



Assessing Behavioral and Emotional Strengths in Black Children: A Measure Designed by and for Blacks

Professionals who work with black children continue to voice concern regarding the sparseness of the research and theoretical literature on black children's functioning, particularly their behavioral and emotional adjustment. Despite our knowledge that strengths are an important foundation upon which intervention and prevention can be scaffolded, research and theory on black children's strengths are extremely limited. Assessing children's strengths for research and intervention requires reliable, valid measures; however, few such measures exist, and those specifically designed for and standardized on black children are noticeably absent. This article describes the development of the Behavior Assessment for Children of African Heritage (BACAH), a strengths-based instrument designed by and for blacks.

Historical Background

Understanding black children's behavioral and emotional strengths requires an appreciation of how blacks' history and contemporary social ecology shape their functioning. Prior to their forced migration to the Americas, black children and families were members of African cultures in which family and community were tightly bound together, and in which there was a strong emphasis on the survival and well being of the entire community. These cultures tended to imbue a strong sense of duty, and to value achievement, wisdom, respect (especially for one's elders and peers), justice, and spirituality (Staples, 1999). This cultural foundation was assailed during the period of slavery and continues to be battered in contemporary society. Yet the central beliefs and values have endured, providing a source of strength that has sustained people of African descent through a difficult history and into the present.



Context of Strengths of Today's African-American Children

Existing literature on black children focuses primarily on deviance in high-risk contexts such as extreme poverty. Comparing black children's behavior and functioning to that of white children, researchers often employ psychosocial models that cast black children's difference as deficiency. These deficit models ignore the behavioral and emotional strengths black children have developed, and they also ignore the ways in which environmental and socio-demographic factors can mediate and/or moderate black children's functioning. For example, black children's performance on cognitive psychological measures decreases if they perceive that testers stereotype them. Differences in functioning can also be seen as alternative competencies, which, while adaptive in the black community, may inhibit functioning in the majority culture. In one study, for example, black children, their parents, and professionals who work with them reported resistance toward mainstream social systems/institutions and fearlessness in expressing opinions as strengths. In contrast, compliance, valued by white culture, was absent from their reports (Lambert, Markle, & Francois-Bellas, 2001).

Problems with Measurement

Most measures of children's behavior and functioning are developed to assess children from any ethnicity or culture, so as to permit cross-group comparisons and the widest research application. Measurement developers often include representative samples of youth from diverse socioethnic backgrounds when establishing norms for their measures; however, the representation of black and other minority youth in such samples is usually insufficient to allow for a full exploration of how these measures function within these different populations. Thus, the content of measures tends to reflect a theoretical and empirical literature base

developed primarily by white scholars for white middle-class children, and the measure may not capture the relevant facets of behavior or functioning among children of different cultural groups. This sort of difficulty around issues of *content validity* makes indiscriminate use of measures across diverse populations problematic (Haynes, Nelson, & Blaine, 1999).

Cultural validity is closely related to content validity, and is an assessment of how well a measure covers culturally relevant content, and whether such content reflects idiomatic expressions of the groups for which they were designed. Measures with cultural validity have items that are appropriately phrased in the “voice” of specific groups, and respondents’ interpretation of the items reflects the meanings intended by the developers of the measure. Language and content for most measures of children’s functioning emerges from the literature reviews or expert opinion. However, such literature is often unsophisticated in its appreciation of black culture, and “experts” are likely to be white, middle-class, and/or unfamiliar with black culture and the idioms of its expression. Discrepancies between intended test item meanings and respondents’ understanding may lead to misinterpretation of measurement items, measurement errors, and inappropriate diagnostic and treatment decisions (see Knight & Hill, 1998).

The Voice of Black Children and Adults Who Live or Work with Them

Addressing the need for culturally relevant strength and problem assessment procedures, we relied on the expertise of black children and the adults who closely interact with them. Using face-to-face contact and interactive television linkage, we conducted 20 focus group sessions with black parents, children, clinicians, and teachers, as well as with a few white professionals working directly with black children. Participants who had administered or completed psychological tests pointed out that such measures seemed to omit behavioral and emotional strengths, especially those that are deemed most important by many black children and families, such as spirituality, cooperation, respect for others, and sense of humor. Parents and children noted that they were sometimes unsure of the meaning of the items on the measures they completed and had little confidence that



their responses matched the test authors’ intent.

Although our research focuses on strengths, participants also described problems not identified in widely-used measures of children’s behavior such as: being vulgar or disrespectful, wearing revealing clothing, being verbally assaultive, attributing too many problems to racism, and having no outlook or belief regarding a personal future. Participants noted that the rating scales of most measures only scored the presence

and magnitude of competence and problems. They suggested that instruments should measure the *effects* of the strengths on the child, since, in certain contexts, strengths can produce negative effects for the child. For example, in some school environments peers ridicule students with excellent academic skills. Participants therefore noted the need for ratings regarding whether children’s strengths might produce some negative effects, as this information could be critical for intervention planning.

