

# ROLE STRAIN IN AFRICAN-AMERICAN WOMEN The Efficacy of Support Networks

EDITH A. LEWIS  
*University of Michigan*

**Historically, African-American women** in families have been responsible for the care and nurturance of their spouses, children, and aging family members (Campbell, 1987). Limited attention has been given, however, to their ability to carry out these responsibilities. Furthermore, few strategies have been suggested which may enable them to balance role responsibilities more effectively. This article reports the findings from a study investigating the use of support networks as a possible survival strategy adopted by African-American women with children.

African-American mothers are cognizant of the societal limitations confronting them as they undertake their economic, parental, and household maintenance tasks. They bear the stigma attached to their ethnic status, as well as that of being female, in many cases. While attempting to modify or execute the responsibilities attached to their roles, they are also influenced by the often "caste-like" restrictions prescribed to them in their ethnic status.<sup>1</sup> Thus it may be posited that the execution of tasks may create a strain for African-American mothers who often have limited access to resources and institutional supports.

Among the illustrations of the difficulties in this "balancing act" are the works of Johnson (1983) and Leggon (1983) who identified the stress related to the simultaneous fulfillment of the roles of mother and worker for African-American women. The United States continues to be the only industrialized nation without a universal child support or child benefit program (Kammerman and Kahn, 1981). Part-time, flexible work opportunities are limited for

women with children, as are affordable quality child-care services (Kammerman, 1983). Darity and Myers (1983), in noting the data on incarceration and reduced life expectancy of African-American men suggest that African-American women understand the inevitability of living in a female-headed household due to the shortage of African-American men.

With that increased probability comes the potential for poverty. The works of Kessler and Essex (1982), McAdoo (1983), and Weitzman (1981) identified the relationship between economic role strain and poverty. Darity and Myers's (1984) research suggests that those African-American women most susceptible to poverty fall in the age range of 21 to 29. While one in five children has a living, absent parent, few of these absent parents provide financial support for their offspring. The economic responsibility for these children is the custodial parent, usually the mother (Oellerich and Garfinkel, 1983).

Given these status issues and role responsibilities of African-American mothers, the following question is raised: How do African-American women, who are more likely to experience economic deprivation, effectively raise children and manage households? The literature on African-American families outlines the tradition of utilizing a system of informal networks. These include extended families (Billingsley, 1968; Hatchett and Jackson, 1983), friends (McCray, 1980), husbands (Hampton, 1982; McAdoo, 1981), and religious communities (Taylor and Chatters, 1984).

Using the existing knowledge of traditional strategies used by African-American women, this study examined the following questions:

1. To what extent do African-American mothers use extended kin, friend, current partner, and religious community informal networks to reduce their role strain?
2. How does the *perception* of support influence African-American mothers' reports of role strain?
3. Is there a relationship between the number of children and reports of economic, household maintenance, and parental role strain?
4. What other demographic factors may contribute to African-American mothers' reports of role strain?

## METHOD

### SAMPLE

This study is a secondary analysis of data collected in the National Survey of Black Americans (NSBA) between 1979 and 1980 as part of the Program for Research on Black Americans of the Institute for Social Research, University of Michigan. The National Survey of Black Americans is a national probability study of the adult African-American population of the continental United States. It is composed of responses elicited from 2,107 African-American adults, age 18 years and older. NSBA instruments were used with a multistage, equal probability sample of African-American American households from 76 primary geographical areas identified from the 1970 Census distribution of the African-American population. The overall NSBA survey provides a wealth of information on African-American Americans across age, gender, geographical boundaries, rural and urban parameters, income, and educational levels. The instrument, averaging 2½ hours to administer, includes sections on personal adjustment, social and family supports available to and utilized by respondents, community life, political and racial attitudes, formal and informal resources available for problem resolution, employment history, family relationship, and religion.

This study focused on the subsample of all women respondents who were parents of, and living with, minor children ( $n = 592$ ). This subsample represented 41% of the available pool of women from the NSBA and 28% of the total sample. Table 1 presents a summary of the general characteristics of the sample.

