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The Multiple Roles of Low Income, Minority Women in the Family and Community: A Qualitative Investigation

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Abstract

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Keywords

Longitudinal, Qualitative, Multiple Roles of Minority Women, and Strengths of Women in Family and Community

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The Multiple Roles of Low Income, Minority Women in the Family and Community: A Qualitative Investigation

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This longitudinal, ethnographic research study was incepted to investigate service use among families living in poor urban communities. Themes that emerged during data collection focus on the variety of roles played by women, in the home, and in the neighborhood. We identified numerous strengths exhibited by women, that is, roles that help families adapt and survive. Over a two-year period, we spent time with families, in their homes, and in their communities. Not only did the women fulfill multiple roles in the family, but they performed "care taking" functions within the community as well. A more complete understanding of family and community strengths will help researchers and social service professionals better serve diverse families. Key words: Longitudinal, Qualitative, Multiple Roles of Minority Women, and Strengths of Women in Family and Community

Introduction

During this two-year longitudinal study, the researchers sought to obtain a better understanding of family and community coping mechanisms, as well as the resources that affect families within selected poor, ethnically diverse, urban neighborhoods. The collaborators: researchers, service providers, city personnel, and clinicians, listened to families in an effort to better comprehend their daily lives. How do these diverse families utilize various resources, what is helpful or hurtful? We believe that qualitative methods are responsive to the unique needs of culturally diverse families and will help researchers determine the coping mechanisms that families use in their lives. Because the focus of this study is on diverse families, some of whom do not speak English, these methods are especially appropriate.

Qualitative methods are particularly amenable to the study of diverse families because they focus on the "processes by which families create, sustain, and discuss family realities" (Daly, 1992, p. 4). It is also important to give voice to women in low-income minority communities. "Giving voice to women's experience in qualitative research empowers women because they are involved in a research enterprise where their interpretations are central" (Catlett, 1997, p. 109).

Much of the past literature in this area has been of a quantitative nature using national data sets and ignoring the important interactions that are occurring within poor neighborhoods. "Quantitative studies alone offer an incomplete understanding of family life and child development in impoverished neighborhoods . . . qualitative studies offer a dynamic view of interactions within families, as well as those that occur between families in specific neighborhoods" (Jarrett, 1997, p. 49).

Qualitative works help in the understanding of ethnically diverse, poor neighborhoods (Andrews, Ybarra, & Miramontes, 2002; Edin, 1993; Edin & Lein, 1997; Gilkes, 1994; Jarrett, 1997; Litt, 1999; Menjivar, 1997; Mohr, Fantuzzo, & Abdul-Kabir, 2001; Stack, 1975; Zinn, 1994). In fact, researchers have recommended that more qualitative, culturally diverse, and gender fair studies be conducted to investigate family dynamics (Catlett, 1997; Jarrett, 1997; Zinn, 1994).

Implicit in our methods is a preventative approach that builds on the Family Strengths Model (DeFrain & Stinnett, 1992; Stinnett & DeFrain, 1985). This model emphasizes the capacities of families rather than their deficits. By utilizing a Family Strengths framework, we shift the focus of what one generally finds in research. Traditionally, we examine only family problems; thus, we find only family problems. If we are interested in family strengths, understanding how families succeed, the Family Strengths Model allows us to discover family competencies. This, in turn, may help professionals and practitioners design more effective service delivery models.

Purpose and Goals

To elucidate the values and culture of diverse families living in poor urban communities, this two-year longitudinal, ethnographic study was incepted. Identifying family and community dynamics in selected urban neighborhoods required careful investigation about how ethnically diverse families living in poverty succeed in their neighborhoods. The research team consisted of five researchers, who investigated service use among poor and ethnically diverse families. Three of the researchers interviewed families in these neighborhoods, while the remaining two researchers talked to service providers and community leaders to broaden our knowledge of service use by low-income families.

The data analyzed in this paper focus on three families living in one neighborhood. Although we were initially interested in how family and community dynamics specifically impacted formal service use, we quickly realized that families had a much broader view of the resources they utilized to promote family well-being. In fact, in reviewing over 400 pages of interview transcripts, we discovered a large portion of our discussions concentrated on the importance of family, womens' roles, and community participation as useful coping mechanisms. Mention of formal services was scant. Thus, families told us that their primary resource was their family and local community members. Therefore, the focus of this paper will be to describe the resources families utilized to succeed in an ethnically diverse low-income community.

Conceptual Framework

To best serve families, we must understand the contexts in which they are embedded. Implicit in our research design is a contextual approach. It is important to acknowledge the multiplicity of influence as we strive to understand motivations, ideas, and behaviors. Over two and a half decades ago, Urie Bronfenbrenner (1974) stated "much of American developmental psychology is the science of the behavior of children in strange situations with strange adults" (p. 3). More recently, McKinney, Abrams, Terry, and Lerner (1994) expressed a similar sentiment that the majority of developmental research continues to focus on middle-class European-American children in laboratory settings. Therefore, the present study uses a conceptual framework that encompasses an ecological perspective (Bronfenbrenner, 1974, 1979) to avoid the study of families devoid of context.

Throughout data collection and analysis, the Bronfenbrenner (1974, 1979) framework was used to organize and comprehend the multitude of complex influences on individuals and families. Using the framework, researchers can seek out patterns at any one system level across families or neighborhoods or look for patterns within a family across the system levels. Information about why a mother does or does not use the city health services may emerge at the microsystem level (her physician does not speak Spanish), at the mesosystem level (the hour's conflict with her work and child care arrangement), the exosystem level (a neighborhood association is offering services at the school site), or the macrosystem level (the clinic lost funding due to a weak economy).

Methodology

Design

A collaborative group of researchers from a variety of disciplines worked together during each phase of the study. The first six months of the study involved preliminary fieldwork activities such as rapport building, establishing credibility, and accessing communities in the area. During this phase, neighborhoods were selected, focus groups commenced, and key informants were identified. We also hired cultural guides and identified families, who would participate in interviews. Purposive sampling techniques were used for site and family selection. Again, data reported in this report stem from results from three families in one neighborhood.

A critical aspect of field work is the establishment of rapport and credibility with the community under study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). With this in mind, a series of preliminary fieldwork activities, including informal interviews, neighborhood meetings, windshield surveys, (Andranovich & Riposa, 1993) walking tours, and literature review occurred over the first several months of the study to gain access to the neighborhoods and families.

