UNIVERSITY OF CINCINNATI

Date: 23-Mar-2010

I, Shirley Clark Ivory, hereby submit this original work as part of the requirements for the degree of:

Doctor of Education

in Curriculum & Instruction

It is entitled:

Experiences Of The Single Low-Income African American Mothers In Their Maternal Protective Role

Student Signature: Shirley Clark Ivory

This work and its defense approved by:

Committee Chair: Kenneth Martin, PhD

Joseph Watras, PhD

Suzanne Ehrlich-Martin, EdD

Vanessa Allen-brown, PhD
EXPERIENCES OF SINGLE LOW-INCOME AFRICAN AMERICAN MOTHERS IN THEIR MATERNAL PROTECTIVE ROLE

A dissertation submitted to the
Division of Research and Advanced Studies
Of the University of Cincinnati

In partial fulfillment of the
Requirements for the degree of

DOCTORATE OF EDUCATION (Ed.D.)

In the Division of Teacher Education
Of the School of Education

2010

by

Shirley Clark Ivory

A.S. Sinclair Community College 1983
B.S. University of Dayton, 1992
M.S. Wright State University, 1995

Committee Chair: Kenneth Martin, Ph.D
Abstract

This study was an IRB approved qualitative investigation of experiences of the single low-income African American mothers in their maternal protective role. In-depth interviews and a focus group were conducted with 13 single-low income women who met the criteria for participation in the study, in an effort to understand the social context in which African American single low-income mothers live when developing and implementing parenting. Data from these interviews were examined with the intent of discerning patterns and themes that might explain which factors had the greatest impact on family interactions to inform research on the dimensions of family functioning for low-income African American single mothers. The findings of this study indicate that there were clusters of patterns and themes depending upon such factors as education, financial support, community outreach programs, self-actualization, childhood experiences, and making the transition to motherhood. In addition, study findings indicated that financial support and community outreach programs were critical during the initial years of transition into motherhood, and continuing support from family members, particularly maternal grandmothers as well as the fathers of the children influenced these mothers’ role in family functioning. The numerous factors disclosed by these study participants as imperative to the understanding of their experiences as mothers included feeling of isolation, poor relationships with the fathers of the children, desperate financial needs, lack of appropriate support by social service agencies, accepting the limitations involved in single parenting, understanding, and possessing a strong commitment to the role of family functioning.
These findings were compared with the existing literature on single low-income African American mothers as well as social stress and the family in an effort to establish more firmly a conceptual framework regarding the factors that influence their parental effectiveness. Implications of these findings suggest that there are holes in the range of existing research concerning this population of women. This study sought to determine the parental effectiveness of low income, single, African American mothers. Although other researchers had approached the same population, they compared the skills such mothers had with the skills possessed by mothers in two parent homes. In this unfair comparison, the African American mothers appeared to be less effective parents. This study found that such a conclusion overstates the case. Nonetheless, the results do suggest that some of the single African American mothers could profit from family skill training and social services programs designed to improve their maternal protective relationships.
Table of Contents

List of Tables and Figures vii

Chapter 1: Overview of the Study

Factors That Negatively Impact Family Interactions 9
Study Purpose 11
Significance 12
Theoretical Framework 13
Summary 17

Chapter 2: Literature Review 19

Previous Methods Used to Study Single Low-Income African American Mothers 19
Conceptual Frameworks 19
Population and Sampling 20
Instruments 20
Data Analysis 21
Findings 22

External Factors 22
Personal Characteristics 23
Cognitive/Affective variables 25

Limitations of Research Concerning Single Low-Income African American Mothers 28
Summary 28
Chapter 3: Methodology

Theoretical Framework Revisited
Design
Setting and Population
Sampling Method
Data Collection
Data Analysis
Limitations of Selected Methodologies

Chapter 4: Findings

Support

Support from Family, Friends, and Neighbors
Support from the Fathers of Their Children
Financial and Emotional Support
State and Local Government Support
Need for Extended Support Services
Summary

Personal Characteristics

Feelings of Self-Worth
Maternal Satisfaction
Measuring Stress Levels
The Role of Family Functioning
Relationship With Their Children
Multiple Out-Of-Wedlock Births
List of Tables and Figures

Figure 1: Hill’s ABCX Family Crisis Model 15
Figure 2: Constructive Family Intervention Model 17
Table 1: Demographic Information of Participants 32
Table 2: Eligibility Requirement Table for OWF 51
Figure 2: Constructive Family Intervention Model 88
Chapter 1: Overview of the Study

The concern for the awareness of the enormous challenges confronting single low-income African American mothers in their maternal protective role has grown over the past several years (Kristine, 2007). Such awareness would serve to increase community involvement in the prevention and identification of underlying causes of child abuse among this population. As violence becomes the topic of a number of news reports, articles, books, and other media, the importance of the effects of this phenomenon on the health and safety of children and the resulting social problems that affect children and their families must be emphasized. Although most children are exposed to a few major life events, stressors and traumas during youth, African American children who grow up in low-income neighborhoods consistently document extremely high rates; 70-100% (Dempsey, Overstreet, & Moely, 2000; Reiss & Price, 1996; South & Crowder, 1999).

Several scholars argue that family functioning is influenced by socioeconomic status, culture, family structure, and developmental stage, and is assessed by primarily using instruments developed for middle-class European American two-parent families (McCreary, 2004; Lareau, 2003). A dearth of up-to-date information encouraged an urgent need for a study to (1) investigate the needs of the single low-income African American mother in order to collect information that might lead later, if needed, to the construction of family skill building training and (2) to test the data collected against the theories of Hill and Blumer.
This study drew on the Hill’s (1958) social stress and the family as well as Blumer’s (1969) symbolic interactionism to provide the conceptual frameworks to ascertain factors of study to create interview questions, structure focus group sessions, and formulate initial coding categories for analysis. To give the readers of this research a quick view of important findings, the mothers participating in this study indicated that although there were several variables affecting their maternal protective role, finances, social service support, and education were identified as the three main factors. They also believed that these factors influenced certain dimensions of family functioning (McCreary & Dancy, 2004). This central finding implies that personal and community resources directly and strongly mediate the effectiveness of single low-income African American mothers. This fact was evident in the majority of the existing literature and highlighted in Hill’s (1958) framework, but also by the personal history and perspectives on the role of family functioning that each of the participants brought when transitioning to motherhood.

Factors That Negatively Impact Family Interactions with Single Low-Income African American Mothers and Their Children

Black motherhood as an institution is both dynamic and dialectical (Collins, 2000). African American women struggle to be good mothers and these tensions foster a continuum of responses. Some women view motherhood as a truly burdensome condition that stifles their creativity, exploits their labor, and makes them partners in their own oppression. Others see motherhood as providing a base for self-actualization. Using data for the National Center For Health and Statistics 47% of children born to African American mothers live in poverty and 68% of these births are to unwed mothers (2006).
In addition, living in low-income communities may increase psychological distress and, in turn, compromise parenting behavior (Jones, 2005). Investigations of poor inner city African American children consistently document extremely high rates (70-100%) of exposure to trauma (Dempsey, Overstreet, & Moely, 2000). Besides witnessing domestic violence, children in low-income, urban environments often experience harsh physical discipline, ranging from spanking or whipping to severe beatings (Dulmus & Wodarski, 2000). Research also suggests parental stress is a contextual factor critical to investigate because of its broad impact on several areas of family functioning within this population. The lack of perceived support in high-risk neighborhoods is particularly problematic given the link between social support and effective parenting. It is also hypothesized that mothers who report more psychological symptoms based upon verbal and violent relational conflict from those close to them will be less likely to have a balanced view of their relationships with their children (Button, Pianta, & Marvin, 2001). Additionally mothers with disengaged representations were less sensitive, more passive, and used less engagement and guidance with their children (Sokolowski, 2007). Finally, single low-income African American mothers seemingly have fewer people resources and more difficulty mobilizing support for coping and problem solving.

Literature relating to the prevalence and patterns of child abuse and neglect, specifically concerning single African American mothers living in low-income communities, is lacking in both numbers and depth. African American children in single mother headed families are likely to remain in poverty throughout their childhood, experiencing lack of access to resources and heightened exposure to violence (Hernandez, 1997).
The crime of child abuse and neglect is one of the most devastating social problems that exists within a violent society (Hammond, 1995). Exposure to the social ecology of poor low-income neighborhoods significantly increases the incidence of traumatic stress disorders, placing children growing up in such environments at disproportionate risks (Kiser, 2007). Along with these statistics, a growing body of research has linked contact with violence with violent behavior (Spano, Rivera, & Holland, 2006). Child abuse and neglect affects the health of all our children and correspondingly the health of the total community.

**Study Purpose**

The purpose of this study was to discover experiences of single, low-income African American mothers in a small Mid-Western city that influence their maternal protective role and reduce the probability of family skill building. Up-to-date information was needed. Thirteen mothers meeting the study criteria were interviewed with the goal of investigating their experiences and perceptions concerning motherhood. The intent of this study was to move beyond simply identifying the factors that affect their maternal protective role and search for the stories behind the journey of this underrepresented population of women. As indicated this study drew on the conceptual frameworks of Robert Hill’s ABCX theoretical family crisis model (1949), Blumer’s symbolic interactionism (1969) and Kiser’s (2006) models of constructive family rituals to ascertain factors of study, create interview questions, and formulate initial coding categories for analysis.
The central questions that I was attempting to answer with up-to-date information were: What are some of the aspects of their individual histories? What are the socio-demographic circumstances? What are their needs as parents and what are their parenting patterns? What are some of their daily stressors? What do they perceive as their role in family functioning and how do they define abuse or neglect?

**Significance**

A qualitative, up-to-date study of single low-income African American mothers is important for several reasons. First, this study adds to and expands on the existing body of scholarly work of the positive and negative dimensions of the experiences of this selection of women as mothers. It does this by testing the data collected against the theories of Hill and Blumer to determine if the lists of needs and experiences expressed by this study’s participants coincide with Hill’s and Blumer’s defined lists. At the same time, it compares and contrasts this list of needs with the services that the social services agencies provide within Montgomery County. This study also adds to the existing body of literature by revealing factors that overlooked in previous research.

Another important contribution of this study is that it helps to validate prior studies that have determined factors that affect the maternal protective role of the single low-income African American mother. As a brief example, in a study that examined the association between perceived neighborhood violence and maternal monitoring (Jones, Forehand, Armstead, & Brody, 2005), the participants’ perception of neighborhood violence did influence the maternal monitoring of their children. The majority of the participants in the study indicated that when neighborhood violence is perceived as being
high there are heightened levels of maternal monitoring in the form of social support from co-parents, friends and neighbors.

This research also points to the importance of understanding the social context in which single low-income African American mothers live when developing parenting patterns by not restricting mothers’ responses as the predominately-used quantitative MANOVA, mean/standard deviation, and regression models of analysis do. As Lareau (2003) discussed, ”it is argued that there is a largely invisible but powerful connection between a parent’s social class, a child’s life experiences, and the development of a cultural logic of child rearing” (p.3). This study attempts to provide more clarity to this argument by providing a deeper understanding of these relationships.

Finally, this study has practical implications via the information it provides which may be useful in efforts dedicated to improving the maternal protective role of the single low-income African American mother in the area of family skill building. Banyard (2001, as cited in Kiser, 2007) advocates that family skill building activities can teach families to use effectively daily patterned routines that constructive, naturally occurring family rituals thereby creating contextual change within the family, which is one of the most promising vehicles for strengthening the single low-income African American mother’s perceptions of their role in family functioning. Educators and policy makers need knowledge about factors that influence these mothers protective role in the family to guide the delivery of services to this population

Theoretical Framework

An array of variables, research findings have indicated, affect single low-income African American mothers’ maternal protective role. Much of the existing research has
utilized a variable-oriented approach first defined in the work of Gustafson and Magnusson (1991) as a “classic” interaction perspective. In addition, McGroder’s 2000 general behavior study of parenting among low-income African American single mothers four theoretical domains of parenting were considered: (1) cognitive stimulation, (2) maternal warmth/emotional responsiveness, (3) discipline practices, and (4) aggravation and stress in parenting. For the purposes of this study, two conceptual frameworks that synthesize the “classic” interaction and the four theoretical domains of parenting were the theories of Hill’s ABCX family crisis model (1958) and Blumer’s symbolic interactionism (1969).

Symbolic interactionism focuses on the family members’ perceptions of the meanings and values ascribed to the activities and interactions that make up family functioning. Dimensions of family functioning included both the positive influence of emotional nurturing, communication, doing things together as well as helping each other and the negative influence of lack of caring, hostility, violence, poor communication, avoidance of family members and neglect of parental responsibilities. To date, little family skill building research addresses experiences of single, low-income African American mothers perhaps because the concept of family skill building has been inappropriately associated with “parenting classes” among this population. As indicated by some of this study’s participants the term “parenting classes” is perceived as a negative connotation associated with “child abuse.”

Hill’s ABCX family crisis model (1958) was the earliest conceptual foundation for research to examine the variability of family outcomes following the impact of a stressor and a crisis (See Figure 1). Hill’s model proposes that family outcomes following
the impact of a stressor and a crisis are influenced by such factors as psychological; personal feelings of the mother, intra-familial; at home with child relationship issues, social variables and community resources.

Figure 1

Hill’s ABCX conceptual family crisis model of the factors

From “Social Stress and the Family”, by McCubbin & Patterson, 1982 pg 23.

For example, as it relates to the psychological personal feelings of the mothers participating in this study several stated that upon making the transition to motherhood they experienced feeling of isolation and uncertainty. It is also hypothesized that mothers, who report having experienced verbal and violent relational conflict from those close to them, will be less likely to have a balanced view of their relationships with their children.
One third of the study participants disclosed issues of emotional detachment, abuse, and neglect from one or both parents when growing up. They realized that this pattern of “low nurturance” and “aggravation” (factor b of Hill’s model; intra-familial at home with child relationship issues,) had transcended into less favorable patterns of parenting such as yelling, hitting, and emotional withdrawal with their own children.

Hill’s third factor social variables, including community resources, were both an asset and a liability, concerning the survival of these women. For example, African American single low-income mothers living in demographically disadvantaged communities may value social support from friends and neighbors to a greater extent than Caucasian mothers may. The lack of perceived support in high-risk neighborhoods is particularly problematic given the link between social support and effective parenting. Additionally, the monetary benchmarking of support from a social service agency, in some cases, an additional dollar increase, could eliminate their eligibility to receive needed medical benefit assistance.

In a variety of ways, Hill’s (1958) framework, throughout this research contextualized the experiences of these women. First, it provided numerous potential factors to use as a focus of study. The study was engineered to highlight the main components of the ABCX framework (i.e. psychological, interfamilial relationships, and social frameworks). Combining existing knowledge concerning individual stress responses with the ABCX family crisis model as their foundation family stress management constructs have been developed. One such theoretically and empirical strong family-coping construct is the family ritual (Kiser, 2007, See Figure 2) which will be discussed in detail in chapters 3 and 5.
Similarly, Hill’s model contributed to the creation of interview questions that corresponded to the components of his framework. In addition, coding categories used for data analysis also have this same framework. Finally, Hill’s model was used to provide greater clarity for the findings of this study.

