The Strength of a People

Exploring the Impact of History and Culture on African American Families Who Are Homeless

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Janet Green, an African American woman, remembers entering foster care as a teenager because of a tumultuous relationship with her stepfather. She recounts feelings of worthlessness and the sense of abandonment. She shares horrific accounts of being sexually, emotionally, and physically abused in various group and foster homes. She had seven children by age 21. Her past continued to haunt her as she struggled to provide for her children in the midst of a cocaine addiction. The need for drugs—and not the well-being of her young children—became her first priority. Janet Green will never forget one early morning 20 years ago outside an office building when a woman briefly stopped to give her something more valuable than money. The stranger looked directly into Ms. Green's eyes and said with conviction to this young woman, who had many times felt, and been treated, like less than a person with value: "I see greatness in you."

Ms. Green represents many of the homeless individuals in the United States who are struggling with addiction, poverty, and a history of violence and neglect. Many are also African American, a group that is overrepresented in the homeless services system. According to the 2006–2008 U.S. Census American Community Survey 3-Year Estimate, 12% of the U.S. population is African American. The families in homeless shelters are more likely to be African American: 55% of homeless families are African American, and a member of a poor African American family has about a 1-in-24 chance of entering a shelter compared with a member of a poor nonminority family's 1-in-88 chance (according to the 2008 *Annual Homeless Assessment Report to Congress*; U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, Office of Community Planning and Development, 2009). The National Center on Family Homelessness (NCFH) reports that over 92% of homeless people have experienced severe physical abuse, sexual abuse, or both during their lifetime. The NCFH also notes that mothers with a childhood history of foster care placement are more likely to become homeless and tend to become homeless at an earlier age, compared with those who do not have a foster care history. According to the *Third Annual Homeless Assessment Report to Congress*, more than half of sheltered homeless children are less than 6 years old (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development Office of Community Planning and Development, 2009).

Homelessness affects different people in different ways. For example, consider the following six dimensions: (a) developmental phase of life (age); (b) gender; (c) social unit (e.g., families vs. single individuals); (d) racial or ethnocultural group; (e) health status (e.g., psychiatric illness, substance abuse, HIV/AIDS, and the multiply diagnosed); and (f) social status (e.g., veteran, civilian criminal, illegal immigrant; Rosenheck, Bassuk, & Salomon, 1999). These different groups may share similarities that do not affect service delivery, but the groups might have some differences that warrant closer attention. This article explores how African American race and ethnicity may have an impact on the experiences of African American families with young children who are experiencing homelessness.

The statistics on young children in homeless families reveal a high number of stressors that can affect their overall functioning. For children who are homeless, many of the key ingredients needed for healthy development such as stable routines, positive relationships, and responsive interactions are compromised because of the instability and stressors that are characteristic of being transient (Bassuk & Friedman, 2005). Another important aspect of early development is the forming of identity and their racial socialization. Their racial socialization is the way in which they view their racial identity as it is defined by their parents and community. One recent positive example is the new Disney movie, *The Princess and the Frog*, which features an African American princess. Other examples of racial socialization include preparing a child how to handle racial discrimination or teaching African cultural traditions. A negative sense of self acquired through adverse experiences in racial socialization may affect children's psychological well-being (Yip, Sellers, & Seaton, 2006). Programs serving homeless families with young children can promote a healthy racial socialization through understanding the racial experiences, values, and goals of families served and emphasizing family and parenting strengths.

Culture and Cultural Competence

All people are influenced by their culture. Regardless of the ethnic and racial group to which one belongs, most people participate in both the larger mainstream culture and smaller cultural subgroups. Cross, Bazron, Dennis, and Isaacs (1989) defined culture as "an integrated pattern of human behavior that includes thoughts, communications, actions, beliefs, values, and institutions of a racial, ethnic, religious, or social group" (p. 18). On the basis of this definition of culture, it is learned, shared, ever-changing, and universal. Culture is: (a) transmitted across generations through socialization and learned through individual and collective experiences; (b) shared through norms for behaviors, values, and beliefs that characterize specific cultural groups; and (c) associated with adaptation to the environment. As the environment changes, groups change to improve their ability to survive or to make maximum use of their environments. As homeless services providers consider the homeless culture—African American homeless families, in particular—their task is to understand family cultural patterns, norms, values, and beliefs and to help the family continue to integrate these patterns into their lives, even as they adapt to the homeless environment.

