
“My Mother’s Keeper”: The Effects of Parentification on Black Female College Students

Journal of Black Psychology

37(1) 55–77

© The Author(s) 2011

Reprints and permission: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav>

DOI: 10.1177/0095798410372624

<http://jbp.sagepub.com>

 SAGE

Tawanna T. Gilford¹ and Amy Reynolds¹

Abstract

This qualitative study examined the parentification of eight Black American college females and its impact on their college experiences. Two 90-minute focus groups were conducted in order to gain insight about how these women overcame personal and family challenges while being away from their families of origin. Results highlight the push-pull factors experienced by the participants from both school and their family of origin and how they dealt with barriers to successful college completion.

Keywords

parentification, resilience, coping, parental involvement

One of the most vital changes in American culture has been the evolution of the family structure during the past 50 years (Antecol & Bedard, 2005). Although there are shifting dynamics in the structure of many American families, the importance and the role of the family remain constant, especially in Black families. One of the most important and strongest institutions in the Black community is the family (Franklin, 1997). Some scholars believe that

¹University at Buffalo, Buffalo, NY, USA

Corresponding Author:

Tawanna Gilford, Department of Counseling, School, and Educational Psychology,

University at Buffalo, 409 Baldy Hall, Buffalo, NY 14260, USA

Email: tgilford@buffalo.edu

the Black family—both nuclear and extended—has been responsible for the survival of Black people in America (Sudarkasa, 1997).

One important change to the structure of Black families in the United States has been the increasing number of female-headed households (Boyd-Franklin, 1989). Although single-parent households are often viewed as problematic, dysfunctional, and deviant (Antecol & Bedard, 2005), Boyd-Franklin (1989) suggested that single parents are capable of providing the financial and emotional support necessary for their children's success.

Research has shown that the ability of single-parent families to function is influenced by social class, with higher socioeconomic status (SES) associated with higher functioning (Boyd-Franklin, 1989). According to American Psychological Association (2009), education, occupational position, and income are interrelated and constitute an individual or a group's social status. Many low-SES families aspire to elevate their SES through education. In particular, Black women have viewed college as an opportunity to have a better life and as a way of making their family proud (Hubbard, 1999). Family and community support from the Black church and other institutions have often helped Black youth achieve educational and employment success (Boyd-Franklin, 1989; Pipes-McAduo, 1997). Difficult economic times have caused more Black youth to remain connected to their families of origin for financial, emotional, and mental support and also to contribute to the household duties.

Depending on children within single-parent families to take on a parental role and provide emotional, mental, and financial support to their family has become an unavoidable consequence of poverty and related social conditions (Burton, 2007; Jones & Wells, 1996). Parentification is defined as a boundary distortion where the parental-child relationships become altered or reversed (Wells & Jones, 1998). Parentification is a result of struggling, sometimes dysfunctional families and has been viewed as necessary for the continuity and survival of the Black family. According to Boyd-Franklin (1989), parentification in single-family households can be a source of support and contribute to an increase in family function. Within intact, supportive families, delegating responsibility to children may actually promote independence, high self-esteem, and a high degree of empathy and altruism (McMahon & Luthar, 2007). However, dysfunction can occur when the delegated responsibilities become arduous or unsuitable and are the result of a parenting void (Boyd-Franklin, 1989). If the parental role is detrimental to the child's identity, self-efficacy, and inhibits the child from pursuing activities and goals that are age-appropriate, then parentification is negatively affecting the child (Jones & Wells, 1996). Mika, Bergner, and Baum (1987) suggested

the following conditions in which parentification becomes problematic: (a) when the parent becomes dependent on the child and assumes the role and/or behaviors of the child, (b) when the role become a burden for the child and inhibits the child's personal development, (c) when the role goes beyond what the child is capable of doing, (d) when the child is exploited in the role and is prevented/discouraged from acting in age-appropriate behaviors and activities, and (e) when children are punished for acting out the role as the parent, even though they are expected to do so. Parentification is most common in families that exhibit neglect; drug and alcohol abuse; physical, mental, and sexual abuse; divorce; disability; and neglect (McMahon et al., 2007).

Many low-SES families aspire to elevate their social status through education and by combining multiple sources of income. Many children from low-SES families aspire to expand their opportunities and elevate their family financial situation so that their younger siblings or children do not have to continue to struggle. In many instances, family function in single-family homes is influenced by social class, where a higher SES is associated with higher function and a low SES is associated with higher dysfunction (Boyd-Franklin, 1989). Because low-SES families may rely on multiple sources of income in order to provide the daily necessities, they may not be able to afford adequate professional child care or schooling, leaving childrearing duties to the oldest siblings (Burton, 2007). According to Burton, although a family may not intentionally place this significant responsibility on their children, the economic strain on the family may require that they receive both emotional and financial support from their children in order to ensure the survival of the family. According to Pipes-McAduo (1997), due to limited opportunities for upward mobility among Black Americans, it may take at least one whole generation to move a family from low SES to middle-class status. Research has demonstrated that Black women perceive college to be an opportunity to have a better life and as a way of making their parents and other family members proud (Hubbard, 1999). Support through the family and the Black community help individuals achieve educational success and seek out better employment opportunities and higher SES (Pipes-McAduo, 1997).