African-American married mothers comprised 45% of the sample, while unmarried mothers were 55% of the sample. Marital status was not available for one respondent. Of the unmarried women in the subsample, 54% ( $n = 177$ ) were separated or divorced, 14% ( $n = 47$ ) were widowed, and 31% reported never having married ( $n = 101$ ).

Over 50% of the respondents were from the southern portion of the U.S., 23.5% from the north central area, 20.3% from the East,

**TABLE 1**  
**Selected General Characteristics of Sample (n = 592)**

<u>Marital status (n=591)</u>			<u>Geographic region (n=592)</u>		
	<u>n</u>	<u>%</u>		<u>n</u>	<u>%</u>
Married	266	45	South	300	50.7
Unmarried	325	55	Northeast	120	20.3
separated			North Central	140	23.6
divorced	177	54	West	32	5.4
widowed	47	14			
never					
married	101	31			

  

<u>Number of minor children (n=592)</u>			<u>Household incomes (n=529)</u>		
	<u>n</u>	<u>%</u>		<u>n</u>	<u>%</u>
1	200	33.8	< \$4,000	95	18.0
2	190	32.1	\$4-10,000	178	33.6
3	97	16.4	\$10-15,000	78	14.7
4	63	10.6	\$15-25,000	110	20.8
5	26	4.4	\$25-30,000	37	7.0
6	10	1.7	\$30,000 or more	31	5.9

  

<u>Respondent's age (n=590)</u>			<u>Years of education (n=590)</u>		
	<u>n</u>	<u>%</u>		<u>n</u>	<u>%</u>
Less than 21	18	2.1	Less than high school	211	35.6
21-29	173	29.3	High school graduate	235	29.8
30-35	148	25.1	Some college	103	17.5
36-45	156	26.4	College graduate	41	6.9
46-54	71	12.0			
55-61	18	3.1			

  

<u>Occupation (n=355)</u>		
	<u>n</u>	<u>%</u>
Professional	52	14.6
Manager	14	3.9
Sales	9	2.5
Clerical	98	27.6
Crafts	10	2.8
Operator	58	16.3
Labor	4	1.1
Farmer	1	0.3
Service	109	30.7

and 5.4% from the West. Mothers reported an average of 2.29 minor children living in their homes. Annual incomes ranged from \$0 to over \$30,000, with a mean of \$11,490. The respondent's mean age

was 35.4 years. The average number of school years completed by respondents was 11.5. While one-fourth of the sample reported some college attendance, less than 7% completed an undergraduate program of study. A majority of respondents in the sample reported being employed. An examination of the occupations held indicates that the largest percentage held service positions, followed by clerical, professional, operative, managerial, sales, crafts, labor, and farming positions.

#### CONSTRUCTS UTILIZED IN THE RESEARCH

As noted earlier, the study examined the relationship between utilization of extended kin, friend, current partner, and religious support networks and African-American mothers' reports of role strain. As such, role strain served as the major dependent construct for the research. Originally defined by Goode (1960: 483) as the "difficulty in fulfilling role obligations," for the purposes of this study, role strain was specifically defined as mothers' reports of difficulty in managing the roles of parent, household maintainer, and economic provider. African-American mothers were asked to indicate whether they had experienced difficulty with their children or finances, and the extent to which they felt overworked by all of their responsibilities.

Four major sets of support networks gleaned from the literature on African-American families were used to measure the methods by which African-American mothers might delegate role enactment responsibilities. Extended kin network, was operationalized as the utilization of adult children, grandparents, aunts, uncles, or in-laws for material and/or emotional assistance. Utilization of a religious support network was also examined as a potential support for African-American mothers. It was operationalized as the identification of a religious affiliation whose members provided material or emotional support to the respondent. In both the extended kin and religious community measures, two items tapping frequency of assistance *and* respondents' perception of the quality of assistance were incorporated. For each measure, two items with Likert-type responses were entered separately into the analyses.

