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ARTICLE

Black Fathers Denied

Black Fathers' and Fatherhood Practitioners' Sensemaking of Race, Gender (Wars), and the Child Support and Custody System

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Abstract

Black fathers' sentiments about the child support and custody (CSC) system reflect an understanding that the CSC overwhelmingly supports mothers at the expense of, and even against, Black fathers. Consequently, Black fathers may develop a sense that their voices and circumstances within the CSC system—along with other federal, state, and county-based health and human service programs—are considered inconsequential. In this context, we argue that this embodies what we term *Black personhood denied*. Drawing from two sample groups of Black fathers derived from two discrete research projects, we use the self-reported narratives and perspectives of Black fathers in the CSC system to qualitatively foreground how their experiences demonstrate the systematic denial of their voices and agency. Secondarily, we explore how their CSC experiences contribute to their understanding and perceptions of race and gender; specifically, how they think civic institutions (e.g., family court, law enforcement, human service sector, etc.) view and treat Black men/fathers relative to women/mothers. Lastly, we explore how perceptions of differential treatment according to their race and gender impacts other areas of their lives.

Keywords: Black Men; Black Fathers; Child Support; Child Custody; Ontology; Patriarchy; Gender; Civil Institutions

> *He who is reluctant to recognize me opposes me.*
>
> —Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*

Introduction

Reflecting Maria A. Johnson and Alfred A. Young's (2016) call for a dynamic, nuanced, and culturally-analytical understanding of Black fatherhood in contemporary contexts, emerging insights concerning the ecology, experiences, and perceptions of Black fathers continue to unfold. Central to this unfolding is the ongoing analysis of the experiences of Black fathers who have been or are engaged with the child support and custody (CSC) system.

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We treat child custody and child support here as two inextricably connected dimensions of a complex system; as such, teasing out the peculiar phenomenon of Black fatherhood in the CSC system, relative to other ethno-racial groups, is not without reason (Harty et al., 2025; Kim 2014; Kim et al., 2024; McDonald 2020; Mills 2010; Pate 2016; Rambert 2021; Threlfall and Kohl, 2015). Given the deeply violent, oppressive, and enduring legacy of how Black men (Cooper 2024; Curry 2017, 2018, 2022) and Black fathers (Abdil 2018; Cole and Lipscomb, 2022; Coles and Green, 2010; Hamer 2001; Hilde 2020; McDonald 2020; Wallace 2023; Wallace and Pate, 2024) have been historically regarded throughout society, it is reasonable to further clarify the legacy of how they have been considered and treated. Consequently, analysis of Black fathers' lifeworlds—and Black people in general—require unique frameworks (Ajari 2023; Curry 2018; Wallace 2022).

Societal imaginings, as opposed to understandings, of Black men/fathers have impacted their material experiences and perspectives. In turn, their environments, experiences, and perspectives shape their attitudes and behaviors—for good and/or bad (Wallace 2023; Wallace and Pate, 2024). For Black fathers who have had some engagement with the CSC, these premises hold weight (Hoffmeister et al., 2025). Generally, for varied reasons, fathers are less likely to be given primary physical and/or legal custody of their children and are more likely to be mandated to pay child support (Cancian and Meyer, 1998; McDonald 2020). Moreover, given larger historical and interrelated structural factors like carcerality (e.g., racialized mass incarceration and hyper-surveillance), racialized labor discrimination, and socioeconomic vulnerability, Black fathers may be disproportionately involved in the CSC system relative to other ethno-racial groups (Boggess 2017; Brito et al., 2014; Brito 2019; Brito et al., 2022; Carbone and Huntington, 2024; Harty et al., 2025; Kim et al., 2024; Nepomnyaschy et al., 2021; Pate 2016; Stanton 2025). Consequently, they may be more likely to be designated co-parental visitation status and pay child support compared to non-Black fathers (McDonald 2020).

To complicate matters, what we know regarding fathers and fatherhood continues to lag behind the accumulated knowledge of mothers (Schoppe-Sullivan and Fagan, 2020). This current state of research is even more stark for Black fathers generally, given the tendency among researchers to focus on impoverished Black fathers (Johnson and Young, 2016). Consciously intended or not, the tendency of narrowly focusing on this subpopulation—specifically when grounded in a deficit-based framework—may contribute to the problematic caricaturing of Black fathers as hypersexual (i.e., the belief that Black men are wantonly irresponsible and promiscuous as sexual partners (McDonald 2020)), and/or proverbially "deadbeat" (Abdill 2018; Battle 2023; Brito 2019; Brito et al., 2014; Coles and Green, 2010; Curry and Curry, 2018; Hamer 2001; Kim et al., 2024).

The ascription of the Black man/father as an innate problem, particularly the "deadbeat" mythos, is generally applied to all Black men/fathers and collapsed into a singular representation regardless of their socioeconomic position (Wallace 2023), experiential background (Wallace and Pate, 2024), or outright facts that speak to the contrary (Curry and Curry, 2018; Ellerbe et al., 2018; Jones and Mosher, 2013; Leavell et al., 2012). Putative myths about Black men/fathers allow stereotypes to fester and, more importantly, provide pretext for further erasing and marginalizing their voices and perspectives. As an interlocutor contributing to the reproduction of stereotypes regarding Black men/fathers, the CSC system may be instrumental in this process, yet we know little of how it may be impacting Black men's/fathers' understanding of gender-racial relations in the co-parenting context, as well as the effects it may have on other facets of their lives.

It is crucial for scholars, community-practitioners, fatherhood programs, and policymakers to accrue context-based information about the actual lives of Black men/fathers in the CSC system for the purpose of mitigating its damaging effects. Given the unique

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structural and institutional disadvantages that Black men/fathers endure, much more information is merited regarding the dynamism of the CSC system and its implications for Black families and communities. For this study we sought to explore four guiding research questions including,

1. What are Black men's/fathers' self-reported experiences with the child support and custody (CSC) system—along with associated state-support systems (e.g., section-8 housing, financial subsidy [welfare], etc.)?
2. What identifiable effects, if any, does the CSC system—and associated state-support systems (e.g., section-8 housing, financial subsidy [welfare], etc.)—have on Black men's/fathers' socioemotional wellbeing?
3. What influential effects, if any, does the CSC system—and associated state-support systems (e.g., section-8 housing, financial subsidy [welfare], etc.)—have on Black men's/fathers' contemporary attitudes and understanding of gender relations?
4. In what ways do Black men/fathers make sense of the relationship between CSC, and associated state-support systems, and their race—namely, their Blackness?

