Introduction

Fathers play a significant role in families, and their relationships with their children influence youths’ well-being across several domains, including academic success (Gordon, 2016), psychological health (Hofferth, 2006), and future educational and occupational attainment (Tillman, 2007). Fathers engage in multiple care-taking roles within families such as spending quality time with their children, providing financial support, and serving as moral support. Literature suggests that the importance of these roles varies by racial and cultural groups (Lamb & Tamis-LeMonda, 2004), and until recently, much of the literature on Black fathers portrays African American men as “deadbeat dads” or absentee fathers. A growing body of research refutes this absentee father paradigm regarding Black fathers (Edin, Tach, & Mincy, 2009; Jones & Mosher, 2013; King, Harris, & Heard, 2004; Nebbitt, Lombe, Doyle, & Vaughn, 2013), and the current case study focuses on Tron’s decisions to transform his experience growing up without a father into a dedicated resolve to remain actively present in his son’s life, a process that the author refers to as “intergenerational change.” Finally, this case study helps to mitigate the dearth of positive research on African American fathers by challenging deficit-based research narratives.

The “Father-Absence” Paradigm

In his 1965 report, Daniel Moynihan reported that the structure of family life in the African American community constituted a “tangle of pathology” and that “deterioration of
the Negro family was the fundamental source of weakness in Negro society.” In his study, the European American nuclear family structure was treated as the superior standard, which suggested that all other family structures were inherently maladaptive. Moynihan concluded that the absence of a traditional patriarchal structure in African American families was responsible for “Negro society’s deterioration,” characterizing African American fathers as absent and African American mothers as harmfully dominant and overbearing. Other studies conducted during this period echoed his conclusions (Pedersen, Rubenstein, & Yarrow, 1979; Popplewell & Sheikh, 1979; Roy, 1978), and this deficit-based paradigm can be found in contemporary literature, as well (Black, 2010; Cartwright & Henrikson, 2012; Sieber, 2008).

An absent father generally refers to a male, biological parent who fails to provide emotional, financial, and other forms of consistent support for his children, and these earlier beliefs about the father-absent homes of African Americans led to a body of work examining the impact of this absence on family life. Wilson and colleagues (2016) point out that referencing these homes as father-absent is one indicator of how female-headed families are seen as inadequate. African American children who reside with their mothers in single-parent homes are seen as “at risk” for developmental and social problems such as juvenile delinquency and low academic achievement, and this “father-absence as risk” paradigm is recurrent throughout the literature. Sciarra and Jantz (1974) reported that children from father-absent homes scored lower on verbal and performance achievement tests than children from father-present homes, and this performance difference was particularly prevalent among males. Others have found that African American males from father-absent homes reported lower grades and more school suspensions than males from father-present homes (Rockey & Mupier, 1999). And in a study that framed strong masculinity as the healthiest form of identity development among males, father-present boys perceived themselves to be higher in masculinity traits than father-absent boys (Mandara, Murray, & Joyner, 2005). A number of studies have framed higher incidence of juvenile delinquency and incarceration as likely outcomes for young boys in father-absent homes. Harper and McLanahan (2004) reported that although other elements such as teen motherhood and poverty can account for some of the variance in African American male adolescents’ likelihood to be incarcerated, father-absence was still a significant risk factor. Other researchers report similar findings (Cao, Cao, & Zhao, 2004; Paschall, Ringwalt, & Flewelling, 2003), generally concluding that young African American males are more likely to become involved with illicit activities when their father is absent.

Although a predominance of this work focuses on the impact of father-absence on males, researchers have applied the “father-absence as risk” paradigm to females, as well. A longitudinal study that explored psychosocial characteristics of adolescent mothers and nonmothers found that although the groups did not vary on psychosocial variables such as self-esteem and academic efficacy, adolescent mothers reported poorer father–daughter relationships (Landy, Schubert, Cleland, Clark, & Montgomery, 1983). Fathers were more likely to be “ineffectual” in homes with adolescent mothers, and the authors concluded that the higher rate of pregnancies among this group related to the absence of a stable father figure. Maestripieri, Roney, DeBias, Durante, and Spaepen (2004) reported that adolescent girls from father-absent homes began menstruating earlier and demonstrated more interest in infant visual stimuli than girls from father-present homes, and another study concluded that father-absence was related to earlier onset of breast and pubic hair development among African American girls (Deardorff et al., 2011). As demonstrated by the previous examples, much of the literature with females focuses on early pubertal development and sexual behavior, and for males, the prevalent gendered theme is juvenile delinquency. In general, this body of literature also points to poorer academic achievement and social adjustment among both males and females due to father absence. Overall, this research suggests that African American youth in father-absent homes are at higher risk for a number of negative psychosocial outcomes, including increased likelihood of delinquent behaviors, higher risk of teenage pregnancy, and poorer academic achievement.

