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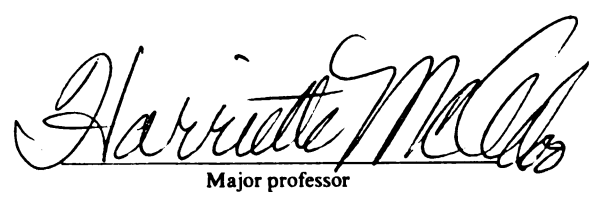Λ

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Raising Children with Learning Disabilities

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Charnessa Hanshaw

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# FACTORS RELATING TO AFRICAN AMERICAN FAMILY RESPONSES TO DIFFICULTIES WHEN RAISING CHILDREN WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES

By

Charnessa Hanshaw

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# ABSTRACT

## FACTORS RELATING TO AFRICAN AMERICAN FAMILY RESPONSES TO DIFFICULTIES WHEN RAISING CHILDREN WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES

By

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This study examined the impact of socioeconomic status, childrearing practices, and perceived hassles on parents' responses to difficulties among African American families raising children with learning disabilities. African American families showed diverse childrearing practices and responses to difficulties. Parental childrearing practices were significantly predictive of their responses to difficulties. However, the influence of socioeconomic status on parental responses to difficulties was insignificant. Although few parents perceived hassles by their family, friends, and community, those who did tended to reframe less in response to difficulties.

# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

# INTRODUCTION

## Statement of the Problem

One in five (20%) children has a learning problem, the largest single portion (30%) of this group having specific learning disabilities (Beale, 1995). Learning disabilities include reading disabilities and problems in math, writing, constructional, and organizational skills (Pennington, 1992). This research is based on an existing need to implement policies and programs for African American children who are at higher risk for learning disabilities (Harry, 1992). African American children are among the fastest growing populations in the United States (Rounds, Weil, & Bishop, 1994). Nationally, they are overreppresented in special education programs for learning disabilities. In the educationally mentally retarded (EMR) category, they are overreppresented by more than twice their numbers in the total school system. Moreover, as enrollment of African American students rises, their disproportionate placement in special education programs also increases (Harry, 1992). To improve the life chances of African American children, it is important to strengthen those families raising children with learning disabilities by ensuring the adequacy of resources available to them.

Understanding the family functioning of African American children

with learning disabilities is an important component of facilitating their

cognitive and emotional development. Furthermore, assessing the adequacy

of resources for families raising children with learning disabilities has been

challenging. While there is existing research on many facets of personal

and social resources for all families, there continues to be a lack of

information on how African American families function within the context

of family and social environments in response to difficulties incurred

rearing children with learning disabilities (Hardman, Drew, Egan, & Wolf,

1993; Harry, 1992; Malo, 1994). Understanding responses of African

American families to difficulties in addressing the needs of learning

disabled children may be a critical directive in linking African American

families to resources. Thus, part of the challenge in providing support for

families requires an accurate picture of the environmental context

surrounding learning disabled children which are, in turn, associated with

parental responses to difficulties.

Significance of the Study

This study will examine the factors associated with the responses of

African American families to difficulties as they raise children with learning

disabilities. Responses to difficulties involves the initiatives of families in

mobilizing personal resources and acquiring assistance through network relationships that facilitate desired goals and healthy outcomes. For the most part, African American families have shown strong supportive networks within their families, extended social kinships, and religious communities. However, among African American families raising children with special needs, there is a paucity in utilization of social resources that are potentially available outside of the home. While, notably, school networks have been shown to be a significant social resource (Coleman, 1988), other community resources have been infrequently investigated (Brooks-Gunn, Duncan, Klebanov, & Sealand, 1993; Chatters, Taylor, & Neighbors, 1989; Klebanov, Brooks-Gunn, & Duncan, 1994; Taylor, Neighbors, & Broman, 1989). Recognizing the increasing reports of disabilities among children from minority racial groups, investigating responses to difficulties in relation to the structure of the family environment may assist professionals in the development of comprehensive policies and programs designed to enhance the environmental quality of life of African American families and their children (Artiles & Trent, 1994; Rounds, Weil, & Bishop, 1994; Valentine,

1993).   Such research could facilitate an improved linkage between families

and resources.

<u>Conceptual Framework:  The Ecological Model</u>

The ecological model contextualizes the family within the larger

environment (Buboltz & Sontag, 1993) and emphasizes the interactiveness

of the two environments.   The environment influences the family and the

family influences the environment.

Ecological influences on parental behaviors include personal

resources (e.g., income), parental psychological states (McLoyd & Wilson,

1990) and social resources (Tijhuis, Flap, Foets, & Groenewegen, 1995).

The literature has shown that supportive networks affect parental practices

(Taylor & Roberts, 1995).  However, researchers also contend that families

are not passive respondents, but perform as actors upon their environment

(Harrison, Wilson, Pine, Chan, Buriel, 1990).  The family social context is

one which individual network members' impact on each other is reciprocal

(Hatchett & Jackson, 1995).  Thus, while factors such as occupation,

income and education influences parental child rearing practices, parental

child rearing practices, in turn, influence their responses to difficulties.

The parenting and personal social networks model provides the

ecological context for factors relating to parental responses to difficulties

(Cochran, 1993). Personal social networks are relatives, neighbors, coworkers, and other friends directly related to family members.

The parenting and personal social networks model addresses the impact of the environment on the development of parental attitudes and behaviors. Parents personal initiatives (i.e. responding to difficulties) are dictated in part by environmental factors. In the same manner, restraints on actions may be due to personal and family ideologies, neighborhood ecologies, and socioeconomic status. These factors may restrain some parents more than others. African American parents and parents with less education and income have a smaller pool of potential network membership and thus fewer options in response to difficulties.

The parenting and personal social networks equally stresses the importance of acknowledging the role that individuals play on challenging the limits of their environment. Parents are proactive in the formation of their social environment. This concept necessitates a better understanding of the social, ethnic, and other environmental factors which are likely to promote or discourage such initiatives. Personal initiatives in forming network relationships may stem from developmental and environmental stresses (e.g. raising a child with learning disabilities). Figure 1. presents the conceptual model for this study. The ecological context in which

5

parents' respond to difficulties are shown. Parents' responses to difficulties are predicted to be influenced by their socioeconomic status, childrearing practices and perceived hassles.
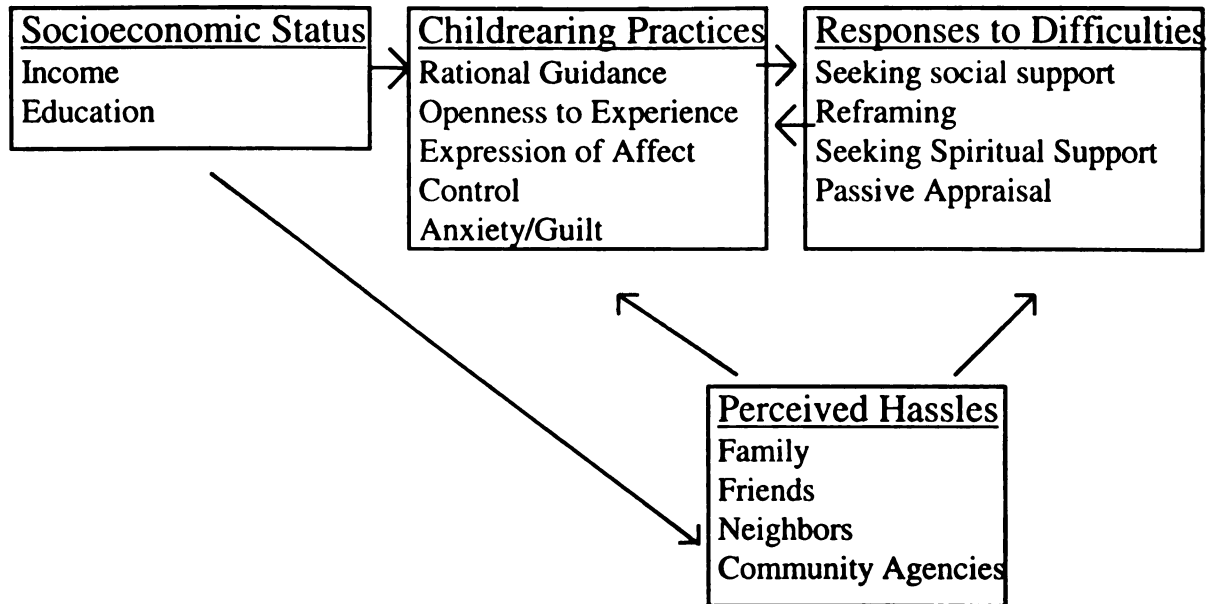
| Socioeconomic Status | | Childrearing Practices | | Responses to Difficulties |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Income<br>Education | | Rational Guidance<br>Openness to Experience<br>Expression of Affect<br>Control<br>Anxiety/Guilt | | Seeking social support<br>Reframing<br>Seeking Spiritual Support<br>Passive Appraisal |

Perceived Hassles
Family
Friends
Neighbors
Community Agencies

Figure 1. The ecological relationship between socioeconomic status, childrearing practices, perceived hassles and responses to difficulties.

## Research Objectives

In order to achieve the research objectives specific to African American families raising children with learning disabilities, the overarching perspective of this study addresses the questions:

1. How do parents respond to difficulties?

2. What factors are associated with responses to difficulties?

# REVIEW OF LITERATURE

## Overview on Responses to Difficulties

In this chapter, the review of literature is organized into areas of responses to difficulties addressing two overarching questions: 1) How do parents respond to difficulties? and 2) What factors relate to responses to difficulties?

