Indigenous Systems within the African-American Community

Aretha Faye Marbley & Leon Rouson

Well, son, I'll tell you:
Life for me ain't been no crystal stair.
It's had tacks in it,
And splinters,
And boards all torn up,
And places with no carpet on the floor
—Bare
But all the time
I'se been a-climbin' on
And reachin' landin's,
and turnin' corners,
And sometimes going in the dark
Where there ain't been no light.
So, boy, don't turn back.
Don't you set down on the steps
'Cause you finds it's kinder hard.
Don't you fall now—
For I'se still going, honey,
I'se still climbin',
And life for me ain't been no crystal stair
—Langston Hughes, 1994

For the African-American family, life ain't been no crystal stair (Jackson, 1991). The African-American family has trotted for over 400 years through a wilderness of racism, poverty, discrimination of all kinds, crossing seas of monsters and forests of demons. Yet, despite the numerous obstacles and attacks that society has mounted against it since slavery, we believe that the African-American family has found creative ways to survive, retain some of its African values and structure, and fulfill its functions to this society.

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Popenoe's Discourse on the Decline of the American Family

Popenoe's (1993) thesis on the decline of the American family highlighted the major or drastic changes the American family had undergone in the critical period between 1960 and 1990, and his analysis has since gone virtually unchallenged. He argued that this period in American history saw an unprecedented decline of the U.S. family as a social institution. Popenoe concluded that the American family changed rapidly in those three decades.

In essence, "Families lost functions, social power, and authority over their members" (p. 528). Among the functions lost were changes in traditional marital roles and family structure, decreasing fertility and increasing divorce, and the socialization of children, including values and morals. All of these functions previously provided family members with nurturance, affiliation and care, and economic and financial support.

Popenoe's conclusion was that, in those 30 years, African-American families, like White families, underwent a rapid decline in the traditional family structure. He presumed that these changes, in particular the loss of functions, social power, and authority over their members, led to the rapid decline of the American family. We reply—nonsense. The massive changes that Popenoe is referring to may have begun 30 years ago for the majority of White families, but not for the African-American family and other marginalized families.

Therefore, in response Popenoe, we launch two criticisms of his stance. First, he failed to address or take into consideration the literature on the cultural differences existing among and between White families and families of color (e.g., Staples, 1999). Second, granted that there is evidence to support a decline in American families regardless of race or ethnicity during this critical period, nevertheless for African Americans and other families of color this phenomenon was not unprecedented (Billingsley, 1998; Staples, 1999; U. S. Bureau of Census. (2003),

Particularly disturbing to us as African Americans is that Popenoe provides no discussion on the damaging economic, social, and psychological effects of the migration experience of Hispanics and Asians, the relocation of and continuing saga against Native American Indians, and the compulsory immigration—involving over 400 years of enslavement—of African Americans (Akbar, 1979; Durfrene & Herring, 1994; King, 1968; Mannix & Cowley, 1962; Yetman & Steele, 1975), as well as the modern-day apartheid in the form of massive incarceration of people of color, specifically African-American men and women.

Further, by focusing on the *American* family as a monolithic social institution, Popenoe failed to call attention to the amazing resiliency, endurance, and survival of people of color and, as a consequence, missed the opportunity to look at the

Stories, Studies, and Statistics of the Resiliency of the African-American Family

survival of *African American* families for possible solutions to this massive decline of the U.S. family. Therefore, in response to Popenoe's discourse on the decline of the American family, this article uses studies, statistics, and stories about the African-American family as an example of American families that survived against insurmountable obstacles and managed to carry out their societal functions.

The article employs an indigenous systems approach in describing the survival of the African-American family in the face of overwhelming adversity, or what Carroll (1998) refers to as *mundane extreme environmental stress*. It identifies and describes the variety of indigenous systems within the African-American community and the role these networks play in sustaining African-American families, starting with the Negro family of yesteryear and continuing up from the Black family of the civil rights era to the African-American family of today.