The purpose of this study is to fill a gap in the literature regarding parentification in single-parent homes, but more specifically, this study will help understand how parentification can persist into adulthood, even after the parentified child has left home or has gone to college. This study examined the lives of Black female parentified college students from single parent, distressed family situations with a parent who currently experiences or has experienced mental illness, substance abuse, incarceration, physical disability, or a parent who is deceased. The aim of this study was to examine their

college experiences including the push and pull factors they experienced from their families of origin while pursuing their degrees. This population is important to study because they are largely underserved and unrecognized in college settings. The results of this study may offer greater awareness and support for parentified children in high school so they can realize their potential for college success.

Method

Qualitative research methods were used for this study because of their ability to allow participants to categorize and understand their own experiences (Burke-Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004). Qualitative research methods, particularly focus groups, provide a means for marginalized people to openly share and make meaning of their lived experiences (Morrow, Raksha, & Castaneda, 2001). Focus groups are also effective for racially diverse populations because they allow for open and detailed dialogue regarding matters of race, discrimination (Saint-Germain, Bassford & Montano, 1993; Solorzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000; Sue, Lin, Torino, Capidolupo, & Rivera, 2009), social class, and other topics that are largely unexamined by society (Kruger, 1994; Seal, Bogart, & Ehrhardt, 1998; Sue et al., 2009).

Madriz (2000) suggests that focus groups increase the degree of accessibility for participants who might find individual interviews to be threatening or limiting.

Participants

For this study, 32 students responded to the advertisements and expressed interest in participating in the focus group. Of the 32 respondents, eight females from two different college campuses were determined to fit the inclusion criteria for the focus groups and were selected for participation. Four essential elements for selection were that the participants: (a) identify as a Black American female; (b) be a college junior, senior, recent graduate, or graduate student; (c) have a parent who is unable to fulfill her parental role due to mental illness, physical disability, substance abuse, incarceration, or death; and (d) must identify themselves as a “parentified child.” Two focus groups were conducted for the study—three students from a local university made up the first group and five students from a nearby college comprised the second focus group. All focus group participants self-described as Black American and were raised in single-parent female-headed households. One participant was a college junior, five were college seniors, one participant

was a second year graduate student, and one student was a recent college graduate who was planning to apply to graduate school. The participants ranged in age from 21 to 45 years. Four students reported being the first born, three participants reported being the middle child, and one student reported being the youngest sibling. The reported number of siblings ranged from 2 to 14. Although all participants described themselves as being parentified, three participants also had children of their own, and one participant took on the role of being a parent to her niece and nephew along with raising her own children. All participants reported living away from home; four students lived on campus and four lived off campus. Seven participants reported being employed ranging from 15 to 40 hours per week, and three participants reported being employed full time. All participants reported paying for school through loans and grants, although one also received scholarship money and another received minimal assistance from her mother. Many received additional support services from various campus and community organizations such as the Educational Opportunity Program, Ronald McNair scholars program, and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.

Participants reported that they became parentified due to their mothers' involvement with the following challenges: substance abuse, mental health issues, divorce/spousal infidelity, and physical disability. Mental health issues consisted of emotional dependence, mood instability, depression, dystymia, hopelessness, and suicide (see Table 1). These problems faced by the parent were significant enough to cause the parent to "check out" of their parental role and cause the participant to become parentified. The income for the family of origin (FOO) was varied and consisted of full-time employment, part-time employment, child support, unemployment insurance benefits, disability insurance, and social security disability payments. Participants reported their current contributions to their FOO as handling family matters and making family decisions; being disciplinarian and mentor/role model to siblings, cooking, chaperoning doctor's visits; and providing financial assistance through full-time employment, part-time employment, refund checks from school, and income tax refunds.

Researchers

The primary investigator for this study was a female, African American, second year counseling psychology doctoral student. The auditing was conducted by a White female assistant professor who has engaged in qualitative research and whose scholarship and teaching focuses on multicultural issues. During the first focus group, a female African American second year doctoral

Table 1 . Demographic Data for Participants in the Female Parentification Focus Group

Alias	Age	Student Status	Where Do You Live	Parent Behavior	Parental/Family Income	Number of Siblings	Birth Order	Employment	Assistance to FOO	Pay for College	College Programs
Sasha	25	Full time	Outside home: same state	SA, MI	PA, CS	4	First	10-20 hpw	Financial family matters, decision maker	Grants, loans, scholarship	EOP, SSS
Alexia	22	2nd grade student	Outside home: same state	MI	PT	3	Middle	Full-time employment	Financial, caretaker, cooking	Grants and loans	EOP, RM, SA
Neesha	21	Full time	On campus	DV, ED, MI	FT, CS	2	First	No	Financial, cooking, role model	Grants, loans	EOP
Stef	21	Full time	On campus	SA, PD	UB, DS	5	Middle	30+ hpw	Financial, cooking	Grants, loans	
Monique	21	Full time	On campus	PD, ED	FT, CS, PT		Middle	15-30 hpw	Decision maker, cooking, chaperone	Loans, grants, parental assistance	SA
Rachel	45	Recent grad	Off campus	MI, DT	FT	14	Last	40+ hpw	Financial, decision maker, family matters, chaperone	Loans, grants	HEOP, EOP, RM
Iris	23	Full time	On campus	MI, DT	PT, PA	2	First	20 hpw	Caretaker; family matters, chaperone	Grants, loans	CSTEP, SSS
Tracey	23	Full time	Outside home: same city	PD	PT, PA, SSD	2	First	40+ hpw	Financial, cooking, family matters	Grants, loans	EOP