Cultural competence also includes understanding the history of African Americans in the United States and how that history—and the cultural practices that have developed—has been transmitted to families, parents, and children across the generations. The history of a people in the United States should always begin with an examination of when, where, and how they entered the country and what happened after they arrived. African American ancestors were first brought to the United States against their will and sold into slavery (Franklin & Moss, 2000; Haley, 1976). The institution of slavery separated many family members from each other and all families from their customs, traditions, and patterns established in the African countries from which they came. In her book *Black Children: Their Roots, Culture, and Learning Styles,* Hale-Benson (1986) described different perspectives of viewing African American history as first outlined by Patterson (1971). Hale-Benson wrote about Patterson's survivalist perspective, which is the history of how

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The members of an African village typically ate together, traveled together, operated businesses together, and helped care for and raise each other's children.

African American families responded to living under the conditions of slavery. Patterson further argued that African Americans have maintained certain aspects of African culture throughout history. In this view, despite African American ancestors being separated from their families, traditions, and customs, certain aspects of these African cultural patterns and values have remained an integral part of the culture of the present-day African American family, and elements of these patterns are also important to recognize and support in African American families experiencing homelessness. These cultural practices and patterns include, but are not limited to, (a) having a sense of community and shared interdependence; (b) maintaining the community's ability to speak for itself and the power to determine its own destiny; and (c) intergenerational patterns of teaching, learning, and transmitting important cultural and family practices. Homelessness may define a family's current circumstances; however, it does not necessarily indicate a family's ability to transmit cultural practices and values. It is imperative that programs serving homeless African American families understand the historical implications of Africans in America and use that experience to integrate family strengths and values into service delivery.

One significant intergenerational pattern that has been experienced throughout the history of African Americans in the United States is the separation of family members. Unfortunately, the practice of separating families is customary in program policies serving homeless families. Frequently, men are not allowed in shelters for homeless mothers and children because of safety concerns about the vulnerability of women and children. Although it may seem harmless, this policy prevents the man from being included in the family unit, discourages his involvement with the family, and may mirror the trauma of the family separation that occurred during slavery. During Frederick Douglass's address of 1846 describing the conditions of slaves in America, he noted:

There was an utter abolition of the institution of marriage. A slave was not protected in that relation. He might be separated from his

partner at any time at the will or caprice of his master. His own wishes or will were never consulted—he lived only for his master's interest, and his master might do whatever he liked with him. (*Douglass, 1846/1979*)

A Community of Interdependence

Many African ancestors who were brought to American shores during slavery came from countries, tribes, and families who were dependent on each other for their survival. This culture of interdependence or reliance on the collective community for survival, sustenance, and success permeated every aspect of the ancestors' lives and culture (Gordon, 2004).

The Village

Members of an African village typically ate together, traveled together, operated businesses together, and helped care for and raise each other's children. This was all possible because it was the norm for the extended family (e.g., grandparents, aunts, uncles) to live together in one community to support the family structure and their way of life. Although today many African American families, and extended families, live apart, there are still some families that have continued this cultural practice of interdependence through informal extended family and kinship networks, as well as close friends.

The importance of community networks was evident to one of the authors (Temple) in her work as the director of a family resource center in the District of Columbia. The community experienced gentrification when HOPE VI, a federally funded Housing and Urban Development program, was initiated to improve the physical and environmental conditions of public housing communities characterized as severely distressed in order to create a new community free of drugs and violence where they could live in harmony with neighbors. The reality was that the Hope VI initiative began to be referred to by many residents as "false hope." The public housing community residents quickly realized that they would not meet the criteria for returning to the new units and that they would be relocated throughout the Washington, DC, metropolitan area and lose the formal and informal support networks they had developed within their public housing community. One mother of three young children who was facing displacement wondered who would care for her children in the evenings as she worked as a security guard once the residents were relocated. Her neighbor Ms. Clary had provided care for her older children, but the mother had just learned that Ms. Clary's unit was slated as the first phase to be demolished and she would be moving into a building for senior citizens and disabled residents. Eventually, this young mother was located to a beautiful new home but lost her job—because she could not find reliable child care in the evenings—and became homeless as a result.

