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UNDERSTANDING HOW FATHER ABSENCE AFFECTS THE EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT OF AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN THROUGH THE LENS OF THE STRONG BLACK WOMAN FRAMEWORK: A NARRATIVE STUDY

by

MAKEIVA JENKINS

Under the Direction of Sarita Davis, PhD

ABSTRACT

African American women experience father absence, at disproportionate rates. However, they are rarely studied or discussed outside of a comparative analysis. Hence, in this study, the purpose is to explore how father absence affects the educational attainment of African American women, post high school. The questions that guide this study include: What is the participants’ understanding of a strong black woman? How does father absence affect the educational attainment of African American women? How does father absence lead African American women to perform as a strong Black woman? This study uses a narrative approach, interviewing six African-American women, who have earned a bachelor’s degree, and experienced father absence.

INDEX WORDS: African American Women, Father Absence, Educational Attainment, Father Absence, Strong Black Woman, Education
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A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts in the College of Arts and Sciences Georgia State University 2017
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May 2017
DEDICATION

I dedicate this to every fatherless woman who knows the deep cut of father absence. You are strong and wonderfully made. Love yourself, and let your light shine brightly.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First of all, I would like to thank and acknowledge God for giving me the strength and fortitude to push through, and not give up, even when I just wanted to quit. To my husband, James Jenkins, who, without his help, this journey would have been twice as hard, if not impossible, I thank you for seeing and believing in my vision, and I honor all that you are and will become.

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Thank you to all the participants for opening their lives and stories to me. Your generosity in sharing your stories, and allowing others to see and understand your experiences is appreciated.

Lastly, I must thank my classmates, for all the laughs, the jokes, the craziness, and the support.
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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

SBW – Strong Black Woman
PROLOGUE

When I was younger, my mom informed that I was a daddy’s girl. I would run to him, when he got home, and jump into his arms. Those memories, like so many at the age of two, have escaped my mind’s eye. The memories that do linger are not filled with the type of warmth I see in other father-daughter relationships, but filled with uncertainty, uncomfortableness, and unfamiliarity.

As an adult, I have come to realize, through self-reflection the way this relationship has affected the person that I am today. It has driven me, molded me, mocked me, but it has also provided me with many questions. These issues have informed my research, and the lens through which I view it.

My goal, in this research, has been to tell the story of many women, specifically African American women, without denigrating the character of African American fathers and men. There are great fathers in the world, who do their jobs well, who love their daughters without thought or hesitation. Experiences in the African American community are varied, and I have personally seen harmonious father-daughter relationships and admired the love I see there. There is a tenderness, and beautifulness in this relationship.

In completing this study, I hope to show that, although having no relationship with your father is devastating on many levels, there can be hope, there can be resilience, and there can be a strength that allows you to pick up the pieces and continue to move on with your life.
1 INTRODUCTION

This paper was written to understand how father absence affects the educational attainment of African-American women, post high school, through a strong-women schema among African American women.

This chapter addressed information on the background of the problem, the problem statement, the purpose of this research, the significance of this research, and the specific research questions. Lastly, I addressed the terms that are necessary to understand this study, and the limitations of this study.

1.1 Background

Father absence can have severe and long-lasting effects that show themselves in multiple ways over the child’s lifetime. Father absence can also have a devastating effect on children’s educational outcomes (Lee, Kishner, & Ho, 2007; Sciara & Jantz, 1974; Gillete & Gudmunson, 2013), sexual activity (Hendricks, Murdaugh, Servonsky, Bobadilla, Hendricks, & Tavakoli, 2005; Guardi, Nelson, & Lertora, 2014), mental health (Flouri & Buchanan, 2002), intimate relationships (East, Jackson, & O’Brien, 2006; Barras, 2000; Makofane, 2015), gender development (Mandara, Murray, & Joyner, 2005), overeating (Barras, 2000), and substance abuse (Brook, Whiteman, & Gordon, 1985). Hence, fatherlessness is a huge issue for the United States according to the National Father Initiative, and the African American community specifically. Also, the National Fatherhood Initiative labels father absence as our nations’ worst social problem. Father absence in the African American community may affect and shape the lives of African-American children on a daily basis. In their father’s absence, many children may miss the knowledge, wisdom, and advice that their fathers can pass on to them. According to Kids Count Data Center, in 2014, in the United States there are twenty-four million children in
single-parent families, and of that six million are African American children. In 2015, 49% of African American children lived with their mother only (Child Trends DataBank, 2015), more than any other ethnic or racial group. On the other hand, 4% of African American children lived with their fathers only. This means that potentially, there are a substantial number of African American children living without their fathers. Hence, these are huge numbers when we consider that African American make up only 13.3% of the population in America, as of 2014 (US Census Bureau). While this data is eye opening it is important to mention here that, although a father may be absent from the home, this does not necessarily mean that they are absent from the child’s life.

Table 1 Living Arrangements of Children, by Race and Hispanic Origin: 2015

![Living Arrangements of Children, by Race and Hispanic Origin: 2015](chart.png)

When fathers are absent from their child’s life it can alter many bio-psycho-social outcomes, especially their educational attainment (Jeynes, 2015; Buchanan & Flouri, 2004; Gillette & Gudmunson, 2013), their academic engagement (Cooper, 2009), their understanding of male-female relationships (Barras, 2000; East et al., 2007; Makofane, 2015), their psychological distress (Buchanan & Flouri, 2003), their sexual behavior and the timing and appearance of menarche (La Guardia, Nelson, & Lertora, 2014), and their feelings of rejection and betrayal (Makofane, 2015).

However, African American women have not received similar kind of attention in the research. Rarely do studies address African American females; the focus is on the relationship between father and sons (Thornton, 2014). When it comes to education (Gillette & Gudmunson, 2013; Battle & Coates, 2004), and father-daughter relationships (Cooper, 2009) African American girls and women are nearly invisible in the research. There have been few studies dedicated exclusively to the experiences and lives of father absent African American women and girls. Hence, previous research has not provided a clear understanding. Previous research has not utilized adult women participants, African-American participants, or focused exclusively on women. Nonetheless, there are still important discoveries from this research that reveals the effects of father absence on African American women and girls. For example, Barras (2000) found that fatherless African American women experienced feelings that often lead to disastrous relationships. These feelings included low self-esteem, unworthiness, and fear. Women may find themselves constantly searching for their father in their intimate relationship, and exhibit signs that keep them from enjoying life or the intimate relationships they chase (Barras, 2000). Her participants, and Barras herself, initiated and started relationships that ended due to their issues stemming from father absence. For example, Barras (2000) cites the following patterns:
attempting to be the perfect women (p.129), “looking to get even” (p.93), and settling for abusive, violent treatment (p.96). These patterns present a huge barrier for African American women who are seeking to have successful intimate relationships and marriages (Barras, 2000; Watson & Hunter, 2015).

In spite of relationship struggles, African American women who grew up without their fathers still experience high levels of educational success. This does not seem to align with data that suggest lower education expectation and attainment for African American children who experience father absence. In 2013, according to the US Department of Education, African American women earned 65% of all bachelor degrees, and 70% of all master’s degrees. One may not expect this to be true, due to the many affects of father absence. According to National Fatherhood Initiative, these affects can include being at greater risk of poverty, teen pregnancy, behavioral problems, abuse and neglect, infant mortality, incarceration, and obesity. African American children are at a greater risk, for the problems discussed above, due to their being disproportionately affected by father absence. Specifically, African American children experience father absence at a rate of 49%, which is the highest of all racial and ethnic groups (National Fatherhood Initiative). Hence, while every African American woman who earns a degree is certainly not experiencing father absence, considering the high number of fatherless African American children, it is important to explore the link between the two to see how one may be affecting the other.

1.2 Opportunity Statement

Over the past five years, father absence in the African American community has remained at 65% or higher (National Kids Count, 2016). However, this has not stopped the success of many African American women in their educational pursuits. It is important to note here, that
this 65% does not consider the fact of couples that may be cohabitating, or children who are living with stepparents. Hence, this study warrants attention because of the sheer amount of success that African American women have been able to obtain in the face of what they may go through as father absent women. Due to such success, it becomes important to understand in the African-American community how father absence can influence the educational attainment of African-American women, and their understanding of themselves as strong Black women. While the topic of father absence has been researched at length, there exists a gap in the literature when it comes to focusing exclusively on African American women, their educational attainment, and how they see themselves outside of body image.

This study presents differently in that it looks at women, not young girls, and how they have achieved outside of k-12 education, and how they view themselves in the context of the strong black woman phenomenon. Existing research focuses on descriptive outcomes of the target population, offering little insights as to the resilient nature of these women. Some prominent examples of existing research include, Watson and Hunter’s (2015) finding that the Strong Black Woman race-gender schema had adverse psychological outcomes, and was associated with negative attitudes toward seeking psychological help, while Abrams, Maxwell, Pope and Belgrave (2014) provided their readers with specific defining characteristics of the strong Black woman schema. The themes turned out to be mostly negative, while presenting some positive themes that were found, and a small mention about the participant’s resilience. Lastly, Beauboeuf-Lafontant (2009) focuses on the SBW’s reliance on overeating, and their depression, both which help the SBW to deal with their constant performance. Again, it offers no look at any positive attributes, or focus on the resilience of these women.
The resilient and determined nature of these women must be examined. It is important to honor these women, share their experiences, and enlightened others in the process. Due to the nature of this study, qualitative methods are used to capture the varied experiences of these women, and reveal the nuances of their stories. Since the focus of this study is African American women, all participants are African American women, who have completed at least a bachelor’s degree.

1.3 Purpose

The purpose of this study was to explore how father absence affects the educational attainment of African American women, post high school. This study took place in the Atlanta, Georgia area, with six African American women who meet the criteria to participate in the study. This study targeted African American women between the ages of 21-45, who grew up without their biological fathers in the home, and had little to no relationship with their fathers. They must have earned at least a bachelor’s degree, be able to meet at assigned times and locations, and be willing to open up and discuss their relationships with their fathers. Due to the sensitivity of this topic, a qualitative approach was selected. The quantitative method was ultimately not chosen because it does not allow the research to explore deeply rooted questions, and it would not reveal the nuances the research is seeking to understand. Interviews are completed with each participant where they answer pre-established questions on the interview guide (Appendix D). During all interviews, participants will be recorded to ensure accuracy of their words during the transcribing process. The interview guide consists of three components: relationship with father, educational attainment, and the strong black woman. All participants are given an opportunity to review their transcripts, and any themes that are found in the study to ensure they align and honor the women’s story and vision.
1.4 Significance of the Study

In sum, women who experience father absence may perform well educationally, but they also may not. Nevertheless, they are strikingly independent, focused, driven and resilient women. On the other hand, the affects of father absence do not stop once a child becomes a legal adult. If anything, the affects begin to show up in critical and crucial points in their lives, as they become adults, such as in their intimate relationships (East et al., 2007). East et al., (2007) found that these women experience feelings of mistrust, lack of respect, and a belief that they will never find a real loving, intimate relationship with a man (p.17).

It is important that the African American community understand that father absence is an issue that affects many young women, and that the affects are real and long lasting. Another innovation of the proposed study is that previous research has focused on the way young African American male adolescents are impacted by living in female-headed households (Alderman-Swain, Battle, 2000). Cooper (2009) noted how father-daughter relationships, or lack there of, could possibly influence academic related outcomes for their daughters. Battles and Coates (2013) noted how educational studies on expectation and achievement have not focused exclusively on women and girls. Thus, the majority of studies where the topic is father absence, neglect to look at adult African American women, or the success they may have had even while having an absent father. In addition, although we know that 65% of African American children grow up without their fathers, there is a gap in the research that doesn’t allow us to understand how this breaks down by gender (National Kids Count, 2016). This provides an opportunity for the research to be extended in this area.

In addition, African American women have historically endured negative images about themselves, from the media, such as the welfare queen, the Strong Black Woman, the Mammy,
the Jezebel, and the Sapphire (Dow, 2015; Hill-Collins, 2009; Walker-Barnes, 2009). Many African American women work to try and combat these negative images, while also experiencing father absence. Though some African American women make the choice to be a SBW, which Dow found in her 2015 research, there is also an expectation that they be strong, no matter their life circumstances, and endure without complaint (Romero, 2000). Hence, the ultimate goal of this study is to understand and inform the work of programs that target single parents, especially women, about the effect of father absence on African American women, their educational attainment, their intimate relationships, and the way they view themselves in the context of the strong black woman.

This study adds to the body of literature, by examining a story that is often forgotten, and providing depth and context to the stories of African American women that experience father absence. It will also provide those who work in programs that target single mothers a basis from which to start when talking about father absence. It can serve as a guide for future fathers to understand how their absence from their daughter’s lives can ultimately affect whom they become and how they see themselves. In addition, it can provide opportunities for father absent young girls to see how successful they can be in completing their educational goals, and having successful careers, while also providing answers that will help them to have successful intimate relationships. Ultimately, this study will add to the literature and increase the scholarship concerning adult African American women, and father absence, while also contributing new knowledge and understanding for future scholars in the African American discipline, who can use the knowledge to increase understanding of this phenomenon in the community.
1.5 Nature of the Study

The research method that was chosen for this study is qualitative. The researcher used in-depth interviews with study participants, which lasted no longer than two hours. A qualitative approach, specifically a narrative approach, was used because it allows the researcher to understand how and why father absence may affect the lives of the participants. This approach also provides an opportunity for me to “identify variables that are not easily measurable” (Creswell, 2013, p. 48) and provides a chance to “hear silenced voices” (Creswell, 2013, p. 48). A quantitative approach would not have allowed me to understand the context of each participant’s situation, honor their unique experiences, respect the detailed and complex nature of the issue, or understand the connections that exist. It is important that I was able to interview and follow-up on comments that they make that are important for creating their story and adding detail, as a narrative approach was used. According to Rubin and Rubin (2012) one purpose of follow up questions “is to elicit detail, depth and nuanced understanding” (p. 150). Hence, investing in a quantitative study would not yield this same result or access. While mixed methods may have worked, they could distract from the ultimate goal of telling the story from the point of view of the participants, and establishing a context to examine each women’s story. Having participants complete a survey would have not added to the purpose or the goals of the paper in any way.

In addition, using a narrative approach provided an opportunity to tell the experiences of these African American women from their point of view. In trying to understand how father absence affect educational attainment, and contributes to the making of a “strong Black woman,” it was important to gain a holistic view of the participants to understand how each one affects the other.
1.6 Research Questions

For this study, the research questions were as follows:

1. What is the participants’ understanding of a strong black woman?
2. How does father absence affect the educational attainment of African American women?
3. How does father absence lead African American women to perform as a strong black woman?

The major focus of this study was to understand how father absence affects the educational decisions made by African American women, post-high school. Therefore, the first research question was framed around answering this question.

Since the nexus of the research was about educational attainment, there was a question that specifically asked about the participant’s educational attainment, and how it intersected with father absence. Another important focus was how father absence helps African American women to accept and embody the strong woman complex. Father absence may make women want to take on the characteristics of the strong Black woman in order to feel safe and protected. It is important to ask these questions and focus on how all aspects link together and support one another.

Each research question was formulated to address the purpose and goals of this study. It is important to understand how the participants understand and see the strong Black woman. Their understanding may influence their responses during the interview, and their definition may also influence how they see themselves within the context of the strong Black woman. In addition, the strong Black woman schema may provide the language for the participants to speak their story as fatherless daughters.
These research questions served as the questions that guide my study, and the questions I built on to create questions that helped me develop rich answers.

1.7 Theory

The concept of the “strong Black woman” (SBW) framework continues to evolve and change both within and outside of the Black community. The following section provides an overview of strong Black woman’s history and foundation. Wallace (2015) first coined the term to the broader community in 1976, presenting the image and all associated components of the “superwomen” to her readers. Today the strong Black woman schema is a powerful construct about African American women, and though heavily debated, can be summed up by an unyielding dedication to those around you, resilience, independence, racial and ethnic pride, displays of multiple forms of strength, including learned and obligatory leadership in the home, perceived obligation to be seen as strong, and standing up for oneself (Watson & Hunter, 2015; Abrams, Maxwell, Pope, & Belgrave, 2014; Woods-Griscomb, 2010; Wallace, 2015).

The strong Black woman was born from the time of slavery, where it was believed that African American women contained an extraordinary amount of strength in comparison to African American men (Walker-Barnes, 2009). However, this strength has been co-opted by African Americans as a positive characteristic, and is viewed as the way to be respectable and accepted in society (Woods-Griscombe, 2010; Romero 2000). As West, Donovan, and Daniel, (2016) state, “in a world where Black women are regularly “othered” and devalued, the SBW pathway can seem appealing” (p.394). Collins (2004) offers a further explanation of the strong Black woman, or the “weak man, strong women” thesis, which she presents as an argument used by the majority community to discredit the African American community by setting unrealistic goals that the economy and political climate of America may not allow for. While many writers
have presented the negative impacts of the strong Black women theory, (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2009; hooks, 1982; Walker-Barnes, 2009; Watson & Hunter, 2015; Collins, 2009), there have also been discussions presented on how it generates positive impacts, and how many women view it as a positive attribute (Abrams, et al., 2014; West, Donovan, & Daniel, 2016; Davis, 2015).

The research that has taken place on the strong Black woman has allowed a view into the mind of African American women. This research also explains some of the problems that African American women experience, such as stress, health issues, weight issues, depression, mental issues, relationship issues, and performance anxiety as they walk in their role as strong Black woman (West, Donovan, & Daniel, 2016; Watson & Hunter, 2015; Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2007, 2009; Woods-Giscombe, 2010; Abrams et al., 2014). However, the strong Black woman also experiences multiple benefits, including strength, independence, validation of Black womanhood, resistance against racism, pride, and ethnic pride. (Abrams et al., 2014; Woods-Giscombe, 2010). Specific examples include, “preservation of self/survival, preservation of the African American community, and preservation of the African American family” (Woods-Giscombe, 2010, p.672). By employing this theory, I honor the lived experiences of some African American women, who good or bad, consider themselves strong Black women.

