Emotional and Social Development
of African American Children

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Concerns about the development of African American children living in poverty most often center on academic, behavioral, and emotional functioning. Efforts to understand and to remedy these concerns are giving rise to explorations of social and emotional development. Social development refers to the growth of abilities and dispositions that are the basis of emotional adjustment and competence in meeting the demands of the social environment. It includes the development of favorable personal, ethnic, and gender identities, emotion regulation, prosocial behavior, and a capacity for intimate relations. As this research progresses, attention to the role of culture and social context (e.g., poverty and racism) in development is unavoidable. Clearly, developmental research is less than illuminating if it fails to consider variations in the ability of families', schools', and neighborhoods' to provide protective and nurturing environments conducive to healthy development of children. Accordingly, the role of sociocultural factors as sources of risk and resilience constitute an important area of scholarly inquiry regarding the social and emotional development of African American children.

Epidemiological and developmental research provide a disturbing portrait of the academic, social, and emotional functioning of African American children living in poverty. A host of problems are associated with being African American and poor. These problems include internalizing and externalizing disorders, aggression, impulsivity, attention deficits and hyperactivity, substance abuse, teenage pregnancy, and problems related to diffuse racial identity, self-esteem, and low academic achievement (Slaughter, 1988).

With respect to psychological functioning, the incidence of serious emotional disturbance as defined by the *DSM-III-R* among African American children is low. However, the rates of behavioral problems are extraordinarily high and remain so throughout childhood (Earls, 1980). In addition, concern about decrements in academic functioning of poor children as measured by standardized achievement tests appears warranted. For example, reports of the Woodlawn Program of Assessment, Early Intervention, and Evaluation (Kellam, Branch, Agrawal, & Ensminger, 1975) suggest that at least one in four African American children exhibited maladjustment in domains they judged essential for academic achievement and social adaptation. Over a 9-year period this project followed six cohorts of African American children ($N = 1,700$) representative of the population in the low-income Woodlawn Housing Project in Chicago who entered the first year of school between the years 1964 and 1969. The study evaluated emotional adjustment and adaptation to the social demands of the environment, particularly the school setting. Assessment focused on five social developmental tasks: social competence, compliance, maturity, academic effort, and intellectual focus and attention. Of these 1,700 children, 24.9% were judged moderately or severely maladaptive on academic effort (low effort), 22.6% on concentration (fidgety and restless, hyperactive, inattentive) and 25.7% on maturation (enuresis, crying, tantrums). In addition, factor analysis suggested that most maladjusted children (68% of the sample) could be classified into one of three types: shy, aggressive, or shy/aggressive. Shy children accounted for 20.5% of the sample and were described as shy, anxious, flat in affect, and had physiological symptoms. Aggressive children made up 15.7% of the sample, were aggressive, anxious, and hyperkinetic, and were described by parents as immature, nervous, and sometimes enuretic. Shy-aggressive children (13.9%) possessed the traits of both the shy and the aggressive children. In another study, the Family Research Project in New York City (Langner, Gersten, McCarthy, et al., 1976), about 23% of the children whose parents were on welfare were marked or severely impaired in comparison to 13.5% of children not on welfare. Sustainable challenges can be made to these epidemiological data on the grounds of sensitivity and selectivity of measurement. Although there is a modest degree of consistency across independently conducted studies in the conclusion that behavioral problems are common, the extremely high estimates of maladaptation reported by some might exaggerate the problem. Existing epidemiological studies support the assertion that a point prevalence rate of socioemotional disturbances is about 20%, or one in five children. In addition, the risk factors associated with this 20% occurrence seem to be consistent across several different countries and

nationalities (Costello, 1988). No matter how intellectually engaging it seems, debate about the precision of these estimates misses the point and diverts attention away from efforts to clarify the factors that cause and reinforce these problems over the course of childhood and adolescence. These epidemiological data can serve a useful purpose in stimulating curiosity about the factors and processes leading up to and sustaining the observed outcomes.

