

The Effects of Gender and Family Structure on Family Functioning of African American College Students

Fernelle L. Warren
Troy University

Barry S. Davidson
Troy University

Shundra Arrington -Warren
Troy University

ABSTRACT

The researchers examined the effects of gender and family structure on family functioning of African American college students. The independent variables in this research project were family structure and socio-demographic variables (age, classification, and gender). The specific family structures of interest are Dual Intact Families, Single-Parent Families, and Extended Families. The dependent variable of family functioning was measured by the Family Functioning Scale. The subjects totaled 270 students (94 males, 176 females). The data were analyzed in a variety of ways. Frequency distributions were conducted to describe the demographic data of participants. One frequency distribution was conducted to describe the demographic data of participants (age, gender, school classification). Another frequency distribution was conducted to describe participants from 11 different family structures, nine of which were used for further analysis. Group means, standard deviations, mean difference between groups, and interaction effects were computed on total scale scores by utilizing a Two-Way Analysis of Variance. The results of the two-way analysis of variance for the total family score revealed no significant effects of gender on the family functioning of African American college students, no significant effects of family structure on the family functioning of African American college students, and no significant interaction effects of gender and family structure on the family functioning of African American college students at the .05 alpha level. In these respects, the difference between African American males' and females' mean family functioning scores did not depend on their family structure.

Over the past three decades, African American families in the United States have experienced a number of substantial demographic transformations. Among a number of important changes are the following: an increase in female heads of households, a higher proportion of births to unmarried women, higher parental separation and divorce rate, a larger percent of children living in female-headed families, and a larger percent of children living in penury (Jaynes & Williams, 1989; Wilson, 1987). Although these changes have been experienced by both African Americans and whites, African American families have been disproportionately affected by these changes.

A great deal of research has been conducted on the outcomes experienced by children in broken families, but few studies have examined the long-term impact on adolescents growing up in a household headed by a single mother (Barber & Eccles, 1992). Among African Americans, 4 out of 7 families consist of a single parent, and 7 out of 11 African American children live with only one parent, usually the mother (*U.S. Bureau of the Census*, 1992). According to records from the 1990 census, at the turn of the 21st century the odds of living in a single-parent family were 3.6 times greater for African-Americans than for whites (Morgan, McDaniel, Miller, & Preston, 1993). Further, information on household configurations indicate that, at the turn of the century, African American families with single mothers were much more likely to reside in extended configurations than were white single mothers (Morgan, et al., 1993).

A tradition of research focusing on simple race differences in family structure and function has characterized African American families as deviant from white, middle-class norms. This past research and current political rhetoric have been driven by a value orientation that assumes that the two-parent family is the ideal family structure and that deviations from this form are risky (Barber & Eccles, 1992). African American researchers have questioned the key assumptions of what is normative for families across cultural groups and offered new paradigms for understanding the nature of African American family life (Allen, 1978; Dilworth-Anderson, Burton, & Johnson, 1993; Dilworth-Anderson & McAdoo, 1988; Taylor, Chatters, Tucker, & Lewis, 1990; Wilson, 1986, 1989). In addition to that, prior research and writings have described African American families as pathological, which is, in part, a consequence of identifying them with the social problems that they face.

Despite the adverse life conditions and circumstances that affect the psychological well being of African American family life, African American families are adaptive and resilient in the face of adversity. Although African American families face a number of social circumstances that may be deleterious to their psychological well being, they possess a number of strengths and resources that serve as an aegis from these risks (Taylor, Chatters, Tucker, 1997). The psychological well-being and effective functioning of African American families is dependent on not only the problematic circumstances they may face but the nature and types of resources and strengths that function to counterbalance these problems. While much attention has been paid to the assets and forces that contribute to the resiliency of African American families, the majority of research on adolescent development has used white middle-class samples. Hence, research on the role of family structure and family function for African American adolescent development is limited, and the findings have been equivocal.

As we enter the 21st century, the number of African Americans who have attained collegiate degrees at all levels has risen. Unprecedented numbers of African Americans have

access to a quality education and have joined the middle and upper class levels of American society. While this may be the best of times for some African American families, it is the worst of times for many other family units. Moreover, the lack of dollars spent on schools in some neighborhoods, coupled with societal biases may contribute to the functional impairment of African families and to the underclass values of family members. A lack of emphasis in some traditional African American family values may impact other factors, such as a societal shift in cultural values relating to family formation and gender imbalance (Hill, 1998; Tucker & Mitchell-Kernan, 1995).

