

# Challenges to the Study of African American Parenting: Conceptualization, Sampling, Research Approaches, Measurement, and Design

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## SYNOPSIS

*Objective.* The primary purpose of this review is to highlight methodological challenges to the study of African American parenting. Over the past two decades, research on African American parenting has burgeoned, and attempts have been made to address the shortcomings of prior work in this area. Recent studies have shed new light on the heterogeneity of African American parenting and help to identify promising directions for future research. *Design.* In this paper, we overview research on African American parenting, with emphasis on studies conducted over the past two decades. We discuss challenges, strengths, and gaps in the areas of conceptualization, sampling, research approaches, measurement, and design. *Results and Conclusions.* Great strides have been made in the methodological rigor of studies on African American parenting which have yielded a more complex understanding of parenting practices and outcomes in this population. Future research should attend to variation in the nature and influences of parenting across different subgroups of the African American population. Additionally, researchers should increasingly rely on multiple methodologies (e.g., surveys, observations, qualitative interviews); ground the measurement of parenting in the experiences of African American populations; and examine patterns within a developmental context. These research directions promise to yield new findings on processes that are unique to African American families, as well as highlight those that are common to parents across racial and ethnic groups.

## INTRODUCTION

In recent years, research on African American parenting has burgeoned. In a span of over 40 years prior to 1995, 45 peer-reviewed articles in PsychInfo contained the key words “African American”<sup>1</sup> and “parenting”.

From 1996 through 2008, only 12 years, the number rose to include 400 more. In addition to the dramatic increase in the sheer number of studies on African American parenting, the literature has shifted from a predominant emphasis on “deficits” to one that increasingly highlights heterogeneity of parenting practices in African American families.

For decades, the approach to research on African American parenting was largely based on sampling strategies in which low-income, at-risk African American families were compared to the majority culture (see Dickerson, 1995, for a discussion). The most common studies of African Americans continued to be prevention and intervention studies conducted with at-risk populations, single and teen mothers, and families from lower socioeconomic strata (e.g., Apfel & Seitz, 1997; McLoyd, Cauce, Takeuchi & Leon, 2000). These sampling practices resulted in a knowledge base on African American families that was grounded in the experiences of poor, at-risk groups, most often compared to a knowledge base on European American families that was grounded in the experiences of middle-income, low-risk groups.

Although African American families disproportionately experience poverty at some point in their lives, insufficient attention to variation among African Americans continues to pose the danger that a picture of lower-income African American life will predominate. McLoyd et al. (2000) described this danger as “grave” (p. 1087) and noted that researchers who fail to recognize class distinctions will only reinforce stereotypes and prejudices. Others also have cautioned against treating African Americans as a single cultural group (e.g., see Davis, Nakayam, & Martin, 2000; McLoyd & Steinberg, 1996) and have highlighted the need to expand studies to middle-class African Americans, a group considered to be “culturally ambidextrous,” or fluent in both African American and mainstream cultures (Toliver, 1998, p. 124). In response, a growing number of studies on African American parenting have included working- and middle-class participants from a range of backgrounds and communities, either exclusively or together with African Americans living in less advantaged circumstances.

As will be shown, many of these recent studies have yielded findings that challenge earlier assumptions about the characteristics and influences of African American parenting and underscore the range of social, economic, and individual factors that contribute to variation in parenting practices. Because family processes occur within the context of the larger communities and cultures in which families and children reside, the

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<sup>1</sup>This count did not include “black” or any other terms of art and so may be an underestimate.

influences of multiple settings on African American parenting should be considered when interpreting research findings (Jones, Forehand, Brody, & Armistead, 2003). Like all parents, African Americans adapt their parenting styles to match the localized settings of their lives (Murry, Bynum, Brody, Willert, & Stephens, 2001). Recognition of the contextual embeddedness of African American parenting moves beyond unidimensional characterizations of parenting toward an understanding that is grounded in ecological theories of human development (e.g., Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998; Garcia Coll, Crnic, Lamberty, & Wasik, 1996).

In this paper, five methodological issues frame a discussion of research on African American<sup>2</sup> parenting: (1) Conceptualization, (2) Sampling, (3) Research Approaches, (4) Measurement, and (5) Design. Relevant recommendations are integrated at the end of each section. Although these methodological issues are important to parenting research generally, they are especially salient and pose unique challenges in the study of African American parenting. As will be shown, current advances in methodological rigor have led to a more heterogeneous and complex, and therefore more valid, portrayal of African American parenting.<sup>3</sup> To highlight this main point, we refer to a subset of the over 400 contemporary studies on African American parenting that exemplify advances in each of the five areas. We excluded studies focused on special populations within the African American literature (e.g., parents with substance use problems, abused children), but otherwise did not place formal restrictions on the studies chosen for inclusion (as would be characteristic of a meta-analysis). Due to space constraints, the review is clearly not exhaustive, which means that several important studies could not be included.

## CONCEPTUALIZATION

The study of African American parenting begins with careful conceptualization of "parenting." Which aspects of parenting are most critical to study? To what extent are current frameworks of parenting applicable to the study of African American parenting and to what extent should new models be developed?

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<sup>2</sup>The focus in this paper is on African Americans, rather than on the broader classification of Black American which would include Caribbean, Africanese, and so forth.

<sup>3</sup>This paper is based primarily on select studies published in peer-reviewed journals appearing in PsychInfo since 1995 and identified through the keywords of "African American" and "parenting."

## Parental Warmth and Control

To date, one of the most influential typologies of parenting is based on the work of Diana Baumrind (1967, 1991). Baumrind rated parenting along two continua: warmth and control, which were used to create a tripartite typology of parenting: authoritarian, authoritative, and permissive. Authoritarian parents were low in warmth and high in control and expected their children to obey their orders without explanation; their children tended to lack spontaneity, affection, curiosity, and originality. Authoritative parents were high in warmth and control and displayed inductive rather than punitive disciplinary methods; this style of parenting was related to the development of competence in children (Maccoby & Martin, 1983; Steinberg, 1990). Permissive parents were high in warmth and low in control and permitted their children considerable self-regulation; children of permissive parents were found to display immature behavior marked by a lack of social responsibility and independence (Baumrind, 1967, 1971). A fourth typology—the neglectful parent—was later added. Neglectful parents were found to be low on both warmth and control, and their children’s outcomes were poor across multiple domains. Based on this work, authoritative parenting styles have generally been viewed as most beneficial to the development of children.

Although Baumrind’s work formed an important foundation for a great deal of research on parenting (e.g., Koblinsky, Morgan & Anderson, 1997; McGroder, 2000; Shumow, Vandell, & Posner 1998; Steinberg, Mounts, Lamborn, & Dornbusch, 1991), the generalization to diverse populations has been questioned (e.g., McLoyd et al., 2000). In fact, Baumrind herself (1972) noted that when data on Black parents of preschoolers were analyzed separately from European Americans, Black parents high on authoritarianism had girls who were the most self-assertive and independent.

Similarly, Deater-Deckard, Dodge, Bates, and Pettit (1996) identified an interaction between ethnicity and parenting in relation to children’s externalizing behaviors, in kindergarten, first, second, and third grade, as rated by teachers and peers. Specifically, parents’ physical disciplinary strategies predicted higher externalizing behavior in European American children, but not in African American children. In fact, there was a trend for African American children who received harsh physical discipline to display lower aggression and externalizing behavior. Similar findings obtained in a subsequent longitudinal study of over 500 families from European American and African American backgrounds followed from pre-kindergarten to grade 11 (Lansford, Deater-Deckard, Dodge, Bates, & Pettit, 2004). European American adolescents who had experienced

higher levels of physical discipline, as reported by the youth and their mothers, displayed higher externalizing behaviors, whereas the opposite pattern obtained in African American adolescents. Across these studies, the authors suggest that different ecological niches of children's development might explain racial differences in the effects of physical discipline on children's problem behaviors. Variation in parents' and children's values and views about discipline, parents' concerns about safety, family structure and resources, and maternal education might account for different patterns of prediction across racial and ethnic groups.

