

**RECONCEPTUALIZING  
THE STRENGTHS AND COMMON  
HERITAGE OF BLACK FAMILIES**

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# RECONCEPTUALIZING THE STRENGTHS AND COMMON HERITAGE OF BLACK FAMILIES

**Practice, Research, and Policy Issues**

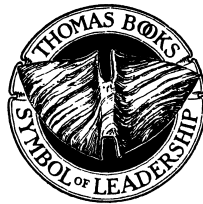
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*(With 14 Other Contributors)*



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*I am,  
Because you are,  
And because you are,  
I am.*

—African Proverb





## FOREWORD

This book, *Reconceptualizing the Strengths and Common Heritage of Black Families: Practice, Research, and Policy Issues*, is both inspirational and practical. It is appropriate for all individuals in service professions with black clientele-care managers; policy makers; social workers and other behavioral health professionals; health services and public health practitioners; commercial service providers; and municipal, county, and state employees, among others. Researchers who care about the quality of their data obtained on or from blacks also have good reason to add this resource to their research design and analysis bookshelf.

In particular, this book should serve as a reference guide to advocates and practitioners of “cultural tailoring” who fail to document the specific cultural group and cultural elements that are being “tailored.” “Cultural tailoring” should include much more than hiring minority outreach workers or community people to assist in implementing research programs in diverse communities. At a minimum, it should document and include developing an understanding and application of the cultural norms and realities of the specific target population based on the culturally-centered principles laid out in this book.

Reflective readers will find this book to be an excellent resource for understanding why their professional practice involving human affairs and services should be grounded in the culture of their clients. To miss this fundamental point in the human service professions means misconstruing important elements of human behavior. It also means that the strengths and assets clients bring to the sociocultural encounter might not be captured by those professionals, thus causing them to miss opportunities for culturally appropriate and effective interventions.

After all, culture includes a group’s design for living—its belief and value systems, its cherished ideals, treasured goals, its perspectives. Culture, also includes the thoughts and notions considered abhorrent

to a group. These intangibles or nonmaterial aspects of culture define a people. Thus, if elements of culture are not incorporated into care and service programs, a people's strengths and weaknesses, assets and liabilities, and unique problem-solving abilities will be omitted from the intervention strategy, and an intervention failure will ensue.

Freeman and Logan (Chapter 1) document the case for a common cultural heritage of black families with differences based on the social context. They are convincing. As a black woman raised as a British "subject citizen" in colonial Grenada in the Caribbean in the 1930s and 1940s, acculturated in the United States of America with university classmates from West and Southern Africa in the 1950s and 1960s, and as a professional student of American culture with international development experiences in six African countries, the evidence in Chapter 1 is persuasive.

The common heritage or Africentric framework is presented in Chapter 1, and then is operationalized by Logan and Freeman in Chapter 2 to guide practitioners in their work with black families. Specific cultural strengths are not only identified and presented; they are put to work or applied to the benefit of the individual, family, community, and society.

Other chapters in Part II of the book serve the reader by providing historical data and cultural critiques of pivotal topics such as housing, mental health, crime and violence, labor, work and employment, substance abuse, youth, men, women, families, and the elderly. In each case, strengths and needs of black families are highlighted to exemplify a practice and research approach that is driven by cultural underpinnings and norms of experience.

To consider how to improve existing conceptual flaws and misdirected social programs, particularly for black families, study this book and refer to it often. It will help to shape your policies, programs, research, and practice in culturally significant ways.

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## INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this book is twofold. First, it provides a comprehensive analysis and critique of the existing bodies of research literature on black families, children, and communities, and the effects of that literature on the status of this population today. Secondly, the book presents new and expanded practice and research frameworks with culturally sensitive guidelines for rebuilding and increasing the self- and collective sufficiency of this heterogeneous group. These frameworks are used to propose specific approaches to culturally meaningful research, practice, and policy development related to black families. Hence, the book's broad perspective is solution-focused, culturally specific (or emic), and strengths oriented.

The book's strengths orientation emphasizes the resourcefulness and natural resilience of African American families, both individually and collectively, in spite of numerous barriers with which they have been confronted. This orientation is important because much of the past and current literature on black families has been pathology-focused. That literature often uses a Eurocentric lens and related standards to frame discussions and make decisions about the life opportunities, health, viability, and well-being of African Americans. Further, this culturally biased lens and set of standards have been used in the development of public and social policy, leading to the many adverse economic, political, physical, and social conditions experienced by these families.

Fortunately, contemporary social work literature as well as some of the general social science literature now reflects many authors' and researchers' efforts to establish more positive perspectives about African Americans and other people of color. Some of this literature, however, still fails to acknowledge the strengths and resilience of these groups. This failure has had many negative consequences, most important has been a denial of the effects of institutional and policy barriers on the

growth and survival of such families. Another gap in this literature is a failure to acknowledge the common heritage and struggles of black people who were brought to this country directly from Africa and enslaved, or who subsequently immigrated here from Europe, Canada, South America, and the Caribbean. Not recognizing these common cultural resources and problems, along with various environmental barriers, has no doubt, limited opportunities for identifying common approaches to planning and implementing family and community rebuilding.

