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Conflict

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# African American Family Functioning: Relationship between Parenting Dimensions and Family Conflict

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*Abstract: This study sought to examine the relationship between parenting dimensions and family conflict among African American families. Family conflict has a significant impact on family functioning and there is a gap in the research that identifies specific traits of parenting that are related to conflict. This study addresses this gap by noting relationships and utilizing a complex theoretical lens to explore findings. The research question addressed: What is the relationship between family conflict (the amount of openly expressed anger within the family) and the six dimensions of parenting (i.e., warmth, rejection, structure, chaos, autonomy support, and coercion) among African American families that access inner city Head Start programs? A relationship between parenting dimensions and family conflict was hypothesized. Survey methods were employed to examine fifty-five African American families. It was determined that a significant relationship existed between family conflict and structure. The relationship found between structure and family conflict can result from the restrictiveness, demandingness, and control found in the definition of structure. This relationship is examined through the lenses of Bowen family systems theory, conflict theory, and human ecology theory. Recommendations and implications for human service practice are explored as well as suggestions for future research efforts.*

*Keywords: Family Conflict, Parenting, African American, Head Start*

## Introduction

Conflict is detrimental to the healthy functioning of the family unit and results in increased negative emotional symptoms (Stadelmann et al. 2010). Depression and anxiety among family members are the result of conflict within the family unit (McKelvey et al. 2010, Tanaka et al. 2010). Conflict can also exacerbate other family issues (Juang and Alvarez 2010); such as poor communication (Dixon et al. 2008), physical health (Repetti et al. 2002), and psychological insecurity (Hannum 2004). In fact, Burns and Dunlop (2002) suggest the intensity level and degree of conflict experienced in early adolescence influences the construction and development of self-image and contributes to the onset of anxiety. Furthermore, Santiago and Wadsworth (2008) contend that family conflict relates to internalizing symptoms and high stress in impoverished families. Although research uncovers many of the serious consequences of conflict for the family unit and children within the family structure (Burns and Dunlap 2002, Juang and Alvarez 2010, McKelvey et al. 2010, Santiago and Wadsworth 2008, Tanaka et al. 2010), the six dimensions of parenting (i.e. warmth, rejection, structure, chaos, autonomy support and coercion) have not been linked to family conflict in previous research efforts. It can be hypothesized that family conflict would impact the ability to parent if the consequences are so severe in other areas of individual and collective development. However, the specifics of the relationship between dimensions of parenting and family conflict have not been determined. As a result, this study sought to determine whether relationships existed between the presence of family conflict and parenting dimensions of warmth, rejection, structure, chaos, autonomy support and coercion among African American families.

## Literature Review

African American parenting practices differ from the parenting practices of other populations (Koblinsky et al. 2006, Lorber et al. 2011, Nievar and Luster 2006). African American parents have positive attitudes toward corporal punishment and use it more frequently than European Americans (Lorber et al. 2011). Economic stress has been associated with increased physical punishment among African American parents (Nievar and Luster 2006). Low-income African American parents were found to be frequently depressed and have fewer positive interactions with their children than higher income families (Nievar and Luster 2006). Furthermore, positive parenting practices among African American parents are associated with lower depression symptoms among mothers, fewer externalizing and internalizing behavior problems among children, and lower family conflict (Koblinsky et al. 2006).

Family conflict research focuses on specific areas of conflict in relation to parenting (Stadelmann et al. 2010, Horwitz et al. 2011). Researchers have explored Head Start populations as well as minorities in their research efforts (Koblinsky et al. 2006). Links between parenting styles and family conflict were identified, as well as the effect family conflict has on children and parenting (Du Rocher Schudlich and Cummings 2007, O'Donnell et al. 2007). Furthermore, family conflict was found to be a mediator for further problems within families (Sturge-Apple et al. 2006, O'Donnell et al. 2007, Du Rocher Schudlich and Cummings 2007).