The first segment identifies parental responses to difficulties. The specific attributes associated with such initiatives are described. The literature emphasizes the commonalties and differences in responses to difficulties in association with seeking social and spiritual support, reframing difficulties in a more positive way, and defensive retreat. This section presents literature that explains the importance of responses to difficulties. As a child's learning disabilities may variously affect family functioning, this section empirically establishes the link between personal and social resources and parental responses to difficulties associated with childrearing practices.

The second section focuses on factors that may contribute to how parents' respond to difficulties. This section examines the impact of environmental factors (i.e., socioeconomic status) on parents in terms of childrearing and how this in turn encourages parents to act on the

environment in terms of responding to difficulties. Two of the major problems associated with assessing the nature and influence of social support is that the individual differences in responding to difficulties are often overlooked and that the negative aspects of social relationships are ignored (Malo, 1994). This section addresses these issues in terms of environmental and attitudinal factors that may constrain parental responses to difficulties.

Seeking Social Support

Social resources refer to the social network systems available to individuals and families through which support can be obtained (Tijhuis, Flap, Foets, & Groenewegen, 1995). Supportive social resources have been found to enhance health and well-being directly when it is measured by the degree to which a person is integrated in the social network and indirectly when measured by the availability of resources (Tijhuis, Flap, Foets, & Groenewegen, 1995; MacPhee, Fritz, & Miller-Heyl, 1996). Findings that social resources enrich family functioning are reported throughout the literature in general as well as learning disabled populations (Chatters, Taylor, & Neighbors, 1989; Harlow & Cantor, 1995; Klebanov, Brooks-Gunn, & Duncan, 1994).

There are two types of support systems identified in the literature: formal and informal (Valentine, 1993). Each is described in the following text as they relate to families and children with learning disabilities.

Informal Support

Informal resource systems are described as relationships that are personal as with family and friends. Common to the general population of families raising children, the literature has identified family, friends, neighbors, and the community (church) as important informal social resources for families of children with learning disabilities (McAdoo, 1995; Taylor & Roberts, 1995). Unique to families raising children with learning disabilities, other families of children with learning disabilities provide an additional social resource.

Research on social resources among African Americans shows the extended and immediate family as well as friends as two of the primary resources they turn to as a response to difficulties (Chatters, Taylor, & Neighbors, 1989; Hatchett & Jackson, 1995; McAdoo, 1995). Rosier & Corsaro (1993) conducted and ethnographic study on those social support resources among nine African American mothers that encouraged their childrens' academic achievement. These African American mothers sought informal support (positive adult male role models, siblings, and

grandparents) to assist them with their childrens' socioemotional and educational development.

While parents of learning disabled children express the need for social support, they also express an absence of support from the same social resources (Waggoner & Wilgosh, 1990). Further research in understanding the reasons for this absence is needed. In the case of African American populations, this phenomena has been infrequently examined. It has almost been taken for granted that the strong kinship bonds within this culture are always supportive. This supports researchers' contentions that African American families are treated as a homogenous group in the literature (Abell, Clawson, Washington, Bost, & Vaughn, 1996; Hatchett & Jackson, 1995; Keogh, 1997). Research has shown that there are differences across groups of African American families' structure, function, and extended family social systems and behaviors (Hatchett & Jackson, 1995). In an attempt to debunk the myth of the monolithic African American family, Hatchett & Jackson (1995) found that while there was an overwhelming feeling of solidarity among African American families (90% reporting feeling close to each other), there were variations in perceptions of support received. Though many families (42%) reported receiving support from

extended family members, there were also those who received little or no

support (57%).

<u>Formal Support</u>

Formal support systems consist of those relationships that have an

impersonal social structure such as with professionals, agencies, or

organizations. Parents may rely on different support networks over the

duration of their child's disability. Studies have shown that parents of

disabled children largely relied on informal support from family and friends

at the time of diagnosis, but that other formal support resources such as

teachers and counselors were sought later (Baxter, Cummins, & Polak,

1995).

Konstantareas (1991) and others (Broman, Neighbors, & Taylor,

1989; Feehan, 1990) argue that many families underutilize formal social

resources. This underutilization may lead to social isolation and reliance on

the family's own resources, and this in turn leads to systemic crisis. While

seeking help from health care professionals is considered an important

coping response for African American families, few actually do seek help

(Broman, Neighbors, & Taylor, 1989). In Broman's et. al. study (1989), a

sample of African Americans from the National Survey of Black Americans

(NSBA; N=631) and the Americans View of Their Mental Health

(AVTMH; N=98) were found to utilize social service agencies and social workers. This was especially prevalent among economically disadvantaged African Americans. However, this helpseeking characteristic was found among only a few (AVTMH=10.2%, NSBA=12 %).

Research shows that the level of dependency on social support networks may have adverse effects. Researchers contend that an overdependence upon a single resource (e.g. family members only) as a response to difficulties could be harmful and reflect a negative adjustment on the part of the parent (MacPhee, Fritz, & Miller-Heyl, 1996). Acock & Hurlbert (1990) suggest that exclusive dependence on kin could reflect poor social integration, and this could decrease parental well-being. Consequently, those who chronically rely on social support in response to difficulties may find others less willing to help over time (Harlow & Cantor, 1994). These findings have been in association primarily with Caucasian and other ethnic groups. These characteristics are infrequently examined for African American families within the context of responding to difficulties.

Seeking Spiritual Support

The literature highlights spirituality as an important resource for African American families in response to difficulties (Billingsley, 1992;

McAdoo, 1988 & 1995). Spirituality has been described as the presence of a supernatural Being in the world and as an integral part of one's life (Taylor, Henderson, & Jackson, 1991). Boykin and Toms (1985) suggest that spirituality involves the acknowledgment of and connectedness to life forces in the universe which are powerful and not mechanistic.

Research has focused on social resources derived from concrete interactions with others in "real" relationships (e.g., church participation). However, researchers contend that not all relations are concretely real (Pollner, 1989). Pollner (1989) describes the existence of imagined others in the social network strata which partly overlaps the network of actual acquaintances but includes unmet, unmeetable, and mythical others. The imagined or mythical other will be referred to as God in this paper. Individuals participate in "divine relations" which are congruent with concrete social relationships in intensity. Spiritual acts such as prayer, reading devotional literature, and participating in rituals are activities involved in the interactive processes of the man-God relationship (Dancy, 1994).

Spirituality is an integral part of human experience for many African American families (Frame, 1996). It is not compartmentalized into systemic beliefs and practices, but woven into everyday experience (Boyd-Franklin,

1989). Hurd, Moore, & Rogers (1995) found that African American parents wanted their children to "put God first" in their lives and that these parents derived comfort and guidance from religious activities and encouraged their children to share in the benefits of faith.

The significance of divine relations has been empirically examined in relation to individual well-being in difficult times (Pollner, 1989). Divine relations were significantly related to well-being even when background variables (race, sex, income, age, marital status) and church attendance were taken into account. Divine relations was the strongest correlate to three measures of well-being (global happiness, life satisfaction, and marital happiness) and was surpassed only by education on the fourth measure of well-being (life excitement). Divine relations positively interacted with marital happiness for those whose social relations were low. Additionally, divine relations had the greatest effect on life excitement for those who were married. This negated the researchers assumption that divine relations would be associated with greater well-being for isolated individuals. The impact of divine relations was also found to be stronger on positive well-being among the less educated. These findings support researchers who report the significance of spirituality in family functioning.

Research has shown affiliations with religious institutions to be an important type of resource among African American families (Billingsley, 1992; Boyd-Franklin, 1989; Martinez, 1993; McAdoo, 1995). It is considered the most organized visible and nurturing institution in the African American community (Frame & Williams, 1996; Hopkins, 1993). Seeking support from church members, ministers, and membership services and attendance has been associated with well-being (Hurd et al, 1995). In an exploratory qualitative study of fifty-three African American families, church members were often described as part of the family. These members provided significant assistance in childrearing.

Spirituality has largely been defined in terms of religiosity (Westgate, 1996). The investigation of religion has only recently extended to the social aspect of a relationship with a Supreme Being which this paper will refer to as God. Few studies have investigated individual relationships with a Supernatural Being as a social resource, particularly among those African American families raising children with learning disabilities. Research has begun to examine the nature of spirituality and how to operationalize it (Westgate, 1996). Westgate (1996) viewed religiosity and spirituality as distinct but overlapping concepts, spirituality representing the broader concept of beliefs and values and religiosity referencing the narrower

concept of behaviors. According to Westgate (1996) and others

(Hinterkopf, 1994; Ingersoll, 1994) religiosity is public and often

manifested in the context of a religious institution whereas spirituality is a

private matter that may or may not be expressed publicly.

Reframing

Researchers have argued that seeking spiritual and social support

often helps parents to maintain positive attitudes in adversity (Bowman,

1993; Kirk, Gallagher, & Anastasiow, 1993; Scorgie, Wilgosh, &

McDonald, 1996). Qualitative research has shown that parents of children

with disabilities respond to difficulties by reframing events positively

(Scorgie, Wilgosh, & McDonald, 1996; Snell & Rosen, 1997). One study

(Scorgie, Wilgosh, & McDonald, 1996) of fourteen urban and rural families

with disabled children describes parents reframing of events as a part of

effective life management strategies. According to Scorgie, Wilgosh, and

McDonald (1996), life management strategies refers to those methods

employed by parents which allow them to function on a daily basis. In

response to managing the child's disability effectively, parents in Scorgie's

et. al. study (1996) positively reframed their thoughts and attitudes. This

process involved acceptance of life circumstances, a determination to be as

successful as possible, an assessment of meaning or purpose for life events, and acquisition of a sense of personal adequacy and competence as a parent.

