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## Dead tired and bone weary: Grandmothers as caregivers in drug affected inner city households<sup>☆</sup>

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### Abstract

At a time of unprecedented growth in the numbers of custodial grandparents, this case study of Emma's household articulates the stresses inherent to the lives of many grandparents whose own children's lives are governed by drug use and addiction. We contrast normative expectations traditionally integral to the culture of extended families with the counternormative demands that drug use imposes on households. This highlights the untenable nature of caregiving for Emma and countless others of her generation. Compelled by tradition and sentiment to help their own children, they are thus allowing drug use driven norms, values and beliefs to permeate the lives of the grandchildren in their care. Yet, they are also trying to protect those children from drugs and from the violence and conflict that drugs bring into the household. Emma's own life illustrates the salience of norms of kinship, reciprocity and respect, and the trauma in her household demonstrates how their absence does, indeed, intensify demands and erode resources. We conclude that the imperatives of raising the next generation may necessitate a counternormative willingness on the part of grandparents to exclude their adult drug using children from their households.

### 1. Introduction

The 1990 Census revealed that 5.5% of all U.S. children (Pelt & Powell, 1995) and 13.5% of all African American children (Saluter, 1992) reside with their grandparents or other relatives. Although in two thirds of cases the child's parent also played some role in the household, the numbers nonetheless represent nearly a 44% increase in a single decade (Saluter, 1992). Minkler points out that this "reflects, in part, a long history of caregiving across generations in Black families, with roots in West African culture and tradition" (1999). (Fuller-Thompson et al., 1997) bemoan the fact that the National Survey of Families and Households omits all data concerning the number of coresident grandchildren in any given household: their own research revealed that 10.9% of grandparents raise at least one grandchild for at least six months. Typically, such arrangements last much longer, with 19.8% reporting ten or more years of such caregiving (Caputo, 1999). In the five years between 1988 and 1993, kinship care as a percentage of all foster care skyrocketed from 22% to 45% in California, from 32% to 54% in Illinois, and from 23% to 36% in New York (Gorge et al., 1995).

Minkler highlights how journalistic accounts reporting such arrangements, "have both praised grandmothers raising grandchildren as 'silent saviors' and berated them for their perceived

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failures in raising their own children” (1999:200). Often, such criticisms are linked to concerns about drug use in the “skipped generation”: National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA) estimates that 15% of women ages 15–44 are substance abusers, and that nearly 40% of them have children living with them (1997). In the case of crack in particular, where the intensity of craving drives women to sell diapers and baby formula to pay for the next ‘hit’ (Minkler & Roe, 1993), such households quite urgently require the contributions of a grandparent or other relative to child raising and to the provision of such basics as food and clothing.

Political and social scientific scrutiny on issues of drug use and abuse, drug markets, and related law enforcement and social and criminal justice policies is intensifying, with scholarly efforts concentrating most particularly on the behaviors associated with drug use and its subcultures (Bourgois, 1995; Williams, 1992). Research about women –particularly poor Black women (Logan, 1999) – who are or who are perceived to be drug users continues to center on their roles as social vectors (Zinn, 1990). As a result, the focus remains on them and their children (Jencks & Edin, 1995; Kozol, 1995; Parent, 1996; Krieger, Rowley et al., 1993; Minow, 1994). The challenges that drugs pose to the extended family in the African American community, as well as the resulting crises, typically remain outside that discourse.

The extended African American family has historically provided needed assistance, child rearing, and care for the sick and aged. It has provided a refuge when necessary, in the form of temporary or long-term accommodations and financial support: “[I]t is perhaps the most enduring cultural strength that has enhanced the functioning of Black families since their days in Africa” (Hill, 1998:21). However, as (Burton & Dilworth-Anderson, 1991) remind us, we must also recognize the potentially dramatic contextual differences currently at play in inner cities. On one hand, the role of the older African American woman as “guardian of the generations” during slavery and its bitter aftermath and during mass migrations in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century (Trotter & Williams, 1993; Wilson, 1996) was honored and stigma-free. One would fairly expect this to be quite different from the reality of caregiving because a child contends with “drug addiction, incarceration, teen pregnancy, death, or incapacitation due to AIDS” (Minkler, 1999:262). Analyses of the impact of drug use on urban life should recognize the stresses it inflicts upon the individual, the family, and the community, and seek to propose intervention strategies that will necessarily include each of them and recognize their interplay (Roe et al., 1996).

“While it is the best of times for many Black families, it is the worst of times for many other [s]” says (Robert Hill, 1998). Over the last two decades, the growing severity of social problems that plague poorer Black communities has included rising levels of each unemployment, poverty (from 1.5 to 2.2 million families during the ‘70s and ‘80s),<sup>1</sup> divorce, separation, out-of-wedlock births, crime, delinquency, spousal and child abuse, alcoholism, drug abuse, poor health, and HIV/AIDS (Hill, 1998). The relationships among those variables are complex, remaining the subject of heated theoretical and political debate despite countless scholarly discussions. Hill laments excessive research “on the minority (16%) of families who are female-headed, poor and on welfare,” and that “depicts them as representing a majority of Black families.” He also recognizes, however, how “one must clearly acknowledge the existence of problems before one can develop effective remedies for solving them”.

Research evidence highlights the steadily increasing proportion of Black extended families in shared housing arrangements –from 23 to 28% between 1970 and 1980 alone (Farley & Allen, 1987). Furthermore, these statistics are almost certain to rise, since the enactment of the

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<sup>1</sup>The 1990s have seen a number of dramatic changes to welfare law and state policies with respect to poverty. Therefore, we refrain from using statistics that, although allegedly comparative, use a wide range of measures for determining who counts as poor, and under what circumstances.

Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 included a federal aid provision requiring “that poor teen parents and their children reside with the teen’s custodial parent or other responsible relative” (Caputo, 1999). We concur with Hill that one can easily overemphasize the significance of simple family structure (Hill, 1993; 1998), when family organization and functioning far outweigh mere physical arrangements. For example, while nine out of ten babies born to unwed African American teens reside in households that include not only their mother, but also grandparents or other relatives (Hill, 1993), one expects that such arrangements provide considerable support and sustenance, physical and emotional as well as economic. Our data point, however, to a very particular kind of intergenerational paradox: the problems faced by grandparents who are raising grandchildren and trying to help their children even when those children display highly disruptive behaviors linked to drug related norms.

Our efforts in this paper are aimed at elucidating a typically hidden dimension of everyday life for grandmothers raising grandchildren in drug-affected households. Without documenting the history of African American families – knowledge familiar to most of our readers –we appreciate the historical roots of an African American commitment to particular culturally grounded normative standards, and to a commitment to family survival (Burton & DeVries, 1992; Scott, 1991; Slaughter, 1988). We add to the scant though growing literature on custodial grandparent stress as an outcome of this struggle (Burton, 1992; Burton & Bengston, 1985; Minkler & Roe, 1993; Shore & Hayslip, 1994). These data highlight yet again how, “[a]s local economies become part of interlocking global economies, and as the industrial/modern era gives way to a post industrialist/postmodern era, vestiges of past disadvantages and persistent discrimination in the present continue to restrict Black equality and participation in society” (Allen & James, 1998: 13).

## 2. Background

Wade Nobles (1997) states that “a proper understanding of the strengths of African American families, the difficulties they face, and the ways in which they are affected by public policy is confused and clouded by several commingling issues, among which the most prominent is racism. The issue of racism totally masks the understanding of African American culture itself, to say nothing of the family as an instrument of culture.” (page 83). Nobles contends that the Black family has been examined from “every conceivable” orientation and in most cases the family has been found to be less than viable (Nobles page 86). Nevertheless classical writings have addressed the strengths of the Black family (Frazier, 1939; Billingsley, 1968; Foster, 1983; Willie, 1967; Hill, 1971). The problems facing the Black family along with historical conditions of racism is a testament to the resilience of the Black family and the culture woven together to keep it alive. The Black family is a sanctuary that protects its members from the many obstacles facing family life and to provide needed support systems that are unavailable in major societal institutions (Hill, 1971, Nobles et al., 1976, McAdoo, 1997). Nobles stipulates that a family strength is any process of interactions that helps its members in addressing, interpreting, managing and so forth or responding successfully to conditions or situations. Within this idea is the strength of Black families (Nobles, 1997). Nobles identifies five strengths of Black families: legitimization of beingness, provision of a family code, elasticity of boundaries, the provision of information/knowledge, and mediation of concrete conditions (Nobles et al., 1976). Grandmothers most demonstrate what Nobles refer to as “mediation of concrete conditions” in the face of the crack epidemic. Emma (case study grandmother) demonstrates the family’s ability to “mediate” conflicts and other concrete conditions that affect its members and provides support. Emma provides her family members with concrete aid and pragmatic help. She sees the problems the crack epidemic has imposed upon family members. She is engaged in problem solving and decision making in response to both external

and internal crisis. She can be seen as constantly buffering and repairing the damage resulting from drugs (Nobles, 1997).

Historically entrenched African American community norms include the provision of care and sustenance to family members in need (Angelou, 1990; Frazier, 1939; Huling, 1978; White, 1985). Yet, grandparents trying to adhere to these traditions by taking care of their grandchildren and lending assistance to drug involved children can find their homes invaded by drug subcultures manifest in the behaviors of the grandchildren's own parents. Granting support despite their adult children's failure to adhere to the corollary expectations of respect and reciprocity has dire consequences. It means these caregivers are barraged by a value system contrary to their own, one that introduces enormous stressful –and some quite tangible risk – into the household. It complicates their child-rearing efforts and exposes their grandchildren to a world of disrespect and immediate self-gratification. As Burton & DeVries (1992) argue, "It appears that grandparents are being recruited by families and social services to address the needs of children whose parents are unable to care for them. The emerging question, however, is, Who will take care of the grandparents when they can no longer take care of themselves or their grandchildren?"

The African American family developed in a sociohistorical context where interdependence offered the only buffer against the unavoidable uncertainty of everyday life. It softened the blows inflicted by resource shortages. Helping those in need created a network of sustenance essential to the self-sustenance of meaningful kinship, and significantly reduced the odds of any one member falling through the cracks. A single norm, however, can only be functional when its application is nearly universal, and in the presence of other norms that shore it up and sustain it. Receiving help carried corollary though informal expectations. Reciprocating, perhaps by babysitting or doing chores around the house, reduced the burdens imposed on the host household, and showed tangible appreciation, consensus, and a commitment to helping keep the boat afloat. Along with Hill, we recognize that such family strengths are "cultural assets ... handed down from generation to generation, and not merely adaptations or coping responses" (1998:14).

The strength of the lineage principle as a safety net for African American households has been evident in the strong sense of interdependence and reciprocal obligation, especially among blood relatives. Even without immediate physical access, extended family ties link people across households and even across distances (as when women in crisis send their children 'down south' to stay with relatives). Children are received as legitimate members of the family kin network into which they are born, no matter their parents' legal status or current circumstances: In the traditional extended family, children belong without question, and continue to belong throughout their lives. Rejecting a child meant undermining the vitality of tradition and thus possibly allowing the real risk of shattering families. Yet, the influx of various drugs at different times has splintered, challenged and divided inner-city families. Consequently, many have recreated kin networks, where as many as three or four generations, sometimes including fictive kin (Levine, 1994), live in close proximity or even share a household.