Basis for Current Study

Existing literature is clear regarding Black men's/fathers' sentiments about the CSC system, reflecting a general sense that the CSC overwhelmingly supports mothers *at the expense of*, and even *against*, men/fathers; deliberately ignores or denies their life circumstances, perspectives, and voices; and further marginalizes them—to the extent of added criminalization—in such a way that substantially increases their sense of alienation from their parental role and responsibilities (Abdill 2018; Battle 2023; Brito et al., 2014; Brito 2019; Cole and Lipscomb, 2022; Edin et al., 2019; Hamer 2001; McDonald 2020; Rambert 2021; Threlfall and Kohl, 2015). In the context of the CSC system, Black fathers' personhood is not recognized and, consequently, they develop a sense of structural and institutional opposition—that is, they think and believe that the CSC system, along with other federally- and state-based health and human service programs, works against them. This study draws from two sample groups of Black fathers derived from two discrete research projects. We use the self-reported experiences and thoughts of these CSC system-involved groups to analytically foreground how their experiences contribute to their understanding and perception of race and gender. Specifically, we explore how they think civic institutions (e.g., family court, law enforcement, human service sector, etc.) view and treat Black men—and by extension Black fathers—relative to women/mothers. We ask in what ways, if any, their perception of differential treatment according to their race and gender impacts other areas of their lives, including parental participation.

Theorizing Blackness and Masculinized Gender

> *I am an invisible man…I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me.*
> —Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*

The theoretical synopsis of Ralph Ellinson's seminal work, *Invisible Man* ([1952] 2014), foregrounds the experiential and abstract peculiarity of the Black nameless narrator and protagonist—a rhetorically masculinized embodiment of Black people—moving through social life as a subject without being heard and seen. Given the challenges and holistic harm that accompanies such a journey, Ellison's partial assignment for readers—presumably,

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White people—was to attempt to indirectly relate to this journey by thinking and feeling what it is like to move through the world devoid of *personhood* (i.e., reciprocally recognized subjectivity). Subsequently, the reader is left with a sense of what it is like to try and form an identity and sense of *self-Being* that the world refuses to acknowledge, let alone respect. A journey that Frantz Fanon—separate from Ellison but coincidentally in thought-convergence with him (Jackson 2006; Taylor 2016)—analytically explicated as an existence that "has no ontological resistance in the eyes of the White man" (Fanon [1952] 2023, p.110).

As far as we know, since its inauguration into the world via transatlantic chattel slavery—and possibly preceding it (French 2021; Wilderson 2020)—Blackness was imbued with a meaning that equated it to the fundamental antithesis of the modern human being. Despite how Africans, now metonymically understood as Black, would come to define and recognize themselves (Robinson 1983), over time the quintessential antithesis of the modern human being (i.e., freedom of choice, and reason or logic above all else) would (sub) consciously come to be understood as *the Black*—that being, alterity at its peak, the ultimate non-person (Fanon [1952] 2023; Jackson 2020; Sexton 2016; Vargas 2012, 2018; Warren 2014; Wilderson 2020; Wynter 2003).

According to Eurocentric thought, as Fanon theorized, to be human one must possess *ontology*, or Beingness—that is, a capacity to define a reciprocally recognized beingness-for-itself (Sealey 2019). Charles Villet (2011) defines *being-for-itself*, or being-for-self, as "the individual that has agency in terms of assigning meaning to one's self" (p. 45). This *being-for-itself*, "is the structure of the human, because the structure of the human is its capacity for choice (or freedom to choose)" (Sealey 2019, p. 31). However, *being-for-others* complicates this understanding of being-for-itself because, as Sealy asserts, "[b]eing-for-others adds complexity to this structure of human freedom, primarily because humans' must enact their freedom in a world that is populated by other free humans (and shaped through their collective choices)" (2019, p. 31). More to the point, this being-for-itself "simply do[es] not hold in the context of colonial domination [given that]…the for-itself structure is always already mediated through its being-for-others" (Sealy 2019, p. 32). This phenomenological configuration can be understood to mean, in an ostensibly post-transatlantic slave world, that to be Black is to only be considered a being-for-others, consequently resulting in not being considered human at all.

An example of this non-recognition in the United States is the systematic coercion and suppression of Black fathers' voices, experiences, and the unique delimiting of their agency throughout civil institutions like the CSC system—in effect, a denial of Black personhood. This act illustrates the inextricable relationship between ontology and humanness, wherein, discerningly reading Fanon, Taylor (2016) states, "the rejection from white others is understood as an immediate sensation of denial, a confirmation of the fact of blackness—the fact that blackness is outside of the realm of the human" (p. 17). In this sense, what the Black men/fathers in this study demonstrate is a continued refutation and/or silencing of who they are as fathers and an ongoing disavowal of the context in which they practice that role. Reflecting Ellison's motif we argue that, for Black fathers in the CSC system, the systematic suppression of their voices and experiences—as they see and understand it—deny them ontological recognition. In effect, they are "…invisible…simply because people refuse to see [them]" ([1952] 2014, p. 1).

This theorizing of the systematic excision of Black fathers' voices in the context of the CSC system should by no means be understood to mean that other Black voices and perspectives are recognized—namely, Black mothers'—let alone valued. For low-income Black women/mothers specifically, the myth of the "dominant matriarch," "welfare queen," or negligent mother serves as the gendered ontological complement to the (blackened) "deadbeat dad" stereotype—both of which function to reinforce the meaning

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and image of the Black "family" as innately pathological (Battle 2023). This general ascription of the "pathological Black family" is most notably illustrated in the eponymous Moynihan report, wherein, supporting our argument, the personhood of Black fathers and mothers is denied and externally spoken for (Spillers 1987). In this instance, it is the CSC that *speaks for* (i.e., being-for-others) both Black men/fathers and (Black) women/mothers in gendered ways that often positions them against each other (Stanton 2025). This may be most salient for low-income Black mothers who receive public assistance (i.e., welfare) and have primary custody of their child(ren), wherein,

> [R]esident parents entangled in [CSC]…because of participation in other social welfare programs would rather handle child support informally with the fathers of their children. This disjuncture between the practices of [CSC] and the desires of their targeted population calls into question the justification for [CSC] policies, especially among poor and working class Black families (McDonald 2020, p. 71).

This denial of Black personhood—that is, unreciprocated recognition of Black people's multidimensional meaning-making and expressions of self or Being—is of course gendered in separate ways (Vargas 2012, 2018).

In a Western patriarchal context, dominant racialized in-group members (i.e., Whites) are conferred social ideologies and scripts that are, to a great extent, mutually agreed upon and subsequently enacted against racialized out-group members—most notably, Blacks—to grant themselves certain powers, privileges, and benefits mediated by gender-based dichotomized markers (e.g., man/woman, boy/girl, father/mother, boyfriend/girlfriend, husband/wife, etc.). Given the logic of this racial-gender contract (Mills 2019), these powers, privileges, and benefits are predominantly accrued to the interest of cishet (cis-gendered and heterosexual) White men as the top subset of the dominant in-group (Curry 2022). Despite out-group members' appropriation (Banks and Stephens, 2018) of White patriarchal standards, thinking, attitudes, and behaviors—outcomes that are expected, given the psychological nature and effect of gendered-racial oppression—Black folx, however, are fundamentally situated outside of White patriarchy's structural advantages and benefits (Ajari 2023; Curry 2017, 2018, 2022). Rather, Blacks are systematically victimized by the dynamic violence of Western patriarchy in ways that are often in accordance with their imputed and/or self-identified gender location (i.e., Black man, Black woman, Black gender nonbinary) (Ajari 2023; Curry 2017, 2018, 2022; Hartman 1997; Vargas 2012, 2018).

