AFRICAN AMERICAN FAMILY DYNAMICS AS PERCEIVED BY FAMILY MEMBERS

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The need to study culture-specific family patterns is becoming well recognized among family therapists (Fullilove, Carter, & Eversley, 1986; Kazak, McCannell, Adkins, Himmelberg, & Grace, 1989; McGoldrick, Pearce, & Giordano, 1982; Spaights, 1990). Although cognizant of the risk that any attempt to identify general patterns may be misused in the form of stereotypes, therapists also recognize that a prerequisite to understanding a particular family is consideration of the context in which the family operates. Culture is one aspect of that context.

There is likewise a need to identify common patterns among African American families (Boyd-Franklin, 1989a; Brinson, 1992; Jones, 1983; Littlejohn-Blake & Darling, 1993; Spaights, 1990). Without minimizing the individual differences and variations among African American families, recognition of predominant patterns provides therapists with a frame of reference, a set of hypotheses, from which to understand a particular family.

Criticisms of the greater part of current research on African American families include the lack of empirical data (Boles & Curtis-Boles, 1986) and the tendency to compare African American families with European American families, implying that the latter provide the norms for measurement. This comparison is further compromised by the lack of controls for socioeconomic levels (Fine, Schwebel, & Myers, 1987; Julian, McKenry, & McKelvey, 1994; Lyles & Carter, 1982; Wilson, 1984).

What has been recommended as a better approach to studying African American family dynamics is that of using family life in the African cultural tradition as the basis for comparison (Fine et al., 1987; Fullilove et al., 1986; Littlejohn-Blake & Darling, 1993; Nobles, 1974; Staples, 1974). This approach uses the family's heritage as a frame of reference rather than arbitrarily assuming European family patterns to be the norm for all cultures. Because the stated purpose of multicultural research is to develop a greater understanding and appreciation of each culture (Locke, 1992; Sue & Sue, 1990), methods that will allow researchers to begin with that culture's frame of reference seem inherently preferable.

The research described here follows the recommendations offered above. African American men and women were asked to express their perceptions of the dynamics in their family of origin by completing the Family of Origin Scale (Hovestadt, Anderson, Piercy, Cochran, & Fine, 1985). The empirical data gathered will be compared with African American family dynamics described in the literature, particularly with those patterns of family life attributed to the African tradition.

LITERATURE REVIEW: AFRICAN AMERICAN FAMILIES

Culturally sensitive researchers recognize that there is no such thing as *the* African American family, that there is variation among African American families just as there is in any culture. Nevertheless, Afrocentric writers have identified five major characteristics as common to African American family functioning: (a) extended family kinship networks, (b) egalitarian and adaptable family roles, (c) strong religious orientation, (d) strong education and work ethic, and (e) flexible and strong coping skills (Boyd-Franklin, 1989b; Hill, 1972; Nobles, 1972). Each of these attributes will be considered further, along with the relevant research.

EXTENDED FAMILY KINSHIP NETWORKS

Extended family networks exist in several forms among African American families. One is the three-generation household, a struc-

ture that allows for pooling financial and human resources for the care of children and the elderly, as well as for the emotional support of parents (Barbarin, 1983; Barnes, 1985). Another is that of family members choosing to live in separate households but close proximity to each other, so that daily interaction is not only possible but likely (Wilson, 1984). And a third structure quite common in African American communities is that of fictive kin. Here, families establish familial relationships with people who are not related by blood and who may or may not live with the nuclear family (Billingsley, 1968; Sudarkasa, 1993). Friends or neighbors are likely candidates for fictive kin relationships and may be given kinship titles, such as aunt or uncle (Scott & Black, 1989).

The predominant perception among African Americans regarding the emotional bondedness of their families is that they are very close (Rotheram-Borus & Phinney, 1990). Using data from a national survey of Black Americans done in 1979-1980, Hatchett and Jackson (1993) reported that "there is an overwhelming perception of family solidarity among Black Americans" (p. 98).

ADAPTABLE FAMILY ROLES

Male-female roles in African American families are generally described as egalitarian and flexible (Barbarin, 1983; McAdoo, 1993). Decisions are shared, as are the responsibilities for financial support, the household, and child care, according to abilities and opportunities rather than gender. Parenting roles may be shared not only between mothers and fathers but with grandparents and other adult relatives, fictive kin, and older siblings (Barbarin, 1983; Boyd-Franklin, 1989a; Scott & Black, 1989). Although, as Boyd-Franklin (1989b) points out, this may mean that the boundaries for some families become too blurred for effective functioning, this characteristic is generally seen as a strength with obvious advantages for handling crises.

STRONG RELIGIOUS ORIENTATION

According to Dubois (1898), "The church is the only social institution of Negroes which started in the African forest and survived

slavery" (p. 6). Historically, the church has been a major indigenous institution central to the community life of African Americans (Barbarin, 1983; Barnes, 1985; Boyd-Franklin, 1989b; Richardson, 1991). It has provided a forum for self-expression, leadership, and emotional and material support. In essence, the church is an extension of the family, the "quintessential kin network" (Scott & Black, 1989, p. 22) that links its member families together.