The purpose of this study is to determine whether or not family structure affects the family functioning of African-American male college students and African American female college students. The research question and hypotheses for this study are as follows: What are the effects of gender and family structure on the family functioning of African American college students?

Hypothesis 1: There is no significant effect of gender on the family functioning of African American college students.

Hypothesis 2: There is no significant effect of family structure on the family functioning of African American college students.

Hypothesis 3: There is no significant interaction effect between gender and family structure on the family functioning of African American college students.

Method Participants

This study was conducted at Tennessee State University, Nashville, Tennessee, during the 1999-2000 academic school year. A total sample of 432 students (African American males and females) participated in this study. Since the sample for this study was targeted at African Americans between ages 18 and 22, 115 students who completed questionnaires were not within this age range; therefore, their questionnaires were excluded from further analysis. Forty-seven students within this age range were excluded because some questionnaire responses were left unanswered.

The participants for this study were comprised of 270 undergraduate students from psychology and sociology courses at Tennessee State University. In addition, participants were obtained through the subject pool in the Department of Psychology. Students who were willing to participate signed a consent to engage form. Of the 270 students, 94 (34.8%) were male and 176 (65.2%) were female. Sixty-one (22.6%) were freshman, 81 (30%) were sophomores, 73 (27%) were juniors, 53 (19.6%) were seniors, and 1 (.4%) left school classification unanswered. The participants' ages ranged from 18 to 22, with the mean age being 20. The participants were

African Americans, eighteen to twenty-two-year old freshmen (61), sophomores (81), juniors (73), and seniors (53) who received extra credit towards fulfillment of course requirements. The principal investigator divided the participants into three groups (intact families, single-parent families, extended families) based on the demographic data provided by individuals engaged in this study.

Instruments

Quantitative measure utilized in this research project included the Family Functioning Scale (FFS) devised by Tavitian, Lubiner, Green, Grepstein, and Velicerl (1987). The Family Functioning Scale is a 40-item instrument designed to measure general dimensions of family functioning. The FFS attempts to overcome flaws in other family measurement devices. It is based on an eclectic, integrative view of family functioning. The 40-item instrument measures functioning in five areas: Positive Family Affect, Family Communication, Family Conflicts, Family Worries, and Family Rituals/Supports. However, the total score can be used. The FFS has many applications in research and treatment, including the possible development of family profiles of different problem populations. Items are scored on a 7-point Likert-type scale ("Never" = 1 and "Always" = 7). Items 4, 21, and 38 are first reverse-scored, then simply are summed to obtain the subscale scores and the total score. The FFS was studied with two samples with a total of 563 subjects, predominantly white (94.5%), single (54.5%), female (57.5%), and Catholic (52.5%) (Tavitian et al., 1987, p.195). Subjects ranged in age from 12 to 64 with 47% being between the ages of 18 and 22. The average annual income for most subjects was over \$30,000. All subjects were volunteers from a variety of sources including college students, church members, and people in therapy at a university clinic. Actual norms data are currently in process.

The FFS has fair internal consistency with alphas that range from .90 for the Positive Family Affect Subscale to .74 for the Conflicts Subscale. The alpha for the total scales was not reported, nor were test-retest data. Research described in the primary reference (Tavitian et al., 1987, p. 195) reveals that the FFS has good concurrent validity, as demonstrated by correlations with the FACES III measure of family functioning. It also successfully discriminated between two clinical groups and a group of "normals." The FFS also predicted individualization among late adolescents, suggesting good predictive validity. However, the most reliable of the subscales, positive family affect, was highly correlated with social desirability, suggesting the need for caution in interpreting that subscale.

Independent Measures

The independent measures utilized in this project were family structure and socio-demographic variables (age, classification, gender). The specific family structures of interest are Dual-Intact Families, Single-Parent Families, and Extended Families. Dual-Intact Families are those families that consist of both biological parents. Single-Parent Families are those families that consist of only one biological parent (usually mother) currently living in the home. Extended Families are those families that consist of both biological parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, or a non-relative currently living in the home.

Statistical Technique

Upon completing the Family Functioning Scale and the demographic data sheet, results of the data collection were analyzed in a variety of ways. Group means, standard deviations, mean difference between groups, and interaction effects were computed on the total scale score for the questionnaire by utilizing a two-way analysis of variance. A frequency distribution was conducted to describe the demographic data of participants. Since participants from extended families were recoded using SPSS and combined into one group, two separate frequency distributions were conducted to describe participants within each family structure. A delineation of these analyses excluding the frequency distribution (age, classification) are presented in the results section.