Note: SA = substance abuse; MI = mental illness; PD = physical disability; ED = emotional disability; DT = death; DV = divorce; PA = public assistance; CS = child support; FT = full-time employment; UB = unemployment benefits; DS = disability; PT = part-time employment; hpw = hours per week; SSD = social security disability; SSS = student support services; SA = student association organizations; RM = Ronald McNair scholars.

student served as a research assistant whose primary duties included the following: to assist in the set up and break down of the focus group space, to provide emotional consolation to any focus group participants who might have become emotionally distressed during the focus group, and to handle financial affairs with the food delivery service. During the second focus group, a male African American third year doctoral student performed those same duties. Both assistants remained in a separate room during the focus group. Only the primary investigator conducted the interviews and was the only researcher present during the focus groups.

Procedures

Focus group recruitment targeted students from colleges and universities in the northeast. Additionally, college students were recruited through community organizations, churches, clinics, and through the use of snowballing techniques (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). Flyers were posted on bulletin boards and placed in the student organization mailboxes and in the mailboxes of the directors, staff, and administrators of the relevant student program offices and organizations on local campuses. In addition to the flyers, emails, and snowballing techniques, the primary investigator sought to recruit students through the use of MySpace and Facebook social networking sites. Participants were also recruited through multiple tablings in the student unions at local campuses. Because of the heavy reliance on the gatekeepers (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998) to promote and support the research efforts by recruiting students, the primary investigator met with staff members on both campuses who could grant access to the targeted population (Seidman, 2006). These meetings also served to demystify the purpose of the study and to address any questions and concerns that the gatekeepers had about the study.

Prospective participants were instructed to contact the primary investigator through email and/or telephone. The primary investigator requested an initial 20-minute interview for each prospective participant to determine degree of fit for the focus group. After it was determined that they fit the criteria, they were informed of the focus group ground rules and instructed to select a personal alias for use in the focus group. Participants also decided which type of compensation they would receive, choosing a \$25 gift card from a gas station, department store, or local supermarket. The two focus groups took place on two different college campuses.

At the beginning of the focus group, participants were given name tags with their aliases so that members of the focus group could refer to them by their selected name only. They were also given an index card with their alias

name in case they forgot their alias when referring to themselves. Participants completed a demographic sheet, consent form, and consent to record sheet. Participants were also given a resource sheet listing local counseling centers and resources in case they needed support beyond the focus group. The primary investigator encouraged the participants to refrain from sharing if they ever felt uncomfortable, and they were instructed they could withdraw from the study at anytime and still receive compensation for their participation.

After the focus groups, the audio tapes from the focus groups were transcribed verbatim and were checked for accuracy by the primary investigator. All tapes and focus group media were destroyed and only the focus groups aliases were used. The primary investigator analyzed the qualitative data using grounded theory methodology (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Several key steps were undertaken to make meaning of the data including open coding, category generation, and exploring patterns across the categories. Open coding involved breaking down individual responses within the focus groups into key phrases or words representing essential meaning units. For each of the focus group questions, the key phrases/words were reviewed and refined, which led to a final list of core concepts that best represented the range of participant responses. The primary investigator then identified excerpts to underscore the central themes.

Measures

Three levels of data collections were used for this study. A 20-minute in-person/phone interview, which consisted of six open-ended and closed questions, was conducted in advance to determine fit for the focus group. Participants completed a demographic questionnaire to gather background information on their current financial, academic, and family situation. During the focus group, nine questions were asked to open and facilitate the group discussion. Examples included the following: (a) What were some of the challenges that you were faced with when deciding to go away to college or (b) What are your plans after graduation? Do you plan to or did you continue to contribute to your family of origin after graduation? All the questions used were developed by the primary investigator and accepted by the institutional review board (IRB).

Results

Results of this study were clustered into nine themes: reasons for going away to college, precollege challenges, push-pull factors from FOO and school,

visiting home, positive and negative family changes, coping mechanisms and mediating factors for retention, internal and external motivation, impact of past on identity development, and life after college. Below, these themes will be described with illustrating quotations from focus group members.

Reason for Going Away to College

Despite the many challenges in their lives, the women in the focus groups stated they had always wanted to attend college. Their college selection was contingent on many factors including cost and which school would provide the best college experience. When considering location, FOO issues were central. Many students believed that family stress would compete with academic obligations, so they decided to go away to college. Neesha, a college senior whose mother experienced recurrent depressive episodes due to a recent divorce, stated:

I knew I had to go to school; it was never an option for me to not go to school and to just work. I knew I had to go to college. I didn't want to go to school at home because I knew that that would be stressful, being at home, and living at home while going to school. I would just be too concerned about everything else and everyone else.