My research specifically aligns with the strong Black woman theory. This theory may remind many people of its connection to racism and sexism (Davis, 2015). For example, “some believe the idea is a refashioned mechanism for from earlier centuries to restrain Black American women from defining their own identities” (Davis, 2015, p. 23). However, it also can provide positive feelings for those who choose to be strong Black women. For instance, Black women “reappropriate the strength image as a form of resistance to oppression and a celebration of their
Black womanhood” (Davis, 2015, 26). Hence, my research fits into current research by using this theory to explain aspects of the participant’s lives, but also examining the larger pattern of father absence that may make them feel as if they have no choice, but to adopt this idea. This is similar to many of the current studies that examine how being a strong Black woman can explain the different aspects of their life, such as relationships, physical health, and mental health. While being similar to these studies, this study differs by specifically examining father absence and educational attainment.

In this section, I have discussed the strong Black woman theory, which serves as the lens through which the interviews are conducted, and the findings are interpreted. In the following section we review the definitions that are important to understanding the current study.

1.8 Definition

Important definitions that are key to the understanding of this study are presented below. The terms are presented below in alphabetical order.

Father Absence: As defined by East, Jackson, and O’Brien (2007), father absence for this study will be defined as a “father being absent from the home due to parental relationship breakdown” (pg. 2).

Educational Attainment: Gudmunson and Gillette (2013) define educational attainment as the “highest level of education achieved to date” (p. 6).

Strong Black Woman: Michelle Wallace provided a definition in 1976 of the strong Black woman that aligns with this study. She defined the strong Black woman as the following: “It is one [image] of inordinate strength, with an ability for tolerating an unusual amount of misery and heavy, distasteful work. This woman does not have the same fears, weaknesses, and insecurities as other women, but believes herself to be and is, in fact, stronger emotionally than
most men. Less of a woman in that she is less “feminine” and helpless, she is really more of a woman in that she is the embodiment of Mother Earth, the quintessential mother with infinite, sexual, life-giving, and nurturing reserves” (p. 54).

1.9 Assumption

Just like with any study, there are assumptions that were made with this research. One assumption that was made here is that the participants are representative of the diverse African American, who met the participant criteria. This is an assumption I made because the study seeks participants from a variety of places. Another assumption that was made is that father absence has indeed affected their life. This is an assumption I made due to the enormous amount of research that speaks to how father absence affects the child’s life (Giillette & Gudmunson, 2013). Lastly, another assumption that was made in the context of this study is that the participants have in some way experienced, directly or indirectly, the characteristics of the strong Black woman. Some young African American women have received this knowledge implicitly and explicitly from the women around them, such as aunties, grandmothers, sisters, and mothers (Abrham, Pope, & Belgrave, 2014).

1.10 Limitations

Due to the fact that I, the researcher, am a part of this culture group, and have experienced father absence in my life, I may have possibly brought my preconceived notions and bias to the table about father absence and the way it affects the lives of the children. To ensure that my bias did not come through during the interviews, I ask open-ended questions, and let the participants lead the conversations, and speak their own truth. Although I ask follow-up questions, those questions will be based on what the participants have shared already, not my bias and opinions, as it is important for me to capture their stories. Another limitation exists in the fact that all of
the participants in this study have to have at least a bachelors’ degree. This eliminates quite a few women in the community. Thus, the possibility to compare women who received bachelor’s degree, with those who have not also presents another limitation, as they may have a completely different feeling about their father’s absence and its affect on their lives.

The study included six women. This made the results impossible to generalize to other populations or situations. In addition, due to the delicate nature of the topics that were discussed, participants may have felt the need to hold back information that might be considered helpful to this study to portray themselves in a positive light even though pseudonyms were used to protect their identity.

1.11 Summary

In the preceding chapter, I have provided information on the background knowledge for this study, the problem and purpose of this study, the assumptions, limitations, and why this research is significant to the Black community. This study is quite significant for those in the Black communities who experience father absence, their parents, and those who hope to work with, or interact in any way with these women. Research has, to this point not focused enough on father-daughter relationships, or they have used comparative frameworks, especially when talking about education (Cooper, 2009). Hence, this study offers an opportunity to examine relationships that have not been studied with a focus on specifically African American women, and their understanding of how their relationships, or lack thereof affect their educational decisions.

In the following chapter, I examined all of the literature related to the topics of study, including, father absence, educational attainment, and the strong Black woman. I also present the
germinal literature for the strong black woman, starting with its first entry into the discourse of African American women.

2 Literature Review

This chapter provided an overview of previous literature written on these topics. It also provided the historical overview of the strong Black woman, and the associated images. More specifically, father absence will be defined, father’s absence affects, gender development in the absence of fathers, and father’s absence impact on education. The review continued with a focus on African American women and educational attainment, presenting an overview of the historical landscape with which African American women began to enter the educational arena, then closes with a through definition of the strong Black woman ideology, and the associated benefits, and consequences of embracing this ideology.

2.1 Defining Father Absence

Father absence carries with it a multitude of meanings and definitions. It can even differ from person to person, and study to study. Hence, there is no agreed upon definition of father absence, and this can lead to a different understanding and belief of what it is among researchers (Makofane, 2015). However, it can be defined as the experience of a child who does not live with their father in the residential home (Hendricks, Murdaugh, Servonsky, Bobadilla, Hendricks, & Tavakoli, 2005; Deardorff, Ekwaru, Kushi, Ellis, Greenspan, Mirabedi, Landaverde, & Hiatt, 2010), or a father who is absent due to death (Barras, 2000). A father can be emotionally absent, but physically and financially present (Clowes, Ratele, & Shefer, 2013). However, a father who does not reside in the home, or is divorced can still be highly involved with their children (Jeynes, 2015), or they can be absent due to divorce, separation, incarceration, employment in the military, or live out of the state (Clowes et al., 2013). Clearly, clarity needs to
be established for readers to understand the researcher’s intended purpose. For the purpose of this study, the definition chosen to define father absence is similar to East, Jackson, and O’Brien (2007): “a father being absent from the family home because of parental relationship breakdown” (p. 15). Further, similar to Makofane (2015) the definition used for father absence in this study will include “the emotional and physical absence of a biological father during childhood” (p. 24). The next section discussed the affects of father absence on daughters.

2.2 Exploring Father absence and the Effects on Daughters

Father absence has received much attention in research, especially with the rise of female-headed single parent homes, non-marital births, and high divorce rates (Guardia et al., 2014). Psychoanalytic theories that focus on the importance of fathers have also helped develop the attention surrounding father absence (Hetherington, E., Camara, K., & Featherman, D.1983). Studies have examined understanding how father absence affects education, self-esteem, sexual decisions, and sexual development to name a few (Gillette & Gudmunson, 2013; Hendricks, Murdaugh, Sevonsky, Bobadilla, Hendricks, & Tavakoli, 2005; Guardia et al., 2014) However, within this research there has been a tendency to either focus on African American boys (Battle & Coates, 2004), or create comparative studies with White children that lead to a focus on risk factors (Yan, 1999), or focus on the roles the mothers played in the lives of their children (Peart, Pungello, Campbell, Richey, 2006). On the other hand, there has been treatment of African American girls in relation with father absence. Studies have examined gender development, educational attainment, educational outcomes, and achievement (Murray, Mandara, & Joyner, 2005; Alderman-Swain & Battle, p.2000; Gilette & Gudmunson, 2013; Jeynes, 2015). While these studies have increased our understanding and knowledge of African American girls, there has also been a lack of research that addresses African American women. For African American
girls, father absence has been studied in a variety of ways, but they have also received less attention due to the effects of father absence on Black males and their being raised in single-parent households (Alderman-Swain & Battle, 2000). Alderman-Swain and Battle (2000) stated that, “in the vast amount of literature focusing on African American families, the majority of research literature, both popular and scholarly, focuses on the impact of female-headed families that are raising African American males and the effects of family configuration” (p.166). However, it was important to discuss the aforementioned studies to help build an understanding for the current study.

While sometimes being undervalued in this society, fathers are important to the overall development and health of their children, and father-daughter relationships are essential to their healthy development (Doyle, Pecukonis, & Lindsey, 2015; Zimmerman & Salem, 1995; Veneziano & Rohner, 1988). The role of the father has historically assumed less significance to the role of mother, with researchers focusing more on the way the maternal role contributes to the well-being of the child, and how mothers should be wholly responsible for the raising of their children, (Rohner & Veneziano, 2001; Hendricks et al., 2005). However, “both roles are essential in the development of children who excel in social situations, and both roles are primary attachments” (Rohner et al., 2001, p.339).

Considering the importance of the father’s role, it should be no surprise that an absent father can affect the self-esteem of young women. Fatherless daughters can feel unwanted or unloved, and this may result in low self-esteem. In Barras’ (2000), part autobiographical and part qualitative study, “Whatever Happened To Daddy’s Little Girl?: The Impact of Fatherlessness” she examines how fatherlessness impacts the lives of herself and the participants. She developed “The Fatherless Woman Syndrome” to explain the way fatherlessness impacts the lives of
women, laying out five components to the syndrome. One of the components is the “Un Factor,” where “the fatherless daughter believes herself unworthy and unlovable” (p. 67). Due to these feelings, father absent daughters develop low self-esteem, which can create other problems. Barras is not the only one to discuss how fatherlessness creates low self-esteem in daughters. Hendricks et al. found in their 2005 study, that there appeared to be little connection between father absence and self-esteem. They noted that this could have been possibly been due to the measurements they gathered, such as racial identification, academic performance, and their families participation in the food stamp program.

Fatherless daughters also may experience severe pain, psychological issues and abandonment issues (East et al., 2007; Flouri & Buchanan, 2003). Flour and Buchanan (2003) found that the involvement of a father or father figure could protect against future psychological issues and psychological distress in women. Furthermore, Barras (2000) explained in the fifth component of “The Fatherless Syndrome,” the RAD factor. She explains that this is where the father-absent women lives with rage and anger that they are unable to explain or understand, and that this rage can develop into depression. East, Jackson, and O’Brien (2006) found that the women in their study felt that their fathers continuously let them down and represented a constant source of hurt. This theme was supported with their feelings of abandonment, hurt, resentment, and anger they felt towards their father. Barras (2000) also discussed the abandonment issues experienced by fatherless daughters. In what she refers to as “the triple fears factor,” her second component, she explains how father absence leads to crippling abandonment issues: “She fears rejection. She fears abandonment. She fears commitment.” (p. 68). Lastly, East, Jackson, and O’Brien (2006) found that fatherless daughters experienced pain and hurt from their father’s absence due to lack of contact, lack of interest, and lack of care.
One thing that fatherless daughters may learn is to be strong in spite of their fatherless circumstances. Many women, especially African American women, adopt a strong woman complex to hide their hurt feelings and father issues. Barras (2000) refers to these women as the Amazons. They feel as if they are “strong as any man, and able to leap tall buildings. They attempt to demonstrate that they are untouched by father absence; they assert that the men who walked away from them whether through death, divorce, or abandonment, lost more than these fatherless daughters. The fatherless girl never wants to be dependent” (p. 128). In addition, Abrams, Maxwell, Pope, and Belgrave (2014) also spoke of their younger participants speaking of being strong in the context of an absent male figure.

Lastly, many authors have found that father absence can also work against successful, strong intimate relationships. Just look anywhere on the internet to observe the discussions warning men against marrying fatherless daughters, or of men saying they won’t marry daughters who grew up without their fathers (Makofane, 2015). Fatherless daughters are unsure of how they should behave around men, the way to approach men, how to have a successful relationship with men, and do not understand the dynamics between men and women (Barras, 2000; East, et al., 2000). In addition, Scheffler and Naus (1999) explored how a father’s affirmation affected a women’s self-esteem, fear of intimacy, comfort with womanhood, and their understanding of sexuality. They found that women who were affirmed by their fathers were comfortable with their sexuality, had no fear in intimate relationships, and had higher self-esteem.

Trust, also important to the development of intimate relationships, can also become an issue for the fatherless daughter. In his research on the experiences of African women who grew up without their fathers, Makofane (2015) found one of the sub-themes to be a lack of trust in
men. Similarly, the participants in East et al.’s (2007) study did not feel that they could trust men because of the disappointments associated with their fathers being absent.

Father absence has thus been shown to have possible affects on daughters in multiple ways. Not only are daughters affected when they are adolescents, but they are also affected during their lives as adult women. Father absence can stunt their daughter’s drug refusal self-efficacy, psychological growth, and strong successful intimate relationships they may have in the future (East et al., 2007; Barras, 2000; Flouri & Buchanan, 2002; Boyd, Ashcraft, & Belgrave, 2006). Hence, it is important that I examined the ways in which father absence contribute to and hinder the development and lives of their children, specifically their daughters.

One specific way that father absence can show up is in how father absent children construct gender development in the absence of their fathers. The next section discussed the studies that have investigated gender development in relationship to father absence.

2.3 Father Absence and Gender Development

There have been quite a few studies that have examined this relationship, between father absence and gender development.

Murray, Mandara, and Joyner (2005) examined how father absence can hinder the gender development of adolescent boys and girls. Their findings revealed that father-absent girls had lower levels of ideal femininity, and perceived themselves to be more masculine than they wanted to be. Fathers not only help to develop gender identities for their children, they also can impact the sexual activity of their children. Hendricks et al. (2005) found that adolescents who were described as father-absent were more likely to be sexually active. Furthermore, La Guardia, Nelson, & Lertora (2014) also found that father-absent daughters engaged in sexual activity at a younger age, and also were at risk for experiencing early onset of menarche. They
also found that father-absent daughters were at a greater risk of teenage pregnancy. These findings were supported by Alleyne-Green, Grinnell-Davis, Clark, and Cryer-Coupet (2015). They found that females were less likely to engage in risky behaviors based on the perceived closeness they experienced with their father.

Lastly, Peterson (2006) explored the importance of fathers on risk behaviors, sexual expectations, and romantic relationships patterns. Peterson found that fathers are important to the sexual development of their daughters, and have a powerful influence over the sexual risks they may take, and the relationships they may have.

The next section discussed the father’s impact on education, more specifically, how father absence affects different aspects related to education.

2.4 Father’s Impact on Education

Father’s absence affects on education have been well researched and documented over the past couple of decades. There have been many studies dedicated to understanding how father absence affects the learning of babies, college age women and men, and young adolescents. There have been quite a few studies that have studied how education affects children at different points in their lives, and different components of their education, for example reading achievement (Jantz & Sciara, 1974). This section addressed these studies and their findings.

2.4.1 Fathers and Educational Performance

African American girls who experience father involvement are able to show positive educational gains and achievement, even when they are raised in father-only homes they are able to show positive educational growth (Alderman-Swain & Battle, 2000; Battle & Coates, 2004; Hayes, 2012; Jeynes, 2015; Sang Min, Kishner & Seong, 2007). When father are present, they are able to impact the educational performance and gains of their children, especially their
daughters. There is a strong connection that belies the importance that fathers, specifically African American fathers, play in their child’s educational success, more so than that of other ethnic groups (Jeynes, 2015). This speaks to the importance of fathers, and the impact that father absence could have on their daughter’s educational performance.

2.4.2 Father Absence and Academic Engagement

Cooper (2009) examined how fathers can impact the academic engagement of their daughters. Cooper (2009) used a sample of 122 girls with a median age of 12.2. What she found was that the relationship fathers had with their daughters had a significant impact on their academic engagement. This finding was important because it supports the belief that African American girls “who perceive a more supportive and communicative relationship with their fathers’ also report greater academic-related engagement” (p.509). Furthermore, daughters who had a supportive, positive relationship with their fathers’ had higher self-esteem, which in turn led to higher engagement. Fathers have the power to impact both their daughter’s academic engagement at school, and their self-esteem. Young African American girls need their fathers in order to engage in sustained academic pursuits.

2.4.3 Father Absence and Educational Attainment

Both Reeder and Conger (1984), and Gillette and Gudmunson (2014) investigated the influence of fathers on educational attainment. Educational attainment is defined as “the highest level of education they have achieved to date” (Gillette & Gudmunson, 2014,p. 314). Reed and Conger (1984) found that for Black women fathers had less influence on their educational attainment, but their mother’s served as their educational role models, while Gillette and Gumunson (2014) found the opposite. For Gillette and Gudmunson (2014) father absence had a substantial influence on their participant’s educational attainment, due to economic distress and
early menarche, which led to lower education expectations, and early sexual encounters. While these studies present opposite viewpoints, it is safe to say that fathers can influence educational attainment. With a father’s disappearance, gone are the resources and educational expectations they bring, and there are probably other life events taking place at the same time (Gillette & Gudmunson, 2014). Hence, fathers can create an environment that allows for their daughters to feel supported in achieving their educational goals.

2.4.4 Education and Work

Krohn and Bogan (2001) also investigated how father absence impacted their daughter’s college attendance and development. What they found was that as fatherless daughters should be preparing to go to college, they are often more concerned about earning a paycheck, so that they can establish their own independence, and create their own security. Their mothers are usually unable to pay for college, and their fathers usually refused to help. Therefore, since most fatherless daughters grew up watching their mothers beg for money, they refuse to be those women, thus they seek immediate employment (Wakerman, 1984).