The research team held several informal interviews with various community members, including police officers, community activists, and city administrators. In addition to orienting the researchers to neighborhoods, these informal interviews provided important contacts with key individuals, who later proved to be instrumental in accessing families.

Another strategy used to gain entry into the communities was attendance at neighborhood grassroots organization meetings. Researchers participated in

neighborhood collaboratives, citywide community events, and professional gatherings. This type of participant observation enabled the researchers to interact with residents and service providers, while gaining an understanding of the naturally occurring variables that were influencing them.

Purposive Sampling

Sampling procedures in qualitative research cannot be separated from data collection. We used three purposive sampling processes. First, key informant sampling identified especially knowledgeable individuals, who increased our understanding of neighborhood conditions (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Second, maximum variation sampling (Patton, 1980) was used to document unique variations in ethnicity, level of neighborhood organization, and level of neighborhood deterioration. Third, snowball sampling was used to develop a network for accessing families and other potentially productive data sources. Detailed strategies for site selection, focus groups, key informants, and family selection are described below.

Site selection. In an effort to select low income, ethnically diverse communities, census data on neighborhoods were reviewed. Census data provided information on income, ethnicity, receipt of public assistance, home ownership, and migration patterns. All neighborhoods selected were in the lowest income category in the city of Long Beach. In addition to obtain maximum variability in ethnicity, we selected neighborhoods with "pockets" of minority groups. In Long Beach, all of the neighborhoods chosen for this study were predominantly Mexican-American; however, each of the neighborhoods varied with regard to the existence of other minority groups. The neighborhood reported in this study had primarily Mexican-American families with pockets of African-Americans; therefore, one African-American family was selected as well as two Mexican-American families.

Another criterion for neighborhood selection was the level of existing collaborative and intervention efforts within the neighborhoods. A program entitled Neighborhood Improvement Strategies (NIS) was in place in several neighborhoods in Long Beach. NIS is a city sponsored community development program that identifies neighborhoods at-risk based on public safety, physical conditions, and social conditions (most at-risk = NIS 1 designation: potentially at-risk = NIS 2 designation: not currently at-risk = NIS 3 designation). NIS organized neighborhood groups to discuss ways to improve conditions within identified neighborhoods. In an effort to obtain maximum variability among our three sites, the NIS designation was used to observe differences in neighborhoods or families based on the level of NIS involvement. Data reported in this study focus on a NIS level 1 (most severe decay) neighborhood.

Focus groups. We conducted focus group meetings to obtain community feedback regarding interview procedures, build rapport in the neighborhoods, identify and meet key informants, familiarize neighborhood members with the project, and learn about community organizations. Those involved in focus groups included community residents, school personnel, clinic workers, clergy, agency administrators, and community police. Focus groups provided the opportunity for participants to become more explicit about their own views as a result of group interaction, i.e., the "cueing phenomenon" (Morgan & Krueger, 1993, p. 17).

Focus group participants were also queried about how the community would receive university members. Furthermore, would families be comfortable meeting us in their homes, or would they rather meet at a neutral place, for instance, a community center? Finally, focus groups were asked about cultural guide characteristics (in addition to speaking the family's native language) that would enhance rapport with families, i.e., age group, gender, knowledge of a specific dialect.

In an effort to begin recruitment of families, focus group participants were asked if they had suggestions for how to access families. We asked if community leaders would allow us to use their facilities as a place to meet and recruit families. Focus groups provided leads to a variety of data sources. Furthermore, these meetings with gatekeepers of the community opened the doors to the neighborhoods.

Key informants. Key informants were critical in the collection of data. The key informants for this study were obtained through multiple sources including focus groups, city government, neighborhood associations, and service agencies. Serving as guides, the key informants provided access to neighborhoods and families. The key informants served as gate keepers of the community in that it would have been difficult to access families without them. Key informants provided on-going assistance with family selection and access to community events. They served as interpreters of the neighborhood environments and family culture. Finally, they provided a context or history within each neighborhood. For example, in the neighborhood discussed in this report, a community police officer was able to gather focus group participants (community members, agency and school personnel) and provide two family names and phone numbers to researchers to assist in family recruitment. This same community police officer introduced the researchers to the local middle school principal, who provided access to the third family.

Family selection. Utilizing information gained through focus group results and key informants, three culturally diverse families from the neighborhood were selected to participate in the study. Each family qualified as low-income in order to study the interaction between service-use and poverty. Census information was utilized to assure that chosen families were a reflection of the neighborhood. Consequently, because the neighborhood's highest minority population was Latino, two Latino families were selected. The second largest minority population in the neighborhood was African-American, thus, one African-American family was chosen. Because generalization is not a goal of qualitative research, we felt comfortable that selected families generally reflect the demographic characteristics within the neighborhood.

Cultural guides. To enhance participant and site accessibility, research pairs consisting of one university faculty member and one cultural guide conducted interviews. Cultural guides served as a bridge between researchers and families by translating both language and culture. It was essential that family interviewers were fluent (oral and written) in the language spoken by families and that the cultural guides be of the same ethnic background as the families with whom they worked. In addition, it was important that interviewers had good interviewing skills and past experience working or living within culturally diverse, low-income communities. Candidates were selected based on their ability to establish rapport and communicate articulately.

Cultural guides were introduced to the goals of the study, layout of target neighborhoods, and interview procedures. Although researchers guided the interviews

with family members, it was important that cultural guides understand the use of effective interview skills. Thus, specific attention was directed toward interview procedures including effective probing. The emergent nature of methods was addressed, and all interviewers discussed strategies for obtaining trust from families. Researcher-interviewer pairs spent time getting to know each other and brainstorming the most effective data collection methods. The importance of a good "fit" between researcher and cultural guide cannot be stressed enough. This teamwork approach served as a key element of rapport building as well as providing reflection during data collection and analysis.

Researchers. The primary goal of the researchers was to truly understand the lives of the families chosen for the study. Our hopes were that we would obtain a better feel for how and if they accessed services. At first, we were somewhat disappointed because the results were more focused on community and family dynamics than service use. We soon realized that this was a primary finding, and we let the qualitative methodology work for us and let the families talk about issues in the forefront of their minds.

