

## The Life Course Perspective and African American Adolescent Development in the Family

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### Abstract

*African Americans remain disproportionately represented in the low-income population, and there is a sizable literature addressing the influence of these circumstances on family well-being. There is, however, an increasing need for the integration of the life course perspective into research on economically disadvantaged African American families as they continue to be vulnerable to deleterious mental health outcomes and lower life chances. This article discusses the tenets of the life course perspective followed by a summary of the research on economically disadvantaged African American families and their adolescent youth's developmental outcomes. In addition, new emerging areas of research are discussed. In conclusion, future directions of research on this population are addressed.*

For decades there was limited empirical research on family processes and adolescent outcomes specific to the African American population. Much of the research conducted in these areas focused on small, non-representative samples of Caucasian families, usually of middle class status. Based on these results, limited assumptions can be made about the generalizability of findings. In the 1990's, however, developmental psychologist Vonnie McLoyd (1998) posited a theoretical framework which integrated the life course perspective developed by Glen Elder (1999) in his study of rural white families during the Great Depression, an adaptation of Bronfenbrenner's ecological perspective (1986). McLoyd's framework identified the distinctive challenges faced by individuals and families living in persistent poverty and the possibility of differences based on race and ethnicity. This framework provided a link between research in various disciplines focusing on socioeconomic status, economic

hardship, family processes, parental mental health and the impact of all of these factors on African American children and adolescents.

There are four primary tenets guiding Elder's life course perspective: 1) the context in which people live, 2) the timing and order of transitions in their lives, 3) their relationships with other individuals in their environment, and 4) the individual choices made throughout the course of their development (Elder, 1999). By linking structural changes to familial factors, which in turn lead to individual level effects, the life course perspective provides a useful framework for studying the impact of poverty and economic strains on outcomes for children and their families. Elder's work specifically examined the impact of sudden economic loss on a sample of white families during the Great Depression positing that: 1) sudden economic loss is more detrimental to families than chronic poverty, 2) economic hardship leads to psychological distress among parents, 3) psychological distress increases conflict and leads to more punitive and harsh parenting, which in turn 4) results in externalized behavior problems for adolescent boys and internalized problems for adolescent girls (Conger et al., 1992, 1993). While this research was meaningful and important in the field of poverty research, it was not necessarily generalizable to the larger population or to minority families who may experience poverty in ways distinct from those of middle class white families in the 1940's. The important tenets of the life course perspective, however, have guided growing research on family processes affected by poverty.

In a theory refuting Elder's findings *and* expanding the theory to include minority families, McLoyd (1998) argues that chronic poverty has a more deleterious impact on cognitive, academic, behavioral, and socio-emotional outcomes than intermittent poverty *and* that this effect is more pronounced for African Americans than for whites when children experience poverty in the first five years of life (McLoyd, 1998). While there has been a marked demographic shift, with more African Americans being characterized as middle class, African Americans remain one of the most disproportionately represented groups living in poverty,

with a poverty rate hovering at 24 percent (U.S. Census, 2007). These rates may have been exacerbated by the current economic downturn in the U.S. economy. Furthermore, even after taking income into account, African Americans are more likely to be proximate to high crime areas and attend lower quality schools with fewer resources (Sampson et al., 2002). African Americans are also more likely to live in economically isolated areas, with higher rates of crime, overcrowding, and increased risks of health problems due to environmental factors such as industrial pollution (see Rankin and Quane, 2002 for review; Zenk et al., 2005; Geronimus, 2000). Within this environment, African American youth face challenges and risks specific to these conditions that may be exacerbated within their family context.

Parents living in poverty are more likely to have physical health problems as well as elevated symptoms of psychological distress (i.e., depression) brought on by the increased occurrence of negative life events associated with poverty. These negative life events and declines in parental psychological well-being are highly associated with parenting behaviors including harsh, punitive, inconsistent punishment and lower levels of emotional warmth and supportive parenting (Gutman, McLoyd, & Tokoyawa, 2005). Such parenting behaviors, in turn, potentially exacerbate the risk to the mental health and development of children already associated with poverty. Parents who are able to cope with stressful situations effectively, however, can provide protective buffers for their children (Goosby, 2007).

Empirical research from various disciplines has explored the role of families in the outcomes of youth from early childhood through adolescence. Much of the emphasis has been on the well-being of children in early childhood, as this sets children on a particular trajectory based on their exposure to risk factors such as prenatal health, maternal education, family structure, neighborhood quality, and level of income (Goosby & Cheadle, 2009; Morenoff, 2003; Duncan, & Brooks-Gunn 1997). The focus of research on adolescence tends to be on school context and peer influence, as the

influence of family declines in middle childhood and adolescence. There is, however, a body of research showing that families remain important in contributing to adolescent well-being and outcomes. Specifically, parental mental health and, to a lesser extent, parenting behaviors remain significant mediators of the relationship between poverty and youth outcomes.