**Challenging the “Absentee Father” Paradigm and Intergenerational Change**

Other studies have challenged these findings and the “father-absence as risk” paradigm, by contextualizing the structure and complexity of African American fathers’ presence in the lives of their children. Wasserman (1972) found no difference on measure of school achievement between boys in father-absent and father-present homes and also suggested that attributing achievement differences to “so-called inherent family characteristics” overlooks educational systems that disadvantage certain groups. Rivera, Sweeney, and Henderson (1986) found that nearly 2 years after the birth of their children, the majority of African American adolescent noncustodial fathers in the study had contact with their child 3 to 6 times a week. Another study with African American fathers found that male participants viewed emotional involvement and “being there” as significant, and that fathers made consistent efforts to be engaged in their children’s lives despite not living in the home (Allen & Doherty, 1996).

More recently, a proliferation of qualitative work has offered a comprehensive perspective on the roles, responsibilities, and presence of African American fathers in their children’s lives. Dallas and Chen (1998) conducted semistructured focus groups with several African American fathers, and among the seven themes that emerged from the data, *transition to fatherhood*, *father–child contact*, and *value of fatherhood* demonstrated the
men’s commitment to their children. Although many of the young men felt confused and unprepared for the new role, all of them described a memory of the first time they felt joy and pride over the news. They discussed the importance of maintaining strong bonds with their children, and a few mentioned that abandonment by their biological fathers increased their motivation to remain involved with their children. The men expressed their belief that “fathers who leave don’t care” and viewed fatherhood as an important role that can only be fulfilled by a male, which was a general consensus among the groups. In the words of one young dad, “Strong mothers can perform many of the parental duties, but a child really needs his father ‘cause a mother can’t show them certain things that a father can.” Another study revealed that while African American fathers reported higher engagement in physical play with sons, and more reading-related activities with young daughters, all fathers believed that quality time with their children was essential for positive development (Leavell, Tamis-LeMonda, Ruble, Zosuls, & Cabrera, 2012). In an investigation of fatherhood among self-identified African American gang members, respondents linked several positive life changes to their new role, such as thinking more critically about their future and intentionally removing themselves from illegal situations (Moloney, MacKenzie, Hunt, & Joe-Laidler, 2009). One male stated, “Fatherhood has changed me a lot... it turned me into a different man basically.” Marsiglio and Pleck (2004) posited that for some men, fatherhood may offer alternative scripts of masculinity, including being a provider, protector, and teacher, which may be irrelevant to young men without children.

Thus, while the “father-absence as risk” paradigm continues to appear in research on African American fathers, an increasing body of work is challenging this oversimplified negative stereotype. More studies have qualitatively explored the experiences of African American males in their roles as fathers (Dallas & Chen, 1998; Hammond, Caldwell, Brooks, & Bell, 2011; Leavell et al., 2012; Marsiglio & Pleck, 2004; Moloney et al., 2009; Threlfall, Seay, & Kohl, 2013; White, 2006), but none were located that focused specifically on the process of “intergenerational change” among young dads whose own fathers were not in the home. By intergenerational change, I am referring to a deliberate shift in parenting practices from one generation to the next among fathers. In particular, I was interested in exploring the ideological beliefs about parenting with someone who grew up without a father figure when he was a child and chose to change this model of “absentee” parenting once he had a child. I attempt to address this gap in the literature through Tron’s story.

**Method**

**Participants: Tron and Bobby Brown**

Tron is a tall, stocky, 22-year-old African American man. His hair is usually lined and cropped close to the scalp, with either a du rag or beanie hat cocked off to the side. He has light brown eyes, mocha skin, and a few tattoos on his neck and arms. Tron lives in a one bedroom apartment on the west side of town, but spends a lot of time with his family, who mostly live on the east side of the city in one of the main housing projects. He picks up his son, Bobby, a few times a week after work and keeps him until his bedtime around 10:00 p.m. A few times a month, he keeps him from Friday evening until Sunday afternoon, and they often visit family during their weekends together. Bobby is a smaller, lighter version of his father. His hair is black and curly, and was recently cut after his third birthday. He loves to play with other children and has a loud, infectious laugh. Several times during our interviews, Bobby ran over to jump on Tron’s lap and often called out, “Daddy!” to steal his attention.

**Interview Setting and Procedures**

The church of the larger intervention program is located in a working class, multiethnic neighborhood that is 26.1% African American (City-Board Data, 2013). The city’s 2013 unemployment rate is 9.2%, and more than 35% of local workers are in occupations that involve manual labor, food preparation, and general service or assembly production. The neighborhood supports one large public housing development, which provides the main source of recreational equipment available to most residents as several community centers have been recently shut down. Many of the lower income African American families have lived in the city for at least three generations, and there is a wealth of informal community knowledge about local issues such as crime rates and drug trafficking. Neighbors often watch each other’s children, and families share food and resources. “I’m X’s son” or “Mrs. Y is my granny” is a common method of introducing oneself through familial roots. The church hosts several community-oriented programs such as game nights and free food events on weekends, which Tron and Bobby regularly attend.

