

The Strength of Black Families: The Elusive Ties of Perspective and Praxis in Social Work Education

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“These are times when our most prolific commodity is language, and language has a great deal to do with alienation and legitimacy.”

- Chicago Catalysts: Declare War on White Racism, 1968

“We must go a step further. If it is clear that the practice of social work by blacks for blacks must operate from a new theory, then this theory of liberation must be fully and unquestionably developed to its fullest by those blacks. This new social theory must not be arrived at by outside sources who would distort the true meaning of liberation.”

- LeVerne McCummings, Chairman Philadelphia Alliance of Black Social Workers, 1969

The strengths perspective, although briefly commented on by E. Franklin Frazier’s (1939) early research describing the Negro family, becomes intrinsically tied to the cultural scholarship produced thereafter which pointed to the impact of structural oppression on the Black family. The political era of the Civil Rights, Women’s Rights, and The Black Power Movement demanded the inclusion of rigorous research that centered racial and gender identity as significant narratives for inclusion in curriculum (Collins, 1998; Solomon 1976, Chunn, 1975). The emergence of Black Studies and Women’s Studies, along with student-led and national organizations incorporating the same identity politics, also became familiar parts of the intellectual land-

scape. Billingsley (1968), Hill (1972), Nobles (1974) and Solomon (1976) emerged as prominent scholars who disrupted the common rhetoric of the pathologized Black family through their emphasis on connecting African cultural values, traditions, and generational behaviors as strengths. Their newly articulated strengths perspective humanized persons of African ancestry and helped to unpack the common labels of “negro underclass”, “underprivileged”, and “ghetto” (Nobles & Goodard, 1985). Through their scholarship, they helped to usher in a critical lens that contextualized the environmental underbelly of America’s legalized structural oppression. The collective identity of their lived experiences as scholars and simultaneously as members of the Black community were brought into alignment as they linked Black lives to positive characteristics such as extended family networks, self-help, mutual aid, collective responsibility, link-fate, community stability, and power (Chunn, 1975; Nobles & Goodard, 1985; Boyd-Franklin, 1989, Harvey 1985).

The Black family, as described in *The Strength of Black Families* (Hill, 1972;1997) is the fundamental source of:

- 1) Strong work orientation
- 2) Strong religious orientation
- 3) Strong belief in family
- 4) Strong achievement orientation
- 5) Adaptability of family roles. (Chunn, 1975, p.9).

The Black family is understood as the core institution of Black life (Dubois, 1898; Frazier, 1939, 1957; Billingsley, 1968, Ladner, 1972; Harvey 1985). The Black family is the incubator of generational knowledge, traditions, values, and behaviors who serves as a protective mechanism against external threats and serves as a catalyst for the next ecological cycle (Billingsley, 1968, 1973, 1973b; Collins, 1989; Hill, 1972; Logan and Freeman, 1990; Nobles, 1974). And yet, Black family strengths have largely been overlooked through scientific inquiry, in support of a western positivist epistemology that reproduces structural inequities (Nobles & Goddard, 1985, Glasgow, 1980, Solomon, 1976, Boyd-Franklin, 1989; Royce-Turner, 1980, Martin & Martin, 1995; Hill 1972; Wells-Wilbon, McPhatter, & Vakalahi, 2016).

The strengths of Black families are further woven into institutions such as the National Association of Black Social Workers (NABSW) and some of the initial social work programs at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU’s), and other culturally-informed curriculum in social work. NABSW, founded in 1968, regards the preservation of the Black family and community as its primary responsibility (Johnson, 1978). Thus, for over 50 years the strengths perspective has guided their members’ research, scholarship, practice and curriculum through the institutionalization of NABSW’s journals, newsletters, conferences, and trainings. (Chunn, 1975; Harvey 1985; Nobles & Goddard, 1985; Waites, 2009; McLane-Davison, 2017; Wells-Wilbon, McPhatter, & Vakalahi, 2016). Clark-Atlanta University, Howard University, Morgan State University, and the University of Michigan’s Schools of social work have all

benefited from the Black strength-perspective as a key competency of their programs. Many of the founding and pioneering members of NABSW were prominent members of the faculty and administrative teams that pushed for this inclusion. Thus, as the Whitney M. Young, Jr. School of Social Work, Clark-Atlanta University, Atlanta, Georgia, celebrates its centennial in 2020 and has the distinction of being the first HBCU School of Social Work, the academic home of E. Franklin Frazier (1939) *The Negro Family*, as well as, Dubois, (1903) book *The Souls of Black Folk*; it may also be considered the birthing ground of the Black strengths perspective.