Summary

Several variables influence experiences of single low-income African American mother. Personal characteristics, interfamilial relationships, and social support affect this variability. Much of the existing research has been accomplished using the Hill’s (1958) ABCX family crisis model theoretical framework. Personal characteristics studied include the mothers’ feelings of well-being, past relationships, and their educational
backgrounds. For example, mothers’ who have confliction communications with people outside the family tend to have problematic interactions with their children as well. The interfamiliial relationships received more attention in the literature concerning the primary maternal protective role of the mothers and less on the role of family functioning. The most likely reason for this is that there is limited intervention research to guide the delivery of services to this population.

The preliminary findings of this study indicate that there is a strong correlation with Hill’s theoretical framework concerning stress and the family and experiences of single low-income African American mothers. An important finding of this study, to give the reader and advance view, indicate that there needs to be more intervention research to build a knowledge base for construction of family functioning training as a mechanism for increasing and defining the maternal protective role of these mothers.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

Several thorough reviews of conditions endured by single low-income African American mother’s literature already exist (e.g. Latimer, 2003; Jackson, 1999; Jones, 2005), but up-to-date information is needed. The combinations of these reviews resulted in approximately 29 journal articles and reports written between 1998 and 2008. This chapter draws on each of these reviews and provides a thematic synthesis of findings regarding factors that influence the parenting skills of single low-income African American mothers. Those factors include: (1) external factors (federal, state, societal, and economic variables), (2) personal characteristics (goals, patterns of interaction, and values) and (3) cognitive/affective variables (adaptability to non-normative family stressors, commitment to the family, and maternal satisfaction).

*Previous Methods Used to Study Single Low-Income African American Mothers*

Existing research in the dimensions of family functioning for single low-income African mothers employed both longitudinal and qualitative definitions, samples, measures, and analysis strategies. In addition, measures from four theoretical domains of parenting were used: (1) cognitive stimulation, (2) maternal warmth/emotional responsiveness (3) discipline practices, and (4) aggravation and stress in the parenting role (McGroder, 2000).

*Conceptual Frameworks*

Any assertion about qualitative investigation must unavoidably connect itself to an appropriate theoretical framework. Systematic studies of families faced with normative and non-normative family stressors and crisis provided a platform of theory
and inquiry using both Herbert Blumer’s Symbolic Interactionism and Robert Hill’s ABCX theoretical family crisis model (Hill, 1949). Blumer’s theory states that people act toward things based on the meaning those things have for them. In addition, these meanings are derived from social interaction and modified through interpretation. Hill’s ABCX theory was the earliest conceptual foundation for research to examine the variability of differences among families in their positive adaptation to stressful situations: A (the stressor event) interacting with B (the family crisis resources) interacting with C (the definition the family makes of the event) produces X (the crisis).

Population and Sampling

The participants in these studies were national samples of single low-income African American mothers ranging from 18 years old to 50 years old. Each recruited from economically distressed demographic profiles, current or past recipients of Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), and had never received welfare. A single mother was defined as any woman who lived with her child age 18 or younger and was not married (Peterson, Sparks, and Tangenberg, 2005; Jackson, 1993; Latimer, 2003) and low-income was defined as household income that was less than 200% of the poverty level. The majority of the studies of this population of women recruited participants by distributing flyers, personal contact with personnel of community programs, and by women who were interviewed and who referred women they knew to the study.

Instruments

The existing research concerning low-income single African American mothers used both quantitative for statistical and data bound analysis as well as qualitative methods for data that were not easily analyzed numerically. Typically, questionnaires
utilized in this literature use Likert scale items to assess such areas as defining family roles and dimensions of family functioning (Miles & Huberman, 1994). A scale developed to measure general feelings of distress and concern about fulfilling family roles (Bohen & Viveros-Long, 1981) used a 19-item instrument. The response options ranged from 1 = always to 5 = never, and asked mothers to indicate how often they felt various stress-related statements which applied to them (for example, “I feel I have more to do than I can handle comfortably”, and I have as much patience with my child as I would like.” Similarly, Greenberg and Goldberg (1989) used a 58-item composite checklist to access role strain, emotional well being, and perceptions of children using a three-point scale ranging from 1 = very much like my child to 3 = not at all like my child.

Although these methods are useful for delineating a list of variables associated with low-income single African American single mothers’ stress levels and maternal roles, open ended semi-structured interviews, surveys, focus groups and questionnaires were used to explain the complex interaction of factors that influence the parenting skills of these women. Only a few researchers (McCreary & Dancy, 2004) conducted semi-structured interviews to study factors associated with family interaction. Interviews were conducted with 20 single African American mothers. The interviews were conducted in private offices at health centers or at a university building convenient to the participants. Participants were asked such questions as “What activities and interactions make up family functioning?”

Data Analysis

Researchers of conditions endured by single low-income African American mothers have used almost exclusively quantitative modes of data analysis, although the
specific approaches have varied. One commonly used approach is to investigate bivariate relationships in order to determine if a particular variable is associated with family functioning (McGroder, 2000). Some researchers focus on a particular category of variables such as demographic factors (Brody; Dorsey, 2002), while others focus on psychological and patterns of parenting (Jones, Forehand, and Foster, 2005). MANOVA and multivariate methods for analysis were used by other researchers in their studies (Seifert, Finlayson, Williams and Delva, 2007; Coiro, 2001). For example, using logic regression analysis to develop a predictive model of factors associated with depressive symptoms in low-income African American mothers, Siefert, Finlayson, Williams, and Delva found that maternal depression is highly prevalent among low-income African American mothers because of household food insufficiency and poorly maintained housing. Still other researchers used standard deviation to identify variability in emotional well-being, role strain, and perception of children (Jackson, 1999).

Findings

The following section reviews the findings from approximately 29 journal articles and reports related to the conditions endured by single low-income African American mothers written between 1999 and 2008. These findings are presented using frequently utilized categories of factors believed to influence the parenting skills of these mothers.

External Factors

Focus on the growth of the number of African American children born to unwed mothers in the United States, reasons for the prevalence of single mothers within the Afro-American community, the relative economic status of families, social outcomes of children from these homes, and public policy are some of the factors that influence
the literature associated with single low-income African American mothers. Statistically, 86% of today’s young Black women are single when they have their first baby and 51.2% of this population lives in poverty (Latimer, 2008). This new family dynamic holds broad and profound implications. Research shows that children, adults and communities benefit when families have a strong marriage foundation. Single parents disproportionately struggle financially and their children more frequently suffer serious health, social and academic problems.

**Personal Characteristics: Dimensions of Family Functioning** (goals, patterns of interaction, and values)

Researchers have consistently found that family functioning is influenced by socioeconomic status, culture, family structure, and developmental stage, and is assessed primarily using instruments developed by middle-income European American two-parent families. For example, in one study 20 low-income African American single mothers were interviewed and the content analysis revealed that they perceived essential dimensions of family functioning as emotional nurturing, communication, and doing things together (McCreary & Dancy, 2004). In addition, guided by Herbert Blumer’s symbolic interactionism conceptual framework this research was able to focus on family members’ perception of five categories of ineffective family interactions: refusing to help one another; being hostile, violent, and unloving; refusing to communicate; avoiding being together, and neglecting parental responsibilities. The implications for researchers concerning family functioning is that imposing a particular definition should be avoided. The more inclusive definition of family composition for low-income African American
single mothers should focus on the quality of family relationships and their adaptive functioning rather than on family structure.

Although single African American women have raised children for generations who become healthy, successful adults, some social researchers and public policy experts are considering what the 21st century holds for this population if unwed single parenting persists as an acceptable norm. Throughout the professional literature, there are numerous descriptions of single, low-income African American mothers that characterize these mothers negatively. The women are described as inferior, nonproductive, and dysfunctional individuals in society, pathological or deficient, and lacking in motivation. Additionally, single low-income African American mothers are described as less effective in facilitating the psychological development of their children, less effective in establishing the fundamentals their children require for positive adjustment in academic settings, and as lacking the skills and abilities needed to help their children establish and maintain meaningful peer relationships (Murry & Brody, 1999).

Several theories and perspectives offer connections to ideas concerning the “why” single low-income African American mothers possess ineffective parenting skills. One perspective blames over-dependence on the “system.” A more accepted explanation; however, is that the great amount of stress experienced by these women negatively affects their parenting ability. This has largely been attributed to the combination of managing poverty, discrimination, and dealing with the ongoing process of adjusting to the continuous transitions including uprooting of households that these families often experience (Caple, 1988). These mothers, for example, are more susceptible to unemployment, job displacement, and work interruption, because they tend to be
younger, less well educated, and over-represented in unskilled and low skill jobs. Others agree with the significance of stress on African American mothers who are single and low income, but suggest that it is not the direct experience of stress that affects parenting skills for this group, but rather depression, a direct consequence of stress (Siefert & Delva, 2007). Conversely, there was an exploratory investigation of parenting effectiveness among 135 single low-income African American mothers. The finding of this study indicated high levels of effective parenting among this group (Woody & Woody, 2003). Two aspects of parenting were researched: satisfaction with one’s ability to parent along with parent effectiveness using the Kansas Parental Satisfaction Scale and the Parent Success Indicator for Parents.

Cognitive/Affective variables (adaptability to non-normative family stressors, commitment to the family, and maternal satisfaction).

Inasmuch as some individuals maintain adequate psychological well-being despite facing the same hardships that bring about distress in others, it is important to inquire into factors that promote or discourage balance within a family structure. The research literature provides clues. In “Unequal Childhoods” (Lareau, 2003) it is argued that there is a largely invisible but powerful connection between a parent’s social class, a child’s life experiences, and the development of a cultural logic of child rearing. It has also been found that depression is associated with a women’s perception of parenting as stressful and unsatisfying and that the greater the depression of the mothers, the more negative their attitudes are toward their children (Jackson, 1998). Studies relating to single low-income African American mothers concentrate on the areas of role strain, emotional well-being, perceptions of children, family routines, family conflict,
intimate partner violence (IPV), and the association between perceived neighborhood violence and maternal monitoring.

Generally those studies that emphasized role strain and emotional well-being used three methods of analysis: Likert scale evaluations that asked how often mothers felt stress related questions pertained to them (for example, “I feel that I have more than I can handle comfortably,” “My job keeps me away from my family too much,” and “I have as much patience with my child as I would like.”, (Jackson, 1993); means/correlations assessments measuring maternal monitoring Dorsey & Forehand (2005); and linear regression (Coiro, 2001; Koblinsky, 2006).

Exposure to IPV (Intimate Partner Violence) is repeatedly been shown to be related to an increase in the emotional and behavior problems, poorer social competence, greater cognitive deficits and more sensitivity to conflict among children from violent homes. One hundred and seventy-two African American mothers and their children ages 4 years old to 12 years old, from battered women’s shelters, participated in a research study using family contextual variables. Results from a cluster analysis indicated substantial variability between African American women experiences with IPV and their parenting stress, defined as negative feeling and stress related to self (parent domain) and to child in the context of parenthood (child domain). In addition to parenting stress, a number of other studies have documented a relationship between IPV and parenting behaviors such as parent-to-child aggression (Hughes, 2007). Similar to findings with other contextual factors, results have indicated that maternal distress is related to a variety of adjustment problems among child witnesses (Graham-Bermann & Levendosky, 1998).
Using path analysis, the effects of sexual abuse as a child on the risk of mothers physically abusing their children was studied (Mapp, 2006). In this study, 133 single African American mothers with a high school education or GED and lower socio-economic status were investigated. The findings indicated that sexual abuse as a child affected maternal depression. Yet, the findings also noted, that it might not be the experience of sexual abuse itself. A mother’s risk of physical abuse may also influence her ability to resolve that trauma.

In a qualitative and quantitative investigation entitled “Mother’s Perceptions of Neighborhood Violence and Mother-Reported Monitoring of African American Children” (Jones, Forehand, & Brody, 2005), researchers wanted to determine whether there is an association between mother’s perception of neighborhood violence and her self-reported monitoring behavior in low-income African American single mother-headed families. The study revealed that this population of women reported higher levels of maternal monitoring in urban than in rural communities based upon their perception of risks within their communities. In particular, mothers’ perceptions of neighborhood characteristics have been shown to be important correlates of actual neighborhood characteristics and psychological adjustments (e.g. Hill & Herman-Stahl, 2002). Additionally in this study, African American single mothers were more likely to withdraw warmth and support from their children when they felt disconnected from neighbors. Ceballo and McLoyd (2002) found that the positive influence of support from close friends and relatives on maternal adaptive parenting behavior (i.e. increased nurturance and decreased use of punishment) was attenuated as neighborhood risks increased.
**Limitations of Research Concerning Single Low-Income African American Mothers**

As with all research, the findings of the literature must be interpreted in light of their limitations. One limitation is that the majority of these studies use large populations that measure to a significance rather than allow for studying individual differences, circumstances, and needs for family skill building training. Making a case for the investigation of individual differences in family contextual factors, the current research will provide a platform to hear the voice of the single low-income African American woman living in Dayton, Ohio. No research study in the literature is highly related to this study, and this needed up-to-date research should be helpful to the discipline. One of the key components of this investigation, which makes this study unique, is the Family Skill Building Assessment. This data collection tool will provide the participants with an opportunity to review and assess family functioning modules that highlight family rituals, resource seeking, and coping patterns. Additionally, none of the existing literature provides evidence that these women have been given an opportunity to compare their experiences with research findings of other studies concerning single low-income African American mothers to answer such questions as “Do all single low-income African American women perceive social service agencies as enablers of child abuse through their policies?”

**Summary**

A significant amount of literature has examined the conditions endured by single low-income African American mothers as a whole postulating the dimensions and related measures of family functioning based upon two-parent European American middle class families (e.g. Jennings, Stagg, & Connors, 1991). A study conducted with 277 single
low-income African American female-headed households (Forehand & Jones, 2005) attempted to measure effectively the social context in which African American single mothers live when developing and implementing maternal roles. An outcome of that research was the development of nine key characteristics being identified as having influence on their parenting effectiveness, including socio-demographics, education, living conditions, emotional well-being, role strain, perception of children, age, economic status, and family contextual factors. The existence of numerous empirical studies also relating to this population have provided quantitative analysis using correlations among variables, multiple/linear and nested logic regression in an attempt to identify family conflict and maternal/family characteristics (Siefert & Delva, 2007; Koblinsky, 2006; Mapp, 2006). Yet, the amount of literature provides the evidence for more up-to-date study. As a former single low-income African American mother, I believe that the completion of this dissertation will contribute to the body of knowledge that will promote healing, comfort, and improved social services to these women.
Chapter 3: Methodology

Theoretical Framework Revisited

This study utilized the conceptual frameworks of Robert Hill’s ABCX family crisis model (1958), Blumer’s symbolic interactionism (1969) and Kiser’s (2006) models of constructive family rituals as a guide for developing questions. Such variables as the mother’s background, past relationships, what it has been like for them being a mother, what types of situations cause them stress in their maternal protective role, and how social service agencies have impacted their family dynamic were analyzed in an attempt to clarify the nature of their relationships. A great deal of the research in this area used quantitative analysis and generalization to explain the relationship between variables. Survey research is the primary system of inquiry used. This methodological design also relies on standardization, which forces the researcher to develop questions general enough to be minimally appropriate for all respondents, possibly missing what is most appropriate to many respondents (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2003). The current body of research indicates that qualitative methodologies are needed that do not limit the single low-income African American mothers’ responses and that can provide information regarding specific contextual influences.