By challenging Popenoe's stance, one that is grounded in Eurocentric ideology, we aggressively question how African-American families have been treated in American scholarship. By presenting a variety of tools such as statistics, studies, and real-life stories, this article presents culturally compatible frameworks for understanding the delivery of educational, social, and mental health services to African-American families and communities.

The African-American Family Writing and Telling its Own Story

Billingsley (1992), speaking to a group of African-American leaders in Chicago during a conference focusing on "African-American Youth as Future Leaders," recounted a story out of his book *Climbing Jacob's Ladder* about a little African-American boy whose dad had read him stories many times about the lion of the jungle. In the stories, the lion was always portrayed as the king of the jungle—a fierce beast.

One night, after the dad had finished reading one of those stories, the little boy seemed genuinely puzzled and asked his father the following questions. "Dad," the little boy said, "Didn't you say that the lion was the king of the jungle? Didn't you say that he was the baddest, fiercest, and meanest animal in the jungle?" To these questions the father answered, "Yes, son, I did say that." "Then, Dad" asked the little boy, "If the lion is so bad, so fierce, and so mean, why does the man always win?" The dad looked at his son and said, "Son, when the lion starts to write his own books, then the lion will start to win."

Granted, while there are prominent African Americans (e.g., Billingsley, 1998; McAdoo, 2007; Staples, 1999) writing about African-American families, the majority of literature on African-American family life has not been authored by African Americans. Rather, the dominant conceptual framework for understanding the African-American family has been primarily based on the value system, epistemology, axiology, worldview, and cultural orientation of an oppressive, racist, and sometimes hostile White and Eurocentric society. As a consequence, the major thrust of the existing research on the African-American family has been written by others, from deficit models, and has focused on the pathology and dysfunction of the African-American family.

For example, earlier literature and data viewed (and still do view) the African-American family as pathological, that is, using descriptors such as damaged, weak, disadvantaged, devoid of American values, destructive, on welfare, a permanent underclass, and single-parent-headed household. Its members are portrayed as dominating state prisons, being on drugs, dying like cattle in urban streets, becoming young parents too soon, having very large high school dropouts rates, delinquents, murderers, uneducated, unemployed, having high rates of divorce, and being the newest and fastest growing victims of HIV/AIDS. According to Billingsley (1968, 1993), this type of research often contributes to the distortions and excessively negative characterizations of African-American family life. For that reason, like the lion in Billingsley's story, to win, African Americans must tell their own story.

Therefore, for African Americans, the big question surrounding the decline of the American family is literature that highlights the environment in which African-American families must raise their children. Such infromation is critical to understanding the functions of African Americans. Further, such data must also

address the resiliency of the African-American family. In other words, over the last few decades, is there empirical research describing how the African-American family adequately carries out its societal functions?

For example, researchers (e.g., Cain, 2007; Cherlin; 2006; Dean; 2007; Dunlap, Golub, & Johnson, 2006; Murphy, Hunter, & Johnson, 2008; Parson, 1949; Rabe, 2008; Winton, l995) in the field of family studies acknowledge the complexity of the functions of families, such as socialization of children, including values and morals, and providing its members with nurturance, affiliation and care, and economic and financial support.

African Americans have wrestled with these changes in family life since Africans first set foot on American soil as slaves some four centuries ago. At that moment, the very essence of the African family was assaulted. The African family lost functions, social power, and authority over its members. For the African family, this transition forcibly altered traditional marital roles, the traditional family structure, and the value of its children. And this assault has continued with the high incarceration rates of African-American women and men, welfare and school desegregation laws and policies, social work, enfranchisement, urbanization, lack of employment, dependency on government food, housing, and medical benefits, all factors that undermine the authority of the family. Though it has not been easy—no crystal stair, over the years—the African-American family responded to these challenges with an amazing resiliency (Billingsley, 1993; McAdoo, 2007; Neighbors & Jackson, 1996).

Granted that political, social, and economic ills exist in the African-American community, the limited perspective of recent research has focused on dysfunction, thus giving a very narrow view which provides a biased and limited framework for acquiring a broader, truer understanding of the functioning of the African-American family. With this caution in mind, we have searched for literature on African-Americans families written by African-Americans scholars and observers that would yield a broader, more accurate, and healthier account of the African-American family.