The stressors associated with economic hardship have a deleterious impact on both parents and their children. Parental mental health (i.e., depression) and psychological resources such as mastery (i.e., locus of control) and self-esteem are mediators of the relationship between poverty and economic hardship on the one hand and youth well-being on the other (Goosby, 2007; Nievar, & Luster, 2006). Research focusing on parental mental health and child well-being has generally focused on mothers, as they tend to be the primary caregivers in the household, and, in many large scale surveys of families, data is more likely to be collected from and about mothers rather than fathers.

In research on samples of low-income African American parents and their adolescent children, economic stressors including maternal unemployment and work interruption have been found to indirectly affect adolescent socio-emotional functioning through maternal psychological distress, which in turn leads to more frequent harsh and inconsistent punishment of the adolescent (Conger et al., 2002; McLoyd et al., 1994). Financial strain and neighborhood stress also impact maternal distress among African American single mothers, leading to declines in positive interactions with their adolescent children and an increase in parent and adolescent reports of parent-child conflict (Gutman et al., 2005). These relationships do not appear to differ based on the gender of the child.

An additional dimension of the parenting context is whether or not both parents are present in low-income families. There is a rapidly growing literature on fatherhood in social science literature, especially focusing on non-resident fathers among African American families, answering the call for more detailed research on the role

of fathers in families (McLoyd et al., 2000). There is evidence that fathers play an important role in the development of both African American males *and* females. Furthermore, father presence has key implications for youth engagement in risk behaviors including early sexual initiation, drug and alcohol use, timely high school completion, and fertility outcomes (for review see Amato, 2000).

Within McLoyd's (1990) discussion of poverty and family processes among African American families, the impact of father involvement on children's well-being in the context of economic hardship is dependent on the quality of the relationship of the parents and their relationship with their children. Moreover, non-resident African American fathers with more education are more likely to interact regularly with their children's regardless of gender (King et al., 2004), which has implications for familial protective mechanisms for black youth outcomes. Specifically, in a study addressing protective factors for adolescent drug use and behavioral problems, time spent with fathers (even those who are non-resident) was found to be associated with *lower* levels of behavior problems for sons and less psychological distress for daughters (Salem, Zimmerman, & Notaro, 1998). Moreover, adult African American children report they feel emotionally closer to their non-resident fathers and that this relationship was supported by their mothers relatively more so than for their white peers (Thomas, Krampe, & Newton, 2008), demonstrating there are potentially distinct adaptive cultural repertoires among African American families and how they manage father involvement.

Empirical research has found marked differences in parenting behaviors between African Americans and Caucasians, with African Americans exhibiting lower levels of emotionally supportive behaviors and more instances of harsh and inconsistent punishments (McLoyd 1998; 1990). It is important to note, however, that African Americans bear the brunt of the most extreme levels of poverty relative to most other groups and that the psychological distress associated with poverty is highly correlated with these types of parenting behaviors. In addition, it is difficult to establish causal

inference between parental mental health and parenting behaviors and child well-being. Some longitudinal studies have found that children who exhibit escalating behavior problems over time have parents who increase harsh and inconsistent punishment as behavior problems increase (Kim et al., 2003). Also, increases in parent-child conflict and declines in parental monitoring are associated with *children's* depressive symptoms, while decreases in parent-child conflict and declines in monitoring are positively associated with *parents'* depressive symptoms (Sagrestano et al., 2003). These findings demonstrate the importance of addressing parental mental health as a way of altering parenting behaviors that potentially exacerbate the impact of economic stress on child and adolescent outcomes.

McLoyd (1990, 1998) argues that poverty and economic loss adversely affect adolescents' socio-emotional well-being through their impact on parents' behavior towards their children. Although most research focuses on the detrimental impact of poor maternal mental health on child outcomes, there is evidence that low income mothers who exhibit healthy psychological functioning engage in adaptive coping behaviors that can buffer their children from the negative effects of economic hardship (Goosby, 2007; Taylor & Roberts, 1995). In addition, adolescents from low income families with positive maternal relationships have fewer depressive symptoms and mental health problems than those with poor-quality maternal relationships (McLoyd, Jarayatne, Ceballo, & Borquez, 1994).