Fatherless daughters sometimes swing on a pendulum when it comes to their education. According to Barras’ and Coma’s (2000) personal communication with Krohn and Bogan (2002) they either strive to be overachievers, or they swing more towards being underachievers (Barras, 2000; as cited in Krohn & Bogan, 2001).

The overachievers work very hard to gain multiple degrees, keep in control, and reach their greatest potential. In doing this, they are hoping that their fathers will accept them and love them. However, underachievers do not reach these levels at all. They are happy with a high school diploma, and they do not reach to wish any higher. They may also drop out of college, or never even try.
Clearly, fathers have a strong impact on the educational journey of their daughters. Based on the studies discussed it can be critical that fathers are involved in the lives of their daughters to help support their educational potential, even if it is indirectly. If fathers are chronically absent, however, they are unable to help support and impact the educational outcomes and potential of their children, especially their daughters. The following section discussed how African American women have obtained educational attainment, and continued to grow in their seeking of higher education.

### 2.5 The Effects of Educational Attainment on African American Women

Educational attainment in the United States for African Americans has been historically denied and limited, and when it was made more available due to the 1954 Supreme Court case of Brown v. Board of Education many more African American women begin to attend college (Garibaldi, 2014). This section explored how African American women took advantage of this opportunity, and began to aggressively seek higher education.

Before 1915, there were only a few African Americans whom had obtained a bachelor’s degree. To be specific, in 1850 there were only thirty women who carried the title of college graduate (Perkins, 2015). With more blacks in college, however, there came an increase of African American women who had degrees (Perkins, 2015). Hence, the educational attainment for African American women has grown ever since the implementation of affirmative action laws, Brown vs. The Board of Education, and open admissions (Garibaldi, 2014). However even before this point, African American girls still attended elementary and secondary school at a higher rate than boys (Garibaldi, 2014). Since this trend has started, it has not stopped. Anderson and Bertaux (2006) explain that the number of Black women between 1920 and 1950 began to earn degrees at such a fast rate, that by the middle of the century they were earning more degrees
that African American men. Furthermore, Garibalidi (1997) explains that the number of African American women receiving doctorate degrees has increased over the last twenty years. Thus by 1995, Black women earned 63% of doctorates awarded. Although these are great accomplishments, Perkins (2015), points out that due to the number of African American women receiving higher education, it has often been seen as a “concern” for the community and has not been met with much celebration or fanfare (p. 742). Louque (1999) explored what enabled African American women participants to be able to obtain their doctoral degrees, through their personal narratives. What she found was that these women believed family, community service, leadership experience, and an understanding of standard English helped them to be successful in obtaining their doctoral degrees.

Anderson and Bertaux (2006) argue that the growth of educational attainment of African American women is related to the occupational opportunities available to them throughout history. Furthermore, they underscore the fact that Black women took advantage of the only opportunities available to them at the time, and that the only jobs opened for Black women to move upwards were in obtaining degrees and going into professions that were considered feminine. Due to the legacy of African American women in obtaining higher education, Anderson and Bertaux (2006) label this an emerging tradition among the African American community.

Kaba (2011) argues that African American women are geniuses because of the many achievements they have made in spite of the difficulties they have faced. She presents data that shows that African American females, in 2009, earned more doctorate degrees than African American males. She further discussed the contribution of African American females to the history-making event that took place in 2002, when women earned more doctoral degrees than
African American women contributed greatly to this achievement, earning 63% of the doctoral degrees awarded to African Americans (Kaba, 2011). Kaba (2008) also argued that Black women are the new model minority. One of the variables she used to support her claim was that Black women have become one of the most successful minority subgroups to earn high school and college diplomas. Furthermore, Kaba (2008) argues, using college enrollment rates that Black women in 2004 had higher college enrollment than all other subgroups. Kaba (2008) shows with specific percentages this achievement; Black women had a higher enrollment in 2004, at 8.2%, than Black men, at 5%, white females, at 6.6%, and white males, at 5.4%, Hispanic females, at 6.6%, and Hispanic males, at 4.3%. According to the US Census Community Bureau, American Community Survey, in 2011, 20% of African American women, 25 and over, had earned 20% of bachelor’s degrees or higher. There has been an enrollment increase in college over the last seven years. African American women are enrolling in college at higher rates than other racial and ethnic groups.

Many Black Women also have personalities that help move them towards higher educational attainment, or draw them away from it. Matthews-Armstead (2002) investigated the college enrollment of African American women from low-income communities, using a qualitative approach. It is important to note that all seven participants the study were from low-income, female-headed households. What was found was that the college-bound women personified empowerment and resilience versus those who were not college bound. The not college-bound women had self-doubt, were dependent, and passive about the decisions that influenced their lives. They lacked a sense of “self-perception, of self-direction, self-reliance, and competence” seen in the college-bound women (p.61). Hence, Matthews-Armstad (2002) concluded that what had the biggest impact on the women were the way they saw themselves,
their role in relationship with others, and their life experiences. What is important to understand here is that the college-bound women found power in meeting their challenges head-on, which were based on how they perceived their realities, not the specific circumstances in their lives that could hold them back.

While the previous research located in this section has documented the steps Black women have taken in obtaining advanced education Winkle-Wagner presents a different perspective. Winkle-Wagner (2015) discussed how individual characteristics, relationships, backgrounds, and institutional supports are relative to Black women’s success in college. By reviewing the literature, Winkle-Wagner (2015) found that research on African American women does not pay enough attention to institutional factors or sociostructural factors, which may affect their ability to successfully graduate. In addition, she found that research does not account for the differences to be found within the subgroup of Black women, nor do they account for the different definitions of success that may be used. Interestingly, the factor that led Winkle-Wagner to examine this relationship, is the soaring enrollment rate of Black women in higher education (Bennett & Lutz, 2009), although, their graduation rate has not been equivalent (Harper, Patton, & Wooden, 2009). For example, according to Winkle-Wagner (2015), the 2009 U.S. Census found “only one in five Black women older than 25 years (20.7%) hold bachelor’s degrees, compared with one in two Asian American women (49.2%) and one in three White women (31.95) in the same age range” (pg.172).

It is clear that African American women have earned post-secondary degrees at a faster rate than their female counterparts. They continue to gain degrees at a rate faster than those around them. Despite numerous challenges they have grown to be one of the most educated groups based on the literature presented here. However, the literature also acknowledged that
African American women must have, at their disposal, a set of skills that will help them to get into college, to stay there, and to move beyond a bachelor’s degree. Furthermore, when examining the success of Black women in obtaining a higher education, it is important to look at other factors that may propel them or hold them back. The following discussion examined the concept of the strong Black woman. The historical nature of the strong black woman is provided, the concept is defined, and germinal literature is provided.

2.6 Strong Black Woman (SBW)

A quality that has always been associated with the experience of being a Black woman in America is one of strength. It began during the burden of three hundred years of slavery, and has endured since (Walker-Barnes, 2009). In this section I explored the historical underpinnings of the “strong black woman,” defined it, and explored the different components related to it. Michelle Wallace, in her groundbreaking “Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwomen” (2015), examined how African American women came to be viewed as a “superwomen.” For Collins (2014) and Wallace (2015) the superwomen role, was developed during the three hundred years of slavery and abuse in America. This concept, of the strong Black woman, is important to add into the conversation, when discussing education and educational attainment. Educational attainment allows many African American women to support their image of themselves as strong and independent (Armstead, 2002). Father absence may also push them to develop the strong Black woman concept (Abrams et. al, 2014). Armstead (2002) found that the college-bound African American women in his study, “believed that becoming increasingly more self-reliant was a necessity” (p.49), and “they placed a great deal of significance on doing for themselves and on having their own” (p.49).
It is important to mention here that the controversial Moynihan Report by Daniel Patrick Moynihan (1965) first brought to attention the term of the matriarch, which blamed the African American women for essentially emasculating the Black man, taking his jobs, and ruining the African American family. In Moynihan’s quote from Duncan MacIntyre: “The Negro statistics are symptomatic of some old socioeconomic problems, not the least of which are under-employment among Negro men and compensating higher labor force propensity among Negro women. Both operate to enlarge the mother’s role, undercutting the status of the male and making many Negro families essentially matriarchal” (1965, p. 34). In her discussion of the Superwomen complex, Wallace (2015) addressed the root of the matriarchal role, and how it came to be. Wallace discussed the tension filled Black Power Movement, where Black women were blamed for the plight of the Black man, based on the findings of the Moynihan report. Wallace (2015) stated, “She was too domineering, too strong, too aggressive, too outspoken, too castrating, too masculine. She was one of the main reasons the black man had never been properly able to take hold of his situation in this country” (Chapter 1, para.8). She expounds on the expectation of the Superwomen to have super human ability and strength, having none of the insecurities and weakness that plague other women, and being a cold, emotionless woman, who also has to be the “embodiment of Mother Earth, the quintessential mother with infinite sexual, life-giving, and nurturing reserves” (Chapter 1, para. 43). She then expands on the historical roots of the role; explaining the need to build a stereotype of Black women that said they were promiscuous, emotionally closed off and unavailable, a fortress of physical strength, and incapable of being vulnerable (Wallace, 2015; Collins, 2004). This narrative had to be created to justify the treatment of these women as chattel, workhorses, and baby-making machines. Furthermore, this narrative had to be created in order to build another narrative: the no account,
unreliable Black man, who was good for nothing (Wallace, 2015). Davis (1982), also brings light to the fact that white men wanted to ensure the safety of patriarchy, so they created stereotypes to explain the strength of Black enslaved women, such as they were “masculinized sub-human creatures” (p.71). Lastly, similar to Barras (2000), and hooks (1982), Wallace also speaks of the Amazonian woman who develops after the end of chattel slavery. Theses Amazonian women were “bigger, stronger, tougher, more rebellious, and usually poor” (Chapter 2, para.175), were cold hearted and unfeminine, but were also important in the fact that they financially supported their families, and ensured their well-being (Chapter 2, para. 178).

In Patricia Hill- Collins’ “Sexual Politics” (2004), she presented the idea that gender politics in the Black community operate as divisive forms of racism, replacing the well-known forms we have come to expect and see. In a nutshell, “the mass media, and public policy all depict African Americans as either less able and/or willing to achieve dominant gender ideology” (Collins, 2004, p. 98). According to Collins (2004), in failing to achieve dominant gender ideology, African Americans display a deviant ideology, which is then used against them to explain the continued plight of African American people. This deviant ideology has become the reverse of the major ideology—weak Black men, and strong Black women. This is linked to the historical devastation of bondage that changed the way men and women were able to relate to one another. Collins (2004) explained in the second part of her book, the different images in the Black community linking some to negative stereotypes. For example, the Strong Black Woman SBW, can embrace being the “Bad Bitch, which means she is a “super-tough, super-strong women who [is] often celebrated” (p. 124). However, to be a “bad bitch”, carries a negative connotation, related to the mule of chattel slavery, and the “aggressive, loud, rude, and pushy” female (Collins, 2004, p.123). These two different uses of the same word are applied to working
class Black women (Collins, 2004, p.123). While these are essentially the same words, they can be said in two different ways that can demean African American women or be used to uplift them, usually by other women. At any rate, the imagery of the “Black bitch” serves similar purposes to the imagery of the Jezebel, Mammy, and Sapphire, to ensure the Black women is ‘ridiculed, isolated, abandoned, and often in physical danger” (Collins, 2004, p.138).

Another important concept that Collins (2004) puts forth as part of the weak man-strong woman thesis was that “unnaturally” strong Black women hold back the community, and Black men. Collins (2004) argues that this thesis is detrimental, and can hurt African American communities in three ways. One of these ways is financial. Collins (2004) focused on the fact that if African American women are busy being more feminine, than their families may go without the financial support they need to survive. Lastly, Collins (2004), examines the beliefs that the role of the Strong Black Woman SBW can cause the carriers to experience and accept abuse, as part of their role as a SBW, and that they can experience violence at the hands of African American men, who feel emasculated, but who also exploit them.

bell hooks (1982) also examined the history of how the strong women/superwomen complex developed, in her groundbreaking work on African American women “Ain’t I A Women Black Women and Feminism.” Like Wallace and Collins, hooks link the image to racism and slavery. She first examines the myth of the matriarch, which hooks convincingly denies, could be applied to Black women. As hooks (1982) states, “the term matriarch implies the existence of a social order in which women exercise social and political power, a state which in no way resembles the condition of black women. The decisions that determine the ways in which black women must lives their lives are made by others, usually white men” (p. 72). Interestingly, hooks also mentioned the fact that Black women were very accepting of this
moniker and wore it with pride. Hence, while it may have developed with a negative intent in mind, it served to provide a way for Black women to feel appreciated for the work they completed for their families and communities. hooks (1982) supported this by sharing the beliefs of a woman she interviewed. The woman believed unequivocally that Black women were matriarchal, even though she herself was living in poverty trying to make ends meet to support her family.

Outside of the stereotypical, historical, negative images associated with being a strong black woman, researchers have also found other overlapping constructs to explain this phenomenon, including the Sisterella Complex (Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003), the Superwomen Schema (Woods-Giscombe, 2010) and the Sojourner Truth Syndrome (Mullings, 2006). Woods-Giscombe (2010) examined how 48 African American women participating in focus groups would define and characterize the Superwomen role, what they believed to be the contributing contextual factors, and the benefits and liabilities they believed existed. What she found was that these women characterized the role as an “obligation to manifest strength, obligation to suppress emotions, resistance to being vulnerable or dependent, determination to succeed despite limited resources, and obligation to help others” (p. 672).

The sisterella complex is another offshoot of the strong black woman schema. Jones and Shorter-Gooden (2003) in their examination identified the sisterella complex. This complex allowed for women to operate with a functional depression, while embracing the facets of the strong black woman. They suffered quietly, experiencing overwhelming guilt for giving too much of themselves to others or being unable to meet expectations set on them by others. These women experienced psychological stress and turmoil, as they used their strength to cover their pain.
In addition, there is also the Sojourner Syndrome to consider in relation to the strong black woman. According to Mullings (2005) the Sojourner Syndrome, is a survival strategy enacted by African American women. Similar to the way Sojourner Truth assumed extraordinary responsibilities, so do African American women of today. They take on “the assumption of economic, household, and community, which are expressed in family headships, working outside the home (like a man), and the constant need to address community empowerment – often carried out in conditions made difficult by discrimination and sacred resources” (Mullings, 2005, p. 86). However, while the Sojourner Syndrome may serve as a survival strategy, it also brings consequences, specifically in relation to my research question. For example, women who exhibit the syndrome and are college educated may experience “elevated risk” (Mullings, 2005, p. 87), “because of simultaneous exposure to both racism and sexism (Mullings, 2005, p. 87). In addition, these women may become single heads of households, due to the lack of available men, and they may experience structural racism as well (Mullings, 2005).

Hence, while Collins, hooks, and Wallace laid a strong foundation for the historical understanding of what led to the “strong black woman,” recent scholars have taken the “strong black woman,” and defined her for readers. “In short, strength advances a virtuous claim about any Black woman whose efforts and emotional responses defy common beliefs about what is humanly possible amidst adversity” (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2009, p. 2). She further expounds that strength is a personal strategy and a social expectation (p. 7). In addition, Black women have historically had women to look to as exemplars of what this strength looks like, including Harriet Tumban, Sojourner Truth, Rosa Parks, and Fannie Lou Hammer (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2009; Wallace, 2015). Black women gladly take on this persona, as it provides a counter to the many negative images they have encountered, and allows them to continue the legacy of their
foremothers (Woods-Giscombe’, 2010). For some women to continue the legacy there were requirements that needed to be met. According to Watson and Hunter (2015a), women without children (usually college women) considered themselves “SBW’s, or Strong Black Women, in training” (p. 9). They did not feel as if they could be strong Black woman, until they were fully financially independent, and caretakers.

The above constructs, have led researchers to the “Strong Black Woman” Schema. Abrams, Maxwell, Pope, and Belgrave (2014), attempted to integrate the varying constructs discussed above, into one overarching schema that address each one. What they found were the attributes and characteristics of the superwoman, characterized by African American women, between the ages of 18-91. The themes they found were that strong woman embody and display multiple forms of strength, possess self/ethnic pride in spite of intersectional oppression, embraces being every woman, and that they are anchored by religion and spirituality.

2.7 The Burden of Being SBW

Much of the literature available on the strong Black woman is filled with evidence of the burden of being a strong Black woman. Abrams, Maxwell, Pope, and Belgrave (2014), and Woods-Giscombe’ (2010) in their research found that there are also liabilities related to being a strong Black woman. For example, a continued repeated theme throughout the literature is the strain that the strong Black woman role puts on their intimate relationships (Collins, 2004; Woods-Giscombe’, 2010). Their need to be self-sufficient, self-reliant, independent, and invulnerable, led to relationships where their significant other did not feel wanted or needed (Woods-Giscombe’ (2010).

Another burden that is continually discussed in reference to the strong Black woman are stress related behaviors (Abrams, et al., 2014; Woods-Giscombe’, 2010). The women discussed
smoking, emotional eating, not sleeping to complete tasks, and postponing self-care (Woods-Giscombe’, 2010, p. 677). Beauboeuf-Lafontant (2009), also examine how eating could be a manifestation of being strong, and hiding emotions, so that African American women could continue to appear invulnerable. Overeating manifested due to the silencing that the women endured to complete the façade of strength and invulnerability (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2009). They may not take care of themselves, consistently putting others before their own health, being ever self-sacrificing. This could result in self-neglect of health issues or other major situations (Abrams et al., 2014). Woods-Giscombe’ (2010), also found that the postponement of self-care was especially high among educated women. The participant’s felt guilty if they took time for themselves, and they constantly put themselves last.