The researchers worked hard to maintain an insider/outsider balance. It was a challenge that was faced throughout the entire research project. At times, the dual role of participant and observer became uncomfortable; we felt compelled to participate in their lives when they needed us. We did not want to just take from them and give nothing back. We documented requests that were made of us (i.e., legal issues, health issues). We developed a high level of comfort with these families, and while we did not become close personal friends, we certainly became friendly. We were in their homes, sharing food, drink, and the details of their lives. It was a very rich and humbling experience.

Reciprocity. The issue of reciprocity, as eluded to above, is one worth mentioning. As much as the families affected us, our views, and our ideas, we also affected them. Because we addressed requests made of us, we certainly had an impact on their lives; we hope a positive one.

Throughout the data collection, we felt surprisingly appreciated by the families. At first, we thought families might view our visits as burdensome. However, they did not see our frequent visits as intrusions, rather they were grateful to have someone hear their issues and concerns. They were hopeful that we could stimulate change in their community.

Data collection. Following the first six months of preliminary fieldwork activity, 18 months of data collection commenced. Data collection involved interviewing families, attending community meetings, and collecting relevant documents. Three primary data collection methods, including interviews, participant observation, document analysis, as well as unique variations of these methods (e.g., photo-journaling and resource mapping) were used to understand family realities. It is important to note that many of these procedures were interactive; for example, interview data helped focus specific participant observation activities, document analysis helped generate new interview questions, and participant observation at community events provided opportunities to collect documents.

The interviews were semi-structured in that they were based on preliminary questions. Researchers exercised considerable latitude in how they worded, sequenced, and used probes to get maximum data. The following interview questions served as a guideline during initial interviews:

1. Describe your family.
2. Describe you neighborhood.
3. How did you come to live here?
4. How do you get around your neighborhood and the city?
5. What do you do when a family member is sick?
6. How do you find out about jobs for you and/or your family members?
7. If you work outside the home, who cares for your children while you are at work?
8. Do your children attend school? Where? To whom do you talk at the school?
9. How do you get food for the family?
10. Where do you get clothing for the family?
11. Does your family celebrate any special holidays or events?
12. Who cares for your older family members?
13. Who do you go to when you need help?

As analysis ensued, new sets of questions emerged. Our inquiry was family-driven, that is, we used their cues to guide the study. This meant we spent time with families, in their homes, and in their communities.

Prior to interviews, each family member was given a description of study goals, research procedures, benefits, risks, and a contact person (i.e., Informed Consent). When consent was provided, interviews commenced. Interviews ranged in length from one to four hours. Family members were interviewed in their language of choice on multiple occasions over the 18-month data collection period. When the researcher did not speak the native language of a family member, the cultural guide accompanied the researcher to all interviews. The researchers guided the majority of initial interview questions (e.g., researcher asks question in English, cultural guide translates question to family member in Spanish and then translates the answer back into English). Periodically, the cultural guide was allowed some latitude in asking follow up questions. All interviews were tape recorded. Interviews conducted in Spanish were first transcribed in Spanish and then translated into English for analysis. In this way, interview questions and data authenticity were preserved. Because our translator also served in the role of cultural guide, we feel her insight into the translations was enhanced. She knew the families, and since she provided the translations during the interviews, she was more accurate when performing the two-stage translation process. Due to the fortuitousness of having one person in both roles, we feel that the authenticity in translated interviews was maintained.

Use of the biographical method involves the subject matter of the life experiences of a person (Denizen, 1989). The biographical method is one in which “the ‘real’ appearances of ‘real’ people are created” (Denizen, 1989, p. 17). To enhance the biographical nature of our research, the researchers attempted to immerse themselves in the life experiences of families. During the interview process, we read local papers, watched the local news, engaged in windshield surveys (Andranovich & Riposa, 1993), and depended on our cultural guides to provide the context for interpretation. In the data analysis stage, we made special efforts to use the family’s own words as much as possible to retain the original “flavor” of data.

Data Analysis

Rather than define what we thought constituted a family, we asked families to define their own family constellation. After families defined their membership, researchers then interviewed all members, above 10 years of age, who were willing to participate. Since the perspectives of multiple family members were important, attempts were made to obtain data from as many family members as possible. Within each family between one and six members were interviewed over the data collection period. Data analysis was ongoing, including a preliminary analysis phase and successive analysis cycles following each of three data collection waves (waves were not necessarily mutually exclusive). A constant comparative strategy (Stainback & Stainback, 1988) was used to build a pattern of relationships from data collected from the families and synthesized into coherent themes. The process of constant comparison involves many iterations of reviewing the data for recurring themes, issues, and events, creating categories to accommodate these patterns, and seeking out new incidents of these categories in subsequent data collection waves.

It was a great advantage to work within a research team. As Gilgun (1993) states, "The single most useful way to do our work well is to work in teams . . . not only do we need previous research and theory and strong conceptual skills, but we also need at least one other person with whom to make sense of the data" (p. 179). Researchers frequently consulted with one another to understand data and develop themes. Typically, we would meet about once per month to share where our families were going, themes that were emerging, and how families were similar and different. Additionally, we would give each other support and insight into future interview ideas and questions. To this end, we developed a rough, yet constantly changing draft of codes (necessary for data management) and themes both within a family and across families. Of course, another issue was the fact that the data grew exponentially. The management of it, while mind-boggling at times, brought us together for mutual support. The evolution of the "code book" was a great aid as we began analyzing data (while continuing interviews). Themes were discussed as they emerged. For example, a researcher might indicate a significant discussion about gang violence and how the mothers were working to keep their children out of gangs. This might also be a theme emerging for the second researcher. They would discuss the "evidence" gained that pointed to the theme and further discuss similarities and differences between families. In this way, the themes emerged across families, with the involvement of multiple researchers' perspectives and interpretations.

Because multiple researchers were working on the project, our unique perspectives were both a strength and a hindrance. We quickly found that we did not share common paradigms or common terminologies. This led to occasional misunderstandings and lack of clarity in communication. The researchers worked through these times by working on replacing "mind reading" with clear discourse.

Family Descriptions

Before describing the themes, we would like to describe the families, who contributed invaluable time, energy, and honesty to help increase our understanding of how they succeed in neighborhoods. To ensure the confidentiality of those who participated in the study, all names have been changed.