This paper analyzes a single case – Emma's household – from the perspective of the stress generated by her daughters' involvement in drugs, and including Emma's own appraisal of her coping strategies. The case study provides a singularly useful research mechanism (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994; Stake, 1994; Smith, 1995). Here it permits an in-depth examination of a conflict that is playing out in households across a community. We show the normative framework guiding Emma's decision to aid her drug-abusing daughters and raise her grandchildren, and the stress resulting from the counternorms displayed by her drug-using daughters. The manifestations of stress in Emma's life make clear it is eroding her mental and physical health

and literally threatening her life (Roe et al., 1996). The case study thus illuminates a silent but painful wrenching of tradition and thus of the values that have anchored generations within their own culture.

We argue that members of Emma's generation bear an enormous burden, as norms they view as essential disintegrate under the influence of their children's involvement in a subculture that is not only devoid, but also corrosive, of traditional values. Their own health consequently sustains significant damage (Miller, 1991). As a community health issue, lending support and sustenance to adult drug-involved children has consequences potentially including drawing the next generation into the self-gratification of drug involvement. Because of the immediate threat posed by this unintended and inadvertent but nonetheless real consequence – the enabling of continued drug use – effective community coping may require a concerted effort at modifying a kinship norm traditionally fundamental to the African American family and community. As cross-cultural research demonstrates, grandparents' goals and ambitions are highly correlated with patterns of ethnic and cultural identification (Strom & Strom, 1997). We conclude that, on both individual and community levels, the pressures exerted by drug cultures upon the African American community impose a stress level that only a global show of community resistance may counter.

### 3. Materials and methods

Data analyzed in this paper stem from a three-year NIDA-funded study titled “*Violence in Crack User/Seller Households: An Ethnography*.” This research centers on the social processes by which violence occurs within crack and drug involved inner-city families kin networks, and seeks to understand the ways in which household organization supports the transmission of violence across generations. The project used intensive direct observation and in-depth interviews with members of 22 carefully selected drug-affected households from areas of hyper-concentrated poverty (Massey & Denton, 1993; Wilson, 1996; Nightingale, 1993) in Harlem, Brooklyn, and the Bronx. Extensive data were collected from a total of 144 participants over three years. Individual interviewers established relationships with all participants sharing a given household, collecting all data and producing all field notes pertaining to these respondents. Analytic strategies include the application of traditional procedures associated with Grounded Theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) upon thousands of transcript pages through the use of Folioviews, a computer program designed to maximize searchability and analytic flexibility for large qualitative data sets.

We concentrate here on Emma's household because it exemplifies a dilemma of growing relevance to understanding the ramifications of drug use in the inner city. Certainly, the burdens she discusses resemble those Burton and DeVries document among coresidential grandparents (1992), and that despite the fact that their respondents were not necessarily contending with drugs as a complicating factor. The case study framed by socio-cultural considerations enhances our understanding of context as well as content. As Stake argues, “... the boundedness and the behavior patterns of the system are key factors in understanding the case” (1994:237). Among the many strengths of ethnographic research is the ability it provides, when data are analyzed sensitively, to not impose “alien cognitive maps” (Stanfield II, 1994) upon the experiences of others. Although Emma is not “representative” in the statistical sense, we believe that her words and her story evoke those of untold others, serving as a cautionary tale against the continued neglect of a generation that is dying in silence.

When cooperative responsibility, mutual obligation, and respect give way to fear, unpredictability and worry, stress exacts severe tolls in the form of physical and mental illness, violence, and eventually, premature death or chronic disability. Emma, like countless and nameless grandparents, belongs to a disregarded generation: too poor to participate in the

“retirement culture” touted in the media, and too isolated from mainstream society to have its complaints heard or cared about (Fuller-Thomas et al., 1997). As a result, millions live parallel, stressed, lives in drug-affected households. The irreconcilability between what they think “ought to be” and what “is” can prove overwhelming, as Emma’s situation demonstrates all too clearly.

#### 4. Emma

Emma, 65, is a wheelchair-bound grandmother. Her spouse died in an automobile accident decades ago, while in the military. Their daughter Dee, 44, has three children of her own. Emma’s younger daughter Diane, whose father’s whereabouts are unknown, is 35 and the mother of Bernice, age 15 and Binka, age 6. Both Dee and Diane regularly consume crack and cocaine. Partly as a result, Bernice and Binka currently live with Emma, who has at various times been the main caregiver for Dee’s children as well. More generally, her daughters’ drug use, and the patterns of drug/alcohol consumption among other members of the extended family, create frequent household upheavals. As a result, Emma finds herself constantly needing to negotiate appropriate conduct norms with her grandchildren. She also struggles to find ways to ensure her own and her grandchildren’s safety and maintain some modicum of predictability in the household, all while sustaining herself through the violence, threats and upsets that now seem constants in her life.

Dee’s and Diane’s membership in the drug culture and the behaviors that result violate several of the core principles traditionally governing the Black community – most notably, the norms of kinship, reciprocity and respect. While Emma is committed to these norms, adheres to them, and tries to teach them to her grandchildren, her daughters belong to a counternormative subculture. Their drug-induced beliefs create a paradox in her life. Dee and Diane have abandoned consistent efforts at parenting; yet, their sporadic presence and their countervailing influences problematize Emma’s rearing of their children. In addition, Emma’s decision to live by traditional kinship norms leaves her household more easily violated and her resources more easily appropriated. While she won’t deny her children the refuge they seek whenever their lives are in crisis, they, for their part, do not hesitate to appropriate whatever resources they find in her home.

