Life Course Effects of Early Parental Loss Among Very Old African Americans

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Objective. To analyze the life course effects of the early loss of one or both parents on very old Black Americans.

Methods. Open-ended, semistructured interviews were used with a sample of 109 respondents aged 85 years and older. Correlations identified significant associations, and qualitative data illustrate life course trajectories of selected respondents.

Results. Those who lost a parent through death or desertion were less integrated into family and friendship groups in late life, and they had fewer social resources in general. Qualitative data describe three outcomes in the sample: those who grew up with both parents present, those who lost a parent but still reported a contented childhood, and those with disrupted families and negative effects.

Discussion. The respondents’ open-ended commentary about their past lives and their current situation enhances understanding of connections between early life events and adaptation in old age.

Researchers who study adaptation in later life tend to favor models of successful aging that rest on the initiative of individuals to achieve their own good health and well-being. Consequently, most theories use concepts such as a sense of control (Ryff & Essex, 1992), personal efficacy, or optimization and compensation (Baltes & Baltes, 1990). Few interpretations pause to consider the possibility, however, that these models may be culture-bound to western European and American cultural traditions. Their value systems endorse the mandate that an individual should be independent and able to exercise mastery over his or her life. As a corollary, individuals must bear responsibility for the successes and failures of their efforts over the trajectories of their lives. Such perspectives tend to overlook those lives that have borne the brunt of poverty, racism, and family breakdown that are beyond individuals’ capacity to control (Johnson, 1994).

The purpose of this study was to analyze the life course effects of the early loss of a parent in a sample of 109 Black Americans, all aged 85 years and older. As few differences were found on major variables on adaptation between those who lost a parent and those who did not, we explored the ameliorating circumstances that may have lessened the impact of these early losses. To illustrate the varied experiences between the loss group and the nonloss group, we analyzed three trajectories: those who grew up in stable two-parent families, those who lost a parent but gave positive comments about their childhood, and those who lost a parent and described negative experiences. To depict these experiences, a biographical approach was used in which the respondents reminisced about past events and experiences and related them to their current life situation. This approach indicates that as an individual interprets his or her life-long experiences, meanings evolve that potentially magnify or dilute the negative effects of earlier events.

Background

A demographic analysis on race and mortality indicated the high risks of parental loss among those born early in the 20th century. Cain (1993) reported that in 1900 the infant mortality rate was 10 times higher than the current rate, but maternal mortality was 80 times higher than currently. In 1900, like now, life expectancy at birth was higher for Whites than for non-Whites, but such advantages of Whites over Blacks have narrowed over the years. Nevertheless, in the cohort born in 1900, one in three Blacks lost a parent before they were 25 years of age. Moreover, Black children were three times more likely than Whites to lose both parents. Like findings from national surveys, the oldest old in our study faced a high probability of losing a parent in their childhood.

Although theories of successful aging have not generally considered the impact of early life events such as the loss of a parent, clinical researchers some decades ago took very seriously the connections between early childhood experiences and quality of life in adulthood. John Bowlby (1982, 1988) concluded that research findings of psychiatry and social and behavioral sciences in Great Britain and the United States showed complex interactions between the individual’s developmental processes and the social, psychological, and cultural contexts in which they occur. He concluded that the seeds of mental and physical health are sown in childhood situations, particularly in the strong bonds of attachment between mother and infant.

Studies have indicated that such ties are likely to culminate in confidence, self-reliance, maturity, and the ability to form enduring and successful attachments (Ainsworth, 1967, 1979; Main, Kaplan, & Cassidy, 1985). Research has also indicated that early deprivation can lead to low self-esteem, whereas secure attachment has been shown to be positively related to social competence (Provence & Lipton,
Although there are adequate theories on continuities and discontinuities over the life course, few conceptual frameworks have been developed that apply specifically to racial and ethnic groups (Jackson, 1985; Jackson et al., 1993). Studies of Blacks have found that earlier events, level of parental nurturance, and family structure influence later development (Barker & Hill, 1996). Following Jackson’s concept of cumulative burden, individual and social deficits become accentuated over time for those in an oppressed minority group. Jackson also maintained that life circumstances during the younger years have a significant effect in later life. As Blacks move into old age, they also face a situation of multiple jeopardy as they confront the usual problems of aging as well as their minority status (Jackson, 1980, 1985).

A common view persists that, during slavery and thereafter, Blacks have been hampered by a high incidence of female-headed households. Gutman’s (1976) history of the Black family, however, has asserted that migration to northern cities did not widely result in family disorganization. For example, he found that in 1925 a stable two-parent family was the most common form among Blacks in New York City. He pointed out that in northern urban areas, female-headed households did eventually increase, but that pattern bears no resemblance to Moynihan’s (1971, p. 37) conception of the Black family as a “tangle of pathology.”

Extended family relations and strong support networks also serve as an adaptive mechanism in shifting social situations (Wilson & Tolson, 1990). McDaido (1998) suggested that research on the Black family needs to focus, not on family problems per se, but on those families who are resilient in overcoming hurdles in their environment. Resilience refers to positive behavioral patterns and functional competence that individuals demonstrate when responding to difficult circumstances.

Three ethnographies in the 1970s studied Blacks in the South and then followed them as they settled in northern cities. Large extended families were key facilitators to adaptation in urban environments (Aschenbrenner, 1973; Martin & Martin, 1978; Shimkin, Louie, & Frate, 1978). For instance, Shimkin and colleagues (1978) described extensive migratory patterns of multiple households where the extended family functioned as the major supportive unit. Fosterage and transfers from one family to another were common in the South, and such family expansion facilitated the migration to the North. Martin and Martin (1978) described a process of absorption by which those who could not care for themselves were informally adopted by nonrelatives or distant relatives. They found that the Black extended family reached across geographic boundaries, so one did not have to live at the family base household to be active with relatives. Also, in a crisis most members of the extended family were likely to respond.