The gatekeepers of all three families, the Cabeza family, the Sanchez/Cupa family, and the Stone family, were women. It was the women, who spoke with us most frequently over the two-year period, and it was the women, who provided the bridges to other family members. Daly (1992) indicates that women often serve as the gatekeepers of family information, and men may be difficult to engage. To maximize comfort level, male family members were invited to join or simply observe interviews with other family members. In fact, in one of the families, the father observed during the researcher's initial contact with his wife but in subsequent interviews was an active participant. In another family, neither the father was at home during the interviews nor did he accept the invitation to be present during other family interviews or to be interviewed individually. And, finally, the third family was a female-headed single parent family.

The Cabeza Family

The first family, who participated in the study, will be referred to as the Cabeza family. Carmen Cabeza, a Mexican-American woman in her late 30's has six children ranging in age from infancy to 17 years of age. Her eldest son, Pablo, is 17 years-old followed by daughters, Lupe, 14 years-old and Alma, 13 years-old, Enrique, an 8 year-old son, Rebecca, a 5 year-old daughter and Miguel, a new born son. Carmen was born in Guadalajara, Mexico where many of her friends and family still reside. She speaks Spanish only, so the researcher and a cultural guide (fluent in Spanish) jointly conducted all interviews. Carmen welcomed us into her one bedroom home and introduced us to the household that consists of her children, her in-laws (Micaela and Pedro), and her husband (Fernando).

Over the course of the study, we conducted interviews with Carmen, Micaela, Alma, as well as two neighbors. Carmen served as the gatekeeper of the family and, as such, participated in all interviews. Her mother-in-law, Micaela, participated in about one-half of all interviews. Alma and the neighbors drifted in and out of only a few interviews.

Carmen and Micaela speak often of their Catholic church (Franciscanos). They are deeply religious people spending time at bible study and other church activities. Micaela, Carmen's mother-in-law, is torn between her children in Guadalajara and those, who reside in California. She has an adult son in Mexico, who is chronically ill. She feels a need to be his caretaker. At the same time, she feels a competing commitment to Carmen, her daughter-in-law in California, who has recently given birth to an infant son and is caring for five other children.

Carmen's husband, Fernando, is a mechanic's assistant and the primary breadwinner in the family. Pedro, her father-in-law, is a janitor. Both Fernando and Pedro work at the same warehouse in Southern California. Pedro, who is now in his 60's, has been working at the warehouse for quite a while and would like to retire. However, since he is not an American citizen, he does not qualify for social security and retirement benefits. It is financially impossible for him to retire, so he must keep working to help support the family. Carmen does not work outside the home; she spends her time caring for their six children and taking care of household responsibilities. Before the birth of her youngest son, Carmen took adult English classes at the local Middle School. Micaela

helps Carmen with housework and child care responsibilities. In addition, Micaela has recently begun selling her hand-made crocheted doilies to supplement the family income.

Carmen, Fernando, and their children left much of their extended family and have moved from her hometown in Mexico to various cities in California over the past two decades to seek a more financially secure life. Although she misses her extended family and friends in Mexico, Carmen feels she must follow her husband as he travels in an effort to obtain work.

The Sanchez/Cupa Family

Rosa Sanchez and Jose Cupa, a couple in their twenties, emigrated separately from Mexico in the late 1980's. They were neighbors living in the same apartment complex in Long Beach, California, which is where they met. All of their children were born in the United States. Their three children, 5 year-old Kimberly, 1 year-old Jennifer, and newborn Juan live with them in a small, one bedroom apartment. Although they never married, Rosa and Jose have been living as a family raising their children together. They live in the same apartment complex as Rosa's brother, Saul. Jose and Saul are both employed at a fabric factory in downtown Los Angeles, California.

Rosa was also employed at the fabric factory but stopped working outside the home when Kimberly, her eldest daughter, was born. She has been involved in activities at the local middle school where a Parent Center has been established. At the Parent Center, Rosa obtains information on childcare, parenting issues, activities for children, and sometimes consults with a teacher. Rosa has taken English classes at the Parent Center. Rosa and Jose's oldest daughter, Kimberly, is taking Folklorico dance lessons and their other daughter, Jennifer, attends Karate classes. When time permits, all family members accompany Kimberly and Jennifer to their extracurricular activities. Rosa was born in Guadalajara, Mexico but has not returned since moving to the United States. Both Rosa and Jose speak Spanish and English but feel most comfortable completing interviews in Spanish. At their request, all interviews were conducted in their apartment with all family members present.

Both Rosa and Jose met with us for all interviews; therefore, we heard the voice of both. In this case, there was not a clear gatekeeper to the family, they shared in this role. The children were in the house for most of the interviews but were too young to participate. During the interviews, the children played in the living room or sat in their parents' laps.

The Stone Family

The third family, who participated in interviews within this neighborhood, was the Stone family. Betty Stone is an African-American single mother of four children, Keenan, a 13 year-old son, Sakkinah, 11 year-old daughter, Tyrone, 6 year-old son, and Jamar, a 3 year-old son. The oldest three children are involved in extracurricular activities. The childrens' fathers are not involved in their lives.

Betty's father is a staff assistant at a local high school and is considering retirement. Her mother is a nurse at the local Veterans hospital and provides medical advice to Betty when her children are sick. Bettys' parents are divorced. Betty is the

oldest of five children. She maintains a Recreation Aide position at a local school to provide financial support for herself and her children. Betty has specifically chosen this profession not simply to provide food, shelter, and necessities for the family but to be in close proximity to her children during the school day.

Betty's next-door neighbors, a married couple, help take care of her children. Betty talks about the frustration of finding reliable, affordable child care. She feels fortunate to have neighbors, who are willing to help her care for her children. The Stone family attends church every Sunday with many of the families and children in the school where Betty works. She also volunteers in the nursery at church. Betty was born and raised in Long Beach, California and has lived in the same neighborhood her entire life. In fact, Betty's children attend some of the same schools she attended.

Due to Betty's very tight schedule, all interviews were conducted, solely with her, during school hours. For this reason, her children were not able to participate in the research. While we would have liked to interview her older children, we felt we had to be respectful of Betty's time and Betty's wishes. Conducting interviews during her work hours allowed her to participate.

Emerging Themes

We have identified common themes that emerged in interviews with three families over the 18-month data collection period. This is not to say that families were identical, in fact, they were each quite unique in their background and family structure. However, amidst the uniqueness emerged common themes about the multiple roles played by women in the family and community. Thus, using family voices, we hope to provide a glimpse into the lives of families living in a poor urban neighborhood in Long Beach, California. The themes that emerged from the data focus on women as caregivers of the family and women as caregivers within the community.