Moreover, the current political climate has led to the development of many cost containment and social program reforms which have exacerbated existing resource inequities and negative media messages about black families and communities. Clearly, an expanded focus and new directions are needed in the literature to enable social work to actualize more effectively the strengths perspective and its' social justice priorities related to African American families and other groups of color. An equally important benefit of such a shift in the literature is that the profession, as illustrated in this book, can identify black stakeholder or consumer-involved dissemination and policy impact strategies for influencing the perspectives of policy developers and other decision-makers.

The book's contribution to this literature on black families includes its' discussions on practice, policy, and research issues at the micro, mezzo, and macro levels, which have seriously disrupted the well-being of African American families, currently and historically. This more integrative approach to systems analyses reflects these families' realities in which the effects of supports and barriers at all three levels often operate/influence each other simultaneously. While these common aspects exist in their realities and African origins, black families in the United States are from various countries and sociopolitical circumstances. They reflect a range of different lifestyles and ethnic identity orientations from the process of adapting to life in this country and in other countries. Hence, this book emphasizes that an understanding of black families must be derived from equally important knowledge areas regarding: (1) Their core African culture, values, and traditions (group commonalities); and (2) Their varied experiences and responses to a history of racism and oppression since the African diaspora (within group diversity). This dual perspective is essential for maintaining the

strengths-focused and culture specific approaches that this book has used to address these important areas.

These two approaches are evident throughout the book, but particularly in Part One, which includes two chapters on the Conceptual, Theoretical, Research, and Practice Orientation of the Book. Chapter 1 by Freeman and Logan identifies common aspects of the heritage of black families: the common strengths, problems, and barriers that they have experienced from an Afrocentric cultural perspective. In that same chapter, the authors analyze how, in spite of these commonalities, such families are different, and the implications of those differences for a culturally sensitive research framework and policy reform process. The book also includes an analysis of the strengths perspective in Chapter 2 by Logan and Freeman, and some unique aspects of its' application to practice with black families and communities. Chapter 2 also discusses how the proposed Afrocentric model from Chapter 1 and the application of the strengths perspective and other spiritually-sensitive approaches can be integrated in assessing and intervening with African American families in their communities.

Part Two includes nine chapters on The Status and Quality of Research Literature on Black Families and Communities related to a number of cutting edge issues and special subgroups within this population. Those chapters provide an analysis and critique of research literature in each specified area in terms of the lens, methodology, and findings in this literature, and then each proposes topic or population specific guidelines for improving the cultural relevance of such research. Chapters 3 through 8 present critiques of black family research literature related to housing, mental health, crime and violence, employment and training, substance abuse, and education respectively. Chapters 8 through 11 address the research literature on African American children and youth within the education system as well as the literature on black women, men, and the elderly, in that order. The topic and population specific research frameworks proposed in these nine chapters provide guidelines that are consistent with the general research framework proposed by the editors in Chapter 1.

Finally, in Part Three, Chapters 12 through 14 focus on micro, mezzo, and macro practice approaches for helping black families and communities to build on their cultural strengths in the areas of cultural maintenance, social justice and political activism, and economic and

social development. These family and community practice chapters include specific principles for systems changes and for improving the well-being of this population with an emphasis on including them as important stakeholders and collaborators based on knowledge summarized in the research chapters in Part II. Part III includes also the epilogue by Freeman, focused on the implications of such integrated strengths-oriented approaches for research, practice, and policy reforms.

This book is designed primarily as a direct practice-research text for graduate students in social work, psychology, mental health, case management, community planning, public health, public administration, and human resource programs that include a focus on practice with black families and communities. Hence, it is intended as an integrative text for graduate courses such as those focused on practice-research, participatory research, community empowerment/capacity building, and combined micro-mezzo-macro level practice. It should be useful as well to beginning and experienced helping professionals, administrators, consultants and trainers, researchers, policy makers, and community activists in a range of social science fields.

The intent of the editors is to provide the readers with an opportunity to rethink their approaches to research and micro, mezzo, and macro practice with African American families and communities. The use of more culturally relevant, stakeholder involved, and strengths focused approaches to research and practice with this population not only requires reconceptualizing this work, but it also requires changes in the readers' roles from expert professionals to the apprentices of key cultural informants. The goal of such changes is to improve the quality and outcomes of that work. We challenge the readers to undertake this essential long-term goal.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The completion of this book represents a promising yet arduous journey for the editors. The idea for writing the book had its genesis during a Spring 1997 Institute on the Common Heritage of Black Families at the University of Kansas. The editors convened that invitational institute with a number of national scholars who had made significant contributions to the literature on black families and communities. The stimulating dialogue and rich exchange of knowledge among the institute participants served as a catalyst for the editors in conceiving and planning this book. As a result, many of the chapters in the book represent papers that were presented during the institute and subsequently revised, as well as other chapters that were added later to expand the list of topics.

