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Perspectives on
Working with African-
American Families



Implications for Practice

Perspectives on Working with African-American Families



- Before we embark on this exploration, we have to be mindful of the social, political and environmental context in which African-American families find themselves.
- Our attention often is narrowly focused on the child welfare system and concerns about over-representation in the system, particularly in placement rates, and rightly so.
- However, we also need to see disparity in a broader context, encompassing many social and economic domains and the consequent risks posed to Black families' stability and their children's wellbeing.

Context



- African-Americans are negatively represented in virtually all social and economic domains in far greater numbers than their percentage in the population.
- This is true nationally, in Minnesota and in Olmsted county.

Defining the Issue



- **Involvement in the child welfare system**
- **Lack of MFIP Success**
- **Negative health care outcomes**
- **Achievement gaps in schools**
- **Expulsion/suspension rates in our schools**
- **Teen pregnancy**
- **Poverty**
- **Wealth gap**
- **Rates of home ownership**
- **Incarceration rates**

Defining the Issue



- African American children continue to be **six times** more likely to enter the child welfare system.
- African American families are more likely to be reported for neglect (**80% vs. 71%**)
- African American children are still more likely to receive a maltreatment determination.
- African American children are still more likely to be placed during assessment.
- African American children continue to be over **six times** more likely to spend some time in placement than white children.

Health Care Access



- 4.6% of whites, 15.6% of blacks in Minnesota do not have health insurance.
- In 2004, 4,604 babies (6.5%) were born at low birth weight in Minnesota. This included 10.5% of Black, non-Latino babies.
- People of color do not experience worse health simply because they are more likely to have a lower income.
- Racism, discrimination and chronic race-related stress play an important role in health outcomes.
- Health is affected through factors such as restricted economic opportunities, limited access to medical care, and barriers and bias in health care systems.

Teen Pregnancy



- The rate of teen pregnancy for African-American girls is roughly **6 ½ times** that for whites despite a recent decline in the teen birth rate overall.
- Eight to twelve years after birth, a child born to an unmarried, teenage, high school dropout is **10 times** as likely to be living in poverty as a child born to a mother with none of these characteristics.
- Research shows that children born to single mothers are **twice** as likely to drop out of high school, **twice** as likely to have a child before age twenty, and **one and one-half times** as likely to be out of school and out of work in their late teens and early twenties.

Incarceration Rates



- The American prison and jail system is defined by an entrenched racial disparity in the population of incarcerated people.
- The national incarceration rate for whites is 412 per 100,000 residents, compared to 2,290 for African Americans.
- These figures mean that **2.3%** of all African Americans are incarcerated, compared to 0.4% of whites.
- **One in nine (11.7%)** African American males between the ages of 25 and 29 is currently incarcerated in a prison or jail.
- While more than 1% of African Americans in 49 states and the District of Columbia are incarcerated, there is not a single state in the country with a rate of incarceration that high for whites.
- The ratio of incarceration in Minnesota is **9 to 1** African-American to white.

Incarceration Rates



- A Black boy born in 2001 has a **1 in 3** chance of going to prison in his lifetime; a Latino boy a 1 in 6 chance; and a White boy a 1 in 17 chance.
- A Black girl born in 2001 has a **1 in 17** chance of going to prison in her lifetime; a Latino girl a 1 in 45 chance; and a White girl a 1 in 111 chance.
- Of the estimated **1,527** youth in residential placement in Minnesota in 2003, **402 (26.3%)** were Black, non-Latino.

Employment



- The challenge for many African-Americans is not only earning a livable wage but also finding employment in the face of subtle, covert bias and racism.
- African-Americans are less likely to be called for interviews when they did not have a criminal record.
- A criminal record reduced the chances of being called back for a white person by half, and a black person by two thirds.
- Blacks without criminal records were still less likely to be called for an interview than a white person with a record.

Poverty



- Black children are more than **three times** as likely as White children to be born into poverty and to be poor, and are almost **four times** as likely to live in extreme poverty.
- **3 in 7** Black babies are born into poverty.
- **1 in 3** Black children are poor.
- In Minnesota, among all children, **1 in 9** (11.6 percent or 139,801) was poor.
- For Black children **3 in 7** (42.4 percent or 32,550) were poor.
- For **White**, non-Latino children **1 in 14** (7.0 percent or 67,279) was poor.

Olmsted County Disparities



- **8%** of our African-American MFIP families are out of compliance with their Self-sufficiency/Employment Plan and are in sanction (reduced benefits), compared to 6.3% overall.
- **39%** of our MFIP families whose cases are closed at the 60-month lifetime limit with no basis for an extension are African American (not working, not disabled).
- Besides the disparity on the Self-support Index, other disparities exist or are of concern when assessing successful outcomes for African-American families.