Women as Caregivers of the Family

Care giving, parenting, and grand parenting emerged as primary focuses of families interviewed. Researchers repeatedly heard parents and grandparents express their concerns about their children: Are they safe in their neighborhood? What will their futures hold? Although issues related to care taking are wide-ranging, often spanning from infancy to late adulthood, from child care to medical care, this theme addresses the importance of family and the primacy of effective care taking across the life cycle, including the care taking of adult family members. Family and parenting strategies are important because they serve as mechanisms to counteract and overcome the day-to-day problems of living in a poor neighborhood (Gibson, 2002; Jarrett, 1997; Jolicoeur & Madden, 2002; Litt, 1999).

Micaela, a woman in her 70's, is torn between her children in Guadalajara, Mexico and those, who reside in Long Beach, California. She has an adult son in Mexico, who is chronically ill and feels an obligation to care for him. Micaela also feels a competing commitment to her son and daughter-in-law in California, who have a newborn son. This may create role strain and issues relating to how time is shared among family members; multiple roles and increasing demands are often a result for many

women (Hirsch & Rapkin, 1986; Jarrett, 1997). Like Micaela, Betty discusses the difficulties she faces being a single parent. Both women speak about the multiple roles, often conflicting, that they play:

Micaela: I have to share. I am shared. With children over there (Mexico) and over here (United States) it's my duty. People are rough on me. They tell me, 'You should be over there because your husband is over there and that is the cross you have to bear'.

Betty: I have four kids. It's not easy being a single parent with four kids and working. It's not easy. . . I have a very big job to do, and I thank God that I have accomplished some of the things as far as my kids. How I want them to be, how I want them to act.

Micaela's daughter-in-law, Carmen Cabeza, tells us about the concern she had for Lupe, her 14 year-old daughter, whom she suspects is skipping classes at her junior high school. She decides to find out exactly when Lupe's school day begins and ends. Since Carmen does not speak English, this information was not easily attained. She first called the junior high school directly but could not communicate with school personnel since they did not speak Spanish. She details how she made numerous phone calls to other parents in order to find out when her daughter should be at school. Equipped with this information she informs Lupe that she must attend school and that she expects her to come directly home after school rather than socializing with friends. In this way, she hopes that she can better monitor her teen's behavior:

Lupe gave me problems last year. She skips classes and I said, 'no'. I'm not going to be battling with that. So if I have them close, I can check on them better.

Carmen expresses frustration with the impersonal aspects of living in a large urban area. She grew up in a small farming community in Mexico where everyone knew and watched over one another. Without the extended family and community she enjoyed in Mexico to help support and monitor the family, she feels somewhat isolated. Thus, she worries about "keeping track" of her children.

Although Carmen did not regularly attend school when she was a child because her family responsibilities came first, she sees the value of education for her own children. Both mothers, Carmen and Betty, stress the goals they have for their children:

Carmen: I would like for them to finish school . . . if they wouldn't want to struggle. To follow a career or something . . . they would work so that they would have what we haven't been able to give them. Buy themselves something they want . . . something they have dreamed of having.

Betty: And I stress to my children: Don't get caught up in that (gangs) because it's a dead-end road . . . you either get killed or put in jail for life. If you want something in life, you work for it . . . you don't take nothing. You work for

everything you want. And you get your education because that is the number one thing, can't nobody take that away from you.

Carmen and Betty have ideas about how they will encourage their children to achieve these goals. Ensuring the success of their children in school is a way that many women of color combat the dangers of their community, while simultaneously encouraging a more "inclusive future" for them (Gilkes, 1994, Jarrett, 1997, Mohr, Fantuzzo, & Abdul-Kabir, 2001; Reiboldt, 2001). Carmen discusses how she oversees her children often participating in meetings at her children's school, while Betty, who is highly involved in her children's school (since she works there), focuses on looking for signs of delinquent behavior:

Carmen: . . . I have gone to all the meetings (parent-teacher conferences) they have had, almost to the majority of them. This time I was not able to go to his open house, but I went and apologized to the teacher. . . . I see that at times my son needs more (help). But now I see, I am needed by the older ones (kids). For about a year, not a year, but some months, that his grades have gone down extremely. And he does not take his report card, he does not take tests, he does not take papers (homework) that he needs to take. . . . I have spoken to him and everything, but I cannot talk anymore because I know that right now he's angry at me because I'm pregnant. It might be jealousy, it might be anger, it might be everything, and I cannot speak to anything. But even like that, I still tell him, you're doing poorly in school son, and I cannot do anything, if you don't do it for yourself. The day of tomorrow you will suffer and not me. You are going to kill (struggle) yourselves and not me. You are going to have to settle for any job like me simply because you didn't get an education.

Betty: If my child was to do something way out of the ordinary, hang-out with the wrong crowd, started wearing baggy clothes, being defiant, not showing up in school, coming home with very bad grades, those are the first things you need to look at. . . .these are signs they need to look at you know.

Although from different backgrounds, both Betty and Carmen emphasize the importance of education in the lives of their children. Betty and Carmen are not formally educated, yet they know that education is a means of success for the next generation - their children. Like many parents, Betty and Carmen are concerned for their children's well-being in an uncertain world. In their neighborhood, they observe violence, decay, and drug dealing, they envision a better life for their children. Their fears are justified; their children are growing up in a neighborhood, which has been identified by the City of Long Beach as a "neighborhood at-risk". Designation as a high-risk neighborhood is based on statistics that show high crime rate, gang activity, drug trafficking, and infrastructure decline. In addition, these mothers are aware of the dangers, which may accompany other peoples' perceptions of their children (e.g., baggy clothes). They are attempting to overcome the stereotypes that are present (Gilkes, 1994, Reiboldt, 2001) as well as the real dangers in their neighborhood. Therefore, they attempt to closely monitor their children. Betty and Carmen express similar concerns about the realities of the

neighborhood in which they live. They are afraid for the health and welfare of their children when they leave the house. Researchers have found that isolation is a means of parental protection (Jarrett, 1997; Litt, 1999, Reiboldt, 2001). These mothers indicate their preferences for keeping their children at home:

Betty: I don't even allow my kids outside because of the simple fact that I'm aware of the gang bangers here. And I am aware that bullets don't have a name. So I'm very protective.