The Black church teaches values that support and sustain African American families in the face of adversity: mutual caring, shared responsibility, and trust in a higher good more powerful than any evil (Hill, 1972). Thus, interdependence is a dynamic that both contributes to and is supported by a strong religious orientation.

EDUCATION AND WORK ETHIC

African American parents generally hope that their children will surpass them socioeconomically (Hines & Boyd-Franklin, 1982). They tend to believe that education and hard work are the necessary vehicles, particularly in light of the societal barriers to upward mobility for African Americans (Boyd-Franklin, 1989b; Coleman, 1986; Hill, 1972).

To promote these values, African American parents teach their children to share family responsibilities, involve them in household and child-rearing tasks, and encourage high academic performance and ambitious career goals (Barnes, 1985; Hines & Boyd-Franklin, 1982; Jordan, 1991). They may also encourage some members of the family to contribute financially to the cost of another's education or seek mental health services when a child is not achieving in school.

FLEXIBLE COPING SKILLS

The ability to survive and to cope with hardship is consistent among African American families (Barbarin, 1983; Boyd-Franklin, 1989b). Barbarin (1983) attributes this ability to a combination of other factors: recognition of racism, which reduces self-

blame; religious faith; flexibility of family roles; extended family structures; paradoxical control attributions (external locus of control accompanied by high levels of personal efficacy); and reliance on informal community support networks. That is, a combination of the four major characteristics previously described results in the fifth characteristic: strong coping skills.

In summary, despite individual differences and variations among African American families, dynamics that predominate include extended family kinship networks, egalitarian and adaptable family roles, strong religious orientations, strong work and education ethics, and flexible and strong coping skills.

METHOD

PARTICIPANTS

Participants were 84 African American students from graduate or undergraduate classes at two community colleges and three universities in Texas and California. There were 32 males and 52 females, ranging in age from 18 to 53 ($M = 24.29$, $SD = 7.52$). All participation was voluntary with no remuneration.

INSTRUMENT

Participants completed the Family of Origin Scale developed by Hovestadt et al. (1985). This is a 40-item self-report instrument designed to measure "self-perceived levels of health in one's family of origin" (Hovestadt et al., 1985, p. 287). Participants respond to each item on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly agree* to 5 = *strongly disagree*). The scale yields scores on the two major dimensions of autonomy and intimacy, as well as five subscales for each of these. Autonomy is broken down to include Clarity of Expression, Responsibility, Respect for Others, Openness to Others, and Acceptance of Separation and Loss; Intimacy is composed of Range of Feelings, Mood and Tone, Conflict Resolution, Empathy,

and Trust. The authors report several studies providing evidence of empirical validity and a 2-week test-retest reliability of .97.

STATISTICAL PROCEDURES

Because the purpose of this study is to compare the empirical data with clinical and theoretical descriptions of African American family dynamics, only descriptive statistics will be used.

RESULTS

Each subscale of the Family of Origin Scale was measured by four items, each of which could be scored from a low of 1 to a high of 5 points, so that the highest possible score for any subscale is 20. The names of the subscales, their meanings, and the means and standard deviations obtained from this study are presented in Table 1. As noted in Table 1, the mean score for autonomy from this sample was 73.19, and the mean for intimacy was 75.93, yielding a mean total score of 149.12.

DISCUSSION

NORMATIVE SAMPLE

The total score "indicates the degree of perceived health in the family of origin" (Hovestadt et al., 1985, p. 290). The mean total score of 149.12 for this sample is consistent with that found by Hovestadt et al. (1985) in their 1980 normative sample, for which the mean total score of African Americans was 147.0. Thus, it seems that African Americans view their family functioning with about the same degree of appreciation today as they did 15 years ago. It is also evident that because the highest possible score is 200, the mean generated by these respondents indicates a predominantly positive view of their family dynamics. They tend to see their families as more healthy than not in their daily interactional patterns.

TABLE 1
African American Perceptions of the Family of Origin

Construct	Meaning	M	SD
Autonomy concept		73.19	13.84
Clarity of expression	Thoughts and feelings are clear in the family	14.73	3.11
Responsibility	Members claim responsibility for own actions	14.33	3.16
Respect for others	Members are allowed to speak for themselves	15.06	3.66
Openness to others	Members are receptive to one another	14.82	3.12
Acceptance of separation/loss	Separation and loss are dealt with openly	14.25	3.33
Intimacy concept		75.93	13.47
Range of feelings	Members express a wide range of feelings	16.00	3.33
Mood and tone	Warm, positive atmosphere exists	16.39	3.17
Conflict resolution	Normal conflicts are resolved	14.13	3.66
Empathy	Members are sensitive to one another	15.24	3.13
Trust	Human nature is seen as basically good	14.12	3.12

AFROCENTRIC LITERATURE

The degree to which these data support or contradict the current theoretical and clinical literature on African American families also bears consideration. Discussion will be focused on the two primary constructs of autonomy and intimacy.