Design

This study was a qualitative, investigative study. The goal of qualitative research is to describe and explain present day phenomena (Sowell, 2001). Qualitative research is fundamentally interpretive which means that several aspects emerge during the study, including theory and general patterns of understanding, and that some aspects, such as
interview questions, may change. In addition, it can be said that the researcher makes an interpretation of the data and draws conclusions about the meaning both personally and theoretically (Rossman & Rallis, 1998). According to Tsang (2004), the purpose of descriptive research is to describe and attempt to interpret past and present situations, conditions, and behaviors, often for no other goal than to help satisfy a basic need to know. He states that topics of descriptive research can include any people, situations, or conditions about which we want to know more. After receiving the Institution Review Board (IRB) approval from our university this study sought to describe experiences of single low-income African American mother concerning the factors that influenced their maternal protective role in family functioning. To gather such information, in-depth interviews and focus group sessions were conducted with these mothers in order to accomplish the mission of the research.

Setting and Population

There were 13 volunteer participants in the study. All were single low-income African American mothers who varied in age, from 22 to 49 years, had from one to five children, and were distinguishable on three socio-demographic characteristics: economic status, educational attainment, and marital status. Participants were interviewed in Dayton, Ohio within a private setting of their home or some alternate location that they felt comfortable. Table 1 summarizes the demographic information for all participants. The participants were given pseudo names.
Table 1

**Demographic information of participants**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th># of children</th>
<th>Welfare past/present</th>
<th>Father active</th>
<th>Grad. h.s.</th>
<th>Attend college</th>
<th>Wk/UE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Marketa</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aliha</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stephanie</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kristi</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cyrese</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Johnetta</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carmen</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Y-Past</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Felicia</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joyce</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Y-Past</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LaDonna</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Etta</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crystal</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Darlene</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Y-Past</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Wk/UE = Work or Unemployed; Father active = Father does not live in household but participates in child’s life.
**Sampling Method**

The sampling technique utilized in this study included both convenience and snowballing. Convenience sampling was employed by recruiting participants from a local community center in Dayton, Ohio, who fit the criteria (i.e. single low-income African American mothers from 18 – 50 years of age). Two of the participants were discovered in this way. Three were found from individuals that I had known while working in other community service projects. A “snowballing” technique was then utilized whereby recommendations for additional candidates were elicited from these three and then from those candidates they had recommended. One was a respondent from one of the flyers that I had posted. This collection of these techniques generated 15 potential candidates. Thirteen of these participants agreed to participate in the study. One candidate decided to withdraw from the study and one candidate did not respond to contact attempts.

The main advantage of this sampling size is that it allows in-depth study of a small number of cases in order to learn a great deal about the specific issues of importance concerning the purpose of the study. Although a qualitative small sample method has an advantage to encourage richness of the experience, the disadvantage is the lack of generalization of the findings.

**Data Collection**

Referencing the qualitative definitions of Patton, Seidman and Frankel, this study utilized a two-phase qualitative data collection procedure: Phase 1 – semi-structured interview sessions and Phase 2 focus group sessions.
Seidman (1998, p. 3) states, "At the root of in-depth interviewing is an interest in understanding the experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience." Interviewing allows us to see things from another person's perspective. Genuinely open-ended questions allow those being interviewed the opportunity to respond in their own words and to express their own thoughts and understandings without having to fit into pre-determined categories (such as with fixed-response questionnaires) (Patton, 2002). Interviews also provide the opportunity for the interviewer to clarify any questions for the participant as well as to ask for clarification or expansion of participant responses (Frankel and Wallen, 2000).

In-depth interviews are usually used when "deep" knowledge and information is sought. This information usually concerns personal matters, such as an individual's experiences, decisions, or perspective (Johnson, 2002). According to Patton (2002), we interview people to find out from them things we cannot directly observe. We cannot observe feelings, thoughts, and intentions. We cannot observe how people have organized the world and the meanings they attach to what goes on in the world. We have to ask questions about those things (p. 340).

Phase I – **Data Collection**, involved conducting in-depth interview sessions with each of the participants. My interview questions were constructed based on the design of questions from similar studies that my research revealed and my personal interest in attempting to understand and bring to light the silent conversations that the single low-income African American mother are conducting concerning their experiences (Goebert, Rosenthal, 2002). Although each interview began with a set of prepared questions, additional questions were added based upon the responses of the participants. Examples
of sample questions include: What do you think is the most stressful part of being a mother? What was it like growing up with your parents? As a parent, could you identify areas that you need help with family skill building? What relevance do you think that your past has on your parenting? What type of help do you seek from neighbors, friends, or relatives to assist you with parenting? How would you define “child abuse” or “child neglect”? What do you think your role is in family functioning? What ways do you think that education would help you become a better mother? What motivated you to participate in this study? What types of social services, if any, are you currently receiving and what are your views of those services? Is there a question that you think I should have asked that I did not? Additionally, each participant completed an anonymous local community services survey to identify the frequency of use as well as the strengths and weaknesses of these services. The data collected from Phase 1 were used to triangulate common intra-familial patterns among this group.

Phase II – Focus Group Sessions. During this phase the study participants met as a group for two group sessions. During the first group sessions each participant was assigned a pseudo name and was referred to by that name for both group sessions and group discussions. The focus group procedures were designed using the “projective techniques” principles outlined in “The Handbook for Focus Group Research” (Greenbaum, 1998). Projective techniques are a group of focus group moderating tools that generate information from participants by encouraging them to make associations with other stimuli as a way of expressing their feelings.
This study employed two of the projective techniques. In variable personality associations, the moderator uses a series of photographs of people to stimulate group discussion and sentence completion. In sentence completion, participants are presented with a series of partially completed sentences and are asked to provide the rest. The outcome of these procedures is discussed further in Chapter 5 and Chapter 6. During the second group session these same participants were asked to evaluate a family skill building assessment model based upon the family ritual hypothesis (Portes, Howell, & Brown, 1992) that family ritual and routine define family relationships. The goal of this session was to gather information that may lead to the future development of family skill building training for single low-income African American mothers.

I began my solicitation for study participants with the two candidates referred to me by the local community center. As the study progressed, I also asked for referrals from other community service agencies for the names of other women they knew that might also qualify as potential participants. Following a standard protocol, I requested that they contact the individual referrals in advance to tell them about me and provide preliminary information about the study that I was conducting and also to get their permission to receive a telephone call from me.

During the interview process, I planned to conduct one 60-minute interview with each participant, with follow-up interviews designed into the interview phase, if possible and if needed to clarify responses to questions. Participants were also given an overview of the goals and objectives of the study prior to the interview session beginning on the day of the interview. Top-Down and Bottom-Up questioning strategies (Dennis, Wixom, & Roth, 2006) were used. The top-down approach asked very general questions
such as, “How many children do you have?” which enabled me to build a rapport with the interviewee and to understand some of the issues before moving into more detail bottom-up specific questions. Two focus group sessions were also held; six participants attended the first session and seven participants attended the second session. The additional information gathered during these sessions allowed me to triangulate patterns of intra-familial routines, co-relationships between personal background information, i.e. previous relationships with parents and learned parenting skills, motivation for participating in the study and to determine the accuracy of previous study findings comparatively. Interviews were audio taped, transcribed, and analyzed. The average amount of time spent with each study participant was 90 minutes.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using both deductive and inductive analysis. The data were deductively analyzed using the existing frameworks of Hill and Blumer to determine if the list of stress factors and needs as well as the types of family interactions coincided with what the both theorists contended. Patterns and themes that evolved directly from the data were analyzed inductively. The principles of inductive design strategy allow important dimensions to emerge from patterns found in the cases being investigated. Using this approach, the researcher seeks to understand the multiple interrelationships among specific dimensions without making prior assumptions or specifying hypothesis (Bianca, 2003). This study uses both cross case and constant comparative analytical procedures.

Cross-case analysis is the process of grouping together answers from different individuals to common questions. This type of analysis enables the comparison of
multiple cases in many divergent ways, which would not be possible within a single case analysis. This approach is initiated by constructing several individual cases, followed by a search for patterns that cut across individual experiences (Patton, 2002). The constant comparative method requires the researcher to take one piece of data (e.g. one interview, one statement or theme) and compare it to all other pieces of data that are either similar or different. During this process, the research begins to look at what makes this piece of data different and/or similar to other pieces of data. Although originally developed as a component to the use of the grounded theory methodology this method also draws from the qualitative procedures of Straus and Corbin (1998). The constant comparative method is inductive in nature that includes the collection and analysis of data in on-going, clarifying processes that includes data collection followed by a series of coding procedures. The patterns generated during this coding may provide answers to research questions or suggest explanations of relationships (Sowell, 2001). This study combined both inductive and deductive analytical procedures by assimilating preset codes derived from factors that align themselves with existing research concerning single low-income African American mothers as well as other codes that emerge from the data. Answers to common research questions were sought across cases after each mother’s interview transcripts were analyzed individually for patterns of information. Upon the establishment of a data pattern, transcripts were scrutinized for unexplained differences that would indicate a contradiction of these patterns.
Qualitative research, broadly defined, means, "any kind of research that produces findings not arrived at by means of statistical procedures or other means of quantification" (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The main disadvantage of qualitative analysis is that findings cannot be resolved to wider populations with the same degree of certainty that other types of analysis can. This is because the findings of the research are not tested to discover whether they are statistically significant or due to chance. In addition, the findings may be limited only to the participants in the study and not to other similar cases. Bias introduced by the investigator in the collection and analysis of the data remains a constant threat. Also, it is difficult to generalize findings from either a case study or results of a focus group. Even if participants in a focus group are selected randomly from some population, the size of the sample is usually too small to warrant generalization or allow the researcher to make definitive statements regarding causality. Because of my disclosure to the participants of my personal background as a former single low-income African American mother, I found that the participants embraced the overall goal of the study and felt comfortable sharing their experiences with me during the interview process and focus group sessions.

Several other potential limitations are valid when conducting in-depth interviews. The interview questions should be engineered in such a manner to support the richness, study of issues in detail and openness (Frankel & Wallen, 2000). For example, I found that I could elicit meaning information concerning this population’s experiences as mothers when I revised a question from asking, “What is the most stressful aspect of being a mother?” to “Tell me what it has been like for you being a mother?”
Fear of retribution is certainly an undeniable threat to participants not answering truthfully. This could be due in part to the sensitive nature of being reported to a support agency and having benefits denied. The possibility for generalization can influence the findings of data collected using qualitative research. This study is not exempt from that, yet, when measured with other similar studies, interested researchers will have to judge the applicability of the findings.

Interpretation of the data by the researcher is representative of the researcher’s analysis and synthesis of the data after completion of the investigation. This requires accuracy in categorization, identification of patterns and themes as well as the ability to discern meaning. Qualitative data analysis, with limited difficulty, can easily be affected by researcher bias (Chris, 1995). I carefully avoided selection bias and preconceived ideas. Selection bias is an error in choosing the individuals or groups to take part in a study. If there are important differences, the results of the study may not be valid. Ideally, the subjects in a study should be very similar to one another and to the larger population from which they are drawn (Patton, 2002). Data were interpreted systematically for discrepancies and I provided study examples and quotes from the data to substantiate the validity of any conclusions.
Chapter 4: Findings

The mothers in this study indicated four main interdependent factors that affected their maternal protective role are: personal finance, support, education, and childrearing efficacy beliefs. This chapter discusses these factors. An implication of these findings suggests that the effectiveness of these mothers is influenced by the social context in which they live, as indicated by the bulk of the existing literature, but also by personal characteristics.

Current research concerning single low-income African American mothers focuses on the study of social-contextual demographic variables and their associations between parents’ representation of their children and parenting behavior (Button, Pianta, & Marvin, 2001). There were two social-contextual demographic variables frequently researched concerning this population: socioeconomic status and education. A family's socioeconomic status is defined by family income, parental education level, parental occupation, and social status in the community (such as contacts within the community, group associations, and the community's perception of the family (Demarest, Reisner, Anderson, Humphrey, Farquhar, and Stein, 1993)). The literature as it relates to the socio-economic status of the single low-income African American mother frequently addressed the areas of income, education level, occupation, place of residence, number of children, and welfare status using quantitative analysis. The greatest constraint of quantitative analysis is that its design does not look beyond the statistics to gain an understanding of the feelings, impressions and viewpoints of the participants, is non-cognitive and/or effective in nature, and can be easily obtained through statistical measures. Personal characteristics of single low-income African
American mothers that are more cognitive and casual in nature, such as the ability to nurture, interests, motivations, view of the world, choice of social networks, and personality have been similarly ignored in the literature (Sokolowki, 2007). The findings of this study indicate that issues of support as well as the personal characteristics, specifically traits that contribute to their effectiveness in the maternal protective role are equally important in describing experiences of single low-income African American mother. In addition, these findings reveal that personal characteristics have a high degree of influence in the maternal representations of their relationship with their children.

Study participants indicated that support was the most important factor that had the power to control their parental experience. Support was discussed referencing three main areas, including social service support, support from family/friends, and support from the fathers of their children. Social services support was identified as the most critical to these mothers’ childrearing efficacy beliefs (the ability to provide food, shelter, and medical care for their children). Support from family and friends included providing transportation, financial assistance, and care of the children. The support from the children’s fathers was emphasized by all the mothers in the study. Their impact could come from a variety of areas, such as spending time with the children and financial support. All mothers believed that if there had not been some avenue of support they would have experienced fewer positive outcomes in their maternal roles.

Mothers also believed that being able to make the transition from being single African American women to becoming a single low-income African American mother or having the personal adaptability for this new role was critical to the family dynamic. Characteristics that were commonly discussed at it relates to their maternal role included
having feeling of self-worth, understanding their role in family functioning, what types of parental situations bring them stress, having an interest in their children, motivations, and healing from past relationships including those relationships with parents.

The remainder of this chapter will discuss the findings of the study in detail. It is structured around the two central factors found to affect experiences of these mothers: support and personal characteristics. The significant variables that construct each of these areas will be explained.

Support

The mothers in this study indicated that issues of support were critical in their maternal role. They specifically referred to the need of having social service and family support in managing the daily lives of their children and themselves. For example, Felecia stated that without support her ability to provide for her daughter would be a greater burden, “Ooh, my goodness it has been a struggle and worry, but the assistance that I get with food stamps and medical through ‘Care Source’ helps to relieve some of the financial responsibility. Darlene also stressed the importance of support: “I had a good family support system. I did not have a problem being a mother, I had a problem being a single mother and my family helped to fill the gap.”