The third and fourth support network measures were related to availability of friends and current partners. Utilizing friends as a source of problem solving and emotional closeness measured the respondents' indication of the number of friends with whom they might talk about their problems. Having a supportive current partner (either husband or unmarried partner) whom the respondent views as beneficial served as another support network. While it may be argued that the addition of the role relationship of respondent/current partner may heighten the respondent's reports of role strain, the decision for inclusion of this relationship as a key variable was related to the availability of the current partner in terms of "defraying some of the costs" of the role strain of mothers.<sup>2</sup>

Several major demographic variables which might influence the relationship between the dependent and independent measures were examined. Household income, geographic region, number of minor children residing in each respondent's household, someone to assist with those children, education, age, employment status, and geographic proximity of kin were included in the analyses.<sup>3</sup>

#### DATA ANALYSIS

The major hypotheses on utilization of support networks, the effects of marital status, and the presence of children on role strain reports by African-American mothers were analyzed via the ordinary least squares regression procedure. This procedure was chosen as appropriate due to the inclusion of both quantitative and qualitative variables.<sup>4</sup>

### RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Descriptions of the economic and other pressures in the lives of many African-American women would lead one to anticipate that a substantial number of the African-American mothers in the study would report difficulties in carrying out their economic, household maintenance, and parental roles. Indeed, over half of the respon-

dents reported economic (65.4%) and household maintenance (54.1%) role strain. With the exception of the friend network, the majority of these women also had considerable network support. Approximately three-fourths of the women had high kin support and available, supportive, current partners. Close to two-thirds (61.5%) reported high religious community support in the form of assistance from church members. In contrast, less than one-fifth of the women (18.4%) reported having a large friend network.

The general relationship between reported role strain and support network utilization suggests that women with high extended kin network support and the presence of supportive current partners were less likely to report household maintenance or parental role strain; the availability of supportive current partners appears to be somewhat more important than strong kin networks in this regard. Moreover, women with supportive partners were less likely than those without such partners to report economic role strain. Availability of supportive partners, many of whom were probably wage earners who contributed to the household income, appears to be the only network unit that affected the likelihood of women reporting economic role strain.

In general, the relationship between network utilization and reports of role strain suggests that women with higher levels of support were somewhat less likely to report role strain. This provides some initial support, although weak, for the basic hypothesis that women with high network support were less likely to report role strain.

#### ECONOMIC ROLE STRAIN

Three measures were statistically related to mothers' reports of economic role strain. The younger the African-American woman, the more likelihood there was for an economic role strain report. Those with lower incomes were also more likely to report economic role strain. Women with supportive current partners were also less likely to report economic role strain than those without supportive current partners. Table 2 presents the results from the regression analyses.

**TABLE 2**  
**Results of Regression Analyses for Economic,  
 Household Maintenance, and Parental Role Strain**

	<u>Economic</u>		<u>Household Maintenance</u>		<u>Parental</u>	
	<u>B</u>	<u>P</u>	<u>B</u>	<u>P</u>	<u>B</u>	<u>P</u>
<u>Support Networks</u>						
Friend Support	.02	.71	-.03	.70	-.09	.23
Current Partner	-.17	.01*	-.07	.32	-.21	.00*
Religious Community	-.06	.40	.03	.66	-.04	.57
Amount of Religious Community Support	-.00	.93	-.11	.14	.04	.61
Family Support	.02	.75	.01	.85	-.01	.81
Amount of Family Support	.00	.94	-.08	.31	-.03	.18
<u>Marital Status</u>						
Married	.10	.65	.21	.36	-.16	.44
Separated/Divorced	-.08	.47	-.00	.97	-.04	.70
Never Married	-.06	.53	.13	.22	-.15	.16
<u>Kin Proximity</u>						
Kin in Same City	-.00	.94	.00	.70	.11	.17
Kin in Same State	-.07	.36	-.01	.83	-.17	.03*
<u>Regional Indicators</u>						
Northeast Region	.12	.07	-.03	.68	.15	.03*
North Central Region	.07	.37	-.01	.82	.12	.12
Western Region	-.00	.98	-.11	.13	.13	.07
<u>Demographic Indicators</u>						
Employment Status	-.13	.85	.12	.12	-.06	.41
Household Income	-.20	.03*	-.03	.75	-.12	.21
Number of Minor Children at Home	.13	.07	.14	.06	.25	.00
Someone to Help with Children	-.02	.68	-.17	.02*	-.09	.18
Female Head of Household	.19	.27	.17	.39	-.02	.88
Educational Level	-.03	.70	.09	.29	.00	.93
Respondent Age	-.19	.01*	.08	.32	.15	.05
	$R^2 = .16$		$R^2 = .10$		$R^2 = .26$	

\*Significant at or beyond .05 level.