Woods-Giscombe’ (2010) also found as a liability the embodiment of stress (p. 678). Participants experienced migraines, hair loss, panic attacks, weight gain, and depression. The participants were able to make the connections between the stress in their lives and the symptoms they experienced. Not only did stress cause outward signs, but keeping emotions locked inside, another component of the strong Black woman schema, also presented health issues (Woods-Giscombe’, 2010). Watson and Hunter (2015a) found that their participants were fully aware of the negative physical outcomes that could result, such as high blood pressure and strokes.

Mental health issues could also result from the internalization of the strong Black woman, such as psychological issues (Abrams, et al., 2014). Watson and Hunter (2015a) found that the participants in her study were expected, under the strong Black woman schema, to be psychological durable, yet they did not engage in wellness behaviors to ensure that they could be psychological durable. While their participants expressed their belief in the fact that emotional
inhibition could cause anger issues, and other psychological and emotional issues they still rejected the belief that expressing their emotion would help. They continued to believe in being strong, in the face of insurmountable odds such as the death of a child, or sustaining under dire financial strains. They further found that participants felt that crying or seeking professional help, such as counseling, lessened their image as a strong Black woman. Watson and Hunter (2015b) also discovered that African American women might suffer from high levels of anxiety, and that the strong Black woman theory may influence their recovery. They also found that Black women, who internalize the schema, demonstrate depressive symptoms. Beauboeuf-Lafontant (2009) also discusses how strength affects depression. She points out that black women who experience depression, link their strength to more of a performance, and to “extreme psychic and physical exhaustion, frustration, and suppressed anger” (p. 62).

2.8 The Performance of Being SBW

Beauboeuf-Lafontant (2009), investigated how Black women wear a mask, and present a façade to the world. They must present a face to the world, that is impassive, emotionless, and that keeps them from identifying completely with the strong Black woman role. However, maintaining a façade is a tireless pursuit as her participants discussed (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2009). Beauboeuf-Lafontant (2009), explained that this façade allows Black women to have only one response to any situations, they must maintain stoicism no matter what life decides to throw at them. According to Beauboeuf-Lafontant (2009), this creates a place where Black women cannot share their real feelings or reveal the true person within. These women could not share their true selves with their family and friends, who might immediately question them if they are not showing their strength façade.
2.9 The Benefits of Being SBW

While most researchers who discuss the strong Black woman phenomenon relate the incredible burden of it, there are also many benefits that help African American women survive a world that continues to deny their existence or their oppression. Abrams, Maxwell, Pope, and Belgrave (2014) pointed out that resilience acts as protective factor against psychological issues, depression, and allows for a higher quality of life and less stress. In addition, they also found that the self/ethnic pride the participants felt in being strong Black women provided positive psychological and social outcomes. Religion/spirituality also had an important impact on the participants, as it helped them counteract the negative images and experiences they faced.

Woods-Giscombe’ (2010) also found benefits of being a strong Black woman in her study. The finding suggested that the benefits of the strong Black woman were their preservation of self and survival. It was important for the participants to be able to survive despite the fact that they lived at the nexus of racism and sexism and had to overcome obstacles. In addition, she found the perseverance of the African American family, and the preservation of the African American community to be important benefits of being a strong Black woman. The participants were concerned with being able to support their parents and children, so they might not experience struggle.

2.10 Summary

In the preceding chapter, I have reviewed the germinal literature related to the topics of father absence, educational attainment, and the Strong Black woman. More specifically, I examined the definition of father absence, its affects on daughters, and its impact on education. I also examined educational attainment of African American women, and then concluded by
examining the Strong Black woman’s definition, as well as, the burdens and benefits associated with this theory.

In the following chapter, I discussed the methodology that will be utilized for this study. This includes the purpose, research questions, information related to the population, sampling, instruments, and the reliability, and validity for the study. Justification for rightness of approach will also be provided.
3 Methodology

3.1 Overview

The purpose of this study was to examine how father absence affected the educational attainment of African American women. The following chapter discussed the methodology that will be used to complete this study. Important information will be provided concerning the population, data collection, sampling, instruments, reliability, and validity, and how the data will be analyzed. Furthermore, information was provided that speaks to the appropriateness of the method chosen for this study.

Since the purpose of this study was to examine how father absence affects the educational attainment of African American women, the following research questions guided this study:

1. What is the participants’ understanding of a strong black woman?

2. How does father absence affect the educational attainment of African American women?

3. How does father absence lead African American women to perform as a strong Black woman?

3.2 Research Method and Design Appropriateness

“In-depth interviewing is the tool of choice for exploring personal and sensitive issues or morally ambiguous choices people have made” (Rubin & Rubin, 2012, p.4). A qualitative approach was used to examine how father absence affected the educational attainment of African American women, due to the sensitivity and complexities surrounding this issue. This issue may be sensitive for many women, even if they have healed from the wounds left behind. This approach allowed for the opportunity to understand how father absence led these participants to their educational decisions. According to Creswell (2013), “We also conduct qualitative research
because we need a complex, detailed understanding of the issue “(p. 48). This study sought to understand a complex issue of an understudied group of women in combination with the recent phenomenon of father absence. By using a qualitative approach, complex issues could be better understood and provide a voice to a minority group. In addition, many studies that have explored father absence, educational attainment, and the strong Black woman have used a qualitative design (Barras, 2000; East et al., 2006, 2007; Johnson, 2013; Makofane, 2015; Watson, & Hunter, 2015, Woods-Giscombe, 2010).

3.3 Participants

Due to the nature of this study, it is important to establish criteria that can help the study to access the richest data possible to answer my research questions. There were 6 participants chosen to participate in this research. Each participant had to meet the following criteria:

- African American/Black woman
- Between the ages of 21-45
- Grew up without biological father in home
- Had little to no relationship and contact with biological father
- Earned at least a bachelor’s degree
- Able to meet at designated time and location
- Willing to discuss the lack of relationship between themselves and their fathers

3.4 Procedures

According to Creswell (2013), snowball or chain sampling, “identifies cases of interest from people who know people who know what cases are information-rich instruments” (p. 158).
I utilized people I know, or got referrals from those who are close to me to find participants who fit the criteria for this study. However, in order to ensure that there was diversity in the participants, and to ensure that I was able to gain the six participants I was seeking, I posted flyers in areas populated by African American women, such as churches and hair salons (See Appendix A: Recruitment Flyer). These women were important, as they could participate, or recommend others who could participate in this study. Those who were interested had the option to contact me by phone or email.

There were a total of 6 participants chosen to participate in this study. This number was chosen because it provided a deeper insight into the questions being asked, and also provided many examples to answer and support the questions the study is seeking to answer. All interviews took place in or around Atlanta, Georgia at a mutually agreeable location for both the researcher and participant, such as the library, a coffee shop, or restaurant.

Each participant was provided with an informed consent form to read through and sign prior to the interview. As the topic of this research can bring up unpleasant memories, numbers to therapist were provided upon requests. Participants were made aware of their rights, the research questions, and the length of the interview, which lasted between 60-90 minutes. Assigning a pseudonym to all the women who volunteered protected the confidentiality of each participant. Furthermore, the interviews were placed in a locked location to ensure the privacy of the participants.

3.5 Data Collection

Data was collected through individual interviews with participants, and the questionnaire provided important data about the participant, such as age, educational level, job status, relationship with father, and their definition of a strong Black woman. Each interview was
recorded and transcribed. Individual interviews were best for this topic because it allowed participants to be open and honest about their thoughts and feelings, in a comfortable environment where they are safe from judgment and free to discuss sensitive issues. All participants were given an opportunity to review their personal transcripts, to ensure it reflects their lived experiences accurately. According to Rubin and Rubin (2012), “ask your interviewees to go over the transcript to comment on what you might have missed or misinterpreted or to bring up what they omitted and now want to add” (p. 60).

Specifically, this study used a semi-structured interview, with a focus on narrative inquiry to investigate the lived experiences of participants. Creswell defined narrative research as a method that “begins with the experiences as expressed in lived and told stories of individuals” (2013, pg. 70). Narrative inquiry is suitable for a small number of participants, and allowed the stories of the participants to shine through. It is important for the study to capture the things mentioned above in this research, as each story may be different but can contribute greatly to our understanding of African American women who grew up without their fathers, but seek higher education. In addition, the narrative approach carries with it a strong collaboration between the researcher and the participants. Creswell (2013) explained, “there may be a strong collaborative features of narrative research as the story emerges through the interaction or dialogue of researcher and the participants (p.71).

While there are other approaches, narrative inquiry is best for this research, because it allows a deeper, more holistic understanding of the lived experiences of these women. Other qualitative approaches that could serve as viable options include, phenomenological, grounded theory, ethnographic, and case study, however, there are limitations of each approach that would keep it from being successful with my research questions and the intent of study. The
phenomenological approach basic purpose “is to reduce individual experiences with a phenomenon to a description of the universal essence” (Creswell, 2013, p. 76). One of the defining features of the phenomenological approach is the bracketing of the researcher (Creswell, 2013). Due to the nature of the topic and my own experiences, I do not believe bracketing will serve my research or my participants well. Grounded theory serves to create brand new theories, and unfortunately the time constraint for this study do not allow for the time it will take to build a new, solid theory. While ethnography might have been an approach the study uses, the participants in my study will share a life experience, not a culture, and I am not interested in determining how any individual culture works in this particular study. Furthermore, completing an ethnography is time-consuming considering the fact that there must be continuous observations and interviews, and a large number of participants. According to Creswell (2013), an ethnography is “interested in examining these shared patterns, and the unit of analysis is typically lager than the 20 or so individual in a grounded theory study. An ethnography focuses on an entire culture-sharing group” (p. 90). Lastly, a case study might have worked, as this approach is one “in which the investigator explores a real-life, contemporary bounded system (a case) or multiple bounded systems (cases) over time, through detailed, in-depth collection involving multiple sources of information, and reports a case description and case themes” (p.97). However, in this particular research the study is not about a focused particular case, and due to my research questions there will more than likely not be a range of qualitative data to pull from, such as audiovisual materials. Although there are, several different qualitative approaches I could have chosen for this study, I believed that the narrative approach best served the research questions I was seeking to answer.
3.6 Instruments

The instruments used for this study included a questionnaire, recruitment form, consent form, and an interview guide (See Appendix A- D). The questionnaire form included pertinent information that helped establish information that was used to facilitate an understanding of who the participants were, as their stories came together. The questionnaire form included questions about the participants’ age, educational level, contact information, relationship with their father, career, current relationship level, and definition of a strong black woman.

The interview guide contained questions about father absence, level of educational attainment, and the strong black woman theory. While many of the studies completed on these topics are quantitative, or do not contain the interview guide used in the study, there are previous studies available to build a strong, comprehensive interview guide. Questions that address the strong Black woman are taken from the strong Black Woman Cultural Construct Scale (SBWCCS), revised by (Hamin, 2008), and based on the Strong Black Woman Attitude Scale created by Thompson (2003). The SBWCCS scale was used to inform the questions I created about the strong black woman that will be asked. The remaining questions that deal with father absence and educational attainment will be aligned with the research questions for this study, and were created by the researcher.

3.7 Reliability and Validity

To ensure the reliability and validity of this study, the interview questions were structured so that the same question is asked in multiple ways. In addition, participants received a transcript to validate their own voices, and ensure that their story was being told. Participants also received a list of the themes that emerged based on their interviews. This was to ensure the themes that emerged were aligned with the way they see themselves and the way they answered...
the questions. Lastly, external reviewers and peer reviewers were utilized to review the coding and the themes found.

3.8 Data Analysis

After collecting my data, and transcribing all recorded information, I coded the data to find particular, themes based on causation coding. Causation coding examines underlying causes that lead people to make specific decisions. Causation coding is defined as attempts to label the mental models participants use to uncover “what people believe about events and their causes” (Saldana, 2009, p.187). In addition, Saldana also stated that, “causation coding is appropriate for discerning motives (by or toward something or someone), belief systems, worldviews, processes, recent histories, interrelationships, and the complexity of influences and effects on human actions and phenomena” (2009, p. 188). The research questions were based on the fact that African American women decide to seek out educational attainment due to their father’s absence. The strong Black woman theory explained who they must become in order to successfully navigate a world without their father. Therefore, it was important examine the links and relationships between these topics to uncover their themes. Furthermore, peers reviewed my coding and themes to ensure the reliability of this study. There was an inter-rater coding alpha of 90%.

3.9 Summary

The methods of a study are critically important, as they can help the study be a success or failure. Hence, in this section I have explored the methods and procedures that were used to successfully complete this study. Here I have focused on the research questions that were addressed, the population the study utilized, the sampling approach, how confidentiality was addressed, and how data was collected and analyzed.
Six African American women participated in this study that meet the criteria mentioned above. Data was collected through the use of individual interviews to allow for participants to be themselves and open up about sensitive topics without pretense. For the purpose of analyzing data, the study utilized causation coding to understand the relationships and links between African American women, father absence, and educational attainment. Causation coding “is geared towards exploring why questions in research endeavors,” (Saldana, 2009, p.189), and “should be used as a heuristic for considering or hypothesizing about plausible causes of particular outcomes, and probable outcomes from particular causes (Saldana, 2009, p. 189). Hence, this type of coding helped me create a plausible explanation to explain the links and relationships. In the following chapter findings based on the interviews and data analysis are addressed.
4 Findings

4.1 Overview

The purpose of this study was to explore how father absence affected the educational attainment of African American women. The first section of this chapter provided a profile of each of the six participants, in the order in which they were interviewed. Pseudonyms were chosen to protect the true identities of the participants. The second section addressed the themes that followed from the interviews with the six participants. In addition, this chapter is concluded by asserting that being a strong Black woman has helped the participants successfully deal with their father’s absence in their lives, and the father absence has influenced their push for higher education. The final section provided a summary of the chapter.

4.2 The Participants

Six Black women who live in and around Atlanta participated in this study. All participants had earned a bachelor’s degree, and three of them were working on advanced degrees. Their ages ranged from 26-45. Four identified their profession as teachers, one identified as a pharmacy tech, and the other worked in an office. Below, individual profiles are provided of each participant. A table containing a summary of the participant information can be found in Table 4.2, located in Appendix E.

Sheila Sheila is a 30-year-old college graduate from Orlando, Florida. She described herself as a strong black woman, who would not brag about it or shout it from the rooftops. She felt that no one had influenced her life decisions, accept her. When asked what would make her feel successful she thoughtfully stated “billionaire status.” She can remember three times that she saw her father, and when asked if they talk at all she said “heck to the no.” However, she did feel that it was important for fathers to be in the lives of their daughters. Without fathers she made it
clear that “if you don’t have your dad in your life than when you go out in the dating world, how are you supposed to know what you prefer? Or how are you supposed to respect a man, if you have never had a father figure?”

*Monica*  Monica is a 27 year-old eighth grade middle school teacher in Dekalb County, who is currently working on her master’s degree. Originally from Charleston, South Carolina, she has two sisters, and was heavily influenced by her mother and her grandmother. She identified herself as a stereotypical strong black woman. The women she admired, a positive strong Black woman, exhibited the positive characteristics discussed above, but Monica felt like she had not yet moved into this arena. However, it was her belief that she could become a positive strong Black woman by depending on someone. Her greatest fear seemed to be becoming strong and bitter like her mother.

*Brandy* Brandy is a 45 year-old ESOL teacher in Gwinnett County, who is in the process of completing her doctoral degree. Originally from East New Jersey, she moved to Georgia to establish a better way of life for her family and herself. She has been married for 25 years, and has two sons. She believed she is a strong Black woman, and believed her mom specifically, and her family in general was her first contact with being a strong Black woman. In a departure from the expected, Brandy was glad about her father’s departure from her families’ home life. She stated that “It wasn’t anything that had to do with him personally, but we were glad that release of him being such a strong individual in our lives was no longer there.” However, she did realize the importance of fathers in the lives of their daughters, and explained, “it makes a difference in who they pick as husbands, and boyfriends, and things in the long run, so I think that’s important.”
Shayla Shayla is a 26-year-old middle school teacher from Tuscaloosa, Alabama, and the mother to a 14 month-old son. During our interview it was clear that she was very spiritual, and depended on God for her understanding of life, and her relationship with her father. She believed that she was a strong Black woman, and garnered her examples from her mother, grandmother, and great-grandmother. However, although she identified as a strong Black woman, she did not like it because of the negative history associated with being a strong Black woman, but at the same time still embraced it. She explains, “I don’t like the fact that I have to be a “b,” but if you’re not going to listen to me and respect my opinion, that may be true, or may not be true, and that’s all I ask is respect.”

Kiesha Kiesha is a 37-year-old new mother, originally from Detroit. She is very African-centered after having received her education from an African-centered school from the 3rd grade to high school. It was here that she learned about things like African rites of passage, and the passage from childhood to womanhood. In a departure from the usual father absent story, as a young girl her father heavily influenced her education, and laid the foundation for her strong beliefs about education. She had an extremely large family on her mother’s side, and a small family on her father’s side. Having once viewed herself as a strong Black woman, she no longer subscribes to that belief. She believed that to be a strong Black woman is to be associated with not taking care of yourself. Kiesha pointed out that “and because we have this pressure to be strong Black woman, we’re constantly running ourselves into the ground, and putting on the happy face and we show up for the people at work, we show up for our children, our significant others, and we’re dying inside, were depressed, that’s mental illness.”

Terry Terry is a 31-year-old middle school teacher in the Gwinnett County school system. She is engaged, and recently had a baby. She grew up in Waynesboro, Georgia, as an only child,
surrounded by a close-knit family and supported by her uncles who stood in as her father figure, and her aunts who she said were more like her sisters. Although she says she grew up poor, her mother never let her know it. She believes that she is a strong black woman, and wants to set an example for her daughter. Following in the example of her mother, and grandmother, she hopes that she can establish for her daughter the same type of example.