The data indicate that the African Americans responding to this survey perceive their families of origin as ones in which autonomy is fostered and supported. The mean score was 73.19 out of a possible 80 points, and on each of the five subscales for autonomy, with a possible score of 20, the mean score was above 14. That is, African Americans in this study believe that in their families of origin, there is a clear sense of individuality, shown by patterns of accepting separation and loss, personal responsibility, varying opinions, individual rights, and clear communication.

Although Coleman (1986) suggests that there are struggles with the issue of autonomy among the families of African American male status offenders, the more prevalent view in the literature is consistent with the empirical data of this study. Jordan (1991) describes the development of self-reliance, independence, and a

sense of responsibility as typical developmental tasks for African American females. According to Lewis (1972), child-rearing in African American families is characterized by a view of the individual as powerful, self-willed, and active with respect to the context in which he or she lives. The strong education and work ethic, the tendency to teach children to accept increasing responsibility as they mature, and the training in coping skills would all contribute to personal autonomy (Boyd-Franklin, 1989b; Hill, 1972).

African American respondents rated their families of origin highly on the construct of intimacy, as well. With a possible score of 80, their mean score was 75.93. Again, each of the subscales had an average of 14 or higher out of a possible 20 points. Based on their responses to the five subscales, respondents saw their families as strongest in warmth and expressiveness and lowest on trust.

These findings, too, support the hypotheses of Afrocentric researchers. Hatchett and Jackson (1993) write of the "overwhelming perception of family solidarity among Black Americans" (p. 98). The bond of the extended family, including fictive kin and the church community (Boyd-Franklin, 1989b; Hill, 1972), is described in a way that suggests an atmosphere of warmth and nurturance in African American families.

Billingsley (1968) identifies an expressive lifestyle as one of the defining characteristics of African Americans. According to Ho's (1987) interpretation of the work of Lewis (1972), "inhibitions on the expressions of one's uniqueness are regarded as undesirable or hurtful" (p. 184). And one of the gifts attributed to the Black church is that it provides a forum for authentic self-expression (Barnes, 1985).

The greater caution with regard to trust is also recognized in the literature. Grier and Cobbs (1968), suggested that African Americans may need to develop a "healthy paranoia" to function effectively in predominantly White America. That is, there needs to be an honest recognition that discrimination still happens. Jordan (1991) agrees.

In summary, the empirical data gathered in this study support the literature that is Afrocentric in nature. Without denying the fact of individual differences, it can be said that the predominant interac-

tional patterns in African American families are perceived by their members to give strong support to both autonomy and intimacy. Furthermore, African American adults perceive their family of origin dynamics to be primarily positive.

LIMITATIONS

The limitations of this study come from several factors: (a) the use of a self-report measure, (b) the nature of the survey questions, (c) sample limitations, and (d) quantitative data. Each bears consideration.

Because the Family of Origin Scale is a self-report measure, it is subject to all of the limitations of such instruments. These include the various forms of response bias: tendencies to be overly severe or overly positive in one's perceptions, tendencies toward the mean, and tendencies to give what the respondent believes are the socially preferable answers. Despite such limitations, however, the scale has been recognized as a valid research instrument (Capps, Searight, Russo, Temple, & Rogers, 1993; Mazer, Hovestadt, & Brashear, 1990).

Another limitation is the solicitation of global rather than specific information regarding family functioning. Respondents are asked to describe their family interactions without specifying differences that might exist between interactions with parents versus those with siblings or between interactions with mothers versus those with fathers. Although this global perception is more consistent with much of the literature to which the data are being compared, the results offer less clarity than might be useful for clinical settings.

The selection of respondents poses further limitations. All respondents were volunteers, and all were either undergraduate or graduate students in Texas or California. These facts leave unanswered the questions of whether those who volunteered to participate did so because they felt good about their families, perhaps better than those who chose not to participate, and whether members of the respondents' peer groups who are not involved in higher education would express similar perceptions of their families of origin.

Finally, the limited geographic representation poses the question of whether there might be regional differences in response patterns.

Finally, the collection of quantitative rather than qualitative data poses limitations. Littlejohn-Blake and Darling (1993) have questioned the extent to which quantitative data can convey an accurate understanding of the way of life of a group of people, as well as the extent to which researchers can go beyond the data. For that reason, the data collected in this study were used only for the sake of comparison with the qualitative descriptions in the literature. Even in that, the conclusions must be limited to the constructs measured by the Family of Origin Scale so that no comparisons can be made regarding other dimensions of African American family life—such as role flexibility, strong spirituality, and flexibility of coping strategies—identified by researchers using qualitative data.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

African American respondents in this study presented strongly positive perceptions of the dynamics in their family of origin. They view their families as warm, nurturing, expressive, and supportive of individual autonomy. These findings are consistent with Afrocentric descriptions of African American families but must be used with an openness to variations among individuals and families. They are presented for the sake of contextual understanding only, never to justify stereotyping.

Additional research of this nature—collecting empirical data from African American respondents to support or challenge the observations of theoreticians and clinicians—is warranted. The current study could be improved on by working with a larger, more heterogeneous sample, one that is more representative of the African American population. It could also be extended by developing and using an instrument that specifies which family relationships are being described, as well as one that measures perceptions of the other characteristics identified in qualitative studies as common to African American families.

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