For 5 months in fall 2013, I interviewed Tron on Saturday or Sunday afternoons after the church intervention program. The church was located in an urban housing district of a medium city in the Midwestern United States, whose members were primarily lower income and working class African Americans. I was a newer member at the small church and had begun to establish relationships with several members, including Tron. As a churchgoer and an African American female, I occupied an insider perspective (Ely, Anzul, Friedman, Garner, & Steinmetz, 1991). The younger children viewed me as another adult in their community network, and I was often called “Titi” (short for auntie). Many of the young adults around my age worked full-time and had one or two children. Most of the older members had been attending the church since they were teenagers, and the church was a family-oriented environment that encouraged resource sharing and cohesion among its members. Interviewers were conducted in...
Tron’s kitchen, selected for convenience, privacy, and comfortability for Tron. Interviews were semi-structured, open-ended, tape recorded, and lasted up to 2 hr each week. I conducted eight interviews with Tron in the privacy of his home, a setting that “put him at ease.” All interviews were recorded with digital audio compressed into .MP4 files and were transcribed by the primary researcher.

The interviews began with questions about Tron’s recent week and his experiences with his son. The first three interviews focused on Tron’s demographic background and experiences growing up, and included questions such as “Thinking back a bit to when you were growing up, what were the families like in your neighborhoods?” and “To what extent do you think fathers were present in your neighborhoods?” We also probed his memories and thoughts concerning the positive and negative interactions that Tron witnessed between children and their fathers while growing up. The next few interviews focused on Tron’s relationship with his father including topics such as his father’s overall involvement in his life, his feelings relating to his father’s involvement, and his beliefs about how his father’s absence influenced his actions as a child and teenager. Near the end of the fourth interview, Tron began to discuss how his father’s absence directly and significantly contributed to his own parenting beliefs and practices, which led to the third portion of the interviews focusing on intergenerational change. During the last two interviews, we discussed Tron’s parenting beliefs and practices with questions such as “How do you approach fatherhood?” The final portions of our interviews encouraged Tron to think of ways in which his fathering beliefs have evolved over time and allowed him to share any final thoughts not covered during prior interview sessions.

Data Analysis

One trained coder conducted line-by-line readings of the full text of all transcripts. An open-coding process (Corbin & Strauss, 1990) was used with sentences and paragraphs used as the units of analysis. In the first stage of the coding process, the primary investigator independently reviewed the transcripts, recorded notes, and identified emergent descriptive themes. In line with Miles and Huberman (1994), these initial sets of notes and themes were compared and compiled into an integrated list of coding categories. I then discussed the intent and meaning behind each coding category with an experienced qualitative researcher to stimulate new insights and avoid error or bias. Following these discussions, the initial sets of categories were refined into a clearly defined, non-overlapping coding scheme that highlighted Tron’s parenting beliefs and practices. The present article focused on the intergenerational change code from the interviews. In line with a phenomenological grounded theory approach (Engward, 2013), Tron’s narrative stories about his perceptions of his experiences were accepted as the “truest” account of events available. In using a grounded theory, phenomenological approach, I was interested in allowing Tron’s stories to frame the interview process. Furthermore, in line with Petitmengin (2006), this methodological approach pushed me to seek out Tron’s authentic experience by “bringing a person, who may not have ever been trained, to become more aware of his or her subjective experience and describe it with great precision” (p. 229).

Positionality: The Researcher–Researched Relationship

Throughout this research, I was aware of my dual role as a church friend and a researcher and documented all nuances as they came to my attention. I was aware that my insider perspective would influence the interview sessions in particular ways, and applied reflexivity at all stages of the research process (Finlay, 2002). I was a participant observer, watching Tron’s interactions with his son, interviewing him, and collecting information about his upbringing and the surrounding community. I tried to be as respectful as possible of privacy issues and remain aware of how our interviews may have affected relationship dynamics with his father and son. The interviews provided me with insight into Tron’s relationship with his father and how this affected his perceptions of fatherhood and the role he wanted to assume in his son’s life. I was able to ask him for his thoughts and feelings on his father’s impact on his life outcomes, which involved several sensitive subjects such as Tron dropping out of school and selling drugs. I not only followed a general protocol for all of my interviews but also allowed the interviews to develop into natural conversations. The interviews were recorded and transcribed to facilitate coding accuracy, and Tron was asked to review my interpretations at several points during the writing process to verify that I captured his story as intended. In this article, I attempt to tell Tron’s story from a strengths-based framework that simultaneously acknowledges the challenges he experienced due to his father’s absence and emphasizes the ways he capitalized on those challenges to shape his positive fathering practices. I approached this study with an appreciation of the complex factors that influence African American fatherhood and an awareness that there are multiple layers to Tron’s experiences as a son and a young father.

