

Black Families and Generational Trauma

By Faith Bunch

Introduction

If you have ever watched the 2009 movie *Precious*, it is an excellent example of an abusive home. The main character, a 14 year old girl named Precious, experienced verbal, physical, and sexual abuse, which causes long-lasting effects on her mental, physical, and emotional state. The movie exhibited many of the attributes and products of childhood trauma: a scary, dangerous, violent, or life-threatening event that happens to a child, with different kinds of abuse causing different lasting impacts on children.

In many Black homes, how parents carry out their methods of discipline can affect their children in multiple ways. Certain stereotypes of Black families can be categorized as dysfunctional. A dysfunctional family is defined by “conflict, misbehavior, or abuse,” (Anter and Beck, 2020). When you raise a child in a chaotic environment, they become a product of that environment. Children who grow up in a dysfunctional household tend to develop differently than one who grows up in a “normal” home. According to Elizabeth Anter and Christina Beck, "when you grow up around unhealthy behaviors, it is normal to believe that this is just how families are and that you are destined to continue on this path." Children in these predicaments tend to act like parents to peers, forget vital parts of their childhood growing up, and have many more lasting effects. Many different factors can play into a dysfunctional family, two out of many are abusive parents and authoritarian parents. An abusive parent is one who uses their actions or words negatively towards their child and an authoritarian is one who is controlling. This parenting style is usually caused by fear,

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which typically comes from their own experiences or something this parent has been told (Al Ubaidi, 2017). Authoritarian parents are seen as controlling, which could be an indication of underlying abuse in itself.

Black parents are perceived to parent their children in the authoritarian parenting style. This could have some negative and positive outcomes. Some of the pros of being an authoritarian parent are: your child becomes goal-oriented, focuses on safety, learns responsibility at a young age, etc. On the flip side, you have adverse outcomes: angry children, lower self-esteem, reliance on rules, often becoming rebellious, etc. The way a parent treats their child has a big effect on their well-being. When you're very strict on a child and show low levels of trust for your children they tend to react based on those actions.

The views and abnormal portrayal of Black families by this society has impacted the parenting style seen by black families today. Black families are seen as deprived, disadvantaged, and poorly educated. According to Nicole Rogers and Rashad Robinson of the Washington Post, when Ray Moore was running for senate he said that to make America great again means go back to a time when families were united, which happens to be under slavery. People saying Black families were better off under slavery isn't old. During the 2011 presidential primary, "candidates Michele Bachmann and Rick Santorum both signed a pledge against same-sex marriage that stated children born during slavery were more likely to be raised by a mother and father in a two-parent home than children are today" (Robinson, Rogers, 2017). This is a result of the portrayal of Black fathers. They are seen as absent, but under slavery, the families were in one household together. It was also said that "59% of poor

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families were depicted in news media as Black, even though only 27% of families living below the poverty line are Black” (Dixon, 2017). This goes along with many other assumptions made about Black families. Black mothers are “known” for making terrible choices and Black families as a whole are seen “as destabilizing forces in society,” which plays into many stereotypes within the Black community (Dixon, 2017).

Black trauma stems from slavery. The trauma Black people face in society would be called race trauma: the emotional and mental injuries that result from continued exposure to racism, ethnic discrimination, racial bias, and hate crimes. (Hoskin, 2022) Starting from slavery, Africans were taken from their homes and placed in another foreign country to have their lives changed in the most traumatic way possible. Then eventually we get to the Jim Crow Era. Black people were constantly undergoing violence in their own communities due to their skin color. Black people were fighting for human rights.

In the present day, humans are all generally viewed as equal overall, but not always treated the same. In the news, it is a constant battle to be seen for more than Black skin. Police brutality and blatant racism displayed in today’s society really affect the Black community. Outside of homes, Black people experience trauma in society day to day. There are a lot of stressors within the Black community that play into the dysfunctional aspects of Black families. These stressors could even carry into the way Black people raise their children. Growing up in a dysfunctional Black household can cause long-lasting harmful effects on Black children’s well-being.