The following categories were dropped from analysis: Southern Region, Widowed, and Kin in Different State.

These findings are consistent with other research done in this area. Danziger and Plotnick (1981) and Darity and Myers (1984) have linked age to the increased probability for poverty. It may be that as African-American women age, they develop additional coping strategies to assist them in meeting their financial responsi-



bilities. It is logical to assume that those African-American women with limited resources are more susceptible to the strains associated with providing the basic necessities of food, shelter, and clothing for themselves and their families. As their ability to provide for these needs improves through increased income, so their difficulties in balancing these demands may be expected to decrease. Also, the assistance provided by older children through part-time work may be a factor, although this possibility was not examined in the present study.

#### HOUSEHOLD MAINTENANCE ROLE STRAIN

Given the literature on traditional supports within the African-American family, a negative relationship between mothers' use of support networks and household maintenance role strain might have been expected. The analysis, however, did not yield significant results. Only one variable had a significant coefficient: respondents having someone to assist them with their children. Thus the support variables were not related to the measure of household maintenance role strain utilized in this study.

The lack of significant findings in the areas of household maintenance role strain may reflect the inadequacy of the measure used. The construct of household role strain has been utilized in other research (Kessler and Essex, 1982) and found to be relevant. While 54% of the women who responded to the question in this research identified themselves as feeling overwhelmed by all they had to do, these women may have been responding to a more general sense of strain which is chronic as opposed to acute and situational, as with the other role strain measures. Given this rationale, the only variable to reach significance in the regression analysis, that of having someone to help with the children, makes intuitive sense.

#### PARENTAL ROLE STRAIN

Four variables were significantly related to reports of parental role strain (see table 2). Negatively related to African-American women's reports of parental role strain were the presence of a

supportive current partner and kin whose proximity was in the same county or state as the respondents (as opposed to being in the same neighborhood or city, or out of state). Positively related to mothers' reports of parental role strain were the number of minor children and residence in the northeastern region of the United States. In other words, African-American women were less likely to report parental role strain if they had a supportive current partner. Women whose extended kin lived some distance away but not out of state were also less likely to report parental role strain. The greater the number of minor children residing in the respondents' home, combined with residence in the Northeast, the more likely African-American mothers were to report parental role strain. Only in the parental role strain analysis did the presence of minor children in the household influence respondents' reports of role strain.

It is in this area that interpretation of the findings is most interesting, as direct relationships between two of the findings and African-American family life in the United States have been heretofore absent in the literature. The finding that African-American women with minor children who live in the northeastern region of the United States are more likely to report parental role strain than those in the South raises some interesting questions. This finding persisted in subsequent analysis controlling for occupational status of the respondents. One explanation for this finding is the popular belief that societal and familial boundaries and behavioral expectations are most inflexible in the northeastern section of the country. Societal role obligations, following this explanation, are rigidly defined and difficult to meet for African-American women, given the lack of availability of supportive partners and discriminatory practices in employment and education. While plausible, this hypothesis has yet to be empirically tested.

More important, this geographic region effect has never emerged in any other empirical research on African-American women. This may be due to the fact that almost all studies on African-American family life have utilized convenience samples drawn from selected geographical areas, while this sample was drawn from the entire country. Furthermore, a great many studies have been drawn precisely from the northeastern section of the country. During the past

15 years, there has been a reversal in migratory patterns of African-Americans such that many more are returning to the South than leaving it (U. S. Bureau of the Census, 1986). Regional influences appear to have importance for African-American mothers' parenting responsibilities.