Similar to Neesha, Sasha, a college senior who has a child of her own and was raised by a mother who exhibited substance abuse and mental illness, shared, "I chose to go to school outside of where I live because of the distractions where I live." While acknowledging the role that parentification had in her development, Monique, a senior who was raised by a mother with chronic physical illness, believed that college would enhance her personal development:

I realized I needed that space to grow up because I was so attached to my mom and family, so it was more about growing up for me, a growing experience, and I needed to stay here in order to do that, I needed to be away from my family.

Precollege Challenges

While the women in the focus group admitted to always wanting to attend college, they also realized how their absence would affect their families and how the demands of their prior life had not adequately prepared them for

college. Some of the precollege challenges they faced were balancing their caretaker role with their student role, past behavioral problems that may have blemished their academic record, lack of guidance from their parent and other family members, limited self-efficacy, and additional financial strain. As Sasha put it,

So I would say one of the challenges was financial, because she [referring to her mother] got money for some of us sometimes. So with us being away now she wouldn't receive the money, so it made it harder for her to try to make up that extra money to pay the rent or whatever. So that was one of the challenges that faced me.

In addition to the financial and emotional disruptions to their FOO, they also dealt with the lack of preparation for and guidance about their pending college entry. Neesha recounted:

A lot of things that I got for school, I had to get when I was up here. Like, I didn't know, so when I came up here, I came with a lot of clothes and that's it. I had to get everything on my own. I didn't know Buffalo; I didn't know where to go. No one was able to help me, so I had to work and I had work study, but, that was a hard transition for us to just switch up and my sisters had to become more responsible, they had to grow up quickly.

Push-Pull Factors From Family of Origin and School

These women discovered early on that not only were their distressed families unable to provide much financial support to a child in college, they were also less equipped to provide support and validation. Based on how essential the college students were to their families, some were encouraged to return home. This is referred to as the "pull factor." In this study, push-pull factors refer to four factors describing the relationship between the focus group participants and their FOO: (a) pull from the family—when guilt or a family crisis causes the student to leave school and return home; (b) push from the family—any family situation that pushes the student away from their FOO and toward school; (c) pull from the school—academic factors that may contribute to college retention, such as peer tutors and concerned faculty; and (d) push from the school—factors that contribute to college attrition including negative interpersonal and academic experiences, geographic mismatch, and financial strain.

Although these women were able to accept this new student role, they continued to (willingly or unwillingly) carry out their duties as the parentified child. Some of the major issues they cited were retaining their roles as the caretaker, experiencing a family conflict/crisis that created a dilemma of whether to return home, parental problems (such as divorce/separation, drug use, or physical impairments), loss of income, and personal struggles. Despite their own personal struggles and increased family pressure to return home, many of the women in the focus groups chose to remain at school. In some cases, the women shared that having a great support system and internal motivation helped them cope with the push-pull factors. Tracey, a college junior who has a child of her own and was raised by a mother with a physical disability, asserted:

My mother has a disability, and even though she wants to be more active, she can't . . . My younger brother and sister will not take the initiative to cook or clean for themselves . . . my younger cousin got into a physical confrontation with my neighbors . . . I was involved in a car accident recently . . . and my daughter was sick in the hospital . . . it was just like so much stuff . . . I was like "maybe I could find a full time job without college . . . but it's not going to work. I am going to stay in college. Just one more year to go."

In some situations, another sibling took over the role of the parentified child. However, all the women in the focus groups admitted to still being in the parentified role while being at school and having no real successor. Despite retaining the role as the "parentified child," many found that when they returned home, they lost the personal space that they had when they lived at home. Other siblings often took over the space, but not the responsibilities of assisting the family and maintaining order in the home. In many situations, their siblings' behaviors worsened and as a result their parents tried to persuade the women to return home. Neesha recalled:

Usually when I come home there's a problem, and my mom would add on top of it, "Like you should come home." She even tried to get me to transfer to a school in the City and I was like I can't. And sometimes I would feel selfish, but . . . I don't know. I felt like for a while, from freshman year to sophomore year, I kind of drifted apart with my relationship with my sisters. They just didn't want to listen; they didn't want to listen to me because I was never home. And my mom was just going through a whole bunch of issues.

In addition to problems with siblings acting out, there were other family conflicts/crises they had to face including siblings being arrested for underage drinking, becoming a teenage parent, and having near death experiences as a result of weapon related incidents. Iris, a college senior whose mother committed suicide while she was in high school, recalled:

There's always something happening. I think the year before last, when I first got here, I was here like four months, and my brother got shot. That really took a burden on me, for me not to be there and my brother almost lost his life. I think I would have went crazy.