The Behavioral Assessment for Children of African Heritage

The Behavior Assessment for Children of African Heritage (BACAH) consists of four forms. These forms are (a) a parent-report form for parents to report on children ages 4 to 18, (b) a teacher-report form for teachers to report on school-aged (i.e., ages 5 to 18) children, (c) an adolescent self-report form for children ages 11 to 18, and (d) an interview schedule for ages 6 to 10. Written at a sixth grade reading level, the first three forms are designed for self-administration but can also be administered in an interview. As described above, the BACAH forms were designed with considerable input from the black community. In addition to seeking input from the focus groups, we also asked 30 black children, their parents, and their teachers to complete the measure and to provide feedback on difficulties with the measure. Another group of 30 black children, parents, teachers and other professionals rated the clarity of instructions on the forms, and rated individual items according to their relevance for black children. We modified the forms according to the input we received from these respondents.

Challenges in Developing the Measure

The development of the BACAH presented a number of challenges beyond those normally associated with this sort of process. One of the main challenges was finding financial support for our work, as funding agencies were reluctant to support our efforts. For example, one program officer from a federal funding agency told us that designing measures for a particular ethnic group is troubling, as other groups might wish the same. Moreover, one would be unable to compare functioning across groups. A president of a foundation asked us "Where are the white children?" This officer also noted that unless we included children from the majority culture in our samples, we would be unable to obtain sufficient resources to complete the project especially if he was heading the funding agency. We viewed these comments as myopic and uninformed. Nevertheless, we were able to proceed, using creative means of funding the project. We used our own financial resources, and obtained funding within our respective universities and from external collaborators.

The other central challenge involved building trust within the black community. With good reason, many blacks are suspicious of researchers, and many are aware of past abuses inflicted on research subjects. Although we are both black researchers, we are associated with the "establishment" (i.e., a university), as some potential research participants mentioned. Others protested that we planned to use their children as guinea pigs, but because the measures' content emerged from considerable input from the black community, we usually responded by pointing out that "The guinea pigs designed these measures." Some informants and community leaders asked why we are looking at children who have no problems. We have noted special interest in showcasing children who are functioning well as too often we focus on the negative in our children.

In order to build trust, we worked to establish relationships with trusted black community leaders in the Midwest and Northeast. People within the black community know that these individuals will do everything possible to protect the community and its members from exploitation. Equally important is that in all phases of our research program, we paid participants for the time they invested with us. Our strategies appear successful as we continue to attract participants.

Project status

Currently, we are using an approach based on Item Response Theory to test the psychometric properties of the BACAH forms. We have shortened the forms, making them a quarter of their original length. We hope to publish the BACAH strengths measure in late 2003 or early 2004.

Across parent, teacher and self reports, we have identified the following three dimensions of strengths: Emotional Connection and Social Adroitness (e.g., feels safe, gets along with older children), Emotional Control and Ecological Adjustment (e.g., deals appropriately with his/her emotions, avoids doing things to make others look bad), and Aesthetic and Cultural Appreciation (e.g., interested in own history and culture, appreciates art and music). An additional dimension we labeled Resilience (e.g. mediates conflicts, problem solving skills, knows own limits) emerged from teacher reports. Preliminary analyses of the data revealed that troubled children are rated lower on all these dimensions.

Scaffolding Intervention with BACAH findings

Because the BACAH forms are written in the voice of black children, their families, and professionals who work with them, informants find it culturally sensitive. Comments from children and parents who complete the measure include "This test was worth my time," and "Finally there is something out there for blacks." Children wrote extensively regarding some questions. That children invest time to complete the BACAH in its lengthy experimental form and write extensively about its items is especially promising. We are optimistic that the BACAH will provide professionals with accurate and useful information for intervention planning and for intervention outcome evaluations. For example, most focus group members reported that children who have an outlook for the future are well adjusted. Some focus group members noted that a lack of such outlook might be indicative of typical suicidal behavior or placing oneself self in situations (e.g., gang activity) which can be life threatening, since the child feels that "He/she has nothing to lose."

Professionals can administer BACAH strength items with a rating scale for the presence and magnitude of strengths, but the rating scale for strength effects might be particularly important. For example, one child who has multiple strengths might view them positively while another child might see having the same strengths as a liability (e.g., demonstrating good academic achievement can result in being accused of acting "too white"). The

professional working with the first child might bolster such strengths, use them as a foundation for the eradication of liabilities, and assist the child in developing strengths in other domains. For the second child, the professional's first task might be to investigate factors contributing to the child's views (e.g., peers, the educational environment). With a better understanding of these factors, the professional can focus on building interventions that are more sensitive to the child's social ecology.

Summary and Conclusion

Little documentation on black children's strengths exists, yet a better understanding of such strengths is critical. Strengths in the black community reflect African culture, a history of enslavement, and the social realities of contemporary society. Measures of strengths developed for other populations are unlikely to capture this heritage and the adaptations that blacks have made to survive and thrive in America. We have developed the BACAH in an effort to provide a strengths-based instrument that can be used as the basis for culturally sensitive and effective intervention with black children. Additionally, we believe that the BACAH will be useful in research settings, for learning more about how and why strengths buffer black children and contribute to positive outcomes.

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