There are very few, if any, single theoretical models unique to understanding the nature and the complexity of African-American family life. Therefore, we offer a combination of Afrocentric and structural functional theories as theoretical lenses to organize the discussion of the available literature on African-American families. We present them as harmonious and mutually compatible frameworks for addressing not only the social, historical, political, and economic realities of African-American family life, but also as frameworks that aggressively wrestle with interlocking agendas, identities, oppressions, realities, and the marginality of the African-American family.

Theoretical Lenses for Studying African-American Families

According to Sue, Ivey, and Pedersen, (1996), identity is embedded in multiple levels of experiences and contexts, making it important to respect the complexity and the value of a personal system, and it is imperative to recognize the complexity of that system. Therefore, because of the complexity of studying culturally diverse families, we introduce a bifocal approach of *Afrocentrism* and *structural functionalism* theories taken together as a more realistic and healthy pair of lenses for viewing the African-American family.

The first theoretical lens, *structural functionalism*, views families as merely one of many social systems (e.g., religion, education, politics, and economics) key to the survival of society (Parson, 1949; Winton, 1995). That is, families perform important functions through procreation and through the socializing of children to the values of a society. The process of socialization (from a structural functional theory), similar to ethnicity, involves shared culture that binds people together. Rather than seeing the individual in isolation, structural functional theory focuses on how people behave and interact with one another in group settings (Turner & Maryanski, 1979).

According to Winch (1967), the following are functional requisites for survival that are performed primarily in families: replacement of dying members, production and distribution of goods and services, maintaining law and order, educating and training members to conform to society's values and norms, and creating procedures for dealing with group harmony, emotional crisis, and maintaining a sense of purpose. Therefore, structural functional theory serves as a great introduction (though not by design) for those who are not familiar with the tenets that underlie the Afrocentric worldview that undergirds the survival of the African-American family. For that reason, we have chosen structural functional theory, even though otherwise largely Eurocentric, to set the initial academic and intellectual tone for this article.

Afrocentrism, the partner theory, takes the structural functional theory a step further by redefining *family* and its functions from a Western/American idea of a nuclear family functioning for the survival of a society to one that encompasses an entire village. In addition, Afrocentrism is used as a framework for describing and explaining the uncanny survival of the African-American family, withstanding four centuries of brutal attack. Therefore, Afrocentrism becomes the framework for understanding how indigenous support systems function in the African-American community, thereby setting the affective and cultural tone.

Structural-functional theory is organized around the basic tenets of system, social structure, function, and equilibrium. Through a structural functionalist's lens, a person is part of multiple systems that are interrelated and interdependent. Because the behavior of one person affects the behavior of other people and other systems, harmony, cooperation, and integration are critical to the survival of social systems.

Thus, a structural-functional approach focuses on stability and resistance to change. From a family perspective, structural functional theory attempts to maintain homeostasis within the family structure. The focus is on the interdependency and interrelatedness of the family members and how the members contribute to the family as a whole, further serving as a template to understanding the survival of the African-American family and it ability to carry out its functions.

Similarly, through an Afrocentric lens there is a constant interplay among systems and among subsystems (Billingsley, 1968), which means that the focus in the African-American community is on cooperation and group cohesiveness. Similar to a structural functional approach, the interactions are circular, rather than linear, and when one part is not functioning properly, the other parts are adversely affected.

According to Bell, Bouie, and Baldwin (1990), the basic principles defining the African-American worldview are "oneness with nature" and "survival of the group." The principle of "oneness with nature" asserts that all elements in the universe (humans, animals, inanimate objects, and natural phenomena) are interconnected; that is, humanity, nature, and the self are conceptualized as the same phenomenon.

The principle of "survival of the group" prioritizes the survival of the corporate whole (the community), which includes all Black people, rather than just the individual or some segment of the community apart from the corporate whole. Cultural values consistent with the basic principles of the African-American worldview are interdependence, cooperation, unity, mutual responsibility, and reconciliation.