Further support exists for differences in the nature and consequences of parenting styles in African Americans in contrast to other racial and ethnic groups. Many such studies indicate that African American parents (on average) tend to score lower than European American and Latin American parents on sensitivity and higher on behaviors associated with control (e.g., Berlin, Brady-Smith & Brooks-Gunn, 2002; Berlin, Brooks-Gunn, Spiker, & Zaslow, 1995; Bradley, Corwyn, Pipes McAdoo, & Garcia Coll, 2001; McLoyd & Smith, 2002). As one example, Shumow et al. (1998) found that African Americans who were asked about their parenting practices reported more harshness and less permissiveness than European American parents. The term "no-nonsense parenting" has been used to describe the parenting of low-income, single African American mothers and their 6- to 9-year-old children living in the rural South (Brody, Flor & Gibson, 1999). This style of parenting includes high levels of parental control coupled with high parental affection.

Some studies on the effects of parental control for African American children argue that high control in the context of high warmth can have neutral or positive consequences for African American children (e.g., Brody, Flor, & Gibson, 1999; Darling & Steinberg, 1993; McLoyd & Smith, 2002; Spieker, Larson, Lewis, Keller, & Gilchrist, 1999). In one study of African American, European American, and groups of more acculturated and less acculturated Mexican American mothers, intrusiveness (a form of control) was associated with decreased child engagement and dyadic mutuality in all groups, except for African Americans (Ispa, Fine, Halgunseth, Harper, Robinson, Boyce, et al., 2004). Moreover, although intrusiveness was associated with increased child negativity across groups, the relation between maternal intrusiveness and child negativity held only for dyadic pairs in which the mother scored low on warmth. The authors speculate that either intrusiveness has a different meaning in African American families, or that its negative effects were lessened to the extent that intrusiveness is often normative within African American groups and occurs in a context of high warmth.

However, studies documenting high levels of control, intrusiveness, or physical discipline in African American parents have typically been based on the experiences of low-income and/or less educated families. Middle-class, more educated African American parents are consistently described as exhibiting less control than their lower-class counterparts, both in practices as well as beliefs (Dodson, 1997; Kelley, Power, & Wimbush, 1992; McLoyd, 1990; Smetana, 2000; Tamis-LeMonda, Briggs, McClowry, & Snow, in press; Wilson, Kohn, Curry-El, & Hinton, 1995). For example, Smetana (2000) focused on perspectives of parental authority in middle-income African American parents and their adolescents. Across the ages of 13 to 15 years, adolescents and their mothers believed that parental authority and adolescents' obligation to comply with parental requests declined as children grew older. Her investigation pointed to a democratic, authoritative parenting style among African American middle-income parents, which contrasts with authoritarian characterizations in other studies.

Moreover, a growing number of scholars point to the deleterious effects of control and/or the benefits of authoritative, responsive, or supportive parenting for African American children. In such studies, predictive patterns for African Americans parallel those for European Americans, even under conditions where average levels of control remain higher for African Americans. For example, in a longitudinal study of low-income European American and African American parents of third to fifth graders, African American parents reported more harshness and less permissiveness than did European American parents on average (Shumow, Vandell, & Posner, 1998). However, harshness negatively predicted various measures of child adjustment at third grade and fifth grade in both European Americans and African Americans; responsive parenting uniformly predicted positive outcomes in children, such as academic achievement.

Similarly, others have documented parallels in both the structure and influence of parenting in African American and European American families with 3-year-old children. In one study, observational and self-report data of maternal and child behaviors were examined in 123 African American and 953 European American families participating in the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development Study of Early Child Care (Whiteside-Mansell, Bradley, Tresch Owen, Randolph, & Cauce, 2003). Analyses on comparable measures of parenting (Responsive, Harsh, and Intrusive), child problem behaviors (Externalizing and Internalizing), and child prosocial behavior (Compliance and Expressiveness), and the factor structure of parenting and child measures did not differ between the two groups. Moreover, associations between parenting and

child behaviors yielded identical patterns in European American and African American families. Responsive parenting was associated with greater child compliance and fewer problem behaviors, whereas the reverse pattern was obtained for intrusive and harsh parenting behaviors, both of which predicted greater externalizing and internalizing in European American and African American children.

Variation across studies in the conceptualization and definition of control is one reason for conflicting findings on African American parenting. Definitions of control have included behaviors as diverse as strictness, harsh discipline and corporal punishment, intrusiveness, and demanding behaviors. Moreover, parents who are “in control” have been contrasted with those who use psychological and behavioral control to pressure children to think or behave in specific ways (Grolnick, 2003), or who overwhelm children with excessive, noncontingent stimulation that interrupts or changes the child’s activities (Ispa et al., 2004). Others have distinguished between “parenting style” (rooted in Baumrind’s work) and “parenting practices” (e.g., more specific aspects of parent involvement such as school involvement) and suggest that the effect of specific parenting practices are moderated by parenting style (Darling & Steinberg, 1993).

### Parental Racial Socialization

The aforementioned studies share in common a focus on aspects of parenting that are built on Baumrind’s original emphasis on parental warmth and control. However, beyond this work, recent theory and research in the literature on African American parenting also has focused on elaborating constructs and processes that may be unique to African American families. For example, scholars note that African American children must be socialized to be competent in both the mainstream majority European American society and the African American community (Boykin & Toms, 1985; Hughes, Rodriguez, Smith, Johnson, Stevenson, et al., 2006). Consequently, there has been growing attention to the topic of racial socialization—the strategies that African American parents adopt to both inculcate cultural pride in their children and to prepare their children for possible inequalities or biases (Hughes & Johnson, 2001; Hughes et al., 2006; McHale, Crouter, Kim, Burton, Kelly, et al., 2006; Quintana, Aboud, Chao, Contreras, Cross, et al., 2006). The relatively broad construct of racial socialization can be further analyzed into four main types: cultural socialization, preparation for bias, promotion of mistrust, and egalitarianism (Hughes & Chen, 1997; Hughes et al., 2006). Distinguishing among these forms of racial socialization is important, in

light of findings that sometimes yield different patterns of prediction to children's outcomes (see Hughes et al., 2006, for review). In particular, research indicates benefits resulting from parents' efforts at cultural socialization by teaching children about the heritage, history, customs, and traditions of their race or ethnicity and promoting pride in their background (Boykin & Toms, 1985; Hughes, Bachman, Ruble, & Fuligni, 2006). Positive messages about a child's race or ethnicity that support ethnic identity are viewed as a protective factor (Chatman, Eccles, & Malanchuk, 2005; Oyserman, Harrison, & Bybee, 2001; Shelton, Yip, Eccles, Chatman, Fuligni, & Wong, 2005). Cultural socialization has been associated with fewer externalizing behaviors, lower fighting frequency and better anger management (especially among boys), higher self-esteem with peers, fewer internalizing problems, and better cognitive outcomes (see Hughes et al., 2006, for review). In a recent study of 241 first graders living in an urban area, mothers' cultural socialization related positively to children's outcomes, whereas promotion of mistrust as a socialization strategy related to a greater prevalence of child behavior problems (Caughy, Nettles, O'Campo, & Fraleigh Lohrfink, 2006).

The influence of racial socialization is perhaps best understood when practices of both parents are considered (McHale, Crouter, Kim, Burton, Kelly, Dotterer, et al., 2006). Mothers were more involved in cultural socialization overall than fathers, although fathers engaged in more bias preparation with their sons than with their daughters. Only modest associations existed between the reported practices of mothers and fathers. The authors suggest that mothers and fathers may differ in their practices in some families but be similar in others. Notably, the effects of racial socialization depended on child and parent gender. Youth reported a lower locus of control and higher depression when mothers were high on racial socialization but fathers were low. When fathers were high on racial socialization and mothers were low, the opposite pattern emerged. These findings point to the importance of considering the entire family system in the study of parenting influences.