Family conflict, positive parenting, depression, family routines, child social skills, and child behavior among African American mothers within Head Start programs have been explored. The findings of this study contended that lower family conflict linked with fewer externalizing problems in child behavior and positive parenting was linked to fewer externalizing and internalizing problems in children (Koblinsky et al. 2006). Stadelmann et al. (2010) explored family conflict, parental separation, parental representation, and behavior in kindergarten children. The findings suggested a positive association between family conflict and negative parental representation. Separated families with high family conflict had increased emotional symptoms and parental separation. Family conflict and children's negative parental representation was found to increase conduct problems throughout kindergarten (Stadelmann et al. 2010).

Research conducted by Horwitz et al. (2011) examined aggressive personality, marital quality, negative parenting, and global family conflict among parents same sex twins along with their spouses. Findings suggested that genetic influences on aggressive personality correlated with genetic influences of global family conflict. Non-shared environment influences of marital quality and negative parenting are correlated with non-shared influences of global family conflict (Horwitz et al. 2011). Although this study did not assess specific aspects of parenting dimensions relating to family conflict, it did focus on negative parenting, genetics, and global family conflict, thus lending insight into the role genetics plays in family conflict and parenting.

O'Donnell et al. (2007) examined interparental conflict, parenting, and depression in fifth and sixth grade students. Findings support the role of parenting and children's cognitions in the effects of interparental conflict on childhood depression. Individual and contextual factors interact to predict the development of children depression and parental warmth and rejection mediate the relationship between interparental conflict and depression (O'Donnell et al. 2007). This study found a connection between parenting dimensions and conflict and suggested relationships exist between specific dimensions of parenting; however, all six dimensions were not explored.

Du Rocher Schudlich and Cummings (2007) assessed parent dysphoria, children's emotional security regarding interparental conflict, marital conflict, and parenting style in families. Findings suggested that parental dysphoria linked to child adjustment through mediating family processes, such as marital conflict and parenting. Furthermore, marital conflict styles mediated relations between parental dysphoria and child adjustment problems (Du Rocher Schudlich and

Cummings 2007). The outcomes of this study did not specifically focus on parenting dimensions, but shed light on the impact marital conflict and parenting style has in mediating issues in parents and children.

Additional empirical research has a focus on parenting and marital conflict within the family. Sturge-Apple et al. (2006) examined marital conflict, parenting practices, and child rearing disagreements in mothers, fathers, and children. Findings suggest marital withdrawal and hostility are associated with increased parental emotional availability more than one year, but did not predict inconsistency in discipline. Additionally, child rearing disagreements are the mediating factor between specific types of marital conflict and parenting practices. Furthermore, marital conflict affects parenting and co-parenting constructs (Sturge-Apple et al. 2006).

In a similar study of marital conflict, Schoppe-Sullivan et al. (2007) examined marital conflict, parenting quality, and children's adjustment within families. Findings suggest that multiple dimensions of parenting mediate relations between marital conflict and child adjustment. Additionally, behavioral controls mediate relations between marital conflict and change in children's internalizing symptoms. Authors recommended further research on parenting dimensions and marital conflict (Schoppe-Sullivan et al. 2007). This study suggests relationship exist between specific dimensions of parenting and marital conflict.

Additionally, Buehler and Gerard (2002) examined marital conflict, parenting, and children maladjustment. Buehler and Gerard (2002) found that ineffective parenting predicts marital conflict and child maladjustment. The effects of marital conflict remain issues within the family over time. A call for further research specific to marital conflict was suggested (Buehler and Gerard 2002). Buehler and Gerard (2002) noted significant influences of conflict on children as well as the role parenting plays in mediating the relationship (Buehler and Gerard 2002; Schoppe-Sullivan et al. 2007). However, the study did not outline specific relationships between parenting dimensions and marital conflict but shed insight into parenting, in general, and how it mediates marital conflict and influences children.