When an African American family becomes homeless, not only does the family experience tremendous trauma and stress, but also in many cases they have lost their connection to their kinship and extended family networks, their traditions, and their history—aspects of their lives and culture that are shared with each other and transmitted through experience to their children. Lisa Goode, program manager and co-founder of the Northwest Church Family Network in Washington, DC, a program that serves homeless families, stated that when families join their transitional and permanent housing program, they often begin to "thrive like a village" (personal communication, November 23, 2009). The Network fosters this phenomenon by holding regular community meetings to discuss village roles and expectations and encouraging a sense of community through sharing of resources among families.

The task for the homeless services worker, in addition to helping the family find stable housing, is to help them connect or reconnect with extended family, friends, and other supportive networks. It is important to understand the historical context of interdependence and the strength found in relationships as families seek stability. However, it is also important to help families develop the skill of discernment. Patty Jones, a recovering addict who is 6 years sober and living in her own apartment, regrets that she cannot tell certain friends and family members where she lives as they are still involved in drug and alcohol use. To maintain her housing, sobriety, and relationship with her children, Ms. Jones

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Service providers working with African American families can be more effective if they become aware of issues of cultural competence.

has had to create her own system of support through trusted family members whom she invites over weekly for family meals, a former social worker, and participants in her Alcoholics Anonymous meetings.

From Griots to Gatekeepers

African griots (pronounced *GREE-ohs*) were, and are, well-respected persons in the village who were considered storytellers (Hale, 1998; "Harps of History," 2004). The griot knew everything about the family and village history and committed this information to memory. In fact, the griot was whom *Roots* author Alex Haley sought in order to learn about his family of origin in the West African country of the Gambia (Haley, 1976). Only when the griot confirmed that the ancestor for whom Haley was searching was the same ancestor from the village did Haley's African family embrace him and welcome him into the community.

African American homeless families often bond around the shared trauma of becoming homeless and form a community of trust, or a "village." This is similar to the experience of enslaved Africans during family separation as a result of the slave trade. Families provided support to children, even when they were not their blood relatives. This same phenomenon is evident among some homeless families who provide protection and support to one another as the result of a shared traumatic circumstance. Within this community, a spokesperson/leader, sometimes called a gatekeeper, emerges to speak for the "village." This person understands the experience of homelessness, he or she knows each family and their history, and the community trusts this leader to "screen" those who are trustworthy and sincere from those who are not. Understanding this relationship dynamic within the African American community and in working with African American homeless families is critical to forging a partnership with families who have often found few whom they can trust to have and keep their best interests in the forefront.

The Oral Tradition

The oral tradition has always been an important part of the African and the African American experience (Gordon, 2004; Okpewho, 1996). In many West African countries, family history and traditions, as well as patterns for child care and child rearing, were transmitted orally and by learning and experience. When enslaved Africans were brought to the United States and separated from family members (e.g., women from men, parents from children), the only connection they could hope to have with each other was through the spoken word and their own memories and experiences. They were not allowed to learn to read and write and so by necessity relied on the oral tradition as the only viable means of transmitting important information between each other and from generation to generation. Programs working with homeless families can encourage the continuation or the beginning of oral traditions. This can be as simple as encouraging the family to share stories of their childhood or even memories of the child's birth. These oral traditions help to increase a child's sense of connection to his roots and build social–emotional development.

Although today African Americans use all forms of communication to teach, learn, and share important information, the oral tradition is still just as important for many families as it was during slavery. Many African American families rely on oral and religious family traditions and African principles such as the *Nguzo Saba*, developed by Karenga (2008), to order their lives and guide the care of their very young children and families. The Nguzo Saba is a system that was developed to reinforce important values of African culture that build and support family and community. The Nguzo Saba includes seven principles that many African American families incorporate into their daily lives throughout the year and that are reflected in the annual Kwanzaa holiday celebrated by many African Americans from December 26 to January 1.

