, play truant from school, perform poorly in school, leave school by age 16, and experience adjustment problems when transitioning to adulthood (National Fatherhood Initiative, 2011a). The potential contribution of this study to address the factors contributing to these quantitative indicators enhances its importance. Understanding the qualitative differentiating factors among those unfathered men who benefit society, model good fathering, and exemplify positive male citizenship and those who become a draw on society can assist in halting the perpetuation of fatherlessness while opening up several avenues for further research.
Research Questions Focused on Solution Finding

The primary research questions for this study are as follows:

- What does the experience of transitioning from boyhood to manhood in a father-absent household mean for males?
- How do men who experienced fatherlessness describe the intersection between masculinity and fatherhood?
- How do men describe the relationships between their history of fatherlessness and their attempts to father their own sons?

The Conceptual Framework

Researcher Stances and Experiential Base

This exploration of fatherlessness and its impact on parenting is built on the researcher’s ontological, epistemological, and axiological stances. An ontological stance refers to “the nature of reality” (Merriam, 2009, p. 8) from the viewpoint of a researcher. To that end, this researcher acknowledges that the experiences of the unfathered are highly differentiated and present a different reality to each individual who has been exposed to fatherlessness. Epistemology defines a stance on the “nature of knowledge” (Merriam, 2009, p. 8) and describes the researcher’s personal desire to increase the breadth and depth of knowledge about the experiences and perceptions of the unfathered. In conducting this study, the researcher attempted to close the gap between his own experience and the phenomenon of fatherlessness (Creswell, 2007). The researcher acknowledges an axiological stance in this research as a result of long-held values of loyalty, family unity, and support for the development of youth which clash significantly with the notions of father abandonment or paternal apathy. Lastly, the researcher brought
to this research a bias against fathers who abandon their offspring and empathy toward those who have endured paternal abandonment and the challenges associated with exposure to apathetic fathering.

The researcher’s worldviews as a pragmatist, social constructivist, and advocate are important to his positioning within this study (Creswell, 2007). His pragmatist worldview places significant value on the outcomes of this investigation and the exploration of how the youth circumstances shape the adult life experiences of American men. The researcher anticipates that this research will uncover some deeply embedded perceptions about the social and historical contexts of father-absence. This study is also influenced by the researcher’s stance as a social constructivist who seeks to understand the meanings and significance of the experiences of fathers who were previously exposed to fatherlessness. Such meanings are shaped by the interactions, beliefs, and experiences from the transition from boyhood to manhood (Creswell, 2007). As an Afro-Caribbean man, the researcher recognizes that differences between his cultural upbringing and perceptions about the family unit and those of the participants in this study may influence the meanings he constructs from the data gathered. The researcher’s view of critical aspects of fathering like discipline and father-child interaction are a product of his cultural experience and must be taken into account as he assembles the data necessary to address the research questions posed. Additionally, the researcher’s personal experiences as a father who experienced paternal absence and his perceptions about the history of the phenomenon of fatherlessness must be appropriately accounted for as he analyzed and drew conclusions from the participant data gathered in this study.
The fears, insecurities, and emotional consequences of exposure to fatherlessness are a significant disadvantage that fathers must overcome. Faced with the lack of modeling from an emotionally and socially present father, unfathered men are often left to derive their view of masculinity from the media (Hanke, 2006), work environments, society, and the power relationships (Creswell, 2007) in which they are involved. It was this researcher’s intention to provide a voice for the participants in this study, bringing awareness to their journey as it relates to the long-term generational effects of father absence and paternal apathy while “freeing them from the constraints” (Creswell, 2007, p. 22) of masculinity as defined by distant, disconnected informers. The researcher draws on the phrase “Daddy Issue” to describe a “lack of emotional and psychological balance” (Gibbs et al., 2007, p. 3) and depression of cognitive performance (Chapman, 1977) associated with the experience of fatherlessness, the abuse of a paternal relationship, or paternal undependability. The desire to give a voice to fatherless fathers originates in an advocate or participatory world view built on the “essentialist” premise (Marsiglio & Pleck, 2005) that fathers are important to the development of their children and the researcher’s own mental model of father as the most critical leadership role men will play in the 21st century and beyond.

**Conceptual Framework of Three Research Streams**

Some men are able to develop vital behaviors that help them overcome the negative consequences associated with father-absence. On the other hand, others struggle with identifying and ultimately practicing the behaviors leading to positive outcomes in spite of their experiences. One such outcome is the ability of men who experienced fatherlessness to engage in vital behaviors leading to healthy domestic relationships and
highly engaged fathering. The differentiated behaviors among the fatherless may originate from many sources. Nevertheless, the variation in behaviors and the personal nature of each one’s experience may indicate that there are inherent experiences, behaviors, acquired attitudes, and practiced activities contributing to one’s propensity to withstand or succumb to the negative effects of fatherlessness. The three research streams forming the lens through which the issue of fatherlessness is viewed are: (a) Paternal Involvement and Issues of Essentialism, (b) the Social Construction of the Masculinity-Fatherhood Linkage, and (c) Resilience and Competence Theory.

*Figure 1: Annotated conceptual framework.*

**Paternal involvement and issues of essentialism.** Men who have exposure to “emotionally distant or physically absent fathering, or with destructive fathering in an abusive family situation” (Pickhardt, 2007, p. 1) may lack the confidence or the conception of how not to reenact the agonies and chaos that typified their experiences. Such fathers, though intimidated, must “commit to profit from the negative example that
they were so painfully given” (Pickhardt, 2007, p. 2) if they are to succeed in not reproducing the fathering or lack thereof to which they were exposed.

Lamb, Pleck, Charnov, and Levine (1985) asserted that the achievement of positive outcomes in a father-child relationship depend on a high level of paternal involvement. They further stated that paternal involvement comprises three core components: paternal engagement, paternal availability, and paternal responsibility. Each of these components is invaluable in building strong paternal relationships, and a significant deficiency in any may lead to perceptions of low father involvement—a key ingredient for the range of behaviors that lead to paternal apathy or paternal abandonment.

**Fatherlessness, competence, and resilience theory.** A thorough understanding of the “events, trends, systemic structures, and mental models” affecting the “contemporary reality” (Senge, Smith, Kruschwitz, Laur, & Schley, 2008, p. 174) of fatherlessness must precede the pursuit of any systemic changes necessary to modify that reality. This study pursues immersion into the differentiated behaviors among men who experienced fatherlessness and encourages thorough reflection on mental models guiding one’s perceptions about fatherhood. The systems thinking approach to understanding variations in the long-term effects of fatherlessness among American men requires inquiry into some “below-the-surface” factors. One such factor is the influence of resilience on the paternal competence of participants in this study. The foundational judgments of resilience include an exposure to threat, risk, or severe adversity, and the achievement of positive adaptation and competence in the face of such adversity (Luthar, Cicchetti, & Becker, 2000). It is important to acknowledge the risk exposure and explore
the lived experiences and meaning of male adaptation to fatherlessness and the achievement of competence in the area of fathering and the modeling of positive male citizenship.

**Social construction of the masculinity-fatherhood linkage.** Masculinity is a socially learned body of perceptions, beliefs, and norms that guide the behaviors, expectations, and values of men. In a historical analysis of masculinity, Kimmel (2012) asserted that “the quest for manhood—the effort to achieve, to demonstrate, to prove…masculinity—has been one of the formative and persistent experiences in men’s lives” (p. 3). The social nature of defining masculinity is further emphasized by the notion that different cultures prescribe varying definitions of masculinity (Kimmel, 2012). The definition is somewhat impacted by “one’s class, race, ethnicity, age, and sexuality” (Kimmel, 2012, p. 4).

Often, the sources of instruction for these learned perceptions of masculinity include media, history, culture, and various father figures. Father figures include biological fathers, adoptive fathers, and other social roles driven by institutions or activities. Unfathered men may be disadvantaged by the absence of a father to model and teach them about masculinity. Void of this influence for long stretches of their lives, these men are forced to build definitions of masculinity from multiple sources. The perception of masculinity that may be formulated in men who experienced paternal absence, though potentially tainted, can ultimately be passed on to their sons, thus expanding its impact. The perceptions of masculinity held by unfathered men are a product of their own experiences of fatherlessness. Invariably, some of these perceptions
are unhealthy and, if allowed to feed on themselves without intervention, can further propagate the attitudes and actions that led to paternal absence in the first place.

This study attempted to uncover the essence of the linkage between masculinity and fatherhood. Understanding how unfathered men perceive manhood and how they navigate the man-experience, as seen through their lens, will be invaluable to understanding differentiated outcomes among this population.

**Definition of Terms**

The following key terms and definitions will be used throughout the study:

**Daddy issue**

A lack of emotional and psychological balance and/or depression of cognitive performance rooted in the experiences associated with the absence of a father

**Disruption**

The stressors, adversity, and life events individuals face that threaten the status quo

**Father absence**

The spectrum of absence ranging from emotional disconnection to physical absence of fathers

**Fatherlessness**

A combination of physical and emotional distance between fathers and children resulting from a continuum of paternal behaviors ranging from paternal apathy to outright paternal abandonment
**Paternal absence**

The spectrum of absence ranging from emotional disconnection to physical absence of fathers

**Paternal apathy**

Emotionally distant fathering, referring to fathers who are physically present but emotionally disconnected from their offspring

**Paternal undependability**

A lack of reliability among fathers with respect to the father-child relationship

**Reintegration**

The behaviors demonstrated by individuals to adapt to life adversity (Richardson, 2002)

**Reproduction of fatherhood**

The assertion that fathers primarily father in the manner in which fathering was modeled for them. Inherent in this definition is the notion that reproduction of fatherlessness also exists, capturing the assertion that fathers who experienced fatherlessness may be prone to enact or repeat the behaviors resulting in father-absence or paternal apathy.

**Resiliency**

The “dynamic process encompassing positive adaptation within the context of significant adversity” (Luthar et al., 2000, p. 543)

**Social construct**

A term whose definition is sensitive to the social, cultural, racial, and economic context in which it applies
**Systems thinking**

The process of understanding how things influence one another within a whole

**Assumptions and Limitations**

This study is built on several assumptions about fatherlessness and its impact on those who experience it. The following list depicts the assumptions and limitations of this study:

1. An assumption of this study was that the impact of fatherlessness on an individual cannot be necessarily separated from issues of race and socioeconomic status. A corresponding limitation was this study did not take into account the racial, socio-economic, and cultural effects on the development of vital behaviors enabling men to overcome their experiences of being fatherless.

2. Another key assumption made in this study was that fatherlessness results from a continuum of paternal behaviors ranging from paternal apathy—emotional absence—to physical absence. It was further assumed that paternal emotional absence and paternal physical absence are equally impactful on the development of a child. One related limitation was the inability of this study to concretely assess where paternal behaviors fall on this continuum.

3. This study limited its investigation of fatherlessness to the impact on males who ultimately become fathers of their own sons; this assumption must be accounted for when making generalizations about trends observed during this study.
4. To understand the differentiated behaviors of men who experienced fatherlessness, this study considered perceptions about educational achievement, societal expectations, career progression, and stability of familial relationships as valuable in the assessment of paternal behaviors. An associated limitation was the fact that these issues may occur for reasons other than the fatherless experience.

5. Many unfathered men have varying routes to fatherlessness which may impact their level of traumatization. Individuals’ exposure to fatherlessness may have been the consequence of divorce, death, emotional disconnection, or abandonment. These routes to fatherlessness impact the level of traumatization and may influence how men perceive fatherlessness. One limitation of this study was it did not draw a distinction between the routes to fatherlessness.

6. One assumption in this study was that a two-parent family referred to a household with both a male and female parent. One limitation of this study, therefore, was it did not take into account the advent and increasing popularity of dual-parent, same-sex households (i.e., households in which both parents are male or both parents are female).

Summary

Over the past two decades, increased nuances of fatherhood research have resulted in greater visibility on issues related to fatherlessness. The body of research is replete with claims, assertions, and viewpoints that sit on both sides of the essentialist fence. Those who believe in the value of fathers proffer that they are invaluable to
positive child development while proponents of the alternative view question whether paternal absence is indeed an important and pressing social issue. Most of the existing research focused on quantitative measures of the negative behaviors associated with experiences of fatherlessness. Moreover, the bulk of existing research places significant emphasis on comparative analysis of behaviors of those from father-present or father-absent households, with little exploration of the highly differentiated behaviors among those who experienced father absence. Few studies have investigated the actual thoughts, feelings, perceptions, and attitudes of those who experienced the “Daddy Issue.” Qualitative exploration of this phenomenon could offer deeper insight into why some American males who experienced fatherlessness transition into adulthood and are perpetually trapped in the negative behaviors and outcomes typically associated with father absence. These men struggle to become effective parents and models for their children. On the other hand, there are others who are able to grow beyond their fatherless experience, become competent fathers, and participate in positive adult relationships.

This study leverages a conceptual framework of paternal involvement, resilience and competence theory, and the linkage between masculinity and fatherhood to answer the key research questions and ultimately deliver findings that may alter educational policy for fatherless adolescents, encourage the creation of programs that benefit the unfathered, and create an awareness of the deeper perceptions about fatherlessness. Ultimately, this study will be important in breaking the generational perpetuation of father absence and contributing to a sustainable society for future generations.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

**Introduction to Chapter 2**

The impact of paternal absence on society is one of the topics at the center of discourse among family structure intellectuals, social scientists, and gender theorists who assess issues of fatherhood through the lens of the family unit, social construction, and the gendered society respectively (Kimmel, 2000). Rohner and Veneziano (2001) asserted that the role of father is a substantially important one that thrusts men into one of the most significant leadership roles in the world. The importance of fatherhood – and by extension fatherlessness – transcends geographical, ethnic, religious, and cultural boundaries (Rohner & Veneziano, 2001).

Senge et al. (2008) asserted that a path toward societal sustainability takes into account the needs of future generations and assesses social issues using a systems thinking approach. One school of thought on issues of fatherhood suggests the presence of fathers is highly important. Father presence, from this perspective, is essential to the development of today’s children into tomorrow’s adults, who will invariably be tomorrow’s parents. This school of thought also contends that an uptick in the levels of fatherlessness in a society leads to several negative externalities transferable from generation to generation. If father presence satisfies a societal need for future generations, it can be proposed that the perpetuation of father absence potentially impacts sustainability. The passage of behaviors leading to physical and psychological father absence from current generations to future generations has become increasingly crucial. Gaining a deep understanding of the perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors facilitating the
perpetuation of or emergence from the impacts of father absence can help in catering to
the needs of future generations.

Rohner and Veneziano (2001) emphasized that future generations need fathers
who are present and actively involved in the development of their sons and daughters.
Blankenhorn (1995), Horn and Bush (1997), and Levine and Pitt (1995) all commonly
pointed to the need for responsible fatherhood as a necessary stimulant for government,
social service, grassroots, and community interventions. While asserting the need for
responsible fatherhood that was both financial and emotional, these researchers claimed
that compromised developmental outcomes for children from female-headed homes
pointed to children’s significant need for their fathers (Curan, 2003). This viewpoint
represents the “essentialist” school of thought (Marsiglio & Pleck, 2005, p. 251),
supporters of which would proffer that societal sustainability requires significant
attention to issues of fatherlessness (Blankenhorn, 1995; Popenoe, 1996; Silverstein &
Auerbach, 1999).

The essentialist viewpoint was highly criticized by contemporary researchers as
an intellectual leap (Marsiglio & Pleck, 2005). Marsiglio and Pleck (2005) questioned
whether “the simple dichotomy of father presence or absence” (p. 253) can account for
the numerous negative outcomes principally attributed to physical and psychological
paternal absence. Curan (2003) described the findings of some social scientists who
embraced the notion that it is not “paternal absence in itself, but the compromised
socioeconomic status of female-headed households” (p. 220) that is primarily responsible
for the majority of troubling developmental outcomes among men who experienced
fatherlessness. Perloff and Buckner (1996) expressed yet another viewpoint that places
equivalent value on the quality of an interactive father-child relationship as was previously placed on paternal absence as influencers of effective child development.

Regardless of the school of thought upon which a perspective is built, analysis of the current reality of issues related to fatherhood or fatherlessness is best undertaken via a systems thinking lens (Senge et al., 2008). Such an approach encourages researchers to be “willing to step back” and develop a “shared understanding of the…four factors that influence any situation: events, patterns and trends, deeper systemic structures or forces, and the mental models…that shape these structures and forces” (Senge et al., 2008, p. 173). Senge’s (2008) Systems Thinking Iceberg Model indicated that a historical summarization of the events and patterns that shaped father absence provides an introduction to the habits of mind and systemic forces that ultimately contribute to this phenomenon. A review of the existing literature on the impact of paternal involvement on individual development – resilience theory as it relates to fatherlessness and perceptions about masculinity – provides a broader, deeper view of the systemic structures and mental models impacting the reproduction of fatherhood.

The role of the father in American society has undergone numerous changes over time. Starting in the colonial era, fatherhood in America took different forms for different ethnic groups. Dudley and Stone (2004) wrote that Euro-American fathers and Latino fathers from the southwest were viewed culturally as patriarchs. In both these ethnicities, fathers were seen as “primary and irreplaceable caregivers” who were expected to teach their offspring “moral and religious values” (p. 6). On the other hand, African American fathers were enduring slavery and, despite their desire to protect their families, were often forcibly separated from their offspring depending on the needs of the
plantation (Billingsley, 1992). A similar experience of being stripped of their manhood and ripped from their families was shared by the colonial age American Indians.

The 19\textsuperscript{th} century brought with it a shift in the economy from an agrarian one to one in which young men had significantly more opportunities to work in industries, factories, and offices that were often at great distances from their homes (Fliegelman, 1992). Consequently, the 19\textsuperscript{th} century is credited with being the era that began the separation between fathers and their families. The close paternal relationships that typified the colonial era became increasingly rare (Dudley & Stone, 2004) during the 19\textsuperscript{th} century.

During the 20\textsuperscript{th} century, voluntary desertion by fathers became more prevalent. Industrialization, urbanization, and wars were the social phenomena behind the steady increase in paternal irresponsibility. By the 1970s, other social phenomena impacting the role of the father in the family arose. The feminist movement of the 1960s and 1970s and the liberal divorce laws of the 1970s and 1980s were just a few such social occurrences that further threatened the role of the father in the family. The latter resulted in a climbing divorce rate and a rapid increase in unmarried-couple families (Dudley & Stone, 2004).

From caregiver and moral guide to breadwinner to superfluous, the role, relevance, and relationships of fathers in the family have fluctuated, forcing many to recognize a need for action and call into question the true societal impact of father absence. The sons of these fatherless families are left to navigate through the effects and outcomes of father absence. One such impacted outcome is the ability of men who
experienced father absence to appropriately model the behaviors necessary for good fathering and responsible male citizenship for their sons (Renshaw, 2005). Some of these men are able to gain the perceptions, attitudes, and experiences enabling them to emerge from father absence and adequately fulfill their role as fathers to boys. Fathering boys requires these men to practice and model sound familial interactions, relationship-building skills, and positive forward-looking views of masculinity.

**Conceptual Framework**

To effectively grasp the essence of fatherlessness, understand its impact, and identify the qualitative factors contributing to its passage from generation to generation, this study explores both theoretical and practical research streams. Collectively, these streams provide a framework through which one can assess the scholarly commentary offered in the literature about the factors contributing to highly differentiated outcomes among men who experience fatherlessness. Particularly, the framework provides a comprehensive lens through which one can analyze issues of father absence and enumerate their contribution to the ability of those who experienced it to in turn model effective behaviors for their sons (Renshaw, 2005). The three research streams upon which this research is built are: Paternal Involvement and Essentialism; Resilience and Competence Theory; and the Masculinity-Fatherhood Linkage.
The confluence of these three research streams and the intersection of the scholarly discourse in these three areas are potentially a compelling source of some theoretical grounding and practical insights on the issue of fathering sons without a model father.

**Literature Review**

Existing research provides valuable insight into how socioeconomic, societal, and political factors have influenced and are in turn influenced by paternal absence. There is a significant body of research that looks beyond the “simple dichotomy of father presence or absence” (Marsiglio & Pleck, 2005, p. 253) to identify other factors that intensify the effects of fatherlessness. A thorough synthesis of previous findings in fatherhood studies along with other tangential subjects is essential to understanding how some men who experienced physical or psychological paternal absence are able to overcome and thrive.
in their own parenting and familial responsibilities. Exploration of the literature may also provide valuable insight into the factors contributing to the inability of some men to move beyond the cognitive, emotional, and psychological damage resulting from their own exposure to father absence. Somehow, this latter group finds difficulty in leveraging opportunities to become more engaged, nurturing fathers who effectively model what fathering looks like to their sons.

While there are many vantage points from which to view the issue of fatherlessness, one lens of utmost importance is paternal involvement and essentialism. This perspective of fatherhood considers the factors affecting paternal involvement and seeks to understand the inherent differentiating factors between fathering and mothering that support the uniqueness of fathers’ contributions to their children. A second research lens that elucidates the phenomena of father absence and the reproduction of fatherhood explores fatherlessness via resilience and competence theories. Luthar et al. (2000) suggested that research on resilience as a theoretical construct has burgeoned in recent years. Inquiry and study in this area deepens the understanding of processes affecting at-risk individuals and provides significant insight into factors that contribute to developing the capability to emerge from hardship; this parallels the focal point of this research, which seeks to understand factors affecting men who may be deemed “at risk” as a result of their experiences with father absence. A third perspective of fatherlessness and the differentiated outcomes it sparks takes into account what Kimmel (2000) refers to as the gendered society—a society founded upon assumptions of gender difference and the politics of gender inequality. Kimmel (2000) emphasized that there is a clear delineation between being male—a physical attribute—and being masculine. He further contended
that masculinity is a socially constructed entity that means “different things to different people” (p. 3). The relationship between masculinity and fatherhood is a necessary consideration relevant to how the perceptions of unfathered men influence their interaction with their sons.

Individually, each of the streams reveals some key learning about an aspect of father absence. When considered collectively, however, they form a conceptual framework providing a holistic view of the thoughts, perceptions, beliefs, and feelings associated with paternal absence. Synthesizing the contributions of several key theorists and exploring the findings of previous studies via the prescribed conceptual framework allows for a deep understanding of paternal involvement and the many sides of what Marsiglio and Pleck (2005) described as a “highly politicized issue” (p. 251). It also lays the foundation for the exploration of how both negative and positive behaviors are passed to subsequent generations via a father-son relationship in which the father himself lacked a solid model of effective fathering.

Examining the literature put forth by resiliency theorists is also important in understanding the role of resilience in enabling some fathers to move beyond their fatherless experiences and demonstrate competence at fathering and modeling positive male citizenship (Renshaw, 2005). Pickhardt (2007) stated that unfathered men have a lack of confidence in their ability to not “reenact the agonies and chaos of their fatherless experience” (p. 2). Such characterization parallels what Luther et al. (2000) referred to as “significant adversity,” a core circumstantial element in their definition of resilience (p. 543).
Marsiglio and Pleck (2005) asserted that a gendered, critical view of fatherhood can expose how model-less fathering is impacted by and “contributes to gendered inequalities within and outside the family” (p. 250). The highly gendered nature of society impacts both inter-gender and intra-gender social relations and has a significant impact on how men perceive their roles as fathers and the related behaviors they demonstrate (Kimmel, 2000; Marsiglio & Pleck, 2005). The opportunities and struggles men face as they attempt “to think and act as male parents” (Marsiglio & Pleck, 2005, p. 250) originates in the notion that a traditionally singular definition of masculinity is being replaced by the perspective that there are multiple social constructions of masculinity impacting men’s approach to fathering. Circa 2005, the literature addressing the relationship between these two socially constructed entities—fatherhood and masculinity—was limited but has increased significantly as more researchers continue to explore issues of masculinity.

**Father Involvement and the Reproduction of Fatherhood**

Father involvement has been one of the focal points of family research over the last two decades. With the increased scrutiny placed on this topic, researchers have shed light on several factors that were believed to influence the levels of paternal involvement observed within families. The societal demands placed on fathers today reflect a myriad of expectations historically considered to be contradictory or conflicting. Renshaw (2005) asserted that the expectations of the contemporary father include “being a good provider; an aggressive workplace competitor; a fearless protector; and a wise, gentle, and sensitive” (p. 7) support for the family system during difficult times. Father involvement is still limited by many to that of the breadwinner or sports coach function,
with “fathers bringing home the money to take care of the families” or “seeing that kids toe the line and follow the rules” (Renshaw, 2005, p. 7).

Socioeconomic and global concerns like industrialization and international conflict were the primary causes of fatherlessness in the mid-20th century. During this period, fathers were increasingly viewed as unnecessary, superfluous, and a luxury – with single motherhood often taking place in a multi-generational setting (Renshaw, 2005). This view of fathers is countered by the essentialist viewpoint, which asserts that father involvement is an important influencer in child development (Allen & Daly, 2007; Lamb et al., 1985). Key findings of a study conducted by the National Center for Fathering illustrated that 70% of the population surveyed agreed that father absence from the home is the most significant challenge facing families in America (National Center for Fathering and Families, 2009). Additionally, almost 97% of respondents in the study indicated that fathers needed to be more involved in their children’s education while only 50% thought that fathers knew what was going on in their children’s lives.

Several researchers have investigated models of the determinants and outcomes associated with paternal involvement. Lamb (1981) proposed that nurturing and involved fathers who were supportive of the mother were more apt to facilitate the development of positive attributes among children. Such views align with the contention by Lamb et al. (1985) that father involvement is important in developing “achievement motivation, cognitive and social competence, psychological adjustment, and sex-stereotyped role attitudes and attributions, particularly in sons” (p. 112). The achievement of such positive outcomes, according to Lamb et al. (1985), depended on three core components that together constituted a model for paternal involvement. The model, later referred to
as the Lamb-Pleck construct (Pleck, 2010), became a foundational element in father involvement research with numerous researchers expanding upon each of its components.

Understanding the components of paternal involvement and relating them to the positive outcomes suggested by Lamb et al. (1985) is valuable in understanding how a paucity of or complete removal of any aspect of paternal involvement can adversely impact children. The first component of paternal involvement is paternal engagement, defined by Lamb et al. (1985) as the “direct interaction with the child, in the form of caretaking, play, leisure” (p. 125), and other shared activities. Marsiglio (1991) described the achievement of paternal engagement as when fathers “develop more fully the expressive dimension to their parental role…establish close and intimate bonds with their children…and provide nurturance and affection” (p. 973). Volling and Belsky (1991) proposed that paternal engagement refers to “direct one-on-one interaction” (p. 462) between a father and child. Each of these descriptions of engagement supports its importance in the Lamb-Pleck construct. However, Pleck (2010) suggested that engagement has been given disproportionate attention by researchers as the core driver of father involvement.

The second component of paternal involvement is paternal availability and accessibility (Lamb et al., 1985). Lamb et al. (1985) measured father accessibility as the percentage of time that fathers are both available and accessible to their children. Volling and Belsky (1991) agreed with the importance of paternal availability to the father involvement construct but clarified that the time measures proposed by Lamb et al. (1985) included time spent in proximity to the child and not necessarily actual interaction with the child. In their discussion of paternal availability, Kelly and Lamb (2000) stated
that healthy father-child relationships are built upon high accessibility. Moreover, such strong filial relationships between fathers and children present ample opportunities for fathers to become sufficiently available and promote deeper interaction with their children, thereby developing the ability to differentiate, interpret, and respond to children’s signals.

The third component of paternal involvement is paternal responsibility. Lamb et al. (1985) defined responsibility as “the role a father takes in making sure that the child is taken care of” (p. 125). Additionally, they stated that responsible fathers are deeply involved in “planning and arranging resources to be available to the child” (Lamb et al., 1985, p. 125). Stueve and Pleck (2003) proposed that paternal responsibility is an aspect of paternal identity which in turn influences the meaning an individual associates with the role of father.

Palkovitz (2002) built on the Lamb-Pleck construct by representing paternal involvement as three overlapping domains—the cognitive domain, the affective domain, and the behavioral domain. Palkovitz (2002) stated that paternal involvement can be assessed according to the three domains through simultaneously occurring measures of the continua of time invested, the degree of involvement, observability of the involvement, the salience of the involvement, and the directness and proximity of the involvement. He further suggested that the level of paternal involvement can also be assessed by looking at 15 dimensions of paternal behaviors: communicating, teaching, monitoring, engaging in thought processes, providing, showing affection, protecting, emotionally supporting, running errands, caregiving, engaging in child-related
maintenance, sharing interests, being available, participating in planning, and sharing activities (Palkovitz, 2002).

Pleck and Masciadrelli (2004) explored each component in this model to characterize the validity of studies and the measures used as proxies for paternal engagement, availability, and responsibility. In their review, Pleck and Masciadrelli (2004) identified more detail and a few shortcomings of the Lamb-Pleck construct. The bulk of the criticism levied on this model is that it is based on the experience of white, middle-class fathers and is, therefore, less relevant to fathers in other demographics and in other socioeconomic strata (Pleck & Masciadrelli, 2004).

Further advances in fatherhood research and the need to solidify its theoretical basis encouraged Pleck (2010) to re-conceptualize the “operationalization of father involvement” (p. 59). For the most part, research built on the Lamb-Pleck construct used father involvement as a synecdoche for paternal engagement and placed very little attention on the availability and responsibility aspects of the model. Pleck (2010) advanced the Lamb-Pleck model of paternal involvement by first refining the engagement component to reflect positive engagement in a narrowly defined set of activities. He asserted that the majority of the studies of engagement were heavily influenced by the focus placed by the Lamb-Pleck model on the total amount of time spent in activities. Such focus resulted in a skew in the research toward quantitative characterization of paternal involvement (Pleck, 2010), prompting several researchers to advocate for the inclusion of more qualitative measures in a revision of the paternal involvement theoretical constructs (Carlson, 2006; Hofferth, 2003; Pleck, 2010). The
qualitative view of paternal involvement included additional factors like paternal warmth and responsiveness to children (Pleck, 2010).

Pleck (2010) also included two auxiliary domains in his revised father-involvement construct: indirect care, defined as “activities undertaken for the child but not involving interaction with the child” (p. 65); and process responsibility, defined as the fathers’ initiative in determining what is needed in the household (p. 65). Pleck (2010) suggested that these two elements were combined under the responsibility component in the Lamb-Pleck construct, “obscuring how conceptually distinct the two phenomena were” (p. 67). The increasingly frequent inclusion of qualitative dimensions of paternal involvement in the research are representative of the desire to better understand the factors that qualify and influence good fathering and in turn may be used to draw conclusions about father absence.

The Pleck revision of the Lamb-Pleck construct aligns with recent research conducted by Hawkins, King, and Amato (2007). Using national data from the 1995 and 1996 segments of the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Harris et al., 2003), Hawkins et al. (2007) conducted a study “to examine the associations between nonresident father involvement and adolescent well-being” (p. 991). Hawkins et al. (2007) considered father involvement by drawing a distinction between “social contact and instrumental contact” (p. 992). Instrumental contact is father-child interaction directly related to children’s educational and social development. Examples include working on school assignments, conversing with children about problems, and attending religious services together (Hawkins et al., 2007). Hawkins’ view supports Pleck’s
narrowing of the activities used to gauge paternal engagement to those he deemed as positive activities.

In addition to investigating the father effect on adolescent well-being, Hawkins et al. (2007) also explored the child effect—attitudes and behaviors by adolescents that “contribute to the weakening or strengthening of the father-child relationship” (p. 993). In conducting their study, Hawkins et al. established a four-part hypothesis. They hypothesized that longitudinal data would show that active fathering was a predictor for several dimensions of adolescent wellbeing—the father effect. Additionally, they postulated that adolescent well-being was in turn a predictor of active fathering—the child effect. The sample in the Hawkins et al. (2007) study included 3,394 adolescents—with non-resident fathers—between grades 7 and 12 and their parents. Additionally, the study also included a sample of 3,394 adolescents from households with a resident father. To assess the impact of active fathering on adolescent well-being, Hawkins et al. (2007) used three latent variables—externalizing problems as indicated by delinquency, violent behavior, and substance abuse; internalizing problems as indicated by depressive symptoms, negative outlook, and low self-esteem; and academic achievement as indicated by grades in English, math, social studies, and science.

Hawkins et al. (2007) concluded, in congruence with prior literature, that active fathering by non-resident fathers—modeled as contact, activities, communication, closeness, and child support—is generally associated with positive outcomes among adolescents. Contrary to their hypothesis, however, they found “there was no support for the father effects perspective” but adequate statistical evidence “supporting a child effects perspective” (Hawkins et al., 2007, p. 1004). The findings indicated there was no
statistically significant relationship in the study between active fathering and adolescent wellbeing in terms of the three latent variables observed. Moreover, there is support for the notion that non-resident fathers “maintain relationships to well-adjusted adolescents and disengage from troubled adolescents” (Hawkins et al., 2007, p. 1004). The comparison of these findings among non-resident fathers and those gathered from resident fathers is rather compelling. Hawkins et al. (2007) found evidence of father effects with active fathering among resident fathers contributing to a lowering of internalizing behavior and improved academic achievement. There was also evidence of child effects with resident fathers indicating “reciprocal patterns of influence” (Hawkins et al., 2007, p. 1004).

Although compelling, the study by Hawkins et al. (2007) is limited by the narrow selection of variables used to assess father involvement and adolescent outcomes. The omission of several other variables in the survey data eliminates the ability to establish a causal direction between variables. Nevertheless, Hawkins et al. (2007) used several variables to represent father involvement and child wellbeing, enhancing its relevance to this study. Additionally, the novel view of father involvement via the father perspective and child perspective lens also informs how father involvement contributes to the study of paternal absence and paternal apathy.

Cabrera, Fitzgerald, Bradley, and Roggman (2007) concluded – after analyzing the models put forth by Lamb et al. (1985), Palkovitz (2002), and a few other researchers – that even collectively, the body of work on father involvement does not contribute toward a comprehensive view of fathering that identifies the father behaviors central to children’s development. Tamis-LeMonda and Cabrera (1999) identified a few of the
factors that may predict or obstruct positive father involvement: “mental health, expectations about fatherhood, family relations, support networks, community, culture, the characteristics of the child or children, and public policies” (p. 9). Cabrera et al. (2007) also provided some additional predictors of father involvement including biological health as it relates to substance abuse; father characteristics like employment, education, parenting style, attitudes, and motivation; contextual factors like mother-father relationship and community connections; and child characteristics. Cabrera et al. (2007) proposed a heuristic model of father involvement depicted in Figure 3.

![A heuristic model of fatherhood](image)

Source: Cabrera et al. (2007)

Figure 3. A heuristic model of fatherhood.

The model provides a comprehensive view of fatherhood by systematically organizing the study of fathers and closely relating it to the wellbeing and development of children (Cabrera et al., 2007). According to Cabrera et al. (2007), factors influencing the relationship between father involvement and outcomes in children include both father
characteristics and child characteristics. Their views align with the research conducted by Hawkins et al. (2007), in which it was observed that there is some salience to both the father effects perspective and child effects perspective as it relates to influencing paternal involvement. The predictors put forth by Cabrera et al. (2007) are individual, contextual, and family-centric, reflecting the complex nature of this topic. The multidimensional influences on paternal involvement were corroborated by Belsky (1984, 1990). He asserted that the quality of fathering is dependent on the personal characteristics of the father, the social-contextual influences on the father, and the personal characteristics of the child being fathered. Belsky (1984) proposed that each of these determinants exerts unequally distributed influence over the quality of fathering.

Grossman, Golding, and Pollack (1988) conducted a longitudinal study in which they assessed the salience of a number of predictors of fathering. Grossman et al. (1988) considered “direct effects” described as “aspects of the men's own characteristics and adaptation that predicted their parenting” (p. 83). They also considered indirect effects that also “influenced the quality and quantity of men’s parenting” (Grossman et al., 1988). The sample in the study comprised 23 families who were recruited when they were expecting their first child and were studied for a five-year timeframe. Data were collected from the families periodically during the five year period via multiple means including semi-structured interviews and observations.

Grossman et al. (1988) identified a father’s psychological health, freedom from anxiety, and sex role identification as strong influencers on child outcomes. Specifically, they found that men who possessed healthy autonomy and affiliation had greater capacity to develop these two important developmental dimensions in their children (Grossman et
al., 1988). In terms of indirect effects, Grossman et al. (1988) found that “sociocultural variables played a significant role in predicting paternal involvement” (p. 89). The overall autonomy of the mother, characterized via the number of years of education and the status of her occupation, were negatively related to paternal involvement.