Visiting Home

With regard to their visits home, the women in the focus groups had both similar and varied experiences. Many of the women shared that they would often jump back into their parentified role when they returned home, in order to give their parent a break. This included running errands, reprimanding and caring for siblings, cleaning, and handling other family affairs. They also shared that they handled these familiar situations differently after being away. They reported being less reactive and more insightful and reflective. In many instances, the participants described being the ones that the family relied on to make important family decisions and take over administrative and caretaking roles. Rachel, a recent college graduate and a parent of two, who stepped in as the guardian of her niece and nephew when her sister passed away, exclaimed:

God . . . Stressful. My sister passed away a few years ago and my mom passed away, so now I am like the parent of my niece and nephew. I just went down to New York City 2 weeks ago. My nephew went ahead and shot most of the left side of his face off and man . . . just talk about drama. It's just real stressful every time I go home. Why? Because I worked in a hospital before? I'm a little bit older, and I don't understand why my other siblings are not stepping up to the plate? Why are they leaving it all on my doorstep?

In terms of their impact on others, there were mixed responses, some women reported being perceived as a role model and a savior. According to Neesha:

Every time I go home, it's stressful. One, because there's always consistently stuff coming up cause that's life, and then, two, the fact that

I feel like I have to walk on eggshells around everyone, adds another stressful factor. Cuz I feel like if I am to be human, and not a super-woman, that everyone's going to freak out or something like that. I don't know.

Other women in the focus group referred to being perceived as stuck up or out of touch, or were told that they were now "acting White." With such mixed reactions, some women reported that they often despised going home. Some women described financial strain that prevented them from traveling home during school breaks. They opted to remain at school and obtain part-time jobs. And when they did return home, some of the women in the focus groups reported not "fitting in" anymore. They reported being uncomfortable when interacting with their family and friends. The shared that they would rather stay at school and socialize with the people with whom they had more in common like classmates and other school friends. Monique shared:

It's sad to see friends, and I realize that a lot of the people that I was at home with are friends, best friends, I can't hang out with anymore because it's like okay, we don't even have anything to talk about or text about.

Positive and Negative Family Changes

In addition to losing their personal space and coping with feeling like the "outsider" in their families, the women in the focus groups unanimously agreed that there were changes in their FOO since they left for college. Some of them reported positive changes, while others reported negative changes. The negative changes most frequently reported centered on sibling behavior. Some of those behaviors included teen pregnancy, incarceration, rebelling, and fighting with parents and other siblings. Stef, a college senior whose mother has a physical disability and engages in substance abuse, revealed:

With my siblings, my youngest one has been more rebellious and jealous, I guess. I came home and found out that she got arrested for underage drinking.

Other negative changes that were shared by the group included a family member's illness or death and the disappearance of "family time," which involved eating dinner together, taking family trips, and participating in family activities. Despite the negative changes, many women also recognized

the positive changes in their family. Alexia, a graduate student who has become a parent to her mother (who experiences recurring bouts of depression as a result of a divorce) and her younger siblings, put a positive spin on negative change, shared:

My youngest sister kinda has to fend for herself now. Mother is still not there and nobody's ever there to cook her dinner. She had to learn to cook for herself since I'm not there. She bakes and that's about it, because she can read the directions on the box. But I think that's a positive and a negative because I think that as an adolescent, you need somebody there in your corner, coaching you and helping you and to know that she has to do that by herself, that's a negative, but to know that she is taking the responsibility and doing it by herself is a positive.

Improvement in family communication and positive family interactions were also used as markers for positive changes in the family. Numerous women in the focus groups shared that some family members became more responsible, attained jobs to help contribute to the family, and learned to overcome their grudges and conflicts with other family members. Iris described her upcoming graduation as the catalyst for improving her family relations. She exclaimed:

Everybody wants to come to my graduation. Like everybody wanna see the fact that "she did it. If she could do it then anybody could do it." So now, the people that didn't talk in my family now talk like "did you hear the good news?" Like I didn't even know the family that I have here [Buffalo], but now I know them and we are getting to know each other, you know what I mean? So its like I am bringing everybody together. It's like a rejoiceful moment for me because I never thought it would happen. All the grudges . . . the people not talking to each other . . . for now, it's like we can just bring it to amends now.

A few of the women in the group also revealed that at times, their family members anticipated their visits and welcomed them with a warm reception when they returned home.

Coping Mechanisms and Mediating Factors for Retention

Among the women in the group, there were many factors that contributed to their decision to stay in school. As stated previously, religion and spirituality

played a significant role in their ability to cope with their family situations and their personal struggles. Alexia asserted: “Church and prayer. That helped a lot, and my boyfriend helps a lot.” Iris shared that a sense of universality helped her to find meaning and cope with her obstacles:

I can’t worry about, you know, what’s going on because there’s always going to be something going on, I don’t know nobody who don’t have nothing going on right now, so it’s like . . . it’s not just me. So when I realized that and I started to put things into perspective and see that there’s more than just me, and that there’s somebody always going through something worse than me, I can take it.

By maintaining a sense of tunnel vision, Rachel pushed herself through the process by ignoring any barriers to finishing college. She asserted:

There is no such thing as giving up. Giving up is not an option, I don’t have a choice but to make it work, but to succeed, but to achieve my goals. There is no option.

Other factors contributing to their decision to stay in school include their desire to help others, their own role models, their ability to make their own children proud, the desire to surpass their parent’s greatest achievement, recognizing the light at the end of the tunnel, acknowledging that life will not improve unless they obtain a college degree, and seeing the positive impact that they are having on other family members. One group member also shared that her little sister has become a source of support for her, because she can lean on her for encouragement and support.