4.3 Overview of the Themes

The purpose of this study was to explore how father absence affected the educational attainment of African American women. Data analysis revealed several themes across all three questions. Generally, participants reported some interaction between their father’s absence, higher education, and being strong Black women. In regards to the definition of what a strong Black woman is, participants reported on the negative vs. positive imagery. Concerning father’s absence affect on educational attainment, the following themes emerged from the data: “you will see me,” “I did it without you,” and “education was always important.” Some participants reported overwhelmingly their father’s influence on their need to seek higher education, while others credited their mom and other family members for their success, while most reported some mixture of the two. Lastly, when asked the question “how does father absence lead African American women to perform as a strong Black woman?”, the data revealed three themes after analysis. These three themes were “stronger for it,” “independent,” and “damaged relationships.” A secondary category that emerged upon analysis was the intersection of higher education and strong black woman. Several themes emerged and overlapped with others. These themes included “independence”, “stability,” and “family support,” which will be subsumed under the third question. These themes and their associated questions can be found in Table 4.3 below.
is important to notes that some of the themes were derived directly from the words of the participants.

_Table 2 Questions and Themes_

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Questions</th>
<th>Themes</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What is the participants’ understanding of a strong black woman?</td>
<td>Negative vs. Positive Strong Black Women</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How does father absence affect the educational attainment of African American women?</td>
<td>You Will See Me</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I Did It Without You</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Education Was Always Important</td>
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<tr>
<td>How does father absence lead African American women to perform as a strong black woman?</td>
<td>Stronger For It</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Independence</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>Damaged Relationships</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### 4.4 Negative vs. Positive Strong Black Women

As discussed in Chapter 2, the strong Black woman theory has been presented positively and negatively. For my participants this was no different. Participants discussed both sides of the strong Black woman. In addition, at some point in the lives of my participants they had all experienced a strong Black woman, and for the majority of them that first contact was with their mother and grandmother. This discussion served as an entryway to identify what a strong Black woman was to them, and they defined and identified a strong Black woman. My first participant, Sheila, grew up immersed in a big loving family on her mother’s side, with a strong Christian background in Orlando, Florida. She fondly remembers attending basketball and summer camps. Although she knew and was immersed in the love of her maternal side, she could only recount
three times that she had seen her father in person, and has little relationship with her father’s family. When discussing her first experience with a strong black woman, her aunt immediately entered the conversation. She explained:

I: Well yea cause my aunt she got seven children. Her husband was a pastor and they use to have to travel a lot. She used to have to get them seven kids in two cars, and drive wherever her husband was preaching. Like sometimes Jacksonville, Georgia, wherever. And I use to be like, I don’t want that many kids, but girl you is strong. You is strong. She got six boys, one girl, and she had twins at the end.

P: Did she work?

I: Yea, she was like a manger over like well first she was just a manager at McDonalds, and then she became like a general manager of like all the McDonalds in district nine or something like that. So she had seven kids, a husband, and going to work, and she was going to school. I’m like I don’t know how you do it.

Sheila identified her aunt as strong, due to the sheer amount of things she was responsible for. It appears that since her aunt worked so hard, Sheila felt that she worked too hard. For her a strong Black woman, is clearly strong, driven, a leader, and someone who is a go-getter based on her description of her aunt. This is also how Sheila identified herself when describing the connections between being a strong Black woman and obtaining higher education. Sheila stated that, “I’m not going to be one of those people that’s going to lay down, I’m always a go getter, I’m always going find me a way to get something.” In addition, Sheila points out something that is common among strong Black woman: the strength needed to endure. She states that “But I mean from the stuff that I have been through, and you know until now. Because some of the stuff I done been through, I know a lot of people would not be where I am now.” Here Sheila identified a positive feature of being a strong black woman: survival. It is clear that for Sheila a strong Black woman must have strength not commonly found in others to define oneself as a strong Black woman. Sheila provided an opportunity to view her definition of both the negative and positive strong black women.
Monica, an 8th grade teacher, struck me as positive and upbeat. She is single, and works hard to continue to be successful. One of three on her mother’s side, she is the youngest and the only one who has obtained a degree; a fact her mother is extremely proud about. Considering this, I was surprised when she stated that she believed herself to represent the negative side of the strong Black woman coin. She immediately sought to clarify when asked the question “do you see yourself as a strong Black woman?” did I mean “strong as in strong?” She explained that,

P: “You know how they stereotype Black women as being all don’t need nobody don’t need this.”

I: Let’s go there.

P: Now with my little friend, he tries to open the front door for me, I am running to the door to open it myself. I’m so serious. Just recently he had come over, and I was taking the trash out, no I’ll take it out, I got it. Like stuff like that.

Monica further builds on this negative definition by expanding the conversation to her mother, who she terms as strong and bitter. She explains her mother in this way:

My mom. I’m going to call her strong and bitter. She’s a bitter old lady, she really is. She’s strong because by herself she raised all three of us. My granny was there too, but you know that’s always how it is. She never worked two jobs, it was always that one job, but she always made sure that everybody had something. She never brought home just one thing, she would bring home three different things. I just like she was strong because she did so much for all of us, and she really ain’t had much to do for herself.

It is clear that Monica defined being a strong Black woman as being strong, bitter, but also independent. However, Monica continued her discussion when asked who else might represent a strong Black woman. She pointed out in this second example that this woman is “very, very successful,” “she never slacked on anything,” and she was unmarried. Monica made it clear that being a strong Black woman included being successful, and doing everything that you say you are going to do. These two things were important to the strong black woman persona; however, a negative point seemed to be the women’s lack of an intimate relationship.
Monica felt that her example could have been better had she been married, but she also felt that she wouldn’t want to be married either:

**P:** This is what I think about her, I feel like she is one of those independent women; I don’t need a man for nothing. I’m do me, if you come you come, if you go, you go. And that’s the type of personality I got from her. Men don’t like that. So its like she wasn’t married, cause I know she would probably wear the pants in the relationship, or she would need somebody way stronger than her.

**I:** She’s an alpha female?

**P:** Yes, yes, yes, yes.

**I:** Does that make her more of a strong black woman or less?

**P:** Without the husband?

**I:** The fact that you feel like she doesn’t need a husband.

**P:** That’s tough. Both. It makes her tough without a husband, because she is able to juggle all of this without help of a man, but than again, when you with a black man, I just feel like in a good relationship, you can be so much better than what you are by yourself.

Through Monica’s discussion of her examples it became clear that she defined being a strong Black woman as both positive and negative. She provided two stark examples to explore this definition that she crafts together. It is clear for her that a strong Black woman can be strong, bitter, independent, and successful, a hard-worker, but also someone who lacks an intimate relationship.

Brandy, a 45-year-old teacher and doctoral student, made it very clear that being a strong Black woman was something she had watched her mother do upon the exit of her father from their lives. While Brandy and her siblings were quite happy with his absence, it was clear that her mother in, picking up his slack, immediately served as an example of what a strong Black woman is, and what she does. While Brandy used what we may term as negative words to define
her mother, and herself, it is clear that she embraces this imagery as something that is positive.

Brandy says this about her mother:

Again, I have to go back to my mom. To be able to work three jobs, raise three kids, and one because my father had a child, and she brought him into our household, so really it became four kids. My oldest brother. To be able to do that without interaction with kids, because like I said when we left in the morning for school she was sleeping. When we came home in the afternoon she wasn’t there, so we didn’t see her literally until the weekend, and even than she would work Saturdays and Sundays. So for her to do that, and she got her degree is amazing.

For most women, raising four kids, and holding down three jobs is unthinkable. Brandy almost attributes a herculean quality to her mother’s actions. It became clear that she sees a strong Black woman as someone who does what she has to do survive and to take care of her offspring, no matter the sacrifices. Brandy also discussed the strong Black woman qualities she sees within herself:

The things that I go through, and have come out on top, its only because I have to be strong about it. Anything in life or education, and bills, or relationship with kids I have to be strong. I think everything falls on my shoulders. I think that’s part of being a strong Black woman. We should all the weight. We have to figure it out.

It should be mentioned here that Brandy had been married for 25 years, but still feels the responsibility to shoulder all of the weight. It is clear that being a strong Black woman for Brandy is to be someone who is independent, who holds her own, and who shoulders the responsibility of all the weight even when there may be help available to accommodate the heavy load for Brandy. While Brandy does not engage in an explicit discussion of the negative vs. positive strong Black woman, she does identify many of the traits associated with the negatives, while also praising the positive aspects.

Shayla, is a 26-year-old first time mother, who works as a full- time teacher at a charter school in metro Atlanta. She believed in the importance of education, a legacy she felt that was
passed down from her great-grandmother. She also believes that she is a strong Black woman, and that her foremothers have served as examples for her. She explained that:

My grandma always had something prepared for us and even though she only had two kids, my mom and my uncle. She was helping raise her sister’s grandkids, because either her sister who had kids were on drugs, or her even her sister was on drugs, or somebody was sick. She would take care of them, and she was sick. So my grandma showed me how to be resilient, like you push through because you got to push through for family. You pray even though they may do some things you don’t agree with, because you got to help take care of their kids because it’s family, that’s what family does.

In looking at her grandmother as an example, Shayla defines a strong Black woman as someone who makes sacrifices for her families, and pushes through. It is not a question of if she will do it, but clearly that she will do it, with reliance on prayer. She is resilient even in the face of consistent obstacles. Family is also drastically important, and her grandmother is responsible for seeing to the survival of the entire family.

Shayla also defined herself a strong Black woman, but she is not happy about this position because of the negative stereotypes attached to it, however she also proudly embraced it and defines herself as such. She explained that, “I just don’t like the negative confrontation that a strong black woman gets.” On the other hand, she asserts that “if I get angry, or assert myself, or feel I have to be powerful or just confident, I’m still going to be the “b” word, or I’m going to be a strong Black woman. For me a strong Black woman is a nice way to say the “b” word.” Hence, it is also clear for Shayla that the strong Black woman has a negative side and a positive side, but in order to assert herself in her life and career she believes she must be a strong Black woman. She closes by saying “... but if you’re going to say a person who’s a strong Black woman, who is resilient, they persevere, they are go-getters, and that would be me.” Hence, it became clear that for Shayla a strong Black woman can be defined as resilient, go-getter, confident, who perseveres in spite of any obstacles placed in front of them. Shalya, then, identifies the positive
imagery that allows her to be confident and get things done, while also acknowledging the negative imagery associated with the word, and how it does not stop her, but she embraces it to survive.

Kiesha’s story differed from the other five participants. A 37-year-old, mother of 1 biological daughter, and three stepchildren, she has worked extremely hard to become successful. Though she viewed herself as a strong Black woman, within the last year she has begun to change her views. Through our discussion of who and what a strong Black woman is, and what they do I discovered her definition has changed. Kiesha stated that:

Because my association with being a strong black woman is to care for others before yourself. And I feel like that’s a detriment to the health and wellbeing not only of black women, but of our families because you can’t take care of anybody if you’re not taking care of yourself. And because we have all this pressure to be strong black woman, we’re constantly running ourselves into the ground, and putting on the happy face and we show up for the people at work, we show up for our children, our significant others, and we’re dying inside, we’re depressed, there’s mental illness. We don’t seek help because we’re supposed to be strong, and we have this, we carry this burden without asking for the support that we need from the people in our lives because we’re so busy taking care of others. On the one hand, I get the idea that black women have held our families together. We’re obviously the backbones and we’re valuable, but I just feel like the idea of the strong black woman is a double edge sword.

So for Kiesha, being a strong Black woman resulted in Black women who cared so much about others that they forgot about themselves. One part of her definition is the negative commentary that has received much attention recently. Black women are to be strong, even when dying inside and suffering. However, Kiesha also addressed the positive Black women holding their families together and doing what they have to support and continue their legacies. Kiesha furthered this definition of the positive strong Black woman by discussing her mother who is representative of a strong Black woman:

She constantly worked two jobs to make ends meet when they finally went their own ways. It’s no small feat to raise three children, and she never slacked on all our extracurricular activities, dance and sleepovers and school performances and everything,
she did it all. She did it all without complaining which I don’t know, I don’t think some black women necessarily do that anymore. For the most part, we didn’t even know my mother was struggling. We didn’t know that it was hard because she never showed us that it was hard for her to care for us. My mother is the strongest of all black women. Tasha is the strongest black woman we know!!

For Kiesha, her mother served as an important example of a strong Black woman. Her mother worked extremely hard to support her family after her parent’s divorce to ensure the survival of her family. Not only did she work hard to see her family succeed, she did it without her kid’s knowledge, always there for them in their important moments. Thus, the definition is a complicated one of a woman who sacrifices for her family, but who gives so much that it is a detriment to her health and her well-being.

Lastly, Terry, a 31-year old new mother proudly embraced being a new mother, and a strong Black woman. It was clear that she carried the title of being a strong Black woman with pride. Her first interaction with being a strong Black woman was her mother, and she sees herself as becoming more and more like her mother. She further defined a strong Black woman as “how I handle things, how I’m always extra prepared and have a backup plan, how I handle business, conduct myself, even keep my home.” She firmly believed that she is a strong Black woman and wants “to make sure I’m successful in every aspect, make sure I can provide for my family, just not having to be dependent on anyone, and making sure I have the knowledge and the background to instill in my daughter what was instilled in me, from hardworking to making sure I’m well rounded, education, I mean she’s able to change a tire on her car, check the oil in her car, as well as perform in the classroom.” For Terry being a strong Black woman is defined as always being prepared, independent, and an example for her daughter as her mother was for her.

Overall, all these women had similar definitions when they were asked to discuss strong Black women. All the participants as discussed here, spoke to both the negative and positive of
being a strong black woman, but they all embraced it to some extent. They spoke of strong Black women being strong, independent, driven, family-oriented, hard-working, and self-sacrificing. Through their own lives, and experiences they were able to create a working definition of a strong Black woman, which is and was subject to change.

4.5 You Will See Me

For the participants, it was critical that they receive acknowledgement from their father, because of their educational success. For them it seemed to be a driving force for them to achieve their respective success. Hence, father absence created an atmosphere where these women were focused on gaining the attention and approval of their father through their education, but also showing off their success, so you will see me.

When asked about the last times she had spoken with her father, Monica spoke vividly of inviting her father to attend her high school graduation. This was obviously a big step on her part, as she had not spoken to him for the previous nine years. However, he made no effort to attend, and any growth that could have occurred in their relationship was halted. The next time they spoke it would be three years after that, and it would be through Facebook during an argument. Monica is currently seeking her masters and mentioned her intention to continue her education towards the doctoral level. So when asked about her educational attainment and father absence I was quite surprised at some of the answers I received. First Monica tried to deny that there was any type of relationship between father absence and educational attainment. However, as we continued the interview, she began to admit that he was a driving force. “Even though I say that I still want to be successful in education, because nigga you going to see me one day, and I’m going to have all these degrees and I’m just look at you like look at me now.” When asked if she would care how he feels about her success her response was as follows:
I: Do you think it will make a difference to him or do you care is it totally about how you feel in the moment?

P: I do care how he feels, and I don’t know why.

I: More like you want him to be proud of you, or you want him to be like the things she could do without me.

P: Both, but more so proud. I ain’t all that mean, but more so proud. I never had that, let me get some type of I’m proud of you at least once.

Although Monica wants desperately not to care, it is clear that she does care, and a part of her is concerned about showing her degrees off to her father. While her father absence may not be her only driving factor in pursuing her higher education, it is definitely important to her. It is important for her that he see her, and when he sees her she wants him to care: care about her and her accomplishments. More so, Monica is seeking the feeling that only a proud father could provide to his daughter, however, she does feel that she will be okay if she never receives it.

Monica is not the only one who is seeking to be seen by their father through educational avenues. Brandy is currently seeking her doctoral degree in educational leadership curriculum with a minor in curriculum and instruction. She admits that it is quite difficult, and she is ready for the process to be over so that she can resume activities that she enjoys and move out of the classroom. Brandy’s biggest influence to be successful was her mother, who continued to push her to get her education, when she didn’t initially pursue it directly out of college. Brandy informed me that financial aid was not offered to her due to her grades, and her mother was single so she could not afford to pay for Brandy to go to school. Although, Brandy consistently stated that her father was an afterthought in her life she showed interest in being able to prove to her father that she had become more. “Now when I finish my doctorates would I post it? Yea, you know this is what I have become, this is where I have gone, and you weren’t there to help
me get there. You know what I’m saying?” While most people might post such information, Brandy related it directly to the fact of being able to say to her father, you see me, I did it. It is an important piece of satisfaction that Brandy hopes to gain after completing her doctoral degree.

Shayla has always been extremely motivated to be successful in school, pushing herself to be successful. She points out that even if she hung out all night she would still attend class the next day. Her friends also respected the importance of her education. Shayla specifically pointed out that she was interesting in continuing her education once her son was older. In discussing father absence and higher education, Shayla notes that it is important for her father to understand and see her success, in spite of having a son at a young age. Shayla stated that:

But the fact that he wasn’t there, and I think for me, it’s like you were able to do what you wanted to, build your life, if you felt like you achieved goals, achieved your goals, if you went to college, you had the ability to do while somebody else is raising your child, then that played a role. I’m like I’m gone get mine because that’s the only way that I foresee myself as having a glimpse of decent life or a decent standard of living.

Not only is Shayla speaking about the freedom her father enjoyed, while she was being raised by her mother, but she also points out that she will “get hers.” Shayla believes in herself, and that she will rise from her circumstances. Also, he will see her pushing forward to gain her education, and setting an example for her son. This is something that her father was not able to do for her. Gaining higher education for Shayla becomes an important way of showing her father that she did it with a child, even though this is something that her father was unable to do with her.