Study participants stressed the significance of having support during their initial transition into motherhood. This beginning support, which created a sense of financial and medical care stability came from the social service agencies and all the mothers reinforced the study findings that some form of this type of support must be in place for them to experience any sense of comfort yet several of the mothers indicated specific flaws within this system. When asked the question, “What types of services (if, any) are
you currently receiving and what are your views on those services?” Johnetta believed that although the social service support of medical benefits is helpful, the constraints override the benefits:

I had a hard time getting medical. They gave me medical for three months because they said that I was making too much money – I make minimum wages. If it is a service to help someone, it is not. It seems that if I was not trying to better, myself I could get anything that I wanted. I just wanted some assistance while I was trying to better myself. It took them even six months before they said that I would qualify for food stamps because I was in school.

Darlene also felt that receiving medical benefits in her situation was stressful; as she explained, “I received food stamps and medical for a while. When it was time for me to sign up again for assistance I decided that it was not worth the hassle of doing all of the paper work for what I was getting.”

The following sections of this chapter will detail specific findings in the areas of support from family and friends, fathers of their children, as well as state and local government that these mothers believed influenced their maternal protective role.

Support from Family, Friends, and Neighbors

The participants in this study expressed that the support from family and friends buffered the impact of single low-income parent experience. During one of our focus group sessions, I used the “projective technique” of sentence completion. Projective techniques generate information from participants by encouraging them to make associations (Greenbaum, 1998). The following two sentences were used to explore specific aspects of their initial feeling concerning the idea of becoming a mother.
After administering the sentences we would have a round robin discussion of their responses: Sentence 1: – When I learned that I was pregnant my initial feelings were; Felicia stated, “Alone, I didn’t know what to do, hurt, worried.”; Carmen acknowledged “Uncertainty, fear, shamefulness.” and Alihah recalled thinking “Everyone is going to think that I’m a failure and that I am going to end up on welfare for the rest of my life and throw my life away.”  Sentence 2: - As a single low-income African American mother, my feelings of isolation came from the fact that; LaDonna said, “I felt alone, that my child has been cheated from having a two parent home.” and Etta expressed, “Raising my child alone, as a single parent.” This question provided insight into whether these mothers felt a sense of support initially.

Existing research is lacking concerning the depth and breadth of the various types of assistance from family, friends, and neighbors. When asked the questions, what type of help do you seek from neighbors, friends, or relatives to assist you with parenting, eight of the thirteen participants stated that receiving the help of family and friends was instrumental in restoring their feelings of support while five voiced some contrasting viewpoints. For example, Joyce stated, “Yes. my mother, father, and brother helped me. My grandmother helped me when I was depressed. She would say, ‘Wake up and get up and get out of this, you can make it!’” Wanda also expressed, “Yes, I relied on my sisters and my grandmother. My sisters mainly because we did not have any brothers and my grandmother was still alive and she played an important role in raising my children. My mother not so much because she was always out partying with her friends.” Previous research found that a significant number of single African American low-income mothers relied on extended family and neighborhood networks to share child-rearing tasks
(Forehand & Kotchick, 1996). Yet, in contrast, this study’s finding indicated a lack of trust and ambivalence reported by some participants concerning the contributions of family, friends, and neighbors: Kristi said, “Like basically when it comes to certain situations when my mother tries to turn my kids against me. I have a very disrespectful daughter.” Carmen, when also asked the same question, expressed – “None, due to the fact that a lot of things that I have been through make me a very private person.” Cyrese, who had lived in section 8 housing for nine years replied, “I use to do that but I do not that anymore. I do not trust my neighbors and I tell them that.” Two recurring viewpoints emerged when the participants discussed their beliefs on support from family, friends, and neighbors. First, nine out of the 13 mothers in the study looked to support from their mothers concerning babysitting, transportation, and council when decisions concerning childcare had to be. Secondly, neighbors had minimal to zero impact in their family dynamic either because of the mother’s desire for privacy or distrust of them.

**Support From the Fathers of Their Children**

Relations between black fathers and their children have become an issue of public concern because children in families headed by single black women have extraordinary high rates of poverty (Jackson, 1999). Existing research has provided evidence that involvement by nonresident fathers has positive effects on maternal depression symptoms and child problem behaviors. The data also show that maternal employment status seems to affect nonresident fathers’ relations with single black mothers and their young children.
Financial and Emotional Support

The study findings revealed a correlation between the number of children of the mothers, periods of employment, and the number of fathers involved within a single household as it relates to financial and emotional support. Nine of the women participating in this research reported having between 2-6 children. Out of those nine, seven indicated that each child had a different father. Ten participants reported that periodic employment reduced their social service benefits.

Cyrese stated that she had non-supportive relationships with all of her six children’s fathers; “I actually receive no financial support from any of my children’s fathers and I have had disastrous relationship with them all. Uh, I do not know how many relationships I have had that have been successful. None of the fathers participate in my children’s lives.”

Marketa explained that two of her four children had the same father and that she had a good relationship with all of them although she was also receiving financial support from the state; “My first two kids’ father does spend time with them and he gives me money from time to time.” “It really does not bother me about the money because I have worked and feel that the state is just giving me back what I have put it – my own money.”

One member of the study, Stephanie, expressed an emotional hardship concerning her existing experience with the father of her children and the support he provides.

My children all have the same father and he lives here with us. He does what he can and I occasionally work. It has been hard right now because I am not working now and taking care of the kids has been a struggle. Right now, there has been a lack of communication – really, our relationship has gone down hill. We often do
not see eye to eye on things for example, if I tell the kids something he tells them that they do not have to listen to me. It confuses the kids as to where they do not know what to do because he said so.

Darlene and Johnetta were two of the study participants who had only one child and each strongly believed in the fathers of their children participating in their lives. When asked the question – What has your experience been like with your relationships with the father of your child Darlene responded positively:

He spends a lot of time with her. He makes sure that she fits in the family very well. If he goes out of town or out of state, he takes her with him. I make sure she acknowledges her father on special occasions in some way.

Johnetta also spoke of her daughter’s deceased father’s belief in spending time with her, “Um, he had a good relationship with her. He liked having a family. When we were together, it seemed as though he was living out his childhood. But as far as he and I were with my daughter he took care of us very well.”

State and Local Government Support

Each study participant completed an “Anonymous Community Outreach Services Survey” that described their experience with a list of selected local community outreach services. The survey solicited the answers to the following questions:

- What was the name of the Agency?
- What did you find most helpful with this service?
- What did you find least helpful with this service?
- How often did you use this service?
- How did you find out about this service?
The findings of that survey are shown below:

Parenting Skills Classes

One out of the thirteen participants identified the United Way agency for this service. The coding of the information from this survey revealed that several of the respondents associated the stigma of “child abuse” with requesting counseling in parenting skills. This information could be a problematic mindset within the overall demographic of the single low-income African American mothers. Gaining the knowledge that all parents single or not, have some of the same parenting issues was the most helpful aspect of this service. A participant who learned about the service when making a telephone call to request counseling is using this service.

Small Groups for Children

One of the thirteen participants noted Madison Park Elementary School and stated that the counselors were able to bring out many of her daughter’s feelings that were distracting her life. The frequency of her visits was one a week for three weeks and she learned about the service through the school itself. A second participant listed a behavioral specialist and found that the openness and warmth from the group sessions was the most helpful aspect of this service. Sessions were attended twice a week and an insurance company recommended the specialist. In addition, one mother expressed interest in finding a great support group because she believed that it would help. The remaining ten mothers had no response to the service.

Legal Advocacy

One mother, while going over her experience with the Montgomery County Child Support Agency, explained that they went over and beyond the call of duty in assisting
her in obtaining child support and that she used them as often as she needed. She learned of this agency through the Montgomery County Job and Family Services. The Montgomery County Court system helped two of the mothers - one for counseling concerning her divorce; she indicated that she learned about the service from a co-worker and another for free legal services. Each respondent believed that the service received was competent. The remaining nine mothers had no response to the service.

Family Services Associations

WIC (Women/Infants/Children) was listed by one mother for helping to provide her with milk, eggs, and juice for her children. She continued to use the service until her children were no longer toddlers and she learned about the service through networking with other mothers.

Planned Parenthood

Two mothers referenced Good Samaritan Hospital and Planned Parenthood as helpful in providing training for self-help and caring for children. Neither mother found any service provided by planned parenthood to be least helpful and the frequency of visits ranged from three times as week to every 3 months. One mother indicated that she learned about this service from her insurance company and the other stated that she found out via a school contact. The remaining eleven mothers indicated they had no prior experience with these agencies.

Montgomery County Department of Human Services Job Center

This agency represents several different services including the OWF (Ohio Works First) formerly referred to as the ADC (Aid to Dependent Children). All thirteen mothers indicated that either presently or at sometime in her past received food stamps, medical
services, and cash—“Truly the monthly help with money and food is a blessing for my family.” “I was able to pay my rent and buy food.” One of the thirteen mothers did indicate that she was not satisfied with the fact that her income was small enough to be considered low-income yet too large to receive medical—“How can they not give me medical, if I’m not healthy I cannot take care of my child.” The eligibility requirement for one child below 18 years of age is at or below 434.00 per month (see Table 2).

Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Size of Assistance Group</th>
<th>Gross Monthly Income</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>$434</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>$584</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>$734</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>$884</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>$1,034</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>$1,184</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>each additional child</td>
<td>+145</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The job center is also a resource center for job opportunities. Those services, which received non-applicable (N/A) from the survey for all study participants, were YMCA Shelter and Housing Network, Artemis Center For Alternative to Domestic Violence, Crisis Care, Suicide Prevention, The Other Place-Day Shelter for the Homeless, and the Domestic Violence Hotline. The non-applicable feedback may be attributed to the fact that these agencies represent crisis care populations.

Need For Extended Support Services

The mothers in this study indicated that they felt a need for extended services to be provided by the state and local government. For Felicia, that meant greater options for
transportation as well as drivers education; she said “For me, I think that they should provide free drivers education to help us learn how to drive and provide us with cars.” Marketa said much the same thing: “I think that the main thing is transportation. If they could have someone pick you up.” Crystal believed that the added services meant job skills schools, babysitters, and schools for their children to attend:

I think that it is unfortunate that you have to go to work and although you have a steady income sometimes five to ten dollars more than the federal government allocates then you have to spend all of your money on childcare. You have to make the decision between childcare or gas.

While sharing some of her views on extended support, Cyrese stated:
First of all they should have job banks not the job center near low-income housing. Then they should eliminate the felony thing. A lot of people have seven or eight kids. If I cannot find adequate employment, what will my kids have?

Summary

The mothers in this study felt that support was one of the critical variables in the parenting process and that having adequate support, especially during their initial years as mothers had enabled them to experience less psychological distress, better family interactions, and a balanced view of their children. Participants indicated that three important sources of support included support from social services organizations, family, and friends as well as support from the fathers of their children. The aspects of social service support that they believed to be the most valuable were medical and financial. In addition they felt that providing transportation would be an added benefit. Regarding support from family and friends, participants indicated that having support
from their mothers for such things as counseling and caring for their children was most important. However, participants stated that having these sources of support was not sufficient to create an effective family functioning environment. Each participant expressed that in addition to the various sources of support central to their relationship with their children was their relationship with themselves or their personal characteristics.

**Personal Characteristics**

Single, low-income mothers are described as less effective in facilitating the psychosocial development of their children, less effective in establishing the fundamentals their children need for positive adjustment in academic and other institutional settings, and as lacking the skills and abilities needed to help their children establish and maintain meaningful peer relationships (Woody, 2003). It was argued (Lareau, 2003), that the cultural logic of childrearing for the middle-class parent stressed the concerted cultivation of children and the low-income parent, by contrast, tended to undertake the accomplishment of natural growth. Concerted cultivation is an educational philosophy commonly used in middle class child rearing. This philosophy is structured on the involvement of the children in organized activities and adult discussions between parents and children that permeates within them a sense of entitlement or peer-to-peer equality. Unlike middle class parents, low-income parents do not consider the concerted cultivation of their children but yet, putting food on the table, arrange for housing and negotiate unsafe neighborhoods as their primary responsibilities. For this population the most relevant responsibilities of parenthood do not lie in evoking their children’s feelings, opinions, and thoughts and there is a clear boundary between adults and children. Poor parents focus on the “natural growth” of their children in which they
experience more leisure time, child-initiated play, and clear boundaries between adults and children (Larreau, 2003).

Several key personal characteristics became apparent, when the interview transcripts were analyzed for this study that would either support or refute the findings of Woody and Larreau’s research and further explain the family dynamic between the mothers who participated in the study and their children. These characteristics were revealed when participants responded to such questions as “What do you think is the most stressful aspect of being a mother?”, “What are some of the activities that you share with your children that you are the most comfortable?” “Do you feel that you transfer your emotional stress to your children?” “When you were growing up did you have any personal experience with child abuse or neglect?” and “What do you think that your role is concerning family functioning?” Because there were many consistencies to the answers to the questions among the study participants a profile of their personal characteristics was constructed. The characteristics that were identified included feelings of self-worth, personal goals, values, maternal satisfaction, patterns of interaction with their children, adaptability to non-normative family stressors, and commitment to the family.

Feelings of Self-worth

One correlation that each study participant shared as it relates to the feeling of self-worth was that of the relationship that they experienced with their mothers and fathers. If the relationship with both parents was nurturing and supportive, these mothers exhibited a “can do” attitude and expressed positive outcomes with their relationship with their children.
Joyce, mother of six children, stated that she felt like she had a good childhood. I had both of my parents, and my father worked hard seven days a week. We went through our phases. I am the oldest of three children and I am the only girl. I saw my father go through the struggle and I knew that it came from living in poverty and low-income projects and I saw him take steps to get us out. I wanted to do the same thing for myself. I had the structure and the discipline to know what to do and what not to do.

Marketa, mother of four small children, said that she had a very good relationship with both her mother and father. “We have always been together. We go on vacation or we sit together and just watch television.” Marketa explained, “I feel that I have earned the right to receive a welfare check each month because I have worked since she I was 18 years old.”

Kristi, mother of five children, had a contrasting experience with her parents. During her interview, she explained what it was like growing up.

I had a poor relationship with my mother and father. Can I be honest? I always had my mom and father around me and they were doing a lot of drinking and putting a lot of pressure on me. My mother always acted as if she hated me and would try to turn my children against me when she kept them. I have always had low self-esteem because of what she has done to me.

During the focus group session the study participants responded to the statement – Help, I have fallen and I cannot get up. Jasmin reflected that she had fallen but she had gotten back up. She further explained that she was connecting the idea of falling to the
loss of her job because she believed that she was not going to be able to keep her home and provide for her child:

I was angry when this happened to me but it ended up being a blessing in disguise I went back to school. If I had remained in that job I never would have gone on to complete my Associate degree and it was the best thing I have ever done. Completing my Associate degree made me want to go on to get my Bachelors and my Masters degree. I realized that I had achieved victory in the struggle.