Internal Versus External Motivation

Focus group participants reported that both internal and external factors influenced their decision to stay in school. Despite the negative characteristics and shortcomings of the parent, participants gave credit to their mothers for being their external motivators. In terms of people who have been the most beneficial to her college retention, Monique credits her mother:

My mother is my motivation; if you can do that, if you can raise four kids and someone else’s kid, a cousin, raising your brothers and sisters who’s older than you, then, yeah, there’s nothing that should stop me.

Some of the women in the group attributed their motivation to their life experiences. By recognizing the challenges and barriers that she faced as a result of growing up “poor,” Sasha viewed her degree as essential to providing a better life for her and her child:

I want to do more with myself. I want to be able to help people, I want to be able to give back, I want to be able to have money, and I want to be able to shop somewhere other than the Corner Store for my food, just regular stuff that I think that’s out there. You know what I am saying. So I think that’s what inspired me, just seeing my conditions and seeing other conditions that I can progress to, so I think that was a strong motivating factor for me.

For other participants in the group, the college experience itself was a primary motivational force in their college retention. The campus atmosphere, the curriculum, and diverse activities also contributed to their sense of satisfaction. Furthermore, they were able to cite faculty members, staff, and fellow students as being motivational factors in their efforts to stay in school. Student organizations, clubs, support groups, and Greek organizations also served as buffers from the push-pull factors. Neesha revealed that she has been strongly influenced by the ambitions and achievements of her sorority sisters:

We just created a support network, and I was fortunate enough, now I’m a part of a sisterhood and it really helps me because all of my sorority sisters have two or three degrees, so that is pushing me like now I gotta do more. I can’t just have one degree.

Some of the participants in the focus groups attributed their internal motivation to knowing that some people expected them to fail and that they did not want to fulfill that prophesy. As Tracey put it:

So, you kind of recognize all the negativity and use that as a constant, like you want to be inspired by that . . . I mean . . . along with people being inspired by you and telling you, you could do it, you also look at the negative things that all the naysayers and used that to propel you forward.

Many of the focus group participants stated that their desire to pursue graduate degrees also contributed to their college retention. Of the eight participants,

six of the women in the group expressed a strong desire to enroll in graduate school.

Impact of Past on Personal Development

Whether positive or negative, all the women in the focus group shared that their past has affected and influenced who they are. Such life influences included family crises and tragedies, having an impact on other people, establishing a support system, and experiencing their own struggles. Looking back on her personal experiences, Sasha recalled:

All that I went through my whole life, like with my mother and all of my family members, I think it made me a very strong person, to know that I can survive in all types of conditions, whether I am poor, or I am rich and I still have my humility as a person.

Many women in the group shared that they have used the negative experiences of others as encouragement to remain positive and optimistic. As Monique put it:

I could say I saw everything I did not want to be and what I did not want to do and I used that to propel me forward because there's nothing worse than to have a bad example in front of you. And still taking that bad example and still being lazy and still not using that to motivate yourself.

Other ways these women had to learn to overcome their personal struggles included: recognizing the significance of expressing affect, learning positive coping mechanism and problem solving strategies, and learning self-care techniques by scheduling alone time.

Life After College

Although the women in the focus groups expressed a desire to continue to contribute to their FOO after graduation, many were beginning to assess and differentiate the type of contribution they were willing to provide. While some of the women remain firm on continuing to support family members after graduation, others shared that they will only contribute: (a) if more responsibility is shown; (b) only if it is their parent who needs help and occasionally a sibling, if that sibling is impaired; (c) only after their children are taken care

of; and (d) if the money is promised to be returned. One of the participants in the focus group exclaimed:

After I graduate undergraduate, I'd like to continue on to graduate school. I would still contribute to my family, but they need to show some responsibility too.

In one instance, another member of the group also came to the realization that her mother's plans for the future include a life where they will continue to be co-dependent. Neesha admitted:

I want to go straight into grad school. I'm having some trouble trying to decide where to go. My mom is trying to convince me that I go to school in the city and we could get a house together.

Monique affirmed that she will be willing to offer support, but it will come in the form of a nonmonetary contribution:

I'm always going to lend a hand when someone's in need, but my family, never monetary support because that monetary support will turn into you supporting them. You do it once, you do it twice, you're gonna do it all the time.

Tracey decided to remove herself from any obligation to help and only be available as a last resort:

I have my child, that's my main focus. I love my mother to death, I love my brother and my sister to death, but I'm an adult. I have my own family. So it's kind of like I have to deal with my family first and then if you need me, call me.

Discussion

The purpose of this exploratory study was to examine the effects that parentification had on Black women attending college. In particular, gathering information on how these young women dealt with the demands of their FOO while pursuing their college education was central to this research. Understanding how these students balance family pressures with the pressures they encounter while at school and how their FOO was affected by their absence was another goal of this study. Lastly, a goal of this study was to explore the

motivational factors that pushed the students to keep on going, despite how tough their family and personal situations became.