If the burgeoning interest in social and emotional development continues, epidemiological studies might have already achieved this end. A significant shift has already occurred among developmental researchers to issues of social development and has focused attention on the psychological processes through which children negotiate their social worlds successfully and form ethnic and gender identities (Maccoby, 1980). Although socioemotional development is viewed as fundamentally interactional and reciprocal, most analyses of social development emphasize the influences of family and community socialization through which children internalize and adopt "the habits, values, goals and knowledge" needed to function effectively (Maccoby, 1980, p. v). Emotional development is an aspect of social development referring to the evolution of capacities for emotional expression, regulation, and adjustment. Use of the term "development" in connection with emotions implies that adaptive emotional responses arise from basic abilities that can be refined and honed through experience and, over time, equip individuals to handle an ever widening array of social demands (Saarni, 1990). Emotional development is a key factor leading up to psychosocial outcomes, such as social competence and psychological health. In addition, it can be implicated in the formation of a favorable self-concept and a firm ethnic identity. The success of emotional development is typically conceptualized in terms of psychological maturity, autonomy, a range of prosocial behaviors such as altruism, sensitivity to interpersonal cues, a favorable self-concept, a capacity for intimate social relations, and the ability to aspire and work toward long-range goals. The emergence of these favorable outcomes is thought to begin with the emotional exchanges related to secure attachment early in life and is dependent on refinement, over time, of the child's capacities for self-regulation, impulse control, perspective taking, empathy, internalization of social norms, moral reasoning, and responsiveness to social demands (Bretherton, 1985, 1990). The importance of emotional development lies in its putative link, on one hand, to indexes of psychological well-being, such as self-efficacy, life satisfaction, achievement motivation, and self-control, when development proceeds normally. On the other hand, it is linked to anxiety, guilt, aggression, impulsiveness, delinquency, substance abuse, and hopelessness when individuals veer off

the expected developmental course. In spite of its importance, the processes and outcomes related to emotional and social development have received far less attention from researchers than those related to cognitive and physical development. However, these processes are slowly gaining a place of prominence in the discourse on childhood development.

CULTURE, ETHNICITY, AND SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Given the recency of interest in emotional development it is not surprising that little is known about cultural and ethnic variations in emotional development. However, it is clear that research on social development is incomplete without attention to culture (e.g., see Ogbu, 1985). After all, cultural norms serve as precise and exacting standards against which the acceptability of specific behavior is measured. In this way, culture influences the development of social behavior. However, culture is a broad and elusive concept that does not lend itself to simple or precise definitions. Culture can be conceived as an acquired system of beliefs, values, and symbols that incorporate and represent the worldviews held in common by its members. It is an internalized working model reflecting the world in which they live. Delineating the specific values and beliefs of the members of a particular cultural group who live in a multicultural social milieu is complicated. When multiple cultures and systems of beliefs coexist they potentially influence one another. Individuals might combine and integrate aspects of several different cultural systems to achieve a template for their own attitudes, values, and behavior. Efforts to assess cultural orientations must somehow account for the issue of cultural homogeneity versus cultural heterogeneity within a time and place. The concepts of assimilation, acculturation, and cultural retention have often been used to guide analysis of this issue (e.g., see Olmedo, 1979). The assimilation versus acculturation perspective suggests that individuals choose a single specific cultural orientation, albeit ambivalently, and reject others. This approach does not account as well for the possibility that individuals might adopt several cultural orientations simultaneously.

In this special issue, Jagers and Mock use the triple quandary paradigm to test the relative integration of the discrepant cultural systems by African American children and adolescents. The triple quandary paradigm highlights the fact that African Americans are exposed to and might choose from at least three dominant cultural systems: retention of African culture from preslavery eras, marginalized oppressed minority orientation, and the dominant Anglo-American system of values that direct and dictate our day-to-day lives, the

symbols used to represent life and death, work and love, which spring from what might be labeled a European and Anglo-Saxon tradition (e.g., see Belah et al., 1985). Jagers and Mock's study is an effort to assess the extent to which these three cultural sources are imbibed by and integrated into the psyche and soul of African American children. In addition, they explore the relationship of these cultural views (i.e., the oppressed, Anglo-Saxon culture, and Afrocentric) to desirable and undesirable personality traits. Their data provocatively suggest that a more favorable pattern of personal characteristics obtain when African American children resolve the cultural choice dilemma in favor of the Afro-cultural orientation.