Barnett and Baruch (1987) conducted a qualitative study to assess the determinants of paternal involvement in family work. They discovered statistical significance in the relationship between paternal interaction time and the “quality of fathering that fathers received as youngsters” (Barnett & Baruch, 1987, p. 35). The Barnett and Baruch (1987) study was limited in terms of diversity of the subjects. Nevertheless, it significantly reflected that paternal involvement can potentially be perpetuated, whereby attitudes toward fathering are influenced by the experience associated with being fathered.

Close analysis of the numerous proposed predictors of father involvement, however, led to a greater understanding of the factors that can potentially lead to fatherlessness. The influence of family of origin from the Cabrera et al. (2007) model of father involvement is of utmost relevance to this study. Cabrera et al. (2007) captured the potential for the generational perpetuation of father involvement or fatherlessness by representing “rearing history” as a determinant of father characteristics that in turn influence paternal involvement, essentially the concept of reproduction of fatherhood (p. 186). How does a father’s childhood and experience with his own father affect his own relationship with his sons? Tamis-LeMonda and Cabrera (1999) suggested that the “origins of fatherhood begin in a boy’s experience with his own father long before
biological paternity occurs” (p. 29). Cowan and Cowan (1987) and Volling and Belsky (1992) corroborated these findings in their own research studies, finding that fathers’ childhood experiences affected their involvement with their children and the security of the father-child relationship. Williams, Radin, and Coggins (1996) found that fathers who had poor paternal role models or fathers who had very low levels of engagement or availability struggled with paternal involvement themselves, even if they had every intention of actively participating in their sons’ lives.

Perspectives on paternal involvement shed some light on the overall phenomenon of fatherhood and by extension father absence and paternal apathy. Another lens providing even more clarity to the issue of fatherlessness is the social constructs of masculinity and the linkages between masculinity and fatherhood. Coltrane (2004), in his assessment of determinants of paternal involvement, referenced studies conducted by Cabrera, Tamis-LeMonda, Bradley, Hofferth, and Lamb (2000) and Hofferth (1998) who all asserted that “fathers are more involved and show more warmth if they believe in gender equality” (Coltrane, 2004, p. 232). The notion of gender is an integral aspect of the intellectual conversation on fatherhood. The important linkage between perceptions about gender, more specifically masculinity, and fatherhood is the second stream in the conceptual framework upon which this study is structured.

The Social Construction of Masculinity and Fatherhood

Paternal involvement and resilience are both elements in a complex subsystem of factors impacting men who experienced father absence. Similarly complex are the considerations to be taken into account when analyzing these men’s ability to halt the passage of negative consequences of fatherlessness from their generation to that of their
sons. Acknowledging and understanding the complexity of this intricate network of determinants, outcomes, risks, and adaptations are a necessary precursor to implementing any systemic change addressing the issue of fatherlessness, paternal modeling, and – most importantly – the perpetuation of father-absence. A key consideration is the conflict men experience between being male, a physical characteristic; being masculine, a socially defined characteristic; and being fathers, another socially defined entity. White and Perez (2010) suggested that the multidirectional emotional and social tugs resulting from such conflict can lead to feelings of confusion, inadequacy, and fear among men.

The fears, insecurities, and emotional consequences of exposure to fatherlessness are a significant disadvantage that men in a parenting role must overcome (Pickhardt, 2007). Hanke (2006) emphasized that when faced with the lack of modeling from an emotionally and socially absent father, unfathered men are often left to derive their view of masculinity from the media, work environments, society, and the power relationships in which they are involved. Some men who experience fatherlessness are somehow able to escape the “grim outcomes” (Larcher, 2007, p. 2) they are often expected to endure. Since some are able to avoid such negative outcomes indicates that, potentially, there are other experiences, inherent behaviors, acquired attitudes, and practiced activities contributing to one’s ability to prevent the perpetuation of the consequences of fatherlessness.

This review of the existing literature introduces some of the key contributions on the topic of masculinity with specific attention targeted at socially defined masculinities as an increasingly relevant focal point of contemporary research. Additionally, focus in the literature reviewed is levied toward the research community’s transition from
accepting a singular dominant masculinity to embracing what Marsiglio and Pleck (2005) described as “alternative constructions of masculinities that give meaning to men’s everyday lives in diverse situations” (p. 250). Despite the fact that the study of masculinity is relatively new, identifiable masculine norms grouped in terms of multiple masculinities have emerged and are rapidly gaining acceptance. Connell (1995, 2000, 2005) shared a similar viewpoint to that of Marsiglio and Pleck (2005), emphasizing contemporary acceptance that masculinities are plural and contextual.

The emergence of alternative forms of masculinity brings with it associated expectations of conformity with widely varying definitions of what it means to be masculine. Constant pressure to align with the behaviors and norms of a given masculinity places significant pressure on men that may ultimately hamper their ability to perform adequately as fathers (Uhl, 2011). The literature relevant to this discourse may be categorized in terms of the following: the historical evolution of masculinity, the multiplicity of socially constructed masculinities, and the impact of masculinity and paternity on individual cognitive and social development. Within each category, the relationship between the socially constructed entities of masculinity and fatherhood shall be highlighted.

Gardiner (2005) stated that “the most important accomplishment of 20th-century feminist theory is the concept of gender as a social construction” (p. 35). With deep exploration into feminist theory dominating early gender-based research, inquiry into concepts associated with masculinity have recently followed suit. The notion of social construction suggests that masculinity is “loosely defined and historically variable”
(Gardiner, 2005, p. 35), contrasting significantly with traditional assumptions that separated men and women based primarily on physical attributes and sex roles.

Gillis (2000) also applied a loose and historically driven meaning to fatherhood as he urged fellow researchers and proponents of essentialism, circa 2000, to consider the relevance of the ever-changing linkage between masculinity and fatherhood to sweeping assertions about the impacts of father absence. Gillis (2000) provided a historical summary of the linkage between fatherhood and masculinity to demonstrate the cyclic historical pattern of issues of fatherlessness. He emphasized that fatherhood and masculinity are both “socially and culturally constructed” (p. 227) and that the linkage between the two has undergone numerous shifts throughout history. In describing post-patriarchal fatherhood of the 1700s, Gillis (2000) cited the work of Ozment (1983), noting that this era was the first time that paternity and masculinity were linked. He described a period during European colonization in which economic circumstances, not paternity, were the key factor that “qualified a man for social fatherhood” (Gillis, 2000, p. 228). At that time, fatherhood was primarily the calling of the privileged male, emphasizing patriarchy and the near irrelevance of paternity with respect to fatherhood.

Gillis (2000) also argued that through pre-industrial, industrial, post-industrial, and post-world war periods, the masculinity-to-fatherhood relationship was redefined on numerous occasions. He described the industrial revolution as an event that had a different impact on the masculinity-fatherhood relationship in the middle class than it did among the aristocracy. Among the middle class, fatherhood seemed to become a thing of the past as fathers were drawn out of the homes and into the firms. Among the upper echelons of society, however, domestic husbanding as the sole mark of masculinity
served to drive a wedge between fathers and their children (Gillis, 2000). Griswold (1992) shared a similar view and described society as one marred by “the politicization of motherhood and the marginalization of fatherhood” (p. 13).

Up to post-World War II, the positioning of masculinity as a set of practices that diametrically opposed femininity was prevalent, with men constantly being challenged to prove their manhood (Uhl, 2011). A wartime period that featured an increased number of women operating outside the household gave way to a post-war environment in which there was an enthusiastic rejuvenation of the separation between masculinity and femininity. Masculinity was suitable for the economic, political, and public realms of responsibility while femininity was again relegated to the domestic realms of society (Kimmel, Hearn, & Connell, 2005). Also, the post-World War II era was characterized by the creation of the “New Fatherhood” approach to fathering and the “Good Family Man” masculinity (Gillis, 2000, p. 231). These two constructions were linked by significant social efforts to increasingly domesticize masculinity and uphold the dutiful breadwinner as the appropriate intersection of fatherhood and manhood. Ironically, the pursuit of the breadwinner masculinity resulted in men who were “increasingly absent from day-to-day interaction with their families” (Uhl, 2011, p. 10). The conflict between breadwinning and domestication highlighted the importance of the masculinity-fatherhood linkage in understanding how physical, emotional, or psychological father absence can be impacted by perceptions about masculinity and vice versa. Moreover, the contextual nature of fatherhood and masculinity became even more apparent. Connell (1998) described the “transnational business masculinity” (p. 16) as one characterized by egocentrism and lack of familial loyalty. Gillis (2000) agreed and attributed the issues
with father absence at the turn of the 21st century as a “revival of a non-familial masculinity…suitable to the context of a global age” (p. 234).

The evolution of perceptions about masculinity was also illustrated by Kirkman, Rosenthal, and Feldman (2001) who conducted a phenomenological study exploring traditional masculinity and its contradiction with involved fatherhood. Study participants included 51 people from 19 Caucasian families in Australia who were interviewed to understand how parents, especially fathers, communicated about issues of sexuality to adolescent children. To analyze the data from the individual interviews of each participant, Kirkman et al. (2001) categorized and elaborated popular themes.

Kirkman et al. (2001) found that fathers predominantly used humor to communicate about sexuality—a means of coping with the “competing discourses” (p.395) of traditional masculinity and the involved father. They also discovered several barriers to fathers’ communication of sexuality: a traditional masculinity characterizing men as strong, aggressive, unemotional, and heterosexual (Levant, 1997); covert male-female double standards regarding sexuality; and male difficulty displaying affection or intimacy.

The tension between traditional masculinity and involved fatherhood is a source of struggle for men, who are challenged to maintain a paternal involvement that conflicts with a traditional characterization of manhood (Kirkman et al., 2001). Kirkman et al. (2001) highlighted the challenge men face in balancing being male and being an involved, active father. The struggle described here parallels the struggles represented by other authors as a known effect of traditional masculinity (Uhl, 2011; White & Peretz, 2010).
At the core of the evolution of masculinity theory is the work on hegemonic masculinity (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Hegemonic masculinity is a concept originating from a study conducted by Kessler, Ashenden, Connell, and Dowsett (1982) at an Australian high school in which findings empirically supported “multiple hierarchies of gender” (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 830). The conclusions of their study formed the basis for extensive critique of male sex-role theory, which had gained some traction circa 1980 but was being questioned for its homogenizing effect and its failure to account for differentiated power within the sexes (Kimmel, 1987). As the notion of hegemonic masculinity took root, there were also several ethnographic studies (Cockburn, 1983; Herdt, 1981; Hunt, 1980; Willis, 1977) demonstrating the plurality of masculinities, the complexity of masculine gender construction, and the intra-gender dominance connoted by the term hegemony (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). The focus on multiple masculinities and the dominance of a single masculinity is well represented by the following quote from Connell and Messerschmidt (2005):

Hegemonic masculinity was distinguished from other masculinities, especially subordinated masculinities. Hegemonic masculinity was not assumed to be normal in the statistical sense; only a minority of men might enact it. But it was certainly normative. It embodied the currently most honored way of being a man, it required all other men to position themselves in relation to it, and it ideologically legitimated the global subordination of women to men. (p. 832)

With its emergence over two decades from a conceptual model with little empirical basis to being regarded as a seminal concept in masculinity studies, hegemonic masculinity has remained central to research efforts on men and masculinity, displacing sex-role theory and patriarchy approaches to inquiry. Valdés and Olavarría (1998), Ishii-Kuntz (2003), Higate (2003), and Uhl (2011) demonstrated the international and
institutional applicability of the plurality tenet of hegemonic masculinity while Guntman (1996) illustrated the social construction of a single masculinity, the hegemonic masculinity that is dominant over all others.

The definition of hegemonic masculinity prescribed by Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) alludes to the existence of a masculinity to which many men strive but very few achieve. White and Peretz (2010) offered a narrative study that investigated how emotions “transformed perceptions and practices of masculinity” (p. 404). The participants in their study were two heterosexual, African American pro-feminist men. Both participated in four-to five-hour-long, semi-structured interviews targeting 25 topics related to masculinity, pro-feminism, and emotional expression. Independent judges coded the interviews and categorized emotions described by the participants as either negative or positive (White & Peretz, 2010). The emergent negative emotions included anger, fear, sadness, and frustration while the positive emotions identified included happiness, empathy, and hopefulness.

White and Peretz (2010) found that the pro-feminist posture among participants originated from an awareness of injustices to women. The increased awareness of blatant gender inequality evoked negative emotions within both participants and inspired their active participation in feminists’ activities that embraced uninhibited emotional expression. White and Peretz (2010) concluded that the pursuit of hegemonic masculinity hampers emotional expression among Black men and depicts real men as those who do not feel pain, cry, or reveal fear—myths that can lead to inadequacy and anger. Their findings illustrate that a redefinition of masculinity can create a positive emotional culture celebrating open expression of emotions.
The conclusion by White and Peretz (2010) that the pursuit of hegemonic masculinity results in a lack of emotional authenticity is similar at the outset to the viewpoints expressed by Collier (1998). Collier (1998) strongly criticized the notion of hegemonic masculinity, claiming the concept had evolved to the point that it was primarily associated with negative characteristics and excluded positive behavior by men. He stressed that these characteristics depict men as being “unemotional, independent, non-nurturing, aggressive, and dispassionate” (Collier, 1998, p. 19). Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) countered this viewpoint by reiterating that hegemonic masculinity is a practical concept enabling men to protect male dominance over females and, as such, there are a mixture of negative and positive actions.

The plurality of masculinities and the relationship that an adopted masculinity has with fatherhood are important to the discourse on the negative externalities associated with father absence. White (2006) offered a narrative study to explore how African American feminist fathers challenge traditional patriarchal models of masculinity. She acknowledged the construction of a dominant ideal of masculinity and agreed with Connell’s (1995) stance that its perpetuation is particularly dependent on the patriarchal dividend afforded to even the most marginalized male populations. White (2006) shared a similar stance as Collier (1998) and described hegemonic masculinity as a predominantly negative conception built on “rigid notions about what is manly…and the repression of anything that seems feminine in men” (White, 2006, p. 45). Such rigid definitions of manhood place pressure on men to conform to hegemonic forms of masculinity and denounce nurturing fathering behaviors requiring development of
associated emotional and psychological skills (Dowd, 2000; Newton, 2005; Risman, 1998; White, 2006; White & Peretz, 2010).

White (2006) cited several feminist scholars who all concur that assessing African American fatherhood goes beyond hegemonic masculinity and the upkeep of patriarchal models. For example, Roberts (1998) and Dowd (2000) stated that the institutional and structural barriers placed before African American men, coupled with a blind acceptance of hegemonic perceptions of masculinity, discourages African American men from pursuing alternative approaches to fathering that are less rooted in traditional notions of masculinity.

In her study, White’s (2006) stated purpose was to identify aspects of fathering that challenge “traditional conceptualization of manliness, contest the narrow view of father as a breadwinner, promote gender equity, and questions the use of corporal punishment” (p. 49). The 14 participants in the study were self-identified feminist fathers between 23 and 58 years old, representing a variety of marital statuses and sexual orientations.

White (2006) captured the stories of participants via a single four-hour-long semi-structured life history interview, and through her findings she identified five themes that were important to feminist fathers. All narratives emphasized fathering as a relational experience and rejected myths that men could not be nurturers, “cry, comfort children, or admit vulnerability” (p. 55). White (2006) also found from the narratives that all participants raised their children to be politically aware and prepared to counter effects and perceptions of racism, sexism, and heterosexism from influences external to the household. With respect to corporal punishment and its prevalence in African American
homes (Strauss & Stewart, 1999), White (2006) found that feminist African American fathers avoided any use of physical discipline, opting for more nurturing and redirecting alternatives.

White (2006) concluded that African American feminist fathers reject norms of hegemonic masculinities and traditional gender-role prescriptions without absolving themselves of financial responsibility for their children. Another interesting conclusion was the observation that “when fathering is tied to traditional definitions of manliness that focus on the proof of virility through the production of a child, caretaking and nurturing becomes irrelevant” (White, 2006, p. 62). The study showed how traditional masculinity may unintentionally encourage paternal apathy and father-absence by placing undue pressure on men to conform to a dominant masculinity which in turn induces stress, fear, and feelings of inadequacy (White, 2006; White & Peretz, 2010).

The link between masculinities and fathering is impacted by other institutional and structural factors that either enhance or impede men’s ability to adopt alternative approaches to fathering not necessarily aligned with those typically prescribed by traditional masculinity. Williams (2009) conducted a phenomenological study investigating the lived experiences of fathers with respect to gender and ethnicity. A purposive sample included 13 experienced fathers between the ages of 27 and 48 from a city in the United Kingdom. There were seven Caucasian and six Afro-Caribbean men, each of whom participated in two semi-structured interviews.

Williams’ (2009) findings aligned with assertions by Lupton and Barclay (1997) as he found that participants in the study celebrated paternal involvement and championed expressions of love and affection. The study also revealed that ethnic
identification and racism had significant influence on men’s approaches to fathering, further evidencing the claims by earlier feminism theorists about the impact of structural and institutional factors on the relationship between masculinity and fathering (Dowd, 2000; Roberts, 1998). Williams (2009) concluded that while all fathers benefit from presumed leadership and unequal domestic roles, minorities experience marginalized masculinity where racism or expectations of racism play a significant role in their fathering (Williams, 2009). The findings in the UK-based study parallel the predominant finding by researchers in the U.S. that African American fathers struggle to perform the provider role (Bowman & Forman, 1997; Cochran, 1997) due to systemic racism and socioeconomic disparities (Collins, 2004) influencing the context of masculinity and fatherhood.

Williams (2009) found that the most significant difference between the Caucasian and Afro-Caribbean groups in his study was the impact of ethnicity on Afro-Caribbean participants and the discovery that ethnicity had no bearing on the lived experiences of Caucasian fathers in the study. Both groups shared a similar stressor as they both referenced the conflict between domestic life and the demands of paid work. The Afro-Caribbean linkage with ethnicity and the conflict between fathering and work are representative of American patriarchal norms. These norms characterize good fathering as being an economic provider, despite the multi-decade disparity between African American unemployment rates, wage levels, and education and those of their Caucasian counterparts. The disparity has been upheld since slavery and continues to impact the self-perception of marginalized elements of the Black male population (Oliver & Shapiro, 1995).
The conclusions drawn by Williams (2009) indicate participants took liberty in rejecting some tenets while remaining bound by other aspects of hegemonic masculinity. Williams' (2009) findings supported the contentions by Connell (1995, 2005) about the dynamic and contradictory nature of masculinities. They also placed the spotlight on existing literature that identified a paucity of emotionality as a concern of contemporary masculinities (Seidler, 1994; 1997). Although the study was conducted in the United Kingdom, Williams (2009) claimed it was relevant to the American experience and context. His assertion is evidenced by the similar sociocultural and contextual implications to masculinity and fatherhood, as well as the existence of similar findings in U.S.-based studies performed by researchers like White (2006).

The social construction of both fatherhood and masculinities and the perceived linkage between the two indicate that “any redefinition of fatherhood simultaneously redefines notions of masculinity…and shapes what are considered appropriate manly behavior among fathers” (White, 2006, p. 45). Furthermore, Connell and Messerschmidt (2005), key supporters of the notion of hegemonic masculinity, conceded that the plural “masculinities are not simply different but are also subject to change” (p. 835). A consequence of the changeability of masculinities and the impact of changes in the social construction of fatherhood on masculinity is increased research in the creation of masculinities considered more appropriate to fathering and more beneficial to children.

fieldwork” (p. 248) conducted from 1997 to 1998 but provided very little detail on the participants in the study. The key research question Gavanas (2004) investigated was the feasibility of domesticating masculinity while simultaneously masculinizing domesticity. A domesticated masculinity contradicts some of the tenets of hegemonic masculinity as it disrupts the inequality in domestic roles between men and women (Williams, 2009).

Gavanas (2004) found that the FRM was split into two factions. The “fragile families’ faction” embraced masculinity and fatherhood through breadwinner-capabilities and focused on improving the “marriageability” of poor, minority men (Gavanas, 2004, p. 250). Their focus was synonymous with reversing the plight of marginalized men so they could become deserving beneficiaries of “patriarchal dividend” (White, 2006, p. 45). The “pro-marriage faction” reinforced “notions of gender difference in parenting that are cemented in the institution of marriage” (Gavanas, 2004, p. 250). Gavanas (2004) found that the FRM pursued tenets of hegemonic masculinity and a masculinity-fatherhood link rooted in heterosexuality and constructed via differentiation from women at its core. Gavanas (2004) concluded that attempting to embrace many of the behaviors and norms associated with hegemonic masculinity dramatically eroded the feasibility of domesticated masculinities. Primarily, Gavanas (2004) emphasized that attempts to re-masculinize fatherhood through the exclusion of alternative masculinities and separation from femininity are futile and only serve to embolden the challenges associated with simultaneously masculinizing domesticity while domesticating masculinity.

In their rebuttal to the numerous critiques of hegemonic masculinity, Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) pointed to widely accepted plurality and diversity of masculinities. Such diversity is institutionalized in organizations like the military (Higate, 2003). The
notion of multiple masculinities combined with the belief that these masculinities are contextual and subject to change (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; White, 2006) is clearly observed as members of the military leave the profession of arms and adapt to civilian life again (Uhl, 2011).

Uhl (2011) presented a narrative study to investigate the role of masculinity in the lives of ex-navy SEALs and the transformative experiences as they transitioned “from extreme warrior to a satisfying civilian life” (Uhl, 2011, p. 78). SEAL training embraces hegemonic masculinity and builds on the assumption that true men were strong, aggressive, risk-taking, emotionally distant, and dominant over women. Participants in the narrative study included 11 former Navy SEALs who spent less than 10 years on active duty. In this study, Uhl (2011) alluded to four key factors contributing to hegemonic masculinity: separation from one’s mother to build a masculine identity (Connell, 2002); objectification of others as things to be competed against; externalization of emotions as a form of subduing internal feelings; and task orientation, which encourages dominance as a problem solving approach (Kilmartin, 2007).

All participants in the study were involved in multiple semi-structured interviews aimed at capturing their stories. Uhl (2011) found that participants transitioning from warrior to civilian life “had expanded…and had found new ways to express their own concepts of being a man” (p. 155) differing from the hegemonic masculinity they once embodied. He also concluded that hegemonic norms and traditional masculinities built out of opposition to femininity are limiting and place significant pressure on men to constantly prove their manhood (Uhl, 2011). Uhl’s conclusion was also supported by White and Peretz (2010) who stated that the chase for patriarchal power hampers
expressivity among Black men and ultimately results in feelings of inadequacy and fear as they pursue a hegemonic masculinity that is predominantly white and inherently unreachable by them. Uhl (2011) contended that the insights from the participants in this study “open new ways to explore what is expected of men today” (p. 155).

The contextual nature of contemporary masculinities was further explored by Gottschall (2009) who offered a hermeneutic study aimed at exploring mediated images and representations of masculinity and fatherhood. The study included an empirical case targeted at infusing practicality into the predominantly theoretical discussion undertaken throughout the study. By using content analysis as the methodology, the researcher analyzed magazine images to identify trends in expectations of masculinity. The sample included issues from Esquire, Ladies Home Journal, Maclean’s, and Today’s Parent magazine for the years 1960, 1965, 1970, 1975, 1980, 1985, 1990, 1995, and 2000.

Gottschall (2009) provided a comprehensive discussion of critical masculinity theory in the last 50 years framed through three lenses. One lens on masculinity was the socially constructed sex-role framework (MacKinnon, 2003). This framework celebrated male dominance, a competitive spirit, career success, sexual prowess and a limited display of emotion as traits of a real man. Trait-based and role-based masculinity was rejected by Connell (1995, 2000, 2005) on the grounds that it depicted a singular masculinity and lacked “ethnographic realism” (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 832). To supplant sex-role theory, Connell (1995; 2000; 2005) developed the early notion of hegemonic masculinity and built on it to create a second lens of critical masculinity theory that positioned masculinity as plural and contextual. The third lens on critical
masculinity theory views it as in flux, contingent, multi-disciplinary, and affected by media.

Gottschall (2009) anticipated that there would be a slow, steady movement of ads overtime with broadening portrayal of men as nurturers and increasingly eroticized representations of the male body. Contrary to his hypothesis, Gottschall (2009) found there was no “sustained increase in depictions of men in the domestic realm” (p. 274). Instead, images increasingly represented men in terms of little responsibility, consumerism, and self-absorption and not in terms of “hard work, family, and commitment to gender equality” (Gottschall, 2009, p. 275). Gottschall’s view aligns with what Connell (1998) described as the emergence of the transnational business masculinity, which he characterized as a declining sense of responsibility with burgeoning egocentrism.

The literature reviewed thus far has considered the plurality of masculinities and their susceptibility to change even though the hegemonic ideals of masculinity have remained intact. By assessing the major critiques of hegemonic masculinity, Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) identified elements of the concept that were eroding in relevance in contemporary American society. It is also important, in the context of this study, to understand how masculinity, and hence fatherhood, impacts the development of children. Oransky (2011) provided a descriptive, quantitative study investigating the relationship between endorsement of traditional masculinities and aggression among adolescent boys, after accounting for the “general belief that aggression is normal” (Oransky, 2011, p. 63). In the study, there were 213 predominantly white participants from sixth to eighth grade from six schools in New Jersey and New York.
To assess endorsement of traditional masculinity, Oransky (2011) utilized a 26-item survey instrument—Meaning of Adolescent Masculinity Scale (Oransky & Fisher, 2009). Five other survey instruments were employed to measure proclivity toward reactive aggression, tendency toward proactive aggression, the extent to which participants believed aggression was normative, adolescent self-assessment, and peer conflict. Oransky (2011) found the relationship between endorsement of traditional masculinity and reactive aggression was significantly negative, after accounting for the belief that aggression is normal. Oransky (2011) made a similar observation about proactive aggression. He concluded there are some components of traditional male norms that deter reactive aggressive behavior.

As with most correlational studies, there were significant limitations on establishing causality among the variables considered in Oransky’s (2011) study. Moreover, the homogeneity of the sample limited its generalizability, especially toward lower social classes or minority populations. Nevertheless, the study showed that traditional masculinity may not necessarily imply a bias toward more aggressive behaviors. These findings are rather interesting and go against the viewpoints captured by Kimmel (2000), who described violence as a consequence of hegemonic masculinity. Kimmel (2000) stressed that men use violence as a means of proving their masculinity. Kilmartin (2007) concurred and proposed that hegemonic masculinity encouraged violence among men in 10 distinct ways (as cited in Uhl, 2011, p. 63). Foremost on Kilmartin’s (2007) list was the idea that boys are forced to separate from their mothers to build their masculine identity.
The adoption of a male identity as part of a man’s personality development is a critical aspect of masculinity studies. Considering the linkage between masculinity and fatherhood, the process via which the adoption of a male identity takes place is significantly important to the social construction of fatherhood itself. Hatcher (2011) conducted a mixed-method study to investigate the relationship between perceptions about African American adolescents’ male identity and student achievement. He explored whether there was a statistically significant relationship between perceived identity development status, high school GPA, and Standard of Learning (SOL) scores among African American adolescent males. Hatcher (2011) also performed a qualitative investigation of how African American adolescent males perceived their identity and its impact on achievement.

Hatcher (2011) retrieved quantitative data from the student performance database and a standard 14-question survey referred to as the Multi-group Ethnic Identity Measure (MEIM-R). In the study, there were 127 participants from an urban high school in Virginia. Hatcher (2011) conducted a semi-structured interview of 12 participants from the sample to probe further into participants’ perceptions about racial identity. Of the 12 participants, Hatcher (2011) selected two who obtained the most extreme MEIM-R scores for a follow-up interview.

From this research, Hatcher (2011) determined that there was a statistically significant and practically valuable positive correlation between perceived ethnic identity and student achievement. He used cumulative GPA and mean SOL scores as a proxy for student achievement. Hatcher (2011) concluded that African American adolescent males struggle to reconcile their perceptions of themselves with the predominantly negative
perceptions others share of them. He deduced that parental involvement with African American youth is important to identity development and student achievement within this demographic. Interviewees with the lowest perceptions of identity were all from father-absent homes, lending credence to the claims by Hrabowski, Maton, and Greif (1998) about the importance of the father’s role in identity development and student achievement.

Hunt and Hunt (1975) also conducted a quantitative correlational study to explore how structural circumstances alter the effect of father absence on orientation toward achievement and personal identities among Black males and White males. Although their study was conducted more than two decades ago, the findings by Hunt and Hunt (1975) are effective at guiding the discourse on structural circumstances and the adoption of masculine identities among adolescent boys. For their study, 445 juniors and seniors from the Baltimore public school system participated. Hunt and Hunt (1975) classified the sample in terms of family structure and social class. The family structure classification identified groups as being from a father-present or father-absent household. They measured achievement orientation by assessing academic performance, educational goals, and proclivity to marriage (Hunt & Hunt, 1975) and derived measures of esteem and sex role identification.

Hunt and Hunt (1975) found that among the white participants, father-absence significantly impacted educational achievement, orientation toward post-secondary education, and orientation toward marriage. In contrast, father-absence had no important impact on the same three measures among Black participants. Additionally, self-esteem and sex role identification were negatively impacted by father absence among White boys.
while father-absence positively impacted sex role identification and self-esteem among the Black boys. When including social class, Hunt and Hunt (1975) found that father absence does not impact any one social class more than others for Black boys while it disproportionately impacted identity among lower class White boys. At all class levels, Black father-absent boys indicated higher self-esteem and sex role identification.

Hunt and Hunt (1975) concluded that father absence negatively impacts achievement and identity among White boys but positively impacts these measures among Black boys. The findings proved Hunt and Hunt’s (1975) “high-status hypothesis” (p. 39) that father absence has a negative impact on achievement and identity when “there are few extra-familial barriers to achievement” (p. 47). Furthermore, the negative consequences of father absence are greater felt when fathers have the capacity to be positive role models and effectively “perform the breadwinning function” (Hunt & Hunt, 1975, p. 47). Thus, according to these findings, father absence perpetuated by marginalized poor African American men who are placed at a significant breadwinning disadvantage due to institutional barriers (Oliver & Shapiro, 1995) may not have as significant an impact as it would among a demographic void of such barriers. In situations where there are several other extra-familial barriers to achievement, like dealing with social inequities, father absence does not have as significant an impact. The findings from the study contrast with those from Hatcher (2011), who concluded that adolescents from father-absent homes had a lower perception of masculine identity. While the findings from Hunt and Hunt (1975) are strikingly different from those in other studies, they are indicative of masculinity and fatherhood as loosely defined, historically variable concepts (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005).
The influence of fatherhood on the self-image of adolescent boys provides another lens through which the influence of masculinity on development may be gauged and assessed. Beaty (1995) provided a descriptive quantitative study to investigate the impact of father absence on adolescent males’ peer relationships and their “masculine self-image” (p. 873). Participants belonged to a sample of 40 13- and 14-year-old boys from a midwestern suburban area middle school. The sample included 59% Caucasian, 30% African American, and 11% Hispanic participants. Half the participants had experienced father absence before five years old. Each participant rated other boys in the study in terms of perceived masculinity and peer adjustment.

Beaty (1995) found that father absence had a profound impact on the sex-role development and socialization of boys, a finding aligned with numerous previous studies (Biller & Bahm, 1971; Hetherington, 1966; Lynn & Sawrey, 1959; McCord, McCord, & Thurber, 1962). He utilized quantitative, socio-metric analysis to determine that father-absent boys had a significantly lower masculine self-image and peer adjustment than their father-present colleagues. Father-absent boys exhibit tendencies to be “dependent on peers” and are “more ambiguous about masculinity” (Beaty, 1995, p. 878).

In a similar vein, Mandara, Murray, and Joyner (2005) offered a descriptive quantitative study investigating how perceptions of masculinity among African American adolescents are impacted by father-absence, family functioning, family income, and self-esteem. There were 106 15-year-old participants of whom 25 were father-absent boys, 25 were father-present boys, 27 were father-absent girls, and 29 were father-present girls. All participants came from high schools in four school districts in Southern California. Mandara et al. (2005) leveraged pre-existing survey instruments: the Multi-Dimensional
Self-Esteem Inventory (O'Brien & Epstein, 1988) to assess self-esteem, the Family Environment Scale (Moos & Moos, 1986) to assess family functioning, and an Adjective Q Sort adapted by the researchers to measure African American perceptions about gender.

Mandara et al. (2005) found that father-absent boys had lower perceptions of current masculinity than father-present boys. Also, results indicated that while income was negatively related to perceptions of masculinity, family functioning had no effect. From this, Mandara et al. (2005) concluded there was “something unique about everyday presence” (p. 216) of fathers that influences their sons’ perceptions about masculinity. Despite limited generalizability and the standard issue of causality attribution associated with correlational studies, Mandara et al. (2005) confirmed the findings of similar studies that preceded theirs. The relevance of their study to the issue of fatherlessness is the conclusion that “the lack of everyday socialization from fathers place father-absent boys at risk for not developing traits such as independence and assertiveness” (p. 218).

**Fatherlessness, Competence, and Resilience Theory**

The corroborated findings of several researchers indicated that the “reproduction of fatherhood” is a valid construct (Townsend, 1998, p. 363). It embodies the notion that key antecedents to father involvement are the attitudes and memories a father has about his experience as the beneficiary of paternal involvement. Research shows that a high level of paternal involvement has significant positive impact on the social, emotional, and cognitive development (Lamb, Chuang, & Cabrera, 2005). High levels of academic achievement, social maturity (Gottfried, Gottfried, & Bathurst, 1988), high levels of sociability (Mosley & Thompson, 1995), fewer behavioral problems, and advanced
personal maturity (Amato & Rivera, 1999) are just a few of the positive outcomes research has shown are influenced by positive paternal involvement.

Conversely, fatherlessness has an overall deleterious impact on a wide range of child and young adult outcomes (Allen & Daly, 2007). Academically, children experiencing fatherlessness have a lower chance of satisfactory performance in school (Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1997; Kelly, 2000) and a greater chance of behavioral struggles (Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1997; Kelly, 2000) with paying attention, disobedience (Mott, Kowaleski-Jones, & Mehaghan, 1997), and truancy (Allen & Daly, 2007). The impact of paternal absence lingers well into adulthood, as evidenced by the fact that those who experience fatherlessness are more prone to be out of school or out of work in their mid-20s (McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994).

The literature suggests a correlation between a lack in moral judgment (Hoffman, 1971), emotional adjustment, psychosocial adjustment (Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1997; Kelly, 2000; Painter & Levine, 2000), and father absence. Boys are more apt to develop unhappiness, sadness, depression, high levels of dependence, and hyperactivity (Allen & Daly, 2007) when forced to grow up without a biological father, while girls tend to develop challenges with anxiety and depression (Kandel, Rosenbaum, & Chen, 1994). They are both prone to poor decisions with respect to peers (Mott et al., 1997) and are more at risk of involvement in substance abuse during adolescence (National Fatherhood Initiative, 2004).

Early exposure to sexual activity increases the probability of a greater frequency of teenage pregnancies and early fatherhood among fatherless young women and men, respectively. Furstenberg and Weiss (2001) found that young fathers who grew up in a
residence without their father are less likely to live with their own children, while the National Fatherhood Initiative (2011a) reported that those unfathered individuals are five times more likely to be poor in their adulthood.

The evidence from the research strongly indicates that fathers who enter adulthood having experienced a lack of paternal involvement or father absence are at a marked disadvantage over their dual-parented peers. Void of a solid paternal model of effective practices for a socially, emotionally, and cognitively healthy adult life, these fathers are in turn prone to perpetuate the negativity of their experience on to their sons. When a father’s attitudes and memories originate in an experience dominated by paternal apathy or abandonment, he must overcome his experiential influence to be engaged, available, accessible, and responsible with his own sons. Overcoming a lack of positive paternal modeling and avoiding the negative outcomes accompanying fatherlessness are both challenging and complex. Several factors are at play, but a man’s capacity for resilience is one key determinant of successfully overcoming these challenges.

Luthar et al. (2000) described resilience as the “dynamic process encompassing positive adaptation within the context of significant adversity” (p. 543). Hines, Merdinger, and Wyatt (2005) offered another definition of resilience as “the process by which individuals achieve adaptive functioning in the face of adversity” (p. 381). Masten and Powell (2003) looked at resilience as “patterns of positive adaptation in the context of significant risk” (p. 4), while Masten and Coatsworth (1998) referred to it as “how children overcome adversity to achieve good developmental outcomes” (p. 205).