### **Future Directions**

In addressing the challenges faced by youth in the context of poverty, African American youth in particular, it is important not only to assess risk factors but also to identify buffers and protective factors that can lead to more positive outcomes for youth in spite of their background of economic disadvantage. As mentioned above, parenting behavior that is harsh and punitive, while potentially exacerbating problem behavior especially among adolescents

(McLoyd, 1998), may be a result of parents' feeling unsafe in their neighborhood, witnessing crimes, or facing additional stressors related to economic hardships and their stressful environment (Cauce et al., 2003). Ethnographic research conducted with the most disadvantaged families has, however, identified parenting strategies that lead to protective mechanisms for their children.

Jarrett (1997, 1999) identifies several strategies low-income parents use to protect their children from stressors and negative neighborhood and peer influences. The first strategy, *child monitoring*, consists of either isolating children from problematic peers or having family members or friends accompany children during certain activities. The second strategy is *parental resource seeking*, in which parents actively identify areas considered safe for their children to engage in activities with supportive peers and neighbors and, in some cases, more advantaged family members. Finally, *in-home learning*, a strategy closely associated with children's achievement and cognitive stimulation, may also benefit children in actively communicating with their parents about things they learn in school. With this strategy, parents reinforce topics students learn and reward their children for making good grades. While a causal link has not been established, these findings clearly demonstrate the existence of protective strategies that parents can use in high risk environments.

Additional empirical research has shown that the quality of the relationship between adolescent children and their mothers may also buffer risk factors associated with economic hardship (Cauce et al., 2003). Gonzales et al. (1996), in a series of studies examining resilience among African American adolescents, found several protective factors based on the mother-child relationship. First, maternal warmth and emotional support buffered adolescents from the effects of identifying with delinquent peer groups and father absence, two factors highly correlated with adolescent externalizing behavior problems. Second, when adolescents identified their neighborhood as more risky, they did better in school when their mothers exhibited high levels of restrictive control; the opposite was

true when adolescents identified their neighborhood as less risky. Finally, Gonzales et al. (1996) found a curvilinear relationship between parenting behavior and externalizing adolescent behavior: parenting that maintained a balance between harshness and lenience was most effective for adolescents living in risky environments (Mason et al., 1996). While these behaviors are important in helping identify protections for low-income adolescents, protective parenting behaviors cannot completely insulate children and adolescents from risky, dangerous neighborhoods and schools.

There are additional stressors specific to African Americans and other ethnic minorities that must be addressed in order to alleviate challenges faced by youth in risky contexts. Urban African American youth living in low-income environments do not develop independent of racial discrimination, a factor that is detrimental to mental health and physical health, potentially leading to general psychological distress, depression, and anxiety (Kessler, Michelson, & Williams, 1999; Williams, & Collins 2002). Racial socialization is associated with the development of a positive racial identity that creates a sense of awareness and pride, as well as preparing children for instances of discrimination they may experience (Phinney, 1990; Sellers, & Shelton, 2003). Racial socialization is defined as parenting practices that provide information about membership in a racial group including: "1) personal and group identity, 2) intergroup and individual relationships, and 3) position in the social hierarchy" (Thornton, Chatters, Taylor, & Allen, 1990, pp. 401-402). This is an adaptive coping strategy that could be advantageous for African American youth regardless of social strata.

Cynthia Garcia Coll and her colleagues (1996) posited a complex integrative framework within which racial socialization occurs at the family level and provides coping mechanisms not only to deal with racism but also to improve cognitive and emotional development. Within this theoretical framework, the emphasis on the minority's placement within the larger social structure of the United States is essential to the ultimate development of minority youth. Specifically, due to the legacy of racism and

discrimination, African Americans are more likely to be segregated economically, residentially, and socially. As a result, they develop coping and adaptive strategies including racial socialization, kinship support networks, religious institutional support, and values related to educational attainment, cultural legacies, and coping with racism (Garcia Coll et al., 1996). While there is a growing literature addressing the relationship between racism, perceived discrimination and mental health, there is still a need for more empirical research integrating the idea of racial socialization as a protective factor among the most disadvantaged African Americans as a way of potentially alleviating some of the challenges associated with economic disadvantage.

Although there are instances of resilience among African Americans who succeed in spite of the odds, this does not alleviate the need for addressing challenges and protective factors at the family level. People in poverty are more likely to exhibit high levels of psychological distress, which may hamper their ability to parent effectively. In order to address the socio-emotional needs of African American children living in poverty, it is important to address the psychological needs of their parents as well. Because the life course perspective orients research towards the importance of integrating individual and family level processes into a larger structural context while taking into account dynamic changes in that context, research studying economically disadvantaged minority families could benefit from a longitudinal approach to understanding how African American families grow and change over time.

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