Like most custodial grandparents (Allen & James, 1998), Emma is poor. She faces the tangible costs associated with trying to stretch skimpy resources to meet the needs of a greater number of people. She also confronts tensions resulting from the dramatic differences between the values and beliefs she seeks to teach her grandchildren and the behaviors her daughters – their mothers – model for them. Diane and Dee embody the self-centered immediacy of drug users; they have little regard for the consequences of their behavior for others (Belle, 1991). Consequently, Emma struggles with the conflicting demands of rearing children who are exposed, while in her household, to their own parent’s inappropriate conduct (Minkler & Roe, 1996). Bernice and Binka are becoming increasingly difficult to raise, replicating their mother’s behavior toward them and toward Emma. These demonstrations counter Emma’s attempts at inculcating traditional norms of kinship, reciprocity, and respect, leaving her feeling pressured, vulnerable, and powerless.

#### 5. Stress, appraisal and coping

Poor drug-affected households such as Emma’s have quite literally become the battle-ground where mutually exclusive value systems war over drugs, and where every generation incurs casualties. Drugs themselves, of course, took hold with particular intensity because inner city communities were socio-economically beleaguered and their residents saw little reason to hope. While it is beyond the scope of this analysis to integrate the significance of community hopelessness within the individual behaviors this paper chronicles, each author has discussed

some dimensions of the political economy of substance use elsewhere (Dunlap, Johnson & Maher, 1997; Johnson, Dunlap & Maher, 1998).

Against this backdrop of drug use, Emma's generation remains committed to a traditional African American normative system of interdependence that historically has meant the difference between life and death. Given the nefarious influences of the drug culture upon their community and upon their own children and families, this has become hard work. The pressures surrounding Emma damage her health, her finances, and her ability to care for, nurture, and parent her grandchildren, who badly need the devoted care and attention her daughters cannot provide (Anthony 1991; Belle, 1991). Grandmothers like Emma appreciate the collective impact of dramatic normative change across generations. As Vissing points out, "personal and social chaos ... lead to individual and community catastrophe" (1996: 213).

Lazarus and Folkman's model of stress, appraisal and coping (1984) most usefully incorporate both internal and external dimensions, and their interplay, within a global framework. Thus, it provides the most effective theoretical frame for depicting the convergence of context and biography, of the attributes of the situation and those of the person – as a complex, compound process. Stress understood from that perspective refers to a temporal context within which environmental or internal demands, or both, tax or exceed adaptive and accessible social, psychological, interpersonal or systemic resources. Stress thus results from the discrepancy between the resources at someone's disposal and the weight of the demands they experience (Tourigny, 1994). Monat and Lazarus remind us that analytically, this means making explicit "the ... conditions ... [that] induce stress, the response patterns ... as indices of stress, and finally, the intervening processes believed responsible for the nature of the responses" (1991:3).

Coping, for its part, is value-neutral: It is a process-driven measure intended to get at everything people do to manage a situation they experience as stressful. It can include "minimizing, avoiding, tolerating, and accepting the stressful conditions as well as attempts to master the environment" (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984: 142). Lazarus and Folkman add that "the problem of *confounding coping with outcome* is addressed by defining coping as *efforts* to manage ... [C]oping .. include[s] anything that the person does or thinks, regardless of how well or badly it works" (1984: 142. Original emphases).

In the specific case of households such as Emma's, stress emanates from the conflict between one generation's beliefs about what matters for family and for community, and the other generation's behavior directly contravening those dictates (Cohen, 1991; Folkman et al., 1991). According to traditional community norms, people in Emma's situation expect themselves not only to meet their own needs, but also to nurture their grandchildren and rescue their drug-using children. Given their paucity of resources, meeting either set of demands would be difficult. Merging them compounds their impact and their improbability. It heightens the importance of teaching values to help grandchildren resist the pull of instant gratification apparent in their parents' lives, as well as of exercising extreme vigilance when drug-using adult children spend time in the household.

From this perspective, traditional African American norms of interdependence thus provide the backdrop – the antecedent factors – against which to evaluate the characteristics of actors and situations. They help us understand Emma's behavior, providing a framework within which to interpret actions that might otherwise seem fanciful, unreasonable, or counterproductive. Assessing the impact of Emma's coping strategies for the lives of her daughters or her grandchildren deserves an analysis that falls outside the scope of this paper.

## 6. Antecedent versus present conditions: norms and counternorms

In stress theory, normative systems can be seen as protective devices. They frame individual thinking about what is and what should be: they play an important role in the appraisal process, by providing the standards against which possibilities are measured. It is useful to understand normative systems as mediating a complex interplay of resources and demands, of entitlements and obligations. By bounding the range of acceptable conduct, they guide everyday behavior and ensure a measure of uniformity and consistency in the event of adversity or unpredictability. They provide a culturally appropriate guiding light, although its effectiveness arguably diminishes when the terrain provides a dramatic break from the past (Tucker & Mitchell-Kernan, 1995)

Like all cultural systems, African American norms evolved over time to sustain the community as an entity, the households comprising it, and their individual members (Trotter & William, 1993). Providing assistance and succor to someone in need may seem inadvisable in light of one's own already very limited resources. Yet, it is precisely because individual African Americans had so few reliable resources that the centrality of interdependence arose (Wilson, 1996). It ensured individual and community survival in the absence of private accumulations of capital. It minimized stress by augmenting the pool of resources available to counter urgent or immediate demands. The mechanism is self-sustaining: if one's own resources are depleted, perhaps partly as a consequence of extending help, the community pool allows replenishment. This global community perspective is integral to an appreciation of the damages that drugs inflict on inner cities.

