



The beliefs of resilient African-American adolescent mothers transitioning from foster care to independent living: A case-based analysis

Wendy Haight ^{a,*}, Dayna Finet ^b, Sachiko Bamba ^a, Jesse Helton ^b

^a School of Social Work, University of Illinois at Urbana Champaign, 1207 W. Oregon, Urbana, IL 61801, United States

^b Children and Family Research Center, University of Illinois at Urbana Champaign, 1207 W. Oregon, Urbana, IL 61801, United States

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ABSTRACT

This study presents the beliefs of three resilient African-American adolescent mothers transitioning from foster care into independent living in Illinois. Young mothers were followed for at least seven months as they participated in an innovative writing workshop for older foster youth. During this time, youth repeatedly initiated discussions of parenting while in foster care. Videotaped observations of workshops, in-depth, semi-structured individual interviews, and youth writing assignments yielded rich materials pertaining to parenting while in foster care. Young women identified a number of common challenges including financial difficulties, the pressure of meeting multiple obligations, stigma, and the negativity of some caseworkers. They also articulated cultural beliefs and practices which may support resilience. These included: the positive value placed on children and motherhood, spirituality, “other mothers” and various sources of community support, and an oppositional gaze. Implications for child welfare research and practice are discussed.

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1. Introduction

This study presents the beliefs of three resilient,¹ African-American, adolescent mothers transitioning from foster care into independent living in Illinois. Despite the substantial challenges they faced, these young women had graduated from high school, were parenting, and were regular participants in an innovative writing workshop for older foster youth. This workshop was intended to elicit the perspectives of foster youth to inform child welfare research, practice and policy. Over the course of seven months, the topic of parenting was introduced repeatedly by the youth, which motivated us to systematically examine their beliefs about parenting while in foster care.

We approach the complex issue of parenting while in foster care through the theoretical lens of cultural developmental psychology. We consider human development as an outgrowth of cultural life. We focus both on concrete patterns of social behavior, and the meanings attributed to them by participants (e.g., see Shweder, Goodnow, Hatano, LeVine, Markus & Miller, 2006). Large scale survey research indicates a high rate of parenting among African-American adolescents in foster care (e.g., Leathers & Testa, 2006) raising important questions about the meaning of such experiences to the youth. Indeed, Black feminists have called for greater attention to the voices of African-American adolescent

mothers articulating their own experiences (e.g., see Elise, 1995). Child welfare researchers also have requested research on the perspectives of pregnant and parenting foster youth (e.g., Brubaker & Wright, 2006). In this paper, we present the beliefs of relatively resilient young mothers about parenting as they develop into more independent young adults in the context of foster care and their African-American communities. These culturally-embedded beliefs can offer guidance to service providers and policy makers committed to supporting positive developmental outcomes for young mothers in foster care and their children.

1.1. Parenting among African-American youth in foster care

The issue of adolescent parenting, including among African-American girls, is of widespread importance to child welfare professionals. Indeed, a significant number of girls in foster care are pregnant or parenting (e.g., Carpenter, Clyman, Davidson & Steiner, 2001; Cook, 1994; Festinger, 1983; Gotbaum, 2005; Leathers & Testa, 2006). Former foster youth interviewed for a large study in the Midwest reported very high levels of early childbearing (Courtney, Dworsky, Cusick, Havlicek, Perez & Keller, 2007). Seventy one percent of females reported becoming pregnant before the age of 21, with 62% of these young women reporting multiple pregnancies. More than half were parenting at least one child. In a survey of caseworkers pertaining to 416 randomly selected foster youth aged 17 and older in Illinois, Leathers and Testa (2006) found that African-American girls were three times more likely to be pregnant or parenting than white girls. This finding is consistent with historically high birthrates among African-American adolescents relative to white adolescents (Franklin, 1992).

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 217 244 5121.

E-mail address: wlhight@uiuc.edu (W. Haight).

¹ The term “resilient” is used in this study to describe individuals who are developing relatively well despite profound and ongoing stress including exposure to racism and foster care. (See Haight, 2002).

Foster youth who are parents face significant challenges as they enter young adulthood. Early parenthood can compound the difficulties for any youth of completing the developmental tasks of adolescence such as finishing school, becoming economically self sufficient, and establishing a secure household (e.g., Furstenberg, Brooks-Gunn & Morgan, 1987; Apfel & Seitz, 1996. Also see reviews by Budd, Holdsworth, HoganBruen, 2006; Carpenter, Clyman, Davidson, & Steiner, 2001), let alone those in foster care (Carpenter et al., 2001; Courtney, Dworsky, Cusick, Havlicek, Perez, & Keller, 2007; Love, McIntosh, Rosst, & Tertzakian, 2005). In addition to the challenges of early parenting, foster youth may share vulnerabilities related to the conditions that led to their placement in foster care, from growing up in the system, or from transitioning to young adulthood without a permanent family to provide an emotional or practical safety net. Indeed, youth discharged from foster care are more likely than the general population to live below the poverty line (e.g., Cook, 1994) and are less likely to have completed high school (e.g., Cook, 1994; Testa, 1992). In the Midwest study, for example, approximately one quarter of former foster youth, aged 21, lacked a high school diploma or GED, about half were unemployed, and almost one fifth had been homeless at least once since leaving foster care (Courtney et al., 2007).