Cleo said that she felt like giving up many times but her faith and the knowledge of the needs of her children kept her going:

There were many days that I wanted to give up. There were many days that I tried to give up but, God just would not let me. He just keeps showing me that I am all that my children have and that if I do not do it nobody else will do it. It is not like I can’t find someone else to do it but no one can love a child like their mother. I found myself in situations where I had to crawl, take baby steps until I get to where he wants me to be. I am just praising him for giving me the mentality to where I did not want to give up and just take whatever necessary steps to get me to where I became a better mom.

Ruth explained that she felt disconnected from time and space:

I felt as though I could not find my way and that basically time was moving without me. There were times when I felt lower than I have ever been and that no one can help me. It seems that when you have fallen you may need to ask yourself whether you cannot get up or is it that you do not want to get up.
Brandi said that she had always lived in a state of fallen:

When I was seven one of my family members molested me.

There were constant things like that which happened to me during my childhood so when I got pregnant, I felt like it was just par for the course. To this day, I hate my childhood even though I let my mother help to raise my children. I never seem to be able to feel comfortable with who I am.

Sonya expressed that so often the female single low-income parent has many obstacles against them and they can easily fall with regularity:

Personal examples, even though the father assists, I would not care if he sent me a check a month there is nothing like having a steady job. The responsibilities are much more above the amount of money that you get to hold her and my livelihood together. Maintaining is difficult and if you are not receiving services when you are working, it is almost as if you are going backwards. This situation forces you to begin receiving assistance when that is not what you want to do.

The transition in being independent to having responsibility especially when you do not have a complete family structure of a father and a mother in the household you are going to fall somewhere whether it be socially, financially, and sometimes emotionally. Again, it is not so much in the falling, because we all fall, but in the strength that it takes to get back up.

Blake expressed that to her the statement meant being trapped in a box with no financial support: “I have no where to turn, no help from anyone and that I am isolated from social contact.”
Naomi, on the other hand, was the first participant that responded to this statement as if it was a platform for research:

”Find out what my options are.” “What do I need to do to pull myself up?”

Jan indicated that at no time did she feel hopeless.

I knew that my son was coming and this was a new life that was a separate entity from me. That was the aspect of hope for me that here is a chance that he might live the life that I had always wanted to live. A person’s attitude depends upon where they came from and how you live. I came from a family of women and we did not have many outside friends. My friends were my family and to think of a child that I carried as a burden or a hindrance was not a part of my makeup or thinking. Having an abortion did not occur to me as an option.

Nine of the 13 participants believed that they had fallen when learning that they were having a baby and two indicated that they planned to have their baby. However, these two participants seemed to make a transition in their mind set relating to their pregnancy after the promise of marriage never occurred or the father of the baby ignored their parental responsibility.

Maternal Satisfaction

Mothers’ representations of their children and parenting behavior are associated with personal and social-contextual variables. Single parents come in all shapes, sizes, and colors. Many single parents are proud to be parents and their children are proud to be a product of a single-parent household. It is also important to understand that family values have always been a part of the African American tradition and practice since African people were stolen from the continent of Africa and brought to America.
One social-contextual variable having an unmistakable influence on the lives of the African American female single parent are the welfare reform laws which are punitive in nature, provide monthly allotments inadequate for even basic survival and at the same time mediate this population’s maternal efficacy beliefs. These mothers find themselves stuck in a degraded position reinforced by a racially biased legal system and have the burden of raising their children under these conditions (Collins, 2000; Dickerson, 1995). In addition, in social context, this study’s findings correlate with the findings of a similar study concerning mothers’ representations of their children and parenting behavior (Sokolowski, Hans, & Bernstein, 2007). Results showed that mothers who experienced more conflict with their own mothers had increased odds of having disengaged representative relationships with their children. Additionally, mothers with disengaged representations were less sensitive, more passive, showed hostility, and used less encouragement and guidance with their children.

Each mother participating in this study was asked two questions pertaining to their maternal satisfaction: Question 1: What has it been like for you being a mother? Question 2: What do you think is the most stressful part of being a mother? In Kristi’s response to question 1 she indicated that she felt as though she had not really given herself the opportunity to embrace the role of a mother:

During my entire pregnancy, my mother made me feel inadequate by telling me she had never had a child out of wedlock. She continually emotionally battered me when she would become intoxicated. The day that I returned home from the hospital the nurses gave my baby to my mother and not me. I really believe that this was the start of my not bonding with my first child. There wasn’t a time that
went by that I did not feel a since of apprehension concerning holding him or just being with him. I had a bad car wreck and they had to put two of my kids up for adoption. Raising my other sons, uh, like sometimes when I ran out of food and stuff like clothes and certain other needs. I was young having my kids they had a lot of learnt behaviors because of my alcoholism and I used to fight a lot and my kids would witness a lot of that. I used to do a lot of things that I had control over but did not take control.

Kristi shared a similar view when asked question 2 concerning what she believed to be the most stressful part of being a mother:

The most stressful part for me has been the guilt of leaving my children in the same environment that I came from. I have never received a Mother’s Day card from any of my children and I always feel a sense of embarrassment when my other friends share time with their kids.

Crystal believed that motherhood has been a wonderful experience.

It teaches you a lot of things like responsibility, love, nurturing, care giving, and how to sacrifice. I feel like I always have enough money to buy them a coat or such things like that but the sacrificing part was that I could not afford to buy a coat for myself so I had to make choices. I had to make a decision as to who was going to be comfortable with coats, hats, and gloves so I chose my children.

Joyce explained that what it has been like for her being a mother was a struggle and worry. “Yes, I worry about making sure that I can provide home, food, and shelter, in an area where that I feel my kids will not be caught up in the street life cycle.”
Carmen indicated that trying to balance work, family, and any other extra curricular activities with children was the most stressful for her:

Yes, I can try to work and maintain a home but it is almost impossible. When you try to work an eight hour a day job and I have very little time to divide my time with my daughter. I do not know how to balance the stress from my job. I know that I have to make a transition from my job role to my mother role and I end up taking my stresses out on her because I cannot give her my undivided time. Not being home enough can be a form of child abuse.

LaDonna also believed that being a mother requires a lot of responsibility:

“Dealing with, I guess, the life of another individual outside of your own is a lot of responsibility.”

In addition, while discussing this topic Felecia disclosed that she did not have anyone to talk to about her situation:

The stressful thing is you do not have anyone to talk to about your problems but I know that I can talk to the heavenly father. I am raising my daughter by myself and it is harder than I had imagined. What I am struggling with is buying clothing and underwear just bringing home 225.00 a week. I am barely paying my bills.

*Measuring Stress Levels*

The findings of this study revealed that study participants experienced varying indicators of stress or as was stated, “When I feel as though I have had enough.”

The mothers interviewed shared the perspective that they experienced different types of stress, worked through the stress in various ways, and agreed that it did affect their ability to manage and perform fundamental parenting skills:
For example, Aliha said that she is never without feelings of stress.

I anticipate the next day of stress from the time that I lay down until the time that I get up the next morning. I am so concerned about having everything run smoothly. My children can see the stress on my face and it influences my interaction with them because it puts them in a bad mood. I remember once when I was so stressed out I was yelling at my son telling him that it was his responsibility to take out the trash and that I was tired of reminding him about it. He looked at me and said, Yeah, it is your responsibility to clean this house too, and you don’t. The only thing that I could think of was that he was right.

Felecia expressed that there are days when she has reached her limit with stress: “I can tell when I have had enough when I go off. I really hold a lot of stuff in. I have anxiety attacks. I have to take medication and sometimes I feel broke in spirit.”

Darlene explained that her stress level had been so high for so long that it seemed like a common place:

I just work, work, work, to try to relieve it. One time my daughter did something and I was yelling at her and getting right in her face. She looked at me with alarm and I knew that I did not want to have another experience like this with her. It made me feel bad because I had put that much fear in her and I backed up.

Crystal expressed a comparable sentiment:

Oh, my goodness. I never really realized that I am stressed out something will have to happen to make me realize that I am stressed out. I lose it and start screaming frantically, I scream so long and so loud that I frighten my own self. I
have to call my mother to come and help me and sometimes she will take my kids for a while to relieve me.

Each of the participants in this study shared similar views concerning the fact that what it has been like for them being a mother is stressful. Those areas of stress that they commonly shared were the concerns for providing food, shelter, time management, feelings of isolation, and having enough money. Certainly, these factors are derivatives of maternal satisfaction consistent with those found in several other studies guided by a theoretical model that tested for direct and indirect effects of financial resources and efficacy beliefs. One such model identified an association between family financial stress and a mother’s belief about their efficacy as parents (Brody, Flor, & Gibson, 1999). The study also revealed that chronic financial stress had a negative impact on parental confidence in controlling aspects of their lives that they value and also negatively influence their child’s development.

*The Role of Family Functioning*

There are clearly notable differences between the beliefs and practices of middle-class and poor mothers as it relates to understanding their role in family functioning. Given the differences in the areas of “social capital” such as financial resources, reference groups, and their cultural setting, this is not surprising. The women in these two groups have varying standards for what they believe a “good” mother should provide for their children. For example, poor mothers have a tendency to stress their children’s formal education and giving children rules whereas middle-class mothers are concerned with providing their children with choices (Hays, 1996). Yet, fundamentally, they share the same parenting philosophy of putting their children’s needs first.
During the focus group sessions the participants in this study, using the “projective technique” (Greenbaum, 1998), where asked to describe what feelings they had concerning their role in family functioning after viewing a photograph of two small African American children who appear to be happy (See Appendix F). Angel explained that after providing the basic needs of food, clothing, and shelter as a mother you should instill in them confidence and self-assuredness. “As a parent you need to lead by example, do not just tell them how to do something make resources available to them to reach their goals.”

Jasmine believed that they looked as though they were well kept. “I would like to just hug both of them. It reminded me of growing up how I looked up to my brother. Really it shows that you are responsible for showing your children the love that you show yourself.”

Diamond expressed that her perception was the total opposite of some of the other study participants.

The children appear to be happy although sometimes looks can be deceiving. The way the child on the bottom is looking up at the older sibling could be indicative of the older child being his brother’s keeper. This picture also reminds of my brother and me because as children sometimes when taking pictures we were told to smile. I remember the times when I would be hiding the pain of the abuse I had suffered from my stepmother behind an orchestrated smile.

Sonya felt that the picture showed happy children and that from the prospective of the maternal protective role that the mother is providing all the necessities for the kids,
they seem to be loved, attentive, bright, healthy and happy. “I think that my role would be providing health, security, self-esteem and awareness to my children.”

Laura stated that she immediately saw the love and the happiness.

As a parent if the single mom is loving, is attentive, is taking care of the basics and some of the little extras a picture like this would be the result. I have always felt that my role as a single mom is to promote health and positive behaviors with my children … at times I feel that I am too strict and then I get over it because I know how I want my children to grow up.

Blake, like several of the other participants, felt defining her role in family functioning was a tough question, and she provided the following statement:

My role as a single Black woman, head of household, is to make everything run smooth. I feel like I am the mother, I am the father, I am the nurturer, I am the provider and the disciplinarian --- I do everything. Um, I am an activity coordinator, coach, educator, financier, and advisor.

Trina defined her role in family functioning as being “head of the household” I feel like I have to be the sole provider and a counselor to my ten year old girls. Giving advice to my twin boys has been difficult because I need to be a father figure --- trying to say what a man would say and do what a man would do in a situation.

Each of the mothers in this study indicated a significant level of commitment in their role in family functioning. The variations of what they perceived or was included in this role was minimal. Each woman echoed the basics of providing food, shelter, and clothing while others distinguished themselves by including key factors such as
counseling, nurturing, and taking responsibility for their children’s emotional development by leading through example. Those mothers’ maternal protective character in many ways emulated their childhood experiences. They acknowledged through their testimonies that the role of family functioning was all-inclusive in any given day and yet in all but one example none mentioned other essential dimensions of effective family functioning such as communicating, planned family activities, and helping one another (McCreary & Dancy, 2004) within this same context.

**Relationship With Their Children**

Doing things together with their children and having an open line of communication were important factors mentioned by all 13 participants concerning their relationship with their children. Each mother in the study was asked to describe some of her daily activities with her children along with what issues were talked about openly with her children. Crystal shared that she really enjoyed spending time with her sons and daughter:

- We spend a lot of quality time you know watching TV going to church and the Mall, even trying to cook together. I like my kids to know something about sex, drugs, violence, and uh, marriage commitment early. I do not want my sons to participate in something where women are taking care of kids by themselves. If you are going to have kids make sure that you are going to be around to be a father.

LaDonna stated she and her daughter do just about everything together.

- One thing that is consistent is that we read daily. I read her a book. I try to make every single night sometimes it is midday or as we are riding along, she is
reading. Weekly to twice a week, I try to get her to the library. I try to instill in her a lot of positive things to do out in the yard.

Kristi expressed that because of her health problems her mother shared a great deal of the responsibility for the daily activities of her children:

I get therapy and I am a diabetic and I also have seizures so uh I take medication to keep calm. I seek professional help. Honestly, the only thing that I participate with them in is the drill team, going stating, sight seeing with them and sometimes their homework. You know that is a good question because my next to the oldest son he think that I do not like him and want him around because he and his dad are not together. It ain’t funny but because I laugh and cry and I ask him, how can you dare say that. I have five kids by five different daddies. It has been confusing with my kids because I do not think that they feel comfortable around me. I do not know whether they see me as a mother, friend, or neither one.

When discussing the question concerning the issues that she talked openly about with her children Kristi explained that she wanted to makeup for the past:

I think I try to clear up what happened to them while growing up because I do not want them to hate me. “Because we discuss how young I was. I did not know that they knew that I was young. Because we talk about things that go on in the world and about education.

Stephanie expressed that much of the time she had spent with her children was visiting with the rest of the family:

We haven’t done nothing really this year, normally we go to birthday parties, the park, and swimming. This year we have spent a lot of time at my moms and with
the rest of my family. When asked the question concerning the issues that she
talks openly about with her children she replied, Uh, sometimes I sit them down
and tell them how I want them to grow up. Sometimes I will get on the subject of
kidnapping. I do not allow them to spend the night with their friends.

When asked about some of the daily activities she shared with her daughter, Felecia
indicated that although the neighborhood that she lived in affected some of the outside
activities that she shared with her daughter much of her time was spent doing simply
things like going to the parks, going to church, and walking:

We went to the park a couple of times and we went to the Dayton Mall. We go
to Sunday school and church. We go walking sometimes. Well it is the
neighborhood because of the types of people that drive around here and I am tired
from cleaning offices from 7 – 4.

Her regard for her relationship with her daughter came through as she reflected on her
desire to protect her daughter and the special bond that they share:

“I will do anything in the world for my daughter. Her and I are very close
she sleeps with me. Yes, um I protect her no matter what.”