Design and Procedure

The purpose of this study is to determine whether or not family structure affects the family functioning of African American male college students and African American female college students. More specifically, this research attempts to identify factors that enhance or diminish the problem-solving skills of African American male college students and African American female college students. While much research has demonstrated the effects of family structure and predicted differences between effective and ineffective problem-solvers, research has not investigated the effects among the aforementioned family structures and problem-solving skills of African-Americans simultaneously.

The design applied in this study was a 2 x 3 factorial design. This design was chosen because two independent variables were being investigated simultaneously, and each level of one independent variable is combined with every level of the other independent variable. In addition, this design allows the investigator to examine whether an interaction exists between the two

independent variables. One independent variable, gender, has two levels (male and female), and the second independent variable, family structure, has three levels (Intact Families, Single-Parent Families, Extended Families).

African American male and female college students were recruited from psychology and sociology classes as well as from using the subject pool of the Department of Psychology at Tennessee State University. The participants were given a consent form to sign. The participants were told verbally and in writing that they could withdraw at any time during the study without affecting them in any way. The participants were given specific directions about the questionnaire and demographic data sheet that they were requested to fill out. The demographic sheet was designed by the principal investigator to provide information regarding the sample of participants. Each individual engaged in this study was informed in writing of his/her rights, of the strictest confidence of his/her responses, and how he/she may contact the chief researcher for the results of the study. Socio-demographic information assessed included age, gender, classification, and family structure.

The participants typically needed 15 to 20 minutes to complete the questionnaires.

The respondents rated themselves on the FFS by describing how they perceived their current family at the present time using a seven point Likert scale (“Never” = 1 and “Always” = 7). The participants rated themselves on the PSI by indicating how they generally reacted to personal problems in their daily lives using a 6-point Likert scale (“Strongly agree” = 1 and “Strongly disagree” = 6).

Results

The purpose of this study was to determine whether or not family structure affects family functioning of African American male college students and African American female college students. A frequency distribution of 270 African American males and females are presented in two separate tables. As shown in Table 1, the African Americans are delineated from 9 different family structures. One hundred forty-four students, 42 males (29.2%) and 102 females (70.8%) were from families consisting of the biological mother and father. Eight (38.1%) males and 13 (61.9%) females were from families consisting of biological mother and father with grandmother or grandfather, or both present in the home. Eleven (42.3%) males and 15 (57.7%) females were from families consisting of biological mother with grandmother or grandfather, or both. Seven (36.8%) males and 12 (63.2%) females were from families consisting of biological mother with grandmother or grandfather, or both, or aunt, or both, and non-relative. One (100%) male was from a family consisting of biological mother with grandmother or grandfather, or both, and non-relative. One (100%) female was from a family consisting of biological mother and non-relative. Twenty-three (46.9%) males and 26 (53.1%) females were from families consisting of biological mother only. One (25.0%) male and three (75.0%) females were from families consisting of grandmother or grandfather, or both, or aunt, or uncle, or both. One (20.0%) male and four (80.0%) females were from families consisting of other as a category.

Table 1

Summary of Different Family Structures by Gender of Participants

Family Structure of Participants	Gender of Participants		Total
	Males	Females	
Biological mother and father	42 29.2%	102 70.8%	144 100.0%
Biological mother and father with grandmother or grandfather, or both	8 38.1%	13 61.9%	21 100.0%
Biological mother with grandmother or grandfather, or both	11 42.3%	15 57.7%	26 100.0%
Biological mother with grandmother or grandfather, or both, or aunt, or uncle, or both, and nonrelative	7 36.8%	12 63.2%	19 100.0%
Biological mother with grandmother or grandfather, or both, and nonrelative	1 100.0%	0 100.0%	1 100.0%
Biological mother and nonrelative	0 100.0%	1 100.0%	1 100.0%
Biological mother only	23 46.9%	26 53.1%	49 100.0%
Grandmother or grandfather, or both, aunt, or uncle, or both	1 25.0%	3 75.0%	4 100.0
Other: Please specify	1 20.0%	4 80.0%	5 100.0%
TOTAL	94 34.8%	176 65.2%	270 100.0%

Note: The values represent the number and percentages of African American males and females from different types of family structures. In addition, the total number and percentages are displayed of African American males and females from the different types of family structures.

As shown in Table 2, African American males and females from extended families were recoded using SPSS and combined into one group. This was done by giving a demographic sheet to the males and females who participated in this study and having them indicate their family structure (including all individual members) in which they were raised. The subjects were given 11 categories from which they were instructed to choose. Out of the 11 categories, a total of three were excluded from further analysis. Two categories were biological mother and stepfather, and biological father only. Another category was other: please specify. However, the category (other: please specify) was included in the analysis only if the subjects met the criteria for one of the three family structures. Groups 1 (Intact Families) and 3 (Mother Only Families) were delineated in Table 1. As of Group 2, 29 (37.7%) males and 48 (62.3%) females were from extended families. Of the 270 subjects, 94 (34.8%) were males and 176 (65.2%) were females.