Snell and Rosen (1997) reported similar processes of reframing among 5 families raising special needs children. Parents reported that in addition to performing the "normal stuff" of parenting, they felt a heightened sense of purpose and intentionality. These parents described a shift in worldviews as a means of doing what was necessary to care for their child.

Reframing in response to difficulties has been noted as the source of a major gap between African American parents and service providers perspective of the learning disabled child. Although African American parents express an acceptance of their child's special need, they prefer to look at the strengths of the child rather than the disability. This has been a source of conflict with service providers as African American parents feel that their focus is excessively on the child's deficits (Harry, 1992; Kalyanpur & Rao, 1991).

Defensive Retreat

Research has shown that families raising children with learning disabilities report greater use of avoidance in response to difficulties (Hardman, Drew, Egan, & Wolf, 1993; Margalit & Ankonina, 1991).

Hardman, Drew, Egan, & Wolf (1993) describe the process of avoiding

dealing with difficulties as a defensive retreat. Parents may attempt to

disappear for a while or retreat to a safer and less demanding environment.

African American parents have been considered to be passive in

response to the special education needs of their child, often deferring to the

service provider (Harry, 1992). Although African American families value

academic achievement, these passive responses have been considered a

defensive retreat from feelings of helplessness and assumptions of

noninterference in their child's educational matters.

Socioeconomic Status

Income, occupation, and educational levels have been acknowledged

in the literature as powerful predictors across all levels of family

functioning (Hauser, 1994; McLoyd & Wilson, 1990, 1991). These

characteristics of socioeconomic status have been found to be either

associated with or predictors of responses to difficulties (Boyce, Miller,

Brent, White, & Godfrey, 1995). Seeking social support in response to

difficulties has been positively associated with income (Klebanov, Brooks-

Gunn, & Duncan, 1994) and educational levels (Chatters, Taylor, &

Neighbors, 1989, McAdoo, 1993). Parents with lower socioeconomic status

(e.g., income, education, and occupation) tend to seek help in response to

difficulties more than parents with higher socioeconomic status (Feehan, 1990; Pavuluri, Luk, & McGee, 1996). However, in addition to accessing greater resources, the literature indicates that higher socioeconomic status increases the use of formal social resources in response to difficulties (Seybold, Fritz, & MacPhee, 1989).

The literature indicates that families of children with learning disabilities have more socioeconomic disadvantages (Michaels & Lewandowski, 1990; Toro, Weissberg, Guare, & Liebenstein, 1990). Families of disabled children with higher socioeconomic status are better able to respond to difficulties and provide support for their child (Boyce, Miller, Brent, White, & Godfrey, 1995). Toro, Weissberg, Guare, & Liebenstein (1990) found that children with learning disabilities experienced significant family economic difficulties and a lack of educational stimulation at home. Similarly, Michaels and Lewandowski (1990) found that families of learning disabled boys had significantly lower socioeconomic status. Lower SES was associated with more delinquent behaviors.

Cochran, Larner, Rile, Gunnarsson, & Henderson (1990) contend that structural forces constrain network membership by means of group identity, prejudice, and limited access to social resources. For African American

families, it has been argued that socioeconomic status contributes, in part, to how they develop familial, spiritual, and other ethnic/cultural resources in the community (Bowman, 1995). As such, it has been argued that individual initiatives in forming relationships coupled with the ecological constraints which restrict minority groups access to social resources produce differences in interpersonal affiliation (MacPhee, Fritz, & Miller-Heyl, 1996).

Parents' perception of receiving greater support is influenced by family socieconomic factors (Boyce, Behl, Mortensen, & Akers, 1991). It has been found that parents' perceptions of their social resources are related to their income and education (Boyce et al, 1991). Chatters, Taylor, & Neighbors (1989) found that African Americans with higher socioeconomic status tend to have larger family, friend, and community social resources. They also found that the size of the helper network was more associated with affiliation (contact) rather than affect (closeness) of the members. It was suggested that differences in aspects of network relationships and factors relating to such conditions account for this finding.

Parental Attitudes and Perceptions Affecting Responses to Difficulties

Research has shown that individuals' attitudes were more important determinants of responses to difficulties than practical factors such as finance, time, or access to care (Hornblow, Bushnell, Wells, Joyce, & Oakley-Brown, 1990). As such, parental responses to difficulties are highly variable (Hardman, Drew, Egan, & Wolf, 1993).

Researchers are finding that the dynamics of seeking social support in response to difficulties varies according to the parents' relationship with the network members and the characteristics of the social support network (Konstantareas, 1991; Malo, 1994; Telleen, 1990). Research has reported much on parental perceptions of social resources once support has been received. Although they often express the need for more (Hardman, Drew, Egan, & Wolf, 1993), parents generally have positive attitudes about the support they do receive (Malo, 1994).

Infrequently reported is the avoidance of seeking support as a response to difficulties (Krause, 1995). In family relationships that are full of conflict, support may come with a price (Hobfoll, 1990). Konstantareas (1991) contends that parental perceived aggravations with support networks has been neglected in the social support research, but that it must be considered. As Konstantareas (1991) exemplifies, a mother-in-law can

provide much needed babysitting for a disabled child, but can concurrently

aggravate her daughter or son-in-law by criticizing their parenting style.

Similarly, Konstantareas (1991) contends that a professionals may provide

stimulation for the disabled child but do so in a perfunctory and critical

manner. Thus, as support networks become critical, demanding, and

overbearing, parents may avoid seeking social support and turn to others as

a last resort (Krause, 1995).

There is some empirical evidence that social resource networks may

be a source of hassle or aggravation for parents raising children with

learning disabilities. In a study (Konstantareas & Homatidis, 1991) of

autistic, mentally retarded, and normal children, mothers of retarded

children were found to have aggravations with the family, community, and

social agents comparable to that of mothers with asymptomatic normal

children, but fewer aggravations than mothers of the autistic children. It

would be advantageous to understand the aggravations of learning disabled

family populations and how it influences their responses to difficulties.

Social networks may be a source of insecurity and uncertainty for

some parents. In a qualitative study on 30 low income single mothers with

high levels of education, Malo (1994) found that mothers rarely depended

upon ex-partners or "other relationships" (e.g., colleagues, neighbors, or ex-

partner's networks) for support and perceived them as harmful. Twenty-four of the thirty mothers reported antagonistic attitudes (e.g., interference, dishonesty, and judgment) from other relationships. Although single mothers viewed family members as living up to their expectations, they were reserved about asking for help most frequently because of certain fears or the need for autonomy. Only 2 of the 30 mothers requested help systematically. Mothers expressed having reservations about asking for help because of the characteristics of the potential helper and/or the relationship. For these reasons, mothers did not want to intrude and felt there was no point in asking. Other reasons for reservations were the personality of the brother or sister and fear that too much would be asked in return. As social resources are limited and valuable, it is important to ascertain the perception of barriers among families raising children with learning disabilities.

Studies have investigated perceived barriers to seeking social support in response to difficulties among parents whose children have behavioral problems (Pavuluri, Luk, & McGee, 1996). In a qualitative study of 272 families, Pavuluri et al (1996) found that only 8 out of 42 families with a clinically diagnosed child sought help and only 4 out of 10 families of children with severe behavior disorders sought help. One in every eight

parents sought help from more than one social resource. These findings

suggest that parents who may need assistance are not seeking help. Barriers

to seeking social support in response to difficulties included parental beliefs

that the problem would go away or that they would be strong enough to

handle the problems alone, lack of knowledge on where they could get help,

and feelings that asking for help was inappropriate.

Within the realm of seeking formal social support in response to

difficulties, family-professional interactions are influenced by cultural

norms (Rounds, Weil, & Bishop, 1994). African American parents may not

seek help from health care professionals because of lack of culturally

sensitive service providers (Rounds, Weil, & Bishop, 1994).

As a point of clarification, it is noted here that parental perceptions of

being capable of handling the problem alone is not always considered a

barrier in the literature. The act of helpseeking in response to difficulties

has been thought to be related to individual ability (Telleen, 1990).

Researchers have found that parents with higher levels of educational

attainment and greater income levels often adopt more positive parenting

styles and show greater skill in managing children's behaviors (Gecas,

1989; Parcel & Menaghan, 1993). In other words, some parents who are

capable of handling a problem on their do not perceive the need for outside assistance.

## Childrearing Practices

Parents are thought to develop their own parenting practices based on their cultural reference group socialization, personality style, and individual and family experiences (Julian, McKenry, & McKelvey, 1994). Although contextual environments (e.g., neighborhoods, culture) are imposed on parents, parents also have a significant role in selecting or creating their environment. Researchers contend that parents' interpersonal skills, values, and attitudes about raising children affect their parental behaviors (Julian, McKenry, & McKelvey, 1994; Luster & Okagaki, 1993). Thus, parental beliefs influence how they choose to raise their child, and their childrearing practices, in turn, influence how parents respond to difficulties (Luster & Okagaki, 1993).