In recent years, there has been an emergence of resilience as a topic of interest to researchers. Richardson (2002) asserted, “resilience has emerged as an intriguing area of
inquiry that explores personal and interpersonal gifts and strengths that can be accessed to grow through adversity” (p. 307). Richardson (2002) further emphasized resiliency theory represents a deviation from the “problem-oriented theory” (p. 307) typically discussed in psychology and represented a theoretical paradigm shift that “incorporated post-modern thinking (p. 307). While many definitions of resilience as a theoretical construct have been proposed, resilience, in general, refers to manifested competence in the context of significant challenges to adaptation or development. Masten and Coatsworth (1998) suggested there are two fundamental conditions that must exist when identifying resilience as a deterministic factor of competence. First, the individual must be in the presence of, or had exposure to, a significant threat typically characterized by an at-risk status. Second, the individual must achieve high levels of positive adaptation and/or development (Masten & Coatsworth, 1998) despite “major assaults on the developmental process” (Luthar et al., 2000, p. 543).

Research on resilience in children and adolescents considered to be “at-risk” primarily looks at youth who show academic, emotional, social, and cognitive competence despite adversity and stress. Researchers in both popular and scientific sectors are attracted to the odds-defying, adaptive quality of individuals who face “major, often chronic, life stress” (Cowen et al., 1997, p. 565). By studying individuals’ capacity for positive adaptation and by methodically “identifying pathways to resilient outcomes” (Cowen et al., 1997, p. 565), the fields of psychopathology and social science stand to benefit from enhancements in the body of theoretical work on resilience. Additionally, understanding the factors that create the need for adaptation—the stressors, adversities, and risks—as well as the factors promoting resilience and healthy adjustment are crucial
in the development of preventative measures from a practical and policy standpoint (Cowen, 1994).

Historically, the research on resilience focused on identifying the factors that prescribe resilient outcomes and providing answers to “the ‘what’ questions about resilience” (Masten, Best, & Garmezy, 1990). More recent research, however, deepens the inquiry by searching for “mechanisms and processes that promote and maintain resilient outcomes under stressful life conditions” (Cowen et al., 1997, p. 566). Masten (2007) contended that developmental psychopathologists and social scientists alike “recognized that understanding the processes involved in competence and resilience…held the promise of informing interventions to promote better development among high-risk” (p. 32) individuals in the future.

How does the concept of resilience, along with all its development outcomes, overlap with the concept of fatherlessness and its outcomes? As mentioned above, the foundational judgments of resilience are (1) exposure to threat, risk, or severe adversity; and (2) the achievement of positive adaptation and competence in the face of such adversity (Luthar et al., 2000). Considering these two conditions separately and testing their applicability to fatherlessness provides a holistic view of the role resilience can play in coping with father absence.

The National Fatherhood Initiative (2011a), in its report entitled The Father Factor, demonstrated the universal impact of paternal absence. It highlighted the assertion that nearly all the social issues facing America today (National Fatherhood Initiative, 2011a) are directly or indirectly impacted by fatherlessness. The report illustrated with empirical data how father absence and a lack of paternal involvement
impacts issues of poverty, maternal health, child health, incarceration, crime, teen pregnancy, child abuse, substance abuse, education, and childhood obesity (National Fatherhood Initiative, 2011a). In the context of resilience, each of these factors presents significant risk that could hamper the wellbeing and normal development of the unfathered. Findings in existing research show that family and, in particular, parental support are key factors associated with positive social, emotional, and cognitive outcomes (Nettles, Mucherah, & Jones, 2000), further emphasizing the risk to which the fatherless are exposed.

The second condition for resilience is positive adaptation in the face of adversity. Researchers have found evidence from longitudinal data to suggest individuals who are exposed to the same kind of risks can have highly differentiated outcomes (Masten, 2007). Masten (2007) noted that individuals from disastrous backgrounds were able to develop high levels of competency and become emotionally, socially, and psychologically healthy adults while others failed to positively adapt as they continually faced challenges during their developmental process. The same holds true for individuals who have experienced paternal absence and this is the fundamental premise upon which this study is built. As the study of resilience evolved, researchers widened the scope of study from being purely rooted in the science of mental disorders to a more cross-disciplinary approach. Moreover, recent research on resilience advanced the need and importance of studying positive life patterns as well as negative ones (Masten, 2007).

Richardson (2002) described the evolution of resiliency theory as occurring in three waves. The first wave of inquiry into resilience centered on the paradigmatic shift from looking at the negative factors contributing to psychosocial problems, to a
strengths-based approach assessing how people dealt with adversity (Richardson, 2002). Richardson (2002) asserted that most of the early studies of resiliency sought to provide some insight into the internal and external characteristics that marked people who “thrived in the face of risk factors as opposed to those who succumbed to destructive behaviors” (p. 308). A second wave of studies of resiliency theory focused on the discovery of the process via which individuals achieve resilient qualities like self-esteem and self-efficacy. Richardson (2002) stated that the final wave of research into resilience theory positioned it as “a motivational force within every person that drives them to pursue self-actualization and reintegration after life-disruptions” (p. 308). Each of the themes from the waves of resiliency research is applicable to men’s response to their experience of fatherlessness. Particularly, individual characteristics that may enable some men to better deal with father absence and the process via which some men acquire those characteristics are instrumental in understanding the differentiated behavioral responses to the lack of a paternal model. Moreover, a thorough analysis of the factors serving as motivational forces enabling reintegration after the experience of fatherlessness may shed light on some key insights into the drivers guiding behavior among men who experienced paternal neglect.

Richardson, Neiger, Jensen, and Kumpfer (1990) proposed a resiliency model illustrating that individuals who are experiencing disruptions or reacting to life events have the opportunity to consciously or unconsciously choose the outcomes of such disruptions. Figure 4 shows the key components of the resiliency model defined by Richardson et al. (1990).
Figure 4. The resiliency model.

According to the model, one achieves a state of bio-psycho-spiritual homeostasis, also referred to as the comfort zone, when one has adapted to one’s life situation. Individuals continually face stressors, adversity, and life events threatening the status quo. Richardson et al. (1990) asserted that repeated exposure to disruptions results in the formulation of resilient qualities as individuals naturally attempt to deal with disruptions and protect their state of homeostasis. Richardson (2002) stated that such “chronic stressors befall people when they do not develop resilient qualities or have not grown through the disruptions in their life” (p. 311).

In the proposed resiliency model, Richardson et al. (1990) illustrated differentiated behaviors that individuals may demonstrate to achieve reintegration after a disruption has taken place. To adapt in the face of adversity, individuals may exhibit
behaviors of resilient reintegration. When this occurs, individuals develop some insight and experience growth through an introspective process of identifying and strengthening their collection of resilient qualities (Richardson et al., 1990). Some individuals, on the other hand, may opt to simply move beyond the disruption and avoid any adaptive changes to return to the status quo. Another response to disruption is to cut one’s losses, while yet another is dysfunctional reintegration. According to Richardson (2002), this latter response is replete with disruptive behaviors. The responses to disruptions represented in The Resiliency Model inform the highly differentiated behaviors displayed by men who experience the disruption of father absence. The spectrum of behavioral responses ranges from “positive adaptation” (Luthar et al., 2000, p. 543) resulting in growth—referred to in the model as resilient reintegration—to behaviors like paternal neglect or abandonment of offspring—represented in the model as reintegration with loss—to behaviors including substance abuse, crime, and violence—depicted in the model as dysfunctional integration.

The research questions that this researcher seeks to answer will further the qualitative understanding of the adversity and risks encountered by the unfathered. In recognition of the need for positive life patterns expressed by resilience researchers, this study will also derive a set of factors collectively contributing to positive adaptation and achievement of high levels of competence among those who have emerged from father absence. The literature suggests there may be a relationship between the factors presented by Cabrera et al. (2007) in their model of father involvement and the factors influencing resilience and competence among individuals exposed to adversity.
Summary

The three streams for which the literature was reviewed included Paternal Involvement and Essentialism, Resilience and Competence theory, and the socially constructed Masculinity-Fatherhood Linkage. Each of these is closely tied to the issue of fatherlessness. Paternal involvement, described in terms of the levels of engagement, availability, and responsibility (Lamb et al., 1985) that fathers demonstrate to their offspring determines the extent of father absence a child experiences. The literature reviewed supports the assertion that the rearing history of a father can significantly influence his own capacity for high levels of father involvement (Cabrera et al., 2007). Such an influence constitutes the “reproduction of fatherhood” (Townsend, 1998, p. 363), a construct connoting that fathers tend to father in the manner in which they were fathered. From this construct, one can derive another entitled the “reproduction of fatherlessness” which refers to fathers’ susceptibility to pass on the negative consequences of father absence to their sons.

The literature also indicated that resilience theory was rooted in two conditions: the exposure to adversity or risk and the ability to achieve positive adaptation and development (Masten & Coatsworth, 1998) despite “major assaults on the developmental process” (Luthar et al., 2000, p. 543). The statistics published by the National Fatherhood Initiative (2011b) presented significant empirical evidence enumerating the risks to which individuals who experience fatherlessness are exposed. Men exposed to father absence meet the risk exposure pre-conditions for resilience. Primarily, this risk lies in exposure to poverty, maternal health, child health, incarceration, crime, teen pregnancy, child abuse, substance abuse, education, and childhood obesity.
Fatherhood Initiative, 2011b). Most importantly, the risks also include a lack of paternal modeling of effective fathering and positive male citizenship (Renshaw, 2005) between fathers who experienced father absence and their sons.

While a significant percentage succumb to these predispositions and experience the associated negative outcomes, there are some who, despite their exposure to the same risks, are able to achieve resilient outcomes with high levels of competence in the areas of fathering and familial relationships (Masten, 2007). The positive adaptation achieved through resilience may be indicative of a father’s ability to achieve adaptive change in his life and in the lives of his offspring. The extent to which those who dealt with father absence are able to resiliently reintegrate (Richardson, 2002), assimilate, and accommodate (Glover, Friedman, & Jones, 2002) will determine their ability to maintain alignment with their environment and drive sustainable systemic change (Senge et al., 2008) into their families and fathering as a whole.

Many researchers concede that levels of father involvement, ranging from highly engaged, available, and responsible dads to absent fathers, directly or indirectly influences social, emotional, and cognitive outcomes in their children (Townsend, 1998). Particularly with sons, low paternal involvement levels leave them prone to early exposure to sexual activity which in turn places them at greater risk of early fatherhood and a higher likelihood of being absent from their own children. This study sought to deeply understand the lived experiences of men who experience father absence to shed some light on how their transition to manhood and, more specifically, parenthood is aided or hampered by the lack of paternal modeling. The study of resilience gives some insight
into why there are highly differentiated outcomes for those who face similar risks associated with father absence (Masten, 2007).

From the literature, the linkage between fatherhood and masculinity proves to be a rich source of perspectives on the impact of shifting masculinities on fatherhood and vice versa. The plurality of masculinity and the maintenance of the hegemonic ideal indicate that fathers face intense external pressure to conform but have the ability to leverage recently accessible opportunities to adopt alternative masculinities and different approaches to fathering. While there are several flaws on both sides of the essentialism assertion, both viewpoints celebrating the importance of a father in identity formation and those questioning the need for a father who espouses elements of hegemonic masculinity are valid in their own rights.

For this study, the systemic forces impacting issues of fatherlessness spanned paternal involvement, resilience theory, and masculinity. They included the elements constituting paternal involvement: engagement, availability, and responsibility. Other key contributors to the patterns outlined in the literature include the factors presented in the heuristic model of father involvement proposed by Cabrera et al. (2007). In this model, researchers provided a complex network of factors playing a role in father involvement. The forces of adversity, positive adaptation, and competence – all from the Resilience Theory theme – are also a part of the systemic structures.

At the base of the Iceberg Model for accessing a current reality that was proposed by Senge et al. (2008) are mental models. In the context of this study, this segment of the model refers to core beliefs about fatherhood and its linkage to masculinities. It represents the aspect of the analysis where there is the greatest opportunity for learning to
take place. A systems view placing issues of fatherhood as a subsystem in a greater system reveals more about the complexity of paternal absence. That which seems at the outset to be a problem with isolated effects on a son of a father who experienced father absence can quickly evolve, with deep inquiry, into something that goes beyond familial concerns and impacts issues of masculinity on a far larger scale.
Chapter 3: Research Methodology

Introduction

Understanding the differentiated behaviors of men who experienced fatherlessness and the impact of their experiences on their approaches to fathering is a crucial first step in addressing the passage of negative paternal behaviors through the father-son relationship. Moustakas (1994) suggested that qualitative research provides the ability to assess the “wholeness of the experience while searching for essences of the experience rather than measurements and explanation” (p. 21). Gathering the meaning of the experience of fatherlessness via descriptions from those who have lived through it is imperative for gaining insight into the differentiated behaviors and outcomes among them. Specifically, phenomenology captures the meanings and essences of individuals’ exposure to a phenomenon, which in this study is fatherlessness. This study sought to capture the essences of men’s experiences with fatherlessness. It investigated their transition from boyhood to manhood, their perceptions about masculinity, and the impact of their fatherless experience on their own fathering responsibilities.

The three research questions this study sought to answer were as follows:

- What does the experience of transitioning from boyhood to manhood in a father-absent household mean for males?
- How do men who experienced fatherlessness describe the intersection between masculinity and fatherhood?
- How do men describe the relationship between their history of fatherlessness and their attempts to father their own sons?
This chapter describes the design and methodologies chosen for the conduct of this study. It provides insight into the target population and the sampling method used to select a sample of participants for the study. Thorough descriptions of the data gathering methods are given, along with clear explanations of how the data were analyzed. The chapter concludes with a summary of the ethical considerations taken into account as data were retrieved from the participants and subsequently analyzed.

**Research Design and Rationale**

This study was conducted as a transcendental phenomenological study (Moustakas, 1994). Creswell (2007) defined a phenomenological study as one that “describes the meaning of several individuals’ lived experiences of a phenomenon” (p. 57). Van Manen (1990) described phenomenology as a means of “reducing individual experiences with a phenomenon to a description of a universal essence” (p. 177). Farber (1943) outlined the strengths of the phenomenological approach by describing it as the “first method of knowledge” and a “logical approach…that identifies pre-suppositions” (p. 58) and limits their influence on the research. Moustakas (1994) summarized transcendental phenomenology as follows:

Phenomenology is a scientific study of the appearance of things, of phenomena just as we see them and as they appear to us in consciousness. Any phenomenon represents a suitable starting point for phenomenological reflection. The very appearance of something makes it a phenomenon. The challenge is to explicate the phenomenon in terms of its constituents and possible meanings, thus discerning the features of consciousness and arriving at an understanding of the essences of the experience. (p. 49)

This researcher captured participants’ first-person account of their life experiences precipitated by their exposure to fatherlessness. The phenomenological approach included three primary processes: epoche, phenomenological reduction, and
imaginative variation. Each of these processes was a crucial element incorporated into this study to ensure its reliability and the robustness of the analysis conducted.

Epoche is a process conceptualized by Husserl (1970), who is regarded as the proverbial father of the phenomenological approach. He defined epoche as conducting a study of lived experiences by first setting aside all suppositions and prejudgments. Moustakas (1994) stated that epoche “is preparation for deriving new knowledge…by setting aside predilections, prejudices, predispositions and allowing things, events, and people to enter anew into consciousness, and to look and see them again, as if for the first time” (p. 85). The process of epoche was of utmost importance as this researcher bracketed his own experiences as a father of sons, who himself experienced fatherlessness. The reality that the researcher supposedly knows as a result of mental models and past experiences were appropriately “put out of action” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 90) as the researcher “openly received whatever appears in consciousness” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 90) through the communicated first-person lived experiences of participants. To enhance the bracketing process, the researcher engaged in repeated episodes of reflection that enabled him to suspend the influence of habits of mind, routines, expectations, and preconceived notions and “perceive things with an open presence” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 89). The effective practice of epoche provided this researcher with a new vantage point and a readiness to accept potentially new perspectives on the essence of fathering by those who experienced fatherlessness. It set aside for this researcher the numerous societal, scientific, governmental, parental, educational, and career influencers on thoughts about fatherhood.
Phenomenological reduction is a process that begins with a textual description of the experiences gathered from the participants. Through this process, all comments provided by the participants were treated with equal value and later reduced to horizons—data elements relevant to the topic and research questions (Moustakas, 1994). Further reduction consolidated horizons into themes and themes into a “coherent textual description of the phenomenon” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 97) of fatherlessness. The process of phenomenological reduction was crucial to the analysis of the data captured from participants in this study. The initial placement of equivalent importance on all participant statements was important for capturing the true essence of the fatherless experience to the men in this study. This researcher, having put aside his own preconceived notions, used this process to gain new insights into how participants described their experiences with father absence or paternal apathy. Additionally, the phenomenological reduction process includes a reflective process in which the researcher connected the various perspectives captured through his “conscious experience” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 93), ultimately unifying the disparate vantage points into a comprehensive view of the phenomenon of fatherlessness.

Moustakas (1994) described the imaginative variation process as the mechanism via which a researcher “derives structural themes from the textual descriptions captured during phenomenological reduction” (p. 98). This researcher considered the phenomenon of fatherlessness from “divergent perspectives” to adequately represent the factors contributing to participants’ experiences with fatherlessness. To effectively perform this, this researcher looked at fatherlessness from the vantage point of multiple stakeholders. The mother in a father-absent household, the son of an absent father, and the son of an
apathetic father are a few of those roles through which this study considered the phenomenon of fatherlessness.

The primary reason for employing the phenomenological research design was the desire to derive knowledge about fatherlessness primarily from the life experiences of those who lived it. There is significant value in the stories and first-person accounts of men who have navigated life, with varying outcomes, void of positive paternal influence. The emphasis on bracketing the experiences of the researcher that is inherent in the transcendental phenomenological approach is also an influential factor in the choice of approach for this study, especially critical given this researcher’s own life experiences with father absence. Researcher openness and suspension of any prejudgments of the participants enables them to provide candid descriptions of their experiences. Participants’ empowerment to share their lived experiences with this central phenomenon led to the derivation of the essence of their experiences and further understanding of the impact of fatherlessness on men’s parenting abilities.

**Site and Population**

**Population Description**

Creswell (2008) defined a population as a group of individuals who have the same characteristic. For this study, the population comprised adult males who experienced fatherlessness for five or more years when they were between the ages of 8 and 16 years old. Aside from common exposure to fatherlessness, being fathers to sons was another characteristic shared by the population. Creswell (2008) indicated that narrowing the population by filtering based on selected criteria yields the target population for a given study. For this study, the target population identified and actually studied included
residents of the continental United States. There were no restrictions on race, ethnicity, or socioeconomic status of participants.

From the target population, this researcher selected a sample of 36 participants via a purposeful sampling mechanism (Patton, 2002). Merriam (2009) asserted that purposeful sampling is a nonprobability sampling method allowing the researcher “to discover, understand, and gain insight” (p. 77) into issues Patton (2002) described as being “of central importance to the purpose of the inquiry” (p. 230).

Accumulating “information-rich cases” (Patton, 2002, p. 230) is imperative to effectively addressing the research questions in this study. As a result, this researcher employed two forms of purposeful sampling: maximal variation sampling and snowball sampling. Creswell (2008) described maximal variation sampling as a “strategy in which the researcher samples individuals that differ on some characteristic or trait” (p. 214). Analyzing the widely varied instances of men who experienced fatherlessness and were fathering sons of their own captures the core experiences and “central shared dimensions” of fatherlessness (Patton, 2002, p. 234).

Consequently, the purposive sample included men who emerged from fatherlessness and established healthy familial relationships, valued educational achievement, experienced career progression, and were active fathers. On the other hand, the purposive sample also included participants who struggled in the family setting, had unstable careers, or underachieved educationally. Some participants were already engaged in paternal behaviors that perpetuated fatherlessness through their own apathetic fathering or abandonment of their sons.
This study also incorporated the snowball sampling method. Through this sampling method, this researcher leveraged participants and prompted them to identify and refer any other men who they knew met the criteria for participation in this study. Creswell (2008) suggested that the snowball sampling method is advantageous through its ability to recruit a large number of participants.

**Site Description**

This study was not limited to participants located at a particular site or affiliated with a given institution or organization. The purposive sampling mechanisms described above—maximal variation and snowball—yielded participants for this study who had a breadth of lived experiences that this study sought to explore. Interviews, observations, and any interactions with participants took place at various locations that were selected primarily at the discretion of the participants. Video-conferencing and teleconferencing technology were employed to support data gathering from participants who were in remote locations.

**Site Access**

With no designated site for the study, the researcher leveraged a rich professional network as a starting point for soliciting participants. Additionally, invitations to participate in the study were distributed in local community centers, churches, social organizational meetings, and via social media.

**Research Methods**

**Description of Method Used**

Multiple methods of data collection were employed to capture the experiences of the participants in this study. In addition to the verbalized experiences of the selected
participants, the reliability and accuracy of their first-person accounts were enhanced through the use of multiple data sources. The following sections provide detail on the methods used for data collection in this study. To adequately assemble these stories, the following methods of data collection were employed:

1. Semi-Structured interviews of participants,
2. Participant focus groups,
3. Researcher notes and reflections.

These approaches were crucial in capturing the lived experiences of the participants. They also served as a means of triangulating the data captured to enhance its reliability.

**One-on-one semi-structured interviews.** One-on-one semi-structured interviews were the primary mechanism used to collect the first-person accounts of participants’ experiences with fatherlessness and its impact on their father-son interactions.

**Instrument description.** Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) stated that the interview conversation allows the researcher to learn about the “experience, feelings, and attitudes” (p. xvii) of participants. In this phenomenological study, the researcher used one-on-one interviews to question and listen to what participants described as their lived experience with respect to fatherlessness (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). The interview participants were encouraged, through open-ended questions, to expose and expand upon their “dreams, fears, and hopes,” while sharing “their views and opinions in their own words” (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, p. xvii) about how their life experiences affected their own approaches to fatherhood.
Each participant participated in a single semi-structured interview that lasted between 50 and 90 minutes. During the interview, participants were prompted to recall memories, emotions, and influential experiences from various segments of their lives. Also, participants were asked to respond to open-ended questions targeted at eliciting insight into their experiences with paternal apathy or paternal absence during their adolescent years (see Appendix A). The researcher introduced questions to ascertain how the participants perceived fatherhood and/or fatherlessness during this period of their lives and what life experiences they believed could have been avoided or enhanced by increased paternal involvement. The interview included prompts asking participants to explore their adult life and how fatherlessness continued to impact their lives. The researcher probed with questions aimed at capturing a deep understanding of how familial relationships, parenting relationships, and professional relationships suffered or were enhanced by participants’ experiences without a biological paternal influence. Moreover, participants were asked to delve into the feelings they developed about masculinity, self-worth, and personal ambitions that were impacted by the central phenomenon in this study.

**Participant selection.** Thirteen interviewees were selected via the purposive sampling methods—maximal variation sampling and snowball sampling—to cover a wide range of experiences with fatherlessness and its life impact. Solicitations for interviewees were circulated to local community centers, churches, social organizations, and via social media. Selected participants were also asked to refer other men who met the participant criteria.
Identification and invitation. Upon selection, each participant for this phenomenological study was invited to participate in a one-on-one introductory meeting via telephone. During this meeting, participants were reminded of the purpose of the study and the key research questions. Additionally, this meeting included a thorough walkthrough of the consent letter to ensure each participant was aware of the limitations and ethical considerations this study entailed. An interview was scheduled for a time convenient to the participant.

Data collection. At scheduled interviews, participants were again oriented to the consent form (see Appendix B) and asked to provide a signature to indicate their understanding of the guidelines governing their involvement in the study. All interviews were audio recorded. The researcher took copious notes during the interviews to capture non-verbal cues indicative of the emotion of the participants at various stages throughout the interview. Immediately upon completion of the interview, the researcher entered into a reflective session during which he wrote a summary of the interview and noted his overall perceptions about all that was witnessed during the interview.

Focus group, semi-structured interviews with participants. Two focus groups comprising approximately 8 and 15 participants, respectively, were conducted. These two-hour focus group interviews were used to collect further data about the lived experiences of men who experienced fatherlessness and were fathers of sons. The focus groups primarily focused on commonalities and stark differences among the experiences described by the participants.

Instrument description. Focus group participants were prompted to respond to similar questions to those posed in the individual interviews. One key difference was the
addition of prompts asking focus group members to reflect on some of the comments made by others and contrast them to their own individual experiences (see Appendix C). The capture of these comparative perceptions added a dimension of richness to the data gathered during the focus groups.

**Participant selection.** The two focus groups were assembled with participants who responded to the solicitations on social media, local community centers, churches, and social organizations. The grouping of participants into Focus Group A and Focus Group B were primarily driven by convenience and availability of the participants.

**Identification and invitation.** All participants who responded to solicitations were prompted to provide convenient dates when they could participate. Immediately prior to the actual focus group interview session, the researcher reserved 15 minutes during which participants reviewed and signed the consent letter (see Appendix B) and the researcher addressed any ethical concerns voiced by participants.

**Data collection.** All focus group interviews were audio recorded. The researcher took copious notes while conducting the focus groups to capture non-verbal cues at various stages of the interview. Immediately upon completion of the interview, the researcher reflected on what transpired and recorded a summary of the interview, noting his overall perceptions about all that was witnessed during the interview.

**Data Analysis Procedures**

Moustakas (1994) and Creswell (2007) emphasized that phenomenological studies require specific and highly structured methods of analysis. Moustakas (1994) suggested the Stevick-Collaizi-Keen approach to analyzing phenomenological data. The first step in analyzing the data captured in this study included the practice of epoche,
during which this researcher’s experiences with fatherlessness and a personal account of how it impacted his ability to father effectively were fully captured. Epoche was performed as a means of “setting aside” (Creswell, 2007, p. 159) the researchers’ personal experiences so the focus during data collection was on the experiences described by the participants.

Once all data were collected from the one-on-one interviews of participants, the audio/video recordings were organized by participant. The recorded interview data were professionally transcribed verbatim and checked multiple times for accuracy and validity against the researcher’s written notes and the original recordings. Participants’ non-verbal mannerisms during the interviews, which were captured in the researcher notes, were clearly annotated in the transcripts, allowing the researcher to relive the experience of interviewing each participant and enabling the recognition of subjects’ emotional responses that were not obvious from the transcripts alone.

Transcripts were read multiple times to ascertain a “general sense of the data” (Creswell, 2008, p. 250). After each reading, the researcher reflected and wrote a brief summary of the experience of reading or re-reading the transcript. This reflective process aligns with the process Moustakas (1994) referred to in his description of Phenomenological Reduction as “looking, noticing, and looking again…to grasp the full nature of a phenomenon” (p. 93).

Analysis of the transcribed interviews and focus groups utilized the process of “coding” (Saldana, 2009, p. 2) the data. Saldana (2009) stated, “a code is a label that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing…attribute for a portion of language-based data” (p. 3). Three coding approaches were used to apply labels to the
interview and focus group transcripts. The first approach to applying labels to the transcripts was “structural coding.” Participants’ responses were appropriately labeled in terms of relevance to a research question or element in the conceptual framework for this study. Another coding approach was “descriptive coding” (Saldana, 2009, p. 70), which was used to capture, “in a word or short phrase, the basic topic of passages throughout the transcribed text” (p. 70). The third approach to codifying the data captured utilized the “in vivo” (Saldana, 2009, p. 74) approach, in which each label consisted of “a word or phrase from the actual language” (p. 74) found in the interview or focus group transcripts. While manual coding was employed, the Dedoose software package version 4.5.98 was utilized to categorize and identify horizons and themes from the transcriptions; this allowed for comparisons of the codes derived, while adding further reliability to the coding process.

The creation and application of the codes allowed the researcher to categorize the labels applied and analyze these broad categorizations for the emergence of comprehensive themes from the data. The data were reduced to a list of unique statements relevant to the description of participants’ experiences with fatherlessness. These unique statements, referred to as “horizons or meaning units,” were further clustered into themes (Moustakas, 1994, p. 122), which were in turn used to derive textural descriptions of “what the participants in this study experienced with fatherlessness” (Creswell, 2007, p. 159).

With the themes established and the textural description created, this researcher reflected on the textural descriptions emerging from the analysis to craft a “structural description” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 122) of participants’ experiences. Finally, the textural
descriptions and the structural descriptions were combined to provide a comprehensive
description of the “meanings and the essences of the experience” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 122) of fathering sons after fatherlessness. The steps taken to analyze data captured from one-on-one interviews were applied to the data captured in the focus groups as well.

**Ethical Considerations**

As with all qualitative research, this study had numerous considerations requiring the researcher’s vigilance for potential violations of ethical standards. The ethical issues that may have arisen fell into the following categories: risk assessment, privacy and confidentiality, informed consent, and researcher influence.

With a central phenomenon that is a sensitive issue, this study of fatherlessness had the potential to evoke highly emotional responses among participants. Most likely, the participants in this phenomenological study had strong passions regarding the topic as they revealed deeply “intimate details and experiences of their lives” (Creswell, 2008, p. 239). There was a significant likelihood that reaching back into their pasts may have re-opened wounds and caused pain that might have led to highly emotional responses. Acknowledgement of this risk was absolutely necessary, especially given that this researcher was not able or qualified to offer any advice or provide psychological counseling. A mitigation step to address this concern was the stated assurance to participants that they could withdraw from the interview at any point in time. Additionally, participants were made aware of such risks via the consent statement and were advised to seek professional counseling if they experienced an overwhelming emotional reaction.
Participants shared some experiences that were personally touching and painful. Many of these experiences were private and some of them could be damaging to the reputations of the participants. The protection of participants’ privacy and confidentiality was therefore an imperative in the conduct of this study. Anonymity of participants was a primary objective during the data collection and data analysis phases of this study. Use of aliases and removal of identifying factors was performed to protect the confidentiality of participants and their families.

All data captured during interviews were stored electronically on a password protected disk. Upon completion of the study, all data will be stored for the period of time mandated by the Drexel IRB policy. Similarly, any digitized version of artifacts provided by participants will be destroyed.

Given the sensitivity of the central phenomenon in this study and the potential for exposure to areas of emotional pain, informed consent by participants was of utmost importance. It was absolutely crucial that the participants were fully informed as to the purpose and key research questions for this study. Full disclosure was central to the conduct of this study to ensure participants understood the importance of their contributions. Such transparency was also valuable in earning the trust and support of study participants while strengthening their passion for the value this study could bring to the body of academic research and policy decisions.

Another important ethical issue that could have arisen in this study revolved around this researcher’s influence on data collection and analysis. Having experienced fatherlessness, this researcher has an intense passion for the topic that could influence the relationship and bonds formed with participants (Patton, 2002). The formation of such
bonds had the potential to influence respondents during interviews to introduce inconsistencies or to neglect mention of critical parts of their story for fear they may disappoint or impress this researcher. On the other hand, such researcher-trust was critical in creating a safe and comfortable environment. To navigate this thin line between researcher trust and unwanted researcher influence, participants were provided with a clear definition of the researcher’s role in data collection. Additionally, a comprehensive description of the researcher’s experiences with the central phenomenon of fatherlessness was written to force reflection on the issue and set aside the researcher’s viewpoints. Since the researcher’s perceptions could not be set aside in totality, participants were made aware of the boundaries in the researcher-participant relationship that were to be upheld during the data collection phase of the study.

A key step in ensuring the ethical compliance of this study was the completion of the Drexel University IRB process. The process involved a complete and detailed proposal to the IRB. The process ensures there was no threat of harm to the human participants with whom this researcher interacted.
Chapter 4: Findings, Results, and Interpretations

Introduction

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences, attitudes, and perceptions about masculinity and fatherhood among a sample of men who experienced father-absence in their formative years. The investigation sought to gain a better understanding of how these experiences enabled or hampered participants’ ability to model positive elements of manhood and fathering for their sons. It also examined how the lived experiences of unfathered men contributed to their propensity to either perpetuate generational fatherlessness or break trends of father-absence in their family.

This study included in-depth analysis of the differentiated behaviors that may be demonstrated by men who experienced fatherlessness as they attempt to be positive models for their offspring. The researcher believed that deep qualitative insight into the phenomenon of fatherlessness among men would allow policy makers, educators, program designers, members of the legal community, and social services providers to operate from a more informed standpoint with respect to issues of masculinity, fatherhood, and response to father absence. This chapter presents the key findings captured from 13 in-depth, semi-structured individual interviews and two focus groups comprising 8 and 15 additional participants, respectively. Copious notes taken by the researcher were used to identify perceived emotions among participants during interviews and focus groups, adding another dimension to the rich data retrieved. The data captured in this study was voluminous, yielding numerous important insights into the lives and
experiences of adult males who experienced fatherlessness for at least five years between the ages of 8 and 16.

This chapter first introduces the reader to the participants in this study. After the participant introductions, there is a summary of key findings supported by participants’ direct commentary on their lived experiences. The chapter culminates with interpretations of the findings that establish potential meanings derived from participants’ perceptions and beliefs about their experience of fatherlessness.

Participants

All names used throughout this chapter are aliases chosen by the participants.

**Participant 1 – Armando.** Armando was a 40-year-old Caucasian man and father to one son and one daughter. He recalled his exposure to father absence began at the age of five years old when his parents divorced. He relayed the immediate significance of his father’s absence and how it thrust him into a period of withdrawal and introversion. Armando cited his father’s absence as a significant contributing factor to his role as the male leader in his household from his early adolescent years. Obligated to work to support his family from an early age, Armando indicated that his forced maturation in the absence of his father caused him to formulate several perceptions of masculinity and fatherhood. In spite of a challenging transition to manhood, Armando was married and achieved a graduate level degree. He proudly described how he has shaped his multi-job career as a college professor and corporate executive to accommodate his family time, as opposed to shaping his family time to accommodate his career. He insisted, “he did not want there to be any doubt that he was doing everything he can for his family.”
Participant 2 – David. David was a 52-year-old African American man and father to two sons. David did not recall ever meeting or seeing his father throughout his childhood or adolescent years. In fact, David painfully acknowledged that his first physical encounter with his father was when he was 42 years old—a meeting in which he stated to his biological father, “I’m not here looking for a father. I’m just looking for the rest of my identity.” This event culminated a tumultuous period in which David experienced extreme low periods of financial struggles, coping with rejection, and intense drug abuse. He raised his teenage sons as a single father upon separation and ultimate divorce from their mother. David earned a vocational certification and is a highly acclaimed documentary and film maker.

Participant 3 – Hancock. Hancock was a 29-year-old African American man and a father to two sons and two daughters. When Hancock was just two years old, his father was incarcerated and he never saw his father again until he was 13 years old. Incidentally, his mother was also absent during this period, and so Hancock was, as he described, “in different foster care group homes and around a whole lot of different random people.” His recollection of his childhood and adolescent years without a father were summed up as a period filled with missed opportunities and a lack of direction, limitations, or rules. Having fathered his first son at age 16 and his second son at age 17, from two different mothers, Hancock described being desensitized to the issue of fatherlessness and cited this nonchalance about being a father as a key contributor to his own abandonment of his sons. Thirteen years after his first son, Hancock had two daughters for whom he was present and available but still maintained minimal to no contact with his sons. As a self-confessed member of the Bloods gang and a drug dealer,
Hancock vehemently expressed his disdain and distrust of men when he stated, “I don’t like dudes.” Hancock was convinced that the presence of an active father would have been the key to an alternative path for his life that may have featured a college level education and a career as a professional athlete.

**Participant 4 – Jeban.** Jeban was a 39-year-old African American man and the father of two teenage boys. He described having only seen his father on fewer than 10 occasions in his entire life. Jeban grew up in an environment in which father absence was a prominent phenomenon. As a star football player and Junior Olympic track athlete, Jeban expressed the intense disappointment he felt as a teenager when his father was never present at his sporting events. The disappointment and emptiness has stuck with him even into manhood. Jeban described the transition from boyhood to manhood as a series of phases that required the guidance of a father to “push you into the next phase of your life.” Jeban mentioned a lack of guidance from a present father as key to his ineffectiveness at dealing with females or resolving household conflict. Jeban was at one point incarcerated and cited this period as one in which he discovered his spiritual identity. Jeban divorced the mother of his boys and had a fiancé with whom he was involved for three years. Despite his early academic challenges, Jeban successfully completed his undergraduate degree. He acknowledged that his sons lived in another state but was adamant that he was present and available to them through his daily phone conversations and bi-weekly trips to visit them.

**Participant 5 – John Q.** John Q was a 36-year-old Afro-Caribbean. He was a naturalized U.S. citizen who was the father of a seven-year-old son. John Q’s exposure to fatherlessness began at the age of five years old when his parents separated. The
immediate significance of his experience of father absence was rooted in the sudden shift in his family structure from two constantly present parents to one in which only his mother was present. John Q lauded the efforts of his single mother at teaching him about being a man but, despite her efforts, he described an intense unfulfilled desire for the male view. He indicated he would have been better able to internalize the many lessons about being a man if the lessons were given from the perspective of a male who has endured similar experiences. In his adulthood, John Q described a struggle with resentment and anger. He discovered this struggle through professional therapy and identified it was rooted in his fatherless experience. A college trained mechanical engineer, John Q gave up his lucrative career as an engineer in the construction industry to become a stay-at-home dad in order to be heavily involved in every single aspect of his son’s life.