Results

Father-Absence in the Neighborhood

Many of the young men in Tron’s neighborhood were raised in homes that would be characterized as father-absent. In one of our early interviews, he estimated that around 70% of his peers grew up without the support and guidance of a father figure, but recognized that this was a “guess estimate” based on his personal observations. When I asked Tron to describe his
perception of the societal stereotype of absentee African American fathers, he said,

I guarantee you dangled near every home I went into had some sort of father issue. The only person I can really say had a strong dad in their lifetime was my cousin, Anthony. That’s literally the only person I can think of in my whole 22 years. So it doesn’t help that what people are saying and stereotyping about Black fathers is actually happening in some places.

Tron not only described his experience of father-absence as an ordinary phenomenon that affected the lives of many youth in his area but also mentioned that there seems to be a push among young men his age to change this reality for their children.

It’s true that a lot of my friend’s dads weren’t around. Most of them were “around,” but not really helping with their kids. But it has to start somewhere. Some generation has to stop that. Somebody has to break that cycle, and that’s kind of how I went into this whole thing with my son. I knew that he would never have to experience that—and I’m not going to lie. The majority of my friends and/or family members who have children are stepping up. Like, a perfect example would be my friend, Michael. His baby mama’s doesn’t give him the easiest of situations when it comes to his kid but he makes attempts to actually see his son. Now, is it as often as he should? Maybe not. But even him taking that type of initiative to see his kid is better than none.

When I asked why he felt some African American men did not assume responsibility for their role as fathers, he replied,

That’s a great question. I would expect that what they’ve been through with their dads would help sway them otherwise, but I think it’s easy for them not to be around. It’s easy not to show up or come around. No, it’s not easy to forget about the person you’re leaving behind, but it is easy to not spend your last $20 on a pack of diapers. It’s easier not to do those types of things because they seem less beneficial to you. It’s easier to just walk away from somebody that you helped create when the hardest thing to do would be to stay and take care of that person as if they were you. So I think they [absentee fathers] are taking the easy way out.

Tron often thought critically about his role as a father and came back to the idea that he “never wanted his son to grow up like he did.” From his perspective, a child’s relationship with their father, including the absence of that relationship, has a significant impact on a child’s life outcomes. Tron often used his father’s absence as a counterexample of the type of relationship he planned to build with his son.

Tron’s Father

Several of our earlier interviews centered on Tron’s relationship with his father. These discussions focused on the development of Tron’s relationship with his dad over time, as well as the ways in which he came to understand and negotiate his father’s absence during his adolescent years. He reported that he did not have a relationship with his father while he was growing up, which often puzzled him:

We pretty much didn’t have a relationship. I don’t know why . . . we even stayed on the same side of town. It just never existed. I think it stems from his father not being around. But then it throws me for a loop when I have my own son, and I want to be there for him. ‘Cause I think—how can a man not be there for a kid his entire life, when I have shown mine so much love and devotion in such a short period of time?

Given their close geographical proximity and Tron’s relationship with his father’s mother and sister, I asked about his interactions with his father and whether there have been positive moments in their relationship. He recalled,

I mean, if there were, it would have been mainly because I was over my granny’s house and he happened to come by. Not per his own doing. He did show me one thing that I remember. I was growing up and he taught me how I should always throw my jab. That was one thing that did stick with me . . . I can say that . . . but that’s probably about it.

Tron reported that his father’s absence may have been exacerbated by his problems with alcohol and unemployment. However, he also reiterated that he did not think these issues gave his father reason to “be virtually nonexistent in his upbringing.”

Honestly, he was in and out of jobs. Never really had any steady work. The one job that I can remember is that he had a factory job probably about six years ago. But mainly, he was an alcoholic. And he chose to hang out with his friends and do things. Uhm, I can’t remember full-blown conversations that me and him have ever had. No life lessons. No advice. No goals for me. Hell, I don’t even think he had goals for himself. I remember he told me the other day—this was probably like two weeks ago—that he knows our relationship is kind of nonexistent, but he was content as long as me and his mother and his sister held a relationship. And don’t get it twisted, I love these women to death. But it makes me wonder how he can call himself a dad. How can you be content with your son having a relationship with other people, and not having one with you?

When I asked Tron to describe how he felt about his relationship with his father and how it influenced his choices growing up, he replied with a lengthy anecdote:

By now, I’ve written it off. I’m older. More mature. Last Thanksgiving, I was thinking, “Man, you should quit holding a grudge against this man. No one is perfect. Yeah, he was never around for 19, 20 years . . . but no one is perfect. Give him a chance. See what he does. See if he takes this opportunity and runs with it.” So . . . I went up to him and I told him, “Look, I’m willing to put everything that happened in our relationship in the
past behind me. I’m willing to start completely clean with how I feel about you. You’re my dad. Just give me a call. You call me . . . I’ll come over. I’ll take that extra effort.” After that conversation, I never heard from him. I gave him another opportunity and he missed it. I tried.