Different family practices prevail at different class and income levels throughout society (Glick, 1988). Thus the parenting practices of parents raising learning disabled children may reflect their socioeconomic tendency to be younger, less educated, and having less income (Boyce et. al., 1995).

Most research on families of disabled children focuses on severely disabled populations. Few studies focus on the families of children with

learning disabilities (Micheals & Lewandowski, 1990). The literature

shows that families with disabled children have difficulty coping and

adjusting. These problems are particularly salient when the child is mildly

disabled (Morrison & Zetlin, 1992). Some researchers suggest that parental

interactions amplify the learning disability (Coles, 1987; Green, 1990).

Other researchers suggest that parental behaviors reflect their efforts to

adapt to the child's disability (Rasku-Puttonen, Lyytinen, Poikkeus, Laakso,

& Ahonen, 1994).

Families of children with learning disabilities have been characterized

as less structured, more disorganized, and more conflictual than other

families (Michaels & Lewandowski, 1990). Parents of learning disabled

children have been found to have less favorable parenting behaviors toward

their child (Micheals & Lewandowski, 1990), more rigid environments and

communication problems, and lower levels of openness (Morrison & Zetlin,

1988). Mothers of learning disabled children take more initiative and make

an extra effort to engage the child in discourse (Rasku-Puttonen, Lyytinen,

Poikkeus, Laakso, & Ahonen, 1994). This interaction is not always found

to be effective. Mothers of children with learning disabilities were found to

give less exact instruction and more ambiguous messages than mothers of

normally achieving children (Rasku-Puttonen, Lyytinen, Poikkeus, Laakso,

& Ahonen, 1994). Families of learning disabled children also score significantly more towards the disengaged end of the cohesiveness continuum (Green, 1990).

Micheals & Lewandowski, (1990) found that families of learning disabled boys tended to score more frequently in the extreme (disturbed) range of family functioning than parents of nonlearning disabled boys. Mothers tended to be more disengaged-rigid. In the way of an explanation, this behavior was discussed as possibly exacerbating the learning disability of a child and increasing the likelihood of the child in such families being diagnosed. It was also suggested that a family high in flexibility and adaptability with a learning disabled child may help the child to function adequately.

It is not clear that such parenting practices promote negative outcomes in all family situations. Some African American families have been found to place an emphasis on unconditional love and respect (Nobles, 1988) as well as independence and temper control, obedience, and getting along with others (Julian, McKenry, & McKelvey, 1994). Such childrearing practices have been accompanied by high levels of parental support and open communication. Julian et al (1994) argue that these parenting behaviors cannot be assumed to encourage children to be complacent,

passive, or subordinate. Instead, these characteristics are perceived as effective coping mechanisms to racism and discrimination in the larger society. This is somewhat supported in the literature on families of learning disabled children. Morrison & Zetlin (1992) found that structured or rigid family environments work for some families and not for others in a mixed sample of African American, Caucasian, and Hispanic parents.

Abell, Clawson, Washington, Bost, & Vaughn (1996) also assert that it is a mistake to assume that one style of parenting fits all members of the population. They suggest that childrearing is characterized by a set of complex interactions between a variety of possible attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors. As such, one mode of child rearing is not better than another without considering the factors converging to define these styles (e.g., income). Abell et al (1996) found that African American mothers in their study shared similar goals in parenting, but were different in the way they sought to achieve those goals. Using the Child Rearing Practices Report (CRPR), low income African American mothers were classified into four clusters of parenting behaviors. African American mothers in Cluster I were differentiated by their affective control and emphasis on teaching children to keep control of their emotions at all times. Cluster II mothers were characterized by their negative emotional involvement and low

support for the child. Cluster III mothers were more democratic and had more child-oriented beliefs and behaviors. Mothers in Cluster IV were more traditionally involved with their children, but enjoyed their children less. These findings emphasize the heterogeneity of families and contradicts the notion that economic disadvantage effects the quality of parent-child interactions in a linear fashion.

Links to Social Resources

As service providers realize the important role that families play in the developmental aspects of children with special needs (Glidden, 1993), researchers have become increasingly interested in the link between family social resources and children's disabilities (Coles, 1987; Green, 1990; Rasku-Puttonen, Lyytinen, Poikkeus, Laakso, & Ahonen, 1994).

Parenting practices are of major importance in understanding responses to difficulties (Telleen, 1990). Childrearing practices are maintained and amplified by behavioral responses to difficulties (Green, 1990). Telleen (1990) found that parental attachment problems and parental competence were important determinants of responses to difficulties. Among a sample of parents (N=79) who voluntarily participated in a family support program and those who did not participate (N=56), those parents

who sought help had more child management problems that those parents who did not seek help in response to difficulties.

Research is focusing on the parents' responses to difficulties which facilitate their child rearing behaviors. Researchers are suggesting that families of children with disabilities must be enabled and empowered to identify their own needs and direct how these needs will be addressed (Agosta & Melda, 1995). For example, seeking help is considered a positive response for parents raising disabled children (Scorgie, Wilgosh, & McDonald, 1996).

It has been established that parental behaviors are reflected in their ability to obtain social resources and transform them into support for a particular situation such as childrearing. MacPhee, Fritz, & Miller-Heyl (1996) found that parental self-efficacy was strongly associated with child rearing practices and mediated the effects of social support.

Major characteristics of African American families are reflected in their parenting practices (Julian, McKenry, & McKelvey, 1994). These include a sense of duty or obligation to kin, the notion that good deeds will be reciprocated in either the short or long term, expression of affection, and a strong religious/spiritual orientation.

# METHODS

## Research Design

This study used secondary analysis of data to investigate factors related to African American families' responses to difficulties as they raise children with learning disabilities. Descriptive statistics were used to describe the sample population as well as the associations between socioeconomic status, childrearing practices, responses to difficulties, and percieved hassles of parents raising children with learning disabilities. Stepwise multiple regression equations were used to examine the influence of parental childrearing practices on their responses to difficulties.

## Sample

This sample is part of a larger study collected by The Ethnic Families Research Project team. The project was funded by the National Institute for Child Health and Development (NICHD). The midwestern regional sample consisted of 152 African American and 107 Mexican American families raising children with disabilities. The sample was drawn from a midwestern school district and community centers through referrals, mailing lists, and flyer handouts. Qualified participants were African American and Mexican American caregivers of children ages 6-13 with a special need that affects their learning in school. The study, which was conducted over a four year

period, was designed to examine the social, cultural, and educational contexts of African American and Mexican American families, children and communities. A survey containing standardized insturments and questionnaires was administered in the homes of participants or in community centers by two researchers from the Ethnic Families Research Project. One researcher read the questionnaire to the participant while the other researcher recorded the information. Administration of the survey was approximately two to three hours long, and a cash participation gift of $25 was given upon the completion of the survey.

The subsample for this present study was 119 African American families raising children with learning disabilities. The characteristics of this sample are shown in Table 1.

Table 1.

Demographic Characteristics of African American Families Raising Children
with Learning Disabilities (N=119)

|  |  | n | % |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Parent Characteristics** | | | |
| **Marital Status** | | | |
| | Never Married | 60 | 50.4 |
| | Married/Living with partner | 26 | 21.9 |
| | Other | 33 | 27.7 |
| **Employment Status** | | | |
| | Employed | 69 | 58.0 |
| | Full time | 20 | 16.8 |
| | Part time | 25 | 21.0 |
| | Self-employed | 24 | 20.2 |
| | Nonemployed | 50 | 42.0 |
| **Educational Level** | | | |
| | Some high school | 25 | 33.3 |
| | High school graduate | 41 | 54.7 |
| | Some college | 8 | 10.7 |
| | College graduate | 1 | 1.3 |
| **Income Level** | | | |
| | $ 0-11,999 | 81 | 68.1 |
| | 12,000-24,999 | 21 | 17.6 |
| | 25,000-69,999 | 17 | 14.3 |
| **Child Characteristics** | | | |
| **Age** | | | |
| | 6 | 14 | 18.2 |
| | 7 | 12 | 15.6 |
| | 8 | 9 | 11.7 |
| | 9 | 14 | 18.2 |
| | 10 | 8 | 10.4 |
| | 11 | 7 | 9.1 |
| | 12 | 5 | 6.5 |
| | 13 | 8 | 10.4 |
| **Gender** | | | |
| | Male | 50 | 64.9 |
| | Female | 27 | 35.1 |
| **Learning Disability** | | | |
| | Aphasia | 18 | 15.8 |
| | Hyperactivity | 63 | 55.3 |
| | Attention Disorder | 71 | 62.3 |
| | Developmental Disorder | 17 | 14.9 |
| | Mental Retardation | 7 | 6.1 |
| | Slow Learner | 74 | 64.9 |
| | Neurological Disorder | 8 | 7.0 |

Note: In the "Some high school" row, the value 25 appears in the n column and 33.3 appears in the % column.

Instruments

This study utilized the second-year Ethnic Family Research Survey. The instrument was developed to assess the social, cultural, and educational contexts of African American and Mexican American families raising children with learning disabilities through a compilation of standardized and modified scales and indices. For the purpose of this study, four scales/indices were selected: 1. The socioeconomic status index; 2. The Child Rearing Practices Report (CRPR); 3. The Family Crisis Oriented Personal Evaluation Scales (F-COPES); and 4. The Hassles Index. The items of each scale and index used for this study are listed in the appendix.

