Father Absence, Reproductive Strategies, and Parent Financial Strain: Effects on African American Female Adolescents’ Educational Expectations

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Abstract
African Americans experience the highest rates of father absence from the home compared to other ethnic groups in the U.S. As of 2010: 67% of African American infants were born to unwed mothers; 33% of African American households were headed by a single mother with at least one related child under 18 years of age; 65% were below the poverty line (U.S. Bureau of the Census). African American women earn significantly less than African American men and all other ethnic groups by sex (except for Hispanic women) (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2007). As of the 2010 Census, 71% of African American females age 25 and over did not have a post-secondary degree.

Keywords
African American, father absence, poverty, economic stress

Disciplines
Family, Life Course, and Society | Finance

Comments
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Father Absence, Reproductive Strategies, and Parent Financial Strain: Effects on African American Female Adolescents’ Educational Expectations

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The Issues

- African Americans experience the highest rates of father absence from the home compared to other ethnic groups in the U.S.
  - As of 2010:
    - 67% of African American infants were born to unwed mothers
    - 33% of African American households were headed by a single mother with at least one related child under 18 years of age
    - 65% were below the poverty line (U.S. Bureau of the Census)

- African American women earn significantly less than African American men and all other ethnic groups by sex (except for Hispanic women) (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2007)
  - As of the 2010 Census, 71% of African American females age 25 and over did not have a post-secondary degree
Research Question

Is father absence and educational expectations linked? If so, how?

Father absent children:
- **Lower academic scores** (Lang & Zagorsky, 2001; Aughinbaugh et al., 2001)
- Score lower on personal assessment of academic competence (Sigle-Rushton & McLanahan, 2002)
- More likely to drop out of school (McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994)
- Less likely to go to college (Sigle-Rushton & McLanahan, 2002)

Create a holistic model that incorporates both biopsychosocial and family theories to explore how father absence may set girls on a trajectory toward low educational expectations

- Family Economic Stress Theory
- Psychosocial Acceleration Theory
Family Economic Stress Theory

- Father absence increases the risk of his contributing fewer resources to the family; these include financial resources as well as interpersonal-social resources.

- Economic pressure, the difficult stressful experiences related to economic hardship, increases as a result of fewer resources.

- Parents under economic pressure have poorer parenting skills and difficulties in parent-parent, and parent-child relationships increase.

- One result is poorer academic expectations, performance and achievement.
Psychosocial Acceleration Theory

- Role of familial and environmental stress in accelerating pubertal maturation in girls

- Evolved to especially sensitive to childhood environment
  - Prepare us for the availability and predictability of resources in the future
  - Influence reproductive strategies (e.g. timing of maturation, sexual behaviors)

- Familial and/or environmental stressors during childhood will accelerate pubertal maturation, sexual activity

- Has not been used to explain personal educational expectations
Hypotheses

- **H1**: Duration of father absence will be positively associated with greater parent financial strain

- **H2**: Parent financial strain during childhood will be associated with lower educational expectations

Family Economic Stress Theory

- Duration of Father Absence → Parent Financial Strain
- Educational Expectations → Parent Financial Strain

Psychosocial Acceleration Theory

- Early Menarche → Early Sexual Debut
H3: Duration of father absence during childhood will be positively associated with early menarche

H4: Early menarche will be positively associated with early sexual debut

H5: Early sexual debut will be negatively associated with educational expectations
National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health)

Survey
- Wave I 1994-1995
- Wave II 1996
- Wave III 2001-2002

Age
- Adolescents in grades 7-12
- Adolescents in grades 8-12
- Young adults age 18-26

Sample
- Public use data
- n=532
- Female
- African American
- Completed at least Waves I and II of In-Home Interview
- Caregiver completed Parent Questionnaire in Wave I
- Father absent and father present girls

Acknowledgement: This research uses data from Add Health, a program project directed by Kathleen Mullan Harris and designed by J. Richard Udry, Peter S. Bearman, and Kathleen Mullan Harris at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and funded by grant P01-HD31921 from the Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, with cooperative funding from 23 other federal agencies and foundations. Special acknowledgment is due Ronald R. Rindfuss and Barbara Entwisle for assistance in the original design. Information on how to obtain the Add Health data files is available on the Add Health website (http://www.cpc.unc.edu/addhealth). No direct support was received from grant P01-HD31921 for this analysis.
Educational Expectations

- Educational expectations: Attitudes toward post-secondary education
  - “On a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 is low and 5 is high, how much do you want to go to college?”
  - “On a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 is low and 5 is high, how likely is it that you will attend college?”
  - “What do you think are the chances that each of the following things will happen to you?” “You will graduate from college”
  - 1 (Almost no chance) to 5 (Almost certain)

**Average Educational Expectations**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Want to Attend</td>
<td>4.51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Likely Will Attend</td>
<td>4.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Likely Will Graduate</td>
<td>4.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Composite</td>
<td>4.32</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Predictor Variables

- **Duration of father absence**: Number of years participant reported biological father absence from the home
  - Wave I Interview

- **Parent financial strain**: Report of receipt of SSI, AFDC, food stamps, or housing subsidy/public housing assistance
  - Wave I Parent Questionnaire
  - 0 = no, did not receive assistance
  - 1 = yes, did receive assistance
  - Higher summed scores indicated higher levels of financial strain
Predictor Variables

- Early menarche: Menarche < 12 years old
  - Wave II if possible; otherwise Wave I
  - 0 = 12+ years old
  - 1 = 11 years old or younger

- Early sexual debut: First Sexual Intercourse < 16 years old
  - Wave I if possible; otherwise Wave III
  - 0 = 16+ years old
  - 1 = 15 years old or younger
Results

Family Economic Stress Theory

- Duration of Father Absence → Parent Financial Strain
  \[0.211^{***}\]
- Parent Financial Strain → Early Menarche
  \[0.13^{***}\]
- Early Menarche → Early Sexual Debut
  \[0.09^{**}\]
- Early Sexual Debut → Educational Expectations
  \[-0.18^{***}\]

Psychosocial Acceleration Theory

- Duration of Father Absence → Early Menarche
  \[0.13^{***}\]
- Early Menarche → Educational Expectations
  \[-0.18^{***}\]
Discussion

- Holistic model is a viable way to examine what contributes to African American girls’ personal educational expectations
- Psychosocial Acceleration Theory may be applicable to non-biological processes
- Parkes et al. (2010) suggested that sexual debut and academic aspirations may lie on the same developmental trajectory

- Stressful environment may signal to the child that the future will be just as stressful
- May choose employment over post-secondary education
Limitations

- Parental expectations, peer influences, school performance, employment during high school were not considered
- Focused on one ethnic group
- Limited to first three waves of Add Health public use data
- Did not go past educational expectations
  - Need to use all four waves of data
Future Research…

Adulthood SES

Occupational Development

Educational Attainment

Educational Expectations
  ▪ Desire to attend college
  ▪ Perceived likelihood of attending college
  ▪ Perceived likelihood of graduating from college

Family Development

Family Formation

Reproductive Maturation
  ▪ Menarcheal age
  ▪ Sexual debut