Keeping in step with our academic fore-parents, the authors have intentionally utilized the historical documents of Black scholars as historical markers to center the Black strengths perspective as it emerged through the voice of a new group of Black scholars during the 1960s. This scholarship is further institutionalized through the founding of The National Association of Black Social Workers, Inc. and in social work programs at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). Lastly, we explore how the Black strength perspective expanded the critical lens of social work research and pushed for a culturally-informed curriculum as praxis of social work education.

THE STRENGTHS PERSPECTIVE

The strengths perspective is a lens through which systems are viewed. It is a perspective that requires one to rely upon innate tools or characteristics that enable that system to withstand challenges to that system (Hill, 1972). The social work practitioner makes a choice to view a system through a strengths perspective. African-centered scholarship relies upon a strengths perspective to frame the lived experiences of African Americans (Nobles, 1974; Harvey, 1985; Boyd-Franklin, 1989; Waites, 2009). Billingsley (1968) reminds us that the strengths perspective requires the social worker to see the family as “the most basic institution of any people, the center and source of its civilization” (Forward). Billingsley (1968) goes on to describe the role of the Black family in society,

...the family is not an independent unit of society. It is not the causal nexus of social behavior. It is highly interdependent with a great number of other institutions for its definition, its survival, and its achievement. The Negro family, then, cannot be understood in isolation or by concentration on its fragments, or on particular forms of family life, or by concentration on its negative functions. The Negro family can best be understood when viewed as a varied and complex institution within the Negro community, which is in turn highly interdependent with other institutions in wider white society (Forward).

It is this perspective that served as a catalyst for the founding of NABSW, in May 1968, at the 95th annual meeting for the National Conference on Social Welfare

(NCSW) in San Francisco, California. The conference theme was “An action platform for human welfare”. There was a division program that supported the conference entitled, “The ghetto and the politics of welfare”. According to Wayne Vasey, President of NCSW, and Professor of Social Work at the University of Michigan, the 1968 conference “was the largest Forum in history, in attendance, with almost 8,200 registered, and certainly the most tumultuous in recent years” (National Conference on Social Welfare, 1968, p. 156). There were several influential events occurring that preoccupied the minds of many of the conference participants and leadership. The Poor People’s March, led by Martin Luther King, Jr’s Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) and other groups like the National Welfare Rights Organization (NWRO), took place in Washington, DC the same week of the NCSW conference. Welfare rights organizations sent representatives to the NCSW conference, such as the National Federation of Student Social Workers and the Social Workers’ Welfare Movement who charged the organization with “welfare colonialism” for failure to address structural poverty (Berry, 1989). The California fruit workers were on strike during this time and sent representatives who also protested the U.S. governments importing migrant workers from Mexico to break the labor unions. There were also widespread student protests at universities and colleges across the country addressing the Vietnam War (Berry, 1989).

Black social workers were organizing around the country to address “gross [social] inequalities after World War II” (Jaggers, 2003, p. 14) and to combat racial discrimination in social welfare agencies and schools of social work (Jaggers, 2003). A contingent of those Black social workers protested during the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) conference on the Urban Crisis in April 1968, for discussing the “urban crisis” without the inclusion of the voices of Black social work leaders. This contingent of Black social workers named themselves the Association of Black Catalysts: Our Black Thing (ABC: OBT), but were most commonly referred to as ABC or The Catalysts. They decided at the NASW conference to attend the NCSW conference in San Francisco in May 1968 to raise the same concerns as was raised at the NASW conference. As was the case with each of the other protesting groups, the ABC expressed concerns about the NCSW’s unwillingness to take a position on pressing social issues. Specifically, the NCSW preamble states that “this conference does not take an official position on controversial issues and adopts no resolutions except occasional resolutions of courtesy (Vasey, 1968, p. 159)”.