Participant 6 – Johnny Bee. Johnny Bee was a 42-year-old African American man who was a father to five sons. Johnny Bee had only slight memories of his father who abandoned their family to start another family elsewhere when Johnny Bee was just five years old. Johnny Bee described a roller-coaster life that, without a father, led to stints in juvenile detention centers and early exposure to sexual activity. The latter resulted in his first son at age 17. Despite this unfortunate start to his manhood, Johnny Bee took advantage of an opportunity to attend college and, in so doing, he too became an absentee father. An epiphany toward the end of his college tenure forced him to question the legacy that was left for him about fathering and contemplate the one he would leave for his offspring. His epiphany brought a new focus to his life, allowing him to begin repairing the relationship with his first son. Since then, Johnny Bee successfully
pursued a graduate level education and developed a highly successful career. He is married and, with his current spouse, fathered three more sons. As of the publication of this study, his oldest son from a previous relationship was a senior, set to graduate from college with an undergraduate degree.

**Participant 7 – JP.** JP was a 35-year-old Pacific Islander, originally born in Guam, and was the father of two sons. JP recalled that, from the age of five until his early teen years, his father was physically absent due to work obligations. He described his father as emotionally distant though physically present during his teenage years. JP described the longing he had for some affirmation from his father, who was never forthcoming with any displays of affection, encouragement, or emotional support for JP. JP sought that acceptance outside the home and ultimately became a member of the Crips gang. He developed significant animosity for his emotionally disconnected father and this led to anger issues. JP was divorced from his first wife, who was the mother of one of his sons. He was engaged to the mother of his youngest son. After the birth of his first son, JP’s lifestyle of drugs and violence led to his incarceration. At the time of this research, JP was on parole after a five-year stint in prison. JP outlined how he learned many life lessons from prison. Particularly, he described “learning the man code from being in prison and jail…what a man’s supposed to be.” Due to his imprisonment and travel restrictions, JP had little to no contact with his first son. He painfully stated, “I think I’m gonna have a lot of footwork to do in that relationship with my older son because all he knows is his mom, and I’m pretty sure he’s got a lot of questions about me.” JP acknowledged that he shut down emotionally as a result of all the pain he endured and had tried without success to become more emotionally expressive.
Participant 8 – Luis. Luis was a 37-year-old Hispanic man who fathered six children, three of whom were sons. Luis’ experiences with fatherlessness commenced at the age of five when his parents divorced. His father died tragically in an oil tanker explosion three years after the divorce, but Luis admitted he “had lost his father long before” his death. He described adolescent years during which he missed the companionship of a male figure and ended up using illegal drugs. Luis was divorced, with three of his six children—two daughters, one son—being products of his first marriage. He shared that he had little to no contact with any of his three eldest children. He described being rather resigned to the paucity of communication with his first three children and aptly described his fathering experience when he nonchalantly stated, “I lost three, but I got three [more].” Luis admitted he was guilty of committing physical violence similar to that which he witnessed his dad exact on his family.

Participant 9 – Malcolm. Malcolm was a 47-year-old African American man who was father to four sons. He described the unfortunate experience of witnessing the murder of his mother at the hands of his father at the age of 12. The loss of his mother, which in turn resulted in the incarceration of his father, represented a sudden change to Malcolm that has been a central incident in his life ever since. Malcolm described his adolescence, transition to manhood, and unusual path to fatherlessness as experiences that caused him to have numerous unanswered questions, as he could not fathom “why my father did what he did, and I could not…I could not, uh…I couldn’t get it.” He described an intense fear of fatherhood and “being like my father.” As he transitioned into adulthood, Malcolm developed an intense passion for a concept he described as “reconciliation.” He ardently described this term as true forgiveness that occurred when
one sought to gain an understanding of something or someone he rejected. The crowning moment of Malcolm’s journey as a father was when he was able to walk his sons’ “grandfather through the front door for them to see him.” He expressed absolute pride at his ability to model forgiveness of extreme order for his sons to follow. Malcolm divorced his first wife with whom he had two of his four sons. He was a college graduate and acclaimed film maker who dedicated his talents to developing an understanding about fatherhood and reconciliation.

**Participant 10 – Que.** Que was a 52-year-old African American man and father of a seven-year-old son. His father abandoned him at the age of four years old after the relationship with Que’s mother ended. Que described a rather turbulent adolescence during which he lacked the direction and guidance he needed. As a student athlete, he described having no male figure present to assist him through his decision making about college. Que joined the military at age 18 and had a lengthy career. He acknowledged that the exposure he gained in the military was really what he envisioned would be provided by a father. Que described a transition to adulthood involving struggles dealing with females and approval-seeking tendencies. He attributed both to the absence of a male model to actively teach him how to interact with ladies and provide the affirmation necessary to build self-confidence. Que divorced the mother of his son but served as the primary caregiver for his seven-year-old boy.

**Participant 11 – Rich.** Rich was a 38-year-old Filipino man who was a father to three sons. Rich’s father abandoned his family upon hearing the news that his girlfriend, Rich’s mom, was three months pregnant and expecting a son. Consequently, Rich had never in his life seen or spoken to his father. He painfully recalled the profound
collection of emotions he experienced as an adult during a conversation with his mother in which she stated, “I love and appreciate you and I do not regret the decision not to abort you or give you away. Your dad wanted to have an abortion, but I said no. You know, I stuck to my guns.” The feeling of being unwanted was the primary emotion Rich attributed to the relationship with his father. Rich described his adolescent years as “being a loner” and considered the lack of affirmation from his father as one of the biggest disadvantages in his transition into manhood. To gather the knowledge and what he cited as the “attributes that…define a man,” Rich joined the United States Marine Corps and suggested that the Corps taught him many of the lessons he would have expected to learn from his father. Rich was married and divorced twice, and at the time of this study was set to be married for the third time. His younger sons—three-year-old twin brothers—were from his current fiancé, while his eldest son was from a previous marriage. Although there was a relationship, Rich spoke regretfully and was visibly disturbed by his lack of presence in his first son’s life. Driven by his views of masculinity, his belief in a man’s role as a provider, and his constant search for approval and recognition, Rich admitted he was a workaholic who hoped someday to achieve the balance he thought would make him far more successful as a father.

**Participant 12 – Robert.** Robert was a 36-year-old African American man whose father abandoned him at the age of seven when his parents divorced. He recalled the significance of his father’s absence taking root at age 11 and described periodic sightings of his father between the ages of 6 and 12 years old. Robert also experienced a trying adolescent period as he navigated the entry into manhood with questions about the departure of his biological father. However, Robert had an outlet. As a star athlete, he
had an entity that absorbed most of his focus. Despite this, he still had a few encounters with the law and was labeled a juvenile delinquent. Robert was now father to a seven-year-old son but shared custody with his son’s mother, with whom he was no longer involved. He claimed to be an active father who vowed “never to leave this kid’s side no matter what happened” in the romantic relationship with the mother. Robert pursued education at the graduate level, was very active in his local community, and had a successful career in the pharmaceutical industry.

**Participant 13 – Tony.** Tony was a 57-year-old African American man who was the father of three sons. He recalled seeing his father no more than three times throughout his entire life. Tony spoke with admiration about his mom, who did the best she could to teach him about becoming a man. Despite his gratitude for the efforts of his mother, Tony admitted that she could never provide the male perspective, something he sought outside the home and through the media. He mentioned that his fatherless experience forced him to step up as the leader of the household during his adolescent years and direct his siblings and act as a source of discipline. Tony also turned to the military which “helped show me pretty much how to be a man.” Tony married only once and has had a long, healthy relationship with his wife. He described the household in which he fathered his children as one allowing for emotional expression and exposure to multiple experiences.

**Focus Groups**

This research study also involved the conduct of two focus groups. Both focus groups were diverse, comprising 8 and 15 participants, respectively. Figure 5 shows the breakdown of focus group participants.
Findings

The perceptions, fears, and emotions about parenting held by fathers who were previously exposed to father absence or paternal apathy are significantly impacted by their own experiences of fatherlessness. Men who endured significant portions of their youth without the continuous presence of the biological father are left with numerous unanswered questions about their own worth, the part they played in paternal abandonment, and self-doubt about their approach to fathering. Indeed, an overwhelming majority of the participants in this study were abandoned by their biological fathers at rather tender ages and left with a single mother. One participant was actually abandoned by both parents and was absorbed by the foster care system for most of his years as a minor. A thorough inductive analysis of the data captured from the participants allowed for the emergence of eight main themes. Figure 6 illustrates the formation of horizons and themes from the data captured.
Participants’ communicated experiences were distilled into themes capturing the essence of how fatherlessness impacted their transition from boyhood into manhood without a father, their perceptions about masculinity and fatherhood, and their experience of fathering boys. The eight emergent themes are:

1. The overwhelming majority of participants expressed the perception that the impact of fatherlessness as an adolescent was at the core of prolonged life challenges.
2. All participants indicated their experience of fatherlessness led to an intense resolve to be more effective at fathering.

3. An overwhelming majority of participants described the experience of fatherlessness during their transition from boyhood to manhood as one that left a void that could not be filled by substitutes.

4. Participants indicated the fatherless experience was instrumental in shaping their development as an emotional being.

5. A majority of participants communicated their lived experiences made them more susceptible to behaviors that repeated elements of their fatherless experience for their sons.

6. All participants communicated the belief that the most important role of a father is that of teacher and model.

7. A majority of participants shared a personal discomfort with the expression of emotion but believed they had to teach their sons to be comfortable with expressing their feelings.

8. The majority of participants sought or desired emotional closure from their experience of fatherlessness through a re-established relationship with their fathers.

The following sections provide an in-depth discussion of each of the forementioned findings and form the evidentiary foundation upon which cogent interpretations of the findings were constructed. The researcher utilized “rich, thick description to enable the transferability of the findings” (Merriam, 2009, p. 227). Such rich descriptions provide context for a vast array of lived experiences described by the
research participants. Excerpts from interview transcripts introduce the voice of the participants and offer insight into their emotions, opinions, fears, and deep-rooted perceptions about their exposure to fatherlessness. Moreover, the highly descriptive representation of the findings enables the reader to empathetically experience the richness of the participants’ realities as they relate to transitioning from boyhood into manhood. Researcher notes are seamlessly interwoven into the discussion to augment it, strengthen its validity, and enhance the importance of contextual factors.

**Finding One: The overwhelming majority of participants expressed the perception that the impact of fatherlessness as an adolescent was at the core of prolonged life challenges**

One of the primary findings of this study was the perception by participants that fatherlessness was a significant contributor to prolonged life challenges they encountered. While participants indicated that fatherlessness was far-reaching and continually impacted multiple aspects of their lives, there were six significant types of lifelong challenges that surfaced. The first challenge, as expressed by the majority of participants (9 of 13 [69%]), was the perception that they were thrust into adulthood rapidly and, as a result, were forced to deal with adult challenges from a rather early age.

**Early exposure to adult challenges.** One participant, Tony, described the scenario in his household in which he was forced to play the role of father:

I had to pretty much step up as an adolescent, especially being the head of the household as the oldest son. I felt like I had to take the role of, uh…I guess being the dad that wasn’t there. I mean, in a sense…I would always correct and, uh…try to direct my younger siblings. (Tony)

He further described how, in his early boyhood, he had to accept the domestic role typically perceived as that of the adult male in the household. He stated:
So I always kind of took that role on early, because I was growing up, uh...we had like a coal stove. I would go out in the winter and shovel coal. I would clean up, you know, things around the house. I became really good with my hands. So I learned those things early on. And that was just being responsible...It made me more responsible knowing that there wasn’t a dad there. (Tony)

Johnny Bee shared the similar experience of being the eldest child in a fatherless household and carrying the burden of the role of father figure. As he described his experience, his body language and tone conveyed his feeling of regret about his experience. His conversational engagement noticeably faded for a brief moment as he was mentally taken back to this period in his life—his early teens—when his siblings and mother depended heavily on his leadership in the household.

I guess maybe just having to be the man of the house at a very, very early age, you know...Having four siblings...Four of us in the house. Somebody’s got to step up and be that man role. You know, for my younger siblings, for those outside of the household, me being the protector, being the fighter, um...So it just makes you have to be a little stronger...than you probably would be...makes a kid grow up faster than he should. (Johnny Bee)

Some participants, in describing the increased role they played as leaders in the household, outlined their experiences of having to make significant financial contributions to their family unit at a rather tender age. Armando indicated that even in his pre-teen years, his fatherless household relied on his ability to provide financially and materially. Given his intentionality in his own presence for his household, Armando was visibly disgusted by the thought of an 11-year-old having to work and support his family.

I didn’t have a role model, but also I felt from my personal perspective that I had to assume a role not unlike that of a parent in my household very early on. Just anecdotally, due to a variety of circumstances, I was working and providing my family with money to pay bills when I was 11 and that was true every summer through high school...I literally had to have money to give to my mom and stepfather to do things like pay the mortgage, pay the car payment. I had to buy us a refrigerator. We had one that was broken for, gosh, I think the better part of
two years, and we didn’t get a new one until I came up with the money working in the summer and said, “That’s it. I’m done. We need a refrigerator.” (Armando)

In addition to being thrust into the role of father and leader in the household at rather early stages of their lives, participants also described the experience of having to seek knowledge on their own. They outlined how the void in male guidance created by fatherlessness was another factor that thrust them into making adult choices they were ill prepared to make. JP displayed his frustration and aptly captured this concept in this statement:

Even with two older brothers in the picture, it’s like they didn’t wanna be there to guide me or nothing like that, so it’s like the only one that was really a guide in my life was myself. So like I said, I really had to put the pieces together myself, figure it out, and I had to grow up as a man at an early age. So I was really…fending for myself when really I shouldn’t have…making adult decisions at a time when I should have just been footloose and fancy free as an adolescent. (JP)

Que shared his experience of having little direction in the face of important life-changing decisions. He shook his head and flailed his arms as if to ask, “what am I supposed to do?” Que expressed how the lack of adult male guidance and direction impacted one critical decision in his life that may have changed the entire trajectory of his adult life—that of college selection. When prompted to describe his experience as an adolescent without his father, Que provided the following response:

No direction! No direction! It was like, okay, I was an athlete, and I was getting letters as a 10th-grader from colleges—UCLA, Xavier, Occidental—on track, specifically, because they were recruits wanting to come out and see me. And so I asked my mom, “What do I do? All these people are coming out and watching me…I don’t know nothing about college.” And she was like, “I don’t know. Figure it out.” And so I was like, “if I had a dad”…because my father was a star athlete too…in track. I found that out through relatives and stuff. And he was…you know, basically like me, or I was like him. So I thought if I could talk…if I could just talk to him, he would know what to do. And I couldn’t and I
didn’t. And so it was like, I’m going into the military then because even though I had these colleges wanting to see me, wanting to talk to me, coming to the house…and sending me stuff…it was overwhelming because I didn’t have the exposure…or the experience. So, it was like…missing that direction in my life. It felt like a stumbling block. (Que)

The perception among participants that they were forced to grow up quickly as a result of fatherlessness was also reflected in their recollection of their experiences of prematurely becoming fathers themselves. Some participants (3 of 13 [23%]) recalled adolescent years when their involvement in sexual activity led to the conception of a child. Armando described this scenario as one of the lowest points of his life and one during which he believed his father’s presence would have made a significant difference.

I think in my life up to this point, probably one of the low points for me that I really felt like I needed a father around was when I got my girlfriend pregnant when I was 16. She ended up having an abortion. That was not my choice, but I certainly respected hers…I felt very, very alone. And I really felt as if I needed some sort of guidance or counsel that I was not going to get from my mother. Nothing against my mother, of course. (Armando)

Hancock, a 29-year-old man, fathered his two sons when he was 16 and 17 years old, respectively. When prompted by the researcher to identify how the presence of a father during his teenage years may have altered his life, he cited several ways in which he perceived that his life would have been different if he had a strong paternal influence. In his response, he included matriculation from a four-year university and the pursuit of a professional career as an athlete. Hancock also responded, after some deep thought, that “if I had had kids, they would have been one, two, or three right now…toddlers…toddlers only.” He strongly believed that a father’s presence would have precluded him becoming a teenage father.
Another participant, Johnny Bee, spoke passionately of early fatherhood and how the absence of his father contributed to his lack of understanding about the value of his own presence as a father. He stated, “In high school, I wound up having my first child…And not having a man in my life and…not understanding the value of being there and the importance of being there.”

**Coping with difficult times.** The prolonged life challenges participants perceived to have resulted from the absence of their father also included their views on coping with hard times. More than half the participants (7 of 13 [54%]) indicated that father absence meant a lack of direction which in turn translated into the lack of someone to model how to navigate difficult periods in their lives. Luis described his own indecisiveness in the face adversity:

> It was a mess not having my dad. It was a mess because…my dad was more strict. I think if he would have been...around, I would be different. I think I would be successful. Look at how my life is right now. I’ve gone to jail twice, made bad decisions, but my wife…It’s not her fault. It’s my fault...I blame myself because I allow her to be around me. If I get in trouble again, it’s not her fault, it’s my fault…I know what I need to do, but I don’t do it. (Luis)

The researcher observed that while making this statement, Luis was noticeably disturbed and flustered by his perceived inability to deal with the complex challenge before him. Another participant, Rich, contemplated the lack of direction he experienced in a fatherless household, stating:

> When you don’t have a reference or baseline to go off of…you’re going to fail…When you have a father figure who sometimes guides you in a certain direction…you’re a little bit fast-tracked. So I would say, like, um, I would have been more fast-tracked. Life probably would have been a little bit easier for me. But the fact that I wasn’t fast-tracked and I always took the bad path, [laughs] the wrong path, it made my journey a lot harder, a LOT harder. (Rich)
Participants also highlighted that the perception of having no direction not only impacted their adolescent years but also went on well into their adulthood. David expressed his awareness of his potential but also his lack of preparation for advancing through a difficult period during his adolescent years when he was trying to determine what the next steps in his life would be:

The Superman that was in my mind of who my biological father was, even, even if he was there...because I felt inside there was a lot of potential in me. But I didn’t know where to go. I didn’t know how to get where I was trying to go. And education wasn’t pushed and forced or even talked about in my home. (David)

Other participants stated that in dealing with challenging times, they ended up hurting others around them and suggested that a father’s presence would have taught them to navigate adversity in a healthier manner. Johnny Bee strongly believed he would have benefited from his father’s advice during challenging times and expressed this in the following manner:

I think I would have hurt a lot less people in life. I think I’ve had to learn way too many lessons the hard way. And I think if I was fortunate enough to have had a father there, I probably would have learned those life lessons early on, without having to learn them the hard way...the value of money...the value of respect...I had no consequences to my actions. I could do whatever the heck I wanted to, because there was no one there to reprimand me. I think if I would have had that earlier on, I think I probably would have...maybe been...a better friend to others. I think I probably would have been a more model citizen at an earlier age...And not to say my mother couldn’t have taught me some of those things. I just didn’t get those. (Johnny Bee)

The ability to cope with hard times transcended the adolescent and manhood phases of some participants’ lives. Jeban captured the viewpoint shared by several other participants when he described how father absence impacted how he approached challenges in his life. When prompted to describe how father presence would have changed his life, he energetically responded with the following:
I don’t know about you, but sometimes I want to talk…just about issues that I deal with as a man. And when you don’t have that, that person to confide in, uh, a person that understands what you’re going through…And I think that’s the biggest issue. I was talking about them steps to becoming a man. And, and even in one of those steps is being a man and being an old man. And a lot of times, men are 30, 40, before they get older men, we always tend to seek wisdom from older people. And I never had that, that man that could teach me stuff that I can draw from. I never had that. And so men would come in and out of my life in seasons. And that’s the struggle in my life at times. And so I never had that consistency of a man to be there. No matter how much I wanted it, it was never there. And so when you don’t have it, and you want to talk to somebody about it, it’s so hard. (Jeban)

Armando recalled an incident during his early adulthood when he sustained a terrible back injury whilst at work. He described the difficulty of working with workers’ insurance and the emotional toll it took on him when he believed his integrity about his injury was being questioned:

I was injured on the job when I was…about 23…and it screwed up my back enough that I was not working full-time for over six years, and during that whole process, there’s this back and forth in the worker’s comp industry about “Can we prove that this is broken or is he lying? Is he just trying to get drugs for his back?” or whatever. It’s just this extended period of time where I really felt as though, on a pretty regular basis, people were questioning my integrity, mistrusting me, and it would have been nice to have somebody around to say, “Hey, you’re not these things they suspect you are.” Things like that.

During that period of time, I felt…very, very lost and adrift and just looking for reassurance…not necessarily to fix something. I didn’t feel I needed anybody to fix anything, but just…I felt like I was questioning myself, like, you know, “Does my back really hurt? Yes, it does. This is why I can’t walk,” and things like this. So it would have been nice to have some sort of parental council in that regard from someone I respected. (Armando)

Another participant, Hancock, provided a rather profound perspective when asked what his father could have provided that would have changed his life and helped him deal with difficult life situations in a more effective manner.

Just their presence! You gotta…like…you can’t…you can’t plant a flower if you don’t watch it grow. You know what I’m saying? You gotta go out and water it from time to time, you’ve gotta go out and switch it a little bit, make sure it gets
sunlight [gestures moving a plant around]...You’ve got to do...feed it every once in a while...You’ve got to do what you’re supposed to do...Same thing for a child as for a plant. (Hancock)

**Involvement in deviant behaviors.** A significant majority of participants (8 of 13 [62%]) indicated they were at some point involved in deviant behaviors that were a product of and contributed to their progression through their adolescent years and into adulthood. These participants perceived that the absence of a male figure in the household they could depend on for guidance was a primary reason why they ended up in legal predicaments. Robert candidly described the efforts of his mother and his perception of a lack of credibility in her attempts to provide guidance:

> The biggest disadvantage during those years was just not having somebody there that I could bounce ideas off of and get it from a male perspective. Um...When I was 11 and 12, I was a juvenile delinquent. I mean, I was getting into a lot of trouble. My mom tried everything in the world to help me, but it was just...hearing it come from your mom that you're not supposed to do this, and this, and this, um...in my head, it was...“what do you know, Mom? You’re a female. You don't know what it's like to be a man or a boy at this point. You never went through this. So I love you, but you can't relate...I can't relate to you.” And it was really tough then, at that point in time in my life. (Robert)

The deviant behaviors were also prominent among participants even in their adulthood and, interestingly, they still attributed their involvement in such behaviors to the lack of guidance. When prompted to describe his experiences while transitioning from adolescent into manhood, Jeban stated:

> Just a lot of dumb mistakes...One thing that I learned about being a man and becoming a man is you get stuck in situations where...And I can give you an example. When you’re a teenager, you’re supposed to act a certain way. But a lot of times, men get caught in that teenage stage well in their 20s, because no one has pushed them into that 20s stage...that young man stage. And a lot times, we could be 21, 22, 23, and we’re still acting like a teenager. And we hear women say, “Grow up.” How? Teach me! Show me how to grow up! Or the words that most woman say, “Be a man.” How do I be a man? No one has taught me! And so with that, I was making mistakes as a young man, and no one had ever taught
me how to be one. They tell me to be one, but no one ever taught me, showed me how. And so when I made the mistake, no one showed me how to fix it. That’s the form of daddylessness that I had to endure. (Jeban)

Jeban later admitted that this lack of guidance led him to a period of incarceration, stating, “I went to jail for a few months in my life. And not having guidance…just making stupid mistakes and partying all the time and hanging around the wrong group.”

Other participants (5 of 13 [38%]) explained how the absence of a father figure was at the root of their involvement with illegal drugs. One participant stated:

I tried drugs. I think I was not concentrating 100% in school. I didn’t listen to my mother how I wanted to listen to her. I think I would listen to her better because my dad used to be more strict, and I think it would have a big impact in my life if he would be around us. (Luis)

Luis described his longing for his father as a guide and influence during his teenage years and further relayed how his absence may have influenced his involvement in drugs:

Discipline. I didn’t have no discipline. I was not…You know…I was begging for my father to guide me through my life. I think I would have a better future right now. I did good, but I think I should have done better. You know, when I was in high school, I totally would start, you know, using with my friends. (Luis)

Another participant, Hancock, concurred, asserting that his father, had he been present, would most likely have stopped him from participating in some of the negative activities in which he was involved.

You learn, every decision that you make, and everything that you do, you learn. So the things I went to jail for, I didn’t go back to jail for them again…except for domestic violence. So for selling drugs…I wasn’t going to stop, because that’s how I made my money, so…If my dad was around, I probably wouldn’t have did that, because he would have stopped me. (Hancock)

As mentioned earlier, the deviant behavior participants attributed directly or indirectly to father absence was not limited to their boyhood years. Some participants painfully described episodes well into their adulthood when the struggle of father absence
resulted in poor choices on their behalf. David described a scenario he endured
during his 20s when he was trying to arrange his first meeting with his father:

He said, “Well, you know, I’m doing a conference in San Francisco. And you
know, maybe we can meet then.” And I remember I was living with a lady, and I
was moving out. And I was broke. You know, early 20s broke. And I’m trying
to buy a little bit of furniture for my house, for my apartment. And I’m like, what
if he comes, where are we going to sleep? So…I had to buy this couch, and to
have the pull-out sofa was $100 more. And I’m like, but I don’t have this $100.
But if he comes, we’ve got to have somewhere to sleep. So long story short, I buy
this pull-out couch, and I never heard from the guy. The date he said he was
coming and was going to be in town came and left, and I never heard from him.
And I…Right around that time, I started doing drugs. I started doing…cocaine
was big then, and I…that’s my low point, I started doing drugs. And I…was in
the dark for two years, just kind of out there. (David)

The challenges with deviant behaviors described by several participants
highlighted their beliefs about the need for the acceptance and guidance of a father during
the critical adolescent years and even into adulthood. Some participants saw such
behaviors as another approach to gaining the attention they sought and were unable to get
from their fathers. Some also engaged in such behaviors as a means of rebellion and this
was well reflected in a statement by one of the participants when he recalled a scenario
with his emotionally distant father. JP reported that instead of encouraging him after a
positive report card, his father simply continued to berate him with negative comments.
The researcher observed that JP was still, at the time of the interview, noticeably angered
by this situation. JP stated:

There’s nothing that I can do to get any kind of positive affirmation from this man
because everything is negative, so that’s when I said, “If they want negative, then
they’ll get negative,” and that’s just when…I developed that attitude. That’s
when I started tail-spinning at that age and into my manhood, you know. (JP)

As with several other participants, JP confirmed that the root of his involvement
in deviant behaviors was the lack of affirmation from a father who was either physically
absent or emotionally disconnected from them. Johnny Bee captured a similar perspective as he pondered how father absence affected his transition from adolescence to manhood. In his profound description, he questioned the reason for his fatherless situation, outlined its emotional impact, and detailed how it manifested in defiance and deviant behaviors on his part.

I guess at some points like, what did I do wrong? Why do I not have a dad? You know, that was one of the things. We just kind of doubt…And maybe having a little bit more tougher skin than most, you know…I think even being a smaller child, I think I really became kind of a tough shell and kind of a bully of sorts. I had a lot of disciplinary issues, um, as a kid. I wound up getting kicked out of school at one point, having to transfer to another school. And it’s not like I came from a bad household. I think I was just really deeply moved and upset by the fact I didn’t have a father in my life, maybe. And maybe having…thicker skin or a façade of having thicker skin…because I didn’t have one, I think. (Johnny Bee)

Adult spousal relationships. Another lifelong challenge outlined by participants was their marked difficulty at having healthy romantic relationships. An overwhelming majority of interview participants (12 of 13 [92%]) described having significant challenges in establishing and maintaining healthy romantic relationships. Figure 7 illustrates the relationship status of participants with the mothers of their sons. If a participant had sons from multiple relationships, then he was categorized as either “Separated” or “Divorced” respectively, even if he is married to the mother of his other son(s).
The chart shows a significant majority of participants (10 of 13 [77%]) are no longer in a relationship with the mother of at least one of their sons. Even those who were indeed married to the mother of all their children expressed their struggles at maintaining adult relationships. The above illustration clearly represents these struggles in adult relationship that were further supported by the perceptions and experiences expressed by the participants.

One commonality among interviewees was the viewpoint that during their childhood and adolescent years, they witnessed and experienced poor models of healthy adult relationships. They stated that these poor models impacted their preparation for the complexity of forming and maintaining a long-term romantic relationship resilient enough to counteract the gender-related, cultural, and experiential-based barriers they encountered. A common assertion among participants was that this lack of preparation for adult relationships was a byproduct of the absence of an emotionally connected father figure who modeled effective behaviors conducive to relationship longevity and success.
Moreover, they cited the belief that they grew up without access to the lessons learned and experiences of a man and, as a result, were prone to make poor choices in their relationships.

When prompted to identify the periods in their lives they perceived as low points, a majority of participants referred to their struggles with marriage. John Q, a participant who was married to the mother of his son, described his relationship struggles as a low point in his life.

Navigating my marriage and having some difficulties with my spouse over the years. You know, fights and arguments, etc… I feel again that if my dad had been around in my formative years, I feel that I would have been better equipped to deal with situations that came up in my marriage, and I would have been able to deal with my wife better and avoid some of the low points that were because of, you know, conflict in my marriage… I think that’s significant because it definitely had an effect on me. And I feel like I would approach my wife in a different way, had I had a good example set by a dad that wasn’t there. Now of course, you can have a dad that’s present in the house, and sets a BAD example, and does not do anything to positively influence how you deal with women or how you deal with your spouse or what have you…I feel like I was robbed of the opportunity to have that, right? Whereas some people might have had that a little bit bad, I did not even have the opportunity to see an example, either good or bad…because a bad example, I might have been able to say, “Oh, wow, wow. That is not how you deal with a spouse.” And a good example, I would have been able to say, “Yeah that is definitely how you deal with a spouse.” So I feel like the experience of having the dad there, um, is still a good learning experience, even if the specific, um…dynamics of that father/mother relationship is not a positive one. (John Q)

Another participant outlined the poor model of a wholesome relationship that he witnessed. David’s biological father left his family before David was even born. So not only was David subjected to the abandonment of his biological father, but he also had a stepfather who was emotionally distant. David described this experience as doubly difficult to navigate, especially considering the flawed model his stepfather provided in some areas. With respect to relationships, he expressed his disgust at the promiscuity and
infidelity present in the adult relationships he saw, primarily on the part of the men.

He described the relationship behaviors that were modeled for him as follows:

> And then when it came to women and girls, it was basically girls like a bus – you miss one, catch another one. You know, or get as many notches on your belt as you could. And I struggled because I still had some spiritual connections then. And I just felt like it didn’t feel right inside of me to have, you know, sex with a lot of women…And then my dad was very promiscuous…So everyone knew, but my mom pretended she didn’t. And you know, I remember having friends tell me in high school, “Man, why don’t you tell your dad to park his car somewhere else? Everybody can see where he goes to park.” And it was just like…What do you say to that?…And then I know, at home the marriage seemed very rocky at times. So I just felt like, man, what if you were different at home, maybe your marriage would be better. So it…you know, it made me just completely different from the ‘have them all’ player mode to “man, what about getting the right person and treating her special.” (David)

Given their shared perceptions of poor models of effective adult relationships, participants also acknowledged their failures at relationships as well. Robert labeled limited relationship competency as one of the biggest disadvantages of paternal abandonment. He described his difficulty in grasping the concept of love when his own biological father chose to abandon him when he said:

> It was difficult for me to grasp that, you know, my real dad didn't want to be there for me, didn't love me, I did something wrong. So growing up…and going through teenage years, going through my early 20s, I struggled a lot with relationships, I struggled with, um, just trying to figure out who I am and what I want to become. It was pretty tough for me…and in just communication as well…how to communicate properly…your feelings and ideals. It was pretty tough for me to do that, at those ages. (Robert)

The majority of participants spoke of challenges with conflict resolution within spousal relationships, a necessary skillset for longevity. One participant described how his lack of effective conflict resolution skills and infidelity ultimately led to his divorce.

> I wasn’t good at making choices, and I’m still working on that. Um, even in my last marriage…we would go from, you know, make up to break up, to separation, and then get back together, and…you know, conflict resolution…was just a
means of keeping the marriage together. There wasn’t an emotional connection tied to it... but it just got to the point to where, you know, to where my mischievousness and, you know, just trying to lead a double life caught up to me. And, you know, my ex-wife got tired of it, and we were constantly butting heads and, you know, it was never a good thing. (JP)

Upon further reflection, the same participant connected the dots from his experience in a household with an emotionally disconnected father to his own behaviors as an adult.

Growing up... it was just normal in the household to be wanting to try to take your head off, and then, you know, all of a sudden, here comes, you know, mom and dad, and they be like, “You’re not supposed to do that. You’re brother and sister...” and blah, blah, blah. But it never meant anything to us because we were just like, we didn’t want to get our asses kicked by our mom and dad. So we were like, alright. But I mean, we didn’t even have no tools growing up or skills, uh... as kids or in the family, like, to even deal with conflict resolution. (JP)

One factor commonly cited as a manifestation of poor relationship skills was infidelity. One participant described feeling constantly “in the chase” and the intense doubt in his ability to have a wife and a strong family unit. When asked to reflect on the root of this self-doubt, Johnny Bee recalled an environment in which he never saw a healthy relationship modeled to him. He provided the following explanation for his early relationship deficiencies as he transitioned into manhood:

In my younger days, I was what we consider a womanizer, I suppose. Not understanding the dynamics of a man and a woman and commitment. I had zero commitment in my life... I’ve had lots of quality girlfriends. I’ve been engaged. I still had this burning desire to chase, you know, something else. And feeling kind of like a caged tiger... I felt like I had to go out there and see and do it. And maybe it was a self-destructive personality, because I see that in my brother... same background. He’s never figured it out. So I think we battled the same type of emotions growing up. He’s never got out of it. So he’ll be with a woman, he’ll leave. He’s got six illegitimate children from six different moms. It’s, um... You know. That’s just kind of how... it was as we were kids, it’s how the people in our neighborhood, there were lots and lots of single moms, lots of people on welfare. Unfortunately, there were no real solid family foundations. And so, unfortunately, he’s never found that. (Johnny Bee)
According to the participants, the behaviors that led to the dissatisfaction and struggles in their adult relationships included, but were not limited to, infidelity, the inability to resolve conflict amicably, and the selection of partners who were not “good picks.” Participants highlighted the lack of a positive relationship model as a key influencer on their challenges with sound relationship practices to date.

**Finding Two: All participants indicated that their experience of fatherlessness led to an intense resolve to be more effective at fathering**

The second major finding that emerged centered on the deep-rooted desire expressed by an overwhelming majority of participants (12 of 13 [100%]) to provide a different father-son experience for their sons. Interestingly, this intense resolve to be a more effective father was expressed by participants even if they had already in some way replicated their own fatherless experience with their offspring. Almost all participants shared the perception that the fatherless experience may be perpetuated along generational lines and, as a result, were somewhat committed to trying their utmost to avoid passing on the trend of fatherlessness in their family. Participants cited the sheer pride in being a father, a desire to break the trend of fatherlessness, the drive to enable their sons to “tell a different story,” willingness to try alternative approaches to fathering, and belief in the mantra “imperfect but present” as factors contributing to their intense resolve to be more effective at fathering.

**Desire to break the trend of fatherlessness.** The topic of breaking trends of father abandonment and/or paternal apathy in their families evoked some of the most passionate responses among participants. As stated earlier, 12 of 13 participants expressed the desire to make a difference in their sons’ perceptions of a father-son bond.
Incidentally, the one participant who did not refer to a commitment to fathering his sons differently was a 29-year-old man whose two sons were conceived when he was 16 and 17 years old, respectively. He expressed concern over his immaturity at the time and how his perceptions influenced him about the role of a father:

Once I was out of the picture, me and her wasn’t dealing with each other no more, I reverted back to basically when I was a kid and I could do whatever I wanted to do, but I just made money and then I just buy my son things, and then just stay there for maybe a day, and then be gone for six or seven days. (Hancock)

Hancock’s comment depicts the attitude toward fathering that this participant developed over his life experience thus far. Another participant, Johnny Bee, expressed a similar experience in which his early foray into fatherhood included misguided perceptions about what it meant to actively father.