In part, due to an Afrocentric focus, the African-American family has developed and maintained amazing fortitude and resiliency. This strength and resiliency, to a large extent, have been a direct result of the indigenous support systems. In fact, these networks are the adaptation responses or coping mechanisms to the external attacks and threats to the nuclear family (Billingsley, 1998, 1968; Staples & Mirande, 1980). That is, they have surrounded, embraced, cuddled, and coddled the African-American family, thus fulfilling many of the functions traditionally ascribed to the nuclear family and assuring its survival (McAdoo, 1997, 2007; Martin & Martin, 1978).

Help-Seeking Behavior

Help-seeking behavior addresses the extent to which (a) people of color, specifically African Americans, underutilize mental health services in relation to their needs and (b) the interrelationships among the factors that explain such underutilization. It is obvious that people of color are not willingly or greatly utilizing formal mental health services. Fortunately, for people of color, both contemporary and traditional indigenous systems exist as viable healing and helping networks within their own communities. Therefore understanding the contemporary and historical roles of these social networks for people of color is critical for their good mental health.

Because of the critical role and the longstanding success of these systems among people of color, Sue, Ivey, and Pedersen (1996) proposed that multicultural counseling and therapy (MCT) theory acknowledge traditional healing and advocate the integration of those helping traditions indigenous in non-Western, non-European cultures. Specifically, Corollary 5C of the MCT theory states, "Though the Western meaning of counseling developed from a Euro-American academic setting in the 20th century, counseling has been available historically whenever individuals have helped other individuals with personal problems" (p. 21). Accordingly, we need to examine factors involved in alternative help-seeking behavior specific to indigenous or natural support systems.

Indigenous support systems refer to those forms of help that occur naturally within the traditions of many non-European, non-Western cultures (Lee, Oh, & Mountcastle, 1992). Historically, these natural support systems predated Western civilization, serving as a source of help for solving personal, spiritual, and vocational problems (Lee et al., 1992; Lee & Armstrong, 1995; Vontress, 1991).

Studies of natural support or indigenous models have identified healing practices in Asian, Native American Indian, African, and Hispanic cultures (Das, 1987; Kakar, 1982; Lee et al., 1992; Makinde, 1974; Vontress, 1991). For example, in Mexico traditional healers (*curanderos*) use prayers, chants, herbalism, and massages to alleviate mental and physical suffering. In certain tribes of West Africa, healers use spiritual forces to eliminate physical and mental health problems (Makinde, 1974; Vontress, 1991).

Consider Parson's (1949) perspective from a half-century ago, discussing the role the family plays in society and concluding that families of color, without the help of social support systems (Billingsley, 1992; Das, 1987; Johnson, Thomas, & Matret, 1990; Vontress, 1991) are crippled and in many ways unable to carry out their functions for either individuals or society. Instead, African American, Asian American, Hispanic American, and Native American Indian communities, unlike White families, faced with racist American ideologies and abusive practices, have had to rely more heavily on indigenous systems in order to survive and alleviate mental and physical health problems. In short, they have used these indigenous networks as adjustment mechanisms in order to fulfill their functions in American society.

Although these kinds of help may be viewed by some clinical professionals as crude, primitive, and lacking scientific rigor, it would be foolish for the counseling profession to discount them. Instead, as suggested by MCT theory, culturally sensitive and responsive counselors can and do utilize such indigenous systems in order to better understand and ultimately utilize traditional practices of healing from many cultures.

Indigenous Systems within the African-American Family

Billingsley (1968) saw the "Negro family as embedded in a network of mutually interdependent relationships with the Negro community and the wider society" (p. 5). References to these indigenous systems (or what Billingsley refers to as interdependent relationships) can be found in multiple places such as history books, fiction and non-fiction literature, African American music and dance, folklore, movies, media, research including empirical studies, and the mere existence of an "intact" African-American family. All of these sources show the African-American family enmeshed in social or indigenous systems.