The members of The Catalysts demanded that the leaders of NCSW address these presenting social issues. Consequently, five members of the ABC “commandeered” (Jaggers, 2003; Vasey, 1968) the plenary stage at the start of a convening session. Other members stood in the center aisle of the plenary session. George Silcott, Professor of Social Work at New York University and founding member of the ABC, read a position statement that reflected displeasure with NCSW’s preamble, which was seen as being in direct contradiction to the conference’s theme of action. Specifically, while the NCSW’s preamble suggests that the conference does not take a position on social issues, the president, Wayne Vasey, delivered an “action-oriented [mes-

sage that states] the need for a massive attack on a wide front of human problems” (Jagers, 2003, p. 19). The ABC viewed Vasey’s stance as contradictory, yet preferable, to NCSW’s stance.

These Black social workers demanded that there be a revision of the organization’s preamble. In addition, Black social workers critiqued NCSW for being an “American white institution in so far as the members of its Board and planning committee do not reflect an ethnic composition commensurate with its expressed concern” (Vasey, 1968, p.160). This critique is evidenced by the list of program speakers. While there were sessions such as, “Work and Income Policies for the Negro in Urban Slums”, there was but one Black presenter on the program. Whitney M. Young, Jr., Executive Director of the National Urban League, provided the closing address, where he expressed support for the actions of the ABC. Furthermore, Black social workers demanded that the people “who speak, write, research and evaluate the Black community be Black people” and that White social workers need to focus on resolving the “problem of White racism” (Vasey, 1968, p.160). The position statement ended with the following statement (Jagers, 2003),

We are committed to the reconstruction of systems to make them relevant to the needs of the black community, and are pledged to do all that we can to bring these about by any means necessary (p. 21).

It is this statement that serves as the basis for the founding of the National Association of Black Social Workers in May 1968, in San Francisco, California. It is this organization that has formally connected the strengths perspective to strengths-based scholarship and practice with Black families.

SOCIAL WORK CURRICULUM ABOUT BLACK FAMILIES

The National Association of Black Social Workers realized the necessity of Black people addressing the social issues confronting the Black family. Black social workers were confronted with the question of how to move social work education to center their understanding of the strengths of Black families from a deficit model of pathology and abnormality (Johnson, 1978; Jagers, 2003). They realized that there needed to be an integration of this content throughout the social work curriculum. Consequently, NABSW demanded that Schools of Social Welfare respond in a culturally appropriate way. Specifically, NABSW made the following demands:

- More fieldwork placements in the Black community, with Black supervisors
- Pay community consultants in fieldwork for their expertise
- Black people should be included in the design and implementation of admissions and financial aid towards the recruitment of more Black students

- Hiring freeze on White faculty until half of the faculty are Black
- Black students, faculty, and community members should be a part of the hiring and recruitment process of new Black faculty and administrators
- Develop Black curricula that meet the needs of Black students, faculty and the communities they serve (Johnson, 1978; Jagers, 2003).

Members of NABSW who were also social work faculty members began the implementation of these demands. Douglas Glasgow, of Howard University, developed curricula that reflected strategies for preparing Black social work practitioners to work with Black families. Howard Brasbon, of the University of Michigan, introduced “minority content in social work curriculum”. James Craigen and Morris F. X. Jeff, of Atlanta University, developed curricula that prepared Black social work practitioners to empower Black families to live at maximum potential despite oppressive social environments. Robert Hill (1972) and Andrew Billingsley (1978) became the most influential authorities on the strengths of the Black family through their books as faculty in sociology at Morgan State University. Faculty often returned to the NABSW’s annual conference and presented on new research, scholarship, or classroom innovations they had made to reflect the accuracy of a strengths approach to working with individuals, families, group work, communities, and community-based organizations.