I. The Authoritarian Tradition of Black Households

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It is a commonly known stereotype that in Black households they raise their children under strict circumstances, which are usually considered authoritarian parenting styles. The expectations are to follow the rules given to you in all circumstances. Each parent won't be the same, but these authoritarian parents expect obedience and respect from their children. To instill these values, they also use corporal punishment (physical punishment): spanking and even simply popping your child in the lip are considered corporal punishment because the goal is to cause some degree of pain. This was picked up by European slave owners. This type of punishment results in "physical and mental ill-health, impaired cognitive and socio-emotional development, poor educational outcomes, increased aggression, and perpetration of violence," (World Health Organization, 2021). This applies whether it only occurred a few times or many times. Parenting style is a product of your environment growing up. The authoritarian style is "known to be elevated among individuals with low current levels of socioeconomic attainment," (Friedson, 2016). According to the American Psychological Association, about 39 percent of Black families are living in poverty, but only 30 percent of Black families use authoritarian parenting (Bradley, 2014).

Corporal punishment and authoritarian parenting styles are not effective in parenting. Of course, everything has its potential positive aspects, but these are linked to negative child development. It creates a barrier between a child and their guardian. These styles of parenting can cause lack of motivation and rebellious behaviors. Authoritarian parenting is "confrontive and coercive"(.). These parents want to maintain hierarchy within their household. This is considered coercive power

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assertion. Instead of listening to the needs of their children, authoritarian parents “assert control over their children”(.). They make sure their kids know they’re the authority in the situation and give punishments as they feel need be. (Gunnøe,)

This can be compared to authoritative parenting styles. Gunnøe states that parenting has two dimensions: responsiveness and demandingness. Responsiveness is attending to your child’s needs in a positive way. Demanding is providing an order and strong future for a kid. It forms their behavior. Americans view authoritative parenting as the “most beneficial parenting”. Parents who use this style know how to react to “bad” behavior without asserting power over their children. This style has high responsiveness and high demandingness. These parents are able to lay their foot down while still being able to be positive. Authoritarian parenting is considered high demanding, but is low responsive. The style provides structure to the child’s life, but it doesn’t remain positive. Although spanking doesn’t relate to a specific parenting style, it may be considered a custom belief of authoritarian style. Other things like hitting a child as a form of discipline are considered negative.

II. Generational Trauma

Generational trauma is usually called “intergenerational trauma”, which is defined as “trauma that gets passed down from those who directly experience an incident to subsequent generations”(Franco, 2021). There is also historical trauma, which is “traumatic experiences or events that are shared by a group of people within a society, or even by an entire community, ethnic, or national group”(Franco 2021). Due to this trauma, parents may pass on their “inborn genetic vulnerabilities” to their children. This could also affect their parenting. It can create a disconnect between

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them and their child. These parents become numb to the outside world, they “seek silence by self-isolating, have a very low tolerance for stimulation of any kind, and are minimally involved in raising their children”(Franco, 2021). Their children may then imitate these practices and learn to build bonds with others through the ways they learned to do the same with their parents.

The Black community has years of unaddressed trauma, which has to do with repetitive social injustice but can also be inherited. Jacquelyn Clemmons states, “Basically, being Black in America means living with chronic post-traumatic stress disorder(PTSD) caused not only by one’s lived experiences, but the experiences of our ancestors”(Legg, Carissa, 2020). PTSD within the Black community is very prevalent, but no one talks about it. Stemming from slavery, the community has practices that are rooted in fear of being seen as a threat. In 2019, it was found that African Americans were found with the “highest lifetime prevalence of PTSD (8.7%) compared to their white (7.45, Latino(7%) and Asian(4%) counterparts”(Taylor, 2022). This is related back to historical trauma. When a community continuously undergoes so many unaddressed traumatic events it eventually builds up and gets released in a not-so-healthy way. Connotations like “The Strong Black Woman” stems from slavery and have carried their effects on into today’s generation. Another example is the school-to-prison pipeline. It sets Black kids up for failure because they’re treated badly by the school system (Washington, 2021). Racism in the Black community is very prevalent and affects the community at large. This can then reflect in the ways Black parents raise their children. Black people cannot begin to heal until

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the issue starts to be addressed, but there are ways that individuals can help themselves. This can start with seeking therapy.