Black men, by virtue of their gender location, are also expected to follow and achieve White patriarchal notions of manhood and/or fatherhood, scripts that they have been historically denied yet expected to achieve (Cooper 2024; Curry 2017, 2018; Rambert 2021). Western notions of manhood present a hierarchical form of masculinity that scaffolds dominance, power, and control as central characteristics (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005). White fatherhood extends from White masculinity, whereby men are socialized to be stoic, authoritarian figures whose overarching purpose is to provide protection and financial resources—the "breadwinner" role (Matlon 2022; Randles 2018). All those who "fail" to embody these qualities, or are necessarily precluded from doing so (e.g., women), are systematically situated on the lower rungs of the social and political ladder (Messerschmidt 2019).

This dilemma for Black fathers—by which they are expected to uphold yet are denied access to the power and privileges of White masculinity—resembles a *patriarchal paradox*. Meaning, identifying or expressing their gender-identity as cis-men, Black men are expected to enact and fulfill dominant notions of masculinity and its paradigmatic forms

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—in this case, White fatherhood. However, given that they have been, and continue to be, harmed and precluded from capitalizing off the currency of White patriarchy, they are consequently deemed failed patriarchs (Carbone and Huntington, 2024)—or not men at all (Curry 2018)—for not actualizing dominant notions of manhood or fatherhood. The historical harm that Black men/fathers experience due to White patriarchy is reflected in what social dominance theorists regard as the *subordinate male targeted hypothesis* (SMTH) (Sidanius et al., 2018; Sidanius et al., 2004). SMTH is understood as the discriminatory targeting of racialized out-group males (i.e., Black men) relative to out-group females (i.e., non-White women). For Black men/fathers, the CSC system may be operating as an extended modality of SMTH.

Moreover, at the cross-section of Black personhood denied and patriarchal paradox, organic notions of Black masculinity or fatherhood also go unrecognized. Politically and culturally exogenous social scripts—often operating in resistance to White patriarchy (Hilde 2020)—are forged in the context of gendered-racial oppression and are treated as nonexistent or inconsequential (Curry 2017, 2018; Hilde 2020). When Black fathers who are (in)voluntarily engaged in the CSC system speak to these phenomena, they often express how any attention directed towards the historical and contextual challenges they face is summarily dismissed. As one participant exclaimed about the CSC system, "[t]hey don't care."

Black Fathers and Child Support Enforcement

> *Each of these poor, Black citizens is present in [child support] court but, neither seen nor heard by the legal actors present, is rendered invisible in that space. Conversely, [he] is simultaneously hypervisible in the legal space he occupies, reconstituted in court through the use of negative, racial stereotypes.*
>
> —Tonya L. Brito, David J. Pate, and Jia-Hui Stafanie Wong (2014)

The stated intent of the CSC program is to mitigate child poverty while negating the reliance on public assistance by partially shifting the financial responsibility to the non-custodial parent, usually the father (Battle 2023; Boggess 2017; McDonald 2020; Pate 2016; Stanton 2025). The latter objective emerges from racialized neoliberal and neoconservative sensibilities taking center-stage since the mid to late twentieth-century (Mills 2010). Historically, critical social frameworks foregrounding race and racism as both the lens and foci of analysis have argued that ostensibly apolitical public policies like CSC severely reduce or outright erase the direct impact that factors like race and gender have on the development and application of these public programs (Battle 2023; Brito et al., 2014; Mills 2010; Stanton 2025).

Combined with the racialized political impetus to eliminate individual and family-based social subsidies, and as a means of responding to the gradual shift away from the married nuclear family model (i.e., the ideal Eurocentric social formation) wherein nonmarital births have steadily increased across ethno-racial groups, mostly for Black families (McDonald 2020), the CSC system instituted aggressive reforms as coercive measures to return to the (White) nuclear family structure (Battle 2023; Mills 2010). This acontextual disposition has allowed for the disavowal or trivializing of larger historical and structural factors that have contributed to the general vulnerability of Black men/fathers in the CSC system (Kim et al., 2024). As Cheryl E. Mills (2010) states, "[s]ocial policy based on negative bias and inaccurate or incomplete assumptions about the behavior of African American men ignores the influence of institutionalized factors, including poverty, persistent racial inequality and discrimination, and changing global labor markets" (p. 345).

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Reforms to the CSC system, particularly during the 1990s, were based on the social conditions and interests of mostly White, divorced or never-married, women and middle-class men (Mills 2010). Consequently, "[Black fathers] were not the men whose behavior social policy was intended to address… As a result of improper data, a distorted assessment of the noncustodial father's motivation, willingness, and ability to pay child support emerged" (Mills 2010, p. 335). Given this, some scholars argue that, by design, the CSC system both erases and particularly disadvantages Black men/fathers and, by extension, harms their children and families (Brito et al., 2014; Brito 2019; McDonald 2020; Rambert 2021).

On June 5, 2023, the Administration for Children and Families published a notice in the Federal Register announcing that the federal Office of Child Support Enforcement would be re-named as the Office of Child Support Services (Contreras 2023). This name change, echoed by child support agencies in Wisconsin and across the country, was intended to reflect a shift toward family-centered policies that emphasize holistic support to meet the needs of the entire family. In Wisconsin, child support services have expanded to include programs to promote responsible parenting, healthy relationships, and economic stability (Milwaukee County Department of Child Support Services 2022). At the same time, child support services continue efforts to recover state public assistance costs from non-custodial fathers, such as holding some non-custodial fathers accountable for repaying the government for the cost of their child's publicly funded birth (Lerma et al., 2025).

In fathers' lived experience, the enforcement aspect of child support services continues to create financial strain and may remain foremost, despite the name change replacing "enforcement" with "services" for a two and a half year period. In December 2025, the Administration for Children and Families published a notice in the Federal Register (Administration for Children and Families 2025) stating that the name of the Office of Child Support Services has been changed back to the Office of Child Support Enforcement. The reversal signifies a redoubled commitment to a dated approach to child support policy, grounded in enforcement actions known to evoke fear, shame, and stigma and interact with family life in counterproductive ways (Good+ Foundation and Aspen Institute 2023).

The current design of the CSC system—evidenced by the reversion of the formal name back to the Office of Child Support Enforcement—adds to the complexity of how race and socioeconomic status (SES) (re)produce unique experiences for Black men/fathers across the socioeconomic spectrum. Notably, relative to low-income Black fathers, we know little about the experiences of middle- and upper-income Black fathers in the CSC system. The experiences of moderately or well-resourced Black families who have been or are engaged with the CSC may vary in some ways compared to their counterparts of lower SES.