And when I was younger, I was just angry. I lashed out from time to time. Carried a chip on my shoulder. I pent up a lot of my aggression like a ticking time bomb. Because I felt like . . . what was wrong with me? I got straight A’s . . . I played sports . . . I was good looking. I didn’t do the things that would label me a “bad kid,” so I didn’t understand why he didn’t act like he loved me. There was a time in my life where I was down and depressed. My mom had lost custody of me and my siblings, and my grandparents were tough on us. I started doing more street-oriented things. I’m not going to say I joined a gang, but I did have a group of people that I associated with and held dear like brothers. Did we do things gangs did? Yes. Did we hurt people? Yes. At that point in my life, I really felt as if I didn’t care what happened. I probably fought every day. If you walked down my street and we didn’t know you, you got beat up. It was crazy, but I used that way of life to mask my anger. It became a release to me.

He also discussed the ways in which substance abuse affected his father and how this might have complicated their relationship if his father had been present.

His substance abuse was an issue. I’ve seen people completely destroyed from that addiction. You want liquor more than you want to be there for your kids. He preferred to walk to the store to get a beer versus walking another two blocks to see me. I’ve literally seen my dad go from a very healthy, muscular man to someone who looks older than my grandfather. It kills a person. And if my “drinking father” had been around, it probably wouldn’t have helped. I’ve seen how alcoholism can affect a household . . . so I mean, I can’t say that him being around in the condition that he was in, would have been a good thing.

I asked Tron about the presence of other male figures in his life, as previous research has demonstrated that socialization experiences from other male role models can mitigate the absence of a child’s father (Fulton, 1997; Lempert, 1999).

I sometimes sought out other men. See if I could find a person who could lend that little mentoring. From time to time, it’d be my grandpa. But he’s very opinionated. When he says something, he sticks to what he says and he doesn’t really care about your opinion. Ha. But you know he cares about you and wants the best for you. I’d do anything for my granddad. I remember looking up to one of my old construction teachers. He was a Black man. An electrician . . . went to the army . . . he was a pretty cool guy. Then there was my Uncle Dave. He would try, but I was too young and I really didn’t seek his guidance until I was older.

Throughout our interviews, Tron seemed to express the most hesitancy when he talked about his father in relation to his adolescent experiences. He was troubled by some of his decisions such as dropping out of school at 16 and selling narcotics for a short period, and believed that his father’s influence may have helped steer him away from these choices. He also struggled with his opinion of his father, as the positive relationship that he desired throughout his childhood years failed to develop. During a later interview, he mentioned that his mother frequently made denigrating comments, which were reinforced by his father’s absence. He said, “She talked about him pretty bad, and him being missing in my life didn’t help justify his cause.” He repeated that sentiment later in the same interview and also emphasized that their relationship has not improved:

A lot of the comments she used were, “deadbeat,” “worthless,” and things like that, so it portrayed a negative image of him. My grandparents didn’t really say anything about him. That wasn’t their place and they never crossed that line. But my mom would, without hesitation. And I wouldn’t say it’s gotten better. I still only see him because he happens to come over to my granny’s house when I’m there. Or he’s there when I come. He has never went out of his way to come see me. I’ve never went out of my way to come see him. I can tolerate him. But, I don’t long to see him.

Tron’s experiences with his father seem in line with much of the “father-absence as risk” paradigm, which is characterized as especially prevalent in the lower income African American community from which Tron originates. The young man expressed that he has battled anger and depression issues, and also dropped out of school to sell drugs. He became a young father himself at the age of 20 and is no longer in a committed relationship with his baby mama. However, there is substantially more to his story. After a few years out of school, Tron aced his General Educational Development (GED) exam, and he is the only individual in his immediate family with a full-time job and a car. He has made plans to return to school, and Little Bobby is a top priority in his life.

**Intergenerational Change**

As ironic as it is, him not being around is probably going to make me one of the greatest fathers. The love I feel for my son is powerful. I feel emotions for this kid that I’ve never felt in my life. I couldn’t imagine my life without him. So I think him not being there has made me always want to be there for mine. The only way I am not going to see my son is if I am dead or in jail. If I have two feet, two hands, and breath in my lungs . . . I will see my kid.