Research that encompasses conflict within the family and aspects of parenting results in significant findings. Negative parenting influences family conflict (Horwitz 2011) and family conflict influences parenting abilities (Sturge-Apple et al. 2006). Additionally, research confirmed that family conflict led to parenting dysphoria (Du Rocher Schudlich and Cummings 2007), ineffective parenting (Buehler and Gerard 2002), and impedes on co-parenting constructs (Sturge-Apple et al. 2006). Furthermore, research suggests relationships exist between parenting dimensions and interparental conflict (O'Donnell et al. 2007) as wells between marital conflict (Schoppe-Sullivan et al. 2007). However, specifics of this relationship are not defined. Therefore, research on parenting and conflict within the family has not shed light into specific characteristics of parenting dimensions that are related to family conflict. This study adds to the body of knowledge on family conflict and parenting dimensions in African American families. It further provides a foundation for future research efforts and implications for practice.

## **Methodology**

### ***Instrument***

This study utilized *Parent as Social Context Questionnaire* (PASCQ), *Family Environment Scale* (FES), and demographics questioning to assess the sample population. *Parent as Social context Questionnaire* (PASCQ; Parent-Report) measured the parenting dimensions of warmth, rejection, structure, chaos, autonomy support, and coercion (Skinner et al. 2005). Interval was the data type generated by each measure. A four-point response format for each item was used to measure participant responses. A response of 1 represented "not true at all," 2 represented "not very true," 3 represented "sort of true," and 4 represented "very true." Each dimension of parenting (i.e., warmth, rejection, structure, and so forth) was composed of five items. Participant's responses to

the items within each dimension of parenting together comprised the subscales identified in the research questions (Skinner et al. 2005).

Validity and reliability for this assessment instrument were determined by using a sample of 645 mothers and 567 fathers. Mothers' scores ranged from .61 for structure and autonomy support to .82 for coercion. Fathers' scores ranged from .62 for autonomy support to .74 for coercion (Skinner et al. 2005). Internal consistencies were calculated using Cronbach's alpha. Internal consistencies were reported as satisfactory (Skinner et al. 2005).

[The] *Conflict Subscale of the Family Environment Scale Form R* (FES; 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition) measured family conflict (Moos and Moos 2002). This instrument was approved by the Administration of Children and Families and used to assess Head Start families (ACF 2010). This study utilized the version of the assessment that assesses the family environment in its natural state i.e., *Family Environment Scale Form R* (real). The conflict subscale measured the perceived amount of openly expressed anger and conflict among family members. The conflict subscale was removed from the instrument and administered independently without harming validity or reliability. The type of data generated from each item was ordinal and treated as interval data. Response categories were "true" or "false" and responses summed in terms of the number of true and the number of false in each column. A scoring key was used to determine the raw scores generated from these responses (Moos and Moos 2002). This instrument was validated based on administrations to 591 individuals from both distressed and non-distressed families (Moos and Moos 2002). Internal consistency was measured using Cronbach's alpha. Subscale alphas for Form R ranged from .61 to .78 for 10 subscales. The conflict subscale falls within the range of .61 to .78 for internal consistency and was not reported independently. Test or retest reliability coefficients ranged from .68 to .86 for the 10 subscales with a two-month testing interval and .54 for independence to .91 for moral-religious with a four-month interval. Test or retest reliability fell within the .68 to .86 range for two-month testing and within the .54 to .91 range for four-month testing. It was not reported independently. Construct validity reported by consistent results with other instruments (e.g., Social Support Appraisals, Social Support Questionnaire, the Locke-Wallace Marital Adjustment Scale et al.) that measure the same constructs and a lack of relationship with those that measure different constructs. Authors did not report the magnitude of these relationships (Moos and Moos 2002).

Together, these instruments comprised of 39 questions that measured family conflict and parenting dimensions. Participation estimated to take approximately 30 minutes to complete. However, the average completion time was 20 minutes.

### ***Procedure***

A copy of the survey and procedures for the study were approved by sponsoring institution human subjects committee. Cluster sampling was employed at an Inner-City Head Start program in a large city in the East North Central state. Letters were sent home by teachers to recruit participants for the study. Two additional follow up letters were sent to parents to encourage participation. Surveys were administered at local Head Start site. Participants completed informed consent document and received a \$5 gift card incentive for participation in study. Participants took self-administered paper pencil surveys in an empty classroom during school hours.