## Summary

A challenge to the study of parenting is the conceptualization of aspects of parenting that effectively promote or hinder child development. Although there is relative consensus that authoritarian parenting styles are associated with negative outcomes in European Americans, there is less agreement about these associations in African Americans. In some studies, behaviors associated with authoritarianism are adversely associated with African American children's outcomes, whereas in others

positive associations are found. In contrast, there is consistent evidence that behaviors associated with authoritative styles similarly predict positive outcomes in African American and European American groups.

These differences are at least in part explained by variation across studies in the operationalization of terms. For example, the construct of "authoritarian parenting" might reflect greater emphasis on monitoring, punitiveness, harsh discipline, structure, or intrusiveness, depending on the study. By distinguishing among specific constructs (such as harsh and negative versus intrusive parenting, as in Ispa et al., 2004), contrasting patterns of prediction are better understood. Similarly, work in the area of racial socialization exemplifies the separation of distinct constructs. Scholars distinguish, for example, among socialization practices that induce pride in cultural heritage and/or prepare children for bias versus those that instill a sense of mistrust; patterns of prediction to children's outcomes vary across these forms of socialization. Therefore, the study of African American families will benefit from more precise definitions of parenting that are based in specific parenting behaviors, a movement away from global terms or constructs, and a focus on parenting in its broader ecological context.

### SAMPLING

Sampling considerations are integrally tied to ecological models of parenting in that African Americans from different economic backgrounds, family structures, and neighborhoods confront unique challenges and circumstances that shape both their views and practices. Under ideal circumstances, the literature on African American parenting would be based on an epidemiologically derived, representative population of families sampled from different socioeconomic strata, family structures, and neighborhoods. This ideal, however, is costly and stands in sharp contrast to the common practice of studying samples of convenience (see Murry et al., 2001, for discussion). Consequently, many racial and ethnic differences in parenting may be attributable to sampling bias (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994). African Americans have been particularly subject to sampling strategies that result in overly narrow characterizations of their parenting styles and their relation to child developmental outcomes. At minimum, researchers should be aware of the ways that sampling decisions affect the nature of parenting as well as inferences about the consequences of parenting on children. In particular, close attention should be paid to sampling along the lines of socioeconomic status, family structure, and community characteristics.

### Socioeconomic Status (SES)

As noted, the literature on African American parenting has primarily included low-income, at-risk families, which is partly attributable to the relatively high poverty rates in this group. Approximately 25% of African Americans live below the poverty threshold (U.S. Bureau of Census, 2004). More than half of all African Americans have lived in poverty by age 26, and close to 90% of African Americans will experience poverty by age 70 (Rothman, 2002). Living in poverty comes with a host of problems and adverse conditions that place African American families and children at great risk, including poor housing conditions, overcrowded schools, joblessness, and disproportionately high rates of crime and substance abuse. Because social class is one of the strongest predictors of parenting, factors related to socioeconomic status may account for some of the differences across racial groups (e.g., Dodson, 1997; Murry et al., 2001).

Nonetheless, despite relatively high rates of poverty, over 85% of African Americans graduated from high school with a diploma or equivalency certificate in 2000 (U.S. Department of Commerce, 2000), and over 44% of African Americans had completed some college and beyond (U.S. Bureau of Census, 2004). Moreover, nearly 90% of African Americans over 16 years of age participate in the workforce; 27% of working African Americans hold executive, professional, and managerial positions, and 18% earn over \$50,000 per year (U.S. Bureau of Census, 2004). Although these rates continue to be lower than those of European Americans, African American families are clearly represented at both higher- and lower-ends of the socioeconomic spectrum, raising the question as to how variation in SES is associated with African American parenting.

Indeed, an increasing number of studies on African Americans reveal links between social class and family-level processes, parenting behaviors, parents' concerns about and priorities for their children, and parents' perceptions of their roles and feelings of self-efficacy. Many of these studies have focused specifically on the disciplinary strategies of African American parents, particularly physical forms of discipline such as spanking. The focus on physical discipline, in part, is the result of the common finding across survey-based studies that the majority of African Americans endorse the use of corporal punishment with their children (see McLoyd & Smith, 2002, for review). In particular, studies find that African Americans report a relatively high use of spanking, which has been attributed to the economic, political, and social disadvantages experienced by many African Americans (Whaley, 2000). African Americans may expect spanking to teach children to respect power and authority, to prepare children for

settings in which others may respond harshly, and to protect children from the greater harm and serious consequences of violating social rules in relatively dangerous communities (Stevenson, 1994; Whaley, 2000). African Americans with less education are more fearful that their children will become involved in antisocial behavior (Kelley et al., 1992).

It is, therefore, not surprising that the use of harsh discipline, including spanking, varies substantially among African American parents who differ on family income and maternal education, and, as a result, may have different concerns about neighborhood safety. A study of the child, maternal, and family characteristics associated with spanking revealed social class to be the strongest predictor of discipline in African American families (Giles-Sims, Straus, & Sugarman, 1995). Similarly, in an investigation of the disciplinary beliefs and practices of nearly 1000 European American and African American parents of kindergartners, low-income parents across racial and ethnic groups endorsed harsher responses to hypothetical vignettes of children's misbehaviors (Pinderhughes, Dodge, Bates, & Pettit, 2000). Parents from low-income backgrounds also believed in the value of spanking and were more likely to experience high stress and negative perceptions of their children. This constellation of factors influenced their disciplinary choices. Another investigation of harshness, responsiveness, firmness, and permissiveness in low-income African American and European American mothers, found that even within a relatively narrow SES window, lower levels of education and income were associated with more harshness, in both African American and European American mothers (Shumow, Vandell, & Posner, 1998).

In contrast, working class and middle-income African American mothers with more education have been found to engage in child-centered discipline, including inductive reasoning, time out, and love withdrawal in response to children's misbehaviors (Bluestone & Tamis-LeMonda, 1999). Others have found African Americans' increased income was associated with less conflict intensity in the family (Smetana & Gaines, 1999) and with parents granting their children greater autonomy (Smetana, 2000). Moreover, African Americans with greater financial resources were more likely to believe that their parenting is effective (Brody, Flor, & Gibson, 1999).

The role of social class in the beliefs of African American parents is illustrated in the work of Hill and Sprague (1999) who contrasted African American parents from different socioeconomic strata. The authors created a three-tiered system of SES based on parents' income and education and defined "modal" families within working class, lower-middle-class, and upper-middle-class groups. Regarding parents' expectations for children, as social class decreased, the prioritizing of school performance and parents' desire for their children to secure a good job increased. The goals of lower

class African American parents closely mirrored the emphasis on school performance and employment upheld in mainstream society. However, when parents' beliefs about parenting were examined, as social class decreased African American parents were more likely to view themselves as providers and disciplinarians and less likely to view themselves as teachers. The greater emphasis on education for children, yet less emphasis on parents' didactic role in children's learning process in lower-income groups, indicates class differences in parents' views about the pathways through which children are prepared to succeed at school and beyond.

Finally, as it does to forms of discipline and control, SES relates to African American parents' racial socialization. Parents from higher socioeconomic strata, those with higher income, more years education, and those who work at higher occupational levels such as professionals report engaging in more cultural socialization and preparation for bias with their children than parents from lower socioeconomic strata, with lower incomes, and/or fewer years of education and lower occupational levels (e.g., Caughy, Randolph, & O'Campo, 2002; Hughes & Chen, 1997). To the extent that cultural socialization bolsters children's sense of ethnic pride, these SES-related differences in parenting practices may ultimately play out in children's developmental outcomes.

### Family Structure

In addition to socioeconomic status, African American families vary in father residency, presence of grandparent or extended kin in the home, and other forms of family structure. To date, there is limited knowledge on how differences in household composition might affect African American parenting and how the social networks of African American families might moderate these influences (Apfel & Seitz, 1997). Researchers have pointed to the sharp declines of marriage, increasing divorce rates, and the rising percentage of female-headed households in the African American population (e.g., Murry et al., 2001). High rates of poverty, male unemployment, and male incarceration in African American populations are some of the reasons posited for declines in marriage rates (McLoyd et al., 2000). Moreover, the implementation of policies such as welfare reform disproportionately affects poor families, such as African Americans, and may indirectly influence family structure, for example by a reduction or elimination of welfare benefits to mothers when fathers reside in the same household.

