Implementing Culturally Competent Research Practices:
Identifying Strengths of African-American Communities, Families, and Children

Mrs. Miller, a 69 year old African-American grandmother, has been parenting her deceased daughter's five children for the past 10 years, beginning when they were 7, 5, 4, 3, and 2 years old. Since Mrs. Miller was very active in her church, she solicited the church's help when her granddaughters moved into her home, enrolling the girls in several youth activities sponsored by the church. She also informed staff at each school that her granddaughters attended that she wanted to be involved in their education. She attended most of their parent-teacher conferences. Mrs. Miller often sat down with her grandchildren and talked about the family rules in the house. She stated that they had to attend school and they had to do well. She reminded them that they were sisters, and they had to be responsible for each other. They were also told that they had to make something out of their lives. Mrs. Miller never finished high school, but she had worked hard to keep her now-deceased daughter and her only son in school. Mr. and Mrs. Miller valued education as a way to get out of the bad environment in which they lived, and she has now instilled that same value in her grandchildren. Mr. Miller lived long enough to see his children graduate from college. Mrs. Miller proudly stated that all of her girls (daughter and granddaughters) were excellent students. They made A's and B's, and they never missed any days from school. They were all very well mannered and liked by everybody. Even though the Millers lived in an area where drugs and other bad things happened daily, none of those negative influences had touched her girls; they were all good girls, and the granddaughters all wanted to go to college.

In the course of our research, we asked Mrs. Miller to describe her major strengths, but she stated that she did not have any. Mrs. Miller is a very strong and determined woman, with a deep commitment to the survival of her family—even to the point of sacrificing her own fragile health and other resources. How many other African-American families are just as purposeful in their commitment to the survival of their families? What are the internal strengths and resources that they possess, and that facilitate and enhance individual and family achievements?

Mrs. Miller and others like her are the inspiration for our research on strengths in African-American families and communities. We believe that a better understanding of such strengths will ultimately lead to higher levels of cultural competence and greater effectiveness in the services and systems utilized by African-Americans. During our work, we have encountered many families like the Millers, and we have collaborated with parents, relatives, community leaders, seniors, and adolescents alike. Our challenge has been to conduct our research in ways that both generate new knowledge and contribute to the empowerment of the community and its members.

This article focuses on the methods and results of two research projects aimed at identifying strengths in African-American families and communities. The first study identified strengths-based behaviors that exist in African-American families and communities (Briscoe & McClain, 2000), while the second study involves the development of a strength-based assessment tool (Joseph, Briscoe, Smith, Sengova, & McClain, 2001). Our goal in the article is to demonstrate our efforts to build and maintain a philosophical congruence between the method, content, and goals of the study. Thus, before turning to a discussion of the research process and results, we describe the philosophy that guided our work and helped us to be

sure that our research was implemented in a way that revealed and enhanced the strengths of all who collaborated in it. The guiding philosophy underlying our work is one that combines strengths-based and cultural competence perspectives.

Guiding philosophy

African-American strengths.

Many early, traditional researchers of African-American families perceived these families as being highly dysfunctional, disorganized, disadvantaged, and unstable. Our research team consciously chose to recognize that African-American families come from a long line of strong African ancestors who have overcome tremendous obstacles, including slavery, discrimination, and segregation. Surviving in the face of such obstacles has created sources of strength and resilience within African-American families and communities. Hill's enumeration of these strengths (1972; 1997) includes strong kinship bonds, strong work orientation, adaptability of family roles, high educational achievement, and a strong religious orientation. Our research is guided by the fundamental belief that the strengths of African-American families and communities should be recognized and sustained by those who seek to understand, provide, and improve services available to African-Americans.

Culturally competent research practices.

Researchers, practitioners, policy makers, and neighborhood residents for decades have actively advocated for guidelines, principles, and values to promote and sustain culturally competent research practices. It has been the concern of Cross, Bazron, Dennis, and Isaacs (1989) that research is usually conducted "without the consent, consultation, or participation of the subject population and the resulting information has not found its way back into the community" (p.11). Jackson (1988) called for "developing multidisciplinary research approaches and cooperation among university and social service professionals" (p. 19). The goal of culturally competent research—or culturally competent intervention--is to always preserve and enhance the interests, dignity, and integrities of children, families, and the diverse cultural communities in which they live.

