PART ONE

OVERVIEW

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Religious beliefs can be central to children's healthy development. In the following narrative fragment, Mrs. Edith Hudley, a 73-year-old African-American, recounted to me her experiences as a 7-year-old child walking to a segregated school.

> The whites would be walking one way, and we'd be walking the other. They'd yell at us, "You dirty, black niggers! We hate you! We hate you!" I'd go to Mama and ask her, "Why do they hate us?" She'd always take me to the Bible. She taught me that God loves us all. God is the judge. She taught me not to take hate inside of myself. (Haight, 1998, p. 213)

Mrs. Hudley went on to explain that when we hate, we destroy that part of God which he left inside each of us when he created us. Thus, from Mrs. Hudley's perspective, she was not the victim of this story; rather, her taunters were (Haight, 1998).

As a scientifically educated developmental psychologist, my interest in African-American children's religious experiences emerged only gradually through repeated exposure to stories such as this one. As Mrs. Hudley spontaneously recounted her own experiences, I often wondered how children of any ethnicity could develop optimally within racist communities. As I listened more closely, it became clear that, for Mrs. Hudley, human development is rooted in spirituality, a perspective in which everyday human events are contextualized by strongly held and deeply felt personal beliefs about the meaning of life including an ultimate love, which all may receive, and an ultimate justice, to which all are accountable.

I first met Mrs. Hudley and the other individuals described in this book in the summer of 1991. My family had just moved from Illinois to Utah. Although my husband and I were very excited about our new jobs,

we also had many concerns about moving our biracial family to Salt Lake City. Our main reservation centered around how our children would develop within this relatively homogeneous context. Many miles from extended family and friends, we wondered where we would find a community in which to raise our family. Upon voicing our concerns, we were directed to "First Baptist Church" by a colleague.[1] Here, we were told, we would find acceptance and support, as well as many activities for children and families. Over the next four years, our family benefited greatly from my colleague's advice as we participated at First Baptist Church.

In describing my own involvement at First Baptist Church, I am contextualizing this book within an intellectual tradition that views all research, ultimately, as representing a perspective (e.g., Briggs, 1992; Denzin & Lincoln, 1994; Peshkin, 1991). In this instance, it represents my perspective on adults' socialization beliefs and practices, and children's participation within a complex community. As a parent, developmental psychologist, and professor of social work, I have personal and practical, as well as intellectual and professional, interests in the lives of African-American children. Although my perspective is disciplined by systematic ethnographic and developmental methods, it emerged from the particular questions that I knew to ask, the particular stories that others felt appropriate to tell me, and the ways in which I understood the stories that I heard and the practices in which I participated. It is my hope that this perspective may shed some light on children's development within an African-American community from which researchers, educators, social service providers, and others interested in promoting the development of all children may learn.

GOALS OF THE BOOK

The first goal of this book is to provide a more nuanced description of African-American adults' socialization beliefs and practices. Much of the existing literature describing the socialization practices of African-American adults is limited and negatively biased. For example, although research on teachers has been extensive, relatively little empirical research has highlighted the methods of African-American teachers, and positive portrayals are infrequent. Whether through omission, distortion, or negative portrayals, some researchers have conveyed the idea that African-American teachers are intellectually understimulating, interpersonally harsh, and ineffective (see Foster, 1995, for discussion). In

[1] To protect the privacy of the participants in this study, I will use the pseudonym "First Baptist Church" throughout this book, as well as pseudonyms for all individuals.

contrast, limited descriptions of African-American teachers nominated as effective by other African-Americans present a picture of caring individuals dedicated to the children, families, and communities whom they serve (Foster, 1994).

One explanation for such contrasting perspectives is the considerable variation across cultural communities in adults' socialization beliefs and practices. For example, "child-centered" beliefs and practices that prioritize children's individual needs and interests are typical within many middle-class, European-American communities (e.g., Chow, 1994; Fung, 1994; Greenfield, 1994). Beliefs and practices more typical of middle-class, Chinese communities prioritize children's mature and socially sensitive conduct (e.g., Chow, 1994; Fung, 1994; Miller, Wiley, Fung & Liang, 1997). Understanding how such diverse socialization beliefs and practices relate to children's competence and well-being requires that they be embedded within their broader sociocultural context (e.g., see Göncü, 1999). This context includes the challenges and opportunities encountered by adults in the larger society, for example, in relation to employment, as well as their beliefs regarding attitudes and behaviors that facilitate success, for example, showing respect to superiors. In this book, I will systematically describe the socialization beliefs and practices of African-American adults from this sociocultural perspective.