In high school, I wound up having my first child. Um…And not having a man in my life and, you know, not understanding the value of being there and the importance of being there…I allowed myself to have a child and let her take full responsibility for the first couple of years, cause not really knowing, because, you know, that happened to me and it happened to other people that I knew, and the people who were in my environment who had no dads were kind of the same thing. Young parents, big deal…their mom or the grandma will take care of the child and, you know, it’s no big deal. (Johnny Bee)

Despite this early demonstration of paternal apathy with his own son, Johnny Bee described a “light switch that went off” as he reflected about his behaviors as a father.

He emotionally detailed his thought process:

It was like, okay, it was kind of an eye opener one day…You have this child whose life you’re absent in. You’ve got this beautiful young man who is growing and who’s going to go in the same footsteps you did if you don’t get your act together and move him in the right direction. And so, even though I initially felt that his mom was doing an okay job of making sure he had everything he needed…and I was there financially. I wasn’t there for him emotionally and helping him grow into a better person…and it was like, okay, I’ve got to get my act together, you know. And so, um, I can’t tell you exactly why or what it was, but it was like an overnight switch, you know. I just wanted to make sure that I
was there, I was part of his life, and rather than just being a financial
contributor, you know, that I was there as much as his mother was. (Johnny Bee)

The realization that a father’s actions could potentially preclude the perpetuation
of the thoughts, feelings, and actions associated with father absence is one that drove
several other participants. One participant described a rather vivid scene in which he as a
father took his newborn son to the ocean and reenacted a scene from the popular Disney
movie *The Lion King*. He described making a strong commitment never to fail his son as
his own father had failed him:

I guess it was a week out of the hospital…and *The Lion King* had just come out.
So I lifted him and I said, “Simba, this is all you see….” And I was playing
around joking, saying, “Everything you see is yours.” And I was holding him,
and I looked at him, and he was just looking at me, and…I told him, “I’m not
going to fail you. No matter what, I’m not going to fail you.” (Jeban)

Another participant described a similar commitment he made never to fail his
sons as a “hardening.” His expressiveness when providing this description connoted for
the researcher an impenetrable protective shield that he placed around him and his son in
order to protect his father-son bond.

It hardened me toward the fact that when I became a father…um, I would want to
do things a little bit differently, and was aware from a young age that this is not
how I would want my offspring to come up in life. And I made up…my mind
from a very early age, even before, you know, the thought of having my own
children…I was able to make a firm [decision]…I was going to be a different type
of father. I was going to be present in my child’s life. I recognized that there was
something that was missing. I recognized that it was something that was
important and that…I would make sure that I would be there in their lives,
definitely. And so that’s what happened there…I had a resolve from an early age
that I would not repeat the quote unquote "cycle" of not having a dad in the
household when I became a dad myself. (John Q)

Rich shared his view of breaking trends of fatherlessness but described a rationale
of living vicariously through his sons’ experiences. He first shared his determination to
be the absolute opposite of his biological father. He desperately wanted to provide
his sons with experiences he wished he had, while being present to create memories with
them. He stated:

Right away, immediately…the moment that I knew…okay, she’s pregnant…I
thought about me…okay, my mom was pregnant. So…you do a quick…rewind
and you think, okay…You think of yourself and the flaws or the gaps that you
had. Um…So I thought, okay, my dad wasn’t there. Okay. I’ve got to be there.
I’ve got to own up. He didn’t own up. Basically, whatever…opposite of
whatever my biological dad, you know…He wasn’t there, but anything that I
didn’t have when I was growing up, I mean, that’s what I thought a man would
be.

I wanted to be a father, um, to…cause then I can practice what I thought
should have been done with me. It’s just actually something to look forward to
like, man, my dad didn’t take me to a baseball game or to little league…I get to
do that. So to me, I imagine myself living vicariously through my children in
raising them. That’s why it’s so important for me…I’ve got to be there. I’ve got
to see them growing up. I’ve got to interact. I want to make sure that they have
memories of them growing up with me in their life that…you know…I
participated…you know…I was a good father…I was there for them. (Rich)

In breaking the generational trend of fatherlessness, participants also recalled how
their own experiences of father absence or paternal apathy made them work even harder
at modeling what an active, involved father looked like. Some participants also
expressed the notion that their father-absent experience placed an added responsibility on
them to make up for the poor job their fathers had done. Here are some of the
descriptions of this increased responsibility:

Um, I think it affected it in a way where it made me want to work even harder to
show and express how to be a father. And, uh, what it takes to be a father,
because of a lack of me not having mine. (Tony)

I was also determined to do a phenomenal job of being a dad to kind of make up
for the job…the poor job that I felt my own father had done in being, um, present
in my life, of being available, um, for me, through my formative years. (John Q)

The thing that drove me was…I don't want to be like my real dad. How he did
me. And, uh, I think that's...to this day, and it'll continue the rest of my life, that's
what drives me, man, is that I don't want my kid to feel the way I did growing up with their real father not being around. No matter the parents split, the parents are together...it doesn't matter. That kid is number one, should be number one for the father. And that's what I do for my son. I think I might spoil him a little bit too much as far as with the love and the coddling maybe sometimes, but I think that's just me wanting to make sure that he's okay, that he doesn't feel that emptiness like I did. (Robert)

I don’t wanna do the things that my dad did to me. Especially not being around...you know...I want to be a good example to my kids, not a bad example. (Luis)

And I think that the drive for constant improvement is fueled by the fear of being a bad dad, or...I guess not wanting to be like what my dad did. I wanted to change that, wanted to make that change, and you know...not to use a cliché term, but break the cycle and not do it how my dad did. (John Q)

My biological father made me know that I would never do to them what he did to me. And the way I said it then was, if there’s breath in me and breath in them, they’ll always be able to get to me. They’ll never have to wonder where their father is and if he loved them and why he would leave them. (David)

Malcolm provided a rather poignant and riveting description of his desire to break the generational trends and debunk some of the superstitious beliefs he had about his destiny as a father. His story was one of immense pain as he described the emotional impact of the murder of his mother at the hands of his father:

Like a lot of young men would say about their fathers, I was going to be a better father. And ironically, my father never knew his father, and he was always telling me as a little boy how lucky I was to have a father. He was always telling me that. “You’re lucky. I never had a father,” that was his line. And it always left me with this confusion around why this guy who beat my mom on a pretty regular basis would think that I was lucky to have him. I couldn’t get that. So after he ultimately killed her, it became that much more confusing for me...And I remember very clearly, um, wanting to do for him what my father didn’t do for me. There was a clear generational connection that I was experiencing internally, because now I was in between a father and a son. So I was the middle guy now. I was the connection between two generations now. And I remember looking at my son, and holding my son, and saying to myself, and maybe whispering to him, that this is going to be different...And I just remember, I kept thinking I’m not...going to fail this boy. I’m not going to hit his mom. I’m not going to do this to him. And it was always, I’m not doing this to HIM. He became the center of my
actions…He was the reflection for me…He was my barometer. Everything was about him. (Malcolm)

Create a different reality for sons. In addition to their desire to break trends of father absence, almost all participants (12 of 13 [92%]) also expressed the need to create a different reality for their sons. Some expressed rather emphatically that their sons would benefit from hearing about both the positive and negative experiences their fathers endured. The elements of the different story they wanted their sons to be able to tell included the creation of a nurturing environment where paternal availability was of utmost importance. Such environments, some participants asserted, led to sons who were far more confident and self-aware than they themselves felt growing up fatherless.

Participants described how they went about shaping a different reality for their sons and how it manifested in their sons’ outlook.

I think the levels of confidence my children have are different than my confidence. For me, mine was maybe a façade of…having to put up that fake wall and be tougher than I really probably was. You know. Whereas my children have a confidence of, you know, they’re loved, they’re nurtured, they’re smart. Um…And you know, they’re going to do well. And if they don’t, they’re going to learn from it and, you know, their mother and I will get together and we’ll figure out, you know, solutions that will help them move to the next level, without them having to figure it out themselves. (Johnny Bee)

In expressing the different experience his sons will have, one participant captured his sheer excitement at the prospect of being a father, while another participant relished helping his son be strong in areas in which he was deficient.

Being a father? I, uh…I love every second of it…I mean, being a dad is just like…everything to me. What I do today may affect generations. My sons, I want them to know what it feels like to be held, to be loved, to be told “I love you,” you know, wrestle with them, to discipline them, to watch them grow into young men. (David)
I think trying your best in anything that you do, realizing that it’s okay to have expectations placed upon you, and it’s also okay to fall short of those. That’s a lesson I haven’t quite learned, so I would hope that my son would. I think that it’s always easier to not finish something or to not be part of a group than it is to finish something and to be part of a group. And I want him to, as I mentioned earlier, be better than me in that regard. I feel as though I didn’t have someone that pushed me to do anything at all. And I would hope that when my son is old enough, he could acknowledge that I had helped him and pushed him but in a constructive way. I don’t want him to be one of those fanatical sports parents or anything like that. I want him to see in our relationship that we’re both better as people because of that relationship, because of our level of communication, because we keep trying at anything, at everything, and that along the way, we acknowledge and talk about the mistakes. (Armando)

Two participants reflected on their level of participation in almost every aspect of their sons’ lives and commented on the impact it would have on their sons in the long term.

I’m not saying I’m the best dad…by no means. But I mean, I coach my kids’ sports, I show up to their classrooms, you know, I do everything that I think a father should do or could do. I don’t think there’s anything outside of my ability…you know…that I should be doing that I’m not at this point. (Johnny Bee)

Um, I’ve been heavily involved in every aspect of my son’s life from the time he was born. Um, I had an opportunity to, um, be a stay at home dad for a number of years, and that has helped me as well, too, because I have been able to be available and be present for everything in my son’s life – good things, bad things, all of his life experiences. And I think that that overall is positive, because when my son gets older now, and he now takes the baton, and he is ready to have his own kids, he has, um, he can look back, and he will be able to always draw from his experiences of having his dad around when he has similar challenges in life or he has similar situations to face in his life, he will have something to draw from. So I think that just being around, I’m setting my son up for success in life, because at minimum, he will at least have, um, history to draw from when faced with various situations in life, and he will have, um, he will have some type of precedent that he can use in his own life. (John Q)

Participants also shared their concern that their sons would not have to endure some of most painful aspects of their fatherless experience. Jeban recounted his disappointment at not having his father attend his sports events and stated:
I don’t ever want him to say what I said. And I told him that, and I told my youngest that. I told them, “I want you to say, ‘when I had a great game, or I did something, my daddy was there.’” (Jeban)

Armando, on the other hand, shared his desire for his son to have the experience of being a boy without having the overwhelming responsibility of providing financial security for the family at a tender age.

Security…both financial and emotional…I felt as though I did not have those growing up. I didn’t, for example, want my child to have to earn money to pay bills for our house when he was 11, as an example. I wanted my son to know what it was like to be loved, to have a father that was affectionate, but most importantly was there. I would rather be there and make mistakes every day than not be there at all. But I think one of the things that I really tried to do in the half-dozen years that my son has been around relates to that affection and communication, knowing that your parents love you and give you a kiss and give you a hug. I just think that it means the world to a child to know that. (Armando)

The imperfect but present father. Throughout the conduct of this research, a majority of participants captured the concept of the imperfect but present father; this concept, they explained, takes into account that their experience of father absence or paternal apathy inflicted some unforgettable emotional wounds. They acknowledged that the fears and emotions resulting from the lack of a relationship with their fathers would continually influence their behaviors and inhibitions. Participants suggested the need to overcome these challenges and address the personality development deficits rooted in their experiences were sometimes overwhelming, consuming a significant amount of their time and effort. The idea of the imperfect but present father indicated that, over time, participants developed the perception that being a present father should be fathers’ highest priority.

In commenting on some of the low points of his life and how fatherlessness contributed to them, Armando described the lack of affirmation from his father and the
emotional scars he had from the constant pursuit of his father’s love and affection.

He described what that meant for him as he acknowledged his imperfections:

He does not express affection toward me. He’ll use the sort of “proud of you,” kind of in-passing, sort of terms, but I think there’s a big part of me that has kind of given up on trying to get whatever I think I need from him: that validation or that acceptance. And I’ve gotten to a point where I said, “You know, I’m imperfect. I am as imperfect as anyone else, but I am here, and I am participating in my family and my life.” And I love my family. And there is very little about it that I would change of any substance. (Armando)

Tony concurred, and as he discussed his concerns about becoming a father after growing up without one, he quipped:

I may be different than most guys, but no, I wasn’t really, because I was there. And I always feel like if a parent is there, a man or a woman, if they’re there with their children, they’re going to give them the best, as long as they’re there. So I didn’t have that fear of what it was going to take…I just did it. (Tony)

David provided a rather succinct but poignant response when prompted to indicate the key lessons he wants to pass on to his sons. He stated “that it’s not about perfection, but it’s about presence. And that they have an obligation to their children to be there for them.” Que also mentioned his determination to be engaged with his son despite his own imperfections, indicating that “if I have a relationship with my son, relationship means that you’re going to see my strong points, you’re going to see my vulnerabilities, and you’re going to see my imperfections, and in it all, we’re going to get through it.”

Both Johnny Bee and John Q prioritized father-presence as one of the factors about fathering they perceive as the key to providing a different experience for his sons.

Here are the viewpoints of these two participants:

A father should be somebody who gives you unconditional love and support…cause kids are going to mess up, they’re going to do great, they are
going to do not so great. You know. You need somebody who is going to be there to support you…So now, it’s just making sure that I’m there to nurture, to love them, to make sure that whatever needs they have, that they’re met and that they learn stuff. (Johnny Bee)

I’ve been heavily involved in every aspect of my son’s life from the time he was born. Um, I had an opportunity to be a stay at home dad for a number of years and that has helped me as well, because I have been able to be available and be present for everything in my son’s life- good things, bad things, all of his life experiences. And I think that that overall is positive, because when my son gets older now, and he now takes the baton, and he is ready to have his own kids…he can look back, and he will be able to always draw from his experiences of having his dad around when he has similar challenges in life, or he has similar situations to face in his life. He will have something to draw from. So I think that just being around, I’m setting my son up for success in life…because at minimum, he will at least have history to draw from when faced with various situations in life, and he will have, um, he will have some type of precedent that he can use in his own life. (John Q)

**Finding Three: An overwhelming majority of participants described the experience of fatherlessness during their transition from boyhood to manhood as one that left a void that could not be filled by the substitutes they sought out**

All interview participants acknowledged that paternal absence and/or paternal apathy created a void in their household and ultimately in their upbringing. Participants perceived that having no father figure around or having an emotionally disconnected father during key developmental periods of their lives resulted in numerous foregone opportunities. Despite the presence of multiple substitutes, participants all described the sheer longing they experienced for the presence of their father.

**The void.** Participants in this study described key elements they missed during their transition. The elements they considered valuable, which they did not experience themselves, they also perceived as “simple things” like having someone to talk to, support at sporting events, and lessons on social interaction with peers.

It’s crazy because you want to talk to somebody about everything, and you want people to be at your games and your sporting events and help you make decisions.
And you want to just…you know what I’m saying…have a blueprint of what you’re supposed to do with your life…you don’t have that person to do that. (Hancock)

When I was in high school, it became more significant because, uh, I was a star athlete. So…And I would look at everybody else and they would have their fathers, and I would look into the stands and I would see nobody. And I wished, man, what do I have to do to win the affections of my father…And you always kind of dream…man…I wonder what my life would be like if my father was here. (Que)

I really felt like, in terms of how to interact with my peers and, ironically enough, in terms of how to interact with them, in particular in sports settings and small and larger group settings, I had no anchor. I had no one to bounce things off of about how do I handle this situation, and so I think that quite often, I didn’t handle those situations very well. (Armando)

You know, being a father now, and really being able to look back and see, you know, what I missed. I mean, you miss so much not having a father in place. You know, teaching you the rights from wrongs, how to throw a ball. You know, just being there for guidance, and just somebody to talk to you and, you know, teach you how to be a man. You don’t have that with a mom, you know. (Johnny Bee)

A common thread among participants’ perceptions about the void created by father absence was the emotionally stressful experience of fathers missing important activities like sporting events and not being present to push them academically. Jeban, a former Olympic junior athlete and football player, described how valuable the presence of his father would have been. As he shared this, the researcher noted his discomfort as the memories of his pain surfaced.

We were like ranked in the country individually. And so when we got…to the finals, and I look up again, and I’m a junior in high school at this time; look up. He’s not there. But he told me he was going to be there. So again, that failure. Even though we won, I still had that empty feeling. They were like missed opportunities, where I wanted my dad to be there.

I was empty. Because even though my mom was there, even though my family came from everywhere to see it, he wasn’t there. I kept looking up, and I remember crying during halftime…And we ended up losing the game. But I remember halftime, I was crying and sitting in a corner, and they’re asking me
what’s wrong, and I wouldn’t tell them. And I never talked about it until now with you. I never told anyone. Because…I didn’t want to make it seem like I was being selfish. But I remember looking up in the stands, looking for him, and he was not there. (Jeban)

Other participants spoke of not having their father to provide the guidance and motivation they thought necessary for them to achieve academic success. Rich explained his perspective as follows:

I think at that point, when you’re a junior, it’s probably when you need your father the most. You have these decisions. Life impacting decisions like college, what are you going to do in life?…That’s probably when I needed the most mentoring because, you know, at that point you are about to become a man…So the closer I got to 18…scholastically, uh…I lost my drive. I lost that push. And I think that if I had my biological father, OR a father figure with me at that point, I would have been a lot more successful. (Rich)

John Q shared as a similar view as he detailed what he considered to be the biggest aspects of his development that he believes were foregone as a result of his father’s abandonment.

Navigating the really important milestones like getting my driver's license, having girlfriends, dealing with sex, navigating my, um...matriculating myself through school, and getting into college. I saw those as important milestones...And, um...those are events that I think I would have benefitted from having the advice of a dad, having a dad present to be able to support me through those things. And encourage me through those things...or advise me well through those things ...And then, um, also, things like being able to handle...oneself in situations outside of the house where you had to deal with...people...who are not your family members, strangers, and how to handle oneself in public as a man in society. Um, those are the things that I feel like I missed out. Those are things that I feel like a dad in the household would have been able to either show me, you know, explain to me, or show me by his example that this is how a man is supposed to operate within the house or the society. This is how a man is supposed to treat a woman, a spouse, or whatever. These are the things that a man is supposed to do. I feel that those are the things that I can point to that I feel were missing and that I missed out on or that were missing. (John Q)

Several participants also poignantly described their adolescence without a father as one void of several benefits they perceived as available when a father is present. Que
captured this when he stated, “You just feel this void, it’s missing, because Dad isn’t there. And so that was the, that was the, uh, baseline. But then the absence of what you perceive that you’re missing was there, along with…I didn’t know what it looked like.”

Luis provided a similar viewpoint when asked what he thought he missed most as a result of his father’s absence, stating, “Discipline. I didn’t have no discipline. I was not…you know…I was begging for my father to guide me through my life. I think I would have a better future right now.”

**Substitutes.** All participants described their pursuit of substitutes to replace the missing father figure from their household. Substitutes often took the form of people—without any limitations on gender, age, or familial affiliation. Other substitutes described included various activities and organizations that participants perceived as providing some of the guidance, presence, and advice they referred to when outlining the void created by their absent dads. The following sections represent some categories of substitutes unveiled during the discourse with the participants.

**Other male figures.** A majority of participants described building relationships and pursuing interactions with other male figures. Here are some of the ways participants described what they sought in other male figures. John Q outlined what he derived from relationships with other male figures:

> I was able to seek out and identify other strong… male role models…I was able to, um…align myself with, um…older males who I could emulate, who I could get advice from, who I could talk to, etcetera, and you know, basically it was a process of filling the gap, filling the void that was left by my dad with, you know, other males that I identified…that would be good as role models. (John Q)

Tony described the relationship he built with his maternal uncle who provided some of the benefits he perceived would originate from his biological father:
I had an uncle that was a…uh…a good man. And, uh…a couple uncles that were good men. Yeah. And I would turn to them growing up. And they would give me good advice, you know. But, um…again, it was temporary, because they would come in, and they didn’t live there. So I would see them maybe a few times a year. So, you know, and when they did come in, they spoke some wisdom…So those were some of the other male figures that I had in my life. And you know, uh, it was a blessing to have them. Because I do look back sometimes and think about some of the things that they had said to me, and places they had taken me to get experiences in life that were very, uh, inspirational. And if I had really, uh, taken a lot of things to heart, um, I believe it would have made me just that much more of a better man. (Tony)

Jeban also captured his thoughts about the importance of other male figures with whom he interacted by providing a succinct description of what he deemed as the most benefit of their presence.

They gave me what I needed. When a man doesn’t have….when a boy doesn’t have…or a young man doesn’t have that man around to…how can I say…make it be okay to mess up but still show me how to fix it, and that was…I think that was the biggest issue…I was making mistakes along the way, and I didn’t know how to fix them. (Jeban)

Que shared how various different male figures were influential on his own development and aspirations in the area of education.

I will say that I had an uncle…a couple of uncles that would talk to me. And my uncles were kind of like my mentors kind of guys. And, uh….They were in prison. So, so I would go to the prisons, visiting them, and, uh…They would tell me what not to do, but at the same time, what I needed TO do. And, uh, they got me excited about you know, some of the most oddball stuff, like, I love science because I could sit there and talk to my uncle about the heart and how the bicuspid and tricuspid valves open and close and how the left ventricles, right ventricles, and you know, all that kind of stuff worked…And then I had a professor, or a teacher, that….noticed potential…and I had another history teacher, and he talked about…Well actually, he was a poly-sci teacher, and he talked about the preamble and he talked about the Bill of Rights, you know, the amendments, and what those things really meant and how we need to look at those things. So he made it alive. His enthusiasm made me want it. So seeing those men made me think, “that’s a man!” (Que)
Johnny Bee described the guidance of one of his athletic coaches as a key contributor to his progression through his adolescent years.

I had a wrestling coach...He was an amazing father. He was a good coach, and he was a good role model for me. So, as I’m out screwing around and some of my friends are gang bangers and into doing, you know, stupid stuff they weren’t supposed to be doing...You know, him being able to pull me aside and look me in the eye and say, “Hey, you’re going down the wrong path”...and talking to me like he would to his own child. You know. And so, people like that, whether it’s college professors or some of my older college fraternity brothers, you know, then, you know, teachers....just professional people that I’ve seen, you know, in my early adulthood. (Johnny Bee)

Upon the tragic loss of his mother to murder at the hands of his father, Malcolm painfully recalled the presence of his extended family when he stated, “So my uncles...The presence of my maternal grandmother, um, my maternal uncle, my maternal aunt, it was a constant reminder that my father was not around, and they had replaced him.” JP explained the emotional wedge that existed between him and his father and described his longing for a father figure, which he sought outside the home:

I felt that I just had no connection with my father ‘cause I’ve looked at other people, my friends and how they had relationships with their fathers, even looking on the TV and what the perception of what the media or the perception of Hollywood gives what a father and son relationship’s supposed to be. I found that wasn’t the case in my household with my father, so I was like...I kind of felt it really made me feel empty inside because it was like, there’s no way I can really have a connection or a bond with him so it led me to...Well, basically, it led me to looking outside of my family for that connection or bond with other people on the streets or other people who I felt could give me that connection which my father couldn’t. (JP)

Mothers. A majority of participants shared their experiences in a single-parent home and suggested, sometimes unequivocally, that their mother—a single woman—was their substitute father. According to participants, mothers in their homes fulfilled some of the roles of their absent or emotionally distant partners. John Q captured this concisely
when he acknowledged, “my mother was a good mother. My mother tried to do all
the things that were necessary to ensure my development.” Tony’s brief description of
the role his mother played in his fatherless household was rather profound:

She kept everyone together. She made sure we were always together. We did
things together. We were exposed to different things in life. And I think that was
one of the biggest things that my mom, um, could have done for us growing up,
for me especially, is giving that exposure.

It made me more responsible knowing that there wasn’t a dad there. And I
didn’t really, like I said, have anyone to really teach me that other than my
mother. She was the, I guess, the man and the woman in the house…I believe I
gained a lot of my knowledge from my mother, as being the stronghold in the
family. (Tony)

The experience of friends and peers. Some participants (4 of 13 [31%])
described seeking life lessons from the experiences of their friends. After a moment of
deep thought, Rich described his experience of looking toward his friends’ experience as
a means of learning about the world:

Um, without having a father figure, you know, you have your friends, really. You
sort of gauge what they’re doing, what their experiences are, and you try to relate.
So you do look for mentors, or…sort of a guide. Um, I think you’re a little bit
more hypersensitive, um, to the fact that you don’t have a father figure. So for
me, I was actively looking and comparing myself with my friends…you know, what they were doing, what they were doing in their life…You know, their
interest, their likes…Because, again, I had nothing really to relate to or use as a
baseline…that a mentor would tell you. (Rich)

The military. Five participants spoke emphatically about the sheer importance of
their decisions to join the military. A common theme among their perceptions about the
military was its role in helping them transition into manhood.

I was fortunate. I went into the military. And the military helped show me pretty
much how to be a man. It teaches you certain responsibilities. And they say
Uncle Sam wants you, he’s pretty much being the dad when he gets…when
you’re enrolled in the military. Because once you’re enrolled in that, your life is
in their hands.
The military really helped me with the transition, because it taught me responsibility. I had to do things and figure things out on my own. And it showed me how to do those things and how to figure those things out on my own. And, um, it gave me a sense of leadership and direction and a sense of pride in being a man. And realizing…and it also taught me that you can succeed in anything that you try and you work hard for. And I feel that if I hadn’t gone in, um, God only knows where I would have been…on the streets, hanging out, getting in trouble, doing the wrong thing. (Tony)

Rich described a similar experience, highlighting that while he originally joined the military to gain exposure to the world, he gained several other lessons he would have expected to receive from his father:

I joined the Marine Corp for five years. One of the reasons why I actually joined the Marine Corp was, uh, I wanted to travel. I wanted to get out and travel, see the world. Um…I was informed that you’re in the military…um…you learn discipline, leadership…a lot of, you know, attributes that sort of define a man…um, you know, those ads. But they tell you, they promote, they advertise that, you know, you learn not only occupational skills but things in life that no other person would.

When you’re in the military, you know, they have a course, a strict course. They have an outline of how to…a code of conduct. And you know honor, integrity, leadership, things that I never learned as a man, you know. So they definitely filled that gap, um…because in order to be successful in the military you have to learn the fundamentals of life…you learn to interact with people better. Um…You learn how to be subordinate or be a leader. (Rich)

Malcolm provided a riveting description of the early impact becoming a father had on his life. He recounted how the traumatic absence of his father created in him paranoia about leaving the side of his newborn son and resulted in his inability to maintain employment. Even though he was well into his adulthood—23 years old—he perceived the military as a stabilizing force on his life.

I went into a tailspin of really bad employment skid for about three months. And I skidded right into a Naval recruiter’s office and was recruited and regained some stability through enlisting…regained some economic stability, regained probably some mental stability… suddenly I was able to provide something more stable for him. (Malcolm)
Que recalled how the military allowed him to trust other men:

So it was, uh…it was, uh, scary, cause it’s like you’re leaving school, going into the military, and you know you’re not coming back home. So this is manhood. And I have to trust other men to get me through this next 12 weeks of basic training. (Que)

The media. Several participants gathered some of the key lessons, which they perceived should have come through a rich relationship with their fathers, from various forms of the media. When asked from where he gathered his knowledge about being a man, Armando provided the following intriguing response:

Oddly enough, I think that a big part of what helped me to form this idea in my mind of what a man should be actually came from comic books. I immersed myself in comic books and the whole idea of good guys and bad guys and very sort of black and white terms at a very early age, and I think that made an impression on me in terms of actions speaking louder than words and supporting what your mind and your heart are telling you to do by taking that step, taking those physical actions. Don’t just say, “I wanna be a good father.” Be a good father. Don’t just say, “I wanna be a good husband.” Be a good husband. Don’t just get married because you’re supposed to. Get married because it’s the person that you want to spend the rest of your life with. Things like that. (Armando)

Rich also expressed how he constructed his personal notion of manhood from the examples and storylines provided in television shows:

You know, it’s not something that you, that I’ve read. It’s something that you…you watch and observe. And I think it’s things that you watch on TV…It’s a little bit more passive, but you know…And then, you know, you sort of create this ideal person…his ideal man. (Rich)

Johnny Bee quipped that father absence impacted his transition from adolescence to manhood since he never experienced a father-son relationship. He stated, “when you don’t have that, you don’t know how it’s supposed to be. You see it on TV…you see it on Leave it to Beaver but you realize that’s very far from your reality.” Tony pondered
the sources from which he gathered his knowledge of manhood and highlighted how
the media guided his perceptions.

I was always looking outside of the home for the male figure. It was either on
television or I’d hear voices on the radio, male figures…The media played some
part in it, because when I was growing up there were a lot of innocent shows on.
And when I say innocent, it wasn’t any swearing, uh, there wasn’t a whole lot of
sex being shown. So those things kind of helped me out, uh, as an individual and
as a man to realize and see that, hey, this is how a man should conduct himself at
home, again, around his family and around, you know, his peers, his community.
(Tony)

**Spirituality and church.** Some participants indicated they leveraged spirituality
and their affiliation with a church as a mechanism to fill the gap left by paternal absence.
A couple participants rationalized their experience of father absence by suggesting they
had a spiritual father. The strong bond they developed with their spiritual father inspired
them to confront any challenges they faced as a result of the failures of their earthly
fathers. Tony captured his perception of the role of his spiritual father as follows:

I ended up accepting God as my Father. So when I didn’t have, early on, when
you asked me what was my other figures that I could….I used God as that one. I
look for his guidance, his direction, and where a man should go. So I studied; I
read the Bible and I studied the Bible and got an understanding of how a godly
man would live. (Tony)

Que aligned with Tony, reconciling the absence and shortcomings of his father
with the all-powerful perfect nature of a deity. Que shared about his relationship with a
spiritual father:

I say it like this, I remember when I would vicariously look at the, like my
mentors. Um, like some of the pastors and stuff. And they would talk about the
Father God and all that kind of stuff. And so in my mind, I said, well, I may not
have a physical father, but I have a spiritual father. And so God is my father. So
since God is my father, then I’ve got everything. I’ve got everything. And so
now, I’ve just got to go out and get what he wants me to have. Mentally…And so
it was kind of like, because the world that I was living in physically didn’t seem
real, I would, I guess in my own way, took what was in my head, spiritually, and make that real...because that seemed to be a better place. (Que)

While other participants concurred on their experience of spiritual fulfillment as a replacement for their absent biological fathers, a few identified the presence of active male leaders in their church as a key source of guidance in their lives. These substitutes provided participants with advice and the benefit of learning from their past experiences. Jeban described his perceptions of the impact of male church leaders on his life by stating, “thank God, since I’ve been here there have been men who have stepped into my life who have taught me how to be a man, how to be a dad, how to be a Christian, how to be a man of god.”

Que particularly recalled the influence of a mentor from the church who introduced him to a young men’s support and mentorship group. Despite his noted mistrust of encounters like this, Que was receptive to the guidance and the benefit of learning from the experiences of others. So Ron took me under his wing. And they had this Brotherhood every Saturday. And so, he was like, “Come on out, come on,” you know how they would kind of egg you on a little bit. Went out there, and saw that the brotherhood was good. So they talked about very practical life issues. And you had a lot of men there that brought some of their kids. They talked about relationships, they talked about their wives, how to deal with that, and related that to scriptures. And you had the older people, you had young people. And in that, it was a good fellowship—Real stuff—And so it made me a student. (Que)

Sports. Participation in organized sports was yet another commonly expressed substitute through which participants sought to gain some insight into masculinity and effective life skills. Several participants (6 of 13 [46%]) self-identified as superb athletes during their adolescent years and passionately shared some of their perceptions of how participation in athletics provided them with important lessons that propelled them into
adulthood and offered stability at times when they struggled with the absence of their fathers. Robert, a top-tier college basketball player who ultimately played professionally, provided a poignant description of his participation in sports as a key contributor to his personal development and a mechanism through which he learned how to cope with paternal abandonment:

I learned through basketball, playing basketball. Because in basketball, you've got to go through trials and tribulations. You're going to have where things just aren't going right for you at all. And you can't pout, throw your head down, and just walk off the court. You've got to sit there and figure out how to...how to do something else. If your shot is not going, I've got to do something else. I can't get angry about it. I've got to figure something else out, and move on from there. Uh, if I'm having a bad game, just doing nothing, and you get put on the bench, you don't sit on the bench sulking and being mad. You cheer on your teammates, because they cheer for you when you're doing well, you cheer for them. Um, I learned a lot of those kind of [clears throat] intangible items through basketball. I learned a lot through basketball, actually. Basketball was a...good safe haven for me growing up, was playing basketball. (Robert)

**Gang affiliation.** Two participants indicated that one mechanism for coping with the rejection they felt at the hands of their fathers was affiliation with a local gang. Of the two participants, Hancock experienced fatherlessness via outright abandonment while JP described a present but emotionally abusive father from whom he constantly sought affirmation.

I was hanging around a bunch of guys which I thought were friends but really weren’t my friends, but they were a part of a local neighborhood gang, so they made me feel welcome of course because they saw I was a loner. And so basically, I was looking for that acceptance which I couldn’t find in my father, so basically I joined a local neighborhood gang and basically looked upon my friends and my peers for that connection which I found. (JP)

Hancock spoke with an element of disdain about his biological father’s involvement in gang activity. When prompted about some of his lifestyle choices that may have been influenced by his absent father, Hancock pointed to the fact that his father was a “gang
banger.” The researcher observed that during this response Hancock seemingly questioned whether his father was even good at being a respected “gang banger,” while lauding his own commitment to the gang. Hancock candidly spoke of his affiliation with a local gang:

He could have changed my lifestyle because, even though my father was a gang banger...If that’s what you want to call it. You know what I’m saying? Cause to me, I don’t see how he was a gang banger, because I don’t see how...I mean, I see how...I mean, I’m connected to him, but I don’t see how, like...I look at myself as being a Blood from [XX], but at the end of the day...how can I really say that, and I’m not doing that every day? But as they say, it’s for life! (Hancock)

**Substitutes fall short.** Despite their seemingly constant search for activities and people to fill the vast void left by paternal absence, the overwhelming majority of participants described these substitutes as falling short. They indicated that although they valued the lessons learned from their “fill-ins,” they acknowledged that they did not even remotely compensate for the emotional toll and experiences foregone as a result of the physical and emotional separation they experienced with their fathers. Participants aptly described how many of these substitutes, in spite of their value, were not enough.

Robert held the efforts put forth by his mother in high regard but acknowledged how there were certain elements she could not fulfill. He stated:

She tried everything she could to make sure I was on track and good to go. But she just...that father, having that male figure around that really cared about you, lacked...A boy needs that physical, get back in line, boy. You know. And I wasn't getting all that.

The biggest disadvantage during those years was just not having somebody there that I can bounce ideas off of and get it from a male perspective...When I was 11 and 12 I was a juvenile delinquent. I mean, I was getting into a lot of trouble. My mom tried everything in the world to help me, but it was just...hearing it come from your mom that you're not supposed to do this, and this, and this, um, in my head, it was...what do you know, Mom? You're a female. You don't know what it's like to be a man or a boy at this point. You
never went through this. So I love you, but you can't relate...I can't really relate to you. And it was really tough then, at that point in time in my life.

You know, I didn't have my real dad there to show me how to play catch, show me how to talk to girls, show me, you know, right from wrong from a male standpoint. And so you know, I was a little bit lost. Uh...lost there as an adolescent. And you know like I said, my mom was always there. My mom played mom and dad. BUT...even though she played mom and dad, you know, she still lacked some of the male...I couldn't go to her for some things that you can do with a man. (Robert)

Tony and Armando shared a similar viewpoint indicating that as they became older and faced male-oriented challenges, they recognized the credibility of their mothers in delivering a male perspective was somewhat limited.

My mother tried the best she could to teach us those things, but as boys growing up, after we got, after I got to a certain age in my life, I didn’t look at her as that strong person to get the male side from. (Tony)

Armando stated, “I really felt as if I needed some sort of guidance or council that I was not going to get from my mother. Nothing against my mother, of course.”

John Q described the realization that mothers simply were not equipped with the relevant experiences to teach some life lessons. These were important shortcomings that precluded a mother completely filling the hole left by his father’s abandonment.

However, later, I came to realize there are certain things that you...there are certain experiences, certain learning experiences or certain developmental experiences, ranging from simple things like tying a tie and shaving, to more, um, significant things like dealing with females and dealing with the opposite sex. And there were certain things that just were more, would be more....that I would be able to digest better coming from a male perspective as opposed to a female perspective, and these are just examples of things that I observed that my mother would not be able to teach me in the same way a dad that was around would be able to teach.