Listening to Tron talk about his son was very emotional for me. As I described earlier, during our initial discussions, he was hesitant to talk about the pain associated with his absent father and sometimes seemed to freeze up during an interview. While talking about his son, he was often overwhelmed with emotion, and in a few instances, a tear or two would
trail down his face while he recounted experiences. For a young man who claimed that he had previously defined his male identity through gang-related activity and fighting, these displays of emotion reminded me that stereotypical representations of African American men often neglect affective and relationship-oriented components of masculinity (Hammond et al., 2011; White, 2006). When I asked him about this, he responded,

“I think our relationship, meaning me and my dad’s relationship, really helped push me to want to be the best father I could, so my son never had to feel that void. I didn’t know how much I could actually love a person. People express that they love someone or they love something, but once you experience what it’s like to love someone you helped create . . . it’s infectious. It’s powerful, it’s controlling. If I could die today knowing that he would live a long, prosperous life, I’d make that sacrifice. I will never make Bobby feel as if he has to put extra effort to have a relationship with his father. I will always go an extra mile to make sure he knows how much I love him. With my son, I’m not afraid to show emotions, and I think that’s true for other men, as well. You’re not less of a man because you show your kids love.”

Many young African American men report feeling unprepared and worried about their new fatherhood roles, and these feelings were often related to fiscal concerns (Dallas & Chen, 1998; Moloney et al., 2009). In their qualitative study on African American fatherhood in the context of urban poverty, several males described the limitations of having “more going out than coming in” (Threlfall et al., 2013). This phrase refers to situations in which fathers’ financial responsibilities extend beyond their income. One father observed, “More problems come up when conventional ideas about fatherhood don’t add up to what I can do. I feel frustrated when I cannot afford to take my daughter out to eat or buy her toys.” When I asked Tron how he felt when he first found out that he would be a dad, he shared similar thoughts:

“Well at first, I was a little scared. Just the whole idea of being 20 with a kid. Especially with the type of relationship I had with my father, and how that could repeat into mine even though I felt so strongly against it. So at first I was a little down, but I warmed up to the idea as time progressed. The main problem was financial stuff. I wasn’t worried about being a bad father because I knew what I lacked growing up . . . the emotional support . . . the relationships that you see other kids having with their fathers . . . playing football and riding bikes and doing things like that . . . so I already knew, “Hey, if I follow this plan here,” I will be a great dad. But we didn’t have a lot of money at the time.

Tron works as a customer service representative at a company that is located on the outskirts of his hometown. He has worked full-time at his current occupation for over 2 years and is proud to say that he is good at what he does. However, between bills, other living costs, and the recently added expense of child support, Tron mentioned that it is often difficult to make ends meet, especially when he wants to do a little extra for Bobby. We talked in-depth about one particular incident:

“His last birthday was a big one. I tried not to show it too much, but I wasn’t able to get him much of anything. Kind of just scraped together the last hundred dollars I had and spent it on whatever I figured he would like. When I actually went to the birthday party, instead of just integrating all the gifts like I thought they were going to do, they separated all the gifts so you see what I got him and what she got him. And it embarrassed me cause I wasn’t able to do for him like I wanted to. And I don’t want him to ever feel like his dad wouldn’t do something for him.”

He was also adamant that having money does not make a man a good father. This is a prevalent theme in much of research that asks African American men to share their experiences. Fathers have mentioned that while they may regret not having the financial means for certain activities or opportunities for their children, their active presence is the most important thing (Aquilano, 2006; Threlfall et al., 2013). Still, Tron’s ability and dedication to maintain a full-time job and provide financial support for his son is another point of difference between him and his father. Earlier in the interviews, he discussed his father’s ongoing problems with alcoholism and unemployment, and also stated that he had made it a personal priority to steer away from substance abuse as he grew older. Tron mentioned on several occasions that he did not want to repeat his “father’s mistakes,” so I asked him to expand on this topic. What were the worries that most concerned him?

“Just not being in his life. Not providing financially or losing my job. Struggling with money is never easy, and things always seem to come up. Flat tire. Higher electricity bill than expected. Hospital bill cause we don’t have insurance. And I was worried about not being there to give him the support that a father should give to their kids. And that I wouldn’t live up to the expectations that I set for myself to be a good dad—like helping him with school work and teaching him how to do things that I should teach him . . . like sports and how to fight and things like that.

Another aspect of the “father-absence as risk” paradigm involves the argument that there is something specific to parenthood that can only be provided by a father. According to the argument, the absence of African American fathers leads to gender role confusion among young boys and early onset sexual behavior among young girls (Goodenough, 1957). While some African American fathers agree with this notion (Threlfall et al., 2013), White (2006) offered an alternate perspective in her review of African American fathers’ feminist narratives of parenting. Several of the men professed open attitudes concerning who can parent a child, which did not conflict with their desire to be present in their parenting roles. The fathers believed that it was important for men to nurture their children emotionally, and this also included parenting tasks that are stereotypically relegated to female
I asked Tron to describe a few good memories with his son to model of involved, supportive parenting with his son. Although Tron does not identify as a feminist, some of his views on parenting mirrored those of the men from White’s study:

I wouldn’t say there are things that can only be provided by a father. I want to do certain things that fathers are “supposed” to do so to speak, but mainly just because those are things I wish my dad would’ve done with me. Like, teach me how to throw a football. Or things that you see other kids doing at the park, and I’d realized as a kid, “Hey that will never be me.” It may not have to be a man who does these things, but as Bobby’s father, I plan to be there and I will do those things. Whether it’s helping him get through homework or holding him through nightmares. I’ve changed his diapers and I used to get up with him every morning and let his mom sleep in. Anything for my little dude.

