Review of Literature on Resiliency in Black Families: Implications for the 21st Century

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Introduction

In 1988, Charles Wille in explaining the present plight of Black families began with the statement, "The Black family is still around." Given the history of Blacks in America that statement was somewhat paradoxical. On the one hand, it must have been a surprise for the pessimists that Black families were still around (Moynihan, 1965), and yet on the other it was probably no surprise to those who were ethically subjective in their studies of Black families (Billingsley, 1992; Denby, 1996; Hill, 1999; Hill et al., 1993; Logan, 1996; McAdoo, 1998; Smith, 1996). The literature is replete with references of the strengths and resiliency in Black families (Genero, 1999; Hill, 1971; Logan, 1996). Yet, in spite of the tremendous advances of Black families, in this the twilight of the 20th century, they continue to be beset by a plethora of social and familial difficulties. However, looking at the history of a people who have survived and thrived in the context of 400 years of slavery; being used as a pawn in a civil war; years of "Jim Crow;" decades of segregation, marginalization, and limited opportunities; and continued intentional and unintentional racism, to only mention a few ceilings, it is not surprising that there are those who are confident about the future of Black families (Christian, 1995). Two important questions to consider are, "How are Black Families Resilient?" and "Are they resilient enough for the challenges of the 21st century?" This paper represents a literature review on resiliency in Black families, a report on the status of Black families, considerations of future challenges, and implications for the next century.

Defining Resiliency

After years of focusing on pathology, social scientists have begun the task of identifying strengths, resources, and talents of individuals and families (Hawley & DeHaan, 1996; Rutter, 1987; Walsh, 1996). Resiliency has been defined as the ability to cultivate strengths (Silliman, 1994), or returning to "original form or position after being bent" (Valentine & Feinauer, 1993), and reparation of one's self after hardship (Wolin and Wolin, 1993). Genero (1998) viewed resiliency as a relational issue rather than an individual characteristic. According to Walsh (1998), being resilient includes more than merely surviving and being a victim for life, it also encompasses the ability "to heal from painful wounds, take charge of their lives, and go on to live fully and love well." (p. 4) In their review, Hawley and DeHaan (1996) found three common properties in the resiliency literature; hardship, buoyancy, and wellness.

Others have cited differences between resiliency found in individuals and resiliency found in families (McCubbin & McCubbin, 1988; Hawley & DeHaan, 1996; Walsh, 1996). Walsh (1996) suggested that "a focus on family resilience seeks to identify and foster key processes that enable families to cope more effectively and emerge hardier from the crisis of persistent stresses, whether from within or from without." (p. 263) Hawley and DeHaan (1996) contend that "resilient families respond positively to these conditions in unique ways, depending on the context, developmental level, the interactive combination of risk and protective factors, and the family's shared outlook.

Resiliency in Black Families

Given that Black families have historically valued the whole over the individual parts, it seems proper to think of resiliency as developing within a family or community context. Rutter (1987) recognizes that resilience changes in people across time as circumstances and situations change. In other words, at one time a person may respond to a stressful event successfully, but the same event at another time may produce disheartening results. So, he advocates the use of the concept of "protective mechanisms" rather than resilience. Rutter further postulates that there are four main processes for developing "protective mechanisms," "reduction of risk impact, reduction of negative chain reactions, establishment and maintenance of self-esteem and self-efficacy, and opening up of opportunities." (p. 316) These and other protective mechanisms are facilitated and maintained through strong family relations, the Black church, and a strong and mobilized community.

Hill (1999) defines family strengths as those "traits that facilitate the ability of the family to meet the needs of its members and the demands made upon it by the system outside the family unit." (p. 42) Earlier, Hill proposed five such strengths that had been culturally transmitted through African ancestry to Black families. The strengths that foster resilient families and members were identified as a strong kinship bond, a strong work orientation, a strong achievement orientation, flexible family roles, and a strong religious orientation (Hill, 1971). It is the present authors' contention that these strengths from the African heritage provide the context for the formation of Rutter's (1987) four protective mechanisms. In order to meet the present challenges and those of the next century it will be incumbent upon Black families and communities to develop greater levels of "protective mechanisms".