It may be assumed that given middle- and upper-income Black fathers' access to resources, they are somehow inoculated from gendered-racialized stereotypes that overwhelmingly shape the lived-experiences of low-income Black men. However, regardless of the socioeconomic location of Black men/fathers in the CSC system, they all must contend with gendered-racial sensibilities that—although often resulting in different material outcomes—still strip Black men/fathers of their personhood (Kim 2014). Supporting this claim, some participants in this study who are college educated and fully employed spoke to how they felt disempowered by their CSC experiences, despite their relatively stable socioeconomic standing.

The ways that Black men's/fathers' engagement with the CSC system impacts their understanding of the relationships among race, gender, and civil institutions remains poorly understood. For example, given their generally negative view of the CSC system and how they think it privileges women over (Black) men, are they likely to express a similar understanding and sentiment regarding race and gender relative to other civil institutions

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(e.g., law enforcement) or public programs (e.g., housing support)? Would/Do their perspectives influence their attitudes and behaviors in such a way that they further disassociate from these systems? Does it lend to a sense of institutionally encouraged gender antagonism or *mimetic-patriarchy*, wherein they simply attempt to mimic White patriarchal norms? Ultimately, Black fathers' engagement with the CSC system may have implications beyond the CSC itself, broadly influencing Black individual and family well-being.

Study Background and Methodology

Origin of Current Study

The analysis presented here leverages two discrete qualitative studies—both of which were granted approval from The University of Wisconsin-Madison Institutional Review Board—guided by different overarching research questions. However, both studies were focused on fathers—the first study specifically focused on Black fathers. The data for both studies were collected in the state of Wisconsin, one in the city of Madison (Dane County) and the other in the city of Milwaukee (Milwaukee County). For Study A, researchers conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews with thirty mixed-income Black fathers—including some non-U.S. nationals—to explore how Black fathers conceptualize their role in the academic socialization of their children (Dilworth-Bart et al., 2021).

Sampling criteria for Study A included, 1) identify as Black or African American man, 2) be eighteen-years of age or older, and 3) have one or more K-12 child[ren] at the time of the interview. Information sheets about the research study were distributed in places where Black men are known to convene including churches, barbershops, and community organizations. Additional information regarding participant characteristics for Study A is available in the supplementary materials that accompany this article. Of note, for Study A, Black fathers from the United States and Black fathers of non-U.S. origin spoke to a shared experience of being systematically stereotyped as Black men and fathers in the United States. However, non-U.S. nationals in Study A did not speak to a shared experience or perspective about the child support system. Therefore, for this study, experiences and perspectives about the CSC appear to be a uniquely U.S. experience.

Study B incorporated both individual and focus group interviews, sampling a total of thirty-five fathers and twenty-two program staff members. This study explored how community-based social service organizations serving noncustodial fathers in Milwaukee, Wisconsin collaborate to meet the diverse needs of this population—including in the areas of parenting, employment, education, and health. Sampling criteria for the focus group component included: 1) the participant be age eighteen or older, 2) be a resident of Milwaukee County, 3) be a father to one or more children under age eighteen, and 4) currently be under a court-order to pay child support or arrears for one or more children. The overwhelming majority (34 out of 35) of focus group participants identified as Black or African American. Additional information including appendices, data tables, and sample characteristics are available in the supplementary materials that accompany this article.

Inclusion criteria for Study B's interview component required that, 1) the participant be age eighteen years or older and 2) work for an agency or program in the designated area that offers social services to fathers. A large majority of interview participants identified as Black or African American (86%) and male (77%). Most (59%) had completed college, and half had been working in the designated urban locale providing services to fathers and families for more than twenty years.

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Data Analysis

Using a *generic descriptive interpretive qualitative research* (GDI-QR) approach (Elliott and Timulak, 2005, 2021), this study will theoretically elaborate on how the CSC system contributes to the perceived erasure of Black fathers' voices and life-contexts—a manifestation of what we call Black personhood denied. Despite the narrow research question guiding Study A, the interviews elicited expansive information about fathers' experiences, perspectives and feelings. Many participants narrated their experiences with, and thoughts about, the CSC system despite not being directly asked about it (i.e., questions or prompts concerning the CSC were not included in Study A's interview protocol), yielding insight into these experiences.

Study B, which focused on access to support among noncustodial fathers, areas of unmet need, collaboration across agencies to increase noncustodial fathers' access to services, and how collaboration can be improved, explicitly inquired about experiences with the CSC. Taken together, data from Studies A and B afford opportunities to ask new questions and invoke new frameworks for making sense of Black fathers' experiences with the CSC system. The current study used a combination of individual interview data from Study A, individual interview and focus group from Study B. Applying a modified version of Steve Doherty et al.'s (2016) approach to GDI-QR data analysis for this study involved the following steps:

I. "Domains were initially identified based on initial impressions of the data [from Study A], a review of the literature, and on the interview questions [from Study B]. These broad domains provided an organizing structure and a conceptual framework for the data" (Doherty et al., 2016, p. 4),
II. Coding the transcripts from Study A and Study B for meaning units (i.e., codes).
III. Determining the core idea of each meaning unit,
IV. "While there was an [intended] level of interpretation throughout the data analysis, the team endeavored to stay close to the participants own words when [constructing] themes" (Doherty et al., 2016, p. 4),
V. Meaning units were summarized and situated under their respective themes, and
VI. Each meaning unit and theme was then allocated to a main domain.

Guided by the study's research questions, analysis centered on the domains of investigation, which can be located in the supplementary materials that accompany this article.

Data were analyzed using NVivo qualitative data-analysis software. We used *concept coding*, or codes that "assign meso and macro levels of meaning to data or to data analytic work in progress"…which are "appropriate for studies focused on theory and theory development…[and] is also an appropriate method when the analyst wishes to transcend the local and particular of the study to more abstract or generalizable contexts" (Saldaña 2015, pp. 119-120). *Meaning units*, or codes, were collated under the appropriate (sub) themes.

Researcher Credibility

To establish credibility (Shenton 2004), the authors relied on *frequent debriefing sessions* with colleagues to offer constructive feedback concerning design and analysis. *Peer scrutiny* of the analytical process was also employed by trusted and experienced colleagues external to the study (Shenton 2004). Finally, *triangulation* was integral to the study design; drawing data from two discrete research projects using multiple methods for data

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collection lends methodological credence to notions of transferability as it relates to study results (Shenton 2004).

Results and Discussion

We generated three primary themes to demonstrate connections between our theoretical impression of the in-vivo language participants used to ground their thoughts and experiences. The actual words participants used (shown in quotation marks) connect the theoretically interpretive language we used to demonstrate deeper meanings behind their words and corresponding explanations of the (sub)themes.

Black Fathers as Insignificant Matter: "They don't care about us."