For Terry, her “you will see me moment” was different. Terry’s father instilled in her a lifelong love of education before his departure from her life. After he left, her love for education did not die but continued to grow. After his departure she continued to work hard and became valedictorian of her class. For Terry, her moment is defined as having her
father see her as continuing to be successful and unbothered by his absence through her continued success. Terry explained that, “I refused to speak to him. I wouldn’t share any of my life experiences with him. I didn’t seek him for any advice. I just kind of saw him in passing because I didn’t want a relationship with him.”

Terry pointed to the low self-esteem that developed after her father’s departure. Terry stated, “I just think it’s very important in terms of girls developing their self-esteem, and this happened to me even though I was in an environment where black is beautiful, and self-pride and self-esteem were like a part of the curriculum, and I still suffered from self-doubt because of my relationship with my father.” However, by being afforded the opportunity to continue her education in an African-centered school, that supported her development as an African American woman, she was able to nurture her self-esteem, and also continue her success, which was important to her father. So he would see her continue to be successful, even if he wasn’t there.

4.6 I Did It Without You

Another theme found in this conversation was the “I did it without you” theme. Participants were really interested in showing their fathers that they could do it without them in their lives. In other words, they could be successful despite the fact that their fathers were absent from their lives. It seemed a source of achievement for them to be able to show their fathers that their absence would not serve as a hindrance to their successful lives and that in spite of everything they had made it.

Sheila will be the first one to share the story of how her father has let her down more times than she can count. The times that she called on him for help, he either never showed up, or showed up in ways that made Sheila feel like a burden. Sheila shared that her father’s absence constantly causes her to second-guess her educational decisions, but had he been present she
believes she would be more confident in the decisions that she makes in her educational life.

Sheila stated:

Yes, and I’m going to say yes because I always feel like I had to ask people do you think that I should know do this, or do you think it would be good for me to do that, and do you think...like I always got to second-guess myself. And I feel like if maybe if I had a father... I think that when you have a father there more like encouraging. That’s just like a mama and a son. And I think if you have a dad you will have more... more self-confidence in yourself you wouldn’t have to second-guess yourself. You’ll be like yes I’m going to do it and I’m going to... you know, but now I feel like I’m always like oh my God is this good enough, am I doing this enough, am I doing that enough. So I feel like yes, that does play a part in what I do.

However, Sheila does feel that the educational decisions that she has made are important and prove something to herself, and her farther. As a culinary student graduate, Sheila always tried her best, and gained some of her best educational experiences here. She even used this degree to create her catering and food delivery business. Thus, when asked how being a strong woman, father absence, and educational attainment all interact together, Sheila responds in the following way:

Well of course. I mean of course what he did made me into the strong person I am today, because I can say that I never wanted to be able to be like oh I need my daddy for this. When I was younger and I needed him he would come and throw it in your face. And I don’t like stuff like that, so I can say that him not being there and me needing him those couple of times made me be like okay get yourself together. Make sure if you not going to go to school, you have a job, or you have two of them, so you don’t ever call him. So yes I can say that he made me want to get a higher education, and so I can provide for myself, and three be a strong woman so I didn’t have to ask him for anything or anybody else. You know so yeah I can say that.

For Sheila it was important to do it without him, so that she would never need to rely on him for anything ever again or anybody else for that matter. The last time she asked him for anything was during her teenage years, and she has promised herself that she will never do it again. For her this meant she might have to work two or three jobs, while going to school, and taking care of her home. She never wants to give him a reason to say that I needed you, or to
have a reason to call him for anything. It is important to her to be independent, and rely on
herself only.

Monica and Brandy also support this theme. While Monica does not mention specific
instances of having called on her dad for anything, for her it is very important that she is able to
show that she did it without him. For Monica education was always important in her household.
She shares a specific memory when she came home with a “B” on an otherwise straight A report
card:

I: Did you get good grades throughout your educational life?

P: Yes, or I would get punished. One time, I had all A’s and one B. My mama bypassed
all those A’s, so how you get this B right here, you need to do better than that. So, we just
going to act like we don’t see these. She didn’t say nothing about them A’s, but she went
in about that B.

It was an expectation for Monica to do well in all her classes, and push to be successful.
However, it was clear during our interview that showing what she could do without her father
was extremely important. Monica shared this:

I feel like without him, I want to prove that I can do whatever I say that I can do. And if
he ever happens to see me or know about me, he going to be like I wish I was in her life,
so I really I don’t want to say I’m doing this to like get back at him, but it would be one
of the reasons. Like if he ever see me, oh she didn’t need me, look at her with her
doctorates degree. Look at her doing this, look at her doing that. And so yeah, maybe its
like a boost, like an encouragement to do better.

Monica makes it clear here that one of the reasons she is so driven to be successful is to get back
at her father for his absence. She also wants him to know that she didn’t need him, and she
achieved her success without him. She also shares that this serves as encouragement to continue
to work towards her educational goals.

Brandy similarly seeks the opportunity to show that she did it without him. Brandy’s
educational experience was quite different. With a mother working three jobs and an absent
father, Brandy and her siblings pretty much had free reign to do what they wanted to do when they wanted to do it.

It didn’t, even as we got older, cause my mom wasn’t there either, so I think what it was, was we had a lot of freedom. My mom worked from 3 in the afternoon, till 12/1 at night. And then when we were at school, she was working doing home aid, and things like that. So we rarely got to see both of them, so we grew up raising ourselves. So we were very independent from a very young age. So we were happy, we didn’t have to come home, and we can do our homework when we want to do, we can eat in the bed if we want to, wasn’t where it was strict rules, so we were happy, I was happy.

Brandy also classified herself as mostly a C student, due to her lack of home structure. There was no one there to ensure that Brandy and her siblings did her homework. However, as an adult and with the support of her mother, Brandy has managed to earn three degrees, and is working on her doctoral degree. When discussing her father and educational attainment, Brandy emphatically denies that her father has had anything to do with her educational attainment. Towards the end of the interview, however, she reveals how important it is for him to see her, and for her to be able to say I did it without you. Brandy stated:

I: So kind of like I did this without you?

P: I did this without you type of thing, yea. You know, because I feel that I deserve at least that kind of accolade that kind of joy of saying look look I’ve done it and you weren’t there.

I: How do you think he will respond?

P: I think that personally with my sister, cause he talks to my sister, and she’s the only one that speaks to him that he’ll probably say something, but other than that he won’t call me he won’t. I mean I had a kidney transplant, and he didn’t even call me, so what he’s going to call me for a degree. I don’t think it’s going to make a difference for him.

I: But for you it makes a difference?

P: For me it would make a difference.

I: Because you feel like I made it to the top?

P: Right.
As we closed out the interview, Brandy made it clear that it was important for her father to see that she had done it without him, that she had been successful and did not require anything from him. She was also seeking the joy she thought she might feel from being able to say she did it without him. It would make a difference to her for him to see her, and for her to have that joy.

Shayla, as a new single mother, discussed how difficult it would be to continue her education with a young son. However, she made it clear that she would continue no matter the obstacles that she faced.

“I’ve always wanted to be a doctor. It’s coming. I don’t know when. But even if it wasn’t a medical doctor, I just want those credentials. I think it validates me as a woman; it validates me as a black woman. I just want to always be educated. I didn’t think I was going to be a teacher. I battle with that because I’ve always tried to teach, but I think education is just the, it’s like one of those, moments in your life that you just like marriage or weddings, that you kind of feel accomplished when you get that education. It’s part of my life cycle to get that education with the doctorate. That’s what I hope to do.

Shayla appeared to believe that without her doctorate she would be less of a Black woman, in other words, her validation depends on her receiving her doctorates. She firmly owned the fact that “it’s coming” even though she doesn’t know when. Although her goals seemed big to her, she expressed that it was an expectation that she attended college from a young age. Therefore, it was no surprise that Shayla had this aspiration, but also used her education and educational pursuits as an opportunity to say that she accomplished it without her father.

I think because of my father’s absence, I wanted to get more exposure for my kid maybe my mom wasn’t able to do a lot of things because she was a single parent. And I never really wanted to be a single parent, but I’m doing that cycle again. Which that’s something that I have to figure out, but with my education, it’s still going to open the doors for Jay. I’m still going to push. If anything, it’s given me an extra push to just be great. Greatness for me was going to be inevitable. I can’t, even though I like being in Alabama, I’m not going to just limit my experience, my exposure to just Alabama because there’s nothing really going on. But the fact that he wasn’t there, and I think for me, it’s like you were able to do what you wanted to, build your life, if you felt like you achieved goals, achieved your goals, if you went to college, you had
the ability to do while somebody else is raising your child, then that played a role. I’m like I’m
gone get mine because that’s the only way that I foresee myself as having a glimpse of decent
life or a decent standard of living.

Shyala sees her education as an opportunity to point out how she will do it all without her father.
She has received her education, and will open doors for her son that her father was never there to
open for her. Not only has Shayla acknowledged that she did it with her father, but she also
acknowledges that his absence is going to push her to be better.

4.7 Education Was Always Important

For the majority of the participants, education was something that was always important
and permeated their lives from a young age. Hence, for them they felt that their father did not
have a direct effect on their seeking higher education, or was secondary to their original
understanding of education. Their family and their mothers were instrumental to their seeking
higher education, and it was embedded in them to seek higher education.

Brandy credits her success in education to her mother, who consistently pushed her to go
back to college when she was not interested in it and could not afford it. Due to her C-level
performance as a student, Brandy readily admitted that she was not offered the grants that could
have helped her afford college after high school. Brandy stated, “That’s why I wasn’t approached
with a lot of the Pell Grants, and a lot of scholarships, and things like that. I wasn’t like an A
student, I didn’t value education at that time, because I was my own.” However, her mother
continued to push her towards college, towards receiving her higher education. Brandy said of
her mother:

P: But my mom kept saying one class at a time, you can still do it, you can still do it. She’s the
one that kind of really instilled me going to school. Even though I started, and stopped, started
and stopped, for years, she always kept saying when are you going to finish school, are you still
going to school, why don’t you just take one class, so she’s the one that kind of pushed me
towards it.
I: So you believe education is important because of your mom’s influence.

P: Definitely.

Hence, Brandy believed that her mother firmly influenced and encouraged her towards her educational success. Although education was not important at first, it became so when she finally decided to get serious about college. It became incredibly important so much that, “Now going through college I got all A’s. That was the importance for me was getting this done, getting it done quickly, getting it done at a higher level. So, I mean all through bachelors, masters, whatever I got, it was all A’s.” Hence Brandy’s father absence does not directly push her to go seek her education, although he motivates her in other ways.

Shayla believed that anybody has the ability to learn whatever he or she are seeking to learn if they are provided with the correct tools. Her great-grandma served as an example of what can happen even if you don’t have any tools. Her grandma also served as an example although she did not complete her high school diploma. Shayla pointed out that her grandma taught her the preamble when she was younger. Her grandma also knew her multiplication tables, basic history, and continues to exercise her mind daily with Sudoku puzzles, crosswords puzzles, and by watching Jeopardy. These two women laid the foundation for a love of learning for Shayla.

An all A student, Shayla worked hard and took Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate classes. She was heavily involved on campus, although she started to slack off in her 12th grade year because she was interested in partying. However, Shayla attended Spellman College, the only one of all of her cousins to attend college. She is interested in returning to school for a master and doctoral degree in the near future. When asked if there is a relationship between father absence and educational attainment, Shayla believed that her family was influential in her understanding of the importance of education. She pointed out that she might
have gone further away from home for college if she had the security of two parents. According to Shayla:

No, I think my dad’s side and my mom’s side, they have a lot of smart people in their family, and they were the examples that I wanted to aspire to be like. I felt when I was younger; I knew I was going go to college. I think my mom always was that factor, like you know you’re going to go to college, because that’s what I want you to do. This is what you need to do. Ironically, even though I grew up very similar to my cousins, I’m the only one who even went to college, no I’m the only one that graduated because I think some of them went, but they didn’t graduate. I think having my mom, and then she was the only one in my family who had gotten a college degree. She did 2½ years at University of Alabama. So she’s like it’s possible to do. I really don’t even know his education.

For Shayla, it was not a question of if she was going to college, but it was understood that she would be going upon completion of high school. Education and being intelligent was something that ran through her family, and that gave her another example to look up to. Shayla also mention’s her mother’s expectation that she would be headed to college. Hence, Shayla was immersed in educational expectations from a very young age. She credits her family, and those around her for creating a natural curiosity that ensured education was always important to her.

Kiesha was a straight A student who attended an African-Centered school, and graduated as the valedictorian of her class. Her best educational experiences occurred when she traveled with her school to West Africa. Also, her being a student at University of Michigan where she was able to be in a classroom with authors that she had read before was an important moment for her educational journey. For her education was important from a young age due to an unlikely source: her father.

My father. Before he went away, I remember crying at night about not wanting to go to school the next day, and my father would always tell me, and I was like 7, 8, like you have to go to school, you have to get your education. You have to get your education because you have to educate other children when you grow up. He was always stressing that education was extremely important. I was actually in a public school originally, and my father was the one who led my mom and my family to this African Centered School. His emphasis on education not just from an academic perspective, but also from a holistic
perspective, is what landed me in the school where I was, and their education was, it was highly emphasized. The expectation was that you were going to go to college. It was always just an automatic expectation.

Kiesha’s love of education sprung from her father’s insistence that she become highly educated. He made sure that she understood education was important, and that she would be successful. After his leaving the seed he had embedded in her did not die, but continued. On the contrary, Kiesha’s love for education continued, and for her it “became something that was intrinsically motivating.” Kiesha’s father touched her educational life by inspiring her to keep going, and stressing that education was and would always be important.

Terry graduated 11 out of 212 graduates in her districts with a 3.89 G.P.A. Her belief is that education is vital to life, and this belief developed from the women in her life. Her mother, grandmother, aunts, and her godfather were all educated and instilled in her “the difference between a well-educated person and someone who wasn’t. They always made sure okay, this is what you’re striving to be, this is not what you’re striving to be.” Education was extremely important to those around Terry, and they made sure that she completely understood that she was expected to excel. Terry totally gives all the credit to her mother and her grandmother for her success in education, stating that, “they always pushed me to be better than them. What you see me do, I want you be better than this. I want you to do five times greater than what I’m doing.” Due to Terry’s familial setting, she was able to develop a deep love of education, and it is something that is extremely important to her.

4.8 Stronger for It

Most of the participants revealed that they felt they were stronger woman in spite of their father’s absence. They felt as if their father’s absence had pushed them to develop a strong exterior and strength that they might not have had otherwise.
Shayla as a single-mother works hard to provide for herself and her son. It is not always an easy feat, but she does what she has to do to take care of herself and her son. Shayla stressed in her interview how important it was for her to take care of her son, and be there for him. She continuously mentioned not wanting to repeat the cycle of being a single-mother even though she is currently repeating the cycle. While she may not appreciate the negative history attached to being a negative strong Black woman, she embraces the fact that she is “resilient, perseverant, independent, and a go-getter.” Shayla realized the part that her father also played in making her a stronger version of herself, a more assertive version that refuses to be walked over. Shayla stated:

Like, if I had, I have friends who have had their dad and they have been spoiled, and I feel like they don’t have to assert themselves, but then I feel sometimes, and not even to knock their personalities, they are more willing to put up with certain things than a person who hadn’t had that example, had to kind of figure out on their own. Maybe things would have been different. I wouldn’t have to be so assertive if I feel like, you know, I’ll call my daddy if you do something to me. I don’t know.

Shayla’s entire energy centered on her ability to assert herself, and present a strong well put together woman who is about her business. In Shayla’s mind this assertiveness, which she mentioned several times during her interview, is representative of her performance as a strong Black woman, who had to grow up without her father’s presence.

Sheila believed that she would be a strong Black woman, even if her dad had been around, but interestingly she credits him with creating certain characteristics she attributes to being a strong Black woman. Sheila states that, “I think him not being there motivated me more to be a good person or to be strong-willed, and to follow my dreams. I think that he motivated me to do that, because I wanted to feel like I ain’t never need him, you know “. For her, his absence created a stronger will to be independent, to stand on her own, and follow her dreams.
Though she may have disliked being without her father, she credited him with helping to create what she is today.

Kiesha realized her strength, and the strength of her mother when her father left. While she no longer believed in being a strong Black woman now, she was also able to recognize how her father’s absence helped to form her and her mother into strong Black women. According to Kiesha, when her father left her mother had to become a strong Black woman. Kiesha had never experienced her mother as a strong black woman. In fact, Kiesha described her family in these terms:

My mother had to be that strong black woman in his absence. When he was there, and he was being Dr. Huxtable, my mother didn’t necessarily have that image to me, so that the idea even as I described it to you before, was that she did all of this because she didn’t have my father as a partner anymore. But when they were working as partners, we just had a strong black family.

Hence, with a missing partner, Kiesha’s mother was forced to adapt a different role for the survival of herself and her family. While Kiesha has put down the strong Black woman mantle for now, she ended her interview by saying, “…so part of me is like always be prepared. We all in love, and it’s beautiful now, but a strong Black woman has to have a plan B.” Kiesha also felt that, “the absence of my father, or the lack of support, whether it be from a significant other, a husband, your siblings, your family, it just kind of requires that you be a strong black woman.” Thus, the absence that Kiesha experienced has made her stronger, and though she may not claim to be a strong Black woman anymore, she does believe in always being prepared for any situation that may come up, which may force her back into her previous role.