During the focus group, Felicia also spoke about the issues of relationships with boys and
sex as the most comfortable areas of discussions with her daughter:

“I talk to her about these boys. I tell her to keep on your clothes and be a good
girl so she does not get pregnant. I tell her about the birds and the bees.”

*Multiple Out-Of-Wedlock Births*

The large proportion of out-of-wedlock births among African American females
is reflective of the economic status of the African American males. Economic and
unemployment considerations also appear to be affecting the attitudes of young African American males toward the institution of marriage (Dickerson, 1995). Concerning the concept of this “new Black family”, 70 percent of African American children are born to unwed parents and 86 percent of contemporary Black women are single when they have their first baby. Some social researchers and public policy experts argue that the 21st century will find unwed and single parenting among this population persisting as an acceptable norm (Latimer, 2003). The link between female-headed households and poverty is well established and yet multiple out-of-wedlock births persist. African-American children residing within these households experience extremely high levels of poverty. Conservatives argue that generous welfare benefits are responsible for the large number of black out-of- wedlock births. Liberals often attribute black out-of-wedlock births to high unemployment and marital quality among black males (Tschoepe, 1999).

In a study conducted by Bane and Elwood (1994), both welfare and unemployment were identified as factors of a rational choice model of human behavior. It was theorized that the “rational” female is more likely to have an out-of-wedlock child if public assistance benefits are available to support that child and therefore the ratio of out-of-wedlock births should correlate with the availability of welfare benefits for unwed mothers. Also, the “rational” female should avoid marrying a male who will not be able to provide sufficient financial support for the family.

During the individual interview sessions, I wanted to determine from the study participants what factors influenced their decision to have multiple out-of-wedlock births. This study’s finding were consistent with the findings of existing research in that both the favored welfare argument and the favored unemployment argument were irrelevant in
explaining why the participants in this study had multiple out-of-wedlock births. The moderating effects of low self-esteem, environmental stress, and socioeconomic disadvantage emerged as the greatest predictors of out-of-wedlock births among this group.

There were six mothers in this study in the category of multiple out-of-wedlock births. Each was willing to share their stories relating to what factors contributed to their personal choice.

Cyrese, mother of six children, explained that being raised in a home with an alcoholic and non-attentive mother was difficult. Because of the lack of love and attention exhibited by her mother, she believed that her life evolved around looking for love. She explained that she connected the attention that she was getting from the fathers of her children to receiving love for herself:

I would throw myself into a relationship with a man and six kids later, I know now that I was confusing sex with love. The relationship would end but I would still have the child to remind me of what I had done and how confused I was. Don’t get me wrong I love all of my children but I do not see their fathers anymore. I think to myself ---wow!

Kristi, mother of five, spoke of the chaotic experiences of her life. She told of how the psychological and physical abuse that she had suffered from the hands of her mother and other family members had caused her to develop little respect for herself and her body:

When I was growing up it was hard for me. Most of the members of my family, including my mother, had alcohol problems. She would curse at me and beat me
sometimes for no reason. I was also sexually abused by other members of my family and they were always putting me down. At some point, I believe that I just really gave up on myself. My family would just always be putting me down.

I had my first child when I was fifteen years old, so I was young having kids. I always felt like I was out of control because of my alcoholism and doing drugs. I never really put any thought into taking care of my body so I just kept having kids. I did not think that I was anything.

Marketa, mother of four, in contrast, viewed her experience as an unwed mother multiple times as a positive and affirming part of her life. During her interview, she expressed that she had always seem motherhood as a good thing because of her close family relationship with her mother, father, and other siblings.

My family and I are very close. We spend a lot of time together. When I was growing up my mother and father always gave me a lot of support. I actually love being around kids and I really love my kids. My kids are like my friends and I enjoy talking to them and doing things with them --- just like when I was growing up.

When asked to expand on why she had multiple out-of-wedlock births Marketa expressed that she was still good friends with the fathers of her children and the support of her family:

I am still good friends with all of my kids fathers. I really never discuss marriage with any of my children’s fathers. My oldest son’s father was close to his father and that is what I attribute that too. I do not see him as often as I should but he does buy things for my son. My girls were each of their fathers first born and
they have a good relationship with them. So far this has not been a problem for me. I said before that I had worked and put money into the welfare system and now I am just taking back some of the money that I put in. I really like kids.

Stephanie has given birth to five children out-of-wedlock. When sharing her experiences as a mother she spoke about the fact that although all of her children had the same father, the financial support was dimensioned by the lack of emotional support.

Although I have a boyfriend he is here but not here. He does give money but he is not here emotionally. We were supposed to get married after my first child was six months old but that never happened. I get so depressed sometimes because I have a lack of communication with him and I feel like I am raising my children by myself. You know, sometimes you get in a rut and you do not know what to do or where to turn. I have just been with him for so long and you just keep hoping.

My youngest child is two months old and I really do not want to have any more children with him. This situation is really hard.

Carmen’s assessment of her choice to participate in multiple out-of-wedlock births echoed the sentiments of the expression of the normative Black morality (Dickerson, 1995). Black morality understands motherhood in terms of a “mistake theme” in which the undesirable aspect of behavior is external to the behavior:

When I had my first daughter I believed that it was a mistake and a by product of my feelings of low self-esteem. When my second daughter came along, I felt I was an adult and that is was no one else’s business but my own. She was a blessing.
Wanda, mother of three, expressed that her multiple out-of-wedlock births mimicked what she had lived as a child:

I got my model of parenting from my mother. I have five other sisters and we do not all have the same fathers. My mother was not married and we were always on welfare. So I learned what I lived. Two of my children have the same father and my youngest daughter has a different father. I can only say when you are young you don’t always make the best decisions. I was really in love with my first two kids father.

Desire to Help

One way to assure a better understanding of the subject matter is to center studies of the experiences and perspectives of a particular group in the group’s own reality (Dickerson, 1995). As the study progressed, a continuing theme began to emerge. Each of the study participants expressed a desire to help other single low-income African-American mothers avoid some of the problem outcomes of their lives as the motivating factor for participating in this research. When asked to share her thoughts concerning her desire to help other women Sonya hoped that by her participation, basic agencies for single low-income African American mothers are maintained and an opportunity for the development of new agencies would be created:

What I meant is that by my participation if it maintains basis agencies that are needed for single low-income women or offer the opportunity for new agencies to be developed. Not so much personal but based upon the outcome of the study itself. Most young women or low-income African American women the majority of them are single parents. When you attempt to better yourself, you are
sacrificing in another area. With the agencies when they find that you are getting a job, you take any services. I find with the agencies that in a sense it is either black or white you are either poverty-stricken or you in that middle-class bracket is taken away. They say that you are in that middle-class bracket but in actuality, I think that with the economy and circumstances you are not really in that middle-class bracket. I don’t think that it really exists anymore. I think that the whole perception of those lines where poverty stops and the middle-class begins need to be reevaluated.

Brandi expressed some of the limitations that she had experienced looking for parenting classes as a driving force in her desire to help point single low-income African American mothers in the right direction:

I would like them to be aware of what agencies are really willing to help. When I became pregnant I was pushed from point A to point B to point C and then come all the way back to point A just trying to find the right agency to help me. What agencies can point you in the right direction who can give you the right type of help. I really don’t think that it has anything to do with your race but just finding people not wanting to do the “foot work” to find the right places to help you. I knew that I was having problems with my son and I felt that I needed some type of parenting classes. searched and searched and I could not find anybody to tell me where to take parenting classes. I was calling my sons doctors, I was going to schools, and nobody could really tell me. So I was going through the phone book and I see counselors but I do not see anything about parenting classes. Not because I thought that I was a bad parent but my son was diagnosed with ADHD
and I thought well, I cannot do this by myself. I need someone to talk to that may know something about this. I prayed about it, it took about two months, and I decided we needed family counseling. I wanted to find something close to home because we did not have any transportation. When I found a counselor, the first question that she asked me was what did I want. I explained to her that I wanted parenting classes but it had been difficult to find them. The counselor said that she did not want to alarm me but that the problem of finding this type of class was because a lot of Black people associate parenting classes with being a bad parent. She indicated that I had finally found the right person and we began to have sessions.

Cleo shared her feeling concerning helping to providing more knowledge to young Black mothers as it relates to their minds and bodies:

I want to provide knowledge to young Black mothers helping them to become more educated with their bodies and minds. Especially being able to help them learn about the difference between loving yourself and someone else loving you.” The reason that I say this is because a lot of young African American women don’t know how to love themselves. A lot of people don’t understand respect and loving yourself. They think that because they get up and put nice clothes on that you are respecting yourself. It is a whole lot to come into respecting yourself. Understanding your body and knowing that your body is going through changes and not allowing men to abuse you mentally because what is around your kids your kids pick up and you have to be of sound mind to be able to provide the nurturing to our children. The other thing is
I talked about loving yourself, when you love yourself, oh my god, you can conquer the world. When you are able to love who you are. I am not saying that you are not going to go through trials and tribulations. Trials and tribulations help you to be a better person and help your children not to make the same mistakes. Some people put so much value on someone else loving you. Young women put value on young men loving them and they do not understand that some of these people don’t even love themselves. How could he love you when he don’t even love and understand who he is. Some of these guys place their manhood on the number of children that they can produce and the number of women that they can whip game on. They do not understand what their mothers, sisters, and their aunts are going through. We have to say stop even when it hurts us. I want to also talk about betrayal because some women don’t understand betrayal either. We get down on ourselves because we have been let down by someone else and I want to let young women know that because somebody don’t love you, you are not less than you were yesterday. Trust me, just because you think the baby daddy looks good and he puts you down it was probably a gift. I also want young ladies to know that someday someone will come along and celebrate who they are.

Ruth expressed deep feelings of hurt and loneliness during her pregnancy and with her daughter. She tearfully explained that by participating in the study she could heal some of the hurt of other women in similar circumstances:

I really felt isolated, I really felt like I did not have anybody. My mother did not understand what I had done. She always told me that she had never did anything
like that when she was going up. My mother was an alcoholic so I had poor self-esteem and my whole life I have just always wanted people to love me. Well you know you cannot make people love you. It is only through the grace of God that he will send people in your life to make you have wisdom and authority.

There is a reason why everyone comes into your life. I felt like God was speaking to me saying at this point in time I want you to tell your story to help others.

Diamond basically said that she wanted to help with the study in order to save another single mother that is going through what she went through:

I am a lot wiser now and I feel that I can help the next person to triumph over tragedy. My only regret is that I did not have someone to help me with all the resources that I know about now because, I would not have had to go through what I went through if I had known. My triumph is the victory of being a successful mother, continuing my education and just doing things with my daughters to help them continue their education and to have a decent life. I struggled a lot and I wanted to give up, not on life, but just give up trying to get ahead in life and I chose not to because as I went through different pains I found out about the different resources on my own and then fortunately through Job and Family Services I found out about a lot of different organizations and resources that helped to put me on the journey that I am own now.

Jasmin said that she wanted to help with the study because of the lack of praise for African-American women and the struggles that they individually experience:

I said that I wanted to help because most African-American women don’t get the praise that they should on a daily basis. Most African-American women
struggle a lot with themselves personally because they feel that if they don’t
do things for their children that they have not succeeded. If they are not the right
size she has not succeeded and if she is not pleasing her husband she has not
succeeded. Statistically the strongest woman on earth right now is an African-
American woman.

Angel expressed a similar sentiment in that she wanted to help other women avoid
some of the troublesome areas of being a single low-income mother:

My situation mirrors Diamond’s and Jasmine’s, I wanted help other people avoid
some of the “pit falls”. Life is going to give you a lot of “pit falls”. Looking at
my life I know that a lot of them were of my own decisions a lot of them were in
my own mind. Many times, I did not give myself enough credit for what I was
doing. I was busy trying to parent and just survive and make it and I did not see
the victories in my struggle. I hope that other people will not delay their desire
for success like I did. Not just in education and finance but in their spiritually
as well.

Summary

The mothers in this study revealed that personal characteristics relating to feelings
of self-worth, measuring stress levels, maternal satisfaction, and understanding their role
in family functioning were critical contextual factors, that influence their values,
attitudes, and behaviors in parenting. Although some of the participants revealed less
than positive outcomes concerning their relationships with their children, for varying
reasons, each mother expressed sensitivity to the knowledge of its importance as a
balance to maternal psychological functioning.
The mothers in this study believed that single low-income African American mothers, including themselves, who have participated in multiple out-of-wedlock births have varying frames of reference for making this choice. They indicated several reasons for making such a decision. These included feelings of low self-esteem, broken promises, inability to discern having sex and having love and respect for themselves, the absence of rational, and just not caring – “it is no one else’s business”.

A continuous theme, which emerged, was the desire of all the study participants to help other single low-income African-American mothers with their journey. Each mother expressed a desire, by participating in the study, to “school” young Black single mothers; how to avoid “perceived life strain.” Suggestions included accessing the right social networks to help provide them with instrumental and emotional support also, acquiring a better understanding of their role in the family process in lieu of providing food, clothing, and shelter for their children.

Conclusions

Four main interdependent factors affected the maternal protective role of the mothers in this study: personal finance, support, such as social service support, support from the fathers of their children and support from family and friends, education, and childrearing efficacy beliefs. These mothers believed that all of these factors were necessary for them to achieve greater effectiveness in the parenting process.

The findings of this study indicated that both the social contextual variables of support and their personal characteristics, specifically those that aligned themselves with the maternal protective role, are directly related to positive parenting practices. This finding seems to correlate with the majority of existing literature that focuses on
predictors of parenting among African-American single low income mothers. These predictors include social capital, higher self-esteem, positive peer relations, and higher academic competence. It should be noted that the majority of studies concerning this population were accomplished using quantitative measures such as ANOVA, longitudinal procedures, and linear regression to understand their day to day lives. Researchers using these methods devoted more attention to determining the causes and effects of single parenthood than to examining the personal characteristics which enabled these mothers to overcome the difficulties associated with raising children alone.

Whether the experiences that these mothers expressed were analogous to the "half-empty" or "the half-full" perspective the emphasis that emerged was their individual personal characteristics which explained the variations in the family dynamic. Maternal satisfaction, feelings of self-worth, measuring stress levels, and understanding their role in family functioning were a crucial link that fosters or impedes successful parenting among these mothers. Feelings of self-worth was the most important to the study participants as it defined their maternal representation and responsiveness to the relationship with their children as well as filtered all other family processes including making rational decisions concerning having more children out-of-wedlock.