Carmen: I'm very comfortable here (at home). At least I have them (children) a little more, more controlled . . . I feel sorry for them because I do know that they want to go out and that they want to be with their friends . . . and they want to have fun.

At the same time, their children are growing up and entering adolescence. As a result, we see parents attempting to monitor adolescent behavior and teens struggling for independence. Mothers expressed fears of allowing their teens too much freedom, while adolescents expressed the desire to gain independence from their family of origin. This process of individuation is typical within families with adolescents (Grotevant & Cooper, 1986). However, research indicates that adolescents from Mexican-American and African-American backgrounds are more apt to be characterized by greater interdependence than independence when compared to mainstream Caucasian youth (Atwater, 1996).

Both Carmen and Betty express lack of comfort with the increasing autonomy of their daughters. When Carmen was growing up in Mexico, the expectations for teens emphasized dependence on family rather than independence. Conversely, Alma, her teenage daughter, strives to be more like her friends, independent. Alma seeks to affirm herself as an individual - separate from her parents. Alma's mother realizes the contrasts between her own upbringing in a rural area in Mexico and her daughter's upbringing in an urban area of the United States. Although Carmen concedes that things are different in the United States, she still has problems with the more "liberal standards" applied to adolescents here. Similarly, Betty is telling her daughter, Sakkinah, that it is best to delay intimate boyfriend-girlfriend relationships:

Carmen: I see people, who let their daughters go here and there. At night, they go to the dance, and they come home late. No, I can't. I don't know, but not even my son. Or is it that they haven't gotten accustomed to that yet . . . no, no, no. I can't get it in my head to let my daughters go alone at night . . . I think to myself that I'm unhappy my daughters want to go out. I know they do, inside I know they have this strong desire to go out. And they want to go enjoy themselves. But my fear is much too great.

Betty: Like, I have to let him (suitor of Sakkinah) know and tell her (Sakkinah), this is only on a friendship basis. We are not going to start this boyfriend/girlfriend stuff. We are going to get this education first. Boyfriend-girlfriend comes way later.

Clearly, both mothers are struggling with granting their children independence. As their daughters demand freedom, the parents strive for control. Alma and Sakkinah, as do most American teenagers, attempt to find their own path, a path that may be different from that of their family. They strive to grow up, to become independent, self-reliant individuals. As a result, we see an on-going struggle between mother and daughter, the mothers attempt to insulate and protect daughters from the dangers of the community while the daughters struggle for independence.

From the above-mentioned quotes, we see family members struggling with the two complementary aspects of individuation, individuality and connectedness. As youth seek to affirm themselves as separate individuals, parents express concerns for their welfare. Family communication becomes particularly important during this developmental period. Individuation involves more than separating from parents. Rather, it consists of changing the parent-child relationship to achieve greater equality and establishing independence while maintaining family connectedness.

In another example of the many roles Carmen and Micaela fill, they discuss how they provide medical care for themselves and family members. At times, when family members are ill, the women in the family provide informal, traditional remedies rather than seeking more formal, institutional medical services, such as doctors and hospitals. It has been customary for them to learn healing practices from other women in the family.

Carmen: I learned from her (Micaela) and from my mother. She (Micaela) learned from other people and from her parents.

Micaela: It's just that on ranches (in Guadalajara) there is no doctor. So the five children that God gave me, first God was my doctor, then my mother . . . there, there was no doctor. There my children were born, and my mother would care for me.

Oftentimes when medical help was needed, they depended on family medical wisdom. For example, when Fernando, Carmen's husband, had a cut on this head they did not take him to a doctor. Carmen and Micaela explain how they used family remedies passed down from generation to generation to treat Fernando:

Carmen: Like she says, before, people do not go to doctors. My husband had a big opening (cut) this big on this part right here (indicating forehead). And he never went to the doctor. They never took him to a doctor.

Micaela: We would cure ourselves like the little animals. With dirt and with lard and well, with what we could, and they (wounds) never got infected. With what we knew, those wounds would close, or the blood would be stopped with those little spider (webs). We'd take the spider webs and put them on the wound.

Micaela and Carmen often provided medical attention to family members when needed. According to Hyde (1997), most Latin American cultures assign the healing role to women. In this example, the family turns to the women for healing rather than to

outside, community or hospital-based medical care. Staying healthy so that the family unit is vital is crucial (Meadows, Thurston, & Melton, 2001). This is yet another example of the variety of roles women play within the family system.

Similarly, Betty uses an “informal” means of health care. Because her mother is a nurse, she calls her when a family member is ill. Using grandmothers is an essential component of the African-American culture (Gibson, 2002). Like many families on limited budgets, only when something serious occurs, does Betty take her family to the hospital.

In addition to assisting with medical care, all the women to whom we spoke have played an important role in bringing income into the family. While being primary caretakers of children, they also find ways to supplement family income with innovative jobs. Carmen talks about her childhood and her responsibility to help in the financial support of the family, while Micaela talks about how she brings money into the family now, as a 70 year-old woman. Rosa Sanchez, mother of three, talks about how she supplements their family income by running a small store inside their apartment:

Carmen: In my place, it's the women. In my place, it has been the women . . . since the beginning. I began to work at the age of 8 cleaning houses; I began to help my family. And from there the girls began to grow and began helping them (parents). Now my father is ill and cannot work. My sister and others . . . the men are working over here (in the US) and are helping them (parents).

Micaela, when asked ‘have you worked?’ responds: Worked in jobs like that? No. (I) Crochet, and I sell my work. That is my job, crocheting. I sell.

Rosa: So then for a while I had been telling my husband that we should sell this. But our refrigerator was too small . . . then (Jose) got a bigger refrigerator and I said, ok now. And we went and bought everything. We didn't know where, but we investigated where the items were sold in larger quantities and all of that. And then we created a small store.

By creating a small store in their apartment, Rosa helps contribute to her family income. This “home business” allows Rosa to generate income and stay at home and care for her family.

While Betty and Carmen have different situations at home (Betty works outside the home, while Carmen does not) both have childcare needs. These mothers talk about how they are able to balance their family and work responsibilities with the help and support of neighbors:

Betty: And my 3 year-old, Jamar. He is at the baby-sitter from the time I come to work. I go back home, and I get home for maybe two hours feed him breakfast and lunch, clean up. Whatever needs to be done before I come back to work. Then I take him back over there (baby-sitter). . . . I try to do my best at work and try to take care of my kids at the same time, you know. But by my kids being a little older . . . I still can come to work. But if they have high fevers, then I won't come. But if it's like a sore throat and a slight fever, I can come and do my first

shift, and I'm back at home, you know. And then, like I said, I have my next door neighbors (to help with child care).