Although the most prominent, supportive, and intimate of these indigenous systems is the extended family (Billingsley, 1992; Johnson et. al., 1990; Martin & Martin, 1978, Spence, 1991; Watson & Protinsky, 1988), there are many other entities that have played and continue to play a vital role in the survival of the Black family. Billingsley (1968) continues:

> The Negro community includes within itself a number of institutions which may also be viewed as subsystems. Prominent among these are: schools, churches, taverns, newspapers, neighborhood associations, lodges, fraternities, social clubs, age and sex peer groups, recreation associations, and small businesses, including particularly barber shops, beauty parlors, restaurants, pool halls, funeral societies, and various organized systems of hustling. (p. 24)

The African-American family, unlike the White family, has had to make massive adjustments in order to fulfill its functions in society. From the Parsonian view of the role the family plays in society, the African-American family was always crippled and in many ways unable to carry out its function. Yet, it has succeeded against the odds with amazing resiliency. This is due largely to the help of indigenous systems.

Chatters, Taylor, and Neighbors (1989) summarized the following demographic factors in an article on African-American help-seeking behavior, specific to an informal helper network:

> Overall, respondents were more likely to discuss their problems with women than with men. Respondents consulted mothers at a higher rate than fathers, sisters more than brothers, daughters more than sons and other female friends more than male friends. Women also had larger helper networks than men. The literature indicates that higher socio-economic status is generally associated with larger support networks that are comprised of both family and friends. The significant interaction between age and widowhood indicated that younger widowed persons utilized more informal helpers than did older widowed persons. (p. 673)

Social support systems have not only served to help the family with its societal functions, but also with the social bonds that are essential for the maintenance of health, both mentally and physically. This is evident in the research in nearly every aspect of African-American life, that is, with adolescents (Watson & Protinsky, 1988), elderly people (Carlton-Laney, 1993; Groger, 1992; Murphy et al., 2008; Luckey,

1994; Perry & Johnson; 1994; Spence, 1991), single parents (Cherlin, 2006; Deng & Bonacich, 1991), unemployed (Brown & Gary, 1985), and the upwardly mobile middle class professionals (Denton, 1990; Toliver, 1993; Wilkinson, 1990).

The African-American family has historically lagged behind White families in annual income. An income gap still exists between Black and White families regardless of family composition. Thus, the need for financial support has always been prevalent in the African-American family, including middle-class families. In a study examining mobility patterns of Black families, McAdoo (1988) was able to demonstrate empirically that involvement with extended families was a help to upward mobility. In fact, the results of this study indicated that the education and achievement of the individuals were often impossible without the support of the extended family (p. 166).

An exploratory study by Flaherty, Facteau, and Garver (1987) of African-American adolescent mothers and their infants shows grandmothers having a central place in the caretaking, nurturing, managing, and coaching in poor Black families. Watson and Protinsky's (1988) study of Black adolescents indicated that enmeshment in Black families is positively correlated with high ego identity (p. 288).

Another study of African-American adolescents showed that gender differences also exist in the selection and utilization of social support systems. Coates (l987) found gender differences in the structure and support characteristics of African-American adolescent's social networks. Some of the differences she found were: (a) males and females differ in the number of females and of males they identify as network members, in their estimates of the number of people they know, and in frequency of contact; (b) males and females differ in church attendance; and (c) both males and females choose parents to help with material resources and peers to help with emotional needs (pp. 682-683).

In another study, Brown and Gary (1985) found that (a) the psychological traumas of unemployment are less devastating to those with the greatest resources, those who perceive they are satisfactorily supported by friends, family members, and others, and (b) unemployed Blacks who are actively engaged in religious activities (Morrison, 1991) are likely to have fewer adverse psychological and health reactions.

According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, in 2008 African Americans were the second largest ethnic minority group. Yet African-American families are still lagging behind White Americans in education attainment (earning high school diplomas and higher education degrees) and economics (household incomes, and living at poverty level) and leading in health disparities.