The annual NABSW conferences provided opportunities to vet scholarship created by Black scholars about Black families. As an example, Gwendolyn Spencer Prater, a California State University-Los Angeles faculty member, presented at the 1978 NABSW conference on the topic of *“Family Therapy with Black Families”*. Her research sought to determine models of treatment used in family therapy, and whether Black clients’ views of family treatment was congruent with that of their social worker’s view of family treatment. Prater found that regardless of race or gender of the social worker, the social worker was more likely to view Black family behavior as abnormal. Interestingly, the clients were more likely to view their families as not amenable to therapy. Prater concludes that there is a need for culturally competent training in schools of social work. It was the White social worker’s view of Black families as being homogeneous that alienated Black families in the therapeutic process. This view leaves the family gaining no value in the therapeutic process, and the social worker seeing that family as abnormal. Prater’s findings support NABSW’s call for a redesign of social work curriculum to reflect a more culturally appropriate pedagogical approach to social work education.

PRACTICE WITH BLACK FAMILIES

Social work practitioners often implemented strategies introduced at the annual NABSW conferences in their practice. For example, long-time member Robert Hill, a

widely recognized scholar on the Black family, identified five strengths of the Black family (Hill, 1972). They are strong work orientation, strong religious orientation, strong belief in family, strong achievement orientation, and adaptability of family roles. Hill's description of these strengths was tested in four majority Black communities in Ohio (Royse & Turner, 1980). The authors noted the following:

A review of the literature suggests that the characteristics identified by Hill are not widely recognized and that there is a dearth of scholarly research on the specific topic of the strengths of black families....It is important that the strengths found in black families be revealed so that social workers and other professionals will be able to utilize those traits in the helping process (p. 407).

The authors administered a questionnaire to 128 families. They found that the families in this study overwhelmingly identified with the family strengths identified by Hill (1972). The authors concluded the following,

It remains the social worker's responsibility to make an individual assessment based on the particular client's strengths and weaknesses. The strengths reported here may provide a starting place for all social workers who need to identify the strengths of black families and to understand how those strengths influence social and environmental aspects of behavior (p. 409).

Again, this study highlights the need for schools of social work to prepare social workers to have a strengths perspective when engaging Black families.

It is important that schools of social work revisit the strengths perspective and a strengths-based approach advanced by Black scholars (see Billingsley, 1968; Hill, 1972; Nobles and Goddard, 1984; Nobles, 1985) as a strategy to shift from negative, pathology-based research that characterizes the study of Black families. Nobles (1985) posits that researchers have relied heavily on "scientific evidence, information, theory and analyses" that suggests that the Black family is inherently part of a malfunctioning system. Nobles and Goddard (1984, pp. 53-54) identified five themes within research about Black families:

- The Poverty Acculturation theme suggests that Black families became successful as a direct result of acculturation, and by accepting and living out the norms, values and beliefs of the dominant society in which they are living.
- The Pathology theme suggests that Black families are inherently disorganized and lacking in structure
- The Reactive Apology theme suggests that Black families are the same as White families, except for the experience of discrimination and poverty.

- The Black Nationalist theme or Africanity theme acknowledges that Black families while living in the Western world and in environments that are alien to their African origins, have retained their African identities.
- The Domestic Colonialism theme implied that Black family dynamics are better understood in the context of domination, economics and politics, conceiving the Black family as operating within a wider system such as a colony.

The only strengths-based theme identified by Wade and Goddard (1984) is the Black Nationalist or Africanity theme. This theme relies on the scholarship of Black scholars for operationalization, and Black practitioners for implementation. Black scholars have developed theoretical models to counter pathological views of the Black family (Billingsley, 1968, 1973; Hill, 1972; McAdoo, 1982, 1988; Nobles, 1978; Nobles and Goddard, 1984). These scholars provide a historical, sociological, psychological and political context that supports a strengths-based view of Black families.