In general, these statistics increase the likelihood of sampling female-headed African American households and highlight the need for

researchers to engage in strategies that result in samples that reflect diversity in family composition. For example, female-headed households vary in whether single mothers live with their mothers, extended kin, or alone; the extent to which the fathers of their children are involved in their lives and childrearing; how much emotional support they receive from their friends and family members; and the extent to which members of support networks are consistent providers of childcare versus perceived as unsolicited intruders (Apfel & Seitz, 1997).

Additionally, more studies are needed on African American two-parent households, a group that is virtually ignored in the literature. One exception is the work by Smetana, Abernethy, and Harris (2000), in which mother-adolescent interactions in middle-class African American families were contrasted in married, intact households versus single, mother-headed households. Mothers from married, intact households communicated more positively and supported and validated their adolescents more than did single mothers, indicating that having two parents in a household benefits the quality of parent-adolescent relationships. A second exception is the work of McHale et al. (2006), who conducted a short-term longitudinal study of gender socialization and development in 162 two-parent African American families. Both mothers' and fathers' socialization strategies influenced their children's ethnic identity and depressive symptoms. Moreover, the effects of mothers' and fathers' behaviors were interactive, which highlights the importance of understanding processes of co-parenting in African American households.

The ways in which family structure influences parenting and children's development depend largely on the social networks of families. For example, African American adolescent mothers benefit from an extended family that helps care for infants (Nitz, Ketterlinus, & Brandt, 1995). Social support has been viewed as a "particularly salient protective factor in African American families because strong extended family networks serve as culturally based influences that buffer the direct and indirect effects of stressful life events on family functioning and child development" (Murphy et al., 2001, p. 144).

The importance and complexity of family relationships and social support in African American families are highlighted in the "kinscripts" framework described by Stack and Burton (1993). They and others contend that single African American mothers recruit and maintain kin networks, such as grandmothers, sisters, aunts, and father-figures, to assist in their families' daily survival and social mobility (Stack, 1974; Roy & Burton, 2007). These extrafamilial components of social networks sustain and reinforce family relationships, intergenerational responsibilities and labor, and shared values.

The benefits of social support in African American parenting, however, are not straightforward. Some researchers have found grandmother support to be positive and adaptive to African American adolescent mothers (Leadbeater & Linares, 1992), but others find less adequate parenting by adolescents experiencing high levels of grandparent involvement (Black & Nitz, 1996). Depending on the nature of the sample, conflicting findings may emerge about positive versus negative effects of social support.

### Community Characteristics

Community characteristics, including neighborhood composition and whether a family lives in the inner city or a rural area, also contribute to the heterogeneity of African American parenting. Studies rarely consider the role of urban versus rural community settings in the study of African American parenting, although a handful of noteworthy exceptions exist (e.g., Bulcroft, Carmody, & Bulcroft, 1996; Giles-Sims et al., 1995; Steele, Nesbitt-Daly, Daniel, & Forehand, 2005). Two dimensions of parenting, use of spanking and degree of parental monitoring, have been addressed to some degree in the research on African American parenting practices across rural and urban settings.

Regarding the use of spanking as a disciplinary strategy, rural mothers reported more spanking than urban mothers (Giles-Sims et al., 1995), whereas others found that the distinction between rural and urban community of residence did not predict the prevalence of spanking (Day, Peterson, & McCracken, 1998). Findings concerning parental monitoring are more consistent. African American parents living in rural areas were more likely to leave their adolescent children home alone, whereas parents in urban areas placed greater restrictions on their adolescent children, including earlier curfews (Bulcroft et al., 1996). In accord with this pattern, when African American parents were asked to report strictness versus laxness in their parenting practices, rural mothers were more lax in comparison to urban mothers who were less tolerant of rule violations in their children (Steele et al., 2005). These rural-urban differences may result from varying levels of parental security with neighborhood environments and peer groups, and the likely greater concerns of urban parents about safety and the adverse consequences of children's misbehavior. The links between parents' discipline and supervision and neighborhood settings exemplify the influence of macro-level contexts on micro-level processes (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998).

Communities also vary in racial composition and patterns of inter-group relations, and these differences might shape parenting practices.

Parents' messages to children about bias and mistrust might be more common in neighborhoods where intergroup relations and discrimination are salient, and/or messages about group equalities might be especially important in neighborhoods where children are in the numerical minority (Hughes et al., 2006). However, studies on the role of neighborhood context in parents' racial socialization remain rare. Research indicates that parents are more likely to communicate to their children about the potential for racial bias in integrated neighborhoods versus those where African American or European American populations predominate (e.g., Caughy et al., 2002, 2006; Stevenson, Herrero-Taylor, Cameron, & Davis, 2002). Similarly, messages about bias and the promotion of mistrust are greatest in neighborhoods characterized by negative social climate, low support, and high levels of danger (e.g., Caughy et al., 2006; Stevenson et al., 2002).

### Summary

African American parents from different SES strata vary in their parenting styles and beliefs. African American families also differ in family structure and location of residence (rural versus urban communities; communities with different compositions and interracial relations), and these factors relate to aspects of parenting such as discipline and restrictiveness. Consequently, sampling strategies will greatly affect characterizations of African American parenting and may be a source of the overly narrow descriptions of African American parenting in the past.

In light of the virtual absence of studies on intact African American families, more studies on this family structure are needed. Moreover, investigations of rural African American families are scarce, underscoring the need to examine variation within rural families as well as to compare the parenting and child outcomes of rural families with those living in urban centers. Finally, researchers should seek to understand how characteristics of neighborhood cohesiveness, composition, and other social indices affect parents' everyday behaviors with, and socialization of, their children.

Thus, future research in this area will benefit from rigorous attention to sampling strategies at the study outset, as well as careful interpretation of findings in light of sample characteristics. Moreover, researchers should consider whether there is a need for within-group studies and analysis of African American parenting prior to conducting race-comparative studies, as comparative studies often mask intra-group variation (Johnson, Jaeger, Randolph, Cauce, & Ward, 2003).

## RESEARCH APPROACHES

Research approaches to the study of African American parenting can be broadly classified as quantitative or qualitative, with a handful of noteworthy studies using a combination of the two. The approach that is selected by researchers under these broad categories will have implications for the depth of information that is gathered, the magnitude and sources of biases in the data, and the types of inferences that are made about the nature and consequences of parenting in African American families.

In the area of parenting, the primary quantitative approach is the use of self-administered surveys or interviews on which parents report on their parenting views or practices. In some instances, older children and adolescents are surveyed about their relationship with their parents or their perceptions about their parents' views or practices. In addition to surveys, certain forms of observation-based assessments take a quantitative approach, such as those in which parenting and child behaviors are coded along a number of behavioral dimensions that are determined a priori.

In contrast, qualitative research methods seek to gain insight into the meanings that underlie parents' behaviors or experiences, to generate new hypotheses or ideas about parenting processes in relatively understudied groups, and/or to aid in the interpretation of quantitative findings (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The strengths of qualitative research include the focus on naturally occurring events in natural settings, the confidence gained by the fact that data have a "local groundedness," and the richness and complexity of the data.

### Quantitative Approaches

The use of surveys is the most common quantitative approach in the literature on African American parenting. Most studies are based on parents' self-report of their parenting practices on the "control" side of the warmth-control continuum. Much of this research focuses on discipline and monitoring, with parents reporting the strategies they use in response to child noncompliance or when structuring their children's time and activities (e.g., Bluestone, & Tamis-LeMonda, 1999; Jones et al., 2003; Kelley, Sanchez-Hucles, & Walker, 1993; Taylor & Roberts, 1995; Taylor, 2000). In terms of parents' racial socialization practices, most studies rely on survey-based self-report by either parents or adolescents (e.g., McHale et al., 2006). Parents are typically asked whether they engage in specific forms of racial socialization or are asked to rate the

strength or frequency of their racial socialization values or practices (Hughes et al., 2006).