The aforementioned studies and statistics bring to light the historical role indigenous systems play in the mental, physical, intellectual, and spiritual survival of African Americans. Following we present some narratives that provide real testimonies of the endurance of African-American families, exemplifying those indigenous systems. It is our goal to share, perhaps in an unorthodox manner, memorable moments from graduate school experiences. The following narratives serve as a presentation of peer mentoring experiences.

We offer these narratives as a technique (from a non-positivist perspective) rather than as a research method. According to Erickson (1986), what makes research interpretive or qualitative is substantive focus and intent, rather than a specific procedure in data collection. Hence, in an effort to share intuitive meanings of different indigenous systems and what it has meant to us, each piece presents a descriptive narrative from a unique experience and perception. We hope to show through these stories a nonpositivist, interpretative approach to the importance of these historical African-American indigenous systems. The stories provide three upfront and personal illustrations of resiliency and interdependency within the African-American community utilizing indigenous systems (extended family, church, and the segregated school system) from the experiences of three African-American women, including those of one of the co-authors of this article.

In Their Own Words
Real Stories

Story One:
The Extended Family

My extended family included not only blood relatives, but also family friends who literally saved my life. My background was anything but typical; from birth, my survival has been the result of multiple facets of the African-American community, mainly my extended family. I was born and raised in Arkansas and cushioned by an extended and augmented (individuals who have always been in the family without an identifiable kinship) family that extended over generations of relatives. From a traditional nuclear family's viewpoint, from my biological mother's family, I am the youngest daughter of four siblings (two boys and two girls); on my biological father's side, I am the youngest of seven (three girls, three boys, and then me); and from my adopted family, I am the oldest of five girls.

My biological birth mom (Sareor) fell ill when I was four months old, and she, my sister and brothers and I were carted off to the country to live with our paternal grandaunts, Johnny and Gold. At the time of my birth, of the seven siblings, only the two of them were living. Aunt Johnnie who had one son and Aunt Gold, who had never birthed a child, together raised three generations of relatives—her sisters' and brothers' children and their children's children, and their children. When my mother died, my brother (then three years old) and I (nine months) were given to the younger sister, Johnnie, and my older bother, Jaster (age 10) and sister, Lue V. (age 13) went with the other aunt, Gold. Although we were placed with different aunts, 90% of the time, we all lived in the same household. This began the Afrocentric phase of my growing-up with an extended family.

Aunt Johnnie died when I was 12 and I continued to live with Aunt Gold until age 15 when our house burned down and relatives moved her to Chicago. For the next three years, I was homeless; more accurately, I was a child of the Black community. In other words, I lived around, sometimes with distant relatives, other times with neighbors and church friends such as Miss Sadie, a friend of both my biological mom and my Aunt Johnnie, and Dee, the eldest sister of my best friend, Nita.

When I was 18, I moved to Chicago to be near Aunt Gold. Due to unusual circumstances, I was adopted by my childhood best friend Nita's Aunt Janice's step-daughter (Mae Helen) and her family that consisted of a father and four sisters. Another unusual relationship was that my friend Nita's mother and her Aunt Janice had both been childhood friends of my birth mother (Sareor). Amazingly, my newly adopted family from Chicago, though not raised in Arkansas, was still connected to me.

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At age 40, I finally grasped the magnitude and the wealth of my extended family. That year, I met my father's children, my other six siblings, for the first time at a family reunion in Arkansas. Ironically, my other two families (biological mom and adopted mom) were also having their family reunions the same weekend. Surprisingly, all three families embraced and knew each other well, intermingled well, and claimed me as one of them, but not each other. More surprisingly, I counted more than 300 family members (siblings, aunts and uncles, cousins, friends' family) and no one was confused; we were just one big family.

Story Two:
The Black Church, My Surrogate Family

My memories of the church originated in purity and holiness. For it was from this entity that I was introduced to God. The church in my life has extended beyond an infrastructure of brick and mortar. It has been the embodiment of Christ's love manifested through the saints who have wrapped their arms around me.