Achievement Gap



- In the Rochester School District, African-American students represented **34%** of all truancies while comprising approximately 8% of the total student enrollment.
- In 2006-2007 African-American students represented **55%** of all suspensions (N= 734).
- **20%** of all dropouts in the district were African-American.
- Not surprisingly, African-American students lagged behind their White counterparts in graduation rates by some **17%**.

The Wealth Gap



- A livable wage for a family of four is estimated to be \$33,323.
- Average annual wages (mean wages) in Olmsted County in 2000 were \$36,106.
- Nineteen percent (8,336) of white households earned \$24,999 or less in 1999 compared to **53%** (526) of black or African-American households.
- The rate of home ownership is 67% white and **39%** people of color.
- Even accounting for income/poverty, there is a disparity ranging from **10%** at the under 2.09% of poverty to **34%** at the 3.46%

Realizations



- African-Americans experience disparity in many different ways and in different settings.
- Concentrating on one aspect misses the larger implications of the intersection of poverty, class and racism and their impact on the social, economic, environmental and psychological lives of the families we serve.
- It's critical to see disproportionality in a broader context than only out of home placement rates or MFIP success or any other domain in isolation.

Realizations



- The fact that African-Americans experience disparities on so many social measures is more than coincidence.
- Those disparities are outcomes of processes which can overwhelm the individual's or family's protective factors (resilience).
- When the social or environmental context increases the likelihood and severity of adverse consequences, the individual, in turn, is at greater risk for negative outcomes.
- Strengths and protective factors, then, should be assessed in the context of race and disparities.
- These factors directly affect the individual or family's resilience and potentially complicate any proposed solutions.

Strategies for Practice



- Subtle biases in the System, whether driven by racism, classism or the like perpetuate these negative outcomes.
- The resultant disengagement of persons and families of color is predictable and further contributes to the cycle of failure.
- Our interventions then have to be on three tiers:
- Macro (policies, practices and programs with rigid rules and regulations, which perpetuate a continued disengagement of African American families from the economic mainstream).
- Mezzo (workers attitudes and sensitivity to the issues confronting persons of color in our society)
- Micro (youth and family change)

Macro-level Practice Strategy



- Agencies need to examine their policies and practices to eliminate potential barriers to engagement with families of color. E.g. Provision of mandatory cultural sensitivity training; Hiring of minority staff in numbers representative of the client community served.
- Child Welfare systems must make a concerted effort to collaborate with as many community partners as possible since the issue of disparities cuts across so many domains.
- Agencies/systems need to look at their practices and procedures to eliminate those which do not respond to the needs of the families we serve or which in fact provide barriers to access. E.g. location of services, hours of service, fragmentation of services among too many providers.
- The agency needs to search out non-traditional partners who may have more roots within communities of color.

Mezzo-level Practice Strategy



- Increase worker knowledge of the issues and challenges facing African-Americans through training and regular exposure to the latest data.
- Workers should be given the tools through practice strategies to adequately address the impact of disparities on African-American families.
- A shift in practice thinking needs to occur which recognizes Race as a risk factor which potentially puts child safety, permanency and well being in jeopardy.
- There needs to be support from colleagues and supervisors for a change in thinking and practice. In other words, there needs to be institutional support.

Micro-level Practice Strategy



- Acknowledge the special challenges Black families face in this society.
- Have an honest discussion of the realities of the family's social, political and economic environment.
- Acknowledge bias, racism and injustice.
- Be open to the anger, frustration and disappointment of the family.
- Create connections to information and resources.
- Eliminate barriers to opportunities
- Build a collaborative relationship with the family through respectful listening and non-judgmental acceptance of the family's point of view.

Conclusion



- As we prepare to work with African-American families we need to address the issues of disparity on micro, mezzo and macro levels simultaneously.
- Systems need to make a concerted effort to partner and collaborate to avoid duplication and to insure access.
- Agencies need to examine their policies and practices to eliminate potential barriers to engagement with families of color.
- Individual workers need to be informed of the issues and challenges facing African Americans. They need to be given the tools, (knowledge and support) to effectively respond to those challenges.
- All of us need to discover new, creative ways to address the issues confronting African-American families.



The Numbers Tell it!

- Black children make up nearly half of the foster care population, although they constitute less than one-fifth of the nation's children...Once removed from their homes, Black children remain in foster care longer, are moved more often, receive fewer services, and are less likely to be either returned home or adopted than other children. (Roberts, 2002, pp.vi)



A New Frame of Reference

- However, given the disproportionate numbers of African American children and families involved in child protective services a new frame of reference and engagement must be developed. This frame of reference must focus on the strengths of African American families as a means of **effective engagement and family intervention**. The worker must **document the strengths of black families** as well, as they attempt to understand these families better. (Royse, Turner, 1980).