We believe that a culturally competent approach to research within African-American communities is grounded in an awareness of the historical, cultural, socioeconomic and political circumstances and experiences that have had significant impacts on African-American people's physical, mental, and psychological well-being and survival. Researchers adopting a cultural competence perspective must also investigate their own beliefs, knowledge, and information about the community being studied. Our team explored its own level of cultural awareness and cultural sensitivity, and took inventory of the cross cultural skills that we have developed over time in working with children and their families who live in ethnically diverse communities.

Combining strengths and cultural competence perspectives, and building on our own experiences as African-American people and scholars, we founded our work on the proposition that African-American families are able to provide rich information about their strengths, and about the everyday, positive, lived experiences that sustain African-American life and survival in America. Through this research, we hope to increase understanding of these strengths, and ultimately, to find ways to tap into them as a direct source of energy and strength for individual, family, and community betterment.

Research studies

Study 1: African-American Family Support Coalition (AAFSC)

This first research effort undertaken by our team began in 1997 as the African-American Family Support Coalition (AAFSC; Briscoe & McClain, 2000), a consumer-driven project designed 1) to plan, coordinate, and implement an analysis to identify strengths and family supports that exist in African-American families and communities, and 2) develop community capacity to use this information

We designed a research protocol based on our vision of strengths-based, culturally competent work in African-American communities, and including elements from action research and grounded theory approaches. Action research approaches involve the theme of "learning by actions" (O'Brien, 1998), and pursue action and outcomes concurrently. The research team generated active dialogue that stimulated family members to recognize, articulate, and build on their strengths. Grounded theory methods involve "discovery work" and theory development, where data are grounded in the realities of the everyday lived experiences of the targeted study group (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). Our approach is also consistent with the system of care philosophy described by Stroul and Friedman (1986), which prescribes that service approaches within the system

should be family centered, community based, culturally competent, and strengths based.

The research protocol for the AAFSC prescribed the active participation of community/neighborhood residents in identifying how their own ongoing activities contribute to the development of children and families in their own communities. Members of community organizations actively assisted with developing research questions, collaborated in identifying indicators of success, and worked actively with our research staff. As neighborhood residents participated at different levels of the process, levels of trust, confidence, and optimism grew. This inclusive process strengthened our entrance, as researchers, into the community and validated our interest and intention to involve and respect the contributions of the communities and their members. Being involved throughout the process enhanced community members' awareness of our commitment to the idea that they were major stakeholders, and that their involvement was primary to the success of the research process. Community members wanted to be involved in the process of finding out about their community and wanted to be a part of the process of seeking solutions that built on their strengths. Because of the level of collaboration required, the research process took longer to implement than we had planned, but we were committed to designing and implementing the project to reflect neighborhood goals and strategies. Additional time was required for data collection in natural neighborhood environments. However, as a result of these activities, community members learned how to participate in the research process and became co-participants in solving their own issues.

The AAFSC created a community-wide team of stakeholders that planned and conducted a comprehensive analysis of family and community resources and strengths, based on:

1. An in-depth census analysis to help identify demographic factors.
2. An examination of local data, (articles, reports, surveys, newspaper articles) provided by African-American organizations and individuals, governmental agencies and universities.
3. A review of the research literature.
4. Asset mapping.
5. Summit meetings where providers, residents, and other professionals identified perceptions, strengths, and resources within four target communities.
6. Focus groups were conducted with successful children, parents of successful children, seniors, at-

large residents, educators and service providers in the target neighborhoods.

Most information on data findings was provided in a timely fashion during neighborhood meetings with residents as deemed appropriate by the community. These reports, both formal and informal, were shared with residents immediately after the research project was completed. This was an agreement established in advance so that the communities could use this information (which they owned) with the expectation that the information will help inform their respective communities and family organizations as they planned various activities and services. Traditional studies have tended not to be community friendly or have not appreciated the importance of community ownership of the data.

The neighborhood-university partnership was a mutually beneficial relationship. Together the partners developed the vision and mission for the project, critically analyzed the neighborhood issues, and developed and designed evaluation interventions aimed at achieving the agreed upon goals. The research team strove to be culturally competent, respectful, open-minded, and non-judgmental of the community members. Consequently, community members felt validated as true members of the team. This built mutual trust and enhanced the research process. The university partners provided technical assistance in program development and training for neighborhood members.