Although widely used, self-report methodologies may be affected by respondent bias, and parents' answers may be rooted in social desirability. In addition, there is an inherent challenge in asking parents about the positive dimensions of parenting. Researchers struggle with ways to probe parents' warmth and responsiveness through the use of surveys, although there is some evidence that both mothers and fathers can respond reliably to questions about their warmth (McHale et al., 2006).

In attempts to avoid some of the inherent limitations of surveys, a more limited number of researchers use observational methods to assess parenting. Typically, researchers videorecord parents and children in situations such as play or teaching in early childhood and conflict negotiation in adolescence and videorecords are subsequently coded along a number of parenting dimensions (e.g., intrusiveness, control, sensitivity).

Despite the relatively high costs of observational studies in both time and resources, observational assessments of parenting may yield greater predictive validity than survey-based measures. For example, in a recent study, parenting measures during preschool were examined as predictors of children's cognitive and socioemotional outcomes in middle childhood in about 300 low-income, African American mother-child dyads (Zaslow, Weinfield, Gallagher, Hair, Ogawa, Egeland, et al., 2006). Parenting in preschool was assessed using self-report, the Home Observation for Measurement of the Environment-Short Form (HOME; Caldwell & Bradley, 1984), and observational methods. Child outcomes were gathered four years later. Findings revealed observational measures of parenting to be the strongest and most consistent predictors of children's later outcomes.

Others also have documented strong prediction of children's developmental outcomes from observational measures of parenting. Many such studies have relied on the HOME, which blends observational items with interview questions and demonstrates reliability and validity in African American groups (e.g., Barnett, Kidwell, & Leung, 1998; Burchinal, Follmer, & Bryant, 1996; Koblinsky, Morgan, & Anderson, 1997; McGroder, 2000). In one study, the HOME was augmented with items from other parenting self-report scales in an examination of low-income, African American single mothers of preschool-age children (McGroder, 2000). Cluster analysis revealed four patterns of parenting: Aggravated but Nurturant; Cognitively Stimulating; Patient Nurturant; and Low Nurturant. Substantial variability in parenting was found even within a group of low-income, African American single mothers. Mothers with Cognitively Stimulating or Patient and Nurturant styles had children

who displayed greater cognitive school readiness than children of Aggravated but Nurturant or Low Nurturant mothers.

In another observational study of rural, single-parent African American families, competence-promoting parenting practices were indirectly linked with children's academic and psychosocial competence through children's self-regulation (Brody, Flor, & Gibson, 1999). Similarly, coercive parenting and poor parental monitoring, as observed in home settings and during drop-off and pick-up of children at Head Start, put children at risk for developing later conduct problems (Kilgore, Snyder, & Lentz, 2000), and controlling parenting was associated with child insecure attachment (Barnett, Kidwell, & Leung, 1998).

Together, findings based on observational methods of parenting stand in contrast to the notion that harsh discipline is unrelated (or even positively related) to children's externalizing problems and that control or authoritarian parenting benefits African American children. Therefore, discrepancies in findings across studies might be explained, in part, by differential use of self-report versus observations.

Researchers have also sought to identify the predictors or correlates of observed parenting styles through the combination of both observational and survey approaches. These multi-method studies have revealed a number of factors that are related to parenting styles, with many such studies underscoring the importance of social support in African American communities. For example, the impact of intergenerational relationships on current parenting practices was explored using surveys and videorecorded observations in participants' homes (Wakschlag, Chase-Lansdale, & Brooks-Gunn, 1996); mothers who reported open, flexible interactions with their mothers provided similarly supportive environments for their children as assessed through observations. Similarly, in a study that combined the HOME with laboratory observations of parent-child interactions (e.g., Burchinal, Follmer, & Bryant, 1996), mothers' social support positively related to observed measures of maternal acceptance-involvement and negatively related to maternal directiveness. Finally, in an observational study of adolescent mothers playing with their infants, mothers who reported conflict with more individuals from their social networks engaged in more negative interactions (Nitz, Ketterlinus, & Brandt, 1995).

Although observational measures provide rich information on parent-child engagement styles, they can be biased as well. Most observational coding schemes have been developed on middle-class, European American parents and children, and may not readily generalize to African American groups. Moreover, there exists potential for cultural bias in researchers themselves. Non-African American coders were more likely to rate

African Americans' parenting styles as controlling and conflicted than African American coders (Gonzales, Cauce, & Mason, 1996).

### Qualitative Approaches

Qualitative approaches can be especially useful for gaining an understanding of the meanings of events in the lives of African American parents and can offer opportunities for generating and testing hypotheses about the nature, determinants, and effects of parenting. Moreover, qualitative methods often have been used to explore the motivations behind African American parenting practices. Qualitative methods provide opportunities to gain a deeper understanding of how parent-child relationships are perceived and understood by parents themselves; what role children are viewed to play in the culture of the family and community; and what attitudes and beliefs parents hold about the effects of specific parenting practices on their children.

Qualitative approaches to the study of African American parenting have been on the rise and have provided valuable insights into the ecology of parenting (see Brodsky & DeVet, 2000; Deater-Deckard et al., 1996; Denby & Alford, 1996; Hurd, Moore, & Rogers, 1995; Harris, 1998; Kelley, Power, & Wimbush, 1992; Kelley, Sanchez-Hucles, & Walker, 1993; Kilgore, Snyder, & Lentz, 2000; Marshall, 1995; Mosby, Rawls, Meehan, Mays, & Pettinari, 1999; Smetana & Gaines, 1999). For example, Brodsky and DeVet (2000) sought to better understand the belief systems that underlie the parenting practices of African Americans. Through in-depth interviews of 10 mothers, they identified three major childrearing goals: correcting behaviors, teaching values, and protection of children from current and future harm. Each parent's prioritized goal, in turn, influenced his or her actual parenting practices. Parents who emphasized the teaching of values tended to use verbal and instructive strategies to achieve their goal. To protect children from harm, parents employed a range of strategies, from verbal and instructive approaches to threats of physical action. In addition, in-depth interviews have been used to document childrearing themes or goals in African Americans (Hurd, Moore, & Rogers, 1995). In order of importance, the themes were: connection with family, emphasis on achievement and effort, respect for others, spirituality, and self-reliance. The authors noted that practitioners should be knowledgeable of these themes and use this information to promote parental self-esteem.

Qualitative methods also have been used to probe the meaning of African Americans' disciplinary styles (Denby & Alford, 1996). One father is reported as stating that he would rather spank his child than have society

later bring his child up on charges for robbing a store and threatening someone with a gun. This father's view was that it would be better if society were to hold him accountable for spanking than hold his son accountable for the illegal behaviors that arose from absence of strong discipline. Parents often asserted the importance of teaching self-control and responsibility to their children, which were both viewed as a necessary response to prejudice against African Americans. As revealed by this qualitative work, some African American parents report engaging in punitive discipline for the good of their children, whereas others focus on children's development of self-control and sense of responsibility.

In the area of racial socialization, open-ended, qualitative approaches tap into the salience of particular themes for parents by assessing what first comes to mind when they are asked to reflect on their childrearing strategies (Hughes et al., 2006). However, open-ended questions rely on parents' recollections of their strategies, and, therefore, do not permit researchers to ask about specific strategies of interest in standardized ways.

Finally, a number of researchers have combined qualitative interviews with survey methods (e.g., Kelley, Sanchez-Hucles, & Walker, 1993; Slater & Power, 1987), for example in the comparison of parent-oriented versus child-oriented disciplinary practices. By combining multiple methods, it is possible to examine correspondences between responses generated by in-depth probing with those derived from more traditional parenting instruments.

## Summary

Both quantitative and qualitative methods have been used in the study of African American parenting. Although surveys continue to be the predominant quantitative approach, a growing body of work relies on direct observations of mother-child interactions. Observational studies are especially useful in assessing positive dimensions of parenting, such as warmth and sensitivity, and have at times yielded different findings than those obtained through interviews. In particular, observational studies yield positive associations between parental sensitivity and child outcomes, but inverse associations between harsh and negative forms of parenting and child outcomes. Qualitative research sheds further light on why parents choose the strategies they do in the rearing of their children and has helped advance an understanding of why some African American parents view harsh discipline as a necessary form of parenting.