## 7. The role of drugs

Drugs have grown sufficiently epidemic that they frame much about inner city residents' understanding of their own lives (Johnson, Dunlap & Tourigny, 2000). Few can count themselves totally outside the reach of a problem that brings violence, child abandonment, and despair to their streets. The subculture of drugs has become a powerful counternormative force of sufficient import so as to erode the reliability of such precepts as obligation to kin, respect, and reciprocity. While the success of drugs in the inner cities owes to factors that have been documented from a wide range of perspectives, it remains nonetheless important to acknowledge that they now form the backdrop for unfolding reality (Zinn, 1990).

Emma's experiences demonstrate the damage crack consumption inflicts upon interpersonal relationships. It renders some persons helpless and unpredictable, and heightens family anxiety (Zinn, 1990). The financial toll can also be staggering. Emma sometimes succeeds in her efforts to get her daughter to take on some parenting responsibility and spend money on her family. Yet, any clothes, necessities or jewelry Diane buys for herself or her children will be sold, often for a fraction of their value, as soon as she needs more drugs. This lack of control over consumption and related behaviors is an everyday phenomenon. The frequency and ordinariness of drug use are eroding the traditional norms and values that brought cohesion to socioeconomically marginalized African American communities. The enormous economic toll on family life is evident. Stress, of which violence is only one manifestation, pervades everyday life in households such as Emma's. The systemic violence of the crack trade injures bystanders and family members alike due to petty arguments about drugs, about money to buy drugs, and about their distribution among users. The cycle of drugs and violence engulfs the community and the households within it, permeating conduct norms and altering cultural precepts. Emma herself is very clear about the links between drugs and violence.

... sometimes it, it does cause them to argue, you know... because if they want and they don't have [drugs], and the other one got money, you know, and don't want to share... or loan the money so they can get... what they want.... They do get attitudes,



you know; and they fall out sometimes. But nine times out of ten they go back together and start all over again.

She also recognizes the power dealers exert over users:

One girl... got a settlement [of] a couple thousand dollars; and the guy who was giving ... her [drugs] on credit ... went through the money. Then she owed him ... about \$500 or \$600. He threatened her and her two kids.... he came in there and he took a VCR ... she had bought jewelry, clothes, and stuff; and he made her give all she could give and then, uh, she went around begging and borrowing, you know, and had to go to the church and confess to them and let them help her out. She was really scared. She was scared for her life and her kids' lives ... But she finally got the guy paid off ... And he gave her so much credit. He knew the money was coming.... Then she start running up a bill. Once they get that first hit, they'll run 24 hr, ... like my daughter.

Emma reveals the similarities between events in the drug subculture and in her own home. She reveals an intense awareness of the impact of drugs upon everyday behaviors:

...a certain person getting high ... happen to look down and see a rice grain ... or a white bread crumb or something.... They be scraping the wall... and some of them freeze and they stop, you know, can't move, you know. This particular one she can't even talk.... And they have bad reactions. And they fight over the pipes, the stems or whatever they call it, you know? I loaned you my stem now you could give me a hit, you know.

Crack subculture patterns become interwoven in family life. Cumulatively, those norms come to permeate a community hobbled by violence mostly related to drug use and sales.

Emma conveys this reality in discussions about the people she knows whose children and grandchildren are also part of the drug subculture – a kind of reality that points up street norms as a countercultural force she alone cannot counter. The compound stress upon the community is evident as Emma talks about the kind of violence she witnesses. Asked to discuss violence in her own recent past, she describes it as both physical and verbal, and portrays it in her own household:

... it's always in this household. I'm always arguin' with [my grandchildren and my daughters]. They argue at me.... The least little thing. I mean they don't even respect me at all. Like Binka, he tell me "I hate you and I'm glad you broke your leg ... and stuff like that, you know, Well he's just be repeating a lotta things that he hear [his mother] say... [Bernice] ... don't ask me could she do this or that because she know I'll say no ... Sometimes I really feel like using physical violence; but I know if I go off, I might hurt one of them you know ... So I just let it go ...

Diane [Bernice and Binka's mother] always accuse me, 'you don't do nothin', "Don't chastise him", "You already hit him".... What am I supposed to do? .... If he get mad, she'll [Diane his mother] make him mad or something and he throw something at her, she pick up something and throw it back –

These events point to drug-centered normative systems totally countering the foundational beliefs of traditional African American culture. The violence, the disrespect, the unwillingness to recognize other people's rights to their own property, the insensitivity to the household and the neighborhood as well as to the community consequences of inappropriate conduct, breach significant and historically entrenched Black community standards of conduct, the first of which is obligation to kin.

## 8. Kinship

One fundamental conduct norm for family life has been interdependence among members of the extended family, itself a basic African American family structure (McAdoo, 1980; Taylor, 1985; Taylor, 1986; Taylor & Chatters, 1991; Taylor, Jackson & Chatters, 1997), and one that provides a sense of community and a measure of security. It assures its members that help will be available should an individual or a household fall on hard times. When it is universally respected, the norm implicates each member directly in the success of every other member: Helping someone meet their own basic needs frees them to find and implement hopefully lasting solutions to their problems. When their efforts are rewarded, the pool of demands shrinks while resources become more abundant, thus buttressing everyone's eventual access to resources, thus reducing the salience of stress for all members.