This study sought to fill some gaps in the literature that emphasize only negative outcomes for parentified children who come from distressed family situations and are expected to be less goal oriented and ultimately unsuccessful. Past research has suggested that children from single-parent homes are more prone to promiscuity, substance abuse, and criminal activity than children from intact two-parent families (Antecol & Bedard, 2005). Research also suggests that parental substance abuse is a predictor of substance abuse in their children. According to Greenberg (2000), biological predisposition, inconsistent parenting, unpredictable living arrangements, potential child abuse, and environmental factors contribute to the likelihood that children whose parent's abuse drugs and alcohol are more likely to follow in their parent's footsteps. In terms of mental illness, Reupert and Mayberry (2007) purport that children living with a parent with mental illness experience social stigma, social, isolation, financial hardship, and are at increased risk for mental illness and problematic behavior. Another study by Broussard, Mosley-Howard, and Roychoudhury (2006) suggested that youth living in impoverished urban communities, where many parentified children reside, are more likely to exhibit school-related problems than youth in other socio-economic situations.

The results from this study suggest that despite the many demands, challenges, and barriers to finishing college, the parentified Black women participating in this qualitative study were able to fully engage in the college experience. In fact, many of them were able to use the difficulties from their past to motivate them to remain in and complete college, to overcome barriers, and, when possible, pass that motivation and inspiration onto their siblings and parents. Most of the women believed that they needed to go away to college in order to be focused and financially successful. The demands from home remained strong, and the women had to develop coping strategies so they would not get pulled back into the family in ways that would negatively affect their academic persistence and motivation. Most were able to rely on both internal and external sources of motivation to combat the relentless demands from home and self-doubt that came with going out on their own.

The academic persistence of these Black women demonstrated their ability to focus on school without sacrificing their connections to their FOO. That did not mean that the relationship did not have to evolve as the students were growing during their college years; it just illustrates how challenging it was for them to become fully interdependent. The developmental component to their struggle needs further exploration because as these women invested

in their college experience and became more focused on their individual achievements and identity, the relationship with their family and their perception of their lives inevitably changed. In addition, as they experienced their own changes, they became aware of how things at home were not always changing in positive directions. Such realizations caused them to think about their lives after college and consider possibilities that may not have existed 5 or 6 years earlier.

In terms of the implications for this study, it is vital that educators and counselors be aware of the unique needs and concerns of this population that are largely ignored and underserved. Despite the apparent strength and resilience of the women interviewed for this study, more supports are needed to ensure the academic motivation and persistence of parentified Black female students. There is an abundance of research that suggests that a mentoring relationship is instrumental to the emotional, mental, and social development in at-risk youth (Bernier, Larose, & Soucy, 2005). Therefore, in order to have both social and academic resilience, research suggests personal and academic mentors help students develop effective interpersonal and academic skills (Bernier et al., 2005).

In addition, interventions for parentified children are needed long before they begin their first semester of college. Such efforts can focus on using social supports, developing personal coping strategies, and promoting self-efficacy and goal attainment. By targeting the barriers to achievement that many parentified students experience, they will begin to feel supported, encouraged, and may see the possibilities of changing their circumstances through education. Additionally, this study addresses the need for college personnel to be more vigilant toward this unique population. By being accommodating to family demands instead of forcing students to choose between school and their families, degree attainment may become a more realistic goal for parentified children. Organizations geared toward assisting financially, economically, and academically disadvantaged groups could implement support groups and mentoring/buddy systems within their programs, so that the students can see that there are other people with similar experiences and learn positive coping mechanisms and skills that will promote retention.

Limitations and Future Research

There are several limitations to this study. The first limitation deals with sampling. This was not a random sample, and it is impossible to determine what motivated the students to participate in this study. This study specifically focused on Black college females; however, it is likely that parentification

exists across racial groups and gender. There are situations where young men experience parentification and when a man is the single parent, raising his children in the absence of a mother or other maternal figure, although McMahon and Luthar (2007) suggested that single mothers are more prone to delegating parental roles to their children than single fathers. Future studies need to examine how parentification affects young men and what happens when the father is the single head of the household. In terms of race, more information is needed. If parentification occurs in all racial groups, what are its unique cultural manifestations? Future studies need to examine the effects of parentification on non-Black students. A multiracial/multiethnic study would help further understand the universal and culture-specific realities of parentification. Many factors need to be explored such as what factors determine whether families place children with this burden and which children in a family are most likely to be parentified; is it gender, birth order, or age? Further exploration is needed to fully understand this important phenomenon and its impact on families.

Another limitation for this study is centered on definition of the key construct parentification and how to best measure it. When developing inclusion criteria for the study, it became clear that there is no consensus in the literature about what constitutes a parentified child. In the interest of empowering the participants, identification as a parentified child becomes one of the inclusion criteria for this study. However, even children who do not identify as parentified may still be experiencing the demands and sometimes the burden of taking over adult responsibilities within their family. Further research is needed to define what is meant by parentification and how to measure it in an inclusive and meaningful way. Although this exploratory study used a qualitative approach to better understand the impact of growing up as a parentified child on the experiences of Black female college students, there is need for further scholarship that uses a mixed methodology and diverse samples of college students on the basis of gender, reasons for parentification, and race. In particular, longitudinal quantitative and qualitative studies would be particularly useful in understanding which children become parentified and how they cope over time with these additional burdens and demands.