### ***Results***

Of the 999 families enrolled in Head Start during the time of the survey, the sample consisted of 55 African American women who had children currently enrolled in Head Start. This yielded an extremely low response rate of .05%. Participants were between the ages of 18-58. The majority was never married, had at least one year of college and were currently employed for wages.

This study sought to answer the question: What is the relationship between family conflict and the six dimensions of parenting i.e. warmth, structure, autonomy support, chaos, rejection, and coercion amongst African American families that access inner city Head Start programs? It was hypothesized that there would be a significant relationship between parenting dimensions and family conflict in African American families.

There was no significant relationship between family conflict and warmth,  $r = .071$ ,  $N = 55$ ,  $p = .608$ , two-tails, or between family conflict and rejection amongst African American families,  $r = .021$ ,  $N = 55$ ,  $p = .878$ , two-tails. There was, however, a significant, positive relationship between family conflict and structure amongst African American families,  $r = .291$ ,  $N = 55$ ,  $p = .031$ , two-tails. As structure increased, there was a corresponding increase in family conflict. Findings also indicated there was no significant relationship between family conflict and chaos,  $r = -.099$ ,  $N = 55$ ,  $p = .470$ , two-tails or between family conflict and autonomy support,  $r = -.041$ ,  $N = 55$ ,  $p = .765$ , two-tails, amongst African American families. There was also no significant relationship between family conflict and coercion amongst African American families,  $r = -.041$ ,  $N = 55$ ,  $p = .767$ , two-tails. A correlation matrix for African American families is presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Correlation Matrix for African American Families

	Conflict	Warmth	Rejection	Structure	Chaos	Autonomy Support	Coercion
Conflict	—	.071	.021	.291*	-.099	-.041	-.041

Note. \* $p < .05$ , 2-tailed,  $N = 55$ .

Table 1 indicates there was a significant, positive relationship between family conflict and structure among African American families,  $r = .291$ ,  $N = 55$ ,  $p = .031$ , two-tails. As structure increased, there was a corresponding increase in family conflict. The coefficient of determination ( $r^2$ ) = .085, which means that 8.5% of the variance in family conflict among African American families can be explained by structure. There were no significant relationships between family conflict and the remaining five remaining dimensions of parenting i.e. chaos, autonomy support, coercion, warmth, and rejection among African American families. Since one out of six relationships examined was significant, the hypothesis partially supported and the null hypothesis is partially rejected.

## Discussion

It was hypothesized that there is a relationship that exists between parenting dimensions and family conflict in African American families. The findings of this partially confirm this hypothesis by noting the significant relationship that exists between family conflict and the parenting dimension of structure. The null hypothesis states there is no relationship between family conflict and parenting dimensions. The null was partially adopted because five of the six parenting dimensions were not relating to family conflict.

The parenting dimension of structure was found significantly related to family conflict in African American families. Structure is defined as the parental role in providing clear guidelines, expectations, and rules for children (Skinner et al. 2005). Structure is also referred to as organization and includes providing information about pathways to achieving desired outcomes and avoiding undesired outcomes (Skinner et al. 2005). Furthermore, Skinner et al. (2005) states, "In parenting, it has also been studied as a defining feature of restrictiveness, demandingness, and assertive control" (187). The relationship found between structure and family conflict can result from the restrictiveness, demandingness, and control found in structure. Researchers have found that high parental control was related to high anxiety sensitivity and indirectly related to physical symptoms, social anxiety symptoms, and harm avoidance symptoms in African

American children (Gray et al. 2011). High levels of structure are directly characteristic of control creating a positive correspondence with family conflict.