Socioeconomic status was measured by the Hollingshead index of occupation and education (Hollingshead, 1968). Hollinghead (1968) utilized occupation and education to create a two-factor index of social position. These two factors were scaled and weighted individually, and a single scale score was obtained.

The continuum of social position scale scores derived from this calculation are reported to be reproducible in the Guttman sense as they do not overlap between education-occupation combinations. Reliability and validity of this scoring method was determined based on extensive studies

on over one hundred variables in Hollingshead's (1968) Social Stratification and Psychiatry Disorders Study.

Parental childrearing practices will be measured by a modified version of The Child Rearing Practices Report [CRPR(Block, 1984)]. The CRPR was designed to assess parental attitudes, values and beliefs about childrearing. The CRPR is a 91-item Q-Sort by which participants describe their attitudes and orientations toward parenting. The CRPR has been administered to more than 3,000 respondents including high school and college students and to parents of different socioeconomic levels, educational backgrounds, and ethnic groups (Roberts Block & Block, 1984; Rickel & Biasatti, 1982).

Respondents for this study completed a 58-item, 5-point likert report. Responses ranged from strongly disagree to strongly agree. Five subscales were used for this study: rational guidance, expression of affect, openness to experience, control, and control be anxiety/guilt. Cronbach's alpha reliabilities for these subscales were .63, .75, .66, .66, and .63, respectively.

Responses to difficulties will be measured by The Family Crisis Oriented Personal Evaluation Scales [F-COPES (McCubbin, Olson, & Larsen, 1981)]. The F-COPES identifies the problem solving and helpseeking strategies utilized by parents in difficult situations. The F-

COPES is a 30-item, 5-point likert report with five subscales: 1. Acquiring social support; 2. Reframing; 3. Seeking spiritual support; 4. Mobilizing family; and 5. Passive Appraisal. The F-COPES showed internal consistency with an Alpha of .86. Individual subscores had Aphas that ranged from .63 to .83. It has also been reported to have good stability with a four-week test-retest correlation of .81. Individual subscales had test-retest correlations ranging from .61 to .95. The F-COPES has been shown to have factorial and concurrent validity, correlating with several other family measures (McCubbin & Thompson, 1991).

This study uses four subscales: acquiring social support, reframing events, seeking spiritual support, and passive appraisal. Each subscale had Alphas of .76, .81, .69, and .64, respectively. The subscale mobilizing family had a low Alpha of .40 and was not used.

Perceived hassles will be measured by four yes-no questions from the Ethnic Families Research Survey asking families if they were hassled by their family, friends, neighbors, or community. Respondents were asked to explain how they were hassled.

## Conceptual Definitions

### Learning Disabilities

Learning disabilities, according to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 1990 (PL101-476), are a disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or using language, spoken or written, which may manifest itself in an imperfect ability to listen, speak, think, read, write, spell, or to do mathematical calculations (Hardman et. al.).

### Responses to Difficulties

Responses to difficulties are parental patterns of acquiring resources from personal and social environments when problems or difficulties arise.

### Perceived Hassles

Hassles are parental perceptions of being bothered by family, friends, neighbors, and community agencies.

### Parental Child Rearing Practices

Childrearing practices are parental behaviors and attitudes toward their learning disabled child.

## Operational Definitions

### Socioeconomic Status

Socioeconomic status measured using Hollingshead's calculation of social position based on participants' education and occupation (Hollingshead, 1968). The educational scale was based on the years of school participants completed. Responses ranging from inder 7 years of school to professional were then assigned a value from one to seven. Educational position had a factor weight of seven.

The occupational scale was based on precise knowledge of the participants occupation and corresponding income levels. These occupations were placed into categroies ranging from professional to farmers and assigned a valued ranging from one to seven. Occupational position was had a factor weight of 4.

Calculations were obtained by multiplying the factor weight of each scale, occupation and education by the scale value. The calculated weight scores then gives the approximate position of the family on the overall scale. In Hollingshead's (1968) example, a manager who completed high school and one year of college would be scored as follows:

| Factor | Scale Value | Factor Weight | Score x Weight |
|--------|-------------|---------------|----------------|
| Occupation | 3 | 7 | 21 |
| Education | 3 | 4 | <u>12</u> |
| | Index of Social Position | | 33 |

### Parental Childrearing Practices

Responses from the Child Rearing Practices Report (CRPR) were averaged for a scale score. Subscales were derived by summing all item scores. Higher scores indicated high levels of parental childrearing practice and low scores indicated low levels of parental childrearing practices.

### Responses to Difficulties

Responses from the Family Crisis Oriented Personal Evaluation Scales (F-COPES) were averaged for a scale score. Subscales were derived by summing all item scores. Higher scores indicated high level responses to difficulties and low scores indicated low level responses to difficulties.

### Perceived hassles

Responses of yes to each of the four questions on perceived hassles was assigned a value of 1 and summed for a total count. A range of 0 - 4 indicated that parents may percieve between zero and four sources of hassle within their social network.

## Research Questions

This study will ask:

1. How do African American families raising children with learning disabilities respond to difficulties?

2. What are the childrearing practices of African American families raising children with learning disabilities?

3. What are the perceived hassles of African American families raising children with learning disabilities.

4. Does socioeconomic status influence the childrearing practices, perceived hassles, and responses to difficulties of African American families raising children with learning disabilities?

5. Do African American families' childrearing practices influence their responses to difficulties?

6. Do African American families' perceived hassles of network relationships influence their childrearing practices and responses to difficulties?

## Analysis Strategy

Frequency distributions will be conducted on SES, hassles, childrearing practices, and responses to difficulties. Childrearing practices and responses to difficulties will be ordered in terms of most frequently reported behaviors.

Relationships between variables will be assessed using intercorrelations, pearson correlations, and stepwise multiple regression equations. Intercorrelations will be conducted for childrearing practices, responses to difficulties, and hassles to determine the associations. Pearson correlations will be conducted to describe the significance of associations between socioeconomic status, childrearing practices, hassles, and responses to difficulties. Multiple stepwise regressions will be used to determine the predictive power of childrearing practices on responses to difficulties. Regressions equations will also be used to determine how well socioeconomic status and hassles predict childrearing practices and responses to difficulties.

# RESULTS

The purpose of this study was to examine factors relating to responses to difficulties among African American families raising children with learning disabilities. The following section presents results based upon the research questions.

## 1. How do African American families raising children with learning disabilities respond to difficulties?

Frequency distributions were conducted for responses to difficulties among African American families in this study. The percentages of responses above the mean (indicating high level responses to difficulties) were reported in rank order (Table 2.).

Table 2.

Rank Order of Above Mean Level Percentages
for African American Families' Responses to
Difficulties

| Responses to Difficulties | Rank | % |
|---|---|---|
| Reframing | 1 | 63.9 |
| Seeking Social Support | 2 | 63.0 |
| Passive Appraisal | 3 | 57.1 |
| Seeking Spiritual Support | 4 | 52.9 |

High level responses to difficulties were reported by the majority of parents (over 50%). Reframing and seeking social support were the two

highest responses to difficulties (63.9% and 63.0%, respectively) among these African American families. Seeking spiritual support was the least frequently reported response of African American parents (52.9%).

Intercorrelational analysis were conducted to determine associations between subscales of responses to difficulties (Table 3). The strongest association was found between seeking social support and reframing at a significance level of .001. All items except passive appraisal were positively and significantly associated. A high level of one type of response to difficulties encouraged high levels in other types of responses to difficulties. Passive appraisal had a negative association with other responses to difficulties. A high level of passive appraisal in response to difficulties produced lower levels of other responses to difficulties. However, the association between passive appraisal and reframing was not significant.

Table 3.

Intercorrelations for African American Families' Responses to Difficulties

| Responses to Difficulties | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. Seeking Social Support | - | | | |
| 2. Reframing | .480$^c$ | - | | |
| 3. Seeking Spiritual Support | .203$^a$ | .264$^b$ | - | |
| 4. Passive Appraisal | -.233$^a$ | -.046 | -.217$^a$ | - |

$^a$ p<.05    $^b$ p<.01    $^c$ p<.001

2. What are the childrearing practices of African American families raising children with learning disabilities?

Frequency distributions were conducted on childrearing practices. High and low levels of childrearing practices were determined based on scores above and below the mean. The frequency of childrearing practices were rank ordered by percentages falling above the mean indicating high levels of childrearing practices (Table 4). All childrearing practices except control were utilized by most (50% or more) African American families in this study. Greater percentages of parents practiced rational guidance (89.9%) and openness to experiences (88.2%). Control ranked the lowest with few parents (35.3%) utilizing this childrearing practice. While the general measure of control was underutilized, most parents did indicate the use of control by anxiety/guilt (66.4%).

Table 4.

Rank Order of Above Mean Level Percentages for
African American Families Childrearing Practices

| Childrearing Practices | Rank | % |
|---|---|---|
| Rational Guidance | 1 | 89.9 |
| Openness to Experience | 2 | 88.2 |
| Expression of Affect | 3 | 70.6 |
| Anxiety/Guilt | 4 | 66.4 |
| Control | 5 | 35.3 |

Intercorrelations were conducted to determine the association

between childrearing subscales (Table 5). There were two groups of

significant associations (p<.001). Positive correlations were found between

rational guidance, expressions of affect, and openness to experiences and

also between control and anxiety/guilt. Therefore, within the two groups,

parents who utilized one childrearing behavior tended to practice the others

as well.