In light of the unique benefits of different research approaches, future studies on African Americans would benefit from the inclusion of multiple

methods. Researchers should make a concerted effort to probe parents' views about parenting, so as to understand the motivations as well as situational constraints (e.g., low economic resources) that underlie parents' actual practices. Additionally, observational methods should be incorporated into studies of African American parenting, thereby providing information on parenting styles that move beyond parental report.

The addition of observational methods, however, will be costly, and may be prone to bias when subjective coding systems are used (e.g., rating parenting "sensitivity" on Likert-type scales) with coders from different racial groups. To address these problems, nested studies could be used where resources are limited, with videorecording of a random subsample of the population that could then be compared to survey findings. In general, research is needed on how parents' reported practices (gained through surveys) relate to actual observed measures of parenting, as well as on the relative predictive validity of report versus observational measures of parenting. Additionally, coding teams should include African American coders where possible, and behaviorally based codes (e.g., tallies of the number of times a parent acknowledges the child verbally) should be considered over subjective codes. Finally, observational studies of parenting are more prevalent in early childhood than in adolescence, largely for practical reasons (e.g., the difficulty of scheduling times when adolescents and parents are together). However, reliable, culturally valid coding systems exist for the observation of parent-adolescent interactions (e.g., Smetana, Abernethy, & Harris, 2000), and future research would benefit from inclusion of observational protocols with adolescents.

## MEASUREMENT

Ecological theories of parenting highlight the need for researchers to use measures that are valid and reliable in the population being studied to draw culturally relevant inferences. If researchers fail to document instrument comparability across groups, group differences in measures of parenting might reflect the failure of assessment tools to capture the same construct across racial or ethnic groups, rather than differences in parenting per se (Whiteside-Mansell, Bradley, Little, Corwyn, & Spiker, 2004). Decisions about measurement are particularly challenging in the study of African Americans because the cultural relevance of most extant parenting measures have not been evaluated. The vast majority of parenting measures have been standardized on European American middle-class families, leaving open questions regarding the reliability and validity of measures with African American populations.

The distinction between *emic* and *etic* paradigms (Brislin, Lonner, & Thorndike, 1973) is relevant to the development, selection, or adaptation of instruments to measure parenting in African Americans. Emic studies are culture-specific and are concerned with the nuanced meanings of a construct as described by representative informants. Instruments developed from an emic stance often have high cultural validity but may lack generalizability (Alegria, Vila, Woo, Canino, Takeuchi, Vera, et al., 2004). In contrast, instruments developed from an etic perspective aim to measure the universality of constructs. They often demonstrate high reliability across cultures but may lack cultural validity (Alegria et al., 2004).

Measuring constructs with African American respondents is complicated due to the dynamic tension that exists between cultural validity and generalizability. Researchers have applied a number of strategies to bridge these often disparate challenges. No single technique offers a panacea, because addressing certain concerns inherently ignores others. Ideally, various stakeholders in the African American community should be involved in an iterative application of emic and etic approaches to measurement.

### Strategies for Measurement Development

From the start of a study, both African American cultural experts and community members can inform investigators about the cultural nuances that may affect study findings. Focus groups can engage representative African American parents in all aspects of the study design including defining constructs to be measured, developing or adapting questionnaire items, interpreting the data, and validating the conclusions (Brody & Flor, 1998; Davis, Nakayam, & Martin, 2000; Morgan, 1996). Members of focus groups also can be asked to examine items for idioms, colloquialisms, and readability (Arnold & Matus, 2000). Input from focus groups can prompt researchers to seek alternative ways of gathering data (e.g., the use of computer-assisted programs and Q-sorts versus standard Likert-type formats; Galehouse, 2003). Focus groups have been used increasingly in research on African American parenting and have aided the development of a number of culturally relevant measures. These include measures of ethnic socialization and racial identity (Marshall, 1995; Thomas, 2000); adolescent-parent conflict and perceptions of authority (Smetana & Gaines, 1999; Smetana, 2000); competence promoting parenting practices (Brody, Flor, & Gibson, 1999), and parenting in relation to externalizing behaviors (Ge, Brody, Conger, Simons, & Murry, 2002; Kilgore, Snyder, & Lentz, 2000).

In one study, focus groups were used in the development of a number of self-report instruments to study the effects of pubertal transition and

neighborhood characteristics, including parenting style, on children's behavior problems (e.g., Ge et al., 2002). The content of the instruments was derived from focus groups of African American women who identified items perceived to be culturally insensitive, intrusive, or unclear. Their comments were incorporated into a revised protocol, which was piloted and further modified. African American university students and community members collected data in the field.

The effective use of focus groups in instrument development is also illustrated in our research. During pilot testing of a behavioral intervention, an African American parent objected to the use of the word "praise" as a parenting strategy (McClowry, Snow, & Tamis-LeMonda, 2006). A focus group of parents from the community was convened, and the advice of cultural experts was sought. After much discussion consensus was reached that the words "acknowledgement" or "recognition" were more culturally appropriate than "praise."

Pilot testing of questions is also valuable to the development of new instruments. As one example, Caughy, Randolph, and O'Campo (2002) developed a Home Environment Inventory specifically for African American families. This inventory assessed parents' cultural socialization by asking about parenting practices that reflected pride in the African American culture. Parents were asked about the presence of African American books, artwork, toys, periodicals, and so forth in the home. Modifications were made to test items and administration methods based on piloting on 25 low-income African American families. After the pilot phase, they conducted home visits to 200 African American families, ranging from those living in poverty to families at least 180% above the poverty line. The validity of their instrument was supported by its relation to children's factual knowledge and problem-solving abilities, after controlling for measures of positive parent involvement and poverty level. In a subsequent study of parents of first graders (Caughy, Randolph, & O'Campo, 2006), the authors found that homes rich in African American culture were associated with greater child cognitive competence and receptive language.

### Generalizability of Existing Instruments

There is great value to developing new instruments specifically for African American parents, but this approach is time-intensive and costly, and new instruments may lack generalizability. Existing instruments, however, may have other complications when used with African American respondents. Parenting measures that were developed and standardized with European American, middle-class participants cannot be assumed

to satisfy an emic perspective in the African American community unless their cultural relevance and psychometric properties are examined. Instruments developed and normed on European Americans must be empirically tested before use in other groups (Knight & Hill, 1998).

One strategy is, again, to ask focus groups of representative parents or community members to comment on the cultural relevance of existing instruments and to offer suggestions for modification (e.g., Hughes & DuMont, 1993). For example, the Parenting Behavior Questionnaire (PBQ; Hart, Nelson, Robinson, Olsen, & McNeilly-Choque, 1998) was modified for use with low-income, urban, African American Head Start caregivers of preschool-aged children (Coolahan, McWayne, Fantuzzo, & Grim, 2002). Early childhood teaching staff, parent involvement staff, current and former Head Start parents, and researchers reviewed the PBQ with regard to its inappropriateness for the target population. Changes were made to improve the instrument's comprehensibility and cultural sensitivity based on feedback from these various individuals. Additionally, once the instrument was administered to caregivers, the measure's construct, divergent, and convergent validity were carefully evaluated. Assessing the cultural relevance of questionnaires is likely to lead to adaptations. For example, The Issues Checklist (Robin & Foster, 1989) was evaluated for cultural relevance as an assessment of family conflict. Seven items were deleted because of low endorsements by African American adolescents (Cauce, Hiraga, Graves, Gonzales, Ryan-Finn, & Grove, 1996).

Another strategy is to seek feedback from research expert team members who have solid grounding in the extant literature. Researchers can clarify meanings of items, reword item phrasing, change behavioral markers of items, and/or add and delete items based on their relevance to African Americans (e.g., Smetana, Abernethy, & Harris, 2000). Additionally, cultural experts can be asked to engage in Content Validity Indexing (CVI) of an existing instrument (Lynn, 1986). In such an approach, cultural relevance is rated on Likert-type scales ranging from *not culturally relevant* to *highly culturally relevant*. Items that fail to reach a CVI of .80 should be eliminated or revised and re-examined.