The importance of family embeddedness is a central theme in the Black family literature. Thus the presence of kin in the same state emerging as being more important than the presence of kin in the same city presents a complicated relationship. Weiss (1975) suggests a rationale that has some face validity. Keeping kin involved in familial affairs is important in times of crises. Problems may arise, however, if large numbers of people are involved in the negotiation or in daily decision making. Perhaps it is better to keep kin "close, but not too close." In other words, some geographic distance allows for psychological availability of kin when needed without their physical proximity when not required by African-American mothers.

While a strong value which equates children with wealth in African-American communities exists both in the U. S. and around the world, the presence of children places increased demands that African-American women in this study found difficult to fulfill. The larger the number of children living in the home, the more likely women are to report role strain. McAdoo (1982) suggests that the "children as wealth" hypothesis may be a reasonable one only after the children have reached adulthood and may be able to provide filial assistance to other members of the family.

Again, the presence of a supportive current partner emerges as a negative predictor of African-American women's reports of subjective parental role strain. It is interesting to note that parenting generally assumes a set of role expectations that are considered to be female-oriented. McAdoo's (1981) contention that African-American men are actively involved in cooking, cleaning, and parenting is substantiated by this finding, assuming that the partners identified by these respondents are all males. Further, it appears that respondents' perception of partners being supportive and sharing the benefits derived from the relationship overrides actual legal marital status.

## SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

This research focused on a national sample of African-American mothers with minor children living in the home. Of interest was the mothers' perception of economic, household maintenance, and parental role strain in the potential presence of traditional networks of support. Each of these was differentially highlighted by the respondents. African-American women who considered their partners to be supportive were less likely to perceive themselves as experiencing economic and parental role strain. Those mothers who were older and had higher incomes were also less likely to report economic role strain. Parental role strain was more likely to be reported by mothers who lived in the Northeast and less likely for women whose kin lived in the same state but not in the same city.

Additional attention needs to be paid to the importance of geographic region, kin proximity, and perceptions of the supportiveness of partners, irrespective of legal marital status. The inclusion of these variables in subsequent research will advance the work on social support and mutual aid already underway, as well as inform our research on African-American families.

Future research that identifies differential patterns of support network utilization over time is needed, as is work that focuses on the impact of children's age on need for and use of traditional African-American family mutual support and aid networks. This information can only benefit those who are attempting to incorporate these strategies in working with African-American families. Most important, continued work in this area provides information which can be directly used by African-American mothers as we respond to the ongoing responsibilities of caring for our children.

## NOTES

1. Ogbu (1981: 144) outlines four prescriptions related to the status of African-American people as "caste-like minorities": (1) involuntary incorporation into the country, (2) membership permanently acquired at birth, (3) membership affecting the degree to which societal

resources will be available to the member, and (4) members focusing on their restricted access to resources as permanent institutional discrimination.

2. Those respondents who suggested that either themselves or they and their partners benefited equally from the relationship were considered to be utilizing supportive current partners. Those mothers suggesting that their current partners were receiving most of the benefit from the relationship were considered as not utilizing current partners as a support. This variable was dichotomized into presence and absence of current partner support for the purposes of analysis.

3. Household income as utilized in this research should not be misconstrued as a measure of socioeconomic status. Simple measures of SES have been alternately claimed as being a primary determinant of family interaction (Gecas, 1979) and as having little utility for the study of African-American families (Jackson et al., 1982). The inclusion of a measure of household income in this investigation was related to the distinctions found among African-American mothers with varying liquid financial resources. Household income, then, was operationalized as the total annual income of a respondent's household from all sources.

4. It must be noted that the utilization of an ordinary least squares regression technique with a dichotomous dependent variable requires that a cautious interpretation of results be made. Rather than identifying the impact of a unit change in the independent variable on the dependent variable, the procedure produces the impact of the unit change in the independent variable on the probability of the presence of the dependent variable (Fox, 1984). The statistical interpretations made in this study are in this form.

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*Edith A. Lewis, M.S.W., Ph.D. is currently employed as an Assistant Professor in the School of Social Work, University of Michigan. Her research interests and writings have focused on the traditional strengths of African-American families with an*

*emphasis on African-American women. She has written and presented extensively on the topics of intergenerational relationships in African-American families, ethnicity as a critical variable in individual and group research, role strengths and strains of African-American mothers, support network utilization, and networking as an intervention strategy.*