Study participants also communicated a strong desire to help other single mothers avoid some of their "pitfalls" in parenting. Establishing the right social contacts to help them with issues of support, learning to love themselves, understanding the role of family functioning, and acquiring more education either personal or parenting were the areas of help mentioned. They also expressed that by their participation existing social services to
single low-income African-American mothers could be enhanced or new services created.
Chapter 5: Discussion

Throughout the interviews of the single low-income African American mothers who participated in this study the extensive findings focused on issues of support and personal characteristics in the context of their role in family functioning. This finding aligns itself with the majority of existing literature in both quantitative and qualitative studies concerning this population in the framework of the same two variables. The quantitative studies in this area consist of survey research pursued through conventional tools such as ANOVA, MANOVA, linear regression, and longitudinal information that is lacking in its ability to allow the inclusion of factors that are more personal in nature. Misconceptions about African American single mothers persist. A dominant culture two-parent paradigm unfairly assesses their lives, parenting abilities, and social service entitlements. What distinguishes this finding of this current study is the qualitative breadth and depth of the interviews and questions specifically designed to discover more information regarding the individual range of their experience and needs as single low-income African American mothers.

Much work remains on conceptualizing and assessing the parenting process among single low-income African American mothers. The research linking this population’s single parent family structure to parenting processes, maternal well being, and child developmental outcomes seems to be lacking in its recognition of the creative ways that these mothers carry out the role of family functioning.

The following sections of this chapter review some of the relevant frameworks used to explain the experiences of the single low-income African American mothers.
This study discusses the relationship between these frameworks and the findings. Prospective implications of the findings as well as suggestions for additional research are also included.

**Blumer’s Symbolic Interactionism Conceptual Framework (1969)**

Blumer (1969) provides a conceptual framework that hypothesizes the primary factors that influence the perceptions of the meanings and values low-income African American single parent families headed by mothers place on activities and interactions that make up the multi-dimensions of family functioning. Family activities and interactions focus on enabling a family to meet its goals provide support for its members’ material and emotional support, and foster members’ well-being and development. This framework suggests that family functioning is subjective to the contextual constructs of socio-economic status, culture, family structure, and developmental stage, and is assessed primarily using instruments developed for middle-income European American two-parent families.

An important emphasis of this framework was the essential dimensions of both effective and ineffective family functioning and to identify the most frequent patterns of interactions. Family interactions that demonstrate effective family functioning were categorized into five major dimensions: (a) providing emotional nurturing, (b) communicating, (c) doing things together, (d) helping each other, and (e) parenting children appropriately. Ineffective family interactions or family functioning were also categorized into five major areas that include both the absence of behaviors of effective families and the presence of negative behaviors: (a) uncaring, hostile, violent; (b) fail to
communicate; (c) avoid being together; (d) refuse to help each other; and (e) negative parental responsibilities.

Although Blumer’s (1969) framework was used as a basis for some aspects of this study (e.g. the creation of some of the interview questions and defining maternal efficacy beliefs), the findings reveal that several of the study participants could not conceptualize the meaning of “family functioning.” In fact, these same mothers could not link this process to their maternal protective role as such until it was explained to them in the context of the responsibilities of a mother. This may be because of their socio-economic status study participants did not express parenting as a systematic process, yet compartmentalized the experience as providing food, clothing, and shelter for their children. Blumer’s framework emphasized the importance of meanings and values assigned to family interactions when measuring the effectiveness of family functioning. The study findings seem to adhere to the five previously mentioned dimensions of effective and non-effective family functioning. Each of the study participants shared a broad range of meaning and values connected to the process of family functioning in both categories of effective and ineffective scenarios. For example, effective variables included sharing time with other family members outside of the home, listening to their children, providing advice, eating meals together, and emotional support. Conversely those participants whose lives evolved around “chaotic circles” expressed ineffective outcomes - poor parent-child relationships, limited family interactions, inability by mothers to embrace maternal protective role evidenced by grandparents and other family members assuming more of the parenting process.
In summary, the findings of this study do not directly conflict with Blumer’s (1969) framework and conceptualization of the dimensions of family functioning yet provide a valid platform for inquiry into the range of meanings and definitions these mothers have assigned to family interactions within the context on ten effective and ineffective dimensions. The findings of this study also reveal that these mothers’ personal characteristics strongly influence their maternal decisions and representations of their children. Using these specific dimensions is not as all-inclusive and may result in invalid conclusions about this population’s strengths and weaknesses. For this reason, other theoretical frameworks examined include Hill’s ABCX Theory of Family Stress (1959) and McCubbin’s (1983) Family Stress Theory.

*Family Stress Theory*

It has been widely accepted that predictors of parenting among African American single mothers are both personal and contextual factors (Kotchick, Dorsey, & Heller, 2005; Brody & Flor, 1998; Patterson, Reid, & Dishion, 1992). Several researchers of African American single mothers hypothesize that stress results in inferior parenting over time through its detrimental effect on maternal psychological functioning. In addition, specific research has shown that such factors as financial stress adversely affects parenting (e.g. McLoyd, 1998) and parental conflict (e.g. Fauber et al., 1990).

In the discussion of the experiences of single low-income African American mothers regarding social stress and the family, two independent lines of research provide insight. First, family stress theory postulates that the primary mechanism through which contextual stressors impair parenting is parental psychological distress (Conger, Rueter, & Conger, 2000; McLoyd, 1998). Stressful life events such as demands on the family
unit, need for more money, and family resources for meeting a demand compromise parenting. This theory evolved from Hill’s (1959) ABCX family crisis model (See Figure 1).

The ABCX hypothesis of family stress was designed for family stress investigations to answer two central research questions; (1) how much stress, and (2) what kinds of stress mediated by personal, family, and community resources. This model consisted of four complex variables (A) – the stressor event interacting with (B) – the family crisis meeting internal and external resources interacting with (C) – the definition that the family makes of an event which, in some cases, produces (X) – the crisis.

Guided by the family stress theory, a second line of research focuses on resources (Burr, 1973), the family’s ability to prevent an event of change in the family social system from creating a crisis or disruption in the system. Internal and external family resources and social support such as social connectedness within the family as well as social connectedness outside the family decreases the impact of multiple stresses on the family.

The factors reported in the existing research that are most closely associated with understanding the various types of stress and the social context in which single low-income African American mothers live when developing and implementing parenting strategies are directly linked to the family stress theory (Forehand & Jones, 2005; Dancy & Mccreary, 2004; Kiser, 2007). Four of the eight factors connected to the mothers’ support systems include the lack of support from the fathers of their children, inadequate support from social service agencies, lack of support from family and friends, and lack of financial support. Three take into consideration personal factors, including past
relationships with parents. For example, mothers who experienced more conflict with their own mothers had increased odds of having disengaged relationships with their children (Sokolowski, 2007), personality characteristics, maternal efficacy beliefs, and only one factor addressed the mothers’ perception of neighborhood violence.

The family stress theory is applicable to this study because it validates part of the findings of the present study concerning the meaning single low-income African American mothers apply to stressful experiences in their day to day lives. When applying family stress theory to the findings of this study, consideration must be given to the study participant’s previous experience in dealing with change and meeting crisis (family’s failure to restore stability). Each of the study participants stated that stress impaired their parental effectiveness. It should also be noted that mothers voiced variable triggers to their stress and variable perceptions as to which were crisis situations or the (X) factor from the crisis model. Family dynamics emerging from the study that precipitate an (X) scenario include, the perceived inadequacy of family financial resources, the mothers’ self-regulation (Forehand, 1988), and lack of social capital. Additionally each participant acknowledged a need for some type of support initially as new mothers to alleviate some of their stress and promote a sense of well-being.

Family stress theory does appear to be a possible explanation for sections of the findings that address conditions endured by these mothers, conditions linked to non-normative life choices. For example, many of these mothers chose to have multiple out-of-wedlock births. Interestingly enough the majority of the literature is in the context of this theory as if this was the only experience of these women. This fact is because in some studies data are correlational in nature, the use of variables measured at one point in
time to predict a variable measured at a later point in time imposes a structure on the results that eliminates the possibility that effects can be interpreted in more than one direction (Heller, 2005). Where the literature fails to fulfill the needs of research is the lack of documented studies of single low-income African American mothers that parent effectively in stressful situations and what coping strategies in lieu of support from family and friends they employ to minimize stress and factors that might contribute to the prevention of interfamilial stress.

Constructive Family Intervention Model – Family Skill Building

Identifying the protective factors that enable single low-income African American mothers to parent effectively under stressful conditions provides an opportunity to determine objectives for intervention and prevention. One such model is the family constructive intervention model (Allen & Bloom, 1994; Banyard et al., Davies & Flannery, 1998; Figley, 1988; Miller, 1999, Temple, 1997). This proposed model explores the role of constructive, naturally occurring family rituals as a vehicle for strengthening a family’s protective function (See Figure 1). Contextually the model builds on established links among urban poverty, exposure to hardship, and related parental distress, which is the problem and presents a specific application of contextual change – family functioning a possible solution.
Figure 2 shows a diagram of the constructive family ritual model. This model uses Hill’s ABCX Family Crisis theory framework. The diagram displays the inter-connectedness of urban poverty with exposure to stressors and trauma. As the diagram illustrates, constructive family ritual is a parental coping tool that elicits positive contextual change within the family process.

This model postulates that family functioning through family ritual life provides behavioral, perceptual, emotional, and spiritual mechanisms that influence protective family processes – structure, connectedness, resource seeking, beliefs in family, and coping. The concept of family ritual life consists of five conceptual frameworks.
Fostering structure

Fostering family structure entails several related functions necessary to establish order, regularity, and predictability in family life. For children this translates into a sense of security (Parker, 1999). There is a feeling of safety and trust knowing that the same thing will happen every day. The family structure created by the participation of the family unit in repetitive daily routines provides meaning, maintains order, and regularity for its members.

Fostering connectedness

Cohesion is a family construct that reflects the degree to which family members feel close to one another, take pleasure in spending time together, and share a common value system. Cohesion is primarily associated with the meaning and experiences involving stable relationships and the positive bonds that develop as a result. The constructive use of family rituals and routines create strong and positive family connections (Kiser, 2005).

Resource seeking

As previously stated, the receipt of social support buffers the impact of stress. For parents individually, positive associations with family and friends are general indicators of quality of life and good mental health, affecting not only their own well-being but also the behavior toward their children. For example, mothers who have conflict
communicating with people outside the family tend to have problematic interactions with their children as well (Biglan, 1997).

Fostering beliefs in family

Studies focused specifically on the resilience of urban, African American, single mothers suggest that setting children and immediate family as a priority is an important component of successful adaptation (Brodsky, 1999). Rituals present families with a chance to express their commitment by maintaining shared time and experiences, investing in the family as a unit, and continuing a sense of cohesion even in the face of adversity. Family ritual life, including celebrations, can provide each member with multiple opportunities to participate in planning and sharing responsibilities, thus communicating a belief in the competence and worth of the family and of the individual members. Families that accomplish their rituals and routines provide context within which the family constructs beliefs in their ability to overcome.

Fostering coping

Incorporating what is known about individual stress responses based upon the framework of the ABCX family crisis model (Hill, 1959), the use of family rituals improves the regulation of stress reaction. Family ritual theory is a strong family- coping construct (Bush & Pargament, 1997, p. 148). As a crisis meeting resource, family ritual is an appropriate intervention strategy that focuses on the family’s use of constructive ritual to improve coping and allow for better information processing. In
addition, the symbolic nature of ritual expression allows individuals to maintain a distance from the real danger while being involved emotionally (Driver, 1991; Johnson, 1995).

Three advantages of the family ritual routine model are in its ability to provide a positive connection to the family, improve family functioning, and promote contextual change within the family.

Several research objectives of the present study connect themselves to the framework of the constructive family ritual model. For example, this model provides a map for discerning patterns and themes that might explain which factors had the greatest impact on family interactions. Three of the thirteen participants of this present study had no conceptual understanding of the “family functioning” process. This fact would imply that the data collected during this investigation would provide insight into the construction of family skill building training for these mothers.

The findings of this study indicate that the intervention model presents a solution to the greatest challenge for the single low-income African American mothers in stressful situations - maternal influence. A common occurrence in behavioral studies is to use process-oriented therapies (i.e. role-play) to effect change (Kiser, 2007). Comparatively these studies have been relatively ineffective because they ignore true nature or naturally occurring family processes. On the other hand, family behavioral and skill-building interventions for distressed families have a strong empirical basis (Taylor & Biglan, 1998) for change because they explore the constructive, naturally occurring family rituals. Those rituals, which emerged during this investigation, include shared activities such as going to church, taking walks together, doing homework assignments,
having dinner together, and having family discussions. The use of family rituals as a mediator to stress is in keeping with research on contextual change. Study participants were polarized along the lines of personal characteristics concerning its effectiveness for fostering connectedness within their specific family structure. Those mothers who had expressed their commitment to investing time with their family and embracing the transition from single African American female to single low-income African American female exhibited an understanding of the concept of “family functioning.” This was because they had experienced this framework as children. The constructive family ritual model also calls attention to stressors and traumas in the context of urban poverty, an idea sustained by other participants in the study via their descriptions of trying to maintain order out of chaos – translated as high levels of conflict with daily routines disrupted or missing entirely. Again, these negative outcomes connect themselves to the mother’s maternal heritage.

**Implications**

The findings of this study indicated that both the social contextual variables of support and personal characteristics directly impact the maternal protective role of the single low-income African American mothers and are directly linked to effective and non-effective parenting practices. Family processes including structure, connectedness, resource seeking, beliefs in family, and coping have important implications concerning family skill building and family functioning for this population of mothers. These findings also have implications for family researchers. The meanings that these mothers give to their interactions and their definitions of their situations’ requirements for
cohesion and stability are also important. What are their perspectives on the development of assessment tools for family processes specific to this group?

Implications Regarding Support

In general, social support has been widely studied and found to be a buffer against stressful situations for impoverished populations (Pierce & Sarason, 1996). Specifically, informal social support from family, friends, and neighbors is a particularly salient protective factor for economically disadvantaged African American single mothers, as they often rely on these extended family networks for childrearing tasks and parenting duties (Kotchick, 2005).

While the findings of this study agree with the research to date that suggests that single African American mothers who perceive higher levels of formal and informal social support experience more positive parenting outcomes (Jones, Shaffer, Forehand, Brody & Armistead, 2003), it brings challenge to the lack of literature concerning intervention research to guide the delivery of services to this population pertaining to the role of “family functioning” in their maternal protective roles. Understanding the circumstances under which disadvantaged families exhibit particularly effective parenting can advance the scholarly study of parenting in low-income minority families and provide insights for designing family support policies (McGroder, 2000). Additionally, the findings regarding support imply that the bulk of the literature concerning the experiences of the single low-income African American mothers have been expressed in theory and that there is a desire by this population for an expression of their “own words” reality.
Support From Social Service Agencies

Single low-income African American women find themselves experiencing social-case management rather than social–case service (care coordination/case management) which is utilized in a managed care environment. The present study found that support from social services agencies plays a significant role in the lives of these mothers and their maternal efficacy beliefs. Today two out of every three Black babies are born to unmarried mothers. Demographic statistics concerning single mothers in America reveal that over the past twenty years, the trend of African American mothers sustaining households with minimal economic resources is increasing (U.S. Bureau of Census Population Estimates, 2008). Even with this acknowledged statistic, the focus of direct practice and policy development for services to this demographic has been on the two parent family type as the model environment for raising children. Participants’ emphasis on the importance of receiving social service support coincides with the literature that specifies social service support as a buffer to the impact of stress and as a mediator in the role of family functioning process (Kiser 2007; Woody & Woody, 2003; Dickerson, 1995).