III. Therapy in the Black Community

Black families have faced years of intergenerational trauma and have had troubles facing the issues on a day to day basis. A resource such as therapy is a way that could help with coping and relieving some of these unwanted feelings, but the stigma of therapy makes one look weak, leading to the black community shunning therapy as a whole. Also, considering the authoritarian tradition within the community, these parents may not be able to express themselves. Since therapy has been shunned for so many years, the community may not know the good that could come from it. On another hand, people may not go because of the cost and the distrust the Black community has for the medical field. Black America cannot move on to healing the community if they don't begin with their individual growth. Understanding this, the community has to begin to find solutions, which starts with self awareness.

During slavery, people believed the enslaved were not developed enough to develop mental health issues. Slaves learned to push these issues off and replace them with "other terms, like 'stress' and 'being tired'"(McLean Hospital). This led to the thought of mental illness being one's weakness. There is a misunderstanding of mental illness that runs in the Black community. Starting back from slavery, people were brought to the US as property, not as humans. Hundreds of years later comes the Jim Crow Era, when laws were passed to allow discrimination against Black people.

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Black people faced a lot of adversities in the 1900s. They constantly dealt with racial trauma, but in all of that Black people still pushed their mental illness to the side.

Black people have a long history of medical mistrust. Medical mistrust is defined as a lack of trust in or suspicion of medical organization(Jaiswal, 2019). This stems from “gruesome experiments on enslaved people to the forced sterilizations of Black women and the infamous Tuskegee syphilis study...”(Hostetter, Morse, 2021). Black Americans have been shown to be taken less seriously than white patients. People believe that the two races have biological differences, meaning people think Black people experience a higher pain tolerance. On top of this, “the health care system often gives short shrift to the physical and emotional tolls of exposure to police brutality...or other parts of the daily experiences of some Black Americans”(.). Health care providers can help this issue by building bonds with their patients. Although the overall mistrust may not go away, at least these patients will gain trust of people in the field. Forming these connections can help Black Americans in the long run, especially when it comes to therapy.

There are ways to mend medical mistrust. If this issue is mended, then Black people can finally get the care they need, especially Black parents. Authoritarian parenting is beneficial in some ways, but if authoritarian parents can increase responsiveness in their kids then it'll become a more beneficial parenting style. Ways this could be fixed is parenting therapy. It is made to help parents with hardships they face while parenting and “helps parents identify, address, and manage their own past or present experiences that may be affecting the way they relate to their child”(Miller,

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2019). Different issues are dealt with differently, there are different programs like anger management, couples counseling, co-parenting counseling, etc.

Kids raised in dysfunctional families have parents who need to “nourish their emotional needs, provide stability, and acknowledge problems”(Miller, 2019). Society could prevent kids from having low self-esteem and unhealthy coping mechanisms if they also become more useful in parenting groups. A parenting group is a support group in order to assure parents that they have help with their job[being a parent]. Parents can gain parenting tips from others and also hear how other parents feel about how they react to certain situations with their child. They can gain an understanding from someone else’s point of view. It is a safe space to reflect on one and others as a parent. (Miller, 2019)

Lastly, in the Black community, church is very prominent. Jeff Diamant states that, “around three-quarters of Black adults say predominantly Black churches have done either “a great deal” (29%) or “some” (48%) to help Black people move toward equality in the United States...”(Diamant, 2021). That being said, if parent groups are implemented into church, more Black people could see it as a useful tool.

Realistically, medical mistrust will take years to mend due to trauma, therefore the church is a temporary solution.

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