Carmen: Sometimes I have to go out and there's no one. I leave her (daughter) with the (neighbor) lady. . . . we call her 'mom' because we all call like that, mom and mom. She's the only one I like to leave her with. Because I do not like to leave her with anyone but with her (neighbor). I feel confident in leaving her.

Betty summarizes the multiple roles she plays as a custodial single parent of four young children. She divides her time between raising her children, providing the sole financial support for the family, and maintaining a household. Research indicates that single parents experience responsibility overload, task overload, and emotional overload. Hill (1986) notes that the single parent "lacks the personnel to fill all the normatively expected positions in the family" (p. 28). Betty talks about the various roles she plays in the family:

. . . these kids are my kids. I stayed up with them. I got up at 1:00, 2:00, 3:00 in the morning to feed them. I'm the one who stayed in the emergency when they got sick. I'm the one that's feeding, clothing them, and buying diapers. I'm the one who is doing all that. So I figure I'm their mother, I'm their father, I'm their sister, I'm the brother. Whatever they want me, I'm that. So I'm two role models. And I think I did very good to be a single parent. I got a kid going to high school, in sports, and doing great, you know. And like I said, I have to pat myself on the back sometimes.

Betty's statement is an eloquent and articulate declaration of the many roles that women play. During the numerous hours of interviews, families expressed the importance, the primacy, of childrearing from infancy through adolescence and into young adulthood. Children and family well being were a principal focus of the families. Many of our discussions focused on parental fears, as well as, children's well-being, triumphs, failures, and successes. Mothers unanimously expressed concern for their children about how to keep children safe in a high-risk neighborhood. Moreover, women, in addition to being the primary caretakers of children, expressed the varied roles they play in the family and the community.

Women as Caregivers within the Community

It was clear throughout the interviews with families that women played an important role, in fact the most important role, in maintaining the physical and mental health of the family. It also became apparent that women were primary caregivers within the community relying on each other rather than more formalized services. A sense of reciprocity and multiplicity of roles was apparent in our interviews. Women were called upon to support family members as well as neighborhood members. Neighbors and community members also support these women. For both families and communities, women's participation is valued and valuable. Women provide support, advice, and

assistance. Wives, mothers, grandmothers, sisters, and daughters described juggling the multiple roles they played. Each woman interviewed described diverse and intricate helping relationships by reflecting the complexity of their lives.

In the Cabeza family, Micaela speaks of a role she fulfills in the community. Much of her time in the United States is spent helping her daughter-in-law, Carmen, with the family responsibilities. But another major task she accomplishes involves collecting used clothing to take back to Guadalajara and distribute to family and community members. This effort is not perceived as an obligation. In fact, Micaela indicates that she is proud, even honored, to have the opportunity to provide "new" used clothing to friends and family at home in Mexico. Michaela says:

We have a very united family, but we are very poor. So I come to see my son and with God's help, I take clothes back with me. Those (clothes) that people give me. I take big sacks filled with clothes, and I go back and distribute them . . . a neighbor works in a second hand store, so he gives me a big discount and then I begin to separate the clothes for my daughter. My daughter has eight in her family. . . . and she lives in a poverty that you could not even begin to comprehend. They gave me presents so that when I leave from here I am taking clothes with me for my daughters-in-law and for my grandchildren and everyone . . . so whatever I take from here I distribute it to my daughter, my daughter-in-laws, and I make them all showy. . . . last year when I came, she gave me many things. It doesn't matter to me if those things are new, what they give me is welcomed. I take it over there (Guadalajara), and its used as if it were new. . . we separate, we wash, we fold, and we create little sacks. And over there it is like grinded gold. The neighbors come, and they ask for a blouse, a dress, and I take them what I can.

Micaela's experience is not uncommon. This circulation of people, goods, and information is referred to as "transnational communities" and is typical among Mexican immigrants (Alarcon, 1994; Menjivar, 1997; Rouse, 1992). Further, a reliance on informal service providers, i.e., family, is very common, and in fact, provides one of the most important resources in the Mexican-American community (Menjivar, 1997; Zinn, 1994).

Like Micaela, Betty also talks about how she furthers her service to community through what she calls "giving back". To Betty and many other African-American women, giving back to the community is important (Gilkes, 1994). Betty elaborates:

. . . I really appreciate (the principal) because without him I don't think I could have had this job. You know, he is giving me an opportunity to show him that I can do the job and a lot more. I'm a hard working person. I always put my best foot forward. And I believe in communication, open communication. Not arguing, not yelling, not fighting. And I believe in also putting time into the community, giving back to what this school has given to me. And that's an education and showing me my values and my goals. So I would like, my thing right now is giving back to this school what the school has given me.

These activities empower poor urban communities to survive (Gilkes, 1994). Other activities, such as volunteering, are another way that families “caretake” in the community. Before Rosa’s last child was born, she volunteered at the Parent Center at the local school. Volunteerism is also important to Betty, who volunteers at the nursery school at her church:

I think I am doing a good job. You know. And like I said, with the good Lord helping me, I can do it. . . . I go to church every Sunday. Of course I work in our nursery at the church on Sunday. That’s what made me really realize I was really meant to be working with kids. Because I have zero to five-year olds over there . . . and I have teenagers here . . . and then I have my own group at home. I like them all. I have no specific group.

Beyond helping their communities, the families are “activists” in their own neighborhoods as well. Jose Cupa, partner to Rosa Sanchez, indicates how Rosa is involved in clean up efforts in the community:

She is one of the Mothers United (Madres Unidas), and they go out (in the neighborhood) cleaning (by) themselves. But right now she is unable to go out. But they (Madres Unidas) do come and clean.

Similarly, Betty Stone is working to improve condition in the neighborhood. She is concerned over the speed at which cars travel in her neighborhood. She is worried about the children’s safety and is lobbying for a stop sign in her local community:

Once they (kids) are gone (killed), we can’t bring them back. And our main thing right now is getting a four-way stop for that particular corner. Because from PCH to this corner. I think it’s 16th and Cedar, it’s the freeway for them (drivers). They don’t precaution themselves to say ‘Hey, let’s slow down’. We have kids, you know, running in and out. Sure sometimes kids just dart out in the street. They shouldn’t do that. If you’re going that fast you are not paying any attention. Your music is loud, you can’t hear. You’re not going to be able to see that kid, never less hear somebody screaming STOP.