And I think that, um, that guidance and that leadership, and that authoritative, if you will, presence in the household, um...there is something to be said for that. And it cannot be duplicated by a woman-only household. And, um...there was just a difference. And like I said, this was very obvious when I visited the households of my friends that had a dad that was present. It was clearly different. The household still was successful, the household still ran,
everything that needed to get done was still done, but there was that element of authoritative leadership that was missing. (John Q)

In addition to the commentary on mothers falling short as substitutes for absent fathers, participants also disclosed their perception that some of the male figures they adopted as mentors, advisors, and fill-in fathers were not completely upstanding citizens.

Put out on his own as soon as he became 18 years old, David described the hardship he faced and the men who came to his rescue when he needed a male guide the most:

For me at the time, I think it was very dark. Because I was then in survival mode, because I turned 18 and the words never changed, so I had to leave home. So I moved to, went to a technical school. And I only knew one guy there. I left home with $300, and this school, and then I kind of...there it was...let me just say it...it was pimps who started kind of...kind of, uh...taking care of us...helping us get through school. So, so now...then it just was about hustling, just trying to eat. Because I didn’t have money, didn’t have money coming from home for support. So it was just survival. (David)

Other participants described how the male figures who stepped in to fill the void left by paternal absence were in some cases negative examples. Particularly, these male role models were, in some cases, imprisoned.

I had an uncle...a couple of uncles that would talk to me. And my uncles were kind of like my mentors kind of guys. And, uh...They were in prison. So, so I would go to the prisons, visiting them, and, uh...They would tell me what not to do, but at the same time, what I needed TO do. (Que)

The guy who I was looking up to as a dad is the one who ended up getting 50 to life. I looked at him as a dad. And even though he was doing wrong, I okayed it in my heart because he treated me...he treated me like a dad. I didn’t call him dad, but I looked, in my own eyes, up to him as a dad...because he was always there when I needed him. He always gave me money. He always...whatever [gesturing to indicate he always did anything]. And so when he did wrong, I made the wrong right in my mind, because I okayed it. (Jeban)

The person that told me don’t get in trouble, his name was Will [XX]. Something like that. He was my foster mom’s husband, or something like that. But he was in jail. (Hancock)
Participants responded candidly about whether the substitutes to which they gravitated compensated for the absence of their fathers. Robert was reflective as he described the impact of the presence of his stepfather:

He didn't fill the hole...I would say he probably filled the hole probably 75%, but that 25%? I still wanted, yearned for my father, my real father, to be there for me. And I, like I said, going through my teenage years and my early 20s, my stepfather was around; he was giving me that guidance. Still I was having problems, just because that hole, that 25% wasn't there. So I wasn't a whole person, for lack of a better term. And it was tough. (Robert)

Que also shared how his mother tried diligently to introduce him to other male figures. His mistrust for their intentions and his viewpoint that they were not genuinely interested in his welfare led him to an attitude of cynicism when dealing with these inserted male figures. Que pensively recalled his perceptions about these individuals:

My mom would have some of her friends...some of her girlfriends’ boyfriends or husbands, whatever, kind of, uh, try to spend some time with me and say, “Hey, why don’t we go to Baskin Robbins and go for a talk?” And the reality of it is, I appreciated that they tried, but they really didn’t know. So it’s like: you don’t know me, I don’t know you. You ain’t around enough for me to share, so let’s just cut it. Let’s just keep it real. You know, you’re cool, I’ll tell you about...yeah...you know...my schooling is good...I’m getting good grades, you know...because I have to...because if I don’t get good grades my mom’s not going to let me play. So...Y’all don’t come to my games, y’all don’t know me. I don’t know you. I’m not going to see you...probably another two or three months...So...But I appreciate the effort. So thank you. (Que)

When prompted to share his perceptions on whether his uncles filled the hole left by his father, Tony stated:

No. They didn’t fill the hole. It’s, it’s...I don’t think it’s something that someone can just fill. You know, I think it’s either you’re there...A child sees his mother and his father...Even if he never sees his dad, he knows he has a dad...So for them to...for you to ask me that, I would say no, they didn’t fill that gap. It’s not something that anybody can just fill. (Tony)
Overall, all participants expressed their belief that there was a void left in their lives as a result of father absence. Whether consciously or unconsciously, participants acknowledged they attempted to fill the gap by seeking other individuals or activities offering the lessons and developmental tools they perceived they would have received from their fathers. In spite of the significant value placed on the substitutes, a majority of participants conceded that none were enough to replace the empty feeling created by father absence or paternal apathy.

**Finding Four: Participants indicated that the fatherless experience was instrumental in shaping their development as an emotional being**

A significant number of participants shared how fatherlessness impacted their emotional wellbeing. A majority of participants indicated they perceived deficiencies in their emotional development affecting their transition into manhood and were key contributors in shaping the men they became. A common perception among participants was the viewpoint that fathers play a significant role in teaching their sons to be comfortable with emotionality and tolerant of the expression of emotion among those with whom they interact. The following sections outline the commonly expressed participant views on various aspects of their emotional health and development.

**Fear.** A majority of participants admitted fear was a major factor driving their approaches to fathering. They shared how decision making and interactions with their sons often centered on a fear originating from their experience of being abandoned by their fathers, from the treatment they received from a father figure, or from the emotional distance that existed between them and apathetic fathers. One fear expressed by an overwhelming majority of participants was that of failing as a father or not being “good
enough” to father their boys. Below are some of the ways participants described their fear. Malcolm shared the intense experience of fear that he would follow the path of his father and that the relationship he initially attempted to build with his son was beyond his control:

I guess my biggest fear was I was, somewhere deep inside me, that I WAS my father, and I was going to fail. That I was going to implode at some point, against that…that…against everything that I had tried, that I was just going to snap, implode, and crash, burn to the ground. That was my biggest concern, that there were forces that were at work against my father and mother, these forces had targeted me also. And that, you know, it was…generational, that it was out of my control. That was my biggest fear…that my relationship with my son was not in my control. (Malcolm)

Armando had similar perceptions about his own predestination of being like his father. He aptly described his concern about his propensity to repeat some of his father’s behaviors that he perceived wounded him during his childhood and adolescent years:

I think that if someone like myself that comes from a dysfunctional or broken home wants to make a change, the best way that they could make that change is by being a man and by living up to their commitments and their responsibilities while at the same time not settling for less in anything for himself or in selecting his spouse or for his children. It’s very easy to do less, but I grew up with parents that did…nothing is perhaps an overstatement, but not by much. And I was extremely reluctant to have children. I was scared of having children for a long time because I felt as though I was, in some respect, predestined to repeat the cycle. (Armando)

A significant majority of participants identified the feelings they experienced when they first learned they were going to be fathers. Robert cited fear as one of the primary emotions he felt when he discovered he would have a son:

I didn't want to repeat what my father did, that I do not do it. So it's easier said than done. And I was scared. I didn't know what to do. I didn't know how to do it, how to take care of a kid, how to be there for the kid, how to drop the things that, you know, you like to do for fun, because you have a kid and the kid needs your attention. (Robert)
When asked what his primary feelings were upon discovering he would father a son, David’s prompt response was, “if I would be good enough. I was afraid.” He elaborated by stating:

I just…I didn’t trust me yet. I just didn’t know if I was going to be good enough. And I knew, I knew what being hard and being a disciplinarian was like, but I didn’t know if I was going to be smart enough to navigate them, navigate…HELP them navigate through and give them things that they needed to become good men. (David)

Participants also expressed that their fear of failure went beyond the perceptions of not being good enough for the role of father into their situational awareness and ability to deal with the numerous scenarios they would encounter as they attempted to father their sons. John Q cited the lack of exposure to his father as a factor in his feeling of being ill prepared for some of the situations he would face as a father:

My biggest fears were that I would not be able to, um…I would not be able to handle certain situations that could potentially arise, because I did not have the experience from when I was a child. Umm…My biggest fear was not being able to perform some types of role that I would normally be expected to perform as a dad, through ignorance of not having the experience as a child. (John Q)

Some participants described a pseudo-paralysis that they perceived as a result of the fears they developed about fulfilling the role of father, having never witnessed great positive models of fathering. The researcher observed that Luis was markedly flustered as he pondered on the crippling effect of his intense fears on his ability to effectively father. He stated, “It affects me by doing nothing…because I’m here. I want to do this, but I can’t do it. I can’t. I don’t know why.” JP described how intense fear of the inability to provide financially for his family was so paralyzing that it drove him toward negative behaviors:
My biggest fear was just...being able to support them through their lives financially, but also being there for them in their lives to support them throughout what they’re going through. I always grew up with this idea that I’m always gonna be like the hero in a situation, and so that’s the way I wanted it to be with my sons, or even in my first marriage, where I’m gonna be the hero. If there was someone bothering my ex-wife or my sons and I needed to play the hero, here I come. Or there was something going on financially and my ex-wife didn’t have the money to do it, then I was gonna play the hero and fix that and this and that, but unfortunately I wasn’t able to do that because I just kinda fell apart. I would be there for, like, if I needed to be there to protect my family, I would be there, but as far as like the other aspects of it, it was too much pressure I put on myself ‘cause every day I would worry. Like, what if I get fired from my job? What if I can’t provide food on the table for my kids or for my ex-wife? Or what if I can’t put...It was just every day with just constant stress. And like they say, pressure busts a pipe, and that’s what happened. When my pipe burst, it was like to the point where I just started reverting back to the streets or reverting back to my old ways, and it ended up landing me in prison and taking me away from my kids and my family. (JP)

Some participants described the trauma associated with being abandoned by their father. David was noticeably shaken as he recollected the feelings he associated with abandonment. He poignantly represented the impact his experience of both paternal and maternal abandonment had on him:

I think because not only did I deal with the abandonment of my father in my early, early years, I was abandoned by my mom as well. And I think that’s what made me decide to spend the 4 ½ years seeking counseling and therapy. So I think I’ve always had this huge fear of women leaving me, because my mom was all I had, and then I was living with my grandparents, and she would come in on the weekends, some weekends she would come see me. And then leave. And every time she left, I’d cry. (David)

**Trust.** Participants also indicated that another aspect of their emotional make-up involved their ability to trust others—particularly men. Malcolm described his feelings toward other men as a result of the experiences that he had with his father:

I was suspicious of other men during that period of time. I went to a Catholic school. And while I never experienced any challenges with priests—you know a lot of things have happened with priests and children over the years—I never experienced any of that. Um, and then there was my uncle as well. I never had
any challenges with, with the priests or with my uncle, but I was always very suspicious of men, authority figures that were in my life. And I didn’t have a lot of trust for men who were in authority. Having to call the priests “father,” as we do in the Catholic Church, was equally difficult for me. Having to say that word over and over again, was, was difficult for me. So the anxiety and the fear, and the distrust was always present for me. (Malcolm)

The mistrust that Malcolm harbored for other men altered his interpersonal interactions. He elaborated on this when he stated, “I am certain that….for a very long time, I shackled myself, or protected myself, in a way that made me unapproachable to both men and women.”

Armando also shared how his experiences impacted the trust he had in other men. He outlined how his interactions with men were often conducted with skepticism and an expectation of disappointment:

I think I operate under the premise that people in general can’t be trusted. And certainly when it comes to men, my experiences with men have been much more confrontational than anything else. And so that has been my sort of default perspective when it comes to that kind of a relationship. It’s not, “Oh gee, here’s my buddy that I can confide in.” (Armando)

Jeban poignantly described his general mistrust of adults, even those who were rather close to him:

Until probably four years ago, I had an issue with trusting men. I had a big issue with it. I didn’t trust people. Male, female…I didn’t trust my ex-wife…even though she didn’t do anything to me. I didn’t trust her. I didn’t trust that she was going to be there forever. (Jeban)

**Resentment.** Several participants expressed the value of fathers in providing the guidance necessary to navigate life’s challenges. As a result, they acknowledged that they perceived themselves as significantly disadvantaged by their experiences of father absence. Feelings of resentment were common among these participants, particularly toward their fathers. JP described the point during his adolescent years when the
frustration at the apathy and emotional distance characterizing the relationship with
his father peaked:

My father…just a real cold temperament in his approach to me, so for that, I
couldn’t make heads or tails of it as a kid because I kept beating myself up
because I kept looking at myself, “Well, there’s something wrong with you.” So
whenever I kept reaching out, it was like they kept pushing my hand away. So I
just…It kinda really crippled me mentally and emotionally.

That’s when I started to really get a lot of animosity toward my father
because it’s like, you wanna sit there and you wanna tell me how to be this way or
that way, but you’re never there to really show me or be by my side step-by-step
to really guide me in that process. I’m the one left to figure it out. (JP)

The pain of abandonment and the resentment it created was shared by Luis. He
mentioned that his father had ample opportunity to be present for his children but gave up
this opportunity in lieu of his participation in his new family.

I feel like we got abandoned. Like, instead of my dad having us be with him
because he got married, he put us with his brother somewhere else, like, six or
seven hundred miles away. You know? Like, hours away driving. And see, I’m
thinking, “Well, if my dad really loved me…” He’d only come see us every six
months; one time every six months. And that was…It got stuck in my head why
my dad did it, you know. It was me and my sister. (Luis)

John Q’s description of his feelings of resentment was comprehensive. He
criticized the inability of his father to prioritize the wellbeing of his children above the
issues taking place in his marriage:

My attitude toward my father now is one, um….I am…I would say it’s very
complex. I have, um….I do not have any anger toward my dad. I bear some…I
bear a lot of resentment because I feel like what he did is comparable to
abandonment. So I do still harbor a lot of resentment, because I feel like, um,
regardless of the issues that you may have with your spouse, it should not affect
your interaction with your children. My dad allowed his, um, problems with my
mother to affect my relationship with him and his relationship with me. So I have
a little bit of…I have a lot of resentment, because I feel like he could have put in a
lot more effort in trying to establish a relationship with me, or what have you. I
also, some of that resentment comes from the fact that after I got older in life, and
I tried to establish myself, you know, educationally and career, etcetera, then he
was more than happy to come around and share in those successes. And I bear
resentment because I feel like he did not contribute in, um, he did not contribute in harvesting the grain, but yet, um…he wanted to partake in the eating of the bread, to use an analogy. (John Q)

**Emasculation and inadequacy.** Participants also shared the belief that father absence resulted in feelings of emasculation and inadequacy. They perceived that these feelings of inadequacy sometimes manifested in the form of self-doubt and a lack of identity. Here are some of the ways in which participants expressed this perception.

First, after expressing frustration at his father for not being there, Jeban shared his feelings of never being comfortable with his identity:

That was a lack of not knowing who I was, not being okay…Cause I used to be, uh, angry about being dark, because my brother and my sister are very light skinned. And I was the only dark one. So I dealt with issues growing up all my life, being a middle child, being the only dark one, being, um…not good…feeling like I wasn’t good enough, no matter what I achieved in my life, I felt like it wasn’t good enough. It never was good enough. (Jeban)

Robert expressed the similar experience at struggling to discover his identity well into his manhood:

It was difficult for me to grasp that, you know, my real dad didn't want to be there for me, didn't love me, I did something wrong. So growing, growing up and going through teenage years, going through my early 20s, I struggled a lot with relationships, I struggled with, uh, um, just trying to figure out who I am and what I want to become; it was pretty tough for me. And in just communication as well, how to communicate properly, um...your feelings and ideals. It was pretty tough for me to do that, at those ages. (Robert)

Malcolm recalled feelings of uncertainty and a lack of confidence as he grappled with his own fatherless development.

And I was always concerned about being like my father, and being like my father to my son. That always concerned me. So I had…As I went to those…those benchmark moments in life, graduation, having my first child…I just remember being uncertain…not having a lot of confidence, you know. I was very smart. Intellectually, I was…I could always talk with the best of them. But internally, I always felt very unsure of myself. (Malcolm)
Participants also indicated their feelings of inadequacy when comparing themselves to what they perceived a man to be. Jeban was one who perceived himself as falling short; he stated, “So you know, I try my best to…I know I’m short. I fall short in a lot of areas in my life…I haven’t…I don’t think I’ve met all the criteria, but I strive daily to make the right decisions to do the right thing.” Rich stated:

I’m far from it. I mean, my ideal man would be…It’s almost too perfect. I don’t think it’s achievable. Um…I think that I’m like halfway there. Um, the fact that I don’t live with my firstborn is primarily why I feel like I’m failing.

**Unloved and misunderstood.** Most participants acknowledged that their feelings of inadequacy referred to above were rooted in their own perceptions of feeling unloved. JP provided a rather profound description of his feelings of neglect and how they centered on the lack of affirmation and expressions of love from his father:

I felt that they kinda gave up loving me or wanting to care for me because I would remember…I don’t know how old I was, but I was pretty young. I was looking for them to reach out to me to maybe give me a hug or console me and say, “Hey, I love you and you’re my son,” and stuff like that, and when I couldn’t get that, then pretty much I would dwell on it, and…You know as a little kid, you’re not supposed to be thinking about that type of stuff. You’re not supposed to be thinking about, “Well, how come my parents…” or in this case, my dad…“How come they don’t love me like that?” or “How come they neglect me like that?” That stayed on my mind as a kid, I mean, all the way up until my teenage years and even my early years as a man because it just kinda like left me emotionally, mentally deficient because I…It just kinda confused me. (JP)

Que reflected on never hearing his father express love for him, stating, “If I would have heard those words when I was a young kid, when I needed it, man. It would have been wonderful.” The perception of being unloved impacted Que well into his adulthood. Rich also described a conversation with his mother when he learned that his
father had asked for him to be aborted. He described how that knowledge has
impacted his entire life thus far:

I think my feelings would be, uh…you know, being unwanted, um…I felt like, okay. I always had this inclination that I wanted to seek my father and meet him. Say like, “Hey, look how I’ve developed. Look how I’ve turned out. Look how much…look what hard work, effort to be successful at work and my family.” (Rich)

David painfully recalled the feelings of rejection he endured well into his adulthood. He described a scenario in his 20s when he reached out to his biological father:

I called him. And I think I was early 20s or something. And, um…when I called, he, you know…I did the uncomfortable, “I think I’m your son” thing, and…He asked me, um…did I have a degree? Cause all of the men in his family had degrees. So…You know. And at the time, I had just come through what I felt like was a hell for me, just surviving, trying to go through this technical school. So basically what he was telling me is, “you’re not good enough.” And then he somewhat implied that...“and I’m not necessarily sure you’re mine, because your mom was kind of seeing more than just me.” (David)

The majority of participants perceived that their experiences of physically and emotionally distant fathers left them with numerous unanswered questions. The lack of resolution was a significant factor as they attempted to rationalize their self-worth with the behaviors of their fathers. Participants described several examples of how the lack of closure continued to impact their lives well into adulthood. David recounted that prior to meeting his father for the first time at age 41, the pain of not even knowing his father haunted him. He outlined the numerous questions he faced on a daily basis:

My pain lived with me daily…I would think about what he looked like, what he sounded like, how he stood, how he walked. I would think about everything about him. I would literally look at strangers sometimes and wonder if that person was my father, and that was until I met him at the age of 41. It was just like I have to go find this guy. I can’t live like this anymore. Just to look at him. (David)
Finding Five: A majority of participants communicated that their lived experiences made them more susceptible to behaviors that repeated elements of their fatherless experience with their sons

The responses from participants in this study suggested that fathers play a significant role as teacher and guide (see Finding 6). Behaviors among participants’ fathers that precluded their ability to provide models of positive male citizenship to their sons were prominent. Faced with either no model or negative models of fathering, several participants perceived that their readiness for the role of father was compromised and they faced an increased proclivity toward negative approaches to fathering over their peers from dual-parent households. These negative fathering behaviors described by participants included actions that highlighted fathers’ unavailability, lack of involvement, lack of emotional support, and failure at being present to teach their sons.

**Negative perceptions of fathers.** A fundamental element of participants’ perceived susceptibility to repeating such behaviors was the negative perceptions they developed about their fathers as a result of the physical or emotional distance they experienced. The unavailability of participants’ fathers was captured in their expressions of not really knowing their fathers. Tony stated, “I didn’t really know the man that well...at all, really. Cause like I said, I only see him around like three times in my life.” Que also described his perception of his father as just “another dude” when he said, “I didn’t really know him. But you know...We talked a little bit. And it was kind of like just talking to another dude. Yeah, you’re my biological dad, but you’re not a father.”

Participants also cited traumatic experiences with their fathers as the impetus for the aforementioned negative perceptions. Some participants (3 of 13 [23%]) described
the horrific experience of watching their fathers physically and emotionally abuse their mothers. Malcolm provided a poignant and profound description of his path to fatherlessness as he stated, “I was physically separated from my father….physically separated from my father after the death…the murder of my mother. My father murdered my mother, at the age of 12, and it began a long period in fatherlessness.” Malcolm proceeded to describe the immeasurable fear and anxiety this event created during subsequent years after this traumatic incident.

I was actually afraid of my father after he killed my mother. And I always felt that my father was going to appear out of nowhere …It was difficult to look around the environments where I played or competed and not expect for him to show up at some point. So it was…just a high level of anxiety when he was not around. And because I was instrumental in him being sent to prison, I was always concerned that he would come back and hurt me. (Malcolm)

**Environment of desensitization to fatherlessness.** A majority of participants expressed the viewpoint that the environments in which they grew up were ones condoning father absence as the norm, creating desensitization to the seriousness of the phenomenon. One participant, Johnny Bee, described his neighborhood as one where there were very few families with present fathers.

Maybe it was a self-destructive personality, because I see that in my brother. You know, who…same background. He’s never figured it out. So I think we battled the same type of emotions growing up. He’s never got out of it…He’s got six illegitimate children from six different moms. That’s just kind of how it was as we were kids, it’s how the people in our neighborhood, there was lots and lots of single moms…Unfortunately, there were no real solid family foundations. (Johnny Bee).

Tony described an environment in which he perceived that African American men were conditioned to abandon their families.

So it becomes almost like, it is understood…This is what we do, exactly. We are so conditioned to leave our families behind…because it was previously done and
it was so easy to do in our minds, that I can do the same thing. If I don’t like
what I see and I don’t like how it feels and how things are going, I can bail out so
easily. (Tony)

Hancock shared his experiences from when he had his first sons and how he held
the misguided belief that financial support was all that was necessary from a father.

When I had my kids, I’m thinking if I provide my kids with money, then I really
don’t have to be there a lot like I’m supposed to be there. I just…It’s just
like…Um…Like…I thought eventually money was going to surpass me being
there. And now I see I should have been there versus having the money or trying
to make money. (Hancock)

Some participants, in commenting on the influence of their environment,
described their perceptions, derived from their own exposure, that mothers and
grandmothers were the ones who took care of children and fathers were not as necessary.

Johnny Bee described his experience of having his first child in high school:

I allowed myself to have a child and let her take full responsibility for the first
couple of years, cause not really knowing, because you know, that happened to
me, and it happened to other people that I knew, and the people who were in my
environment who had no dads were kind of the same thing. Young parents, big
deal…their mom or the grandma will take care of the child and, you know, it’s no
big deal. (Johnny Bee)

**Perpetuation of father absence.** One participant, Rich, provided a poignant
reflection of how he believed father absence contributed to his own propensity to repeat
the absence he experienced. He was a father of three sons but no longer lived with his
oldest son as a result of a failed relationship with his first wife. He spoke of the
independence he was forced to develop as a result of father absence.

The fact that, you know, you’re not dependent means like you…you really…If
you want to give up, you can give up. I think part of growing up, when you have
your father or your mentor, uh, tell you like, “don’t give up. Keep trying. Get
up”….And for me, if I didn’t think that it was worth it, I’d just simply give up. I
just…I think that’s something that’s taught to you. But if no one tells you, “Don’t
give up, keep trying,” you don’t use that, you know…how you apply it in life. So
I, I easily gave up on things that may or may not have been important, but you know...I think that if my father was there...I had my father participating in my life, he probably would have told me, “Hey, don’t give up on your marriage. Don’t quit. Keep trying.” (Rich)

Several participants expressed disappointment at having perpetuated fatherlessness onto their own sons. Rich described the dreaded realization that he repeated the behaviors of his father upon discovering his wife was pregnant with his first son:

I’m pretty ashamed because we were actually in the process of separating. Um...And I didn’t want to be with her anymore. I was like, what should we do? Is, you know, abortion an option? I...I’m really ashamed to even say that that was a thought in my mind. Um...but it was. And that...the fact that I thought about it, I was like, “Oh my God, I’m doing exactly what my biological dad did.” You know. He had the notion of doing the abortion and so did I. (Rich)

Hancock regretfully admitted he never spent time with his firstborn son. He stated, “I have never had a conversation. Like, I’ve seen him, when he was a baby. Like, six, nine months old...less than a year.” He also described how he created the same physical and emotional distance from his second son—a similarity to the relationship he shared with his father. He painfully disclosed that he saw a lot of the rebellious behaviors in son that he displayed himself as a result of father absence.

My son right now...he’s so angry with me, he feels like I’ve never been there. It’s really hurting me, because I really have to go through my son like this...So now it’s kind of like, I’m...mad that I waited this long, because I feel like my son’s not supposed to be doing things like he’s doing right now. And it’s because I wasn’t there. And I just see myself in him, and I see all the decisions I started making at that same age. (Hancock)

JP also described how he passed on father absence to his offspring. He first shared about the moment when he realized he was inflicting the same pain under the guise of discipline that his emotionally distant father inflicted on him.
I know there’s something wrong here, but I couldn’t stop it, because every time my stepson would mess up, I would discipline him the same way that I was disciplined...I couldn’t stop myself. It was the only way I knew how to discipline. It was like, what I said I would never be, I am...because I am a reflection of my father...how he disciplined me. It was brutal. And the cold thing with it was I didn’t have a problem doing it. (JP)

JP went on to painstakingly describe the devastating impact it had on him as he realized he was becoming the kind of father he dreaded as he was growing up:

But the ugly side of that, I turned out just like my father. I did the same exact thing that my father did and...I talked to him in the same way that my father did with this kid. My ex-wife told me, “Hey, you’re affecting this kid. He’s always in his room, and he’s crying and he thinks you don’t like him or he feels the things that you say to him are true.” My father used to say “You’re stupid and dumb, and I wouldn’t amount to nothing.” So I called this kid the same thing when he would mess up or when he wouldn’t listen. I knew that I was repeating history just like how history happened to me. So I definitely told myself growing up I didn’t wanna be like my father but, unfortunately, the ugly side of that was...My father’s imperfections became my imperfections. (JP)

Luis also described how he demonstrated behaviors very similar to what he witnessed in his father. When prompted to describe his level of involvement with his sons, Luis described having zero interaction with his first son and minimal contact with his second son. He was rather candid as he characterized his paternal involvement.

I’m not there 100%. I guess I’m scared of showing him love. I think I guess I’m scared to be attached to them because I know how this relationship is going. It’s like I’m gonna lose him...I’m tired...going to court back and forth...You want to have my kids, you can have my kids. I’m at the point... [Gestures washing hands] I wash my hands. You deal with them. (Luis)

Referring to his frustrated outburst about washing his hands of his children, Luis acknowledged that simply giving up on his children because of relationship difficulty was contrary to his own values but reminiscent of the behaviors demonstrated by his father.

He stated:
To be honest with you, I don’t think that’s the right way to do. That’s not right. I think the right way to do it is just, you fight for your kids, you be responsible with your kids, but the bad thing is that I’m not doing it. I’m comprehending what’s going on. It’s just I’m not doing it. Why? I don’t know. (Luis)

Robert shared about the moments in his life that he perceived to be high points and low points. He hesitantly spoke of the broken relationship with his son’s mother that resulted in him no longer living in the same residence as his son. Robert described this as follows:

And then low points would be, uh, probably, probably not being able to see my son every day. That's a low point for me. His mother and I split. So not being able to see him every day, not being involved in his life everyday kind of sucks a lot…so what it makes me feel about me is that I failed him a little bit…I feel like I failed him.

The majority of participants perceived that their experience of father absence or paternal apathy hampered their readiness for fathering but also increased their penchant for behaviors that repeated their experience for their sons. The responses provided by participants showcased how fatherlessness contributed to their negative perceptions of fathers and how their environments growing up may have desensitized them to the importance of fathers. Both of these factors in turn contributed to participants’ reluctant demonstration of behaviors resembling those of their fathers.

**Finding Six: All participants communicated the belief that the most important role of a father is that of teacher and model**

Participants shared candidly about their own perceptions of how fathers contribute to the emotional, social, and cognitive development of their sons. Several roles perceived as the role of the father in a household were brought to the fore. One particularly popular perception described by the majority of participants was that a key role for fathers was to
provide affirmation for their sons. Two participants provided analogies profoundly capturing the importance of fathers affirming their sons. Jeban described how photographs are taken to capture moments and compared this to the mental photographs fatherless men take throughout their life journey that capture only moments in which there is no father in the picture.

We take pictures for moments. And those pictures that we take inside our mind, when we take that picture and fathers are not there…it’s a key component missing. Because when I do good…I want to hear my father say, “That was good, son.” Um…I think that’s important. And that’s why I’ll always go out of my way for my sons. Because when they take those mental pictures and talk about events in their life, I want them to say, “Mom AND my daddy stood there.” (Jeban)

David, on the other hand, shared a biblical example he believed confirmed the need for paternal affirmation. When prompted to describe what he perceived would have been different had his father been in his life, David unequivocally responded, “Validation…validation.” He went on to provide the following explanation and biblical imagery:

Let me say it this way. I believe in God…and I got a revelation one day. When Jesus was baptized…and he rose from the water and then the heavens opened up, and then the spirit of God came down in the form of a dove. And God’s own voice says, “This is my beloved son, in whom I’m well pleased.” And I read that and read that, just thinking…Oh…God’s telling the people watching Jesus be baptized, “Listen to my son, because he’s my son.” And my thought was, so what is God doing? He’s validating Jesus, right? You’re my baby boy. I’m proud of you. And my thought was, if Jesus, a perfect man, needed to be validated by his father, then how much do our imperfect children need the same validation? (David)

Although the latter example was rooted in the respondent’s personal spirituality, it aptly captured the importance shared by several other participants about the confidence-building role of an affirming father. Nevertheless, an overwhelming majority of
participants indicated that despite the numerous roles fathers play, the most important
one is that of teacher and model to their sons. Tony actually stated, “I believe that men
are, uh, gifted with teaching or giving that instruction of being responsible.” From the
responses captured, there were several aspects of the teacher role played by fathers.

**Fathers model being a man.** Fathers teach their sons the fundamental aspects of
being a man. John Q described this perceived responsibility of fathers, indicating that
even though mothers may be able to relay these lessons, the teachings were more
“digestable” coming from a father.

There are certain experiences, certain learning experiences or certain
developmental experiences, ranging from simple things like tying a tie and
shaving, to more, um, significant things like dealing with females and dealing
with the opposite sex. And there were certain things that...I would be able to
digest better coming from a male perspective as opposed to a female perspective,
and these are just...things that I observed that my mother would not be able to
teach me in the same way a dad that was around would be able to teach.

Johnny Bee also spoke of the importance of fathers teaching the basic skills
associated with being a man after pensively reflecting on what he thought was the biggest
disadvantage of not having his father around.

Being able to look back and see you know, what I missed. I mean, you miss so
much not having a father in place. You know, teaching you the right from wrong,
how to throw a ball. You know, just being there for guidance and just somebody
to talk to you and, you know, teach you how to be a man. You don’t have that
with a mom, you know.

He further commented:

A father should be somebody who gives you unconditional love and support. You
need somebody who is going to be there to support you...and no matter what you
do...being there to teach you...whether it’s teaching you to tie your shoes or ride
your bike, how to do your mathematics, shaking hands, looking people in the
eye...all the little things that you don’t necessarily get from a mom. You
know...chin up, chest out. These are things that resonate with me as I speak to
my children.
**Fathers teach from their experience.** Participants also suggested that another key aspect of fathers being models and teachers was their ability to draw on their own experiences to guide their sons. Some participants identified the lack of access to their fathers lived experiences as a key factor contributing to their challenges in transitioning from adolescence into manhood. Without the experience of a father providing guidance based on his life experiences, participants spoke either hypothetically or described their experiences with their son(s). Que captured his perception of the role of father by stating, “A father begets into his son…that is, a father takes the essence of who he is and transfers that into his child.” John Q shared a similar concept of a father’s responsibility as a teacher and model to transfer his full experience to his son. When asked to describe his perceptions about being a father to a son, John Q provided the following commentary:

[It means] I would be able to transfer the full experience to the child. If I had a female child first, then I probably would have been a bit hesitant…but as far as a male, I think that I was happy, because I thought that I had being a male under control at that point and I would be able to, um, successfully raise my son and be able to convey to him all of the values that I gained over my years, and…encourage all the positive experiences that I had, and also the negative experiences I had.

Participants spoke about using their prior experiences, both positive and negative, with intentionality. Tony shared leveraging the lessons he has learned and his life experiences to inform how he provided guidance to his children, extended family, and loved ones. Jeban described how he approached guiding his sons through his life experiences and how he built the trust of his sons by challenging them to describe a scenario they could possibly endure that he had not.
I tell my son, “Son, there’s nothing you could ever do that I ain’t done. Name it…I promise you, I can tell you when I done it, where I done it, how I done it…name one scenario that you’ve been through that I ain’t been through yet.” I say, “don’t be afraid to talk to me about something, because I’m not going to tell you what to do, but I’ll tell you how it affected me, making the wrong decision, so you can make the right one.” (Jeban)

**Fathers teach/model responsibility.** One term an overwhelming majority of participants associated with fatherhood was the word responsibility. Participants predominantly believed the main characteristic an effective, active father must possess was responsibility. They characterized responsibility in multiple forms including responsibility for one’s actions, responsibility for one’s household, and responsibility to the external community among others. Regardless of how they described the responsibility a father should model, participants overwhelmingly thought a father must model or teach this concept of personal responsibility to their sons.

Johnny Bee thought of responsibility in a rather literal sense of “doing what you say and saying what you mean.” He passionately captured the lessons he did not have as a fatherless youth, which he tries desperately to impart in his sons. While sharing the key lessons he would like to pass on to his sons, he stated:

> Take responsibility for your actions, first and foremost. I mean, you own it, you know. I see so many people just walk away from something, whether it’s your kid or a project. If you start something, you finish it. That’s the big thing with me and my kids. I don’t care if it’s a puzzle, if it’s, you know, food on your plate…whatever it is, you started it, you finish it. You know. Do what you say, and say what you mean at all times. (Johnny Bee)

Tony readily expressed his view that responsibility was a key component to fatherhood and described the role of fathers in teaching lessons about personal responsibility to their sons. He shared about the complexity of transitioning through adolescence without a father figure to teach him about being responsible.
As an adolescent, I think that’s where a father really comes into play to help a child realize their responsibilities...It was very difficult. Because in our society we’re supposed to be an adult once we graduate from high school. So it was just...about learning to be responsible. And at that time, not having a father figure, it’s really difficult because you don’t have someone, again, to teach you responsibility. Especially as a man, because growing up, young boys, if they don’t have that father there to show them that you’re going to be responsible for taking care of your family, taking care of your children. (Tony)

Armando recalled the depression that his fatherless experienced created and how he immersed himself in comic books as a place of refuge. Upon reflecting on his fear of overcompensating for his lack of a father in his father-son relationship, Armando quipped that he “would much rather be around to teach him about what it means to have moral responsibility than have him kind of cut adrift on his own and having to figure it out through comic books.” His statement reflected his own disappointment at the paucity of guidance in his life and his commitment to actively teach elements of responsibility to his offspring.

**Fathers teach/model effective behaviors for family life.** Another way in which participants perceived fathers as teachers and models was in a family setting. Participants described some of the key lessons they believe should originate with a father. Often, they considered how they made the transition to manhood without ever being taught the lesson of how to interact with one’s family members and how they had to learn these lessons from other sources or via trial and error. Particularly, participants considered family life as synonymous with interacting with a spouse.

John Q pondered the aspects of his personal development he perceived were lacking as a result of his father’s absence.

Those are things that I feel like a dad in the household would have been able to show me; you know, explain to me or show me by his example that this is how a
man is supposed to operate within the house or the society. This is how a man is supposed to treat a woman, a spouse, or whatever. These are the things that a man is supposed to do…that I can point to, that I feel were missing. (John Q)

Upon further reflection, John Q also described his lack of exposure to a father operating in a domestic setting as a significant disadvantage during his transition into manhood.