The major findings of this analysis are identified as the seven global strengths that exist in African-American families and communities, and are shown in Table 1:

Table 1 Global Findings

Global Strengths of African-American Families	
Global Findings	
1. Neighborhood Solutions	Community members have a desire to solve their own community problems (from the heart of the people)
2. Power of the Church	The church has the ability to influence and promote community economic development through the spiritual strength of the family
3. Family Networks	Strong ties exist within families and extended family networks
4. Education Valued	Families value education
5. Neighborhood Pride	Residents have pride in and cohesiveness within their neighborhoods
6. Neighborhood Organizations	Strength and power reside in tradition African-American support systems and neighborhood groups
7. Youth Achievement	Many youths have a strong desire to achieve

Currently, four committees in the community participate in building upon the identified African-American strengths. These are the committees for: Strengthening the Coalition, Promoting Strength-based Practices, Implementation, and Community Support.

Study 2: Identifying Strengths in African-American Families (ISAAF)

The second project, Identifying Strengths in African-American Families (Joseph, Briscoe, Smith, Sengova, & McClain, 2001) focused on designing a strengths-based assessment tool for African-American children and families. As in the first study, this study was built on a philosophy combining strengths and cultural competence perspectives. The research framework was also informed by grounded theory and action research approaches.

Focus groups were convened as a vehicle for engaging residents and service providers in conversations about the activities and assets that contributed to raising successful children and youth in the community. Twenty-five focus groups (five at each site) were conducted in Baltimore, Detroit, Plant City (FL), San Diego, and Savannah (GA). Focus groups included successful youth (age 11-17), parents of successful youth, senior citizens, at-large residents, and service providers. Focus group dialogue was transcribed and analyzed, and meetings were subsequently held at each site to report on findings to the families and communities.

A summary of the major findings from this research is provided in Table 2. Fifteen cross-site family strengths were culled from extensive analyses of the focus groups. The family strengths numbered 1 through 10 on Table 2 were identified consistently across all five sites; four sites reported 11 and 12, while 13, 14, and 15 were reported in at least three sites. Table 2 also lists the 13 child strengths. All of the five sites consistently identified the first four child strengths, while four sites identified 6 and 7. The rest, 8 through 13, were identified in at least one of the five sites. Next steps in the project include developing an instrument to measure these strengths and testing the instrument for reliability and validity.

Table 2 Cross-Site Summary of Family and Children's Strengths

Major Cross-Site Findings

Family Strengths

1.	Emphasis on Education/High Expectations
2	Parental Support, Supervision and Guidance
3.	Extended Family Support
4.	Effective/Positive Role Models
5.	Spirituality
6.	Family Cohesiveness/Family Structure
7.	Open Communication and Trust
8.	Teaching Values to Children by Action and Example e.g. honesty
9.	Discipline
10.	Unconditional Love
11.	Family Activities/Broader Exposure For Children
12.	Family Security/Consistency
13.	Strong Work Ethic
14.	Strong Survival Skills
15.	Cultural Awareness and Identity

Identified by all sites and previous study

Identified in four of the five target sites.

Identified in three or less of the target sites.

Child Strengths

1.	Positive Self Image/High Esteem
2.	Focused/Motivated and Hardworking
3.	Determined/Resilient
4.	Leadership/serve as role models
5.	Respectful/Obedient
6.	Responsible
7.	Talented /Competent/Possess certain skill
8.	Helpful/Altruistic
9.	Independent
10.	Ability to make good judgment and choices
11.	Confident/Self efficacy
12.	Honest and Trustworthy
13.	Culturally Aware

Conclusion

These two studies provided a strong foundation for identifying and supporting the development of a strengths-based approach with African-American children, families and communities. The studies also provide an example of research conducted using what we have termed an applied strengths- based framework. Our expectation is that using such a framework will help African-American families, along with their service providers, to identify and utilize family and community strengths to support and nurture successful African-American children. The applied strengths-based framework involves a neighborhood-based methodological approach for identifying strengths and university researchers collaborating with community members to achieve favorable outcomes.

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