Table 5.

Intercorrelations for African American Families' Childrearing Behaviors

| Childrearing Practices | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. Rational Guidance | - | | | | |
| 2. Expression of Affect | .604$^c$ | - | | | |
| 3. Control | .052 | -.132 | - | | |
| 4. Openness to Experience | .666$^c$ | .661$^c$ | .070 | - | |
| 5. Anxiety/Guilt | .144 | .010 | .617$^c$ | .173 | - |

$^a$ p<.05    $^b$ p<.01    $^c$ p<.001

3. What are the perceived hassles of African American families raising children with learning disabilities.

Frequency distributions were conducted for perceived hassles. The percentages of parents indicating yes to being hassled were rank ordered (Table 6). Most parents did not perceive hassles. Among those who did, the greatest hassles were from family members (23.5%) followed by friends (19.3%). Perceived hassles by the community ranked the lowest (10.1%).

Table 6.

Rank Order of Above Mean Level
Percentages for Perceived Hassles

| Perceived Hassles | Rank | % |
|---|---|---|
| Hassles by Family | 1 | 23.5 |
| Hassles by Friends | 2 | 19.3 |
| Hassles by Neighbors | 3 | 17.6 |
| Hassles by Community | 4 | 10.1 |

Intercorrelations among hassle items showed significant associations for all but community hassles (Table 7). The association between perceived hassles were all positive. Parents who perceived hassles in one social context also tended to perceive hassles in other social contexts. Perceived hassles within the family were strongly associated with perceived hassles by

friends, neighbors and the community at .001. Community hassles were not

significantly associated with neighbor hassles.

Table 7.

Inrecorrelations for Perceived Hassles of African American Families

| Perceived Hassles | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. Family Hassles | - | | | |
| 2. Friend Hassles | $.400^c$ | - | | |
| 3. Neighbor Hassles | $.385^c$ | $.220^a$ | - | |
| 4. Community Hassles | $.471^c$ | $.331^c$ | .138 | - |

$^a$ $p<.05$   $^b$ $p<.01$   $^c$ $p<.001$

4. Does socioeconomic status influence the childrearing practices,

perceived hassles, and responses to difficulties of African American

families raising children with learning disabilities?

Pearson correlational analyses showed that socioeconomic status was

not associated with childrearing practices, responses to difficulties, nor

perceived hassles (Table 8).

Table 8.

Pearson Correlational Analyses of Socioeconomic Status
and Childrearing Practices, Responses to Difficulties and
Perceived Hassles

| | Socioeconomic Status | |
|---|---|---|
| | r | (n) |
| Chilrdrearing Practices | | |
| Rational Guidance | -.179 | (76) |
| Expression of Affect | .034 | (74) |
| Control | .082 | (75) |
| Openness to Experience | -.013 | (75) |
| Anxiety/Guilt | .025 | (76) |
| Responses to Difficulties | | |
| Seeking Social Support | -.118 | (77) |
| Reframing | .055 | (75) |
| Seeking Spiritual Support | .072 | (77) |
| Passive Appraisal | -.038 | (77) |
| Perceived Hassles | -.095 | (76) |

[a] $p<.05$  [b] $p<.01$  [c] $p<.001$

## 5. Do African American families' childrearing practices influence their responses to difficulties?

A Pearson correlational analysis was run to determine the association

between childrearing practices and responses to difficulties (Table 9).

There were significant associations between parents' childrearing practrices

and responses to difficulties. Reframing in response to difficulties was

significantly associated with all parental childrearing practices [rational

guidance, (r=.413, p<.001); expression of affect, (r=.454, p<.001), openness to experience, (r=.403, p<.001); control (r= -.218, p<.01); anxiety/guilt, (r= -.231, p<.01)]. Parents who reframed in response to difficulties tended to raise their child with more rational guidance, expressions of affect, and openness to experience and less control in general and control by anxiety/guilt. Passivity was only significantly associated with the two controlling childrearing practices [control, (r= -.364, p<.001); control by anxiety/guilt, (r= -.373, p<.001)]. Parents who were more controlling tended not to be passive. Seeking social support was significantly associated with rational guidance (r= .251, p<.01), expressions of affect (r=.319, p<.001), and openness to experience (r=.316, p<.001). Those parents who sought social support in response to difficulties tended to practice rational guidance, expression of affect and openness to experience. Seeking spiritual support in response to difficulties was significantly associated with expressions of affect (r=.241, p<.01), control (r=.334, p<.001), openness to experience (r=.192, p<.01), and control by anxiety/guilt (r=.221, p<.01). Those parents who sought spiritual support tended to be utilize expressions of affect, openness to experience, and controlling childrearing practices.

Table 9.

Pearson Correlational Analysis of Childrearing Practices and Responses to Difficulties

| | Responses To Difficulties | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Seeking Social Support | | Reframing | | Seeking Spiritual Support | | Passive Appraisal | |
| | r | (n) | r | (n) | r | (n) | r | (n) |
| Chilrdrearing Practices | | | | | | | | |
| Rational Guidance | .251[b] | (116) | .413[c] | (115) | .141 | (117) | -.025 | (117) |
| Expression of Affect | .319[c] | (113) | .434[c] | (112) | .241[a] | (114) | -.122 | (114) |
| Control | -.033 | (115) | -.218[a] | (114) | .334[c] | (116) | -.364[c] | (116) |
| Openness to Experience | .316[c] | (115) | .403[c] | (114) | .192[a] | (116) | -.129 | (116) |
| Anxiety/Guilt | -.168 | (116) | -.231[a] | (115) | .221[a] | (117) | -.373[c] | (117) |

[a] p<.05    [b] p<.01    [c] p<.001

Stepwise multiple regression analyses were run to determine how well childrearing practices predicted responses to difficulties (Table 10). Seeking social support was positively predicted by openness to experience childrearing practices and negatively by anxiety/guilt childrearing practices. With a beta of .36, openness to experience was the strongest predictor of seeking social support. Together, these childrearing practices accounted for 16% of the variance in seeking social support.

Table 10.

Stepwise Multiple Regressions of African American Families'
Childrearing Practices Predicting Responses to Difficulties

| Predictor Variable(s) | Seeking Social Support | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | Beta | t | $R^2$ |
| Step 1 | | | .10 |
| Openess to Experience | .32 | $3.60^c$ | |
| Step 2 | | | .16 |
| Openess to Experience | .36 | $4.03^c$ | |
| Anxiety/Guilt | -.23 | $-2.57^a$ | |
| | Reframing | | |
| | Beta | t | $R^2$ |
| Step 1 | | | .21 |
| Expression of Affect | .45 | $5.34^c$ | |
| Step 2 | | | .27 |
| Expression of Affect | .46 | $5.64^b$ | |
| Anxiety/Guilt | -.26 | $-3.11^b$ | |
| Step 3 | | | .31 |
| Rational Guidance | .26 | $2.60^a$ | |
| Expression of Affect | .31 | $3.16^b$ | |
| Anxiety/Guilt | -.28 | $-3.49^c$ | |
| | Seeking Spiritual Support | | |
| | Beta | t | $R^2$ |
| Step 1 | | | .12 |
| Control | .34 | $3.83^c$ | |
| Step 2 | | | .20 |
| Expression of Affect | .29 | $3.40^c$ | |
| Control | .38 | $4.42^c$ | |
| | Passive Appraisal | | |
| | Beta | t | $R^2$ |
| Step 1 | | | .15 |
| Anxiety/Guilt | -.38 | $-4.37^c$ | |

$^a$ p<.05   $^b$ p<.01   $^c$ p<.001

Reframing in response to difficulties was positively predicted by expressions of affect and rational guidance and negatively predicted by anxiety/guilt childrearing practices. Expressions of affect ($B=.45$) was the strongest predictor of reframing, entered in the first regression equation. Expressions of affect only decreased in predictive power ($B=.31$) of reframing when rational guidance ($B=.26$) was entered in the equation. Expressions of affect, anxiety/guilt, and rational guidance together accounted for 31% of the variance in reframing in response to difficulties.

Control ($B=.38$) and expressions of affect ($B=.29$) significantly predicted seeking spiritual support in response to difficulties. Control was the strongest predictor, accounting for 12% of the variance on the first step of the regression equation. Together, control and expressions of affect accounted for 20% of the variance in seeking spiritual support.

Anxiety/guilt was the only significant predictor of passive appraisal. With a beta of -.38, anxiety/guilt explained 15% of the variance. The relationship between anxiety/guilt and passive appraisal was negative, indicating that parents with low anxiety/guilt childrearing practices had high levels of passive appraisal in response to difficulties.

## 6. Do African American families' perceived hassles of network relationships influence their childrearing practices and responses to difficulties?

Pearson correlational analyses showed that perceived hassles were not associated with parental childrearing practices (Table 11). However,

Table 11.

Pearson Correlational Analysis of Perceived Hassles and Childrearing Practices and Responses to Difficulties

|  | Perceived Hassles | |
|---|---|---|
|  | r | (n) |
| Chilrdrearing Practices | | |
|     Rational Guidance | -.009 | (117) |
|     Expression of Affect | .159 | (114) |
|     Control | -.005 | (115) |
|     Openness to Experience | .028 | (116) |
|     Anxiety/Guilt | .144 | (116) |
| Responses to Difficulties | | |
|     Seeking Social Support | -.057 | (116) |
|     Reframing | -.226[a] | (115) |
|     Seeking Spiritual Support | .112 | (117) |
|     Passive Appraisal | -.129 | (117) |

[a] p<.05   [b] p<.01   [c] p<.001

perceived hassles were significantly associated with reframing in response to difficulties ($r$= -.226, $p<.05$). Parents who perceived more hassles tended to reframe less in response to difficulties.