I did not have a sense of what the male’s domestic responsibilities were because my mom performed all of those roles. Whatever she was not able to do, she was able to…to hire help or get outside help to take care of those things. I was not able to observe how a man was supposed to relate to or treat his wife, or his spouse, or his girlfriend. That was not something that I had an example that I could emulate in my own house, I had to turn to the streets, or to TV, or what I leaned from observing other people’s households. (John Q)

John Q’s commentary mirrored that of several other participants who believed a key lesson to be taught by a father, and one they intended to teach to their sons, involved taking adequate care of oneself and one’s family. Tony captured this rather succinctly when he stated, “I think the key lessons that I’ve passed on to my sons are being honest, showing integrity, and showing love for themselves and for their spouses.”

**Finding Seven: A majority of participants shared a personal discomfort with the expression of emotion but believed they had to teach their sons to be comfortable with expressing their feelings**

Fathers in this study overwhelmingly described a personal discomfort with the expression of emotion. While several admitted experiencing a myriad of emotions, they were particularly adamant that they were absolutely uncomfortable with any public display of emotions other than those connoting toughness. Participants sometimes cited the environments in which they grew up as ones particularly intolerant of excessive displays of emotion among men. In fact, participants predominantly considered emotional expression and crying to be synonymous.
**Views on emotional expression.** When asked whether father absence impacted their perceptions about emotional expressiveness, participants provided rather short and candid responses. Que responded, “Absolutely! Where I grew up, if you cry, he is a punk! Um, if you hugged, he is a punk! That was weak!” Robert was essentially dismissive of the thought of expressing emotion and quipped, “Uh, there was none [dismissive]. No man, never. Girls I dated were like, ‘You never smile,’ [laughs]. Cause I had no emotion.” Robert emphasized his perception that the absence of his father played a significant role in his inability to be emotionally expressive. Johnny Bee was frank in his commentary about emotional expression and the impact of father absence. He said, “Not allowed. Without having a father myself, and a lot of people I know in that same environment were taught it was the norm to not cry. Suck it up, don’t cry.” Johnny Bee went further to describe his beliefs about allowing his sons to see him expressing emotions. He stated:

> I don’t know…..That would probably never happen… So, even like a death in the family…I’m very, very, very sad, but I feel that I’ve got to be the pillar of the family, you know. Be the strong one, the rock. And if I’m sad…I just leave. You know, go and then come back, and give whoever needs hugs, hugs. (Johnny Bee)

Another participant, Jeban, described how he handled his emotions and mentioned that in the absence of his father during his adolescent years, he received some advice from other adults who ushered him to “Grow a spine!” and informed him to never “let people see you weak. That’s a form of weakness if you cry in front of people.” That seemingly minor incident, according to Jeban, affected him for many years. He captured the impact of that advice when he stated, “I kept everything bottled up, and I didn’t show
my emotions…I didn’t…Because my perception was, a man is strong. He never lets his family see him weak, because a form of weakness is crying.”

Rich shared his views on allowing his sons to see a display of emotions, stating, “I don’t think I’m consciously preventing them from seeing me cry. I think I’ve hardened up. I think when you’re growing up you…have to tough it out. It’s not too often I can even see myself crying.” JP was by far the most stoic of all participants in this study and he provided a rather candid description depicting his perceptions about emotional expression and how he viewed himself:

I’m kind of emotionless and kind of like, uh, you know, like, like cold in my expressions. Like in dealing with certain situations…when they get a reaction out of me, it’s kind of like…I have a black heart or, you know, ice runs through my veins and stuff like that. I’m trying to learn…how to bring emotion back into myself because, you know, I mean, just what I learned from my father…that you just don’t show or let your emotions out like that. (JP)

John Q also highlighted his views that expressing emotions, particularly crying, was a sign of weakness and a poor example for his sons. When asked to describe his emotional openness with his son, John Q replied:

Um, obviously I try not to. He has probably seen me cry on one occasion. But as a general rule of thumb, I try not to…And the reason I try not to is because…I always want him to view me from a position of strength, from that position of strength. And I think that if I’m the patriarch of the family, if I’m the leader, if I’m the provider, if I’m all those things…I still believe in…whether it is imposed by society or what have you, I still believe that me crying does not set a good example for my son in terms of strength. (John Q)

**Teaching sons the value of emotional expression.** While an overwhelming majority of participants shared the viewpoint that emotional expression was a show of weakness, several still believed the freedom to be emotionally expressive was something they wanted to teach their sons. Ironically, a significant majority of participants believed
a primary responsibility of a father was to teach the importance of emotional honesty and effective emotional expression. Lacking those paternal lessons, they conceded, placed them in a position where they often struggled with teaching something they found difficulty in even tolerating. Interestingly, a majority of participants also shared that they tried their utmost to openly share positive emotions like affection, care, and love to their sons.

Armando described the value he placed on teaching his son about emotional expression even while communicating his admission that “there’s so much of that [emotions] that I internalized for so long.” He further stated:

I think that I have tried to encourage the positive expression…I should say the expression of positive emotions, and when the expression of negative emotions has come up, I try to temper that a bit. I try to work with my son and get him to understand that it’s okay to be frustrated, but not to the detriment of himself or the people around him. I think that expressing emotion, even if it is anger, is good. I think if it is less constructive, you need to be more cognizant of how and when you express it, but I don’t want my son, for example, to wonder about whether or not he should jump up and down and be happy if his team wins a game or if his sister does some neat thing or for that matter if his father or mother do some neat thing. I want him to be excited about that and be okay with being excited about that. (Armando)

Armando continued to describe how internalization of emotions was a habit that was characteristic of two generations of men in his family prior to him:

But I think that my father and his father were both quite stoic and internal sorts of thinkers and how they expressed their emotion was very internal most of the time until it kind of built up and then, generally, it was kind of…I don’t know if “rage” is quite the right word but, certainly, I think he could be perceived that way, and I have certainly done that myself…And so I wanna steer him away from letting things build up, letting things eat at him. Say that you’re frustrated. Say that you’re sad. Say that you’re happy. Get that out. Let people know that. I think that’s just ultimately better for yourself and everyone around you. (Armando)
Que underscored his relentless effort at trying to outwardly show his love for his son through continually telling him “I love you” and openly hugging him. He also described “reading books for him so he can understand his identity as a young man, and that he can be tough but, at the same time, he can be endearing and feel and enjoy being or having a gentle nature.” His effort to show his love for his son was matched by his effort to teach his son about emotional expression. Despite his stated aversion to excessive or manipulative crying, Que insisted a key aspect of imparting life lessons to his son was lessons associated with emotional expression. He shared how a part of this teaching was honing his son’s vocabulary so that he could effectively use “feeling words.” He adequately described that, stating, “My son, he’ll cry when his feelings are hurt. He’ll say, ‘Daddy, my feelings are hurt.’ Because I thought it was important to teach him feeling words. You have to be able to communicate your feelings.” Que provided more depth to his commentary by explaining his belief that a father-son relationship is one in which both strengths and deficiencies should be adequately on display. He described this belief by saying:

I have a relationship with my son. Relationship means that you’re going to see my strong points, you’re going to see my vulnerabilities, and you’re going to see my imperfections; and in it all, we’re going to get through it. (Que)

Jeban described a similar viewpoint. Despite his admission that he grew up “keeping emotions bottled up inside,” was once advised to “grow a spine,” and was told that emotional expression was a sign of weakness, Jeban was a staunch advocate of openly showing affection and care to his offspring. He said:

And I let them know that I love them. And I think that’s a key component to a man, is being emotional and being okay with being emotional, and not someone telling you “grow up, grow a spine…be a man.” A man is someone who can
show their kids that it’s okay to cry, it’s okay to fail. But teach them how to get up. (Jeban)

John Q also provided a rather poignant description of the lessons he believed a father needs to teach his sons about emotional expression. He used the example of his father-son relationship to illustrate the value he placed on such expressiveness. First, he outlined how he taught the importance of emotional openness:

[I have] great resolve in the area of emotional openness with my son. Specifically, telling him that I love him and just being open about emotional stuff. I mean being able to have a heart to heart conversation about feelings and things that are usually not considered to be the macho, masculine type of things that you want to talk about. But have a really emotional conversation about how you feel about certain situations, how does that make him feel about stuff. From the time my son was able to communicate with me in that way, I made sure that I made it a priority to convey to my son the idea that he can come to me and he can talk to me about any issue or problem, matters of the heart, matters of emotion. We would have a quote unquote “open door policy,” and he should be able to share any of those things with me. (John Q)

John Q provided a self-evaluation of his effectiveness at teaching and allowing his son to be emotionally free.

I think I’ve done a good job because my son, right now at seven years old, he’s able to come to me and does not feel any trepidation whatsoever in opening up to me and telling me something that he feels sad about, something he’s upset about… I also let him know that I love him every opportunity that I get because I think that that’s important in a father-son relationship, even though society sometimes may say otherwise, you know. So I think that because I did not have it, did not experience [it] with my own dad, I was resolved to make sure at all costs to have it with my son, And I think it will pay dividends later on in life. (John Q)

Although John Q conveyed his effectiveness at teaching his sons the value and necessity for emotional expression, he aligned with a majority of participants through his admission about his discomfort with his son crying. He described the internal conflict that arose as a “tug of war” in which there were forces that suggested “I want him to be
strong…I do not want him to show weakness” operating against other forces that suggested “I want him to feel free to express his emotions.” This struggle was common among participants. John Q further expressed how he attributed a significant portion of his difficulty with managing this internal conflict to the absence of his father. He stated, “since I did not have my own dad to help me navigate that situation, I find myself having difficulty…having internal conflict in terms of how best to advise my sons in matters of crying.”

Finding Eight: The majority of participants sought or desired emotional closure from their experience of fatherlessness through a re-established relationship with their fathers

Participants acknowledged that their experience of father absence was a source of significant adversity, the impact of which was felt well into their adulthood. Several who were abandoned early in their lives described a lack of emotional closure and their perception that they had incomplete identities. More than half the participants described the desire to rekindle a relationship with their fathers as a means of gaining closure and understanding more about who they were.

Rekindling a father-son relationship. Que indicated that he gained some emotional closure on a chance encounter with his father well into his own adulthood. After the encounter, Que’s father called him and left a recorded message in which he stated, “And I want you to know that I love you.” This message had a profound impact on Que as he admitted:

I listened to that message probably about 20 or 30 times. And I never thought that those words would happen…the impact that they did have on me, as a grown man. But now that I hear them and I’m an older adult, they have an impact on me still, but [I] don’t know what to do with it, except acknowledge it, receive it for
what it’s worth, and let the hostility, resentment, perceptions go. Let it go. So I let him go...that was like five years [ago]. (Que)

Interestingly, although he was capable of “letting it go,” Que expressed a deep concern about his desire for his son to have a relationship with his grandfather. The inner conflict was evident as Que recounted his thought process when faced with the decision to introduce his father to his sons.

The impact...that I think about is, my son knowing his grandfather. And it’s like...do I want him to know this man as a grandfather? And have this man disappoint my son? Or do I let him have the opportunity to be a grandfather? And that’s what I weigh back and forth.

John Q also described his attempts to rekindle a relationship with his father as a result of the feelings of incompleteness.

When I reached a certain age...I started to realize the things that I was missing in my life from the dad perspective and so I made a concerted effort to reestablish a relationship with my dad and to...build the foundation for a better relationship with him...I took it upon myself to reestablish that relationship.

Robert was visibly impacted as he too described the emotional closure he experienced after having a few conversations with his father.

I kind of don't only think about my experience with my father...much anymore...I've grown a whole lot, where that's the past. But I know who I am now, I know what I want to become even more in my life.

When prompted to outline from where he gained this emotional closure, Robert recalled the immediate anger he experienced when his father called him in an attempt to repair their broken relationship.

I think it's when my father reached out to me and I was able to unleash all of the anger I've had on my chest for 20 plus years....almost my whole life. At that point, man...At that point, it was kind of like, [sighs]...I’m good...I was extremely harsh, but...it had to be done...I told him how I felt, and he wanted to see my son. I said, "No, you ain't seeing my son, because this is not the time to
see him. We have a lot of stuff to go over before I bring him into the picture." (Robert)

As he described this multi-conversation encounter with his father, Robert recalled more of the content of the intense conversation he shared with his father:

I'm a father. I don't understand. I can't perceive anybody…doing the things that you did to me. I will NEVER do that to my kid. I see him as a part of my heart…and if he was never in my life…a big portion of me is dead. How could you do that to me? You just didn't care about me. (Robert)

Robert ultimately overcame his reservations about introducing his son to his father. He further described the process of meeting his father by stating, “When I was able to go through that process...It was a healing process for me. To go through there and just tell him how I felt.”

Malcolm also described continuous feelings of emotional turmoil centering on the circumstances that led to his father’s absence. He discussed his anxiety about the generational issue of fatherlessness and the thought that the relationship with his son would simply follow the trends of broken father-son relationships typical in his family. Malcolm’s viewpoint changed when he reconnected with his father.

That viewpoint…changed in a phenomenal…way. And I can’t say that I don’t have moments…of just remembering what I used to feel. I don’t have moments of that level of anxiety and fear, but I do have those moments where I remember where I’ve come from. My liberating moment was when I did finally go back and reconnect and reconcile with my father. And then was able to do it, in retrospect, was able to do it within 18 months of him dying. I feel like I had…accomplished a mission…that I had beat the demons…that I had settled whatever score needed to be settled on my family’s behalf.

Malcolm expanded on the emotional closure he experienced when he was able to introduce his sons to their grandfather.

I remember the resentment. And ultimately, I remember the liberation that I had when I introduced them for the first and only time to their grandfather…One of
the greatest moments of my life was not their births, but my symbolic rebirth the day I brought their grandfather through the front door for them to see him. (Malcolm)

**Let go and move forward.** Having endured significant emotional pain as a result of fatherlessness and its side effects, a majority of participants expressed their desire to simply let go of the negative feelings they felt toward their father, even if they never met their fathers. Tony described when he had this realization as a man in his mid-20s.

I realized that...I have to let that go. I have to release that. And it was almost like a voice saying that in order for you to move forward you have to let the past go. So I kind of grabbed hold of that, and realized that I can’t sit back and blame: “Well my dad is not there, this is why this is happening.” Or “My dad is there, this is why this is happening.” Any time anything was negative, any fear, it was easy to blame my dad not being there to teach me. (Tony)

Armando described his decision to let go of the past but cited disbelief that the relationship with his father would sufficiently improve. He stated, “I think there’s also a big part of me that, at this point, says, “You know, it’s not going to happen. It’s not. What I’m looking for from my father…isn’t going to occur, and so I need to accept that and move past that.”

**Forgiveness and reconciliation.** A majority of participants cited forgiveness as a key component in achieving emotional closure. Malcolm provided a rather profound description of forgiveness:

Forgiving is truly transcending your limitations, not allowing what you perceive as your personality to be so stagnant that you cannot expand. It’s in that forgiving that we grow…forgiving is not a concession. It’s an expansion. And it’s not a dismissal of what someone might have done, or what you might have done to yourself. It’s an acknowledgement. So you focus to expand with knowledge. And that’s how we grow as men and as fathers.

The quintessential characteristic of being a man is that a man is forgiving. A man forgives biologically, physiologically, intellectually. People would tell me all the time, “You’ve got to forgive your father.” But they were not there. They don’t live inside of here. So they don’t have the experience, they don’t have the
hurt, they don’t have the trembling…And so…in order for me to become a better man, forgiving was the price that I would have to make. (Malcolm)

Tony also shared a similar viewpoint on forgiveness and described the scenario in which he recognized the need to forgive his father:

I came to the realization that I’m human…that my dad was human…circumstances happen…things happen! Things I can’t explain happen. And I came to a realization, too, that I have to forgive him, because I didn’t know all of his circumstances. I don’t know if he didn’t want me or he did want me. (Tony)

Tony concluded by affirming, “I’ve forgiven my dad for not being there.” One participant, Malcolm, discussed the notion of reconciliation. Although this concept was solely shared by Malcolm, its contextual significance was such that this researcher considered it highly noteworthy. Malcolm highlighted his rejection of his father and his strong desire to understand his father and what factors contributed to his decision making and actions.

I didn’t understand that at the same time I was rejecting my father, and also trying to understand my father, that that was the nature of reconciliation. How do you integrate what you reject with what you’re trying to understand? (Malcolm)

Having described the concept of reconciliation, Malcolm further explained what was necessary for him to experience the emotional closure buried in the harsh experience of witnessing his mother’s death at the hands of his father.

It wasn’t just about forgiving. It was equally about, for me, reconciliation. It was about getting to the place where, knowing I could not understand, I could not come up with a reason, I could not wrap my brain around it, and I had to let my father physically back into my space to get rid of the fear, the anguish. I had to find an authentic process…And the only way it was going to be authentic was if I lived through the rage, the hate, the revenge. That was the only way for me that it was going to work. (Malcolm)
Results and Interpretations

The findings from this study illustrate the depth and breadth of the perceptions of men who experienced fatherlessness and the vast impact of these beliefs on how they approached fathering sons. Participants’ responses evidenced significant differentiation among their demonstrated behaviors rooted in their lived experiences as fatherless men. Senge et al. (2008) asserted that tangible events like those described by the participants in this study provide considerable insight into the current reality of father absence. However, excessive focus on such events without an understanding of the key influences can serve as a distraction and preclude a complete understanding of the phenomenon of paternal absence. While the aforementioned findings captured the participants’ perspectives on events illustrating the fatherlessness phenomenon through their lens, deeper analysis and interpretation of the findings provided a richer comprehension of the patterns, trends, and mental models shaping participants’ experiences. Such analysis was instrumental in converting the raw data captured from participants into information from which strong recommendations may be gleaned and from which knowledge can be developed about the topic of fatherlessness.

Several participants indicated that one of the impacts of their experience of father absence or paternal apathy was their susceptibility to behaviors perpetuating fatherlessness to their sons. A comparison of participant descriptors and known fathering behaviors that mimicked their fatherless experience was rather compelling. Participants varied in highest level of education achieved. When highest level of education achieved was compared with the frequency of contact with sons, it was interestingly noted that the frequency of contact with sons was higher among participants who achieved higher levels
of education. All participants with a Master’s degree or higher indicated they interacted with their sons at least multiple times per week. Participants who shared they had no contact with their sons had not pursued education beyond the high school level.

While this is by no means indicative of a causal relationship between education level and father-son contact among fatherless men and their sons, it is an interesting pattern that aligns with the commentary of participants. In particular, Johnny Bee, a participant who admitted having his first son while in high school, left all care-taking up to his son’s mother for the first two years of his son’s life—essentially repeating his father-absent experience. He detailed a “light-switch moment” while pursuing his college education in which he was overcome by the conviction to be far more active and present as a father. He shared that key components contributing to this shift in thought were partially the growth he experienced through his educational advancement but also the positively influential men he was able to interact with while at a higher education institution. Johnny Bee captured this when he stated, “I got into college…I really learned what it’s like to really be a man…I realized the importance of…being there for somebody.”

Notwithstanding Johnny Bee’s perceptions about factors that reversed his initial propagation of father-absent behaviors to his sons, there are alternative interpretations that may be applied to the pattern associated with higher education levels and frequency of contact with sons. Johnny Bee’s comments were indicative that the observed pattern between education level and contact with sons were potentially a proxy for the impact of the environment in which fatherless men were immersed. One key finding in this study was the belief of participants that the environment in which they lived created a
desensitization to the issue of father absence and conditioned fathers to leave their parenting role if and whenever they encountered adversity in their families. The response to such adversity in the participants’ environments, where the desensitization was mostly emphasized, was typically to abandon the child and leave rearing to the mother and her family members. Johnny Bee described this abandonment, stating the following:

That happened to me…and it happened to other people that I knew…and the people who were in my environment who had no dads were kind of the same thing. Young parents, big deal…their mom or the grandma will take care of the child…it’s no big deal.

Environments in which men are socially permitted to forego their paternal responsibilities can shape the beliefs about father absence among boys in subsequent generations. According to participants, these environments, while downplaying the role of fathers, implied that nurturing or caretaking were functions to be left for the “mom or the grandma”—a woman’s thing, lending credence to the conclusions from the study conducted by White (2006). White (2006) determined that “when fathering is tied to traditional definitions of manliness that focus on the proof of virility through the production of a child, caretaking and nurturing becomes irrelevant” (p. 62). The key interpretation here is that halting the perpetuation of fatherlessness goes beyond the willpower of fatherless men and must take into account elements of the environment in which behaviors associated with father absence or paternal apathy may be cultivated or nourished.

Another result derived from this study involves the characterization of the qualitative impact of father absence. While many quantitative studies have attempted to capture the effect of fatherlessness, few have sought to gather a deep description of the
lived experiences of the sons who were forsaken. Participants in this study readily acknowledged that their experience of paternal apathy or paternal absence had considerable psychological and emotional impact. The effects of their lived experience continued well into their adulthood – shaping their behaviors, beliefs about fathering, and perceptions about masculinity. Participants expressed exposure to fatherlessness as a major source of adversity they must overcome, and they actually continued to spend a significant amount of time combating its effects.

While enduring physical or emotional father absence, the transition from boyhood to manhood is complex, painful, and filled with uncertainty. Participants sought substitutes—people, behaviors, and activities—to replace their distant fathers. The substitutes were valuable to the participants as alternative sources of guidance for navigating the challenges encountered during adolescence and early adulthood. Participants in this study overwhelmingly suggested that despite any accolades applied to them, substitutes never completely filled the void left by a biological father. Even stepfathers, who were lauded by some participants for their roles in stepping in to lead a formerly father-absent household, were deemed to have “fallen short” of meeting their expectations of fathers. The unmet expectations were manifested through the plethora of unanswered questions that lingered even into manhood and perceptions of an “incomplete identity” held by fatherless men.

Fatherless men developed perceptions of masculinity and what it means to be a man from the various influences to which they were exposed. Overwhelmingly, participants described their perception of masculinity as entailing fulfillment of responsibilities, guiding households, being well-rounded, demonstrating persistence,
being principled, and practicing focus. Masculinity, through the lens of the fatherless male, was considered to be complex, embracing traditional notions of strength and problem solving but also including factors like availability, comfort with emotional expression, and the capability to love unconditionally. While the broad definitions of masculinity may be interpreted as supportive of Conner and Messerschmidt (2005) and their concept of the plurality of masculinity, they could also add credibility to the assertion by Beaty (1995) that father-absent boys are “more ambiguous about masculinity” (p. 878).

Participants indicated they constantly strived to achieve and prove their masculinity, a quest that according to Kimmel (2012) “has been one of the formative and persistent experiences in men’s lives” (p. 3). Although participants were somewhat able to describe their perceptions of masculinity, almost all of them expressed dejection at not achieving it. Phrases like “nowhere close,” “I’m far from it,” “I fall short,” “I don’t think I’ve met the criteria,” and “I just barely comprehended being a man” were used by participants to describe the beliefs they held about masculinity. Participant statements align with Mandara et al. (2005), who found that father-absent boys had lower perceptions of current masculinity than father-present boys and that there was “something unique about everyday presence” (p. 216) of fathers that influences their sons’ perceptions about masculinity. The expressed disappointment at failing to achieve their perception of masculinity also confirmed the allusions proffered by Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) regarding the existence of a masculinity to which many men strive but only very few achieve—hegemonic masculinity. Additionally, the perceived inadequacy shared by participants supports previous research suggesting that rigid
definitions of manhood place pressure on men to conform to hegemonic forms of masculinity (White, 2006; White & Peretz, 2010; Dowd, 2000; Newton, 2005; Risman, 1998).

Previous research asserted there was a linkage between fatherhood and masculinity, two socially constructed entities. The linkage, according to White (2006), was such that changes to the definition of either would impact the definition of the other. The evidentiary base in this study supports such a linkage between masculinity and fatherhood. However, participants’ perceptions of the linkage was one in which the primary purpose of the socially constructed fatherhood was to teach what constitutes masculinity to developing men.

A synthesis of participant’s views on masculinity, their stated beliefs that fathers teach or model masculinity, and their experience of father absence leads to a logically cogent explanation for why fatherless men perceive they have not and potentially cannot meet their expectations of being a man. To combat the lack of teaching resulting from father absence, a majority of participants described gaining some of these lessons via institutions like military and prison. Such statements again aligned with Connell and Messerschmidt (2005), who point to the institutionalization of the plurality of masculinities in highly rigid settings like the military and detention facilities.

The data captured in this study supports the interpretation that fatherless men have significant internal conflict. As shown above, this conflict manifested itself for participants in the form of questions such as “who am I?” versus “who should I be?” Another source of internal conflict that may be interpreted from the communicated lived experiences of fatherless men was the emotional clash between innate behaviors and
cultivated values. The term innate behaviors, in this context, is not intended to support or debunk any assertion that individuals are born with certain tendencies. Instead, it seeks to describe expectations and behaviors learned during the early stages of experiencing physical and emotional distance from a father. The sample in this study included men who experienced fatherlessness between the ages of 8 and 16. During that stage of their lives, innate behaviors related to their father-absent experience were developed. However, the transition to manhood may provide exposure to different environments, activities, and people who help to reshape previous behaviors and cultivate newly acquired elements of the man’s value system. Such cultivated values can be directly opposed to the innate behaviors previously adopted. Herein lies the aforementioned conflict.

A frequently referenced example of this conflict emerging from this study was the notion of how discipline was enacted by men who experienced fatherlessness. In particular, fathers who experienced corporal punishment, referred to as “beatings” by one participant, described a commitment to using alternative forms of discipline; that commitment was cultivated as they matured and witnessed other approaches from partners and other fathering models. Fatherless men, however, have an intense proclivity to revert to the innate behaviors of spankings and corporal punishments. One participant effectively captured this as he commented on how father absence impacted his approach to discipline:

That’s another one I do struggle with…punishment. I grew up in the world of spanking. And we live in a world of time...It’s just different now. I don’t really have a good answer for that one because I struggle with that...My wife comes from the time-out world. I come from you know, beat your ass world. So we’re in the middle. (Johnny Bee)
Another example of the internal conflict between innate behaviors and cultivated values involves fatherless men’s tolerance of emotional expression among their sons. Participants cited the lack of an engaged model of how to effectively handle emotional honesty and expressiveness. A majority talked about their own discomfort with crying but also their commitment to creating an environment enabling their sons to freely demonstrate their own feelings. However, in practice, this freedom of expression created significant turmoil as the internal battle raged between the innate behaviors rooted in the perception that men do not cry and the cultivated values suggesting men should be allowed emotional freedom. One participant described this conflict as he explained the impact of father absence on his reactions to his son crying:

I still struggle with how I should approach my son crying. On the one hand…I want him to be a strong man. And I don’t want him to show weakness by crying. But on the other hand, I also want him to feel comfortable enough that he can express his emotions within the comfort of our family…and sometimes that involves crying. That is something that I continue to struggle with because I still do not have a good idea of the balance I should strike in terms of advising him to be strong, be a man, don’t cry, suck it up…and the other side of the coin where you gotta express your emotions. (John Q)

The conflict between what this researcher termed as innate behaviors and cultivated values, particularly as it relates to the expression of emotion, was previously addressed by White and Peretz (2010). They concluded that the pursuit of hegemonic masculinity precludes emotional expression and depicts men as those who do not cry or reveal fear. Research by Collier (1998) also suggested the difficulties of emotional expression among men were rooted in the pursuit of hegemonic masculinity, which he stated depicts men as “unemotional, independent, non-nurturing, aggressive, and dispassionate” (p. 19).
The findings from this study highlighted differentiated responses to adversity. Participants demonstrated various coping behaviors to reintegrate after the disruption resulting from father-absence or paternal apathy. Negative adaptive behaviors included involvement in crime, violence, gang affiliation, substance abuse, and perpetuated abandonment of children. On the other hand, some men responded by accepting increased responsibilities, pursuing education, and involvement in sports. Others acknowledged that as a result of their fatherless experience, they were obsessed with achievement and had no sense of when they were going too far as they sought the affirmation they did not receive from their fathers.

The adaptive behaviors demonstrated by participants provided support for the resiliency model proposed by Richardson (2002). Some fatherless men demonstrate resilient integration—behaviors illustrating growth and development of insight as a result of “an introspective experience in identifying, accessing, and nurturing resilient qualities.” An example of this was seen with several participants admitting to attending professional therapy to address the emotional deficiencies they faced as a result of their lived experience. Fatherless men dealing with the adversity of never having a model of effective fathering may, as with some participants in this study, abandon their own offspring when faced with relationship challenges and other external factors impacting their perceived role as father. Richardson (2002) refers to this as “reintegration with loss” (p. 312). It includes behaviors demonstrating a loss of motivation or hope. The drug abuse and destructive behaviors like family violence that were shared by study participants exemplify what Richardson (2002) referred to as “dysfunctional reintegration” (p. 312) in the face of adversity.
The final result extracted from the findings in this study was the concept of need for emotional closure among men who experienced fatherlessness. A key source of such closure, according to participants, was a rekindling of a relationship with their distant biological fathers. The value of this rekindled interaction was never seen as a means of making up for the years of absence but rather as a means of getting answers to the numerous questions that remained open about their experience. It was also a mechanism used by participants to gain insights into their own identity and to better understand factors that impacted their sex-role development and socialization. The unanswered questions and the perceived incomplete identity participants described showcased alignment with the findings of numerous previous studies (Beaty, 1995; Biller & Bahm, 1971; Hetherington, 1966; Lynn & Sawrey, 1959; McCord et al., 1962). As stated by participants, gaining such closure led to forgiveness and enabled men who experienced fatherlessness to move forward with their lives unencumbered. The value of such closure was aptly expressed by one participant who fervently pursued reconciliation and rationalization for the simultaneous loss of both his parents when his father murdered his mother. The closure was the only way, in his words, that he would be able to ultimately accept full responsibility as a father.

I think that the issue around fatherhood, manhood, and forgiving is one that I really can’t overstate. I think ultimately accepting responsibility as a father requires whatever I went through to get to this place. But if somebody were to ask me for the one ingredient in the recipe of manhood, that ingredient would have to be forgiving…Comprehensive forgiving is what makes us better men and better fathers. As I said, it’s not a concession, but it’s an expansion into new stuff. (Malcolm)


Summary

The findings in this phenomenological study provided powerful insight into participants’ common experiences with the phenomenon of fatherlessness. The viewpoints, beliefs, and perceptions expressed by participants highlighted the commonalities among their experiences but also showcased how the experience of father absence uniquely impacted their individual life experiences. The captured findings and derived interpretations from this study supported a linkage between fatherhood and masculinity identifying the key role of fathers of sons as one in which they teach their sons elements of masculinity. What constitutes masculinity, however, is variable and contextually dependent on factors like culture and time in history, corroborating the ideas of plurality of masculinities asserted by Connell and Messerschmidt (2005).

The perpetuation of fatherlessness was another fundamental question under consideration in this research. The discovery of social and societal factors, beyond the shortcomings of the individual, contributing to the propagation of behaviors associated with fathers’ physical or emotional distance from sons was important. Indeed, the environment in which fatherless men reside influences their level of desensitization toward behaviors promoting father absence and the level at which such behaviors are socially permitted.
Chapter 5: Conclusions and Recommendations

**Introduction**

This study sought to describe the lived experiences of fatherlessness among men who, as of the time of this study, were fathers of at least one son. For the purpose of this study, fatherlessness was defined as a combination of physical and emotional distance between fathers and their sons. The fatherless phenomenon was initially considered to be the result of a continuum of paternal behaviors ranging from paternal apathy, which creates emotional distance in the father-son relationship, to paternal abandonment—combined physical and emotional distance between a father and child. At the core of this study was the problem statement asserting that the experience of fatherlessness generates highly differentiated behaviors among men that ultimately influences their ability to effectively father their sons and thereby halt the generational perpetuation of fatherlessness.

The study was conducted as a transcendental phenomenology (Moustakas, 1994). In line with definitions proffered by accomplished phenomenologists, the study focused on distilling the lived experiences of father absence to a “universal essence” (van Manen, 1990, p. 177) via an approach that “identifies pre-suppositions” (Farber, 1943, p. 58) and neutralizes their influence. The population for this study comprised of men who experienced fatherlessness for five or more years between the ages of 8 and 16 years old. There were no restrictions on participants’ eligibility based on race, ethnicity, or socioeconomic status. The study included a grand total of 36 participants who were involved in individual interviews and two focus groups.
Reliability was a primary area of emphasis during the conduct of this study. They were both achieved through strict procedural adherence to the phenomenological processes of epoche, phenomenological reduction, and imaginative variation and through triangulation of data gathered via different methods. Thorough data analysis leveraged the data management and efficiency multiplying effects of Dedoose—a qualitative data analysis software tool.

The three research questions for which answers were sought during this study were as follows:

1. What does the experience of transitioning from boyhood to manhood in a father-absent household mean for males?
2. How do men who experienced fatherlessness describe the intersection between masculinity and fatherhood?
3. How do men describe the relationships between their history of fatherlessness and their attempts to father their own sons?

The derivation of answers to these questions was built on a conceptual framework that viewed the phenomenon of fatherlessness through the lens of paternal involvement and essentialism, the social construction of masculinity, and resilience theory. Given this conceptual framework and the findings gathered during the conduct of this study, there are several conclusions the researcher can draw. These conclusions provide compelling answers to the research questions posed in this study.

Descriptions of the impacts of fatherlessness have primarily been documented in terms of quantitative factors. Prior research associated quantitative measures like dropout rates, rates of early exposure to sexual activity, and lower academic grades with the
absence or presence of a father in the household. This study captured the qualitative impact of fatherlessness on men and, through their stories, provided deep insight into the thoughts, feelings, beliefs, and perceptions of individuals who actually experience this phenomenon. While quantitative—particularly correlational—studies have significant limitations on establishing causality among variables, the conclusions drawn from this study originate directly from those who openly attribute several differentiated behaviors to their experience of paternal absence.

Conclusions

Participants in this study indicated the experience of fatherlessness during key developmental years in a boy’s life can have far-reaching repercussions well into their adulthood. The conclusions described in this section culminate a thorough research process in which the lived experiences of fatherless fathers were explored in depth. Each conclusion that emerged was categorized in terms of its applicability to the research questions initially posed by this study. Once synthesized, they represent a comprehensive response to the research questions and a thorough exploration of the problem statement.

What does the experience of transitioning from boyhood to manhood in a father-absent household mean for males?

From the findings in this study, it was apparent there were several meanings men attributed to their experience of father absence. Participants in this study indicated the absence of a father in the household during their transition from boyhood to manhood meant: the lack of a male model, a perceived lack of male availability and support, feelings of inadequacy, lack of paternal affirmation, and an on-going quest to find father-substitutes.
Lack of a model. One of the key findings from this study was the viewpoint that the primary role of fathers is that of teacher and model. Predominantly, participants indicated that fathers uniquely teach a range of life skills. One such life skill includes lessons on effective behaviors by men in the familial setting and in the broader society. Overwhelmingly, participants believed the essence of becoming a man can only be effectively and credibly passed on by someone who has also endured this transition. Fathers also model personal responsibility and teach their sons, through example, what it looks like when men honor their responsibilities.

Given participants’ perceptions about the role of a father as a teacher and model, it is conceivable that men from fatherless households may perceive themselves as lacking an effective model of how to navigate the arduous journey from boyhood to manhood. In several cases, fatherless boys may live in households with dual-role mothers—single mothers who take on the perceived roles of both father and mother. While some gender theorists may express some skepticism about the classification of roles by gender, it was evident in this study that participants believed there were some lessons not suitably taught by a mother, regardless of her competence. In fact, as participants described their experiences as adolescent boys progressing toward manhood in father-absent households, they suggested that throughout their development, there was increasing cynicism about the value of some teachings originating from their mothers. From their lived experience, they lacked an effective male model—a crucial element in their emotional, cognitive, and social development.

Feelings of inadequacy. A home that was void of a father figure or had an emotionally distant father meant repeated episodes in which fathers missed key
milestones in the lives of their sons. The absence of a father was prominent at athletic events, as well as other celebratory moments like graduations. Participants in the study commented on their athletic prowess and the significant successes they achieved in the field of sport. However, they constantly alluded to the fact that “when they turned to the stands,” there was someone missing—their father.

According to participants, the inherent value of highly laudable performances, by several standards, was diminished as a result of their fathers’ failure to attend. Continually repeated bouts of high expectations and disappointment were extremely painful, affecting their performance and ultimately leading to what participants described as an emotional hardening. The perceptions that their accomplishments were not worthy enough to encourage their fathers to share in them contributed to the erosion of the self-confidence and self-esteem of boys transitioning to men in a fatherless household.

