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Black Deaf Persons and Their Families: Ecological and Systems Perspectives

Elizabeth A. Creamer

Abstract

This paper presents both the ecological and systems perspectives for understanding and empowering Black Deaf persons in the context of their families and social systems. The term "Black Deaf Persons" can be referred to as African American Deaf persons or Black Deaf persons originally from America, Africa, Caribbean countries, or other countries. The learning objectives are to scrutinize and explicate both the ecological and systems framework for understanding the relationships that occur within Black families with Deaf members and among other social systems that are involved with Black Deaf persons, and planning and implementing creative interventions to adjust Black Deaf person-family-system relationships. Community resources that benefit Black Deaf persons and families are also discussed.

Introduction

Both the ecological and systems theories provide a framework to examine the transactions between Black Deaf Persons, their families, and their social environment in order to determine how external factors and deficits interfere with their social functioning and how various resources and opportunities improve their social functioning. General systems theory explains how human systems function and relate to each other (Greene, 1991; Shafer, 1969) while the ecological model centers on how things fit together and how they adapt to each other (Germain and Gitterman, 1980; 1996). The term "Black Deaf persons" can be referred to as African American Deaf persons or Black Deaf persons originally from America, Africa, Caribbean countries, or other countries (Anderson and Grace, 1991).

Derived from biology, Ludwig Von Bertalanffy discovered the general systems theory that can be useful for social work practice (Andreae, 1996). General systems theory describes the principles by which systems function, develop, and interact with other systems (Greene, 1991; Shafer, 1969). Systems include but are not limited to the family system, the social service system, the political system, the educational system, the religious system, and the employment system. Each system can be part of a larger system. In the concept of wholeness, the elements within a system create an entity greater than the additive sums of the separate elements. No system can be sufficiently understood or completely defined once it is

broken down into its component parts. In the concept of relationship, the pattern and organization of the elements in a system are as important as the elements themselves, but all systems have symbiotic relationships. A change in one part will affect all other parts. All systems have boundaries. If a system is open, that means the boundary is permeable and allows the exchange of matter, energy, and information across the boundary; however, systems vary in degrees of openness. In the concept of homeostasis, living systems seek a balance to maintain and preserve the system. Systems are continually changing and are often unpredictable and chaotic but systems tend to function in ways that preserve a steady state. In the concept of entropy, the system becomes disorganized. All systems need resources, energy, and information to counteract entropy and maintain organization. According to Greene (1991) and Shafer (1969), system functioning has four activities: input (taking in energy), conversion operations (activities that process the input and translate it into forms that can be used by the system to continually function), feedback (processes by which the system monitors its own functioning and makes adjustments in order to maintain a steady state), and output (interaction with other systems). In the concept of equifinality, a particular effect may result from several causes while the concept of multifinality says that a given action may create several outcomes. The concept of interface refers to the meeting or overlapping of two or more systems (Greene, 1991; Shafer, 1969).

Ecological theory draws selected concepts from the science of ecology (Germain and Gitterman, 1980; 1996). The ecological perspective focuses on the interrelationships between people and their environments. Concepts include person-environment fit, adaptedness and adaptation, life stressors, stress and coping, relatedness, oppression, niche, and life course. In the concept of person-environment fit, there may be either a positive or negative match between the needs, abilities, behaviors, environment, and objectives of people. In the concept of exchanges, there are continual relationships between individuals and their environments in which each influences the other over time. In the concept of adaptedness, both the person and his/her environment match, which would promote human growth and well-being and would protect and cultivate the environment. In the concept of adaptation, the actions are developed to promote personal change and/or environmental change. In the concept of life stressor, external stressors and internal stressors are examples of negative relationships between people and their environments such as job loss and illness. Stress may result in physiological or emotional difficulties. The life issue can be viewed as a challenge when we believe we have resources

to overcome it. In the concept of coping, stress management can be self-administrated such as relaxation exercises. A person functions within a culture, a society, and an environment.

Physical environment includes the natural world, organizations, space that support and arrange organizations, and biology. Social environment includes families, friends, relatives, communities, organizations, and institutions. Culture is part of the individual and part of the environment, and is carried through individual's values, norms, beliefs, and language. From the holistic perspective, people and environment must be analyzed as to how they influence each other. For instance, there may be some negative results to human development through cultural change, but not the genetic aspect. Ecological perspective focuses on helping alter maladaptive relationships between individuals and their environments.

The ecological model emphasizes person-in-environment. In the concept of person-in-environment, individuals constantly interact with social systems. The person-in-environment transactions can be positive, negative, or neutral (Germain and Gitterman, 1980; 1996). With this concept, social work can focus on three areas. The first area focuses on an individual and develops his/her problem-solving skills, coping strategies, and abilities . The second area focuses on the relationship between an individual and the systems he or she interacts with and links the individual with resources and opportunities. The final area focuses on the systems and changes them to meet the needs of individuals.