Emma is the quintessential grandmother fulfilling traditional obligations. The fact that so many members of the extended family find shelter at her house is testimony to her sense of obligation to kin and to broader issues of poverty. Sharing living space is one way kin with limited resources of their own can extend a helping hand (Kotlowitz, 1991). Allowing them to move in and share resources when they face difficult circumstances reflects not only Black American history, but also the poverty that too often limits alternatives. It provides a psychological cocoon: sheltering those in trouble from aloneness frees them to concentrate on seeking solutions, and helps ensure that those answers will remain congruent with prevailing cultural norms. From a global, sociocultural, perspective, it permits continuity: the development and implementation of solutions necessarily falls under the kindly but nonetheless interested scrutiny of kin network members.

The presence of drug use or sale negates this equation. The introduction of drugs into the household brings a particular kind of violence. Drug and street norms become a part of family life through a specific coping process: families respond by adjusting their behavior to that of drug abusing members. This often means resorting to –and therefore further entrenching – various forms of violence within the extended family. When several similarly afflicted families live in close proximity, a state of constant crisis results:

Oh there was a shooting in the hallway not too long ago, and the boy got shot in the leg.... Right here in the hallway; and, uh, looks like there's a guy, one of my girlfriend's ... son he's a big guy, you know. He's selling crack, you know? Uh, he be out here every morning.... and he leaves about 12 o'clock..... So he was out there, and, uh, he saw... so somebody told him, you know, that the cops was over there in front of ..[grocery store] and told him the cops was coming. And he started running, and the cops chased him. He ran down there and he jumped over two cars. They caught him, and they beat him up, and they knocked his teeth out--..right down there in the circle. [He had drugs on him.]

... And the housekeeper I had, you know, she was dealing --.. and her brother, and they lived right there in nine. Her granddaughter, how they knocked the door down. They had her handcuffed out there.... and then another time when the boy got shot in the leg in the hallway. [T]he social worker was here. She hit the deck honey! She hit the floor and crawled over Donnelle. She crawled over Binka and she was sitting up by the bathroom doing like this, you know. Long after they came out she stayed there.

Women like Emma are a dying breed: converging demands are killing those who do not finally walk away (Freeman, Rotimi & Cooper, 1996; Martinez & Lillie-Blanton, 1996; Pearlman, 1996; Rimer, Conaway et al., 1996; Tourigny, 1997b). A growing proportion of them report having experienced “nervous breakdowns” (Shore & Hayslip, 1994; Minkler & Roe, 1993) – total mental exhaustion and inability to continue coping with the escalating crises of everyday life in their own homes. Their sons and daughters, to the extent that their lives are governed

by the imperatives of drug use, extract the benefits of kinship without meeting any of its demands. They contribute little if anything of worth to the households where their mothers and their children live. They deplete family resources in their search for drugs. Effectively incapable of picking up the mantle in traditional intergenerational fashion, they then further exhaust the supplies of funds and energies by their inability to parent. Women like Emma are left to pick up the pieces, feeling compelled to simultaneously provide shelter and refuge for their children – at least in extreme circumstances – and then also fulfilling obligations these children are unable to meet.

She's a sorry mother. I hate to say so. It's my daughter, but she doesn't do what she should do... cause the oldest son she didn't... raise him, she never took care of him. [George] came back here to stay with me and when the kid was [staying with me] she got mad ... she stepped off and left him with me until she [Diane] got pregnant with Binka, and then she came crawling back home. I had him till he was 12 or 13.

This excerpt typifies how crack addiction in the parent –Diane – influences the behavior of members of both preceding and the succeeding generations: Emma and Bernice. Widespread crack use across the community has shattered a fundamental component expectation of the community norm of kinship: that mothers will care for their offspring. Substance users are often incapable of the outward focus childcare requires. Expected, historically normative, behavior patterns are giving way to the demands of the drug culture: Emma's life is in many ways characterized by the tensions between what she believes "ought" to happen and the reality unfolding in her own home. Thus, the kinship norm is under simultaneous attack from several fronts. Grandparents straggle to meet the obligations neglected by their children, and attempt to raise those children's children to honor traditional norms, while simultaneously contending with the unhelpful intrusion of adult children introducing the norms linked to crack use into the household.

## 9. Reciprocit

A historically entrenched kinship expectation obligates recipients of help to reciprocate. In colloquial terms, the reciprocity norm posits that "if I give you room and board, you will help around the house." Washing dishes, taking out garbage, running errands, and babysitting, are ways of meeting that obligation. This norm is particularly important since adding people to the household without also increasing financial resources strains what is often an already precarious balance. Reciprocity serves a unifying socialization function that offsets somewhat the increased complexity in household interactions. While the literature reports mixed findings, the negative effects of crowding certainly intrude upon Emma's life, as they do upon the lives of so many grandmothers who forego even the pretense of privacy (Kotlowitz, 1991; Kozol, 1995). Doing a share of work to sustain the household communicates appreciation, limits otherwise spiraling demands, and also engages everyone in smoother day-to-day activities. Failing this cooperation, stress devolves to the grandparent who finds herself financing the lifestyle as well as seeing to the everyday needs of everyone in the house.

The following excerpt demonstrates the inter-relatedness among norms. It also illustrates the prompts for arguments that sometimes escalate into violence, which then suffuses household interactions. The rapid and frequent disappearance of personal belongings triggers confrontations:

I didn't invite [another grand daughter, Tee]... but she had nowhere else to go.... I wasn't going to see her in the street, ... stranded like that. So I took her in... Bernice didn't want Tee in the room.... Then she [Tee] claims one of the kids took her rings, her four rings. She put them on the dresser every night with her earrings. Her earrings was there but the four rings was gone.....Then she went and took, uh, Bernice's bus pass with her ID to get in school. It was up here, and she couldn't find it, you know.