Participants' experiences with the CSC system shape their feelings and understanding of how they think the system operates. Insofar as their perspectives are materially fact—which is, of course, critically important to determine—exploring their experiences allows for the identification of patterned thought and behavior that may be having an adverse impact on their individual and family well-being. In this instance, if Black fathers feel and think that the system is against them, then their capacity to fully engage their parental and civic responsibilities may be increasingly compromised. When probed to elaborate on how he thinks and feels the CSC and social service systems treat fathers, Hank (Study A) offered:

> Hank: They don't care! At least that's what I feel like. But that's my opinion… She [Mom] lost everything, and she ended up going to jail…. They wanted me to take my son. I don't have no problem taking my son…. But what I'm showing y'all these check stubs. Look, they're taking out this much, my rent this much, my light bill this much; I'm not asking for anything. I'm still going to work. I'm asking if y'all can help me out with percentage and stuff like that. You know, help, I'm asking for help…. I'm still paying her child support…. They don't want to help me, even though I've been productive, but when they gave her everything, she wasn't doing nothing. I'm going to work every day, forty-hours a week. I know I put forth the effort and I tried, and they told me no, no, no. So there's no use of pondering…. And then…(Tasha [i.e., the child's aunt]) get my son, this her (i.e., the child's mother) sister. She…already…had section-8; nothing against Tasha, I'm just saying how the system works. Man, they hurried up to get Tasha a three bedroom. I said wow, but nothing for me!

A similar sentiment was offered by Scotty (Study A), when prompted to explain the circumstances surrounding his homelessness, bluntly stating, "Child support for one, 'cause I couldn't get me no place…that's the main reason, child support." In the following excerpt he elaborates on what he believes to be a general uncaring for single fathers, offering,

> Scotty: There's no reason for them to reject me, no reason. I don't get why they rejected me, and I got a son.
> Interviewer: What'd they say?
> Scotty: They didn't have no reason; it just said your application has been denied…And I've been homeless all this, the majority of the time I've been here, so how the hell I get denied for section-8…. The system is stupid, that's what I'm talking about, you know what I'm saying. And it's more catered to women than it is for men. Women can get more help quicker than a man can. Ain't nothing out here for single fathers. When I

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> was with my son, I couldn't get no help. None! No assistance, no emergency money, nothing, nothing! I couldn't even be put in a place… they don't do right by the men down here at all, at all! You can't get no assistance for men like "hey I'm a single father, I got my son, we need help." "Well, we don't have any programs, um." Come on man, seriously. Everything for the women…. Everything!

Overwhelmingly, fathers in both studies expressed feelings of not being acknowledged because, as they understand it, "they don't care" about fathers. This institutional uncaring seemingly extends into Black fathers' expression of wanting to actualize their parental role in the lives of their children via direct care. According to some participants, and consistent with prior scholarship, the CSC system continues to reify the gendered social script that mothers are by nature best suited to care for children (Kim 2014). Daniel (Study B), a fatherhood programming specialist, calls attention to this point, stating:

> Daniel: So the system…they claim it's in the best interests of the child, but the best interest of the child is not always the mother…. When you have two parents, two people who are just having a baby, they're not married, they're not necessarily in a relationship, why do the courts assume that she's going to be a better fit than him, right? It's all these generalized assumptions that fathers are unfit to take care of the children.

Though the CSC system may have shifted toward a more gender-equitable, family-based approach in a post-divorce context (Carbone and Huntington, 2024), for never-married parents this gender-neutrality may have little effect on CSC dynamics, particularly for low-income CSC-involved participants.

Many fathers were much more vocal about the salience of race and how it factors into how people are treated in the CSC system. Nathaniel (Study A) directly alludes to the role of race, stating "It's a White folk's world, y'all got to understand that man, they're trying to do everything to bury us, man. From the child support, you know what I mean. Like, c'mon man, are you serious right now!" This assertion reflects some scholars' analysis of how the CSC system, specifically, is weaponized as a racialized mechanism of social control, wherein historically embedded negative ascriptions of Black men—coupled with the willful elision of structural barriers that preponderantly disadvantage them—are systematically deployed against Black fathers via the punitive use of welfare and child support laws (Brito et al., 2014; Brito et al., 2019; McDonald 2020; Rambert 2021; Stanton 2025).

As a matter of analysis, the fathers who participated in one of the focus groups for Study B (Group 1) even offered racial-historical context that, for them, explained the particular treatment that Black fathers receive, positing:

> Trevor: …I believe that's a major part of why we're enduring what we're enduring, because we're considered second class citizens. Right, and Black men are, well you know, hey…
> Chris: Two-thirds of a man, I ain't got no different than that.
> Trevor: Well, we could lose one or two of them (sardonically alluding to Black men), it's no big loss, but we can empower this woman, right? Right!? But without us our race dies. It's, it's a lot man, it's a lot man. Anytime you lock a man up for child support and…he's in that child's life, who you helping? Who are you helping?

Using a similar approach in his analysis, Jason (Study A) theorized:

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> Jason: Oh yeah, of course, yeah. [I]n this state, it's a women state, so they're not—you know the system, how the system was rigged from what I learned. [Y]ou know, the system's been rigged, you know, years ago—fifty-some plus years ago in Madison, WI. And they… set this up for these Black women to be pushed into these low-income housing apartments and segregating them from… their kids, parents, which is a Black man, and that's why they come up with the rules. The rules say you can't have his father on… your premises or you will be evicted. So, yeah… all this been rigged up. This system… they'll let you build up to a certain spot but once you think you're going to get to this certain spot, they shut you out, you're not going to get further past that. So yeah, it's all messed up.

For a few respondents however, gender was the primary factor, where in another focus group (Study B, Group 2) one father opined,

> Ezra: This is a situation that is an epidemic… it's a pandemic, that's just what it is. So, this is affecting every man. There ain't no Black, there ain't no White… this is every man who's involved in this system.

Hyperbole aside, what renders this process so harmful is the surreptitious plausible deniability baked into the legal framework, including CSC. The threshold for proving gendered-racial bias leaves aggrieved parties with the responsibility of proving conscious intent (i.e., confession or full disclosure), allowing for the disavowal of race being used as a (sub)conscious factor in the adjudication process (Brito et al., 2014). Fundamentally, the fathers in this study expressed a shared sense of their own unimportance within the CSC system, seemingly derived from a racialized, gendered, historical, and ongoing pattern of institutional harm, intended or not, levied against Black men.

(Blackened) Patriarchal Paradox: "[T]his is a woman's world."

Among study participants, the general consensus was that women/mothers were institutionally favored over, above, and against men/fathers. This collective perception and understanding contradicts the generalized notion that men—across the ethno-racial spectrum and institutional domains (e.g., law, labor, education, etc.)—are afforded structural power and privileges due to their masculinized gender. One father in a focus group (Study B, Group 1) was explicit about this belief, stating:

> Max: So, everything is against us. Every little corner we turn, it's against us, against, against, against; like we just ejaculated and had a baby. We didn't want to be doing this. So, you know that's crazy, it take two to tango.