SOCIAL IDENTITY

In dealing with the issue of the emotional adjustment of children, one cannot ignore the role of self-esteem and ethnic identity. For almost 60 years, the nature of the relationship between self-esteem and ethnic identity has been at the center of one of the most vigorously researched and hotly debated controversies addressing the inner lives of African American children. Although this topic is rarely cast within a cultural framework, it is in fact an attempt to understand the role of the social context and external evaluation on African American youths. Self-esteem itself is a sensitive indicator of mental health inasmuch as it is inversely related to depression and positively associated with enthusiasm, motivation, self-confidence, and assertiveness. Self-esteem, then, is an important index of socioemotional functioning. The essence of the controversy is that African American children were assumed to experience low self-esteem and exhibit other problems because they internalized societal devaluation. In his article in this issue, Whaley addresses the complicated issue first by reviewing previous studies on self-esteem and ethnicity. He makes an important contribution in using social and developmental frameworks for understanding and elucidating the contradictions between assertions and facts. Although cultural orientation is unrelated to self-esteem, as Jagers and Mock demonstrate, it is related to other aspects of personal functioning and adjustment.

CONCEPTIONS OF ADJUSTMENT

Research on emotional and social adjustment of African American children must confront head on questions about the generalizability and rele-

vance of problems, formulations, and diagnostic schemes to specific cultures and ethnic groups. For example, the widely used *Diagnostic Statistical Manual (DSM-III-R)* has been attacked on many different grounds. Johnson's article in this issue describes the historical and intellectual legacy of the *DSM* and challenges its applicability and accuracy for African American children. In a similar vein, Barbarin and Soler suggest in their article presented here that the diagnosis of hyperactivity among African American youth, particularly boys, might in fact be a misdiagnosis. Symptomatology, diagnosed as attention deficit disorder with hyperactivity (ADHD), may in fact be more accurately classified as an anxiety-based disorder or chronic agitation syndrome resulting from living in situations characterized by loss and random violence. Johnson also proposes an alternative category of disturbance observed in African American children that gives a prominent role in the etiology of psychological disorders to trauma or distress, particularly distress resulting from negative racial encounters. Consider, for example, the distress that many African American youths experience in being chronically treated as an object of suspicion and fear. It is not an unusual experience for many to be scrutinized and followed in stores, detained and interrogated on the streets by police, and treated as a public nuisance when they congregate on the sidewalks or in places of business that normally cater to and welcome other groups. Exposure to these events in the long run exact a price. Along with other trauma they can contribute to stress-related disorders or other disturbances.

To understand the cumulative effects of these and other trauma, Barbarin and Soler present data on behavioral and emotional symptoms based on a national probability sample of African American children. The picture they provide of the emotional functioning of African American children is sobering. Symptoms associated with anxiety, conduct, and hyperactivity disorders are among the most frequently reported parental concerns. Moreover, high rates of these difficulties are associated with family structure, age, and gender. These studies are consistent with epidemiological research on a broader array of ethnic groups in the United States, Canada, Australia, and Puerto Rico. From these studies it is clear that some children are more likely to experience difficulty than others. For example, analyses of gender and SES (socioeconomic status) point to subgroups who experience somewhat higher rates of psychological symptoms. Low SES was associated with higher rates of emotional and behavioral disorders than was higher SES. Girls had higher risk for emotional disorder, and boys had a greater risk for behavioral disorders. Older children were at greater risk for emotional behavioral disorders than were younger children. Other highly affected groups include

residents of urban areas, those who have experienced school failure, poor health, or antisocial peer socialization, and those who have parents with history of psychiatric disorder or criminal arrest (Costello, 1988).