My fondest recollections of the church began in my grandmother's living room during Holy-Ghost filled prayer meetings. Although my first cousins and I was the choir, we sang with conviction. Visiting preachers laid holy hands on our foreheads protecting us from evil and praying us into our destinies. No meeting was complete unless grandmother admonished us to "hold to God's unchanging hand." The biggest treat of all were Grandma's teacakes that were served fresh at the end of service. My grandmother started many churches with these prayer meetings. Once established, an ordained minister would pastor these congregations. I am grateful for my rich heritage of faith that has been transferred from my devout grandmother.

Then there was New Day Holiness Church, my childhood church in the heart of the hood. One would think that a person would be filled with fear upon entering the graphite parking lot. On the contrary, the saints at New Day were more than friends, they were my surrogate family. Starting with my pastor, Bishop Taylor, there were a host of role models that nurtured me as if I was their own blood. These included my Sunday school teachers, youth leaders, and many other saints. At the altar, I accepted Christ into my heart at the age of nine. These saints knew of God's love for children and took us seriously as we made personal commitments. When I made mistakes and fell down, I was taught to get back up again.

New Day supported me through all of my academic accomplishments and challenged us all to pursue higher learning. Much of my socialization was learned through the church. Of course the best part of church as an adolescent was passing notes during the message. However, most importantly, I learned how to respect my elders and was shown how to function in the world. Two of the saints, Jackie Martin and Denise Malloy, embraced me unlike any other. They were both 10 years older than I, and were saved, educated, and beautiful. They modeled that if I gave my all to God--spirit, intellect, and body--my life would be highly favored and blessed. Although it has been 20 years, when I go home, I can't help but drive by my beloved church and reminisce. Even 500 miles from home, while in college, the church was the core of my emotional, social, and spiritual survival. The saints fed me home-cooked meals, gave me money, and even provided a roof when I was in need. Several of the ladies embraced me as their own when I missed my loving mama.

To this day, I maintain reverence for the church. It has been the foundation for so many black families for generations. I am honored to have children of my own that I can show how faith in God will save their souls, and finding refuge in the church will provide a haven for them and their own children. It should not be surprising that on a typical fourth Sunday, youth day, my heart fills with pride. For it is on these days that I watch my children through tearful eyes sing in the Sunshine Band and recite verses from scripture. God bless America and God bless the church, for it is the crux of our nation.

Story Three:
Black Teachers, Black Schools—How They Affected Me

School days in the early 1960s were memorable. This was in part because of the impact all my Black teachers had on my life. Their illustrative style was quite effective, encouraging and admonishing us to set high goals that were achievable. They stressed the pursuit of higher education in order to beat the odds against us. "Study," "Do your best," "Be goal-oriented," was echoed in our ears. "You'll have to be twice as good as your white counterparts."

At the onset of my junior year, I could not foresee myself ever going to college. But one of my teachers, Mrs. Porter, provided me with researched information on student loans, grants, and scholarships. This information contributed to and afforded me the opportunity to pursue a higher education.

Our teachers seemed to always provide the "extra push" or nurturing needed. These extraordinary teachers proved to be suitable role models as well. In fact, I never knew that teachers smoked when I was a young student. They seemed to conceal their vices quite well.

The highlight of a school day for me would be when another one of my teachers, Mr. Banks, lectured us on the hardships and adversities that he overcame to achieve his own goals. General auditorium assemblies were especially motivational and inspirational. The keynote speakers would be anyone from then-Attorney Barbara Jordan, Reverend Bill Lawson to black school board member Hattie White and many other notables.

"Colored people" as we were called then, chiefly resided in the Second, Third, Fourth, Fifth, and Sixth Wards of Houston, Texas. In those days, there lurked an underlying current called segregation. This practice imposed the separation or isolation of whites from blacks. It socially separated the races, particularly in schools and housing but in other areas as well. At my schools, E.O. Smith Junior High and Phyllis Wheatley Senior High, we were primarily issued "used" books. A new textbook was a real treasure.

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School busing had a different meaning also during my school days. The few Hispanics who lived in our neighborhood were bused out of the area to a school unknown to me. On the contrary, we walked the long, dusty miles to our all-black schools. There were no school buses to retrieve us. Again, segregation was at work.