As the interviews advanced, it became apparent that Tron often made these types of conscious decisions to transform what had been absent in his relationship with his father into a model of involved, supportive parenting with his son.

I can’t go a week without seeing my son. I wouldn’t feel right. Not only would I long to see him, but I would feel like I am cheating him as a father . . . not giving him what he deserves. Which is that undivided 100% parenting that every kid should have. I didn’t think I was capable of it. He changed me, as cliché and corny as it sounds. That boy is my Curious George. And I’m the guy in the yellow hat. I honestly don’t know what I can accredit my groundedness to . . . maybe it was the lack of me not having a family life. And I’ve gotten to where I have no desire to prove anything to anybody besides my family . . . the street life is irrelevant to me, too.

I asked Tron to describe a few good memories with his son to further contextualize his fathering practices:

Well, one thing that really sticks with me is when I play my game and he has his own little spare controller. He makes it a priority to have me find his controller, even though it will be right in plain sight. Then he comes and sits on my lap and reenacts the same things I do on the game. Or little things like baths. Things that people do on a daily basis that I don’t get to do, so when I do do it, it feels extra special.

When he spends an evening with me, I let him tear up the house while I fix dinner. Then we sit down and eat together. We’ll watch some Burney. He’ll jump on me and have me flip him. He’ll get mad because I quit flipping him. I’ll flip him some more. I always have to wrestle with him for about two minutes to put his shoes and jacket on when he knows he’s about to go home and then I take him home. Every time I drop him off, he tries to have me sit down and stay with him, but I don’t even waste my time because I know it will hurt me and him by just hovering around.

He’s kind of young right now, so it’s hard to know that he understands my emotional support. I make sure that I tell him that I love him as much as I can. I try and be that positive father figure that I never had. Even if it’s small things that he’s doing, I make them seem like they’re big. Whether it’s pee ing on the toilet or throwing something in the trash or catching a nerf ball, I treat it as if he’s won a million dollars.

Given my conceptualization of intergenerational change, it seemed important to consider how he thinks their relationship will develop as Bobby matures and to discuss Tron’s goals for his son. How does he think about the future?

Hopefully we get closer as he gets older. Eventually, I am going to ask him if he wants to live with me. If he doesn’t, I’ll understand . . . but I’m hoping he makes that step. One thing I want to teach him is to do the best you can to be the best person you are. Don’t let your peers or your situation or your environment influence the person that you can be. It may not be easy, but maintain your path. I’m not going to blame certain things that happened to me on my environment, but it played a huge factor in my life to live in a city where the majority of the schools and people in the neighborhood cared more about kids staying out of trouble versus whether they were actually doing things that would help them have a good future.

I know a few of the demons I faced so I try to be everywhere, doing everything. Me being his dad, I feel like the guardian or the watcher of my son. If there’s anything that I can do to make his life easier, I do it. If there’s anything that I can do to protect him, I do it. If it came down to him eating or me, he would be the one eating. I feel that my duties as his father are to make sure that he is the most successful man that he can be.

And I want him to do the things that make him happy, but under strict standards. Like—yes, you can do what makes you happy, but you must maintain your schoolwork. You must do your chores. You must be an overall good person. And if you do that, I will back you in any endeavor you choose, whether it be music producing or fashion . . . I don’t care . . . I’m behind you.