Conclusion

As the structure of families has evolved and changed in the United States, so have the roles and responsibilities of children. Some of those changes have benefited children but many have not. Understanding the perceptions and experiences of young Black women who carry the burden of their family's

survival is essential to their emotional, mental, and financial well-being. More information is needed about what they experience, how it affects them, and what they do to cope. Such knowledge and insight will assist in the creation of interventions and programs that meet the needs of their family and enhance their opportunity for personal growth and academic persistence.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no conflicts of interest with respect to the authorship and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research and/or authorship of this article.

References

- American Psychological Association, Public Interest Government Relations Office. (2009). *Socioeconomic status and health*. Retrieved from <http://www.apa.org/about/gr/issues/socioeconomic/ses-health.pdf>
- Antecol, H., & Bedard, K. (2005). Does single parenthood increase the probability of teenage promiscuity, substance use, and crime? *Journal of Population Economics*, *20*, 55-71.
- Bernier, A., Larose, S., & Soucy, N. (2005). Academic mentoring in college: The interactive role of student's and mentor's interpersonal dispositions. *Research in Higher Education*, *46*, 29-51.
- Bogdan, R. C., & Biklen, S. K. (1998). *Qualitative research and education: An introduction to theory and methods* (3rd ed.). Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon.
- Boyd-Franklin, N. (1989). *Black families in therapy: A multi-systems approach*. New York, NY: Guilford.
- Broussard, C. A., Mosley-Howard, S., & Roychoudhury, A. (2006). Using youth advocates for mentoring at risk students in urban settings. *Children & School*, *28*, 122-127.
- Burke-Johnson, R., & Onwuegbuzie, A. J. (2004). Mixed methods research. A research paradigm whose time has come. *Educational Researcher*, *33*, 14-26.
- Burton, L. (2007). Childhood adultification in economically disadvantaged families: A conceptual model. *Family Relations*, *56*, 329-345.
- Corbin, J., & Strauss, A. (2008). *Basics of qualitative research: Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Franklin, J. H. (1997). African American families: A historical note. In H. Pipes-McAdoo (Ed.), *Black families* (3rd ed., pp. 5-8). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Greenberg, R. (2000). Substance abuse in families. *Childhood Education*, *76*, 66-69.
- Hubbard, L. (1999). College aspirations among low-income African American high school students: Gendered strategies for success. *Anthropology & Education Quarterly*, *30*, 363-383.

- Jones, R. A., & Wells, M. (1996). An empirical study of parentification and personality. *American Journal of Family Therapy, 24*, 145-152.
- Kruger, R. A. (1994). *Focus groups: A practical guide for applied research* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Madriz, E. (2000). Focus groups in feminist research. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (2nd ed., pp. 835-850). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- McMahon, T. J., & Luthar, S. S. (2007). Defining characteristics and potential consequences of caretaking burden among children living in urban poverty. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry, 77*, 267-281.
- Mika, P., Bergner, R. M., & Baum, M. C. (1987). The development of a scale for the assessment of parentification. *Family Therapy, 14*, 229-235.
- Morrow, S. L., Raksha, G., & Castaneda, C. L. (2001). Qualitative research methods for multicultural counseling. In J. G. Ponterotto, J. M. Casas, L. A. Suzuki, & C. M. Alexander (Eds.), *Handbook of multicultural counseling* (2nd ed., pp. 575-603). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Pipes-McAdoo, H. (Ed.). (1997). *Black families* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Reupert, A., & Mayberry, D. (2007). Families affected by parental mental illness: A multiperspective account of issues and interventions. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry, 77*, 362-369.
- Saint-Germain, M. A., Bassford, T. L., & Montano, G. (1993). Surveys and focus groups in health research with older Hispanic women. *Qualitative Health Research, 3*, 341-367.
- Seal, D. W., Bogart, L. M., & Ehrhardt, A. A. (1998). Small group dynamics: The utility of focus group discussions as a research method. *Group Dynamics: Theory, Research, and Practice, 2*, 253-266.
- Seidman, I. (2006). *Interviewing as qualitative research: A guide for researchers in education and the social sciences*. New York, NY: Teachers College.
- Solorzano, D., Ceja, M., & Yosso, T. (2000). Critical race theory, racial microaggressions, and campus racial climate: The experiences of African American college students. *Journal of Negro Education, 69*, 60-73.
- Sudarkasa, N. (1997). African American families and family values. In H. Pipes-McAdoo (Ed.), *Black families* (3rd ed., pp. 9-40). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Sue, D. W., Lin, A. I., Torino, G. C., Capidolupo, C. M., & Rivera, D. (2009). Racial microaggressions and difficult dialogues on race in the classroom. *Cultural Diversity & Ethnic Minority Psychology, 15*, 183-190.
- Wells, M., & Jones, R. (1998). Relationship among childhood parentification, splitting, and dissociation: Preliminary findings. *American Journal of Family Therapy, 26*, 331-339.