Consequently, we wish to acknowledge the groundbreaking scholarship of our contributing authors in completing their chapters. Their work throughout this process has been both professional and collaborative. We also acknowledge and appreciate the work of Marian Abegg, support staff in the University of Kansas School of Social Welfare in Lawrence, Kansas, who typed parts of the manuscript. Finally, we thank our families for their enduring and nurturing support, and most of all, we are grateful for the spiritual and cultural inspiration that led us to write profoundly about the strengths, needs, and common heritage of African American families.





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## **PART ONE**

### **CONCEPTUAL, THEORETICAL, RESEARCH, AND PRACTICE ORIENTATION OF THE BOOK**





# Chapter 1

## COMMON HERITAGE AND DIVERSITY AMONG BLACK FAMILIES AND COMMUNITIES: AN AFROCENTRIC RESEARCH PARADIGM

EDITH M. FREEMAN AND SADYE L. LOGAN

General assumptions about black families in the media and professional literature have reinforced myths that such families are a homogeneous group. Contrary to these self-perpetuating myths, black families are from many different countries and sociopolitical circumstances. These assumptions and myths not only pathologize common aspects of black families and encourage gross generalizations about them (Barnes, 2001; Horton, 2002; Schiele, 1996), but they also ignore the importance of within group differences. Hence, they limit dominant society's understanding of and appreciation for variations in black families' cultural traditions, identities, experiences, values, beliefs, and lifestyles, as well as commonalities among them.

Black families' life opportunities and resources have been severely limited in a number of ways as a result. First, policy makers and those who influence them have used such assumptions as the basis for biased research and policy decisions, leading to and perpetuating a process of institutionalized racism and oppression toward black families, other families of color, and the poor. Biased research results and related social policy often lead to biased or culturally destructive service

programs, another consequence of these assumptions (Freeman, 1996). Since service providers for these programs are not required to be culturally competent, the resulting services are often culturally insensitive and psychologically inaccessible to the target families and communities.

The purpose of this chapter is to present a common heritage framework that can increase service providers' and policy makers' understanding of the common strengths and needs of black families. The chapter also analyzes within group differences that are equally important for informing the development of culturally competent services that build upon the collective sufficiency of these families. A discussion is included on the implications for culturally competent research based on the commonalities and differences presented in the chapter, along with related policy issues. The term black families is used in this discussion to include all people of African descent and the African diaspora, a more inclusive concept than African Americans in this context. Before describing the common heritage framework, an analysis is presented of theoretical assumptions that support or dispute the concept of a common heritage among black people.

### **Theories about African Continuity and Discontinuity**

Different theoretical concepts have been used to support or argue against direct linkages between the past and present culture of black families. These concepts, conclusions, and beliefs affect how the problems and strengths of black families are conceptualized. Moreover, they affect how services are organized and social policies are developed to address those problems, hence predisposing policies and programs to either acknowledge or ignore those strengths. Both continuity and discontinuity perspectives are grounded in assumptions about the African roots of black families.

#### ***African Discontinuity Perspective***

This perspective assumes that although the cultural roots of black people are centered in Africa, vast differences existed among the African countries. Their different languages, religions, philosophies, customs, and values were assumed to be in conflict. Those assumed differ-

ences were used to infer the absence of a common culture among the various West African countries (Frazier, 1966), and to conclude that, collectively, those cultures were less valuable or valid than European cultures.

The fact that Africans quickly adapted to the cultures and demands of different countries after the diaspora, during slavery and colonization, is viewed as confirmation of the absence of a common valued culture rather than the existence of their culture as a strength (Sudarkasa, 1983). Some historians and researchers have labeled African adaptations as inferior versions of the European cultures of those who enslaved or colonized them. This argument ignores how those adaptations persisted in spite of enduring barriers, including American laws that prohibited the teaching of English, religion, and commerce to slaves (McRoy, 1990). Based on these assumptions, black families have often been called culturally deprived or *accultural*.

The goal of policies and service programs based on these assumptions is to acculturate or socialize black families to Eurocentric traditions and values, including the “colorblind” myth perpetuated in America. Hence, the best progress is assumed to be that which makes black families blend in with other races and ethnic groups, an impossible and undesirable goal. Other programs based on these assumptions may imply that very little change in black families is possible, based on the intersection of social class and racial biases. This lack of belief in the possibility of change is implied by euphemisms such as “the poor will always be with us” and “why haven’t black people done better given all the affirmative action and social programs being provided to them?”

### ***The Continuity or Survival Perspective***

In contrast to the discontinuity argument, the survival perspective assumes there *was* a common culture among Africans before the diaspora, particularly among West African countries. Some differences were acknowledged, however, those differences were assumed to be minor considering the degree of unity that Africans were able to develop in order to survive after the diaspora. During slavery and colonization, some historians and researchers believe the oral tradition allowed the blending of common aspects of the different countries’ culture, traditions, language, and values (DeBois, 1969, Herskovits, 1958).