Statistical techniques also can be applied to evaluate the generalizability of existing instruments during later stages of the research process. One approach is to examine whether psychometric estimates remain stable when data derived from a sample of African Americans parents are compared to the original norms. Comparing coefficient alphas or test-retest reliabilities is a first-line approach, but may be inadequate due to group differences in response tendencies. For example, African Americans compared to European Americans, tend to respond on the extreme of Likert-type scales (Bachman & O'Malley, 1984; Hui & Triandis, 1989). It is also

possible to test for differences in means and standard deviations between or among groups using one-sample *t*-tests. However, contrasts, again, are likely to be confounded by differences in responses sets. Weighted scores for different cultural groups can be created, but it is important that such scores are not used in discriminatory ways, especially if the tool is used for diagnostic or clinical purposes (Arnold & Matus, 2000; Dana, 2000).

In instances where a multi-item scale is being used, it is possible to compare factor structures by visually comparing similarities and differences of cross-sample loadings. Measurement equivalence can be tested through factorial invariance, and functional equivalence using analytical procedures (e.g., Knight & Hill, 1998; Michaels, Barr, Roosa & Knight, 2007). Conducting confirmatory factor analysis based on analysis of covariance structures (ACS) using maximum likelihood, general least squares, or unweighted least squares is encouraged (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994). Others support examining congruence coefficients after conducting an orthogonal Procrustes rotation as an alternative to ACS (McClowry, Halverson, & Sanson, 2003; McCrae, Zonderman, Costa, Bond, & Paunonen, 1996). Factorial invariance can be tested by comparing model fits for unconstrained models to those in which item loadings (and in some instances item means) are constrained to be equal across groups. If fits improve under constrained models, there is support for invariance (Whiteside et al., 2003). Functional equivalence can then be tested by asking whether paths from factors to outcomes in children are similar or different across groups (by contrasting models in which slopes are constrained to be equal versus free to vary; Michaels et al., 2007; Whiteside et al., 2003). Finally, item response theory or Rasch models can be used to test the difficulty and discrimination of individual items on a scale, as has been used in the evaluation of items on the HOME (Leventhal, Selner-O'Hagan, Brooks-Gunn, Bingenheimer, & Earls, 2004).

### Summary

Cultural relevance and generalizability of measurement are always concerns when examining parenting with African Americans respondents. A number of strategies are evident in the literature to bridge the emic/etic perspectives. A limited number of instruments developed from an emic perspective with African Americans exist, although some researchers have developed new instruments with the use of focus groups comprised of members from the community. Focus groups are also useful for assessing parents' reactions to questions, and statistical techniques offer further strategies for evaluating the reliability and factor structures of instruments. However, the use of focus groups can also present biases. Most focus

groups are typically formed with convenience rather than randomly-selected samples, and participants in focus groups may, therefore, represent a highly self-selected group of African American parents.

Additionally, future studies of African American parenting should attend to issues of both measurement and functional equivalence when comparing parenting across racial groups. Nested models can be used to compare fit indices of models in which item loadings and path coefficients are free to vary versus constrained to be equal in African Americans and other groups. This analytic approach enables researchers to investigate whether the structure and/or prediction of parenting is similar or dissimilar across groups, and also can be used to ask about the conditions under which divergences occur.

## DESIGN

A final consideration in the study of African American parenting is the design of research studies as cross-sectional versus longitudinal, which will have implications for the types of questions that can be effectively addressed. In cross-sectional studies, data are gathered at a single point in time, and relations among variables are assessed using correlation, regression, path analysis, or structural equation modeling. However, cross-sectional designs preclude examination of lagged associations between parenting and child outcomes (and the reverse), as well as inquiry into the precursors of later parenting behaviors.

In contrast, longitudinal studies involve assessments at two or more points in time, thereby, enabling researchers to examine stability and change in individual characteristics and behaviors and to model lagged associations and mediating pathways over time (Trost, 1992; Bordens & Abbott, 2002). Longitudinal designs, however, have a number of disadvantages, including the financial and time costs, the requirement of relatively large samples to assure sufficient power, and most centrally, the problem of participant drop out. Because attrition poses a serious threat to a study's validity and the generalizability of findings, researchers must attend to participant retention as a preventive strategy and also be prepared to effectively handle missing data that results from participant attrition (Snow & Tebes, 1991).

### Participant Retention

To date, the majority of studies of African American parenting have been cross-sectional, although the past decade has witnessed a growing

number of noteworthy longitudinal studies (e.g., Burchinal, Follmer, & Bryant, 1996; Bynum & Brody, 2005; Deater-Deckard et al., 1996; Gutman & Eccles, 1999, 2007; Kilgore, Snyder, & Lentz, 2000; Kim, Brody, & Murry, 2003; Kotchick, Dorsey, & Heller, 2005; Shumow, Vandell, & Posner, 1998; Simons, Simons, Burt, Drummund, Stewart, Brody, et al., 2006; Smetana, 2000; Zaslow et al., 2006). One reason for the relative lack of longitudinal studies on African Americans is the challenge of maintaining the integrity of the original sample over time, which can be exacerbated in the context of a relatively mobile, and often under-resourced African American population. Consequently, special efforts must be made in the recruitment and retention of African American families.

The longitudinal research conducted by Brody and colleagues (e.g., Brody & Flor, 1997, 1998; Kim, Brody, & Murry, 2003; Bynum & Brody, 2005) on African American parenting in the rural South exemplifies cultural sensitivity in both the recruitment of families and maintenance of rapport with participants. The research process began with extensive outreach by African American staff to community members including pastors and teachers. Once these community members developed trust in the staff, they became front-line advocates who informed prospective parents of the study. Moreover, staff utilized focus groups comprised of community members in the development of study measures. During actual data gathering, African American researchers, who had received one month of training prior to the study, conducted all interviews and observations.

Similarly, a five-year longitudinal study of African American and European American parents and children across multiple waves from children's entry to kindergarten to fourth grade yielded retention rates of over 80% with no evidence of selective attrition (Deater-Deckard et al., 1996). The authors report matching interviewers to the ethnicity of participants, which may have aided the high retention rates, particularly given the study's emphasis on sensitive topics (e.g., harsh disciplinary strategies) gathered through parent self-report.

Practical strategies also should be implemented to maintain updated contact information for study participants. Contact information should be gathered at each wave and include as much demographic information as possible (e.g., address, phone number, place of employment, contact information for relatives and close family friends). The maintenance of extensive contact information and tracking strategies is evidenced in large-scale, national studies on parenting and child development in racially diverse low-income or at-risk families (e.g., *Fragile Families*, *FACES*, the *Early Head Start Evaluation study*). For example, the *Early Head Start Evaluation Study* (Love, 2005), which has been following a

low-income sample containing a large proportion of African Americans, has examined parenting and children's development at repeated time intervals across children's first five years. Because Early Head Start is a program for low-income families, extra efforts were implemented to maximize retention rates in this very mobile, under-resourced population, including gathering of contact information, centralized databases, birthday and holiday cards, and telephone contacts between regularly scheduled home visits. Yet, even with these efforts, substantial attrition occurred (i.e., over 25% of the sample), and subsequent analyses relied on state-of-the-art data weighting and imputation methods to generate accurate estimates of effects.

The difficulties in retaining families in the Early Head Start National Study mirrors the challenges faced by other large-scale, multi-site studies of low-income populations. Typically, smaller studies that sample middle-income African Americans yield more impressive retention rates, as in Smetana's study of adolescent-parent interactions around conflict, which reports 90% retention over two years (Smetana, 2000). In that study, 69% of African Americans were married, and over 70% had incomes greater than \$40,000 in 2000 (with 40% making over \$70,000). These marital rates and household incomes are substantially higher than those reported in Early Head Start and other studies of low-income African Americans.