Challenges for Black Families

Increasing decline in marriage rates (Gasden, 1999; Glick, 1997; Tucker & Mitchell-Kernan, 1995). In 1970, 68% of African Americans were married where as by 1994 that percentage had dropped to 48% (Gasden, 1999; Tucker & Mitchell-Kernan, 1995). In addition to the decline or delay in marriage of Blacks there has also been an acceleration in the divorce rate (Glick, 1997). Two parent households numbered in Black families numbered 80% in 1890 and they had declined to 39% by 1990 (Billingsley, 1992). As a result of these situations fewer Black children are growing up in two parent households (Gasden, 1999; Glick, 1997).

Toliver (1998) suggests that apparent economic gains among Black middle-class families should be tempered by the realities of the whole. Although, many Black families experienced economic increases between 1960 and 1970 (Billingsley, 1992) since then there has been a steady decline in the percentage of Black middle-class families (Toliver, 1998). There has been a tremendous increases non-working poor and working poor families, and in the number of Black children living in poverty (Rexroat, 1994; Taylor, Tucker, Chatters, & Jayakody, 1997). In 1959 thirty-five percent of Black children lived in poverty (Rexroat, 1994) while by 1995 that percentage had grown to about forty-two percent (Taylor et al., 1997). The number of Black children in foster care rose dramatically during the decade between 1981 to 1991, from 270,000 to 429,000 (Taylor et al., 1997).

Many have pointed to the decline of the Black community as a disturbing pattern (Gasden, 1999). The drug and crime statistics in most large urban cities, where the majority of Black families reside, in America are staggering (Hill et al, 1993). These communities have reported an absence of effective role models, education, and job opportunities for the next generation (Franklin, 1997; Staples & Johnson, 1993). The recent attacks on affirmative actions programs and government assistance programs have only contributed to the sense of frustration felt by low socio-economic Black families (Franklin, 1997).

In what seems to have been an accurate prophecy, Hill (1989) suggested that there were three significant challenges facing Black families in the next century. The challenges were the ability to attain economic self-sufficiency, the strengthening and stabilizing of Black families, and the development of vital and healthy communities. It seems apparent that each of the previously mentioned difficulties besetting Black families falls into one of these three challenges.

Implications for the 21ˢᵗ Century

Logan (1996) suggests that Black Americans have forgotten the values that provided "strength and meaning to their existence." (p. 10) She lists the following seven principles as the values for developing effective solutions for strengthening Black families: unity, self-determination, collective work and responsibility, cooperative economics, purpose, creativity, and a belief in the righteousness of the struggle. In order to meet the needs of the next century, Black families and communities, from all socioeconomic strata, must band together to rise above the circumstances that impede upward mobility.

The strengths listed by Hill (1971) and others have proved sufficient in helping Black families survive; but only a small segment of the Black population is thriving. This trend is of major importance to the present authors. Recent changes in social policies, concerning the reduction of funding for social programs, will only continue. In fact, it is likely that cuts will increase in the future (June, 1991). Further more, these programs have failed to close the gap between poor and middle-class Black families (Crawley, 1996). Therefore, it appears that it will be necessary for Black families to intensify their own efforts toward improving the quality of life as they enter the 21ˢᵗ century. Specific and intentional behaviors to reduce divorce rates, teen pregnancy, and other social problems will need to have higher consideration.

Strong kinship bonds have been cited as a key element in the resilience in families. However, some researchers worry that urbanization and upward mobility have had a deteriorating effect on the utilization of kinship and fictive kinship bonds (June, 1991). Kinship bonds will have to be extended far beyond blood relations to include the entire community relation (Denby, 1996), particularly children. Building racial pride and positive self-regard is crucial to the growth of successful children (Denby, 1996), and eventually functional adults. Also, in the next century kinship bonds, if successful, will have to cut across socioeconomic barriers.