Terry fully recognized herself and the women in her life as strong Black women. She discussed how deep her mother’s influence was on her, and how she continues traditions that she learned in her mother’s household. These traditions include playing Anita Baker and Stephanie
Mills while cleaning her household. She realized that her mom was a strong Black woman, when she graduated high school, because she saw the deep sigh of relief that her mother experienced on that day. Her mother had done what for many may seem impossible, and raised her daughter on a salary as cashier at a convenience store. Terry never knew they were poor, and never experienced what it was like to go without. Therefore, it was no surprise when she answered in the following way”: I definitely do. I’m thinking it made me stronger, it made my mom stronger because she knew what she had to do for her child.” Terry feels that as a result of her experience with father absence, she experienced strength in her mother, but it also created a deep strength within her to survive as her mother had done.

Terry also felt that her father’s absence created a perfect blend for her to become the women that she is today. Terry states, “I think that, I hate to say it like this, it kind of was a perfect blend, because it made me stronger, it made me wiser, and it made me more determined.” Terry felt that she was stronger in spite of having not known her father, which helped to create her as a strong Black woman.

4.9 Independence

One of the hallmark characteristics of being a strong Black woman is to be independent, and my participants’ experiences were no different. Every single participant spoke on the importance of being independent, and being able to take care of yourself.

Sheila set herself a part as one of the most independent participants in the study. Her independence was built into the fabric of who she is, and who she is trying to be. While she felt that she is a strong Black woman, she did feel that she could grow from growth opportunities that would help her become better, and that we all have space for improvement. However, her growth did not stop her from being independent. She mentions not needing her father multiple times
throughout the interview, and consistently working hard so that she never has to call on anybody for anything. For Sheila her father’s absence has determined the way she sees the world, and the way that she sees it is that she must be independent and depend only on herself. She positioned herself in the following way: “... Be a strong Black woman, so I didn’t have to ask him for anything or anybody else.” She also stated the following about independence: “...so I can say that him not being there and me needing him those couple of times made me be like okay get yourself together. Make sure if you not going to go to school, you have a job, or you have two of them, so you don’t ever call him.”

Brandy understood the importance of being independent, and being able to take care of yourself. Knowing that you could do it, and actually pushing yourself to get it done also defined Brandy’ view of a positive strong Black woman. Brandy never uses the word independence, but when describing her mother, she clearly points to a woman that has to be independent, because she had no other choice. This example set for Bandy a clear way of being a strong Black woman in the world. Hence, while Brandy never uses the word independent, she does share that, she is the dominant one in the relationship. Brady informed me that:

Definitely, because I feel that there are things that happen, and I have to figure out okay well how are we going to get out of this. And although I know he’s probably processing it I process it quicker, and I end up coming up with a solution and getting it done way faster than he does. And so I think that I’m always the dominant one. I’m the dominant in the relationship because I know that I’m doing things to make our relationship and situation better.

Brandy, who has been married for 25 years, never indicates that there is togetherness in their marriage, but more like she is in charge of their relationship. She is also very clear that she will not deal with any nonsense from her husband, because she refuses to endure any of the things that her mother endured in her relationship with Brandy’s father: “I don’t tolerate nonsense quite well, and I let my husband know from day one my father left. These are my thoughts as far as
whatever you have in mind, if you want to go than go, but I’m not going to tolerate any of the stuff that she did.” Brandy is independent in her own way, and it seems quite important to her that she is the leader, and not the follower.

Kiesha viewed the independence it took her to mother to succeed without her dad, and developed her own ideas of how she would be independent and rely only on herself. For her to be independent Kiesha realized the need to rely heavily on her education to create this space for herself. Kiesh stated that “I got to be able to get my own job, and take of myself because I can’t rely on a relationship, like I want a family, but I can’t necessarily count on having that partnership and so I have to push forward and do what I have to do.” Her fear of never knowing whom she could lean on or where she could turn due to her father’s absence, created a woman who is focused on ensuring her success for her and any offspring she might have.

Terry’s mother and grandmother set a good example of what it was to be an independent Black woman. Her grandmother had six kids, and her mother put her through college on her cashier’s salary. Therefore, it is no surprise that Terry feels that a strong Black woman should embrace her independence, and do what she needed to do to be successful. Terry pointed out that:

I think it has worked in my best interest because it has made me more driven than ever because I want to make sure I’m successful in every aspect. I want to make sure I can provide for my family, just not having to be dependent on anyone. And making sure I have the knowledge and the background to instill in my daughter what was instilled in me, from hardworking to making sure I’m well rounded and educated. I mean she’s able to change a tire on her car, check the oil in her car, as well as perform in the classroom.

Terry’s independence is important to her success as a strong Black woman, and a woman who has experienced father absence. She does not want to depend on anyone if she can avoid it, and wants to ensure that she can provide for her daughter and herself. Independence is not only
important for her, but it seems important to establish the same type of independent spirit in her young daughter.

4.10 Damaged Relationships

Each participant mentioned relationships, and many discussed the relationships they had damaged. They also discussed the struggles they had in their current relationships, and the failure of their fathers to properly prepare them for relationships and interactions with men.

Monica, a newly single woman, realized that her father’s absence had affected the men that she had chosen to have relationships with. She stated that “If you don’t have a dad in your life, you are going to be looking to this man and that man.” It has also affected her confidence when she is a relationship, and she is unsure of what to do most times. For example, Monica shared the following:

Sometime I question am I good enough for this guy or that guy or am I being too much to this guy am I being too good to them. Are they going to leave are they going to stay. Am I doing too much am I liking them more than they like me? Cause I don’t know... I’m not use to I guess the reciprocated feeling from my father to know like if I’m doing too much too less.

Monica also realized that now as a newly single woman, her need to be a strong Black woman and in control shades any relationship that she tries to start. Any help that her friend, as she calls him, offers her she instantly refuses. However, she feels that this makes her the stereotypical strong Black woman, which she accredited to her father’s absence. Monica stated this about her father, and being a negative strong Black woman:

And I feel like having a whole family with a mom and a dad that’s going to make you whole. And you’re going to get mom’s love and dad’s love, and those are two different types of love. And when one misses out on one type and they grow up it’s like a hole in your heart, a hole in your body that you missing out on forever, and it can never be filled. I feel like without the dad, you get the negative strong black woman, and with the dad you get the positive.
Hence, Monica attributes her negative strong Black woman performance to her father’s absence, which she see’s played out in her relationships, as she tries to find her footing, and release the stereotypical strong Black woman she has known herself to be.

Shalya has learned from her experiences with her son’s father different ways in which her father’s absence and being a strong black woman has hindered their ability to have a successful relationship. Although, she is attempting to change her approach, she still realized that her relationship with her father’s child has been damaging because of some of her behaviors. She clearly identified that because she lacked male attention it was important for her to be noticed. When she started receiving attention it led to her first pregnancy and abortion, which she had little choice about. Although they continued their relationship, it eventually failed and Shayla realized some of the reasons why. She recognized the ways in which her behaviors during their relationship led to its end:

So I think just having somebody to guide you, tell you right from wrong, tell you what to avoid, and just show you how a woman’s supposed to be treated. I felt like even now in our relationship, I’ve done some things that I shouldn’t have done, like emasculated him. I’m the type I always thought women handle a man like that. That’s how you going to keep them, make sure they in check. It’s like he had a father in his life, so it’s just like that’s not how you as a woman supposed to talk to a man, but I never knew. There are a lot of little mistakes I made. I could go into a thousand, but we don’t have time.

Shayla realized that her behaviors effectively damaged her relationship with her son’s father, who refused to live in such a way. However, I think Shayla realized the ways in which she negatively impacted her relationship, and is working towards becoming a better version of herself.

Sheila is newly engaged to her boyfriend of ten years. She has not had much experience in varying relationships, but the experience that she had gained within her current relationship
came through during the interview. She spoke of not knowing how to talk to men, and not being able to shut up when speaking to her significant other. She offered the following:

But I do think that it affects like your love life, you know like you and your significant other cause like I say you don’t know when...where your place is. Like not saying, because you know people be like oh my god you know its 2017. But still you know it’s a man in the house, and you feel like you don’t how talk to them, and I think it all boils down to not having a father. Just you know being with your mom, and then you got a stepdad and yea but it’s like you don’t really respect them, cause that’s not your daddy. So you really have that relationship. So I think that it does and it does not. Because I mean it ain’t stopping me from having no family or nothing like that, but it does play a part in me not knowing when to shut up, and all that, because I will talk and cuss and everything.

She also spoke on the guidance that a father absent daughter missed when entering the dating world for the first time. Sheila pointed out that, “I think it’s important, because if you don’t have your dad in your life then when you go out in the dating world, what you suppose to know what you prefer? Or how you suppose to respect a man, if you never had no father figure?” Although Sheila has managed to maintain a long relationship, she understands that not having a father has impacted the way in which she handles her relationships, and the way that she reacts.

Brandy has been married for 25 years, so has managed to avoid many of the pitfalls that accompany the relationships of father absent women. However, she did discuss how an absent father could affect the relationship decisions of their daughters. When asked of the importance of father’s in the lives of their daughters, Brandy stated that, “I think it makes a difference in why they pick as husbands, and boyfriends, and things in the long run.” So according to Brandy fathers are important to the decisions that women make when they pick their significant others, as it can be a deciding factor in their futures.

Kiesha’s father leaving made her come to a deep realization about herself as women, “the are odds are stacked against us as women.” For her the world she experienced at home, and the
world she experienced at school were two different lives that conflicted for the young child.

Kiesha stated that:

Just because of the whole patriarchal idea that women are supposed to play a certain role and you know, that men feel justified in their abusiveness just because they’re men and because it’s excused and because of the way our society is set up. It was a major disconnect, like conflict within me, because I’m learning it’s wonderful to be a woman and you’re a goddess, and you’re sacred, and I just didn’t feel like the world reflected that.

Kiesha also mentioned that her father absence created self-doubt, even when she was learning self-pride and was increasing her self-esteem at school. This was not all that was happening for Kiesha, as she discusses her relationship with her father, “...my relationship with my father was so spoiled, it definitely played into my fears about being in relationships with men, my paranoia about their intentions, my willingness to trust men, my nervousness about rather or men could be faithful, and wanting to be in a committed relationship.” Kiesha realized that the self-doubt, the anger, the disappointment, and betrayal all created intimate relationships that were having trouble thriving. Thus, Kiesha begin counseling, to heal her past hurts, and established a much-needed line of communication with her father to heal her wounds.

Terry shared that an important part of her healing, has come from accepting and giving forgiveness. During this interview, Terry shared that she married at the early age of 19, but she was angry. She was angry at her father, angry at her marriage, and angry at her divorce. Terry stated:

I came to that forgiveness because I married early. I married at age 19, and I had to learn how I was angry at everything that went on in my marriage and my divorce, and I went to my pastor at the time. And he told me, gave me bible verses and stuff to read, but he also told me that the things that happened to me were because I allowed it to happen, that I was still at fault. So I had to learn how to forgive those people that had hurt me. So it was my fault, which was ironic because I wasn’t even talking about him. I was just talking about my ex-husband. So once I learned how to forgive, I was able to forgive him, my ex-husband, and whatever else that hurt me.
So an anger she did not even know she had at her father surfaced during her marriage and her divorce. While Terry did not provide explicit details of the things that happened in her marriage, it was clear that her father absence’s played a role in the failing of her first marriage. However, she was able to heal herself by forgiving him before his death, and now is happily engaged. She took control of her life to heal herself, but her father’s absence, and her performance as a woman led to her marriage ultimately being damaged.

4.11 Summary

In this chapter I have discussed the major themes that were identified from the data. All themes found were linked to the specific research questions that guided this study. Six women were interviewed about their thoughts on father absence, the strong Black woman theory, and higher education. The answers were as varied as the participants. There were seven themes found from the data. In the next section, I discussed the implications, recommendations, and limitations of this study, and the findings.
5 Conclusion, Implications, and Recommendations

5.1 Overview

The purpose of this study was to examine how father absence affected the educational attainment of African American women. The research questions guiding this study were as follows:

1. What is the participants’ understanding of a strong black woman?
2. How does father absence affect the educational attainment of African American women?
3. How does father absence lead African American women to perform as a strong black woman?

Six African American women between the ages of 26 and 45 were interviewed for this study. These interviews served as the sole source of data for the study. A qualitative research design was used to understand how father absence impacts educational attainment and strong Black woman performance, and the data was analyzed using the causation method. The interviews were conducted face-to-face and were semi-structured. Participants were recruited using the snowballing method, and participants who were known to me and who fit the criteria were also recruited. This chapter discussed the general conclusion of the study, the implications for theory and practice in the field of African American studies, the limitations of the study, and recommendations for future research.

5.2 Conclusions and Discussions

Based on the analysis and the themes found in the data, three general conclusions were drawn from the data. The conclusions were as follows:
1. African American women need fathers who are present to help establish and maintain healthy intimate relationships.

2. African American women feel the need to perform as strong Black women for multiple reasons.

3. African American women believe in getting higher education, for survival and specifically for lessons learned from father absence.

*African American women need fathers who are present to help establish and maintain healthy intimate relationships.*

Many people believe, such as Monica did, that the relationship between fathers and daughters are extremely special. All my participants believed in the importance of fathers in the lives of their daughters and the role they play in having successful intimate relationships. Participants mentioned how fathers served as protectors, provided guidance for their young daughters, and examples of what they should expect from men and how they should be treated. This is in line with Peterson (2006), who found that “...romantic relationship patterns were influenced by attachment to their fathers prior to and during adolescence” (p.78). In addition, every single participant was able to discuss to some degree how their father’s absence impacted their intimate relationships. As discussed above, every participant had a belief of how fathers influence their daughter’s choice of significant other. The participant responses supported the findings in the literature. East, Jackson, and O’Brien, (2007), Scheffler and Naus (1999), and Barras, (2000), all discussed how father absence has affected the intimate relationships of their participants.

Many of the participants were able to make these connections on their own, realizing that their behaviors inside of their relationship were harmful, and not helping them. In addition, the
father absent women did things to heal themselves, such as therapy, forgiveness, religion and more openness to reaching out and having discussions with their fathers. Although they still identified as strong Black women, excluding one participant, it became clear that some means of healing was necessary for the participants to heal, and move on with successful romantic relationships. Although one participant was still finding her way, Barras (2000) addressed the importance of healing, moving on, and finding peace. In her chapter entitled “The Healing Balm.” Barras (2000) enumerated a list of steps that a fatherless daughter should take to heal herself. The fifteenth step was entitled “Forgive and forget.” Barras (2000) stated that, “these are the greatest gifts the fatherless daughter can give to herself. If there is no forgiving of her parents, especially her father, then there can be no moving on to her future” (p. 245).

African American women feel the need to perform as strong Black woman for multiple reasons.

Much of the literature suggested that Black women perform as strong Black women for multiple reasons including financial, psychological, and self/ethnic pride. Self-efficacy was also a reason to perform as a strong Black woman to deal with societies negative perceptions of them. They also experienced benefits and liabilities for being strong black women. My participants were no different, in that they all had multiple reasons for performing as strong Black woman whether negative or positive.

Five of my six participants fully believed in themselves as strong Black woman, rather negative or positive. Participants discussed the fact that they felt that they had no choice but to be strong Black woman in today’s world to survive. They also were focused on surviving relationships, surviving the world, and also showing up in the world as strong and component. For example, Shayla discussed the following:
The positive side. Even the negative side. I’m not going to lie, because I can’t because I think behind some stereotype, there’s truth. I don’t like the fact that I have to be a “b,” but if you’re not going to listen to me and respect my opinion, that may be true or may not be true, and that’s all I ask is respect. Then oh that side will come out of me and you’re not going to put me on the same platform as somebody in a different demographic and I have the same credentials and the same certification and whatever and qualifications, then yea, I’m going to be assertive. And if I have to assert myself to be seen, even if I don’t get the position, I’d rather you know who I am and where I came from than compromise my life or my struggle. I won’t even say struggle, just because you see me as that stereotype that I have to sometimes be.

Hence, similar to the literature, performing as a strong Black woman offers financial gain for Shayla, as well as a strong self-efficacy to deal with the negative perception society has about her. Other participants spoke to psychological reasons for being Black women. Shayla mentioned that it helped her to deal with her father’s absence, while Brandy understood that being a strong Black women helped her deal with the obstacles she has faced in her life. Brandy said the following about her life and being a strong Black woman:

Definitely, I think I am. The things that I go through and have come out on top, its only because I have to be strong about it. Anything in life, or education, and bills, or relationship with kids I have to be strong, I think everything falls on my shoulders. I think that’s part of being a strong black woman. We shoulder all the weight. We have to figure it out.

Woods-Giscombé (2010) found that the benefits of being a strong Black woman included survival of self and family, and that contributing characteristics included a “manifestation of strength,” (p.672) and “determination to succeed, despite limited resources” (p.672). As mentioned above, one of the reasons that my participants felt the need to constantly perform as strong Black women were survival and independence. Abrams et al. (2014) found that independence, absent male figures, and self-ethnic pride were also important characteristics and reasons for being strong Black women. Thus, my findings are in line with previous research.
African American women believe in getting higher education, for survival, and specifically for lessons learned from father absence.