**Discussion and Implications**

Through telling Tron Brown’s story, I have suggested that African American fatherhood extends well beyond the “father-absence as risk” paradigm and that intergenerational change represents a positive theme that deserves further exploration. I have displayed the internal emotional responses of both anger and sadness that Tron displayed as he grew up without his father’s presence, which connected to external decisions that he later regretted but worked to overcome (i.e., dropping out of school but earning his GED). These experiences informed his decision to ensure that to the best of his abilities, his son would never encounter similar types of conflict due to his absence. He stated that “he thinks about his son and his responsibilities as a father all the time,” which indicates that he is persistently making meaning of his lifetime experiences to support his son’s future.
Tron’s story illustrates a need to counter dominant narratives of African American fathers as absent and neglectful. Coley and Chase-Lansdale (1999) assessed African American urban fathers’ involvement with their children and found that the majority of noncustodial fathers in the study were highly involved with their children at preschool age. Lempert (1999) and similar works suggest that a father’s absence from a household does not necessarily imply an “absence” of involvement or the “absence” of an emotional and caring bond between fathers and their children (Furstenberg, 1995). Carlson and Furstenberg (2006) found that as mothers are increasingly likely to be employed outside the home, fathers’ roles have expanded beyond being sole “breadwinner,” which includes noncustodial fathers. Men are more likely to provide caregiving and emotional support, and are also more involved in coordinating children’s after-school activities and community involvement. In addition, “other fathers” frequently play an active role in children’s lives, consistent with Tron’s description of his relationship with his grandfather and a few other men. Fulton (1997) examined the relationship between male’s self-concepts and father-absence, and found that socialization experiences from other men gave young boys the opportunity to observe and emulate other male role models. Tron’s story demonstrates that while father-absence may be a present reality for some children, there are other perspectives that need to be considered, as well. Future research should consider how youth make sense of parental absence and include more contextualized analyses of other forms of support in adolescents’ lives.

Second, although Tron did not mention structural concerns, for example, unemployment, substance abuse, and incarceration, as potential challenges to supportive fathering practices, several scholars have noted the potential impact of these barriers on African American fathers’ ability to be actively present in their children’s lives. This body of research emphasizes that African American men, especially those from lower income environments, disproportionately experience these issues at higher rates than men from other racial and socioeconomic backgrounds (Thompson, 2012). For example, Rasheed (1998) found themes of powerlessness and helplessness among unemployed African American fathers that was associated with shame, low self-confidence, and chronic depression. These men reported that their chronic unemployment led to emotional detachment and destructive relationships with the mothers of their children. Many of the men continued to provide fatherly support but struggled psychologically with their inability to find steady work. Ferguson (2000) discussed the limited abilities that lower income African American men may have in being able to provide child support and other financial assistance. His analysis considered the ways in which punitive social policies in the 1990s and early 2000s may have influenced the issue of father absence. For example, with few exceptions, public assistance is not available to two-part families, thus making it necessary for one parent to leave the home. In many instances, fathers “leave,” putting the requirements of state policy at odds with the best interest of lower income families.

Hatcher (2012) made similar conclusions in his analysis of how financially stressed fathers are generally considered an “enemy to be pursued and monitored” rather than another parental figure in need of state or federal assistance. In a study with urban fathers, Tach, Mincy, and Edin (2010) found that young men often reported optimism about the future and a commitment to being involved with their children’s lives. For several of the men, however, a series of structural factors worked against these early hopes, including incarceration and economic struggles that undermined their fathering stability. Armon and Mikia (2012) examined parental involvement and child outcomes among incarcerated African American fathers. Their results indicated that fathers struggled to find and maintain jobs after release, and were less involved with their children. The majority of the men had been incarcerated before their child’s fifth birthday, further complicating the closeness of the relationship. These studies provide a brief snapshot of the types of external structural factors that may challenge fathers’ positive involvement with their children. Returning to Tron, his focus on father-absence as an individual choice may involve his personal experience with a geographically proximal father who seemed to choose to remain absent in his life. It is important to note that his father struggled with alcoholism and unemployment, and it is impossible to determine whether their relationship would have evolved differently if he had not suffered with these issues.

Third, my research findings on the capacity for intergenerational change is likely illustrative of other African American men as well, which suggests a need among professionals to expand their conceptualization of African American fatherhood. It seems that many portrayals of “absent fathers” are oversimplification of the roles that African American men assume in the lives of their children. While I am not questioning the reality that some males do not provide fatherly support, it is also important to consider the ways in which many African American men embody supportive fathering practices. The intent of my qualitative study was to examine how one young man consciously transformed his negative relationship with his father into positive goals for his relationship with his son. We discussed not only the intensity with which Tron experienced the absence of his father in his life but also the level of commitment he invested in changing this in his relationship with Bobby. This phenomenon is an area, I believe, that warrants further research to understand how individuals make meaning of their experiences with their parents, and create a framework for how they will parent their children in the future. This seems especially relevant with the large body of deficit-based research on African American fatherhood (for critiques, see, Bullock, 1998; Cochran, 1997; Marsiglio, Amato, Day, & Lamb, 2000), which overlooks the readily available examples of
affirmative parenting practices among fathers in the African American community. Although I have attempted to explore the topic through Tron’s story, future research should further examine the ways in which the psychological, economic, and social experiences of fathers directly and indirectly affect the outcomes of their children.

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Notes
1. “Baby mama” refers to the biological mother of one’s child.
2. Bobby’s mother recently filed for child support assistance through the court system. This has added an additional financial burden in that Tron cannot negotiate how much he spends on Bobby throughout the month based on other responsibilities or emergencies. If he fails to pay the full amount of support each month, Tron could be sentenced to jail time and other additional fines.

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