Is the adverse pattern of adjustment observed for a sizable minority of African American children the natural consequence of racism, poverty, adaptation to physically threatening and dangerous environments, or an unstable family life? No single factor provides a compelling account of these observed outcomes. However, a plausible argument can be made that social causation and social context are principal factors in these behavioral and emotional outcomes. Henly's article mounts such an argument in the case of adolescent pregnancy. The salience of contextual factors can be extended to other aspects of social development. Although the importance of personal factors such cognitive ability and temperament is well established (Earls & Jung, 1987), a degree of consensus is building around the relationship between several contextual factors, such as family functioning and poverty, and the risk of psychological symptoms (McAdoo & McAdoo, 1985; McLoyd, 1990; McLoyd & Flanagan, 1990). Thus the familial, social, and community contexts are widely believed to play a critical role in the nature of the socioemotional competencies developed and the timing of their emergence. Ordinarily, three aspects of the social environment—the family, the schools, and the community—are thought to play a critical role in the exacerbation or amelioration of psychological disturbances. Speculation about the mechanisms through which family and social environment influence emotional development centers on the selective valuing, eliciting, and reinforcing of specific competencies, the provision of the social-emotional supplies needed by the child, and the exposure to or protection from debilitating environmental stressors. Operating in tandem they are able to provide a safe haven and nurturing environment to help children thrive. However, for African American children, these institutions themselves are in grave danger and in need of life supports if they are to function adequately. Potential problems within the family or household include lack of resources to provide the basic necessities of life, despair and loss of hope about ability to change the family's life situation, inavailability/lack of involvement of parental figures in the lives of preadolescent and adolescent children, instability of residence, overburdened parents, lack of supervision during nonschool hours, strain on extended family when parents become dysfunctional, lack of respite and other child care, recreational activities for adult caretakers, and poor health of primary caretakers. Over half of African American children are being raised in households designated by the census as single-parent families. Yet children growing up in single-adult households have a higher risk of disorders

than do children in most dual-adult structures. The one exception is the mother/ stepfather combination, which places children at as high a risk for maladaptation as children in single-parent, mother-only households (Earls, 1980). These effects of family life on child development are not the same for boys and girls. Family functioning, in contrast to family structure, appears to be more crucial in predicting adaptive behavior of females than of males. For males, the external environment, the neighborhood, seems to play a more significant role in predicting adaptational outcomes.

The schools, a second leg of the supportive cradle for children, is also struggling to achieve effectiveness. The problems that children face in schools include instability of staff, low teacher morale, ineffective instructional programs, problems of discipline, order and direction, weak, distrustful relations between school and families, and limited caretaker involvement in the child's school. The neighborhood, the third leg to the supportive cradle, can be as much a source of distress as of nurturance for many children. Aspects of the neighborhood ecology possibly relevant to these include infrastructure elements, such as housing, recreational facilities and programs, or outlets for creative energies, and the elements of physical safety and crime victimization.

CONCLUSION

A lethal combination of economic hardship, limited access to supportive services, and the psychological burden of oppression have all combined to disadvantage African American children and to place significant obstacles in the way of their development. The sequelae of these conditions can be observed across the life span: increased morbidity and mortality, mood disturbances, academic underachievement, aggression, premature sexuality and childbearing, substance abuse, delinquency, underemployment, high rates of divorce, and instability of family life. It is abundantly clear that these conditions exact a high price on the emotional development of African American children as evident in the alarming data about the high rates of difficulties and problems observed over their life spans. The rates of difficulties reported here give rise to realistic worries about the long-term emotional, social, academic, and financial well-being of African American children. Although agreement is building about the association of certain risk factors to adverse psychological development, particularly in behavioral and emotional realms, the underlying causes are still not clear. The role of the social context as represented in a combination of the forces of oppression, commu-

nity breakdown, and family instability as well as a combination of personal factor undoubtedly contribute to these adverse outcomes.

This special issue focuses on the complex situation of African American children by assembling a select group of articles addressing the sociocultural context and outcomes of socioemotional, academic, and cognitive development of African American children. Theoretical and empirical contributions presented here seek to advance understanding of the cultural context of development, particularly the role of family and community forces in shaping this development of African American children. Culture and ethnic identity are no less important. Whaley concludes from his review of the literature that cultural identity is a potent predictor of adjustment outcome and that this should be used as a basis and target of preventive intervention. In contrast, he reminds us that efforts to enhance self-esteem appear to have less potency and effectiveness in moderating social and academic behaviors.

This special issue on emotional development is intended to move the discourse on the development of African American children beyond polemics and impassioned rhetoric to analyses that might contribute to policy discussions and the design of intervention. These articles focus on select issues affecting development, provide data that clarify the prevalence and nature of competencies or problems in domains such as mental health, school achievement, or social competence, or provide a theoretical or empirical review that advances understanding of development of problems and competencies. There are many fruitful areas of research that have received scant attention, particularly in light of their critical importance to the development of African American children. Many areas need attention, but let me point out a few. High on the list of issues to be explored are infant mental health and attachment; racial and gender socialization and identity; effects of family structure and household composition on social and academic development; substance abuse; effects of family and community context on development (e.g., economic distress, poverty, illness, and violence); and research and development of prevention programs.

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