Examples of other studies on African American parenting that have yielded high retention rates include a multi-site, 2-wave study of parents of fifth and sixth grade students in Iowa and Georgia (86% retention; Simons et al., 2006), a 2-wave school-based recruitment study (87% retention; Kotchick, Dorsey, & Heller, 2005), studies on mother-child interactions and the home environment spanning early infancy through eight years (95% retention; Burchinal, Follmer, & Bryant, 1996), a study of the effects of parents' harsh, firm, responsive, and permissive parenting strategies on the academic achievement and behavior problems of children from third to fifth grade (90% retention; Shumow, Vandell, & Posner, 1998), and a five-year longitudinal study of middle-income African American parents and their adolescents (83% retention over the five-year period; Smetana, Metzger, & Campione-Barr, 2004). Unfortunately, however, many longitudinal studies of African American parenting that yield high retention rates do not typically describe retention efforts.

### Strategies for Addressing Participant Attrition

Even with the best retention efforts and plans, however, some degree of missing data will exist, particularly when low-income families are

included. Often, African Americans have the highest levels of attrition. For example, in one longitudinal study of the moderating effects of neighborhood on relations between parenting and the development of grade-school children in African American, European American, and Latin American students, the choice was made to only include participants who had sufficient levels of non-missing data. Of the three groups, African Americans were the least likely to have sufficient levels of non-missingness, leading to a higher likelihood that African American children and parents would be excluded from analyses. Although supportive parenting values buffered the adverse effects of dangerous neighborhoods on the development of African American children, questions arise as to the generalizability of these findings in light of the higher levels of missingness in African Americans. Similar patterns of missingness are reported by Ispa et al. (2004) who studied parenting intrusiveness and warmth in African American, European American, and Mexican American mothers and children. Although all groups were low-income, African Americans were the most likely to drop out of the study by the time infants were 15 months.

Attrition is particularly problematic if the participants who drop out of a study (or have missing values for certain measures or waves of data collection) differ from those who remain (selective attrition). Analyses can be performed to test selective attrition through the use of basic statistical tests (e.g., ANOVAs or chi-square tests) which evaluate whether significant differences exist between the baseline characteristics of those who remain in the study versus drop out (Snow, Tebes, Arthur, & Tapasak, 1992).

In many longitudinal studies, tests comparing remaining participants to those dropping out of the study reveal patterns of missingness that indicate selective attrition. For example, Shumow, Vandell, and Posner (1998), even in the context of impressive (i.e., 90%) retention rates across the third- to fifth- grade period, found that the 10% of families who dropped out of their study tended to be harsher on parenting skills and to have children with lower grades and poorer teacher ratings than those who remained in the study. A study of African American parents and children followed from infancy through fourth to sixth grade had a 63% retention rate; analyses revealed that those lost to follow up came from less responsive homes (Burchinal, Roberts, Zeisel, & Rowley, 2008). Selective attrition also was documented in the Maryland Adolescent Development in Context project, a longitudinal study of middle-school adolescents that included measures of parenting and adolescent data in both European American and African American families (Gutman & Eccles, 2007). Participants who had data from both waves had higher incomes, more

parent involvement in school, and higher GPAs. Moreover, European Americans had greater incomes, and African Americans comprised 73% of the single-parent households.

Several steps were taken to address these differences, including the inclusion of relevant covariates in analyses as well as prior testing of the latent structures of measures in single versus two-parent households. Other strategies for handling missing data include imputation, including maximum likelihood estimation (Allison, 1987) and Bayesian multiple imputation (Rubin, 1987). The goals of both are to minimize bias by estimating as closely as possible the population values based on all available data, and for the variance of the estimate to be small. These methods are preferable to mean substitution (which can result in distorted variances and correlations and reduced reliability) or case deletion (in which complete cases may be unrepresentative of the population under study) (Burchinal et al., 2008; Schafer & Graham, 2002).

### Summary

There is growing recognition of the need for rigorous longitudinal studies in the field of African American parenting. However, longitudinal studies with African American families pose challenges to participant retention and require effective strategies for establishing rapport with participants, maintaining accurate contact information, and using cutting-edge analytic techniques to test for selective attrition and handle missing data so as to attenuate sample bias. As standard practice, future longitudinal studies on African Americans must: (1) incorporate rigorous retention strategies; (2) statistically contrast characteristics of families who remain in the study versus those who drop out; and (3) apply strategies for handling missing data to minimize bias.

## CONCLUSIONS

This review on African American parenting highlights methodological challenges in the areas of conceptualization, sampling, research approach, measurement, and design. The past decade has witnessed enormous growth in both the quantity and quality of studies on African American parenting. African American parents have been described as displaying parenting styles that are authoritarian (or characterized by harsh forms of discipline; Deater-Deckard et al., 1996), authoritative and

democratic (Smetana, 2000), child-oriented (Bluestone & Tamis-LeMonda, 1999), "aggravated but nurturant" (McGroder, 2000), or "firm with no nonsense" (Brody, Flor, & Gibson, 1999), depending on the study.

Perhaps most centrally, researchers are beginning to address previous shortcomings in the area of sampling strategies and measurement development that promise to yield new insights on African American families who vary across socioeconomic status, rural and urban communities, and family structure. Models that highlight variation in parenting across African American communities continue to replace earlier deficit models that were solely based on at-risk families. As such, authoritarian characterizations of African Americans have been revisited, as have assumptions about the putative benefits of controlling parenting for African Americans.

Additionally, the earlier reliance on quantitative surveys to assess parenting has been expanded to include observational and qualitative approaches. Observational studies offer a unique window onto the quality of the mother-child relationship, and typically yield positive associations between parental sensitivity or supportiveness (rather than control) and children's developmental outcomes. This pattern mirrors findings for European American children, indicating that certain positive forms of parenting hold similar predictive validity across racial and ethnic boundaries, in line with an etic approach. Moreover, qualitative methods have yielded new information about the views and motivations held by African American parents—such as fears about child safety in certain subgroups—and thereby have advanced a further understanding of the reasons behind certain parenting practices (e.g., restriction of children's freedom by some subgroups of the African American population). Together, new research approaches and recent efforts in the area of measurement (e.g., including the testing of psychometric properties of measures across populations) have given rise to a richer, ecologically embedded portrayal of African American parenting.

This review also highlights directions for future research on African American parenting. Most centrally, future researchers must vigilantly attend to the effects of sample characteristics (e.g., SES, family structure) on parenting. Sampling concerns further escalate when Black communities outside the African American population are studied (e.g., Africanese, Black Caribbean). In such cases, immigration status and acculturative processes may play a central role in parents' views and practices, and studies that fail to distinguish among subgroups of the Black population confound the interpretation of findings. Unfortunately,

many studies use pan-ethnic groupings of Black Americans, which ignore the cultural, political, and social histories of subgroups. This problem has largely arisen from the use of convenience samples rather than purposeful selection of families. Heightened attention to sociocultural differences in the relation between parenting practices and developmental outcomes across subgroups of the African American community specifically, and the Black population more broadly, promises to both advance a deeper understanding of parents' behaviors, as well as inform effective interventions and policies for families (Whaley, 2000).

Finally, there is continued need for longitudinal studies with African American populations. Such studies, particularly when coupled with effective retention efforts and cutting-edge treatment of missing data, promise to contribute to theoretical models about the pathways through which early parenting processes contribute to children's developmental trajectories over time. Developmental researchers, policy makers, practitioners, social workers, health care professionals, and educators will all benefit from an increased body of reliable, replicable, and meaningful research in this area.

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#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This manuscript was supported with funding from the National Institute of Nursing Research (R01NR4781) to Sandra G. McClowry. We thank the families in the INSIGHTS project for sharing their wisdom on parenting with us. Parts of this paper are based on the dissertation work of R. Briggs at New York University's Department of Applied Psychology, Steinhardt School of Culture, Education and Human Development. Finally, C.S. Tamis-LeMonda also acknowledges New York University's Center for Research on Culture, Development, and Education, NSF BCS# 0218159.

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