All the participants I interviewed had a bachelor’s degree, and were working on furthering their education, excluding one. When discussing their higher education, the participants of this study stressed that it helped in making them feel successful, and like they could survive and take care of themselves and their families. No participant wanted to feel dependent upon another person, specifically a man to take care of them. This is a lesson that many of them feel they learned from their father. Being educated for them served as a way to provide for their families and survive. Historically, for many African American women this seems to be true. According to McDaniel, DiPrete, Buchmann, and Shwed (2011), “the small but prolonged female advantage in college completion for blacks prior to 1980 may also be related to the high labor force participation rates of black educated women” (p. 894). They concluded that one of the reasons for this was that “historically, black women worked more because black families had lower incomes, owing in part to black men’s higher unemployment rates and lower education levels than white men” (p. 895). Similar to the literature, my participants believed that when it came to getting a higher education it was about surviving and never having to depend on anyone. It was also important to achieve higher education because of their absent fathers. Gillette and Gudmunson (2013) found the opposite for their participants, who had lower educational attainment and expectations due to father absence. This differed from my findings, where participants identified father absence as a motivating reason to earn their degrees.

5.3 Limitations of the Study

As with any study there are limitations that existed with this one. One of the limitations in this study was the sample size. This study only contained six participants, so it was impossible
to speak to the diverse experiences of African American women by only interviewing six African American women. However, it does provide insight into the thoughts and feelings of African American women.

In addition, the criteria of the study, served as another limitation. The age limits and requirement that all participants have at least a bachelor degree limited the scope of my participant and the experiences that they may be able to provide. There are many African American women who do not have bachelor’s degrees, but they have trades that make them quite successful and have required schooling as well. Age served as a limitation as well. The cut off age for this study was 45, but there are many women pass this age who might meet the other criteria. Their experiences may have offered a more diverse look on the topics, especially since that might include a shift in the time period. It might present an opportunity to observe how the time period affected the narrative.

Lastly another limitation was the topic of father absence. For many women this may represent a painful time, and experience in their lives that they may be hesitant to discuss. Hence, they may answer in a way that allows them to mask their true feelings, or they may not even know what their true feelings are because they have yet to deal with them. They may also attempt to appear like they are over it, and it no longer affects them even if those are not their true feelings.

5.4 Implications for Theory and African American Studies

Other studies on African American women, father absence and educational attainment, have focused on one or the other, but never in conjunction with each other. Also, few studies have employed the strong Black woman theoretical framework when studying father absence. This study, however, was different from previous studies in three major ways. One, this study
focused on examining how father absence impacted the educational attainment and strong Black woman performance of African American women. This study also used the strong Black woman theory, which is usually studied independently to explain the characteristics of African American women. Lastly, this study differs from previous findings in that it provides an opportunity for adult African American women to discuss their feelings and experiences as father absent women. Although the sample size for this study does not allow for data that is generalizable, there are theoretical implications and implications for the field of African American studies.

5.4.1 Theoretical Implications

This study utilized the strong Black woman theory to understand the behaviors of African American woman, who experienced father absence and had earned higher education. It was important to explore the notion of strength, survival, independence, endurance, but also the benefits, such as the financial and psychological rewards a woman might receive. This study revealed all of the above to be true. All the participants claimed one of the above as a reason for adapting the strong Black woman persona, along with the learning that were instilled in them by their mothers, grandmas, great-grandmas, and aunts. Women in the family of the participants played an important part in passing on their wisdom of survival and strength, which fits with the literature on strong Black woman. Shayla my fourth participant stated, “She’s my first experience with that, and I have to say family in general, cause all my aunts and females in my family went through some type of experiences with the males and they were single and things like that, so for them to kind of keep up and do what they did was honor.” All participants expressed similar sentiments about the women in their lives who heavily influenced their raising.
While all participants expressed their sentiments of being a strong Black woman, they also discussed the struggle of carrying the load. As much of the literature suggested, there are costs as well as benefits associated with being a strong Black woman. While it is a protective shield that they are able to present to the world, strong Black women are simultaneously praised and put down at the same time. Being strong to survive is what Black women feel they must do, and what they are praised for, but they also seem to suffer heavily for it also. On the one hand, songs like “Independent Woman” by Destiny’s Child and “Independent” by Webbie support a women doing it on her own and supporting herself. However, in the findings of Wood-Giscombe (2010), she found that African American women who considered themselves strong Black woman could experience strain in their romantic relationships. The strain on these romantic relationships presented itself due to the independence the women exhibited.

Wood-Giscombe (2010) also found that Black women could experience health behaviors related to stress, such as over-eating, smoking, inadequate sleep, and lack of self-care. Kiesha acknowledged this fact when she provided this insight:

Because my association with being a strong black woman is to care for others before yourself. And I feel like that’s a detriment to the health and wellbeing not only of black women, but of our families because you can’t take care of anybody if you’re not taking care of yourself. And because we have all this pressure to be strong black woman, we’re constantly running ourselves into the ground, and putting on the happy face and we show up for the people at work, we show up for our children, our significant others, and we’re dying inside, we’re depressed, there’s mental illness. We don’t seek help because we’re supposed to be strong, and we have this, we carry this burden without asking for the support that we need from the people in our lives because we’re so busy taking care of others. On the one hand, I get the idea that black women have held our families together. We’re obviously the backbones and we’re valuable, but I just feel like the idea of the strong black woman is a double edge sword.

This is an example of how African American women suffer, even in the midst of being strong, although Kiesha turned away from this lifestyle due to the strain. However, it was very clear that
if needed she could immediately adopt this persona to fit her lifestyle. If Kiesha expressed such strain, and previous studies supported this liability of being a strong Black woman, it is clear why many of my participants expressed strain but still embodied the persona of the strong Black woman.

Hence, this study suggested that Black women are for the most part going to continue to embody this persona as a survival mechanism, for themselves and their family. Thus, the strong Black woman theory and research should be included in college and community classes to help African American women deepen their understanding of its benefits and liabilities, especially as it may intersect with father absence. These classes should also affirm the women’s right to be strong because of the society they face, but also serve as places where these women learn the importance of self-care, help, healing, and vulnerability, and how to successfully balance the two.

5.4.2 Practice Implications

Father absence has been researched extensively, but has been done by those in the field of sociology, the medical field, and education. Many have researched but their research has lacked a focus on African American women and their stories told form their point of view. Higher educational attainment has received much attention recently as stories circulated of African American women being the most educated group. However, there seems to be few studies that have explained why this phenomenon may be occurring, especially in the field of African American studies. This leaves a gap in the literature, and presents an opportunity for the field to begin researching and creating narratives on father absence from the point of view of African American women.
This study impacted the field of African American studies in a number of ways. First, it provides new information on African American women and father absence, to those who can implement strategic changes in the community and the college classrooms. Those in the field have the ability to create and implement programs for the healing of these women, or even a way in which support programs can be created for women to talk through their experiences and uplift others.

Secondly, this study can create interest in future research of not just educated African American women, but other subsets of the population who may experience father absence. Father absence is a problem for many people, especially in the community, and by studying its impact on the African American community we become better equipped to handle it when it arises and support those who face it.

Lastly, this study has the ability to impact father absent African American women’s understanding of themselves and their relationships with men. To many times father absence becomes something shameful, a scar that many attempt to try to hide, or a weapon to be used against them. African American studies, through its ongoing research, can help create spaces where African American men and women are able to have conversations that serve to heal any divide or breach. As a community based department, it is imperative to ensure that any divide that may exist be healed through seminars, conferences, and community classes that allow both sides to speak, heal, and move on with their lives.

5.5 Recommendations for Future Research

The purpose of this study was to examine how father absence affects the educational attainment of African American women. The research questions that guided this study were as follows:
1. How does father absence affect the educational attainment of African American women?

2. What is the participants’ understanding of a strong black woman?

3. How does father absence lead African American women to perform as a strong Black woman?

Based on the findings of this study, the following are recommended for future research:

1. Repeat this study with African American women who have some technical training, but not a bachelor’s degree, and with a wider age range.

2. Explore the relationship between father absence and the strong Black woman theory for married African American women.

3. Explore the different ways African American women have developed to pass on the concept of the strong Black woman.

Below are the explanations for each recommendation.

*Repeat this study with African American women who have some technical training, but not a bachelor’s degree, and with a wider age range.*

While my study focused on women with bachelor’s degrees or higher, between the ages of 21-45, it limited the diversity of my story. Adding more women with different backgrounds would make the narrative more complex and offer additional viewpoints. Efforts should be made to include diverse narratives that explore multiple views of the strong Black woman theory, father absence, and higher education. These narratives could expand our knowledge base and understanding of African American women.

*Explore the relationship between father absence and the strong Black woman theory for married African American women.*
Due to my participants focus on their relationships with their significant others, and because of their position as a strong Black woman, it would be informative to understand how married African American women who subscribe to being strong Black woman are able to ensure the survival of their relationships. This information can serve as a road map for similar women who are seeking successful marriages but dealing with the pangs of father absence.

*Explore the different ways African American women have developed to pass on the concept of the strong Black woman.*

The concept of being a strong Black woman is important to African American women. Every participant expressed that they were, or had been a strong Black woman at some point in their life, and that female family members had shown them how to be strong in the face of adversity. Considering how female family members pass on this knowledge, it would be useful to understand the ways in which it happens. Understanding the ways in which this knowledge is translated from one generation to the next becomes important to the narrative of African American women and a part of their history.

5.6 **Chapter Summary**

The purpose of this study was to examine how father’s absence affects the educational attainment of African American women. The research questions guiding this study were as follows:

1. What is the participants’ understanding of a strong black woman?
2. How does father absence affect the educational attainment of African American women?
3. How does father absence lead African American women to perform as a Strong Black Woman?
This study adds to the body of knowledge on father absence, educational attainment, and strong Black woman theory. This study investigated how father absence affected the educational attainment of African American women, while also questioning how the strong Black woman performance explained the behaviors of father absent women. Three conclusions were drawn from the data, and they were the following: (1) African American women need fathers who are present to help establish and maintain healthy intimate relationships; (2) African American women feel the need to perform as a strong Black woman for multiple reasons; and (3) African American women believe in getting higher education, for survival, and specifically due to lessons learned from father absence.

In this chapter, the conclusions, the implications of this study, as well as recommendations for future research were provided.
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APPENDICES

Appendix A

Informed Consent Form

Georgia State University
Department of African American Studies
Informed Consent

Title: Understanding How Father Absence Affects the Educational Attainment of African American Women Through The Lens of the Strong Black Woman Framework: A Narrative Study

Primary Investigator: Sarita Davis
Student Principal Investigator: Makeiva Jenkins

Purpose
You are invited to participate in a research study. The purpose of the study is to investigate the effects of father absence on decision-making in regards to the educational attainment of African American/Black women. You are invited to participate because you are an African American/Black Women, who has received a college degree, has had little contact with their biological father, and falls between the ages of 21-45. A total of 6 participants will be recruited for this study. Participation will require two hours of your time for one day.

Procedures:
If you decide to participate, you will be asked to fill out a questionnaire. You will be interviewed by Makeiva Jenkins for two hours. This interview will be audio recorded, and will take place in the home of the participants, or in a private classroom or library room, during the weekend, in the afternoon. Interviews will take place in the months of January and April. This will be a one-time interview, lasting no longer than two hours, however, you may be contacted afterwards for clarification purposes.

Risks
There is the possibility that participation in this study may cause you some discomfort due to the sensitivity of the topic. To prevent this, participants will be able to skip any questions that make them feel uncomfortable. If you experience any discomfort a list of trusted therapists will be provided to you.

Benefits
Participation in this study may benefit you personally. You will be provided with an opportunity to share your story, which can help you grow and reflect on your own experiences. Overall, we hope to gain formation that will serve to create conversations in the community about the phenomenon of father absence.
Compensation
You will receive a five-dollar gift card for participating in this study.

Voluntary Participation and Withdrawal
Participation in research is voluntary. You do not have to be in this study. If you decide to be in the study and change your mind, you have the right to drop out at any time. You may skip questions or stop participating at any time. Whatever you decide, you will not lose any benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

Confidentiality
We will keep your records private to the extent allowed by law. Dr. Sarita Davis and Makeiva Jenkins will have access to the information you provide. Information may also be shared with those who make sure the study is done correctly (GSU Institutional Review Board, the Office for Human Research Protection (OHRP). We will use pseudonyms rather than your name or study records. The information you provide will be stored in locked cabinets, as well as, in password-and firewall-protected computers. This information will include audio recording, which will be stored in a lock box, and kept for a year. Internet will be used in terms of analyzing the data. All assigned pseudonyms will be used in the program. Any emails will be deleted. After this year, the recording will be erased. Your name and other facts that might point to you will not appear when we present this study or publish its results. The findings will be summarized and reported in group form. You will not be identified personally.

Contact Persons:
Contact Dr. Sarita Davis and Makeiva Jenkins at 404-254-8968 or mgraham21@student.gsu.edu if you have questions, concerns, or complaints about this study. You can also call if you think you have been harmed by the study. Call Susan Vogtner in the Georgia State University Office of Research Integrity at 404-413-3513 or svogtner1@gsu.edu if you want to talk to someone who is not part of the study team. You can talk about questions, concerns, offer input, obtain information, or suggestions about the study. You can also call Susan Vogtner if you have questions or concerns about your rights in this study.

Copy of Consent Form to Participant:
We will give you a copy of this consent form to keep.
If you are willing to volunteer for this research and be audio recorded, please sign below.

_________________________________________  Date ______________________
Participant

_________________________________________  Date ______________________
Principal Investigator or Researcher Obtaining Consent
Appendix B

Questionnaire
Please respond to the following questions:

1. Do you identify yourself as an African American/Black woman? Yes or No

2. What is your age? ______

3. Did you grow up in the same house with your biological father? Yes or No

4. Please describe how much time you spend in contact (speaking with/spending time with) your biological father? ________________

5. What is your current education level? ________________

6. Do you intend to continue your education past your current level? ______

7. What is your personal definition of a strong Black woman? ________________

________________________________________________________________________

Name: ___________________________________________________________________

Phone Number: ___________________________________________________________________

Email Address: ___________________________________________________________________

Phone Number: ___________________________________________________________________

Profession: ___________________________________________________________________

Please provide any additional information that you think will be useful to the researcher.

________________________________________________________________________
Appendix C

Recruitment Form

Hello. My name is Makeiva Jenkins, and I am currently a master’s level student in the African American Studies Department at Georgia State University. I am interested in interviewing you regarding father absence, your educational attainment, and your honest opinions about strong Black women for my study “Understanding How Father Absence Affects the Educational Attainment of African American Women Through The Lens of the Strong Black Woman Framework: A Narrative Study”.

The purpose of this study is to examine how father’s absence effects the educational attainment of African American women, and how the strong Black woman phenomenon interacts with these two variables. You will be asked questions regarding your experiences as a woman who grew up without your biological father, your educational experiences, and your thoughts about strong black women. You will also be asked to complete a questionnaire to gather some general information. You will not have to answer any questions that will make you uncomfortable, however, you will be expected to speak freely about father absence, education, and strong black women.

In order to participate in this study, you must:

- Be between the ages of 21-45
- Consider yourself African American or Black
- Earned some form of higher education
- Had little to no contact with biological father
- Must be able to meet for interviews
- Grew up without biological father in the home

There are two ways to contact me if you are interested in participating in this study:

- Call me at 404-254-8968 (this number has caller id, so if you are concerned please use another number) or Email me at makeiva.graham@hotmail.com
- Identify yourself. If we do not make contact, please leave a message and try again later. You may also send a text message if you like. Our conversations will consist of details about the study, and any questions you may have.

Thank you for your time. If you are interested, I look forward to speaking with you and discussing the details of this study with you.
Appendix D

Interview Guide –
Father Absence

1. Tell me a little about yourself (family, where you grew up, childhood etc...).
2. Can you tell me about a person who has influenced you and your life?
3. Can you tell me about the best experiences from your childhood?
4. Can you tell me about times when you talked to or saw your father? How often do you talk to or see him now?
5. On a scale of 1 to 10, 1 being you talk/see him a lot, and 10 being you don’t provide a number to explain your experiences.
6. How much importance do you assign to fathers in the lives of their daughters? Why?
7. Can you provide an example of what it was like to grow up without a father?
8. Can you provide feelings that you associate with this experience?
9. Provide an example of what is it like to be an adult with little father presence.

Educational Attainment

1. What are your beliefs regarding education, and where did they come from?
2. Is education important to you? If so, explain?
4. Describe your best educational experiences.
5. Did you get good grades during each educational periods (elementary, middle school, high school, college)? If so why, or why not?
6. How has being without your father affected some of your major educational decisions in your life?
7. How has being without your father affected where you have chosen to live?
8. How has being without your father affect the family you have decided to create for yourself?

9. How do you view your decision-making in terms of educational attainment in relation to your father’s absence?

**Strong Black Women**

1. Can you tell me an experience where you were around a strong Black woman?

2. Provide your first experiences with a Strong Black woman?

3. Do you subscribe to the notion of being a SBW? If so, explain.

4. Do you believe you are a strong Black woman?

5. On a scale of 1 to 5, how much do you relate your SBW position to the absence of your father?

6. Does your need to seek higher education, have anything to do with you being a strong Black woman?

7. How do you believe father absence, your education, and being a strong Black woman work together?

**Appendix E**

**5.7 Table 4.2. Summary of Individual Group Information**

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Place of Birth</th>
<th>Highest Level of Education</th>
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<tr>
<td>Sheila</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>Orlando, Florida</td>
<td>Bachelor’s degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monica</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>Charleston, South Carolina</td>
<td>Bachelor’s degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Age</td>
<td>Location</td>
<td>Degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>--------</td>
<td>-----</td>
<td>-------------------------</td>
<td>-----------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brandy</td>
<td>F</td>
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<td>East New Jersey</td>
<td>Specialist degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shayla</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>Tuscaloosa, Alabama</td>
<td>Bachelor’s degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keisha</td>
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<td>MBA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Terry</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>Waynesboro, Georgia</td>
<td>Master’s degree</td>
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