The Black church has long been a reservoir for helping families in the Black community (Hill, 1971; 1993; Smith, 1985). However, the Black church must also be a beacon for the development and perpetuation of a strong value system that enhances the moral fiber of the Black community (June, 1991; Smith, 1985). It is imperative that a religious pragmatism not be allowed to erode the long standing virtues of a Christian heritage that has been embedded in the Black family for two centuries (June, 1991; Smith, 1985). The values of the two dominate denominations of the Black family, Baptist and Methodist, both hold to religious teachings that can be helpful in meeting previously mentioned challenges.

The Black church must also provide a network of resources for those in need in Black communities (Allen, 1991; Smith, 1985). Allen (1991) suggested that given the Black church's' indigenous role in the community it will need to "sponsor periodic workshops on child-rearing, on writing religious literature for all ages, on business development, career development, career planning, and investments." (p. 28) Bagley and Carroll (1998) suggest that the Black church will need to develop a collaborative relationship with the mental health community and be a referral source for its members.

The Black community has a storied history of creating opportunities and aids for Black families. There are many organizations, like the NAACP and the National Urban League to name a couple, within the Black community that need to join forces in the restoration of its neighborhoods (Franklin, 1997). Black communities, through preservation programming, must become a respite for it children and elderly (Dubois et al., 1996) rather than a war zone of violence and crime.

Denby (1996) suggests that traditional family preservation programs are monolithic in that they represent majority cultural values, and they lack cultural sensitivity. She recommends that preservation programs must be representative of the culture which they are intended to serve, in this case the African American culture. Dubois et al. (1996) list the following as guiding principles for the mobilization and development of effect community programs:

>   Human Potential is the most valuable community asset.

> Investments in programs and activities which enrich human potential have a positive return-the benefit is greater than the cost; education and training are the primary means to economic independence and empowerment.

> Effective programs depend on motivated, competent people providing sustained personal attention to achieve the a positive outcome.

> Communities and people must have a meaningful role in the planning and taking initiatives to benefit them and their neighborhoods. (p. 129)

More Mentor programs need to be developed in communities where low socioeconomic young people reside in hopelessness (Franklin, 1997). Such programs that have been successful are the one in California started by Links Inc. who matched members with young women with various family problems (Franklin). A similar program was developed in the Washington DC. area by a group called the Alliance of Concerned Men. In this program "a small group of middle aged Black men who have seen and survived a life of drugs and crime" (Franklin, p. 237), were mentors for young Black men. Still another helpful program called the "Yes program" was designed, using a camp environment, to help young Black students with 3.0 or better grade point averages study in order to increase their entrance exam scores for college. These programs undoubtedly have great implications for Black Families as they face the 21st century.

There is considerable controversy about the necessity of historically Black colleges and universities (Garibaldi, 1991). Historically Black colleges and universities continue to provide quality education for African-Americans. They continue to produce significant numbers of graduates both at the undergraduate levels and at the graduate level of African-American students in this country (Garibaldi, 1991). According to Carter and Wilson (1989), historically Black colleges and universities produce thirty-seven percent of all bachelors degrees and thirty percent of all masters degrees in this country. According to Garibaldi (1991), in states where historical Black colleges are located they produce more than fifty percent of the undergraduate degrees for the African-Americans. These colleges and universities provide a context for African-American students to not only gain quality education, but also to develop individual competencies and self-esteem in order to be more successful in this country.

Summary

The 21st century will be fraught with challenges, both old and new, for Black families. Although the indigenous strengths of Black families listed by Hill (1972) have been effective in the past, the new millennium will challenge their strength even more. Although Black families have proven that they have the ability to bounce back after facing hardship and adversity, they will need greater levels of resiliency in order to navigate the challenges of the future. It will be important that "protective mechanisms" (Rutter, 1987) continue to be fostered and more developed through the collective efforts of the strong kinship bonds, the Black church, Black colleges and universities, and the Black community. Others, like local, state, and national policy makers must do their part to ensure equity and fairness for all families. However, Black Americans must take on the burden of responsibility in order for the Black family to be successful in the 21st century.

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