From the ecological and systems perspective, family is a system in which the members receive and exchange information with each other and with other social systems. This system is an emotional one of at least three or more generations (Carter and McGoldrick, 1999). Although the family has roles and functions, the main value in the family system is in the relationships. Even if an individual lives alone, he/she was reared in the complex family system and was intensely influenced by this association (Andreae, 1996). Social and cultural factors can play a role in how a family goes through the life cycle (Billingsley, 1968; 1970; 1992; Carter and McGoldrick, 1999; Germain and Gitterman, 1980; 1996; Gitterman and Shulman, 1994; Lum, 1996). Both the ecological and systems theories present a framework for understanding the difficulties of Black Deaf persons in the context of their families and other systems.

Black Deaf Persons and Their Families

The majority of Black Deaf persons come from hearing families where they experienced different forms of communication (Schein and

Delk, 1974). In many cases, their communication is limited to spoken language, gestures and/or writing despite heightened deaf awareness and widespread availability of sign language classes (Harvey, 1989). When deafness interferes with communication, the family relationship is affected and the Black Deaf person experiences a feeling of social isolation (Anderson, 1992).

In the 1990s there were many variations in the family structure especially in the Black community. Diverse families include but are not limited to extended families of three or four generations, families experiencing divorce, blended families, families with children belonging to several households, single parent families, families with aunts and nieces, unmarried couples with children, interracial families, and adoptive families (Carter and McGoldrick, 1999; Logan, Freeman, and McRoy, 1990). Therefore, the needs of Black families vary. Because of racism and disenfranchisement numerous Black families, developing the extended family network and kinship system for the purpose of support, have experienced role flexibility throughout history (Billingsley, 1968; 1970; 1992; Freeman, 1990; Rasheed and Rasheed, 1999).

Within the context of racism and disenfranchisement Black men may feel oppressed as compared to Caucasian men, partly because of the fact that they are often forced to depend economically upon Black women (Billingsley, 1992; Rasheed and Rasheed, 1999). As numerous Black men move up to middle class/professional positions their priority may change. Some Black men value the role of provider more than the role of husband. As a result they are inclined to spend less time with their families. It appears that the issue of economics has an impact on Black families. In addition to their jobs, parents have to deal with the issue of racism which often takes a toll on them psychologically (Billingsley, 1992; Rasheed and Rasheed, 1999). All the cultural, economic, and social circumstances that impact Black families also influence Black Deaf members (Brooks, Moore, and Allen, 1992; Gitterman and Schulman, 1994).

As stated earlier, the majority of Black Deaf persons come from hearing families where they experience limited or no meaningful communication. As the parents tend to utilize spoken English language, the lack of sign communication harms Black Deaf children on a psychological and/or educational level (Anderson, 1992). In many cases parents are inclined to leave the problems to schools or teachers, which compels the educational system to become "surrogate" parents to the Black Deaf children (Aramburo, 1992; M. M. Miceli, Personal Communication, February 23, 1999). Parents are grieved over their children's deafness for

years (Harvey, 1989). As a result the parents do not attend to the needs of the Black Deaf family members. It does not necessarily mean, however, that the parents neglect their Black Deaf children. It is simply because the parents do not have tools to deal with their Black Deaf children (Anderson, 1992). Considering their negative experiences with American society, the parents may not seek social services or not attempt to take sign language classes outside their homes. In some cases, the parents would show up in a mental health agency when they experience a real crisis, which often creates additional difficulties for Black Deaf children (Anderson, 1992). Some Black Deaf persons, however, survive family difficulties and grow out of the cycle and its continuous crises with a more whole and integrating sense of individual and group identity (Gitterman and Shulman, 1994).

Studies have confirmed that the educational needs of many Black Deaf children have long been insufficiently met (Aramburo, 1992; Brooks, Moore, and Allen, 1992; Hairston & Smith, 1983). Historically, Black Deaf children were placed in racially segregated schools where teachers were not well trained in education. Numerous Black Deaf persons have disproportionately been placed in vocational schools. Black Deaf persons are often encouraged to try entry level or dead-ended jobs by vocational rehabilitation counselors which reinforces their beliefs that they have limited skills. They did not have an opportunity to meet any positive Black Deaf role models early in their lives that would help bolster their self-image despite the fact that a few had Black Deaf teachers or counselors. Those Black Deaf persons who achieve success tend to have experienced positive reinforcements by their families, African American mentors and/or Caucasian mentors who have a heart for them. Unfortunately, such positive experiences do not occur often enough (Anderson, 1992; Anderson and Grace, 1991; Aramburo, 1992; Brooks, Moore, and Allen, 1992; Hairston & Smith, 1983).