In conclusion, even though your teachers may not impact you the way mine did back in the day, your liberties and freedoms in education should never be taken for granted. Segregation in public schools in southern states existed for over fifty years. However, in 1954, the Supreme Court ruled in the case of Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas that segregation was unconstitutional. Several years later, in 1969, the court ordered desegregation of all schools.

There were many demonstrations and sit-ins led mainly by the renowned Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. His eloquent pleas for racial justice resounded all over the country. Let's not forget any of the people who paved the way and paid the ultimate price for our freedoms that we enjoy today. The struggle was not easy.

These three narratives are real stories that give you an idea about the critical role that the extended family, Black church, and the segregated school have historically played in the lives of African-American children and adults. These African-American women's narratives illustrate the importance of these systems in the success of African-American people.

The Delivery of Social, Educational, and Mental Health Services to African Americans

Implications for Curriculum and Policy Development and Therapeutic Services

Multiculturalism, as a dynamic force, has influenced research in education, the hard sciences, social sciences, and many other areas, and it has paved the way for research that recognizes the validity and functionality of African-American families. That is, it advocates for empirical studies that are not based on the realities of a continuing racist, hostile society. Rather, if viewed with positive lenses, the data on African Americans' strengths filters through.

As of 2010, there were only a few empirical studies that looked at the role of natural support systems. The African-American family has historically utilized the schools (Duling, 1997; Henry & Feuerstein, 1999), church (Billingsley, 1999; McAdoo & Crawford, 1990; Morrison, 1991; Rubin, Billingsley, & Caldwell, 1990), and extended family (Billingsley, 1998; Martin & Martin, 1978; Staples, 1999), yet there has been little research that investigates these factors.

For that reason, the indigenous systems emerge as important, powerful, and critical adaptation mechanisms for the African-American family. Indigenous systems have been relevant, supportive, practical, and necessary survival tools and appropriate to the social realities African-American people face. Thus, the importance of these networks to the resiliency of the African-American family needs to be brought to the research foreground!

Family researchers can and should focus on how the African-American family has used alternative routes. In mental health, major efforts should be made to integrate traditional healing methods, especially when working with a less acculturated, more traditional, and culturally different person. As African-American scholars, we simply ask that professionals consider cultural differences when writing scholarly pieces, conducting research, providing mental health, offering social and educational services, and developing policies for and about African Americans. The implications are immense and powerful, with far-reaching advantages, and as African-American scholars, we humbly and respectfully call for more studies and research to be done from an indigenous support system perspective as well as research that is more integrated, collaborative, and cross-disciplined.

Conclusion

The strength and resiliency of the African-American family, as revealed through the studies, real stories, and statistics in this article, speaks for itself. Consequently, this article is only one attempt to reverse how African-American families have been treated in scholarship. This article shows the African-American family's strength and, as such, is a testimony to its resiliency.

Even if one doesn't concur with Popenoe about the American family's decline, it is true that the American family has witnessed some very rapid changes in the 1ast 50 years. If the American family is to survive and carry out its function, then adjustments must be made. The challenge is for contemporary researchers and practitioners to restrain themselves from trying to assimilate or transform the ethnically-diverse families' values and behaviors to that of the majority. Rather, there needs to be a healthy respect for the value and strength that diversity offers.

From a multicultural perspective, and recognizing the messages in the above narrated stories, educators and practitioners are ethically responsible for knowing how to effectively use indigenous systems when working with African Americans. The good news is that there exists some quality research on Black families that has simply been overlooked. Ironically, the same literature that has been written about the dysfunction within and the social ills of the African-American family can actually be reframed into resiliency and thus become useful in developing strategies to offset the decline of American families.

Given the historic and current tribulations endured by African-American families and their amazing strength to keep going and "a-climbin," the focus needs to be turned to considering the benefit of indigenous support systems for all families. The triumphs and remarkable endurance of the African-American family keeps hope alive for all. Popenoe's question then changes from "Is the American family in decline?" to "Is the American family in an adaptation mode?" The answer is a resounding Yes!

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