Table 2

Summary of Family Structure by Gender of Participants

Family Structure of Participants	Gender of participants		Total
	Males	Females	
Biological mother and father	42 29.2%	102 70.8%	144 100.0%
Extended families	29 37.7%	48 62.3%	77 100.0%
Biological mother only	23 46.9%	26 53.1%	49 100.0%
Total	94 34.8%	176 65.2%	270 100.0%

Note: The values represent the number and percentages of males and females within each family structure. In addition, the total number and percentages within each family structure are displayed for males and females.

In order to test the three hypotheses, a two-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was performed. Means and standard deviations are presented in table 3, while the results of the two-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) are presented in table 4.

Hypothesis 1. It was hypothesized that there is no significant effect of gender on the family functioning of African-American college students. This null hypothesis cannot be rejected because the main effect of gender of the two-way analysis of variance did not reach statistical significance at the .05 level, $F(1, 264) = .546, p > .05$.

Hypothesis 2. It was hypothesized that there is no significant effect of family structure on the family functioning of African-American college students. This null hypothesis cannot be rejected because the main effect of family structure of the two-way analysis of variance did not reach statistical significance at the .05 level, $F(2, 264) = .253, P > .05$.

Hypothesis 3. It was hypothesized that there is no significant interaction effect between gender and family structure on the family functioning of African-American college students. This null hypothesis cannot be rejected because the interaction effect of gender and family structure of the two-way analysis of variance did not reach statistical significance at the .05 level, $F(2, 264) = .953, P > .05$.

As shown in Table 3, African American males from Intact Families had a mean score of 178.60 and a standard deviation of 23.39. African American males from Extended Families had a mean of 181.34 and a standard deviation of 19.92. African American males from Biological Mother Only Families had a mean of 179.17 and a standard deviation of 21.85. Overall, African American males had a mean score of 179.59 and a standard deviation of 21.79. African American females from Intact Families had a mean score of 182.08 and a standard deviation of 22.22. African American females from Extended Families had a mean score of 183.44 and a standard deviation of 26.02. African American females from Biological Mother Only Families had a mean score of 180.46 and a standard deviation of 17.30. Overall, African American females had a mean score of 182.21 and a standard deviation of 22.59.

Table 3

Mean Family Functioning Scores of Males and Females By Their Family Structure

Gender of Participants	Family Structure of Participants	M	SD	N
Males	Biological mother and father	178.60	23.39	42
	Extended families	181.34	19.92	29
	Biological mother only	179.17	21.85	23
	Total	179.59	21.79	94
Females	Biological mother and father	182.08	22.22	102
	Extended families	183.44	26.02	48
	Biological mother only	180.46	17.30	26
	Total	182.21	22.59	176
Total	Biological mother and father	181.06	22.54	144
	Extended families	182.65	23.79	77
	Biological mother only	179.86	19.37	49
	Total	181.30	22.31	270

Note: M = Mean SD = Standard deviation

Table 4

Two-Way Analysis of Variance for Total Family Score

Source	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Gender (G)	275.693	1	275.693	.546	.460
Family Structure (F)	255.109	2	127.555	.253	.777
G x F	48.859	2	24.429	.048	.953
<u>S</u> within group					
Error	133199.662	264	504.544		
Total	9009364.00	270			

Note: S = Subjects

F (1, 264) = .460; P > .05 F (2, 264) = .777; P > .05 F (2, 264) = .953; P > .05

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to determine whether or not family structure affects the family functioning of African American male college students and African American female college students. While the majority of research has compared African Americans and whites from intact and single parent families, research on African Americans from extended households has been a neglected subject in past research. Yet, this study is consistent with previous research that continues to reveal that the proportion of African-American extended households has risen steadily over the past two decades. African American extended households and single parent households are emerging as the censorious structure in the twenty first century. Although household types were diverse in this study, many African Americans are still evolving in intact families, followed by extended and single parent homes, respectively. In addition, the variations in living arrangements are suggestive of the resiliency and common cultural patterns of many African Americans from extended households and single parent households as well as intact households which have supportive social networks; flexible relationships within the family unit; prolonged use of extended family helping arrangements; a strong sense of religiosity; adoption of

fictive kin who become as family; and a strong identification with their racial group (Stack, 1974; Boyd-Franklin, 1989; McAdoo, 1993; Allen, 1993). These patterns concentrate more on the egalitarian roles in African American families, rather than on the more individualistic emphases that are found in many mainstream families (McCubbin, Thompson, Thompson, & Furtress, 1998).