In another exchange (Study B, Group 1), similar opinions regarding the (racialized) inversion of a gender-based privilege were offered, saying,

> Joshua: [R]emember, this is a woman's world, this is a woman's state… they don't care nothing about the man. Like you said, they just beat us down. They don't care about what we got to go through; they don't care if we got to pay bills. They don't care if we got to eat. [T]hey don't care if… we eat, got nothing; they don't care.
> Darryl: …We up there fighting for our lives in front of a judge that's already biased towards us and already looked at us as deadbeat fathers because we have such a trend about the stuff, and our fathers did it, but we trying to break the chain. But we can't

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> break the chain because the judge is still looking at us as racial profiling and as neglectful parents and as the man is the one that's not always taking care of his kids. But you give the woman food stamps, you give the woman Medicaid, and you give the woman daycare, and you give the woman a check, you give the woman housing…. Man everything under the sun, and you leave the man out there to drop, just drop; he ain't got no food, he ain't got no water or a place to lay his head, no nothing to throw out the window, nothing. But then…you want to sit up here and say how can we fix it. How? It's so lopsided.

Both respondents in this exchange invoked a set of racialized concepts that have historically been enacted against Black men. For them, experiences like racial profiling and use of the deadbeat father trope both possess direct influence over their material experiences within the CSC system and index their overall standing in society as Black men. Most strikingly, their invocation of these concepts is used to underscore the gender-based paradox that they are averring. By virtue of being Black men, they believe and think the CSC system—and additional public programs—both ignore their material interests while choosing to serve the needs of women/mothers over theirs.

Strikingly, no other theme in this study was imbued with the same weight as the idea of women/mothers being situated against (Black) men/fathers. Consequently, this reading of Black men's/fathers' thoughts and sentiments could reasonably lead one to infer that the CSC system may be contributing to a collectively emerging or active gender antagonism (i.e., gender war) between Black men/fathers and women/mothers (Stanton 2025).

To many participants, the CSC system seemingly enables women/mothers to weaponize the often-acerbic CSC process to punish fathers. Aside from women/mothers who receive federal and/or state assistance, and consequently, have little to no choice in the matter (Stanton 2025), this suggested claim is not without some justification given that the emerging scholarship concerning *legal and administrative aggression* may be disproportionately targeted against and experienced by men (Bates and Taylor, 2022). Legal and administrative aggression is the weaponization of various civil institutions, like the CSC system and law enforcement, to aggress against a particular person, often an ex-partner (Bates and Taylor, 2022).

One focus group respondent (Study B, Group 1) argued that "…they need to do an evaluation of the woman too, because some just do it (i.e., legal or administratively aggressive actions) out of spite." Another participant in a different focus group (Study B, Group 2) augmented this perspective, asserting the presumed generalizability of this gendered understanding, stating, "[t]hat's common sense too, that some of these women are bitter…that always you can be taking care of your business and she's still trying to fuck you [over]. You know what I mean." This feeling is reflected in another exchange during the same focus group session :

> Albert: I look at the old days. Like my daddy he got two kids, right? My mom's, my pops—my mom ain't putting my daddy on child support. Because like I always said, the women nowadays just, they bitter, they bitter and they feel like they're entitled to something
> Darryl: That's true…
> Albert: I look at the women nowadays and it's just like okay, "What could I [do] to hinder him?"

These excerpts, again, illustrate the complexity of the racialized patriarchal paradox, wherein feelings and thoughts about systematically being unseen and unheard due to being

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Black men reify perceptions, among some, that women, conversely, are contextually (i.e., bounded by the given situation) accorded both structural power and privileges. Additionally, women are thought to be afforded the capacity to weaponize their purported power and privilege. In some sense, participants' perspectives may be a consequence of SMTH (Sidanius et al., 2018; Sidanius et al., 2004). SMTH—the discriminatory targeting of racialized out-group males relative to out-group females—may result in Black men/-fathers in the CSC system experiencing more acts of gendered-racial discrimination relative to women. However, their understanding of their experiences may also be negating or trivializing the negative bias that (Black) women/mothers experience in the same system and other social service systems. Further empirical research is warranted to examine the validity of SMTH within the CSC system.

No Consequences

Participants were particularly vocal about the notion that women/mothers were not held to account in the way that men/fathers are, if at all. This belief was often foregrounded when participants narrated experiences that positioned the mother as the transgressor of CSC court orders—most notably due to custody issues involving accusations of *parental alienation* or *maternal gatekeeping*. Parental alienation, as a process and outcome, involves the manipulative use of children to disrupt, sever, or weaken the relationship one parent has with their child for the purpose of controlling or harming the targeted parent (Hine and Hine, 2022). Often related to paternal alienation, maternal gatekeeping involves the mother, as the primary caretaker/custodial parent, possessing the control to either inhibit or encourage father-child contact (Abdill 2018; Hamer 2001). The in-vivo use of "no consequences" as a descriptive subtheme partly embodies these concepts, further underscoring the idea that for racialized men the privileges of institutionalized patriarchy are largely foreclosed. Gary (Study B)—a former board member and current program specialist for a non-profit organization that offers fatherhood services—illustrates this understanding among Black fathers:

> Gary: [F]rom what I understand, like our current DA (District Attorney), um, he doesn't prosecute women that go against the court's orders, you know what I mean. So, you can file a complaint of contempt or whatever, but that's not necessarily going to go anywhere…. Like I say, um, I think it's an unwritten rule that that's… gonna' happen. And that's why it is happening, because it's no consequence behind that…. To say I had a child and the mother isn't letting me see the child, and even though I filed the proper paperwork; "Hey she's not letting me see the child." And she goes right in front of that judge, and the judge say, "You know what, we talked about this at the last court hearing that you had to let this man see his child," you know… and you didn't do that, now you got to go and sit down somewhere. Now you got to, you know what I mean? It's gotta' be some kind of reprimand for those kind[s] of issues and that's on both sides; it's not just on the father's side…. But as I been seeing it, it has been very lopsided.

Daniel (Study B), a service provider and father, had much to say about this issue—largely based on his own firsthand experiences in the CSC system—offering an institutional analysis:

> Daniel: [M]en wouldn't have a problem paying child support, if they weren't being stone-walled to be with their children…. [S]o the courts look at it as, "well you've got

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> to support your children" but men are saying "I want to support my children, but I want to see my children." And what you're telling me is that if I don't pay child support, you're gonna' send me to jail, but if she's refusing to let me see my children nothing happens to her. So it was this rift that's kind of… being created between dad and mom, because seemingly mom is getting everything she's asking for, when dad is getting nothing. Dad is giving, giving, giving, giving, and not getting anything in return.

Building upon the idea that the CSC system may be willfully or inadvertently contributing to an antagonistic gendered-racial milieu involving Black fathers, Daniel offers his analysis via advocacy, saying,

> Daniel: So, if the courts are going to be involved, then let the courts be involved on both sides of the house and not just on one…. Don't call me for child support and not call me to say, come get your kids as well. Or don't threaten me with prison for not paying child support but then don't threaten her with prison for not letting me see my kids. Like, let the enforcement be equal on both sides. Hold us accountable equally, hold us accountable to our children so that our children have the best opportunity to thrive.