Similar to Black hearing children, educational standards are found to be lower for Black Deaf children (Cohen, Fischgrund, & Redding, 1990; Cohen, 1993). Despite the fact that Deaf children, regardless of what their colors are, tend to score below hearing students on standard achievement tests, the scores of Black Deaf students are even lower than Deaf Caucasian students. The main issue seems to be that the educational curriculum has long been inadequately inclusive especially in Deaf schools and programs for the Deaf (Brooks, Moore, and Allen, 1992; Cohen, Fischgrund, & Redding, 1990; Cohen, 1993). One of the disturbing findings was that the subjects stated that they learned about their culture mostly from literature on their own or from their families but not in schools (Aramburo, 1992).

In 1989, the Conference of Educational Administrators of Schools and Programs for the Deaf (CEASD) had responded to these problems by hosting the national conference on Black Deaf youth and Hispanic Deaf youth. As a result, a growing number of residential schools for the deaf have developed cultural diversity lessons that are incorporated into the school curriculum (Anderson and Grace, 1991). In general, many Black Deaf children seem to have cognitive abilities but they need to be pushed to achieve their full potential (Brooks, Moore, and Allen, 1992). In spite of a number of Black role models in school, Pennsylvania School for the Deaf officials have been experiencing difficulty in getting as many parents involved in the school (M. M. Miceli, Personal Communication, February 23, 1999).

As a consequence, Black Deaf persons may be unprepared to function adequately in the real world. Among the developmental problems are lack of problem-solving skills, lack of decision-making skills, lack of independent living skills, limited communication skills, emotional disturbance, and/or behavioral problems (Anderson, 1992; Gitterman and Shulman, 1994). In addition, parents have to deal with difficulties in fitting into the American culture that often results in stress, fatigue, and other psychosomatic difficulties (Rasheed and Rasheed, 1999). Mental health professionals working with Deaf persons often misunderstand the behaviors and responses as well as the difficulties encountered by Black Deaf Persons (Anderson, 1992). Stuart and Gilchrist (1991) pointed out that, despite the fact that Deaf individuals have common needs, there is diversity within the Deaf community. Mental health professionals have failed to explore the contextual problems experienced by Black individuals and families (Anderson, 1992; Billingsley, 1992; Rasheed and Rasheed, 1999). Considering their hostile environment, Black Deaf persons do not have an opportunity to process their negative experiences of racism and oppression. Rasheed and Rasheed (1999) affirmed that mild adjustment disorders and major depression resulted from the problems of racism and oppression. Mental health professionals who often maintain stereotypes of Black Deaf people tend to dwell on the deficits and problems, which are found to be similar to the perspectives of professionals in general (Anderson, 1992). For example, limited community resources have been an issue for Black Deaf individuals and families.

Many working class and professional Black men encounter the presumption that they are just like "other" Black men. They are not viewed as individuals, and their talents, skills, and other individual characteristics tend to be overlooked. They are seen as a part of a larger group of "others"

(Rasheed and Rasheed, 1999). When they are given an opportunity to demonstrate their abilities and skills, they may be considered the "exception". Caucasian colleagues would say, "You are different from most blacks I have known". That can create negative consequences for Blacks because this declaration suggests that other Black people are inferior. As a result, they experience feelings of anger, rage, and a sense of hopelessness (Rasheed and Rasheed, 1999). Coming from hearing families, a majority of Black Deaf children around eight or nine years of age can sense these feelings (Cohen and Grace, 1992). Many of them value their families out of their love, regardless of how they relate to each other. Black families turn to their extended families and/or churches for support (Billingsley, 1968; 1970; 1992; Logan, Freeman, and McRoy, 1990).

Black churches have traditionally been a source of support. Enjoying the spiritual and social support, Black families have actively participated in churches as part of their family life. Black churches have a long history of being involved in the civil rights movement (Kellogg, 1967), and playing a significant role in battling racism. In addition to providing for spiritual and physical needs, Black churches also provide social and community programs such as youth ministry, senior ministry, and counseling (Lum, 1996). Many Black Deaf persons attend Black churches with deaf ministries.

From the social work perspective, community is defined as an institution of ethnic, racial, and emotional identity (Rasheed and Rasheed, 1999). The sense of identity is based on the assumption that there is some form of homogeneity, attachment, and mutuality among the members of the Black Deaf community. As their deafness is obviously overlooked, they have a tendency to identify with their race first mainly because of its explicitness (Aramburo, 1992). For years, Black Deaf persons have been organizing social and cultural events for the purpose of education and entertainment (Brooks, Moore, and Allen, 1992; Hairston & Smith, 1982). Black Deaf people often gather informally. More and more community organizations and schools attempt to recognize Black Deaf culture by coordinating African events, symposium, parties, and feasts as well as inviting presenters in celebration of Black History Month.