The second goal of this book is to contribute to our understanding of children's development within an African-American community. Overall, the number of articles in mainstream developmental journals pertaining to African-American children is very small, and, indeed, decreased from 1970 to 1990 (Fisher, Jackson & Villarruel, 1998). Historically, developmentalists, educators, and social service professionals have paid very little attention to African-American children except when they pose social problems such as educational underachievement, poverty, adolescent pregnancy, drug use, and crime (see Fisher, Jackson & Villarruel, 1998; Lee & Slaughter-DeFoe, 1995; Slaughter & McWorter, 1985). Hence, we know relatively little about the contexts in which competencies emerge in well-developing African-American children. In this book, I will describe children's stable and changing patterns of participation with adults and other children at church.

The third goal of this book is to provide a more nuanced description of children's experiences within a religious community. The existing empirical literature is also limited with regard to children's participation within religious contexts, and it is negatively biased. Descriptions of children's participation within a European-American church (Zinsser, 1986) and within a private, religiously based African-American school (Mehan,

Okamoto, Lintz & Wills, 1995) focus on practices that appear antithetical to children's development. Interactions between adults and children are characterized as highly structured and adult centered with a one-way flow of communication from adult to child. Literal meaning is privileged, and children are discouraged from questioning, speculating, or extending presented material. In this book, I will provide a detailed and contrasting description of the participation of adults and children in a range of activities at church.

The fourth goal of this book is to consider the implications of these patterns of socialization and participation for professionals involved in supporting children and their families. The absence of knowledge about the practices through which competencies emerge in well-developing African-American children, in conjunction with the existence of negative stereotypes, can be highly problematic for helping professionals. For example, speaking from her experience as an educator, Mary Smith Arnold (1995) asserts that too often teachers, social workers, counselors, and others view "at-risk" and "black" as interchangeable terms.

> I am deeply concerned that those who work with Black children be exposed to a range of images that represent the abundant variations of Black experiences in the United States. Too often the stereotypes and one-dimensional portraits paraded before us on society's vast channels of communication (television, print media, movies, schools, etc.) become the defining contours of the children we have been commissioned to serve . . . flat, narrow, negative images . . . impair our ability as professionals to see the strengths . . . (p. 146)

In this book, I hope to contribute to a fuller, more complex, and three-dimensional perspective of African-American adults and children. I will describe how this perspective informed the development of an intervention for African-American children. I also will consider the implications for educators involved in preparing university students to enter the helping professions.

A SOCIOCULTURAL PERSPECTIVE ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF RESILIENCY

This book focuses on religious practices that may promote the development of resiliency in African-American children. Investigators of resiliency use the concepts of risk and protective factors to understand how individuals like Mrs. Hudley have developed well despite profound,

ongoing stress (e.g., Fraser, 1997; Masten, Best & Garmezy, 1991). In brief, risk factors such as poverty can increase the probability of onset, digression to a more serious state, or the maintenance of a problem condition. Protective factors such as positive relationships with adults in adolescence can moderate the effects of risk factors so that more positive developmental outcomes may occur (Fraser, 1997).

In this book, the development of psychological resiliency in children is conceived of as occurring through the dialectical processes of socialization and acquisition. In brief, socialization is the process by which adults structure the social environment and display patterned meanings for the child (Haight & Miller, 1993; Miller & Sperry, 1987; Wentworth, 1980). It is this process on which I focus in this book. Socialization may be direct, as when a pastor preaches a special children's sermon; or indirect, as when parents bring their own religiously oriented reading material into the home. Socialization may be intentional, as when a grandmother escorts her grandchild to Sunday School, or unintentional, as when a child observes her godmother engrossed in prayer. Acquisition is the process through which children interpret, respond to, and ultimately embrace, reject, or elaborate upon the social patterns to which they are exposed (Miller & Sperry, 1988; Wentworth, 1980). For example, adults alter the content and structure of their socialization messages in relation to individual children, and children adjust their understanding and behavior in relation to adults' socialization practices. For example, Sunday School teachers described the ways in which they influenced individual children's lives, but they also described how interactions with their young students enhanced their own understanding of the scriptures.