So Bernice said I can't go to school without it, you know. I can go, but I can't get in. So I said well look in the kid's [Tee's] bags, "... you have my permission." She went in there and she found it, and she found a hat of hers.

Hosts are left to deal with their own pent-up emotions, including frustration with blatant disregard for their hospitality. Emma, despite her own better judgment, allowed her daughters into her house and permitted her granddaughter's return. Because of drugs, however, such helping behaviors are transformed. Reciprocity simply falls totally outside the range of conduct of someone involved in the immediate exigencies of crack use. It contrasts with the exigencies of crack subculture, which mandates absconding with private property, appropriating whatever has street resale value to get drug money: Resulting conflicts exacerbate the transience and consequent household instability. When children's own parents introduce violent elements of crack subculture as possible models for children to follow, the grandparent's task is rendered even more difficult.

They almost did [physically fight], you know? Bernice got so mad she called the kid a bitch.... Then the kid told her she was going to put her foot up her ass, you know. And, uh, so my cousin was here, you know, and I got him to intervene, – before it came to any physical blows.... But if it had come to that, I was going to tell them both to leave.... I think [the fight] was about the rings, the missing rings. And then she's [Tee] light fingered anyway. She pick up tapes and things that, you know, don't belong to her.

Reciprocity is thus not only an essential feature of a complex and fluidly composed household, it is also one of several demonstrations of another fundamental norm: respect for those whose household it is, for the norms they honor and for the sacrifices they make by sharing their resources. For these reasons, respect, particularly for one's elders, has historically played an important normative function, anchoring behaviors within an attitude designed to facilitate harmony.

## 10. Respect

Respect smoothes over differences, minimizes the intensity of conflict among people who suddenly share living space with others with whom they disagree, and generally promotes harmony in crowded, often economically strained, households. By contrast, disrespect opens the door to loud, sometimes violent, altercations. It negates the contributions or worth of others, shifts the emphasis away from the interests of the group to those of the individual, and becomes self-sustaining, paving the way to escalating manifestations of anger, intolerance, and violence. Disrespect is often a twin to crack.

Diane brings much tension whenever she "crashes" at Emma's house. Her disrespectful conduct triggers numerous petty, escalating, arguments. One such constant irritant centers on Diane's views of Emma's parenting. Emma's confinement to a wheelchair limits her interaction with the children in her care. Diane claims that Emma does not properly chastise the children. When Diane appears, she suddenly seeks to impose her parental will, in ways that add to the confusion in the household. When she is angry with Binka, she treats him as an equal unworthy of respect: she throws something at him, only to have him throw it back. Diane's presence models abuse to her mother, Emma, and her children, Binka and Bernice. Her children then emulate her violence. Constant bickering triggers additional forms of disrespect, including Emma's loss of control over the children as they get older. Bernice, a teenager, no longer finds it necessary to obey Emma. Even Binka, who is only 6 years old, already emulates his mother and his older sister. Emma, wheelchair-bound, often tired and sometimes overwhelmed, can do little to offset the cumulative influences of drug culture and violence.

What dramatic cultural shift can so alter the fabric of a community over a single generation? Drugs generally, and crack in particular, have become a constant and growing source of stress for the community generally, and for its elders in particular. Transience has been exacerbated in many households as a result of drugs. The historical importance of respect is negated, and elders are ridiculed. The crack subculture in particular centers on taking every possible advantage from everyone. Emma's stress is heightened because of the fluctuating composition of the household, which heightens the intensity of the demands upon her limited resources. The situation only worsens when other substance-using members of Emma's kin network also stay in her household.

## 11. Coping: the consequences of drugs

People who confront demands exceeding their resources – people facing stress – cope in various ways. When stress intensifies, individuals combine or superimpose various coping strategies, to try and contain if not resolve the problem (Burton, 1992). Drugs themselves have convincingly been argued as a form of coping with overwhelming environmental and interpersonal stress (Murphy & Rosenbaum, 1997). In socioeconomically strained communities with scant hope for substantial improvement in life chances, we might well see drug use as the end point of a series of coping efforts which have yielded no mastery over constraints located in the social environment (see Klinger, 1977). Drug use undeniably does, however, trigger additional stressors, upwardly spiraling in numbers and intensity. Drug users – and those who are routine users of crack perhaps most of all – reframe kinship norms into opportunities without obligations. Neither reciprocity nor respect holds sufficient weight to counter the all-absorbing influences of drugs. Normative systems – be they traditional or drug-centered – are exacerbated in times of intense need for drugs, money, or shelter.

As the clinical literature has amply demonstrated, some manifestations of stress are tangibly physical. Emma spoke of how the frequent arguments make her sick, and about how she finds that drinking a beer helps relieve stress (Pelt & Powell, 1995). Thus, her understanding of the range of normatively appropriate behaviors suggests that although consuming hard drugs is detrimental to family life, soft drugs or alcohol can ease its pressures. Therefore, she sanctions some alcohol or drug especially in social situations, while arguing against the use of hard drugs, which she sees as leading to neglect of obligations and dereliction of duties.

Some of them abuse [alcohol or marijuana] ... and some don't. You know they use it in moderation, you know; but there's some, you know, they can't control it like other people, you know. They got to go the whole nine.... I mean light drugs, I'm talking about marijuana... or beer, or liquor. I have [smoked marijuana], and maybe once in awhile if I'm at a party and it go around I take a tote.