Of course, there are many influences on how African American families raise their children. They may rely on historical and cultural traditions, as well as on the most recent research on child development and trends in infant and toddler care. The homeless services worker must understand how history and culture, as well as other influences on parenting practices and preferences, affect family functioning in the African American community. The challenge for the worker is to honor family traditions and values about child care and development and simultaneously help families integrate all of the different sources of information in a way that honors the family's values, goals, and priorities.

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One significant intergenerational pattern that has been experienced throughout the history of African Americans in the United States is the separation of family.

Applying History's Influence to a Modern-Day Crisis

Service providers working with African American families experiencing the crisis of homelessness can be more effective if they become aware of issues of cultural competence, such as microaggressions in the workplace, motivations for helping, staff diversity, and historical and cultural traditions in the African American community.

Understanding the Role of Microaggressions in the Workplace

Sue et al. (2007) defined racial microaggressions as brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicates hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults toward people of color. It can be challenging for African Americans working

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in a setting with other races or ethnicities to voice concerns when they feel that a colleague exhibits behavior that is offensive. This burden should not rest only with the offended; service providers also have a responsibility to be in a constant state of self-awareness and careful observation in noticing the behavioral change of colleagues of a different race or ethnicity that may be in response to one's actions. It is important to be aware of racial microaggressions in the client–worker relationship and also within the context of relationships among colleagues. Awareness of racial microaggressions may prevent unintended barriers both in the workplace and in the helping relationships.

Exploring One's Sense of Self in the Helping Relationship

Self-awareness about one's motivation for providing support to families is crucial to being effective in the helping role. Some common red flags include the behavior of "doing" things to help families that they can do for themselves or promoting one's own cultural values on issues such as parenting. Such practices, although unintentional, may promote a sense of learned helplessness in the client. Self-awareness questions include:

- Do I feel like I am the "savior" to this client?
- What experience do I have that might contribute to these feelings?
- Does my behavior (e.g., tone, speech, appearance) convey a respectful or disrespectful message to the family?
- Do I empower the clients to make decisions for themselves or do I make the decisions for them?
- Am I trying to connect the client to the support system, or am I the support system?

Asking these questions can be a starting point for a deeper assessment of self-reflection regarding a professional's intrinsic values and intent in working with African American families.

Examine Staffing Diversity

Examine the racial diversity of the staff by asking the following questions:

- Are the majority of African Americans or other people of color serving in administrative support positions or in leadership positions?
- What is currently being done to build capacity in the community served?
- Does program staff reflect the racial/ethnic community served?

It is easy to become focused on refining one's own skill and on providing mentoring to those of similar backgrounds. However, working to build the skills of those within the community provides others the opportunity to customize services to meet the needs of those whom they know best—their own communities. For example, the aforementioned resource center in the community affected by Hope VI employed residents within the community as family service workers (100% of family service workers resided in the public housing community). Building the capacity within that community allowed residents who understood the culture of the families to assist in the creation, implementation, and evaluation of effective service delivery.

Using African American Values in Service Planning

The Nguzo Saba encompasses seven guiding principles for African Americans based on values of African culture (Karenga, 2008). One of the principles, *kujichagulia* (self-determination), emphasizes that each individual must be committed to his or her own achievement. African American families are experiencing homelessness at a rate higher than their counterparts. However, in reviewing the history of Africans in America, it is important to never forget the resilience of a people who have survived centuries of oppression and the guiding principles that have remained with these families throughout the generations. Homeless services workers and all who work to support African American families can use these guiding principles and values as a springboard for better outcomes for the families and their young children.

The true story of Janet Green at the beginning of this article serves as an example of the power of words to inspire hope and change when those words reflect deeply held values: "I see greatness in you." When Ms. Green recalls her state of mind during relapse, frustration over housing, and feeling lost as she navigated the child welfare system to be reunified with her children, this powerful statement stayed with her and nurtured her

self-determination and resilience. Today, Ms. Green is a homeowner and has an outstanding relationship with her children. Sobriety continues to be a daily struggle, but more than any effective therapeutic intervention and parenting class, Ms. Green continued to hold on to the encouraging words until she started to believe that she was worthy enough to parent her children. Empowering families to believe in themselves begins with an understanding of each family's cultural traditions, beliefs, and values and offers them the best chance for effective intervention.

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