Betty is concerned about children in her community. Through her job as a Recreation Aide at the local middle school, she explains how she counsels the children:

I make a big difference. I know I can make a big difference. And I have run up against a lot of our tough kids. I pull them to the side, you know. And I talk to them on their level. And they talk to me, and they let me know. So every time I see them, I let them know I care about you. I care about your benefit and your education.

In all of these examples, we see that women frequently play primary and multiple roles in the family and community. By creating these informal community attachments, women help sustain and build their community (Gilkes, 1994). Reciprocity exists among

these women as they rely on each other and serve as caregivers within the community. Common threads that were intertwined throughout data collection involved the central and essential roles women played as mothers, wives, teachers, role models, community leaders, volunteers, and caretakers.

Discussion & Conclusions

The women in this study played a variety of roles in families and communities. From a Family Strengths perspective, we see that families succeed as a result of the variety of roles women play. These women are the leaders, the sustainers, and the essence of the family and community. The wide range of diverse tasks accomplished by these women allows these families to thrive.

As families shared their lives with us, we began to have insight into the importance and multiplicity of roles played by women in the family and the community. When we began the study, we initially expected to collect information regarding formal service use. However, as we conducted family interviews, we realized that in describing their daily life experiences, formal services were rarely mentioned. Family members garnered strength from one another. They derived their motivation, courage, and stamina from the duties they performed as mother, wife, husband, daughter, and grandmother. When they needed help, they turned to other family members.

The strengths of these families were manifested in a variety of ways. They sustained their families through the multiple and varied roles played by mothers in and outside the family and their concentrated efforts to care for children. Hays-Bautista (1989), in a study of Mexican-American immigrants in the Los Angeles area, indicates that these immigrants often arrive in the United States with strong family networks. Another study done in Los Angeles found that Mexican-American and recent Mexican immigrants meet with both cooperation and antagonism (Ochoa, 2000). They demonstrate high labor force participation and low levels of dependency on welfare. According to DeGenova (1997), “Mexicans and Mexican-Americans are often credited with enjoying large extended family and close kinship ties. Familism - a collective term for a strong and persistent family orientation . . . and a consistent preference for relying on the extended family for support as the primary means of coping with emotional stress - as a defining characteristic of Mexican-origin families” (p. 62).

Common threads that were intertwined throughout data collection involved the central and essential roles women played as mothers, wives, teachers, role models, community leaders, and caretakers. Multiple roles, such as mother, worker, and head of household have been a reality for African-American women for generations (Hyde, 1997). African-American women have defined their identity other than exclusively housewife and mother as they take on a variety of roles.

Traditionally, the primary role of Latinas is as mother. Mexican-American women are expected to be self-sacrificing in relation to her children and husband, and at the same time, Mexican-American culture attributes high status to motherhood. Although superficially these roles seem to support female submissiveness, the reality is far more complex. Williams (1990) found that Mexican-American women are creating new roles for themselves and are not simply passive recipients of culturally defined gender role

patterns. According to Hyde (1997), most Latin American cultures assign the healing role to women and that such roles are often associated with power and status.

It is important to note that in much of the “ethnic difference” research there exists a confounding of race and social class. Because ethnic minorities such as Mexican-Americans and African-Americans tend to be over represented in the lower socioeconomic status, it is generally not clear whether differences between Blacks and Whites or Mexican-Americans and Whites should be attributed to race or social class. Many researchers indicate that much of what seems to be race differences may actually be social class differences and that similarities among ethnic groups is far greater than differences among them (Hyde, 1997). We found this to be the case during our interviews. Although of different ethnic backgrounds, families tended to have similar concerns and parallel strengths.

Understanding family and community dynamics is important when serving families living in poverty. This study found that these families garnered their strength from one another rather than more formal services. Frankly, this was not what the researchers expected to find. We set out to improve formal services in the community, yet when we talked to families in this neighborhood, we found that their primary resources were not formal, but rather informal. Families went to family members and friends when they needed help. Thus, asking families to venture outside the family to access resources may not be as effective as reinforcing resources “inside families”. Social service providers can benefit from this understanding and empower families accordingly.

Changing immigration patterns contribute to the complexity of providing support for families in urban areas. Recently, in Los Angeles County, for example, many communities have experienced dramatic population changes as immigrant families settle into neighborhoods (U.S. Department of Commerce, 1992; Clifford & Roark, 1991). A diverse, multicultural population increases the complexity of developing effective solutions to social and economic problems.

Poor urban neighborhoods are not homogenous and the impact of poverty on families varies depending on the nature of the neighborhood in which they live (Korbin, 1982). Poverty is linked to disparity in a family's access to basic human services and an incapacity to fulfill basic needs (Garbarino, 1992). Inequality in individual earnings and family income is greater today than 20 years ago. As a result, the percentage of children, who are living in poverty, has increased over the past decade. National data show that 21% of children were living in poverty in 1995. California exceeds the national average with 25% of children living in poverty (Anne E. Casey Foundation, 1997). Approximately 14.2% of Americans (35.7 million) were living in poverty in 1991 with the incidence of poverty highest among African-American and Hispanic families (U.S. Department of Commerce, 1992).

Present policies and programs for families living in poverty often focus on intervention and remediation with limited attention to prevention solutions (Naisbitt, 1994; Schorr, 1988). Social service policies that emphasize investment in distressed urban communities by assessing strengths and challenges will empower families to succeed despite their poverty status (Schorr, 1988). Communities rich in diversity require working toward programs that consider values, culture, the neighborhood, community, and society at large (National Resource Center for Family Support Programs, 1993). It is important for community workers and researchers to understand the neighborhoods in

which they work. Detailed information, which goes beyond census data, are needed to best understand how low income minority families survive in their communities.

Families living in distressed urban communities exhibit strengths and overcome challenges that characterize poor neighborhoods. In this study, we listened to ethnically diverse, low-income families, who told us that they depend primarily on resources within, rather than outside the family. Women, in particular, were primary in this support network. Focusing on building upon family strengths will help researchers and service providers better understand ethnically diverse low-income urban families and how they succeed.

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