Black social work scholars have continued to advance the narrative of the necessity for a strength-based lens when practicing with Black families. Barbara Solomon (1976, 1987) posits that to engage in culturally appropriate practice with Black families requires the social work practitioner to use an empowerment approach. Solomon sees empowerment as a healing and strengthening mechanism for disempowered and oppressed Black families. Sadye Logan has developed models for social work practice with Black families that are culturally appropriate (Logan & Freeman, 1990), and strengths-based (Logan, 2018). Logan provides models for specific practice areas with Black families, such as with children (Logan, 1981), mental health care (Logan, Denby, & Gibson, 2013), health care (Logan & Freeman, 2012), and substance abuse (Logan, McRoy, & Freeman, 1987). Furthermore, Logan advocates for the reliance upon African cultural values in working with Black families (Logan, 1996; Logan & Freeman, 2004). Cheryl Waites furthers the narrative for relying on African cultural values when working with intergenerational Black families (Waites, 2008, 2009). Nancy Boyd-Franklin (1989) provides therapeutic models specifically for practice with Black families across the generations. Anne Chavis (2004) has developed a technique for using genograms that capture the cultural nuances of the Black family. Iris Carlton-LaNey highlights strength-based models of social work practice used by Black social workers to address the needs of Black families and communities during the Progressive Era that are relevant to contemporary social work practice (Carlton-LaNey, 1994, 1997, 2001, 2004, 2014). This roll call of Black social work scholars is not intended to be an exhaustive list, but a sample of the scholarship that has modeled ways in which to practice with Black families using strength-based approaches.

There is a need for predominantly White Schools of Social Work to revisit the demands of the National Association of Black Social Workers, as described by Johnson (1978) and recounted by Jagers (2003), that social work programs are inclusive

of African American scholarship and culturally appropriate practice with African American families and African American communities in social work curricula. There appears to be a proportionate number of African American graduates in BSW programs (19.3%), in MSW programs (16.6%), and in Ph.D. programs (16.1%) (Council on Social Work Education, 2017). However, the faculty of social work programs still remain largely White (US Department of Education, 2019). Of all university faculty, across all disciplines, approximately 6% are African American or Black. Social work faculties mirror this racial disparity (Beimers, Warner, Mackie, 2013; Robbins, Regan, Williams, Smyth, & Bogo, 2016). While there are studies on the state of field education in CSWE-accredited programs (Fisher, Holmes, & Lewis, 2015), there is a need to examine the demographics of field instructors and the impact on student learning outcomes and student experiences.

CONCLUSION

While there is a plethora of research by Black scholars highlighting the importance of a strengths-based perspective when working with Black families and communities, these voices, both historical and contemporary are largely silenced in schools of social work, as well as social work scholarship. As a result, social workers are often prepared to view Black families from a pathological lens that renders their approaches incapable of addressing their own challenges. The social workers then cause more harm by disempowering Black families, resulting in distrust between the practitioner and the Black family. To echo the call of the founders of the National Association of Black Social Workers, schools of social work must develop culturally appropriate curricula and hire culturally appropriate faculty to truly support a strength-based approach for working with Black families. Billingsley, in a keynote address at the 1978 NABSW Conference stated the following,

The relationship between families and education for Black Americans is one of the most misunderstood and sometimes deliberately confused relationships in the whole arena of higher education. There were a few of us who began writing things that made sense back in 1967, 1968, 1969, and 1970, and we thought for a while, for a brief moment in history, that we had made our point. We thought we had corrected the misconceptions, we thought we had made an impact on America's scholarship. Sad to say we have just scratched the surface, for America's scholarship is just as resistant to change as American society itself, and equally resistant to change (p.xxiii)

Unfortunately, Billingsley's lament about the state of higher education is still relevant today. Despite the scholarship by Black social work scholars and the testing of practice models by Black social work practitioners, it appears that the misconceptions have not been corrected, that we have only just scratched the surface. Social work education seems to be resistant to change.

END NOTE

The authors use the terms Negro, Black, and African American interchangeably in this chapter to describe people of African descent in the United States. The terminology is indicative of the politics of the time period.

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