The structure of African Americans from these patterns, especially extended and single households, are indicative that they are able to attend college and function as effectively as African Americans from intact families under general conditions or even under stressful ones. While some African Americans in intact families have high levels of psychological and social adjustment, others do not. They may have poor self-esteem; they may appear anxious; they may be cruel to other adolescents; they can be prone to bullying other adolescents; they may skip school; and they may make less desirable grades. The same applies to other family structures; in each, some children will do quite well and others have a difficult time reaching their academic potential. The reason for the difference is the quality of the relationship between the family members (Demo, 1997). From this, the assumption of what is normative for families across cultural groups and understanding the nature of the African American family life are dependent on the nature and type of resources and strengths that function to counterbalance these problems. Despite the changes in African American family structure that have occurred over the past 30 years, this research indicates that black families are very integrated and livable. The only major differences observed in the results of this study were that more females participated than did males. This is due to the sex ratio imbalance found in the college population.

Of the three hypotheses tested, none were rejected after analysis of the data. There were no significant effects of gender and family structure on the family functioning of African American college students. There was no significant interaction effect between gender and family structure on the family functioning of African American college students. In these respects, African American males and females did not differ with regard to their family functioning. The difference between African American males and females mean family functioning score did not depend on their level of family structure.

One explanation for these findings is that studies examining the effects of family structure and functioning have compared many children from intact and single parent households and focused on younger children and young adults. Yet these studies comparing African American and whites have yielded inconsistent results. Furthermore, although studies examining the effects of problem-solving skills have found significant differences among males and females in a college population, these studies have not examined the common cultural patterns of the African American as indicated earlier in this study.

Another explanation for these findings is that family structure is not the most important influence on family functioning. There is evidence to suggest that hostility within the family has a stronger influence on the child than does the family structure (Bishop & Ingersoll, 1989; Long, 1986; Nelson, Hughes, Hanal, Katz, & Searight, 1993; Parish & Parish, 1991). Parental conflict has been found to have a negative impact on children's and adult's self-esteem (Bishop & Ingersoll, 1989; Parish & Parish, 1991), educational attainment (Amato, 1988; Forehand, McCombs, Long, Brody & Faub, 1988), parent-child relationships (Booth, Brinkerhoff, & White, 1984; Tschann, Johnston, Kline, & Wallerstein, 1990), and psychological adjustment (Bolgar, Zweig-Frank, & Parish, 1995; Buchanan, Maccoby, & Dornbusch, 1991; Long, 1986;

Nelson, Hughes, Handal, Katz, & Searight, 1993). Yet, parental acceptance, interest, warmth, respect, and closeness have been noted to be positively associated with children's and adolescents' self-esteem (Bachman, 1970; Rosenberg, 1965; Greenberg, Siegel, & Leitch, 1983; Buchanan, Maccoby, & Dornbusch, 1991).

Remaining explanations for these findings are that studies have found that many children in spite of their living conditions are remarkably resilient and are able to successfully cope in a stressful environment. Resilient children tend to have high levels of efficacy and self-esteem, and tend to be affectionate, good-natured, flexible, and to exercise self-discipline (Anthony & Cohler, 1987). They are more likely to have a strong relationship with at least one parent or other significant adult, supportive friends and extended family members, parents who themselves constructively cope with their environment, and a strong educational milieu (Garbarino, Dubrow, Kostelny & Pardo, 1992). Therefore, in families wherein members provide emotional support; power is shared and problems are solved through negotiation; family rituals are emphasized; feelings are expressed openly; communication is clear; empathy and conflict between members are minimal; and there is a strong parental coalition, members are likely to perceive themselves as effective problem-solvers. Although the findings of this research seems to imply that problem-solving skills are not affected by family structure of African-American college students, other variables may be affected such as size of family, sex of parents, quality or quantity of the relationship, or the type of support. Further research is needed to provide information on these variables.

The limitations of this study in terms of sample are highly recognized. Although this study used cross-sectional data, further research using longitudinal designs could provide more insight into the possible causal relationships among the aforementioned variables. Further, this study could be regarded as highly selected in that it represents males and females college students from three family structures that portray the common cultural patterns of African-Americans.

Therefore, generalization of these results should include cautious consideration of instruments used and how different family structures are operationalized.

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