Stepwise multiple regressions were run to determine the predictive power of perceived hassles on responses to difficulties (Table 12). Perceived hassles ($B$= -.22) negatively predicted reframing at .05 significance. The greater the number of perceived hassles perceived, the less parents utilized reframing in response to difficulties.

Table 12.

Significant Stepwise Multiple Regressions of Hassle Predicting Responses to Difficulties

| | Responses to Difficulties | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | Reframing | | |
| Predictor Variable(s) | Beta | t | $R^2$ |
| Step 1 | | | .05 |
| Perceived Hassles | -.22 | -2.34[a] | |

[a] p<.05    [b] p<.01    [c] p<.001

An additional stepwise regression was run to determine the predictive ability of childrearing practices when perceived hassles were entered in the equation (Table 13). Expressions of affect continued to be the strongest predictor of reframing in response to difficulties, accounting for 21% of the variance alone. Perceived hassles ($B$= -.30) became strongly significant on the second step and gradually decreased in predictive power ($B$= -.25) when

anxiety/guilt ($B= -.25$) and rational guidance ($B=.22$) were entered in the 3rd and 4th equations. Both perceived hassles and anxiety/guilt were negative predictors of reframing. Those parents who perceived more hassles and controlled their children through anxiety/guilt tended to reframe less in response to difficulties.

Since hassles bore only modest reliability, chi square analyses were conducted on individual hassle items in association with childrearing practices and responses to difficulties as a means of exploring the limitations of the index (Table 14). Perceived hassles by the family were most significantly associated with responses to difficulties. Fifty-four percent of parents who perceived hassles by family members were less likely to seek social support and reframe in response to difficulties. Perceived hassles by friends were associated with reframing. Fifty-seven percent of parents who perceived hassles reframed less in response to difficulties. Perceived hassles by neighbors was associated with passive appraisal. Sixty-two percent of parents who perceived hassles by neighbors were less likely to use passive appraisal in response to difficulties.

Table 13.

Stepwise Multiple Regressions of Perceived Hassles and
Childrearing Practices Predicting Reframing

| | Reframing | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Predictor Variable(s) | Beta | t | $R^2$ |
| Step 1 | | | .21 |
| Expression of Affect | .46 | 5.40[c] | |
| Step 2 | | | .30 |
| Perceived Hassle | -.30 | -3.61[c] | |
| Expression of Affect | .51 | 6.26[c] | |
| Step 3 | | | .35 |
| Perceived Hassle | -.27 | -3.38[c] | |
| Expression of Affect | .52 | 6.50[c] | |
| Anxiety/Guilt | -.23 | -2.88[b] | |
| Step 4 | | | .38 |
| Perceived Hassles | -.25 | -3.09[b] | |
| Rational Guidance | .22 | 2.29[a] | |
| Expression of Affect | .38 | 3.95[c] | |
| Anxiety/Guilt | -.25 | -3.23[b] | |

[a] $p<.05$    [b] $p<.01$    [c] $p<.001$

Table 14.

Significant Chi Squares of Individual Perceived Hassles Items Associated with Responses to Difficulties

| | Family Hassles | | No Family Hassles | | $X^2$ | Friend Hassles | | No Friend Hassles | | $X^2$ | Neighbor Hassles | | No Neighbor Hassles | | $X^2$ |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | n | % | n | % | | n | % | n | % | | n | % | n | % | |
| **Seek Social...** | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Low | 15 | 53.6 | 29 | 32.2 | 4.16[a] | - | - | - | - | ns | - | - | - | - | ns |
| High | 13 | 46.4 | 61 | 67.8 | | - | - | - | - | | - | - | - | - | |
| **Reframing** | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Low | 15 | 53.6 | 27 | 30.0 | 5.18[a] | 13 | 56.5 | 30 | 31.3 | 5.13[a] | | | | | |
| High | 13 | 46.4 | 63 | 70.0 | | 10 | 43.5 | 66 | 68.8 | | | | | | |
| **Seek Spiritual...** | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Low | 15 | 53.6 | 27 | 30.0 | 4.80[a] | - | - | - | - | ns | | | | | |
| High | 13 | 46.4 | 63 | 70.0 | | - | - | - | - | | | | | | |
| **Passive Appraisal** | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Low | 8 | 28.6 | 47 | 52.2 | ns | - | - | - | - | ns | 14 | 66.7 | 37 | 37.8 | 5.90[a] |
| High | 20 | 71.4 | 43 | 47.8 | | - | - | - | - | | 7 | 33.3 | 61 | 62.2 | |

[a] $p<.05$   [b] $p<.01$   [c] $p<.001$   (df = 1)

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# DISCUSSION

## Findings

This study sought to describe the childrearing practices and responses to difficulties of African American families raising children with learning disabilities. Parents showed a diversity in their childrearing practices as well as their responses to difficulties. This study has shown that the majority of parents reported high usage of each childrearing practice with the exception of control. Two distinct relationships among African American families childrearing practices emerged. The two control subscales of parenting practices, control by anxiety/guilt and general control, were strongly related and the three remainging subscales, rational guidance, openness to experiences, and expression of affect, were strongly related. There were no significant associations between these groups. These findings suggest the usefulness of different parenting techniques in moderating the affects of environmental factors as well as the child's disability.

Each response to difficulties was employed by most parents. However, the two top ranking responses to difficulties were seeking social support and reframing. These findings are supported by previous research indicating that reframing and seeking support are utilized in successful

management of daily life as well as stressful events (Scorgie, Wilgosh, & McDonald, 1996; Snell & Rosen, 1997).

Overall, the association among responses to difficulties was strong. Passive appraisal and reframing were the only insignificant associations. Seeking social support and reframing bore the strongest association. While the literature has documented the association between reframing and social support (Scorgie et. al., 1996), the directionality of this relationship is uncertain. While some studies indicate that social support encourages positive parental responses to difficulties (Agosta & Melda, 1995), other research shows that reframing is the first step (Scorgie et. al., 1996). Parents in Scorgie's et. al. qualitative study (1996) reported that they began the process of managing life effectively by reframing. Their reframing in response to the difficulties of coping with a disabled child encouraged them to seek social support. However, as parents contacted others raising disabled children, this in turn increased their reframing abilities. Although this relationship has not been empirically grounded, it suggests a reciprocal relationship between reframing and seeking social support. Further quantitative studies on the use of mulitiple reponses to difficulties is becoming increasingly urgent. Service providers recognize the importance

for families to identify their own needs and respond to them appropriately but have only recently begun to systematically explore the use of multiple resources in an attempt to improve support (Agosta & Melda, 1995). It is asserted that effective implementation of services and programs should begin with a firm understanding of the social and cultural ecologies of family functioning. The present study shows that African American parents are empowered to utilize multiple resources in response to difficulties based on their childrearing practices.

Another objective of this study was to examine the influence of socioeconomic status on childrearing practices, hassles, and responses to difficulties. SES did not have a significant association with hassles, childrearing practices, or responses to difficulties in this study. As other research on parenting has shown (Abell, Clawson, Washington, Bost, & Vaughn, 1996), families can demonstrate resilience and competent parenting in various socioeconomic contexts.

Contrary to the results reported by Boyce et. al. (1995), socioeconomic status was not significantly associated with parents' responses to difficulties in this study. One explanation for the insignificance of socioeconomic status in this study may be the presence additional resources for the child diagnosed with a learning disability. Many

of the parents in this study have children who were diagnosed by a teacher or professional as having a learning disability and are receiving educational, social, and financial support for their child. As researchers have suggested that other resources (e.g., social) may offset the influence of socioeconomic status (Heath, 1989; Rosier & Corsaro, 1993), these additional resources may account for this finding. As another explantion, the findings in this study are consistent with literature which indicates that responses to difficulties are more a reflection of parental attitudes and characteristics than SES (Hornblow, Bushnell, Wells, Joyce, & Oakley-Brown, 1990). Further, research implies that while socioeconomic status may shape families' ecological niches, parents' interpersonal and problem-solving skills, values, and beliefs strongly impact how parents choose to respond to diverse situations (Luster & Okagaki, 1993).

The impact of childrearing practices on responses to difficulties was also explored. Findings of this study clearly show the impact of childrearing practices on their responses to difficulties. The diverse parenting practices of African American parents contributes significantly to their responses to difficulties. Those parents encouraging more openness to experiences and less anxiety/guilt were more likely to seek social support in response to difficulties. All childrearing items were significantly associated

with reframing in response to difficulties. Openness was not predictive in comparison with expressions of affect, rational guidance, and anxiety/guilt. Parents who were more controlling and affective tended to seek spiritual support. This is supported by other research indicating higher levels of control among more religious families (McAdoo, 1993).