Defining Family Strengths

- Researcher Robert Hill 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 systems outside the family unit. They are necessary for the survival, maintenance, and advancement of family networks.” (Hill, 1999, p42) Other researchers such as Littlejohn-Blake and Darling define family strengths as, “Those relationship patterns, interpersonal competencies, and social and psychological characteristics that create a sense of positive family identity.” (Littlejohn-Blake, Darling, 1993)



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- ❖ Hill identified five strengths of African American families:
- ❖ strong achievement orientation,
- ❖ flexible family roles,
- ❖ strong work orientation,
- ❖ strong kinship bonds,
- ❖ strong religious orientation (Hill, 1999)



Parenting Strengths of low-income single mothers

- Substantial parent involvement,
- An abundant amount of support for parenting from external caregivers,
- Parenting skills which emphasize and enhance achievement,
- Respect for others and self respect and racial pride with their children. (Woody, Woody, 2003).



Implications for Caseworker Practice

- Caseworkers must be keenly aware of the role that race, class, culture, and socioeconomic conditions and factors play in the lives of African American families. Poverty and limited financial resources can negatively impact an African American mother's ability to parent. In fact researchers Daphne S. Cain and Terri Combs-Orme in their study of parenting and family structure in African American families found that **Poverty and the quality of the parenting experienced by mothers influenced parenting more than marital status or family structure.** (Cain, Combs-Orme, 2005).



Different Lenses

- Caseworkers when anticipating working with African American clients should take some time for **personal self reflection** and look at their own **family functioning**, values, codes of conduct, and **parenting practices** and decide how their **family ecology may benefit or harm the African American families that they work with**. Researcher Sandra Barnes suggests that social workers, and human service agents who interact with African American families (especially families that face economic problems) should continually evaluate the standard by which they judge these families. (Barnes, 2001)



World-views

- The majority of social workers, who are mostly European American, tend to have a more liberal progressive world-view as compared to an orthodox world-view of African American clients (Hodge, 2003).



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- Caseworkers of color along with European American caseworkers need to look at their socioeconomic class values that may be different from lower income African American families.



Individual Assessment

- The worker must be able to see each African American client as unique and provide an appropriate assessment based on the unique characteristics of the client and family. Royse and Turner assert: “It remains the social worker’s responsibility to make an individual assessment based on the particular client’s strengths and weaknesses.” (Royse, Turner 1980)



Family Relationships/Ecological Elements

- Family relationships, structure and Dynamics
- Supporting Healthy Male-Female Relationships
- Mother's Well Being
- Parent-Child Relationship Building
- Sprituality



Where is Daddy?

- Most child protection data or SACWIS systems are designed to open the case in the mother's name. Even if the couple is married or there is a father in the home we still open the case in the mother's name!
- Why is that?



Mother's well Being: View and reflect on Mother's Emotional self and Health

- The worker should ask the mother what are her strengths?
- Focus on mother's self esteem
- Discuss her mental health status and possible referral to African American mental health agencies or culturally competent therapists.
- Determine alcohol and/or other drug issues; has mother acknowledged problems and received treatment?



Mother's Needs and Ability to Nurture and Protect child(ren)

- Ask mother to describe the good things that she does everyday for her children.
- Have mother define and describe her ability to nurture
- Have mother describe stressors that keep her from parenting effectively
- How can her ability to nurture be developed and supported?
- What specific thing (s) that relate to the reason for the report and substantiation need to be changed (i.e. educational neglect-truancy; domestic violence; unsupervised children, etc.) examine this collaboratively with parent and document in the case plan
- Parent(s) and child (if age appropriate) need to create action steps to address issues i.e getting to school, behavioral issues, etc. caseworker should support and document this
- Consider how spouse/partner or relatives/ kin help the nurturing process



Conclusion

- If African American families can be preserved in its broadest form i.e. extended family and kin then perhaps the racial disparities for African American children in the child protection system can be reduced and or eliminated. Focusing on strengths of African American families is best practice and family-centered case practice



A Message from the Dagara tribe

- African author, Sobonfu Some, from the Dagara tribe in Burkina Faso, Africa says that children are spirits who come to test the willingness, generosity, genuineness and openness of people...they are called the future because no community has ever survived without its children. So, the role of the community is to attend to the children's needs. (Taylor, December 2005).



Caseworkers are the community!

- Child welfare caseworkers play a key role in empowering clients to meet the needs of their children and families. Therefore, they are instrumental in supporting strengths and creating and sustaining community.