It is important to underscore, however, that some adolescent mothers do create meaningful lives for themselves and their children. Indeed, there is considerable diversity in psychosocial functioning even among high risk, inner city adolescent mothers in foster care (Budd, Heilman & Kane, 2000). Furthermore, longitudinal research with primarily African-American, low-income adolescent mothers indicates that there is significant within group variation in their life course outcomes (Apfel & Seitz, 1996; Brubaker & Wright, 2006; Furstenberg, Brooks-Gunn, & Morgan, 1987; Leadbeater & Way, 2001; Testa, 1992). For example, Apfel and Seitz (1996) followed for 12 years a cohort ($N=115$) of inner city, primarily impoverished, African-American mothers who were 13- to 17-years-old at the time of their first delivery. They found that early parenthood affected some young women more negatively than others. Some young mothers avoided rapid, repeat pregnancies (spaced less than two years apart), limited their family size, had support from their own families in learning to parent, and maintained their mental health. Many of these resilient young women went on to finish their educations, became economically self sufficient, and raised successful children.

Some comparative research suggests that some African-American adolescent mothers may be resilient relative to many white and Hispanic adolescent mothers. In a survey of adolescent mothers 17 years and younger who were receiving welfare in and around Chicago, African-American adolescent mothers had higher educational attainment than white or Hispanic adolescent mothers (Testa, 1992). In a study of foster youth in Illinois aged 17 and older, African-American young women were more likely than any other group (males, whites, Hispanics) to be enrolled in college. Caseworkers also reported that they were at less risk for delinquency, dangerous behavior, depression, difficulties in their relationships and domestic violence than young white women. Of those who were pregnant and parenting, caseworkers reported that African-American mothers were less likely to be victimized by others than white mothers (Leathers & Testa, 2006).

The apparent resilience of African-American adolescent mothers as a group relative to other groups raises the issue of possible protective factors supporting culturally-specific developmental trajectories within African-American communities. Testa (1992) and others (Hamburg & Dixon, 1992; Gibbs, 1992) have suggested that some impoverished, urban, African-American adolescent mothers may follow a viable, "alternative life course." African-American adolescent mothers are more likely to remain in their parents' home after childbirth, continue in school and delay marriage than white or Hispanic girls who were more likely to leave home, drop out of school and get married (Testa, 1992). Clearly, there is substantial diversity within African-American families and communities, but a common

cultural matrix of related beliefs and practices² has emerged from a shared history which may support resilience in young African-American mothers in foster care.

1.2. Informal sources of support for African-American mothers in foster care

1.2.1. Positive value of children and motherhood

A cultural belief on which young mothers may draw is the positive value placed on children and motherhood including within families headed by single mothers. In general, children and motherhood are highly valued in African-American communities, and women's innovative and practical approaches to mothering under oppressive conditions can bring status and recognition. Motherhood is associated for many African-Americans with creativity, continuity and self-esteem (Brubaker & Wright, 2006).

Furthermore, parenting by single mothers is not unusual within many African-American communities. High levels of black, female-headed families and out-of-wedlock births date back to the 1800s and continue today (Hill, 1999). According to the 2006 data from the U.S. Census' American Community Survey, approximately 54% of African-American families currently are headed by single mothers in contrast to 20% of white families. In Illinois, approximately 61% of African-American families are head by single mothers, in contrast with 18% of white families.

Given these and other values and historical trends, it is not surprising that many African-American adolescent mothers are encouraged by their families to keep their babies and to view their situations with a sense of responsibility. For example, Brubaker and Wright (2006) followed 39 African-American, 14- to 19-year-old adolescent mothers. The young women described an initial sense of loss and shame. Eventually, with the help of their families, many developed a new and positive sense of themselves as mature and responsible. Many also described a new interest in doing well in school and graduating so that they might offer a better life to their children. Themes of survival, power and identity were crucial as they developed from "problem daughters" to "good mothers."

Many youth in foster care also may value positively children and motherhood. Focus group interviews with foster youth in the Chicago area, who were primarily African-American and included adolescent parents, indicated that many youth saw benefits to having a child at an early age. Youth participating in the focus groups told researchers that a child could provide them with someone to love and a permanent family. They also mentioned that a child could motivate them to succeed in school and beyond, and that being a mother could bring respect within their communities (Love, McIntosh, Rosst, & Tertzakian, 2005).

1.2.2. Spirituality

Another set of cultural beliefs and practices on which young mothers may draw is spirituality. In describing the strengths of African-American families and communities, many scholars point to religious traditions (e.g., Hill, 1999. See also edited volume by McLoyd, Hill and Dodge, 2005). Certain spiritual beliefs and socialization practices associated with African-American traditions (see Mitchell, 1986; Hale-Benson, 1987) may strengthen resiliency in youth (e.g., Haight, 2002). African-American religion has been characterized as pragmatic: it addresses specific human needs and experiences and helps individuals cope with life's challenges in positive ways (Hale-Benson, 1987; Lincoln, 1999; Smitherman, 1977). In addition, the notion of the inherent worth of each individual as a child of God, viewed by many as a cornerstone of contemporary African-American theology (see Haight, 2002), may be critical to the development of self-esteem in youth experiencing oppression as a young woman, a person of color, a foster child, and a teen mother.

² Note that this proposed matrix likely is not complete, i.e., there are other relevant beliefs and practices; reflected in all individuals, families or communities; and components may be found in other cultural communities.

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