At a basic level, what Gary and Daniel appear to be calling for is the intentional institutionalization of gender-equity as a principled practice and value in the CSC system. Simply put, "Hold us… [equally] accountable." At a more abstract level, however, the frustration these fathers and fatherhood practitioners express is grounded in the perception, in part due to their experiences, that the personhood of women/mothers is seemingly acknowledged while the personhood of Black men/fathers is not.

Adding to the irony of patriarchal paradox, Black men/fathers seemingly perceive women/mothers as structural and institutional benefactors via their feminized gender. In effect, for them, women are privileged, at least in the context of CSC and law enforcement. This thinking may have material implications. Daniel illustrates how this conundrum may harm the relationship between Black fathers and their children:

> Daniel: [B]ut more often than not, fathers will fall back, because they don't want to deal with the drama. So then what's heard is, "Well, he a deadbeat." He's not a deadbeat, he's trying to prevent problems, because if something happens, he likely is going to be the one that's going to get arrested. But if there's a fight that breaks out, he'll probably be the one that's going to get arrested, not her, even though she may have provoked it, she may have started it, you know…. Self-preservation is telling him, let me just stay away. When the kids get older, I'll go see the kids when they get older, when they have the opportunity to speak for themselves and, you know, do all that stuff. So, many times we are villainized unjustly and unnecessarily because people don't know all the ins-and-outs of what's going on.

This understanding, however, may more accurately reflect the contingency of intersectional subjectivities within the matrix of gendered-racialized structural power, wherein one group (e.g., Black women) may be more or less marginalized, given the circumstances of a particular context, relative to another (e.g., Black men) (Collins 1990; Rambert 2021). Underscoring the thematic point, the psycho-behavioral response among Black fathers to the stressors of their CSC experiences—though seemingly strategic and practical—may be adding to the challenges that strain their capacity to fully participate in their

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children's lives. This outcome is among the wide-ranging and diffuse effects of the CSC system on Black fathers.

Alienated Black Fatherhood: "How much of a father can I be?"

Participants' thoughts and feelings about their experiences often led to ruminations about the effects of their CSC involvement on their social, parental, and work life. For example, one father in a focus group (Study B, Group 2) offered insight into how some Black fathers are psychologically responding to their aggravation with the CSC system, saying:

> Brian: So look, I would rather not work, you know what I'm saying. I'm working my ass off and coming home, my check is $100, which could be $1,400 to $2,600 a week. Did you see you're taking all of this money and you ain't giving her nothing? This is absorbed state interest and blah, blah, blah, R&D filing fee, blah, blah, blah, right? And you wondering, oh, you want to call me deadbeat now, you know what I mean…. [W]hen you got that little money, what did you do with it? When you still calling me for money, do you understand…. Now you got to find me now. Now I'm going outside with this on my head as a Black man to try to survive. You know what I mean? I'm looking over my shoulder… from being hunted in these streets, you know what I mean? Because you know, wolves out here, they see your head down, you going through something, either you a target, mark, or something, right? I'm gonna' dig myself from the hole, sit here and try to wait it out, right…. [W]ell, how productive of a man am I now?

Amidst his criticism of the CSC, notions of criminal surveillance and abscondment are not so subtly suggested throughout his account. Feelings of being "target[ed]" or "mark [ed]" reflect the gendered-racialized trend within the U.S. legal system that has historically ensnared Black men. In fact, the pervasiveness of this legacy was present in the research process. Multiple fathers who participated in the focus groups told researchers that they were hesitant to participate because they wondered if law enforcement would be waiting for them at the designated location. They assumed that the focus groups were a trap where law enforcement would lay in wait at a space where men with child support orders would be gathering. One participant told us he had his buddy "scope it out" and then call him and tell him it was okay to come. This hearkens to a pattern of punishment as an institutional principle when dealing with Black men, rather than a commitment to context and blind justice (i.e., fairness). Another father, Mike, elaborated on the psycho-emotional impact:

> Mike: How much of a father can I be to these kids now, when I got this over my head? And on top of that, even if I show up at your (custodial parent's) door, it's like having a restraining order. I'm not authorized to visit my kids, it's… by the discretion of the parent. I'm a parent, you know what I mean? This is all frustrating. So, I'm looking at it like this, if you want to make this system work, you make this system understand what we are as men working for, and the only thing that a man I can tell you that's working and trying for is, to die happy and to be able to retire…. We can't retire. We got to find ways to work around the system. We can't own nothing…. You can buy a car… [but] it ain't your car.

Beyond extending the metaphors of criminality and surveillance ("having a restraining order"), Mike also invoked interrelated notions of stress, disempowerment, and reduced *parental efficacy* (i.e., the belief that a parent can actualize their parental role effectively).

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This illustrates the repressive influence that the CSC system can have on these and other life-course factors that contribute to the general mental health and parental confidence of CSC-involved Black fathers.

Nathaniel (Study A) opens a window into the dynamic mental and emotional processes that Black fathers employ, consciously and/or implicitly, when dealing with the CSC system, saying:

> Nathaniel: I mean something has to give with the child support, man… like that's a big thing man…. Just give us another way, work with us man, you know what I mean…. Or, you know, just give us a way to finally get out the hold man, you know what I mean…. You know, and it just makes us resent, you know, and I don't like feeling like that, man. I mean just give Black folks more opportunity man. Just, I mean, give everybody more opportunity. It's not really just about us, you know what I mean, like you got to be able to teach the others too, the other races. You know what I mean, like, we're not who you guys think we are, you know what I mean. Like, it's—I don't want to be confused for that cat with his pants hanging halfway off his ass and shit, talking like you got no damn sense, you know what I mean. Rude as hell, you know; I don't want to be associated with that. Yeah, we're both Black but I'm not him, you know what I mean. Like, if I had the means, you know, the—I don't know, it's a lot of work to do, I know that it's a lot of work to do.

Part cathartic reflection, institutional critique, and political advocacy, Nathaniel's use of the term "resent" stands out, indexing the residual effects that CSC participation can have on the emotional well-being of Black fathers. Most strikingly, however, was Nathaniel's allusion (i.e., "I don't want to be associated with that. Yeah, we're both black but I'm not him") toward what Kim (2014) regards as the *bi-polarity of Black men.* Grounded in a gendered-racialized respectability politics, the bi-polarity of Black men forcibly places them into two opposing stereotypes: the good Black man and the bad Black man—in the context of the CSC system, the good Black father and the bad Black father—both of which function to center and satisfy White supremacist sensibilities at the expense of the personhood and psycho-affective well-being of Black men.

Gary (Study B) adds further insight into how the CSC system may be having a compound negative effect on the mental health of Black fathers, operating as an added stressor in combination with multiple stressors across life-domains. He also offers an argument about the efficacy of fatherhood programs, and particularly programs with a CSC navigation component, suggesting the value and necessity of such efforts to address the particular needs of Black fathers involved in the CSC system:

> Gary: [W]hat I'm hearing from a lot of men of color especially, they say man, "It's hard just being a Black man in America." So now I got this (CSC) brought on and it just leads to a bunch of stress, you know. So, this navigation [program] is showing, you know, that listening and helping them get through that, you know, as far as the child support, and then just meeting them where they're at, is the thing.