The predominance of drug use and sale in the community generally, and in the building in which Emma lives, underpins her acceptance of some substance use:

I go out to card games, you know, parties; and some of those, my friend's kids know like that. It's common. Very common. A couple of girls in this building are heavy into drugs, you know, crack and coke. It don't bother me.

Yet, she also perceives drug use and drug dealing as a problem

[D]efinitely because there's somebody right back there selling it.... Some of them sell crack. Others sell marijuana, you know. So it's easy to get. They right by them every day. They know them, you know. A couple of people [in this building] ... are dealing.

## 12. Concluding analysis

A paradox confronts Emma and millions more like her. They are doing more than most of us would dare ask to care for and nurture loved ones. On the other hand, their households, organized to rescue loved ones in need of help, become the place where children learn from their parents the very norms governing street drug culture –the very lifestyle from which their grandparents want to shelter them.

Drug and street norms have grown increasingly violent and self-serving as inner cities face growing economic and political oppression (Dunlap et al., 2001) while housing growing numbers of users (Simon & Burns, 1997). Grandparents are convenient child minders: they offer stability to the children of users while assuaging the guilt likely to result from outright abandonment. But these grandparents' contributions to their own grandchildren's lives both further constrain their own resources and open the door to their drug-using children and those adult children's insatiable needs. For users in the clutches of a craving for drugs, resources are meant to be appropriated in the service of the next fix; and households are places to be invaded when they are too ill or too broke or too cold, or when they are coming off a bad trip or in need of shelter for uninterrupted sleep.

Ironically, grandparents' adherence to traditional norms leaves them vulnerable to abuse. Out of their own commitment to a prior community agenda of kinship, reciprocity, and respect, they are unable to exact respect out of their own children, who see them as willing victims, view their households as ready refuges, and eye their possessions as objects to be resold for cash.

To use the language of stress theory, Emma's efforts are frustrated by her daughters' violation of her principles and their appropriation of her resources. Her own daughter's – the children's mother's – modeling counter attempts at nurturing her grandchildren in ways normatively congruent with historical African American norms. Her commitment to providing her grandchildren with badly needed shelter, care and stability thus contradicts her sense of obligation towards her own children. Her daughters' violence provides the backdrop against which she is seeking to raise nonviolent, respectful, grandchildren. Yet, for her, "coping" explicitly excludes thought of turning her back on her children. To do so would be to reject the norms and values that have guided her life, thus triggering a different –and possibly even more daunting –kind of stress.

Changing conduct norms are playing out in changing parent-child relationships strained by the influence of drugs. Diane's modeling of violence to her children is reflected in her daughter Bernice's verbal onslaughts, and in Binka's tendency to throw things. The community where Emma lives displays drug use and the strictures of drug markets as normative. The ease with which drug using members of Emma's extended family visit violence upon her household perpetuates a climate her grandchildren expect and necessarily experience as normal. Her attempts at influencing their behavior in a different direction almost certainly appear to them as misguided and ill-fitting to their context.

If breaking the mold with respect to addiction-related conduct is the problem, tolerance alone is obviously not the answer. The everyday experiences of people who must live with drug use in their communities prompt them to incorporate it within their own lives in some way. While Emma struggles with various drugs and their impact upon community members; she is also trying to negotiate some range of acceptability within her own home. She therefore categorizes drugs around the freedom users retain to exercise personal control. Alcohol and marijuana are accepted as drugs that can be controlled.

Clearly, Emma seeks to negotiate a path of peaceful coexistence through the several minefields dotting the landscape of her life. Her adult children's appropriation of the right to define what constitutes normative conduct is causing her fear, physical symptoms, and loss of property. It could eventually cost her her home, or at the very least cost her grandchildren whatever stability her home provides them. In the event of Emma's total disability or death, either Diane or Dee could only sustain a household for a short while: it would soon become a shooting gallery or crack house totally inappropriate for the children.

Extensive empirical evidence suggests that youths born since 1970 shy away from injection drug use and are less likely than their parents to resort to hard drugs (Johnson & Dunlap, 1998; Johnson, Dunlap & Tourigny, 2000). We cannot predict the extent to which this tendency will typify Emma's grandchildren's generation. History suggests that they are unlikely to survive exposure to subcultures of drugs and violence unscarred if their grandparents cannot oversee their childhood. Some will be drawn into the behavior of their drug-using parents. Since welfare "reform" is now imposing the loss of the kinds of social support mechanisms that have provided bare-boned sustenance for households such as Emma's – mechanisms once integral to the economy of the community – their situation will likely worsen (Sidel, 1996; Tourigny, 1997a).

Coping with adult children who are themselves victims and ready to victimize others is a no-win situation (Pearlin, 1991; Singer et al., 1991). Emma has faced the quandary, and answered in the only way she could: by trying to be all things to all people, extending herself in myriad directions all at once. She has paid a price for her faithful adherence to norms, however. Her health is failing, her household is disintegrating under the impact of violence and theft, and she is visibly distraught by the untenable dilemmas that her life now contains.

Clearly, the compound impact of stress is increasingly lethal (Roe et al., 1996; Minkler et al., 1997). Whatever coping strategies are eventually enacted, the wave of drug use in inner cities may have already struck a major blow to historically entrenched precepts within the African American kin network. One generation has been too absorbed by the immediacies of drug use to adhere to or model interdependence, reciprocity and respect. The children borne by that generation may be too damaged by the constant conflict between traditional and counter norms, or too blunted by the casualties suffered by their custodial grandparents, to incorporate traditional values within their own conduct. The community faces a quandary that can neither be postponed nor resolved without grappling with even more intense stress: whether to suspend the application of traditional norms to its children in order to ensure the survival of its grandchildren.

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