From this dialectical perspective, development occurs within a social context as children actively observe and participate with adults and peers in the routine, everyday practices through which culture is maintained and elaborated (see, e.g., Corsaro, 1996; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Rogoff, 1990). For example, children's spiritual belief systems emerge through their observations of, and increasingly complex participation in, cultural practices such as storytelling and verbal conflict with teachers and peers in Sunday School. This dialectical perspective reflects a movement in the field of human development away from defining developmental trajectories in universal terms, abstracted from the particular practices within which children develop, toward the identification and description of various kinds of expertise that emerge within particular cultural contexts (Rogoff, 1990).

Understanding and promoting resiliency within individuals, then, re-

quires that development be embedded within its sociocultural context. From this perspective, the nature of risk and protective factors can vary tremendously depending on the context of development. For example, racism is a significant risk factor in the development of African-American children (Garmezy, 1985), limiting opportunities for development and undermining motivation, confidence, and self-esteem.

Children's spiritual belief systems, on the other hand, can be protective factors (Hill-Lubin, 1991; Werner, 1989). Spiritual belief systems encompass ideas and feelings pertaining to a nonmaterial higher force (Boykin, 1994) and address the meaning and purpose in life (Coles, 1995). Belief systems, including spiritual belief systems, are taken-for-granted ideas about the nature of reality that provide a frame of reference within which individuals interpret experience and formulate goals and strategies for living within the constraints of culture (Bruner, 1990; Goodnow, 1988; Harkness & Super, 1996).

Scholars of black history and culture have argued, essentially, that spiritual belief systems are protective factors for many African-Americans. Spiritual belief systems have been portrayed as a common cultural value (e.g., Boykin, 1994; Schiele, 1996), a strategy for coping with adversity (Hale-Benson, 1987; Potts, 1996), and an agent of socialization (Brown, 1991) for African-Americans from the time of slavery through the present (e.g., Hill-Harris, 1998; Lincoln, 1999; Riggs, 1997; Smitherman, 1977; Sobel, 1988; Stewart, 1935). For example, spiritual beliefs helped enslaved African-Americans find purpose and meaning, as well as the strength to develop, despite extremely difficult lives. Indeed, responding to evil and other challenges of life while remaining a moral person was viewed as an important opportunity for spiritual development.

> They might remain slaves in body for the rest of their lives, but they were free in ways their white masters might or might not be. Theirs was a freedom that could not be bought. This conviction provided blacks with an internal strength. It was not just an accommodation, a way to accept their status as slaves. It was a spiritual wisdom that became the core of their lives. External status, external appearances, aspects of personality, and the outer me did not share the eternal spirit. (Sobel, 1979, p. 117)

In twentieth-century North America, spiritual belief systems also have been portrayed as a key factor in African-American families' abilities to cope with and thrive despite stressful lives (Hale-Benson, 1987). For

example, in Maya Angelou's (1969) autobiography, the spirituality of African-American women sustains families. James Comer (1988) begins the biography of his mother, Maggie, at the doorway of a black Baptist church. Robert Coles (1995) describes children and families who call upon their rich spiritual traditions to deal with the trials of their own, everyday lives. For example, spirituality was an important tool on which African-American children relied to survive racial hatred during forced school desegregation. In the words of an 8-year-old North Carolina girl in 1962:

> I was all alone, and those people [segregationists] were screaming, and suddenly I saw God smiling, and I smiled. . . . A woman was standing there (near the school door), and she shouted at me, "Hey, you little nigger, what are you smiling at?" I looked right at her face and I said, "At God." Then she looked up at the sky, and then she looked at me, and she didn't call me any more names. (Coles, 1990, pp. 19–20)

Religious meanings also have been portrayed as a source of great creativity. As African-Americans have come to terms with the negativity of their situation, many have transformed it to create another view of reality (e.g., Angelou, 1969; Hale-Benson, 1987; Long, 1997; Smitherman, 1977). For example, it was the enslaved African who gave religious meaning to the concept of freedom; in other words, that to fully serve God one must have no other master. According to Charles Long (1997),

> The black community in America has confronted the reality of the historical situation as immutable, impenetrable, but this experience has not produced passivity; it has, rather, found expression as forms of the involuntary and transformative nature of the religious consciousness. (p. 28)