In response to the difficulties encountered by Black Deaf persons and families, the Black Deaf Advocates (BDA) organization was established in the early 1980s by a small group of Black Deaf professionals and interested consumers in Washington, DC (Brooks, Moore, and Allen, 1992; Hairston & Smith, 1982). Starting with the establishment of 2 local chapters in 1982, the National Black Deaf Advocates, Inc. (NBDA) is a

growing organization with an Executive Board and 28 chapters in addition to associate members. The mission of NBDA is to promote culture and empowerment of African American persons who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing. In addition to annual national conferences, NBDA sponsors a weeklong youth conference (Youth Empowerment Summit-YES), Miss Black Deaf America pageant, banquet, workshops, and seminars. NBDA, with over 1,000 members, has strengthened the network of positive Black Deaf role models, Black families with Deaf children, professionals working with Deaf and Hard of Hearing individuals, and interested consumers. It also led to the establishment of the National Alliance of Black Interpreters (NAOBI) and NBDA Interpreters/Translitterators of Color Committee (ITOCC). NAOBI has been training people of color to become professional interpreters and to work effectively with Black deaf persons. NBDA has been playing a significant role in the lives of Black deaf individuals and their families by developing and maintaining its working relationship with community organizations. Although positive effects were obviously evidenced, BDA has only been able to reach out to a small portion of the Black Deaf community (A. Couthen, Personal Communication, March 12, 1999). The Black Deaf community reflects a deep and rich connection with their heritage that has been shaped by the historical and pessimistic experiences of social inequality, discrimination, and oppression.

Intervention Strategies

Derived from the popular African proverb used in the Black community, "It takes a village to raise a child", the Black community should be addressed as a community model (Rasheed and Rasheed, 1999). From both the ecological and systems perspectives, we can build vicinity around Black Deaf individuals and families. The intervention strategies listed below are only suggested to stimulate some ideas of how we can enrich the needs of Black deaf and hard-of-hearing individuals and families, how we would organize activities that benefit this population, and how we would strengthen a network of existing organizations.

Developing a working relationship with Black Deaf Advocates (BDA) would benefit the general community by mobilizing community resources. Black Deaf advocates should serve on advisory boards and/or participate in coalition meetings in order to enhance their position as role models while promoting program and policy changes. Such opportunity would give Black Deaf advocates an opportunity to form formal partnerships with community organizations and agencies.

BDA should be invited to help with establishing a chapter in the local area where there is a lack of Black Deaf representation or leadership. Establishing a BDA chapter would provide Black Deaf persons with an opportunity to develop and exercise their leadership in voicing the concerns and needs of Black deaf and hard-of-hearing individuals and families. This organization would also provide Black deaf and hard-of-hearing individuals with an opportunity to organize social, cultural, and educational activities to strengthen a link between Black deaf persons, their families, and community resources. Such opportunities would enable Black deaf and hard-of-hearing individuals to reassess their values and beliefs and to realize their full potential. NBDA is available to provide leadership training upon request.

Representatives from either the NBDA organization or a local BDA chapter should be invited to speak with a group of school children and to participate in extracurricular activities as volunteers. That would inspire more Black deaf children to strive for excellence and to enter professional fields of study.

Black Deaf individuals and their families should be given an opportunity to visit deaf churches or churches that have deaf ministries where they may gain a sense of spiritual bonding. This opportunity would enable them to develop and maintain a regular fellowship with other Black deaf individuals and their families and to ease the tension between Black deaf individuals and their families. Counseling or support services can be provided in such non-traditional settings and would reduce the strained relationship between Black deaf persons and the community agencies. Innovative outreach services may include parties and cultural events where Black families can share their experiences with other families with deaf members. This opportunity would allow them to learn more about Black deaf culture and to strengthen the familial relationships.

The family minister should be invited to participate in a multidisciplinary team meeting upon the family request as he/she may play an important role in the life of the Black family. Individual therapy may benefit some Black deaf individuals as unresolved conflicts may prevent the growth of Black deaf individuals. It is important that each individual should be given an opportunity to examine life experiences and reflect upon how their environment has shaped their lives. Professionals must be familiar with Black culture that would allow them to understand the contextual problems that have an impact on the lives of Black families and their Deaf members. They may voluntarily visit BDA meetings and social functions where they can learn about the needs and strengths of Black deaf

individuals and families. Focusing on the strengths of Black deaf persons and families would motivate consumers to make positive changes in their lives (Saleebey, 1992).

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