The feelings of inadequacy originating in father absence were exacerbated by other factors. Specifically, the increasing body of questions about self-worth plagued the psyche of the boys developing into young men. Citing their inability to proudly state the simple phrase “my dad is at home,” the continuous self-questioning planted the seeds for a lifetime of doubt and insecurity about self-worth. The metaphorical seeds of the “am I not good enough” tree were planted and further fertilized with every additional disappointment that took place. Additionally, having to witness other two-parent families only served to further the questioning, as fatherless boys tried to put the pieces of their lives together. To continue the metaphor, the “am I not good enough” tree continued to grow well into adulthood and was only truly uprooted later in life when participants actively pursued emotional closure.
Lack of paternal affirmation. Men from father-absent homes or in households with significant emotional distance in the father-son relationship seldom received affirmations of their worth from the source where they most desired it—their fathers. The common perception among participants in the study was that their peers in two-parent homes were frequently reminded of their value and were consistently reminded that they were loved by their fathers. Consequences of seldom hearing “well done” or “I love you” from a proud father were numerous.

Firstly, the lack of guidance coupled with lack of affirmation fed the inadequacy previously described. As a result, it contributed to the downward pressure already exerted on the self-perceptions held by fatherless boys. A second impact of the lack of affirmation was the belief among some participants that they had no way of gauging when they were doing well. The result of this inability to “pace oneself,” as one participant described, ultimately developed into an unhealthy obsession with achievement lasting well into their adulthood. The rationale behind this, as explained by participants, was rooted in their lifelong pursuit of a father’s approval—even if the father-son relationship was still strained.

Continuous quest for substitutes. The absence of a father in the household creates a void. Young men growing up in a father-absent household search for substitutes they perceive will fill that void. The substitutes sought may be considered as positive additions to the lives of fatherless boys or they may be perceived as factors negatively impacting their lives. Regardless, the boys transitioning to young men consider these substitutes as sources with the potential to fulfill a need left unmet by paternal absence.
One of the substitutes participants identified was other people—a strong mother, a stepfather, extended family members, and other male models. As they progressed into manhood, spouses and adult partners were also considered as substitutes who met some aspect of fathering the developing man missed. Primarily, young men turn to other people to provide the guidance, support, and aforementioned affirmation they perceive ought to come from their fathers.

As indicated in this study, boys transitioning to manhood also turn to various institutions as a replacement for the presence of a father and the significant aspects of a healthy father-son interaction they missed. One institution frequently identified by participants in this study was the military. The military provided the discipline, relationships, structure, exposure, and life skills crucial for preparing young men for responsible manhood. As boys transition, they also derive value from involvement in other societal institutions such as church, organized sports, and even prison and gangs all offered some benefits that were, in the eyes of the unfathered boy, inaccessible. Commonly cited benefits included attention, time, guidance, and perceived interest in one’s development.

Despite the value of substitutes and their potential to make significant contributions to the lives of fatherless boys transitioning from boyhood to manhood, the common perception was that they never completely filled the void. The unanswered questions about fatherhood and the experience of father absence persist. The quest for substitute-fathers continues as these fatherless boys age, enter into manhood, and gain more experiences while seeking out elements that shape self-perceptions and assist with identity completion.
How do men who experienced fatherlessness describe the intersection between masculinity and fatherhood?

Masculinity and fatherhood are both socially defined constructs embodying the perceptions, beliefs, and norms that guide the behaviors, expectations, and value system of men and fathers, respectively. This study confirmed a perceived linkage between these two entities but also provided some deeper insight into the characterization of this association. Participants’ perceptions about the intersection between masculinity and fatherhood were illustrated through their descriptions of the evolution of male leadership, the emergence of the pro-feminist man, and how fathers shape masculinity.

Evolution of male leadership. Fundamentally, both masculinity and fatherhood are complex concepts, the construction of which is responsive to both social and historical considerations. In this study, participants described both as multifaceted but cited some areas of overlap perceived as significant. Common themes included the notions of responsibility, leadership, and availability. Interestingly, perceptions of masculinity as it relates to responsibility go well beyond the household or simply fulfilling the traditionally perceived role of provider or protector. Responsibility is viewed in a broader context as men and fathers are now perceived to have a greater duty to other men and to their communities. With broadened social responsibilities, men and fathers are expected to operate more frequently in the capacity of coaches and mentors within their family and in the broader community.

The viewpoint that men and fathers partner with women and mothers to effectively guide the household was another conclusion derived from the findings in this study. While participants referred to traditional expectations of fathers and masculinity
as it relates to “setting the tone” in the household, there were indications of the expectation that men partner and co-lead with women in setting the direction within families and in society in general.

**Emergence of the pro-feminist man.** Another key intersection between masculinity and fatherhood emerging from this study was the need for men and fathers to be comfortable with expression of emotion and tolerant of emotional expressiveness in others. Such a need indicates a potential trend in which the social construction of fatherhood and masculinity embraces what White and Peretz (2010) referred to as pro-feminist qualities. Men and fathers are perceived as increasingly comfortable with being nurturing, compassionate, and gentle.

Traditional constructions of masculinity and fatherhood rejected expressions of vulnerability or softness. In traditional masculinities, tolerance of emotional expression—particularly among sons—was discouraged. However, participants in this study expressed that they experienced an internal conflict when faced with scenarios in which they had to deal with their sons’ expressiveness—especially as it related to crying. The conflict centered on the tug they felt between the construction of masculinity prominent when they were growing up—never show vulnerability—versus the pro-feminist elements of contemporary masculinity—be a nurturer, encourage emotional expression. The conflict was evidenced throughout the study as a majority of participants were adamant about their refusal to allow others see them cry, while stating they teach their sons about the acceptability of expressing one’s feelings without reprisal. Their discomfort once emotional expression manifested itself as crying was also further proof of the conflict.
Fathers shape perceptions of masculinity. As mentioned above, masculinity is a socially constructed phenomenon built on the perceptions, beliefs, and norms guiding the behaviors, expectations, and values of men. A major conclusion from this study emerged from participants’ assertion that the main role a father plays in the lives of his sons is that of teacher and model. A father operating in the capacity of guide and teacher was seemingly most important to participants— even superseding the traditional concepts of “father as provider” and “father as protector” of the household. The importance placed on fathers being a model for their sons was apparent. Among the numerous life skills and behaviors fathers teach are traits of responsibility, resiliency, tenacity, honesty, self-awareness, and self-confidence. Additionally, fathers are crucial in passing on lessons on navigating life in a family setting and on effectively integrating into society as a responsible citizen.

Participants encapsulated all the ways in which they perceived fathers as teachers by asserting that fathers provide guidance on what it means to be a man to their sons. Such guidance is by no means trivial. It entails the physical considerations that must be taught about being male, as well as socially defined considerations about being masculine. The former may be exemplified through lessons dealing with physical traits of men such as how to shave or how to deal with the physical aspects of puberty. In acknowledgement of the plurality and diversity of masculinities, however, the latter considerations are far more complex. The value of a father to the development of their sons, as communicated by those who endured father absence, is to teach about being a man by using his own experiences. Moreover, a father is most effective when he embraces the concept of multiple masculinities in his instruction to his sons.
The researcher acknowledges the sensitivity of this conclusion given the scrutiny placed on issues of gender in contemporary research. Taking into account that masculinity is a socially constructed entity, the researcher acknowledges there are several sources beyond the teachings of a father that may influence those perceptions, beliefs, and norms that in turn guide the behaviors, expectations, and values demonstrated by their sons. Nevertheless, the findings from this study indicated that fatherless men perceived that men and their experiences were a more influential and credible source from which they were willing to emulate behaviors and adopt values.

**How do men describe the relationships between their history of fatherlessness and their attempts to father their own sons?**

Men who experienced fatherlessness feel its emotional effects well into adulthood. Numerous unanswered questions persist. As these men become fathers themselves, the impact of their exposure to father absence is magnified as they are thrust into a relationship, albeit as the father, that for them bore a history of pain and disappointment. The conclusions about the relationship between a history of fatherlessness and attempts at fathering boys that emerged from this study included: the disadvantages of the fatherless experience, the perceptions of self-worth among men who were fatherless, the susceptibility to repeating negative behaviors, the resolve to be different, and the conflict of learned behaviors.

**Fatherlessness men are at a disadvantage.** Participants in this study overwhelmingly believed their history of fatherlessness placed them in a disadvantageous position as it relates to their ability to effectively father their sons. The absence of a father – whether physically, emotionally, or both – constituted a lack of a model for how
to handle the complexities of fatherhood on a daily basis. The concept of a daily model provides access to learning opportunities that offer insight into what to do in certain scenarios as a father. Of equal importance is the exposure to fathers’ negative behaviors and associated outcomes – conclusion aligned with the claims of Renshaw (2005), who emphasized that the father-son bond was a conduit for the passage of teachings about the father role and that modeling how to father requires almost daily interaction and close observation.

There are several areas in which the disadvantage expressed by participants in this study was more emphasized. One key area alluded to in the study centers on the effective administration of discipline or punishment. Void of a model, men who experienced fatherlessness described not having a good gauge on appropriate enforcement of discipline. Other areas in which a disadvantage was perceived included emotional transparency, tolerance of emotional expression in sons, and how to navigate adult romantic relationships. The latter factor was rooted in perceptions among participants that they were never privy to a demonstration of positive behaviors contributing to longevity in an adult romantic relationship.

**Fatherlessness men question their worthiness.** Abandonment by a father or emotional distance in the father-son relationship took a toll on perceptions of self-worth among participants. Fatherless boys are continually confronted with questions regarding why their fathers chose to leave and what was wrong with them that made them not worth it. The knowledge that their fathers made a conscious decision to leave their sons or did not see it as valuable to have a close emotional tie to their sons was haunting and a source
of significant emotional pain. Such pain was common among participants and formed the foundation upon which several fears about fathering were established.

Describing the biggest fears held upon becoming fathers, participants in this study overwhelmingly suggested they were concerned they were not good enough to be a father. The viewpoint that they never had a model is applicable here as well. Nevertheless, a key consideration was the fact that fatherless men seldom had the positive affirmations empowering them to achieve whatever they set out to achieve. On the contrary, some even experienced the emotional abuse at the hands of apathetic fathers who consistently reinforced that they were incompetent and worthless.

**Proclivity to repeat the cycle but driven to be different.** The participants in this study expressed a deep concern that they were susceptible to behaviors propagating the phenomenon of fatherlessness onto their sons. They outlined the belief that their lack of exposure to active and involved fathering led to outcomes of emotional turmoil centered on feelings of emptiness, inadequacy, embarrassment, insecurity, and heightened anxiety. Additionally, they expressed the periodic sadness associated with feeling discarded, unwanted, and unloved. Their lived experiences, coupled with the emotional turmoil, contributed to some negative perceptions about fatherhood. For some, this manifested itself in an early rejection of becoming a father for fear they would inflict the same pain they endured on their sons.

Whether they described a lived experience in which there was no father present or the present father demonstrated paternal apathy, participants shared some factors that increased the chances they would wound their sons in the same manner they perceived they were wounded. While several of these factors were rooted in their individual
experience, participants also cited living in environments that bolstered the tendency for men in general to perpetuate behaviors leading to fatherlessness and its associated outcomes. Such environments condoned these behaviors as the norm and contributed to desensitization toward the seriousness of the fatherlessness phenomenon. A common belief among participants was that in such environments, there was a deficiency in the value placed on paternal resiliency as it related to dealing with family issues. Essentially, men were conditioned to leave when they perceived any difficulty with familial relationships.

An environment that socially permitted fatherlessness, along with the negative perceptions of fatherhood from their lived experiences, resulted in participants identifying their perpetuation of fatherlessness as one of their utmost concerns about becoming a father. Recognizing their susceptibility fuelled the fear but also resulted in an intense resolve among participants to create a different reality for their sons. With views such as “never wanting to be like my father” or “my son must tell a different story” being primary motivators, the men in this study overwhelmingly cited their drive to be different. Interestingly, even those participants who had already abandoned one or more of their sons shared that they had an intense desire to be a present and active father but succumbed to the pressures of an environment and to the model of fathering they experienced. They expressed remorse and pain at the thought of their sons having similar experiences to theirs.

Conflict of learned behaviors. The missing model is a pervasive concept throughout this study. This study uncovered the perception that the primary role of fathers in the father-son interaction is that of teacher and model of positive male
citizenship. Therefore, it is easy to understand how the experience of fatherlessness can create a void in which negative teachings and behaviors can take root. Participants mentioned that the father-substitutes they pursued and invariably selected were not always upstanding and were not always regarded as models of wholesome decision making. Consequently, participants acknowledged having a poor foundation for being a man and being misguided about several facets of fatherhood – resulting in their development of a body of perceptions, beliefs, and actions that shaped their identity as men and fathers. It encapsulated their approaches to discipline, displays of emotion, and willingness to demonstrate nurturing behaviors.

As some participants continued in their development and progressed toward manhood, they described having increased exposure to alternative approaches to fathering and acceptable behaviors that conflicted with those they had previously embraced. Their desire to be different for their sons drove their pseudo-acceptance of these new approaches.

An interesting conclusion emerged from participants’ description of the impact of gaining new insights and adding to the value system informing their approaches to fathering. They specified that their natural response in situations with their sons and family were often rooted in the misguided behaviors initially learned. This natural response, they admitted, was not always the healthiest response. A common example cited by participants was their response when faced with the scenario of an emotionally shaken son crying. They universally indicated that although their upbringing taught that “boys are tough” and “boys don’t cry,” they had acquired sensitivity toward their sons’ emotional freedom. Hence, their natural response in such a scenario was one of quickly
and harshly questioning why their son was crying and recommending that it be stopped right away. However, if they paused and reflected on their reshaped value system, their response was more measured and focused on nurturing their sons’ ability to describe emotions.

Participants cited several other examples in which there was a conflict between the learned values they embraced in the early stages of their fatherless experience and those they acquired as matured and gained more exposure. They viewed this conflict as highly important as it significantly influenced their behaviors toward their sons. Patience and measured responses were commonly cited as mechanisms toward ensuring the appropriate behaviors were displayed.

**Additional Conclusions**

The contributions of participants in this study yielded some conclusions that went beyond delivering answers to the research questions posed. These conclusions are equally valuable in understanding the issue of fatherlessness and how men who experienced father-absence describe its impact on how they father sons. Other emergent conclusions captured participants’ experiences with familial resiliency and the issue of emotional closure.

**Familial adversity and capacity for paternal resiliency.** Participants described their experience of fatherlessness as one that limited their exposure to examples of paternal resiliency in a family setting. Invariably, families encounter adversity. How they reintegrate after the adversity essentially defines the longevity and health of the family unit. Participants in this study repeatedly indicated that their fathers who abandoned them or were apathetic toward them were hasty and even selfish in how they
dealt with familial adversity. Some participants expressed they could never comprehend how the complexities of the adult relationship between a father and mother could lead to a father’s decision to abandon his son and forego his responsibility to be a guide.

Those participants who were active fathers committed to providing a different experience for their sons and described taking an alternative approach to adversity in the household. They were intent on incorporating resilient reintegration (Richardson, 2002) into how they handled the familial adversity resulting from household conflict as well as the internal conflict originating from their experience of father absence. Despite expressed trepidation about what this required, an overwhelming majority of participants described seeking professional counseling as a means of developing their capacity to resiliently respond to adversity within the household and, in so doing, realize their resolve to create a different reality for their sons.

**Emotional closure.** A commonly expressed desire among participants in this study was for the achievement of emotional closure. They cited an emotional rollercoaster throughout adolescence and well into manhood that was the outcome of not having an engaged father actively participating in their lives. Such emotional turmoil was a prolonged impact of the fatherless experience for which they wanted to achieve closure. They also expressed the need to “complete their identity,” a phrase participants used to indicate their desire to witness first hand where some of their physical traits and behavioral tendencies originated.

For participants, this meant rekindling a relationship with their fathers, if possible. In several cases, it meant meeting an individual for the first time or after multiple decades
of no interaction. Those who were able to accomplish this described the efficacy of the experience, indicating that, for them, it put to rest the churning emotions that had affected them throughout their lives. They used the rekindled relationship to ask the questions that were, for a long time, unanswered. Interestingly, participants expressed initial hesitance at allowing the fathers who caused them such pain to meet their grandchildren but ultimately saw the re-introduction of father to son and the introduction of father to grandson as a means of destroying the cycle of fatherlessness affecting their family for decades.

**Recommendations**

Given the findings of this study and the pervasiveness of fatherlessness in American society, there are several steps this researcher believes will further elucidate this issue and provide some redress to its contributing factors. The insight about the lived experiences of men who faced father absence and paternal apathy during their formative years, and the increased understanding of how the fatherless experience impacts their parenting, scratches the surface of a larger system of interrelated phenomena. The perpetuation of fatherlessness from generation to generation has a far-reaching impact touching every aspect of society. Education, social services, criminal justice, and healthcare are a few examples of subsystems that are stakeholders directly or indirectly affected by issues related to fatherhood. To forge further ahead in curbing the effects of fatherlessness, the following recommendations are suggested.

**Training Programs for School Districts, Counselors, and Administrators**

Counselors and administrators are key sources of influence in the education sector. They are charged with understanding the student population and determining
mechanisms for improving the efficacy of information delivery in the school system. With this responsibility, it is imperative counselors and administrators are sufficiently equipped with the information and tools to effectively work with all students, regardless of demographic differentiators. The challenges students face that ultimately affect academic performance are numerous. Also, factors contributing to students’ difficulty with social adaptation in school are far reaching. The more knowledge officials in education have about the multiplicity of indicators, causes, and outcomes associated with problems students face, the better.

Fatherlessness is one of the phenomena of which counselors and administrators must be aware. The fact that almost one in three children in the United States reside in households without their biological father indicates there is a significant probability that school officials will encounter individuals who share the experiences of the participants in this study. Consequently, it is recommended that school officials are effectively trained to identify and address some of the negative externalities resulting from the fatherless experience. Acknowledgement and recognition of the qualitative impacts of fatherlessness should be central elements of the recommended training curriculum. Other key segments may include mechanisms for identifying the needs of fatherless boys and suggested approaches for adequately supporting them.

**Accessible Resources for Fatherless Men**

According to the findings uncovered in this study, men who experience fatherlessness lacked a model of effective fathering approaches. The lack of a model impacted their confidence as they entered into fatherhood and continued to resurface as they encountered new parenting scenarios. Participants in this study perceived that
access to resources assisting with parenting and overall life skills are hard to find and primarily accessible only after being court-ordered. They also overwhelmingly expressed that the opportunity to verbalize their experience in a safe environment was helpful to them.

The recommendation surfacing as a result of the perceived lack of resources for fatherless men is the formation of a network of support services easily accessible via various media. Subscribers to this learning network will benefit from and deliver services to other members. Services should include easy access to a core of coaches who understand the fatherless experience and are available to listen and offer on-demand assistance to other members of the network. Other services will include access to publications, webinars, seminars, and electronic feeds with pertinent information about the fatherless experience and the skills necessary to enable resilient reintegration and reduce the propensity that the cycle of father absence or paternal apathy is continued.

By leveraging the power of technology and the efficiency of social networks, accessibility to such a body of resources would be enhanced. Fatherless men can individually and collectively benefit from the power and therapeutic effect of simply sharing their experiences among each other. Consequently, it is recommended that subscribed members of the proposed network should be able to interact with individuals from various backgrounds who share the common experience of fatherlessness. Such a recommendation attempts to address the paucity of social services specifically targeted at understanding the plight of the fatherless man; recognizing the qualitative nature of his experience; and allowing for open, non-judgmental communication about his journey.
Enable Resilient Reintegration in Juvenile Justice System

The participants in this study outlined the cognitive and emotional responses to father absence they experienced. They also described the constant pursuit of substitutes to fulfill the void left by a physically or emotionally distant father. On some occasions, the emotional responses and poor choices of substitutes—e.g., gangs, poor models—led to the unfortunate experience of detention in the juvenile justice system or incarceration in the criminal justice system. While immersed in these environments, participants outlined their exposure to various factors leading to further misdirection, increasing their potential for recidivism. One participant even shared that he adopted a form of masculinity from his prison experience—the “outlaw” masculinity—a form of masculinity held and practiced by a man who intentionally breaks the rules but lives by a strict code of conduct in doing so.

As a result, this researcher recommends that an element of the juvenile justice system needs to be attentive to the qualitative impacts of fatherlessness among its population, meaning that key stakeholders in the juvenile justice system—e.g., judges, counselors, probation officers, and teachers—should be educated about the phenomenon of fatherlessness and how boys may respond to the experience. The intent of this recommendation is to ensure the appropriate support and services are made available to this population and that all stakeholders responsible for counseling or teaching are readily equipped to help individuals cope with all the challenges they encounter, some of which may be associated with their fatherless experience.

It is this researcher’s belief that a greater awareness of the thoughts, feelings, perceptions, and beliefs held by boys experiencing fatherlessness will enable system
stakeholders to deliver support services more effectively, providing boys with opportunities to verbalize the intricate details about their experience and share how it contributes to their current behaviors. Adolescent boys in the midst of the fatherless experience lack direction—a common complaint among participants in this study about their adolescent experience. Their placement in the juvenile justice system may be a manifestation of their misdirection. Stakeholders who, through adequate training, can relate to fatherless boys’ experiences are better prepared to provide redirection and enable them to resiliently reintegrate from the adversity they encounter.

**Increased Efficacy of Mentorship Efforts**

Although findings from this study suggested that mentorship does not completely fill the emotional void left by an absent father, participants still indicated there is tremendous value in positive role models. Participants described lessons learned from positive father-substitutes as invaluable, despite their contention that they would have preferred many of those lessons to have originated with a present and active father.

There are several organizations nationwide that have developed mentorship programs targeted at adolescent boys who belong to what are deemed underserved populations or communities. Often, the term underserved connotes that the targeted group has significant exposure to risk factors and experiences a lack of access to certain resources—e.g., economic resources, educational resources.

Rooted in the findings of this study, this researcher asserts that the qualitative impact of fatherlessness undoubtedly creates significant exposure to risk factors. The lack of a model, the pursuit of substitutes, the need for direction, and the tendency to be emotionally closed off creates the perfect storm of risk factors within fatherless boys that
can lead to their detriment. As a consequence, mentorship programs across the nation should encompass elements that prepare both mentors and mentees to directly confront the fatherless experience. Among other things, this will lead to a better understanding among mentees of how their perceptions and beliefs about masculinity and fatherhood were shaped.

Enable Rekindled Father-Son Relationships

In this study, the need for emotional closure stood out as an important part of the fatherless journey. A majority of participants shared that their desire for closure and identity completion led them to engage in efforts to rekindle a relationship with their fathers. They used this relationship to gain answers to previously unanswered questions about their experience and about their biological fathers. They sought to satisfy their thirst for information on the similarities and differences, physical and otherwise, existing between them and their fathers. They also participated in rekindling these father-son bonds as a means of introducing previously distant fathers to their grandsons, positioning themselves as the connection between two generations.

Since this was regarded as highly important among participants, it behooves this researcher to recommend programs aimed at fostering the rebuilding of these relationships. As of the compilation of this study, there were only a few examples of such programs spread across the nation. The intent of these programs would be, where possible, to locate and reconnect estranged fathers and sons to facilitate the initial reconnection and harness the potential for further interactions. The desired outcome would be to enable men who experienced fatherlessness to gain the emotional closure
that participants in this study indicated was highly important to their efforts to break the cycle of fatherlessness.

**Raised Awareness of Qualitative Impact of Fatherlessness**

A final practical recommendation emerging from this study centers on the fundamental task of raising awareness. This researcher sees absolute value in a nationwide campaign aimed at bringing the issue of fatherlessness to the forefront of discussions of social issues with which this nation is challenged. Such a recommendation could potentially manifest itself through a series of nationwide workshops, publications, and televised discussions that orient the general population to the depth and breadth of the fatherless experience. The more awareness generated—particularly about the qualitative affects—the greater chance for recognition of fatherlessness as a primary issue and widespread efforts at reducing its perpetuation.

**Additional Research**

This study opens the door for follow-up research on various issues and related phenomena. Firstly, the fatherless household is only one of many potentially dysfunctional family structures. Hence, there are opportunities for further exploration into the phenomenon of motherlessness and how it impacts child development. Moreover, this study focused only on the effect fatherlessness has on a son. There are certainly ways in which fatherlessness impacts daughters as well. Consequently, there is an opportunity to build on this research by investigation of the ways in which fatherlessness impacts girls and how motherlessness may impact both boys and girls.

An important consideration taken into account as this study’s findings were synthesized was the concept of essentialism as it relates to fatherhood. Supporters of
essentialism claim that fatherlessness is at the root of threats to societal sustainability. As noted earlier, this viewpoint was highly criticized by contemporary researchers with the main area of contention centering on whether father presence or absence can account for the numerous negative outcomes principally attributed to physical and emotional paternal absence. There are admittedly several phenomena actively influencing the family dynamic in father-absent households. It is, therefore, imperative that future research is conducted to enable a more systematic isolation of the impacts of fatherlessness from the effects of other social or familial dynamics. In spite of the projected value of such additional research, it is imperative the value of participants’ attributions, as it relates to their lived experiences and perceptions about the fatherlessness phenomenon, is considered and regarded as highly important in the derivation of further conclusions.

With the burgeoning research on gender-related issues, and increasing societal attention on alternative household structures, there are opportunities for studies into the phenomenon of households with same-sex couples and the effects, if any, on the identities of children reared in these households. The increasing popularity of such same-sex households—particularly dual female family structures—calls the essentialist viewpoint into question. As a result, further exploration of the essentialist concept is required. This researcher also asserts that there is significant opportunity for even deeper analysis of perceptions of masculinity among sons and femininity among girls given these various household structures to be considered.

One limitation of this study was the fact that there was no consideration of race or socioeconomic status among participants selected to participate. Further exploration into
how the introduction of these considerations may alter the results derived in this study would be fascinating and serve as a valuable addition to the body of knowledge about fatherhood and masculinity. Another limitation of this study centered on the working definition employed for the term “fatherlessness.” For this study, fatherlessness resulted from a continuum of paternal behaviors ranging from paternal apathy to paternal abandonment. Refinement of the findings in this study would be achieved if future research were able to isolate the impact of paternal apathy—a present but disengaged father—from the impact of no father present at all.

Further research that takes into consideration what this researcher calls “the path to fatherlessness” would also serve to further enhance the findings in this study. Participants in this study became fatherless via apathy, abandonment, and even death of their fathers. Removing the assumption that the same level of traumatization may be applied to all paths to fatherlessness may reveal some rather interesting findings that build on those established in this study.

Finally, prior to this study, fatherlessness was viewed, for the most part through a quantitative lens. This study illustrates that the qualitative experiences of fatherless boys, and ultimately fatherless men, really adds an element of detail that could be lost in quantitative approaches to analyzing these issues. Certainly, there is significant value in the conduct of quantitative assessments of this phenomenon but this researcher asserts that the depth afforded from a parallel qualitative inquiry should not be foregone.

**Summary**

Blankenhorn (1995) contributed some rather contentious statements on the issue of fatherlessness. His statements included a prediction that American society would
someday be divided along the lines of patrimony—those who had the daily presence of a father and those who did not. Such statements, as asserted by numerous scholars, were narrow, failing to account for the emotional presence of fathers. Nevertheless, it captured the notion of the emergence of patrimonial haves and have-nots in society, with the latter having significant disadvantages in terms of psychological, social, cognitive, and emotional readiness. This study took into account the entire spectrum of physical and emotional distance in the father-son interaction. Undoubtedly, participants overwhelmingly communicated the discomfort they endured as a patrimonial have-not.

The findings and conclusions derived in this study highlighted the perceptions and beliefs that men who experienced fatherlessness hold about masculinity and fatherhood and how their lived experiences affected how they fathered their sons. It was evident from this research that fathers who did not have the fortune of a present and active father perceived that they were at a constant emotional disadvantage—one they struggled daily to overcome with limited success but were intent on preventing their sons from experiencing.
List of References


Appendix A: Individual Interview Protocol

Date/Time: ______________________
Location: _______________________
Interviewee: _____________________
Interviewee Alias: _______________

Research Questions

- What does the experience of transitioning from boyhood to manhood in a father-absent household mean for males?
- What is the essence of the meaning of the intersection between masculinity and fatherhood among men who experienced fatherlessness?
- What is the meaning of the lived experiences, perceptions, and attitudes of unfathered men to their ability to model good fathering and responsible male citizenship to their sons?

Interview Protocol:

1. Describe in general what it meant to grow up fatherless?
2. At what age did your exposure to fatherlessness begin?
3. Describe when it became significant to you that your father was not present?
4. Describe the biggest disadvantages of not having an active father around?
5. At times during your life, when you thought about your father not being around, what were the feelings or emotions that arose?
6. Describe the characteristics and behaviors that in your opinion make a man a man?
7. From where did you gather your knowledge about what it meant to be a man?
8. Did you have friends who had their fathers around? Describe what feelings came to mind as you witnessed your peers who had active fathers in their lives.
9. Think back to the moment you found out that you were going to be a father. Can you describe the immediate emotions that you experienced when you heard the news?
10. Describe the thoughts you had when you first envisioned yourself as a father?
11. What were your biggest areas of concern or fears about becoming a father?
12. What were the things you looked forward to the most about becoming a father?
13. Describe the characteristics and behaviors that in your opinion make a great father?
14. Describe the characteristics that you envisioned when you thought about the kind of father you wanted to become.
15. How would you describe the experience of fathering boys?
16. How would you describe your level of involvement with your sons over time?
17. What behaviors, if any, do you consider to be totally unacceptable from your sons?
18. How would you describe your approach to discipline with your children?
19. Describe the key lessons that you imparted or intend to impart into your son(s) about what it means to be a man?

20. Describe the key lessons that you imparted or intend to impart into your son(s) about what it means to be a father?

21. Describe how your experiences with being fatherless impacted the following life experiences:
   a. Confidence in making parenting decisions
   b. Your ability to form meaningful bonds with other adults
   c. Your decision making with respect to education and career
   d. Other lifestyle choices

22. Describe what steps you have taken to deal with the challenges you have faced as a result of not having that biological father figure around.
Appendix B: Consent to Take Part in a Research Study

1. Title of research study

Emerging from the Daddy Issue: A Phenomenological Study of the Impact of the Lived Experiences of Men Who Experienced Fatherlessness on Their Approach to Fathering Sons

2. Researcher: David R. Inniss

3. Why you are being invited to take part in a research study

We invite you to take part in a research study because you are a father of son(s) and you experienced fatherlessness for five (5) or more years between the ages of 8 and 16.

4. What you should know about a research study

- Someone will explain this research study to you.
- Whether or not you take part is up to you.
- You can choose not to take part.
- You can agree to take part now and later change your mind.
- Whatever you decide it will not be held against you.
- Feel free to ask all the questions you want before you decide.

5. Who can you talk to?

If you have questions, concerns, or complaints, or think the research has hurt you, talk to the research team at Dr. Ed Bureau, web28@drexel.edu.

This research has been reviewed and approved by an Institutional Review Board.

You may talk to them at (215) 255-7857 or email HRPP@drexel.edu for any of the following reasons:

- Your questions, concerns, or complaints are not being answered by the research team.
- You cannot reach the research team.
- You want to talk to someone besides the research team.
- You have questions about your rights as a research subject.
- You want to get information or provide input about this research.
6. Why are we doing this research?
The purpose of this research is to explore the lived experiences, attitudes and perceptions about masculinity and fatherhood among men who experienced fatherlessness. The investigation seeks to understand how these experiences have enabled or hampered the participant’s ability to break trends of father-absence in their family. It pursues broad, deep inquiry into the lives of un-fathered men some of whom appear to have risen above the negative outcomes typically associated with not having a father and others who have struggled to cope with the consequences of father-absence on their lives. This study will also explore the attitudes and activities that impact the development of men who experienced fatherlessness into models of effective fathering and positive male citizenship for their sons.

7. How long will the research last?
We expect this entire study to be complete by December 31st, 2013. However, we expect that your participation in this research study will be for 90 minutes for individual interviews or 120 minutes for focus groups.

8. How many people will be studied?
We expect about 30 participants in this research study, 16 of which will be individually interviewed and the remainder will be in focus groups.

9. What happens if you say yes, you want to be in this research?
Should you participate in this study, you will participate in a single interview or focus group. Each interview will last no longer than 90 minutes and each focus group will last no longer than 2 hours. The interview/focus group shall be semi-structured and will include questions about becoming a man without the guidance of a father and about your perceptions about how father absence has affected you, especially as it relates to fathering your sons. There will be no follow up interviews.

10. What are your responsibilities if you take part in this research?
If you take part in this research, it is very important that you provide truthful responses about your experiences.

11. What happens if you do not want to be in this research?
You may decide not to take part in the research and it will not be held against you.
12. What happens if you say yes, but change your mind later?
You may agree to take part in the research now and stop at any time it will not be
held against you.

13. Is there any way being in this study could be bad for you?
You may share some experiences that are personally touching and painful.
Reaching back into your past may re-open emotional wounds that may lead to highly
emotional responses. Should you be overwhelmed with emotion, please remember that
you can withdraw from the research at any time. It is recommended that you seek
professional counseling if participation in this research causes significant emotional pain.
To mitigate any risks to your privacy or confidentiality, your name will not be
used with this research. There will be no identifying factors within the research.

14. Do you have to pay for anything while you are on this study?
There is no cost to you for participating in this study.

15. Will being in this study help you in anyway?
We cannot promise any benefits to you or others from your taking part in this
research. However, possible benefits include an opportunity to openly share your
personal experience, and express some emotions or feelings that you felt in the past.

16. What happens to the information we collect?
Your privacy and confidentiality of your responses is of utmost importance. To
protect your privacy, no identifying information will be collected from you. Identifying
information refers to any personal data such as addresses, identification numbers, etc.
You will be asked to provide a preferred Alias and all audio responses and transcriptions
will be referred to using your designated alias. The confidentiality of your data will be
protected through secure storage of recorded interviews and related transcriptions on a password protected hard drive that is not accessible via the Internet.

While utmost efforts will be made to limit your personal information to people who have a need to review the data captured, we cannot promise complete secrecy. Organizations that may inspect and copy your information include the Drexel IRB.

17. **Can you be removed from the research without your OK?**

The person in charge of the research study or the sponsor can remove you from the research study without your approval. Possible reasons for removal include discovery that you are a minor or do not meet key participant criteria.

We will tell you about any new information that may affect your choice to stay in the research.

18. **What else do you need to know?**

This research study is being done by Drexel University.

If you become emotionally overwhelmed during this interview or afterwards, please contact a professional counselor.

Upon completion of the study, you will be informed of the published results at a designated website for your review.
Your signature documents your permission to take part in this research.

DO NOT SIGN THIS FORM AFTER THIS DATE

December 31st, 2013

Signature of subject

Date

Printed name of subject

Signature of person obtaining consent

Date

Printed name of person obtaining consent

Form Date
Appendix C: Focus Group Protocol

Date/Time: ______________________
Location: _______________________
Facilitator: _____________________

Interview Protocol:

1. By a show of hands, how many of you either did not have your fathers around at all or had your fathers around but they were distant?
   a. For those of you who **DID NOT** have your fathers present and active, when do you remember it becoming significant to you that your father was not present? (RQ1) (STR3)
   b. For those of you who **DID** have your fathers present and active, when do you remember it becoming significant to you that your father was there to support you? (RQ1) (STR3)

2. Describe the experience of being fatherless as an adolescent. What was the biggest disadvantage? (RQ1) (STR3)

3. Describe your transition from adolescence to manhood.
   a. For those of you who **DID NOT** have your fathers present and active, how did not having your father impact that transition? (STR2)
   b. For those of you that **DID** have your fathers, describe how his presence impacted the transition?

4. Describe your perspective of what makes a man? (RQ2) (STR2)
   a. From where did you gather your knowledge about what it meant to be a man?
   b. Describe what society tells you makes a good man? (RQ2)

5. Describe the role of father as you see it? (RQ2) (STR1, STR2)
   a. What are the things that drove you when you thought about the type of father you would be?

6. What feelings come to the fore when you think about fathering son(s)? (RQ3)
   a. What were your biggest fears about becoming a father of a son?

7. How would you describe your level of involvement with your sons? (RQ3)
   a. How has your involvement changed over time?

8. How has your adult life measured up against the man that you described above?

9. Describe how your experiences with being fatherless impacted the following life experiences. (RQ3)
   a. Expression of emotion, nurturing, discipline
   b. How you make parenting decisions
   c. Resolving conflict in the household and dealing with anger
d. Forming meaningful bonds with other men/women

e. Decision making with respect to education and career

10. Describe what would be different about your life if your father was more present? (RQ1)

   a. Particularly, what would be different about how you father or have fathered?

11. Is there anything that I did not address that you would like to mention?