High anxiety/guilt practices were predictive of less passive appraisal and reframing. While the majority of these families controlled their children using anxiety/guilt, this practice did not encourage reframing. Parents may not respond to difficulties by seeking support and instead, choose to isolate themselves from social relationships that would view them negatively or impart judgment (Malo, 1994). This could explain the lack of reframing among parents who practiced control by anxiety/guilt. Social network interactions are a source of positive referencing of parental behaviors and attitudes (Abell et. al., 1996; Scorgie et. al., 1996). Families raising children with learning disabilities often feel stigmatized and misunderstood (Harry, 1992). It is offered that African American families may feel that their parental practices of control by anxiety/guilt are not acceptable or positive. Thus, it would be no surprise that anxiety/guilt practices are inversely related to reframing. Thus, as parents who practice anxiety/guilt may not seek social support, they may lose positive referents and experience

a decrease in reframing. As a cautionary measure, the lack of reframing in association with parental practices of anxiety/guilt should not be interpreted negatively. Rather, as researchers have contended, this finding should be examined in conjunction with the sociodemographic context of families (Abell et. al., 1996). It is important to consider that while African American families in this study practiced anxiety/guilt, other childrearing practices of rational guidance and expressions of affect were prevalent. The anxiety/guilt aspect of parenting may reflect African American families disciplinary or structural alternative in adjustment to their child's learning disability.

Hassles were examined in association with childrearing practices and responses to difficulties. Overall, few families perceived hassles. Perceived hassles were strong negative predictors of reframing even when entered in the equation with childrearing practices. Those parents with no hassles tended to reframe more. As an index, perceived hassles was only significantly associated with reframing in response to difficulties. Due to its modest reliability, further analysis was conducted on individual hassle items. While hassles continued to have no significant relationship with childrearing practices, there were significant associations between perceived hassles by family and seeking social support, reframing, and seeking

spiritual support. Families who perceived hassles in the family were lower in seeking social support and reframing. However, families who perceived hassles by the family were more likely to turn to spiritual support. There were also assoications between perceived hassles by friends and reframing. Those families who perceived hassles by friends tended to reframe less. As researchers have suggested that families may avoid contact with social networks (Krause, 1995), it is implied that parents also forego the positive benefits associated with those interactions. Thus, the decrease in reframing may result from the loss of positive reference groups when parents do not seek social support. As parents raising a child with learning disability may already experience strain (Scorgie et. al., 1996; Waggoner & Wilgosh, 1990), parents may chose the less emotionally taxing response to difficulties. Further refinement of the hassles index to include more items and a broader range of responses could allow more conclusive interpretation of these findings. However, given that a stronger measure of perceived hassles is needed, this preliminary investigation provides the impetus for further research of factors prohibiting positive responses to difficulties, especially for socioeconomically disadvantaged families raising children with learning disabilities.

## Limitations of the Study

The sample population for this study was African American families raising children with learning disabilities. However, the diverse characteristics of the child's learning disability and the prerequisite of children between the ages of six and thirteen limited the generality of the present findings to all African American families raising children with disabilities. Rather, the present findings provide service providers, researchers, and policy makers with relevant issues to consider.

All sociodemographic variables (i.e., the number of children in the household, gender of the learning disabled child, and age of the parents) which may influence parental responses to difficulties were not examined in this study. This study addressed infrequently explored aspects of research on African American families raising children woth learning disabilities.

## Implications

As resources for families raising children with learning disabilities are limited, it is important to explore these alternatives. As such spiritual support warrants further research. The findings in this study that the majority of Afircan American families seek spiritual support merits further empirical investigation. Specifically, more emphasis should be placed on measuring the abstract nature of African American families relationship

with a supernatural Being or God distinct from concrete religious interactions.

It is also important to explore the use of formal resources by African American families. Research has shown that African American underutilize formal resources and suggested that an environment more reflective of African American cultural values may encourage increased utilization (Broman, Neighbors, & Taylor, 1989; Julian et. al., 1994). African American families value a sense of connectedness and belonging (Broman, et. al., 1989; McAdoo, 1988). Therefore it would seem necessary to "deinstitutionalize the institution." As other researchers suggest (Agosta & Melda, 1995), service providers should present programs and activities in a more culturally sensitive and family-centered package.

African American families, like all other families, are constantly changing, and our perception of them needs to evolve along with those changes. It is a disservice to treat any group as homogeneous (McAdoo, 1995). While it is important to acknowledge and include the historical resilience and strength of African American families in research and services, it is equally important to account for variations of family functioning within the group. In a changing American society, African American families are not static. Indeed, their boundaries are permeable,

and adverse environmental factors create multiple dimensions in African Americans family functioning.

Further research is necessary on African American that involves the impact of childrearing practices and responses to difficulties on the learning disabled child's outcomes. Such research should examine the parental characteristics which promote different parenting practices and strategies. It would also seem paramount to validate African American parental experiences by attending to their perceptions of constraints as well as supports within their family and social environments which encourage optimal family functioning. In doing so, a more complete conceptualization of African American family processes could be realized.

# APPENDIX

# Appendix

## List of Selected Scale and Index Items From the Ethnic Families Research Project Questionnaire

### A1.   Socioeconomic Status Index

#### Educational Subscale

8   No education
7   Less than 7th grade education (grades 0-6)
6   Junior high school (7, 8, 9th grade)
5   Some high school (10, 11th grade)
4   Graduated from high school (12th grade diploma or GED)
3   Some college (freshman-13, sophmore-14, junior-15 or vocational, Trade or Business)
2   Graduated from college/university
1   Graduate degree (Masters, PhD)

#### Occupational Subscale

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 10 | Unemployed, homemaker, student | Less than $6,000 |
| 9 | Farm laborer, caring for relative | 6,000- 8,999 |
| 8 | Service worker, unskilled worker/not farmer | 9,000-11,999 |
| 7 | Clerical, sales worker | 12,000-15,999 |
| 6 | Military service | 16,000-19,999 |
| 5 | Semi-skilled worker, machine worker | 20,000-24,999 |
| 4 | Skilled craftsman. technician | 25,000-29,999 |
| 3 | Semi-professional of self-employed, assistant manager | 30,000-49,999 |
| 2 | Manager, foreman, official | 50,000-69,000 |
| 1 | Professional, large business owner, high level executive | Over 70,000 |

## A2. Child Rearing Practices Report (CRPR)

| Strongly<br>Disagree<br>1 | Moderately<br>Disagree<br>2 | Don't<br>Know<br>3 | Mostly<br>Agree<br>4 | Strongly<br>Agree<br>5 |
|---|---|---|---|---|

### Expression Of Affect

____7.    I feel a child should be given comfort and understanding when he is scared or upset.

____12.    I express affection by hugging, kissing, and holding my child.

____28.    I joke and play with my child.

____30.    My child and I have warm, intimate times together.

### Control By Anxiety/Guilt Induction

____20.    I teach my child that in one way or another punishment will find
him when he is bad.

____35.    I expect my child to be grateful and appreciate all the advantages she has.

____49.    I let my child know how ashamed and disappointed I am when he misbehaves.

____54.    I control my child by warning heer about the bad things that can happen to her.

### Openness To Experience

____15.    I encourage my child to think and wonder about life.

____33.    I encourage my child to be curious, to explore and question things.

____40.    I encourage my child to talk about his troubles.

### Rational Guidance

____26.    I talk it over and reason with my child when he misbehaves.

____38.    I believe in praising a child when he is good, and I think it gets better results than punishing him when he is bad.

____39.    I make sure my child knows that I appreciate what she tries or accomplishes.

## A3.  Family Crisis Oriented Personal Evaluation Scale (F-Copes)

| Strongly Disagree | Moderately Disagree | Don't Know | Mostly Agree | Strongly Agree |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |

When we face problems or difficulties in our families, we respond by:

### Seeking Social Support
\_\_\_\_1.      Sharing our difficulties with relatives.

\_\_\_\_2.      Seeking encouragement and support from friends.

\_\_\_\_5.      Seeking advice from relatives (grandparents, etc.).

\_\_\_\_ 8.      Receiving gifts and favors from neighbors (e.g., food, trips to mall, etc.).

\_\_\_\_10.      Asking neighbors for favors and assistance.

\_\_\_\_16.      Sharing concerns with close friends.

\_\_\_\_20.      Doing things with relatives (get-togethers, dinners, etc.).

\_\_\_\_25.      Asking relatives how they feel about problems.

\_\_\_\_29.      Sharing problems with neighbors.


### Reframing
\_\_\_\_3.      Knowing we have the power to solve major problems.

\_\_\_\_7.      Knowing that we have the strength within our own family to solve our problems.

\_\_\_\_11.      Facing the problems "head-on" and trying to get a solution right away.

\_\_\_\_13.      Showing that we are strong.

\_\_\_\_15.      Accepting stressful life events as a fact of life.

\_\_\_\_19.      Accepting that difficulties occur unexpectedly.

\_\_\_\_22.      Believing we can handle oue own problems.

\_\_\_\_24.      Defining the family problem in a more positive way so that we do not become too discouraged.


### Seeking Spiritual Support
\_\_\_\_14.      Attending church services.

\_\_\_\_23.      Participating in church activities.

\_\_\_\_27.      Seeking advice from a minister.

\_\_\_\_30.      Having faith in God.

## F-COPES... Continued

### Passive Appraisal

_____12.     Watching television.

_____17.     Knowing luck plays a big part in how well we are able to solve family problems.

_____26.     Feeling that no matter what we do to prepare, we will have difficulty handling problems.

_____28.     Believing if we wait long enough, the problem will go away.

## A4. Perceived Hassles Index

Yes   No

1     0

_____a.      Have people hassled you in your family?

_____b.      Have friends hassled you?

_____c.      Have any neighbors hassled you?

_____d.      Did people in community agencies and organizations hassled you?

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