Findings from this study were interpreted revealing a pattern of dissatisfaction by all participants with the existing social service policies concerning the service delivery. For example, two of the participants identified key limitations in the areas of transportation, job center locations, and financial hardship such as, “The system needs to provide us with cars so that we can have transportation to provide for our family needs,” “Job centers should be placed in our neighborhoods for easier access,” and “Electric and
heat should be paid for by the government regardless of the hardship. Having children in a home with no electric and heat is a form of “child abuse.”

This finding is the most important implication concerning social service support for this population while also coinciding with the increased understanding of cultural assessment and service delivery hypothesis as critical to the awareness of the facts rather than assumptions about a group (Miller, 1989). Additionally, a symbolic interactionist perspective that delineates the dynamics of stigma used to frame the experiences of impoverished African American women who participate in such programs (Jarrett, 1996) aligned itself along educational levels during this study’s focus group sessions. The finding was that the higher the education level the more sensitivity to the use of WIC (Women/Infants/Children) services. The implication is that social service agencies should place more emphasis on providing opportunities for educational advancement in a variety of areas and institutions for these women. Social service policies regarding education should expand beyond the perception of college to include vocational school disciplines. Participants in the current study sought opportunities for acquiring short term certificate programs which would provide them with additional education while at the same time open doors for future employment in a timely manner.

Implications Regarding Personal Characteristics

Throughout the professional literature are descriptions of single low-income African American mothers that characterize these mothers negatively. The cultural variant perspective argues that African American mothers have a different cultural background and face a different set of social obstacles and discrimination compared to European American mothers (Collins, 1989; Dickerson, 1995). Descriptions include less
effectiveness in facilitating the psychosocial development of their children, less
effectiveness in establishing the fundamentals their children need for positive adjustment
in academic settings, lacking the skills and abilities needed to help their children establish
and maintain meaningful peer relationships, and over dependence on the “system”
(Woody & Woody, 2003). Conversely, opponents of the cultural deviant and cultural
equivalent perspective argue that this point of view ignores the adaptive capacities of
African American single low-income mothers within its context (Dickerson, 1995).
There is a long history in which single, low-income, African American mothers have had
to rise above racism, sexism, poverty, and political powerlessness and provide themselves
with opportunities to support their own concrete and emotional needs and those of their

Overcoming this negative perception of the maternal instincts and positive
responsiveness by single low-income African American mothers concerning parental
effectiveness requires further critical inquiry by both scholars and policy makers into the
resistance and resiliency aspects of their personal characteristics. This research could
well follow the framework of the resistance and resiliency model (Masten, Best, &
Garmezy,, 1990; Spencer, 2005). This model proposes that protective factors can buffer
the effects of the risk factors and prevent the development of unwanted outcomes. When
applied to the findings of this study this theory allows the linkage of the empowerment of
the daily experience of these mothers as points of resiliency. Fueled by the avenues of
social capitol, during their journey, such as family, friends, and the church this study’s
participants recounted several experiences of resiliency. In addition, these women
exhibited adaptability, spirituality, courage, responsiveness to the social plight of urban
African American mothers, desire for education, and a sincere interest in their children. The study participants also felt that having these characteristics were key to their survival in their maternal protective role.

The most important implication of this finding is that educators, researchers, and policy makers should take the personal characteristics of these mothers into consideration when evaluating social contextual theory concerning parenting effectiveness. For example, those mothers who believed that they could influence their children’s development were more likely to endorse developmental goals such as education, respect for the community, and concern for others.

The results of the present investigation suggest that more research is needed concerning ways to support positive maternal psychological functioning and maternal sense of control over life circumstances. Empowerment consists of “having the specific resources that are required to make, pursue and achieve informed life choices (Dickerson, 2005).” Many of the study participants indicated that social services agencies should provide avenues of training for building self-esteem to relate professionally and socially in the “outer world” and that colleges and local school districts are the most likely source for these programs. Furthermore this study suggests that the intensity of support and the assessment of services is an important component of this population’s psychological functioning.

Future research should concentrate on identifying additional contributing and moderating personal and contextual variables that predict parenting among African American single low-income mothers. What characteristics do they employ that most effectively buffer stress (resistance)? Given the importance of parenting in promoting
child adjustment, it is vital that our analysis of the life processes of this population be accurate and not general in nature. Single low-income African American women will continue to have children, yet there are women who fall within this category who decide not to have children or to delay parenting until they are married. The implication is to develop a more comprehensive understanding, through research, of the comparative opposing mindset of these women. Once the preliminary investigation has been completed and the conclusion reached the action-oriented research can be undertaken, the second step involves conceptualization of the problem through the development of a causal model (why is this happening?), an intervention model (what specific action(s) will solve the problem, and an action model (how exactly does the intervention alleviate the problem?) (Rosen & Freeman, 1993). The implication of this study is that single low-income African American mothers should be co-researchers in the development of a causal model and both the intervention and alleviation models. One obvious benefit is that this process would give them an opportunity to work with other mothers that share the same “true” or “real world” knowledge.

Any critical inquiry into the lives of the single low-income African American mothers is to understand the social contextual factors that affect their lives from both the resistance (endurance) and the experience (everyday life situations) perspectives. The goal of the research, including this current study, is to contribute to the empowerment of these women through contemporary knowledge.

Suggestions for Further Research

The purpose of this study was to investigate the experiences of the single low-income African American mother in their maternal protective role. The findings indicate
that having adequate support along with their personal characteristics were the two most critical factors that influenced their parenting effectiveness. Participants’ emphasis on personal contextual aspects point out that these personal factors play a more significant role in their understanding and conceptualization of their individual roles in “family functioning.” This is important because much of the literature is based upon the framework of the family stress theory that focuses exclusively on research concerning conditions endured rather than highlight individual self-efficacy characteristics of resilience, pride, and belief in the family structure.

Implications of this study suggest that:

1. Single low-income African American mothers need to be provided with sufficient support to strengthen their family structure and process especially during the initial years of transitioning to motherhood.

2. The personal characteristics of the single low-income African American mothers including interests and motivations should be taken into account and linked to scholarship and policy making to help expedite social change.

3. Family researchers should conduct more “action” research to investigate factors that might contribute to the prevention of interfamilial stress such as family ritual intervention strategies.

4. Critical to the increased understanding of the cultural assessment and service delivery to this population is the knowledge of the aspects of the maternal psychological functioning of the single low-income African American mothers that influences their protective roles.

5. Recognition of the resilience of the single low-income African American
mothers should be validated in the research to affect policy change and provide information through scholarly pursuit to enlighten and empower these women.

In order to construct a more comprehensive perspective of the experiences of the single low-income African American mothers additional research is needed. One area of this needed research concerns the reassessment of sources and types of support provided to single African American mothers in this demographic, and how the data collected can affect change in parenting effectiveness. For example, do job center programs really address the needs of contemporary single low-income African American mothers? What aspects of in-home visits by social service agencies do these mothers find most beneficial? Have the benefits of establishing mother-to-mother social networks been explored as a potential program for buffering interfamial stress?

Similar research should seek to evaluate the effects of family ritual intervention training on fostering healthy family functioning. What are the protective and promotive dimensions of ritual behavior? What are the meanings that the single low-income African American mothers assign to the concept of family routines and family ritual? Research in this area should ascribe input from these mothers’ point of view in order more effectively to examine the breadth and depth of the behavioral, perceptual, emotional, and spiritual mechanisms that influence critical protective family processes. Perhaps the present study’s findings could be used to create questions regarding family ritual.
Research that investigates the personal characteristics of these mothers, including interests, motivations, and resiliency should be the primary focus of additional research in this area. The findings of this study indicate that these factors contribute substantially to their maternal efficacy beliefs and must be given relevance in future studies. However, this study was based upon a small number of cases and must be validated by additional large-scale studies.

These findings were compared with the existing literature on the single low-income African American mother in an attempt to establish a conceptual framework more representative of the factors that influence the experiences of this population of women from their prospective. This framework provides a basis for more research effort.
References


Appendices
Appendix A

Semi-Structured Interview Questions

1. How many children do you have?
2. What are their ages?
3. Have you ever participated in a study concerning Family Skill Building for Single Low Income African American Mothers? if so, to what extent?
4. What do you think is the most stressful aspect (part) of being a mother?
5. What is your relationship like with your mother and father?
6. What has your experience been like with your relationships with men?
7. How do you measure your “stress level”?
8. What are some of your daily activities with your child or children?
9. What issues do you talk openly about with your children?
10. What are some of the activities that you share with your children that you are the most comfortable?
11. What do you feel are the most comfortable aspects of being a mother?
12. Do you feel that your children feel comfortable around you?
13. Do you feel that you transfer your emotional stress to your children?
14. What is your educational background?
15. Are you employed outside the home?
16. What motivated you to participate in this study?
17. When you were growing up did you have any personal experience with child abuse or neglect? Explain.
18. How would you define “child abuse” or “child neglect”?
19. As a parent, could you identify areas that you need help with family skill building and improve your relationship with your children?
20. How would you describe your neighborhood?
21. What is your daily routine with your children?
22. What type of help do you seek from neighbors, friends, or relatives to assist you with parenting?
23. What types of services (if, any) are you currently receiving and what are your views on those services?
24. What types of services to you feel that the state and local governments should provide for you as a single low-income African American mother?
25. What issues
26. What relevance do you think that your past has on your parenting?
27. Is there a question that you feel that I should have asked but I did not?
Appendix B

Family Skill Building Topics For Focus Group Discussion

(The topics listed below were used to assess the study participant’s existing knowledge and practice in the home for promoting family structure)

**Topic 1** - Fostering Structure

- Role Of The Family
- History of African American Family
- Establishment of Daily Family Routines

(use of daily patterned routines rules of day-to-day life translates into a sense of security)

**Topic 2** - Fostering Connectedness

- Planning Events Together
- Share Common Value system
- developing stable relationships family members feel close to one another

( helps to reduce the high risk of dissolution, conflict, discord, increased disorganization, heightened anger)

**Topic 3** - Resource Seeking

- Finding Social Support Venues
- Friends/Family

  Note (mothers who have conflict communicating with people outside the family tend to have problematic interaction with their children)

**Topic 4** - Family Priority

- Investing In The Family As A Unit
- Maintaining Shared Time
- Birthdays/Special Accomplishments/Treating
- Each Child Special
Topic 5 - Coping With Stress

- Rituals (allow for better information processing)
- Proactive – rather than reactive
- Ritual Activity (often associated with the positive meaning attached to it.)
Appendix C

Focus Group Discussion Points
(The key points listed below use the “projective techniques” principles outlined in “The Handbook for Focus Group Research”, (Greenbaum, 1998).

- African American children in single mother-headed families will likely remain in poverty throughout childhood and adolescence with access to fewer resources and exposure to heightened risks including violence.

- The perception of neighborhood violence shapes African –American mothers’ maternal parenting behavior.

- Perceived social support strengthens parenting among low-income African-American mothers.

- The enormous challenges confronting African-American single mothers may increase psychological distress and compromise parenting behavior.

- Low-income children are exposed to a variety of dangers in their homes, schools, and communities on a daily basis and fear the imminent threats to their physical and emotional well-being.

- Children living in low in-come, low-income neighborhoods risk development of a lack of basic trust in the ability of others to protect them, view the world as threatening, and lack confidence in their own ability to handle life challenges.

- There is little intervention research to guide services to this population.

- Less attention is paid to interventions focused on naturally occurring family rituals and routines

Question

How could family skill building strengthen the resilience of low-income African-American single mothers and increase the protective role in the family?
February 16, 2008

From: Jennie Sethna  
Executive Director  
Founders Family Center  
Dayton, Ohio 45406

To Whom It may Concern:

This is to confirm that I recommended several young ladies, who are involved with programs at the Founders Family Center, to assist Ms. Shirley Ivory with her study. All of the young ladies were excited to meet with Ms. Ivory and to share their stories.

Wishing you much success with this valuable project.

Sincerely,

Jennie Sethna
Appendix E

Survey of The Use of Community Services by Single Low-income African American Mothers

This anonymous survey is intended to enable you to describe your experience with the selected community outreach services listed.

These questions ask you about community outreach services, which you have used.

Please make your comments below.

**Parenting Skills Classes** (Name of Agency)

- What did you find most helpful with this service?
- What did you find least helpful with this service?
- How often did you use this service?
- How did you learn about this service?

**Support Groups For Children** (Name of Agency)

- What did you find most helpful with this service?
- What did you find least helpful with this service?
- How often did you use this service?
- How did you learn about this service?

**Legal Advocacy** (Name of Agency)

- What did you find most helpful with this service?
- What did you find least helpful with this service?
- How often did you use this service?
- How did you learn about this service?

**YWCA Shelter and Housing Network** (Name of Agency)

- What did you find most helpful with this service?
- What did you find least helpful with this service?
How often did you use this service?
How did you learn about this service?

Artemis Center For Alternative to Domestic Violence  (Name of Agency)

What did you find most helpful with this service?
What did you find least helpful with this service?
How often did you use this service?
How did you learn about this service?

Crisis Care  (Name of Agency)

What did you find most helpful with this service?
What did you find least helpful with this service?
How often did you use this service?
How did you learn about this service?

Suicide Prevention  (Name of Agency)

What did you find most helpful with this service?
What did you find least helpful with this service?
How often did you use this service?
How did you learn about this service?

The Other Place – Day Shelter for the Homeless  (Name of Agency)

What did you find most helpful with this service?
What did you find least helpful with this service?
How often did you use this service?
How did you learn about this service?

Legal Aid Society of Dayton  (Name of Agency)

What did you find most helpful with this service?
What did you find least helpful with this service?
How often did you use this service?
How did you learn about this service?
Founders Family Center (Name of Agency)

What did you find most helpful with this service?
What did you find least helpful with this service?
How often did you use this service?
How did you learn about this service?

Family Services Association (Name of Agency)

What did you find most helpful with this service?
What did you find least helpful with this service?
How often did you use this service?
How did you learn about this service?

Montgomery County Department of Human Services Job Center (Name of Agency)

What did you find most helpful with this service?
What did you find least helpful with this service?
How often did you use this service?
How did you learn about this service?

Planned Parenthood (Name of Agency)

What did you find most helpful with this service?
What did you find least helpful with this service?
How often did you use this service?
How did you learn about this service?

Domestic Violence Hotline (Name of Agency)

What did you find most helpful with this service?
What did you find least helpful with this service?
How often did you use this service?
How did you learn about this service?
Appendix F

Recruitment Flyer
(Posted in churches, daycare centers, and grocery stores in low-income communities)

Family Skill Building Study For Single “low-income” African American Mothers

Are you a “low-income” single African American mother living in Dayton Ohio who would be interested in participating in a local research study conducted by the University of Cincinnati to help discover your needs for “family skill building intervention training?”

Please take the contact information attached below.

Thank you.