Bowen family system theory notes the role conflict plays in impeding on parenting (Bowen 2011), further supporting the notion of structure relating to family conflict. Family conflict is the amount of openly expressed anger or conflict within the family (Moos and Moos 2002). Findings suggest that a highly structured environment can lead to conflict within the family. However, further research is needed to define the role structure plays in its relationship with family conflict. A review of research reveals that parenting mediates the influence of conflict (O'Donnell et al. 2007). It further notes that relationships exist between certain forms of conflict found within families and parenting dimensions (O'Donnell et al. 2007), which support the findings of this study. Furthermore, multiple dimensions have been found to mediate relationships between conflict and child adjustment (Schoppe-Sullivan et al. 2007). The findings of the relationship between structure and family conflict among African American families are consistent with previous research efforts. Bowen family systems theory and human ecology theory supports these findings as well. Bowen family systems theory notes the role parenting plays in impacting the family system (Bowen 2011). It accounts for conflict in the family unit and its impact on parenting (Papero 1990). Human ecology theory notes the complexity of minority families in its family ecosystem tenet and the role the environment plays in understanding minority families (Phenice and Griffiore 1996). Structure and family conflict are also aspects of the African American family environment, and this theory supports the relationship found between these two variables by noting the complexity found in minority families and the need of environment consideration.

The findings of this study are important in understanding parenting and family conflict in African American families. This study does shed light on an area of parenting, structure, which can be further supported in practice and further explored in future research efforts. However, this study is not without its limitations. This study is limited in scope which is evident in the small sample size and low response rate. However, the low response rate can be contributed to the transient nature of the population. Future research should include soliciting a larger sample size that is representative of the population. Furthermore, this study included cluster sampling, which impacts the generalization of the study's results to all African American families. The results of this study may be representative African American single mother head of households that access inner-city Head Start programs. A larger sampling size and random sampling method could increase this generalizability of future research efforts. Future research should consider replicating this study by addressing the limitations to see if the findings are consistent in a larger sampling of African Americans, two parent head of household African American families and populations outside of Inner city Head Start programs. Furthermore, research efforts should focus on the development of assessments that can be used by service providers to access the level of structure and conflict within families. This would be beneficial in treatment planning and removing barriers faced by African American families.

## **Human Service Practice**

The findings of this study suggest a significant relationship between the parenting dimension of structure and family conflict in African American families. This finding adds to the body of knowledge on minority family systems as well creating understanding of the aspects of parenting that influence conflict within some minority families. It is understood in helping professions that minority families rely heavily on cultural values which impact communication patterns and roles within the family systems. It is further understood that there are unique variables that impede on family functioning in minority families and that these variables can differ within family systems of the same culture (Crosson-Tower 2014). The relationship between structure and family conflict is worth exploration in other minority family systems.



The relationship between structure and family conflict among a sample of African American mother's impacts practice by providing an area to further support of African American families in service delivery. Practitioners that strive to remove barriers and build supportive services to this population should consider focusing on programming and models of service delivery that minimize the prevalence of conflict within the family. For, inner city low income mother head of households focusing more on healthy structure within the family unit can contribute to minimizing conflict in African American populations.

Additionally, counselors may want to consider accessing structure in families in their service delivery to African American families who seek services to address family conflict. In family therapy, unhealthy families resist change and are referred to as closed system due to unresolved conflicts (Nichols 2014). Counselors can begin with assessing structure and addressing structure within the family as a way permeating the closed system and moving towards positive change in African American families who are unhealthy as a result of the presence of conflict.

Family reunification workers, social workers, parent advocates and other agents of change should consider focusing on the development of activities and workshops that develop parenting skills in the area of structure. This would assist in building and preparing African American families for success after they have suffered from tragedy or life altering events. Educational programs and community agencies with a high participation African American families such as inner city Head Start programs, whom have a focus on parenting can use the findings of this study to strengthen the parenting aspects of their program by developing curriculum for parents that has a content focus on recognition of conflict, recognizing unhealthy levels of structure and creating healthy structured environments for children.

## **Conclusion**

The focus of this study was to determine the relationship between family conflict and the six dimensions of parenting i.e. warmth, structure, rejection, chaos, autonomy support and coercion among African American families who access inner city Head Start programs in a North Central State. This study determined a significant relationship between structure and family conflict in the sample population. The limitations of the study limits the scope and ability to generalize findings. However, this study creates a foundation for future research efforts, provides recommendations for service delivery among human service practitioners and adds to the body of knowledge on the relationships that exist between parenting dimensions and family conflict.

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