With few exceptions, however, social scientists, educators, and social service providers have been silent with respect to the role of children's spirituality in the development of resiliency. Despite a resurgence of interest in spirituality in the field of social work (e.g., Bullis, 1996; Canda & Furman, 1999; Pinderhughes, 1989; Sheridan, Bullis, Adcock, Berlin & Miller, 1992), very little attention has been paid to children's spirituality. Similarly, very little research exists within the fields of developmental psychology and education, although age-related changes in religious reasoning (see Oser, 1991) and faith development (Fowler, 1981) have received some attention. From the perspective of these disciplines,

the most deeply meaningful spiritual experiences described by Mrs. Hudley, as well as by scholars of African-American history, are what Jacqueline Goodnow (1990) has called "homeless phenomena." There is literally no place for them within existing theories of human development (Hudley, Haight & Miller, in press).

Thom Moore (1991) offers an explanation for the neglect of religion by many social scientists and social service providers. Focusing on psychology, he points to a value base in which religiosity is equated with irrational thinking. He also describes the competing assumptions and intents of religion and social science.

> The knowledge foundation of the church, based on religious principles, is faith, while the knowledge base of psychology comes from scientific research. . . . The science of psychology studies human behavior, and when it is applied the intent is to change behavior. A church, on the other hand, is established to nurture the spiritual needs of an individual or individuals, and in the process has an impact on the social lives of the people involved. (p. 149)

Fortunately, there are some hints that the situation described above may be changing. For example, during in-depth interviews with mothers of young children, Cindy Clark (1995) explored the connections between children's beliefs in childhood myths, such as Santa Claus, the Easter Bunny, and the Tooth Fairy, and the developmental foundations of religious faith. In their edited volume, Karl Rosengren, Carl Johnson, and Paul Harris (2000) move toward a more complex portrayal of children's cognitive development – one that includes metaphysical and theological as well as rational experience.

THE AFRICAN-AMERICAN CHURCH AS A CONTEXT OF SOCIALIZATION

In this book, I contribute to these recent efforts to bring a fuller appreciation of children's religious experience to the fields of human development, education, and social work by exploring patterns of socialization and participation within an African-American church. Psychologists have characterized churches, in general, as potential contexts for the development of resilience (Garmezy, 1985; Maston, Best & Garmezy, 1991). Given its unique role within black communities, the African-American church may be an especially important context for the development of resilience in children. In many African-American communities the church is the

only institution that is owned, managed, and supported by African-Americans (McAdoo & Crawford, 1991). Indeed, the black church has been described as the oldest, the most powerful, and the most influential African-American institution (e.g., Moss, 1988; Smitherman, 1977).

Throughout its history, the African-American church has played a significant role in the provision of social support and services (e.g., Franklin, 1969; Moore, 1991). For decades, scholars have elaborated upon the multifaceted roles of the African-American church in providing concrete aid and refuge in times of need. Historically, strong involvement in churches has been one of the means through which African-American families have coped with adversity (e.g., McAdoo & Crawford, 1991).

Consistent with these characterizations of the African-American church, many blacks consider the church to be second in importance only to the family (Moore, 1991). In a Gallup report on religion, 76% of African-Americans claimed church membership, and 94% said that religion was fairly important to them (as reported in Moore, 1991). Despite the unique significance of the African-American church, its role in the development of children has not been explored. As John Ogbu (1985) noted, "There are hardly any studies of the full role of the church in the transmission of competence [to black youth], but it is likely that the church does indeed play an important role" (p. 61).

Within the African-American church, Sunday School is a particularly significant context for children's socialization. Ella Mitchell (1986) observed that

> many a mature Black still remembers with pride an Easter recitation or a Christmas play which awakened his or her first conscious awareness of personal dignity and worth. . . . Perhaps the crowning contribution of the Sunday schools would have to be the tremendous percentage of Black adult church persons whose sense of identity with and commitment to Jesus Christ was evidenced and symbolized in a conversion experience during childhood or youth. Almost all of these were directly or indirectly the result of the love, concern and influence of teachers in the Sunday schools, and the joyous activities associated with this program. (p. 109)

Although Sunday School is an important part of the lives of many African-American children and youth, it has been virtually ignored in the mainstream developmental, educational, and social service literature. According to Diane Brown and Lawrence Gary (1991), the absence of research examining the role of Sunday School in the development of