Conclusion

Building on prior scholarship, we sought to both critically and theoretically explore the experiences, thoughts, and attitudes of a group of Black fathers and fatherhood program practitioners involved with the child support and custody system. Our findings provided deeper insight into our four guiding questions. First, in addressing the initial exploratory

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question, w*hat are Black men's/fathers' self-reported experiences with the child support and custody (CSC) system—along with associated state-support systems*, we determined that their understanding of their experiences and their perspectives generally reflect their standing in society as Black men. Black men's voices and perspectives—and the historical contexts that shape them—continue to go unrecognized, thereby situating them as uniquely challenged within the CSC system. We regard this as Black personhood denied, wherein the reciprocal recognition of their life-circumstances and self-meaning (i.e., ontology) as a father, in the context of CSC, is systematically denied.

Second, addressing the guiding question, *what identifiable effects, if any, does the CSC system—and associated state-support systems (e.g., section-8 housing, financial subsidy [welfare], etc.)—have on Black men's/fathers' psycho-emotional wellbeing*, we learned that the cumulative effects of CSC participation often engendered negative socioemotional outcomes for Black men/fathers. For instance, participants spoke of their frustration with the CSC system and the impact that it had on their psychological and emotional well-being, highlighting their expressed doubts about their capacity to parent, financially provide for themselves, and/or feeling criminalized or surveilled.

Third, to the question, *what influential effects, if any, does the CSC system—and associated state-support systems (e.g., section-8 housing, financial subsidy [welfare], etc.)—have on Black men's/fathers' contemporary attitudes and understanding of gender relations*, we interpreted their perspectives concerning additional life-domains like gender relations or their parental role as fathers as being affected in challenging ways. Specifically, participants indicated a sense of institutional bias levied against them as Black men, averring that their gender counterparts—that is, women/mothers—are somehow systemically privileged relative to them. Themes like "no consequences" for mothers who consciously alienate their children from their father without repercussion, or the notion that women/mothers are almost intuitively accorded state support (e.g., housing) while (Black) men/fathers are seemingly ignored even though they present similar needs, were highlighted among the participants.

We regard these experiences as instances of a patriarchal paradox wherein—contrary to conventional thinking regarding patriarchy—racialized out-group men (i.e., Black men) are both systematically harmed and denied the power and privileges accrued to racialized in-group men who are endemic to the hegemonic order. This analysis mirrors the subordinate male targeted hypothesis, wherein CSC-involved Black men/fathers are not just experiencing unique instances of institutional harm, but *maybe* more harm generally, compared to women/mothers. The residual effects of a patriarchal paradox, however, may lead to a particular perception among some men that women/mothers are ascribed institutional power and influence and may erase perception of the ways that the CSC system negatively affects or harms women/mothers, namely low-income and/or Black women/mothers.

Lastly, although not absolute, our findings regarding the question, *in what ways do Black men/fathers make sense of the relationship between CSC, and associated state-support systems, and their race—namely, their Blackness*, indicated that most participants were explicitly mindful of how their race (i.e., Blackness) factored into how they were perceived and treated in the CSC system. Some Black fathers in this study anchored their understanding in a historical analysis of race, offering a historical-material basis for how they understood why Black fathers are generally treated differently. In effect, for many participants, given that Black men have been historically treated inequitably throughout civil society then it stands to reason that this tendency would naturally extend into civil domains like the CSC system and other social services. We also found, however, that this logic was not universal. While some participants indicated that race impacted CSC treatment of all Black parents—for example, "they…set this up for these Black women to be pushed into these low-income housing apartments and segregating them from… their kids, parents, which is a Black

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man"—other participants circumscribed the effects of race in the CSC system to the treatment of Black men, or emphasized the influence of gender over and above race altogether.

Policy and Research Implications

Results from this study highlight the importance of offering programmatic support for Black men/fathers that, as mentioned by one participant, "[meet]…them where they're at." Specifically, fatherhood and CSC navigation programs may be able to effectively address the unique contextual circumstances and cultural sensibilities of Black men/fathers while offering critical political and legal education about court processes and parental rights. Such targeted support may assist Black men/fathers individually and, more importantly, offer opportunities to coalesce and mobilize as a political bloc.

Moreover, fatherhood advocates, via fatherhood navigation programs, may be well positioned to challenge the perpetuation of gendered-racial bias by placing the onus on the CSC system and not the fathers (and mothers) who maneuver through it. Gendered-racial equity in the context of the CSC system will not germinate or operate within a vacuum. Consequently, knowledge about the irreducible importance of Black fathers may be best cultivated as an on-the-ground organizing and social service endeavor. However, given the novelty of these programs, more research and evaluation studies are warranted to further identify their effectiveness or lack thereof.

Lastly, there is currently no national database capturing the demographic variance within the CSC system (Stanton 2025). While prior research identifies racial and ethnic disproportionality and disparity in child support (Kim et al., 2024), the lack of comprehensive national data precludes definitive conclusions related to racial gaps in CSC experiences and outcomes nationally. Instituting a national research framework and database to capture population-level demographic data would dramatically expand opportunities to further identify patterns or relationships among interrelated factors like race, gender, and socioeconomic status. Equally important as part of a comprehensive research agenda is to document the personalized experiences of CSC-involved people across interpersonal and collective contexts. Collecting such data would allow for deeper understanding and policy that is responsive to the needs of CSC-involved people across individual, community, institutional, and even national contexts.

Strengths and Limitations

Given the dearth of culturally-informed scholarship regarding the contextual lives of Black men/fathers in the CSC system—particularly, scholarship that centers their actual thoughts and voices—adding to this body of knowledge via a gendered-racialized analysis is an important contribution to the literature. Moreover, by expanding the domains of interest beyond the CSC system itself, our work was able to establish an emerging conceptual network connecting the CSC to other areas of Black fathers' lifeworlds.

Future research studies should employ diverse methodological approaches to further explore, examine, and/or test the results of this study. For instance, employing an (auto) ethnographic approach to inquiry would allow for a more thorough immersion in the life context of the participant(s), which should surface additional nuance and possibly validate posited theorizations and/or claims offered in this paper. In this instance, solely relying on the narrativized experiences of research participants limited our capacity to capture highly contextualized data.

Additionally, research concerning the experiences, perspectives, and knowledge of socioeconomically stable Black fathers engaged in the CSC system is virtually absent.

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Research centering middle- and high-income Black fathers—both divorced and never-married—in the CSC system is needed to understand the breadth and diversity of experiences within the CSC. Similarly, centering the experiences of Black queer, CSC-involved parents should be given priority due to the virtual absence of this population in the body of research knowledge. This study provides a critical foundation for further scholarship by scaffolding the significance of gendered-racial meaning-making in the institutional context and its indelible influence on the lives and wellbeing of Black men/fathers.

Supplementary material

The supplementary material for this article can be found at http://doi.org/10.1017/S1742058X26100228.

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