Migration to the urban North was facilitated by inclusive, flexible, elastic boundaries around the kinship group, so the extended family was usually large, with numerous relatives living in proximity. Rather than an emphasis on marriage as a basis for the family, the Black family organization in its African origins was based on the solidarity of siblings (Sudarkasa, 1988). This pattern continues today in this country, particularly with the emphasis on collateral relationships.
and strengthened involvement with aunts, uncles, and other collateral relatives. Black extended families also increased the size of their group by creating fictive kin out of nonkin (Aschenbrenner, 1973; Chatters, Taylor, & Jayakody, 1994; Johnson, 1999). When children were needful, they were readily incorporated into an extended family, usually by informal adoption. These kinship groups often regrouped in northern cities, and the major extended family household provided a home base as other relatives joined them.

In summary, these reports on adaptation in the context of Black families indicate two opposing themes underlying Blacks’ life experiences. On the one hand, adaptation of Blacks is seen as being undermined by the forces of poverty, racism, and oppression, forces that had to be surmounted throughout the life course. On the other hand, a more recent view stresses the resilience individual Blacks possess that allows them to adjust to these negative forces. In the following, both of these perspectives are illustrated in the respondents’ accounts of their lives.

The Life Course Model

The following analysis uses a model that combines psychological and sociocultural conceptions of the life course. Two theoretical frameworks have been adapted to interpret the respondents’ constructions of their life histories. First, Whitbourne (1985) emphasized the psychological construction of the life course. She concluded that life course models are useful in analyzing the effects of life events over the individual’s cumulative life experiences. Moreover, she suggested that the individual’s own construction of a scenario or life story is central to adaptation in adulthood.

Second, Fry (1999) offered a life course model that is also applicable to Black Americans. She concluded that conceptions of the life course provide a theory on how things work, a model for living that is used to organize experience. In her model, the individual codifies life events and experiences that have four functions. First, the life course model provides an explanation of what people can expect in life. Second, the life course model is also normative, for it establishes guideposts to evaluate one’s own life in terms of social expectations of what life should be like. Third, an individually constructed life course assembles cultural factors that can be used to negotiate with others in managing individuals’ social identities. Fourth, this process establishes age norms to calibrate the social clock of role entrances and exits.

Methods

The Sample

We initially selected respondents from public voting records in San Francisco and Oakland, California, and then used a snowball technique in which respondents secured from the voting records referred us to their age peers. The voting records included date of birth and usually current addresses to facilitate locating respondents. As Blacks 85 years and older comprised a small proportion of the local population, it was also necessary to secure additional names from various community associations. In total, our sample consisted of 34% found through voting records, 32% ran-
ries stemming directly from the data rather than from preconceived categories imposed by the researcher.

In addition to coding for the above purposes, the qualitative data need to be reduced to more abstract categories that will provide an interpretive framework. This productive although time-consuming process is used to analyze the respondents’ open-ended discussions about how respondents define, evaluate, and interpret their childhood family experiences and family relationships. To identify such patterns, the data are decontextualized by filing together all discussions about family life.

Here the open-ended comments about early childhood experiences are singled out, listed, and then categorized. These lists of comments are further condensed as categories are identified that indicate consistent patterns. Once patterns, such as childhood family structure, are identified and categorized, the data are recontextualized through analyses of the entire interview. These patterns and categories are then examined within the context of other factors in that individual’s life.

Results

Of the original sample of 122, 109 respondents gave adequate information on their family backgrounds. Of these, 49% grew up in a two-parent family, and most of them gave predominantly positive reports about their early family life. Only 9% grew up in two-parent families that were described negatively, such as exposure to parental alcoholism, severe parental discipline, or excessive poverty. Fifty-one percent reported the death or desertion of one or both parents before the age of 16. One half of these respondents, even in advanced old age, described that early life event as a source of unhappiness and a profound sense of loss. Those individuals who lost a parent were significantly more likely to be childless.

Table 1 presents correlations between the loss of a parent before age 16 and indicators of adaptation in late life. Those with a higher educational level were significantly more likely to have grown up in a two-parent family. The only other area where the loss group differed from the nonloss group was in indicators of social integration. Those in the loss group had significantly fewer family resources, and they were less likely to report they were satisfied with their family life. The early experience with loss apparently had no impact on their current well-being and their level of mastery.

It is interesting to note that despite disadvantages over their life course, many long-term survivors expressed a high level of contentment with their current lives (Johnson, 1994). High subjective well-being was associated with strong social integration, if not into a family, then into a social network that included community institutions, such as a church. Because these findings stem from a relatively small nonrandom sample, however, they cannot be generalized to refer to a larger population. Nevertheless, they are consistent with typical survey findings on the importance of social ties to Black Americans.

Stable Two-Parent Families in Childhood

Most of those who grew up in two-parent families gave positive accounts of their childhood. They commonly de-

| Table 1. Correlations Between Early Loss of Parent and Indicators of Adaptation in Late Life |
|---------------------------------------------|-----------------|--------|
| Late Life Indicators | Parental Loss | p < |
| Education | −.289 | .02 |
| Economic status | −.082 |
| Perceived health | −.081 |
| Total social contacts | −.268 |
| Family integration | −.054 |
| Friendship network | −.160 |
| Satisfied with family | −.259 | .03 |
| Satisfied with friends | −.174 |
| Social resources | −.268 | .03 |
| Relationship with: | |
| Child (n = 66) | .016 |
| Sibling (n = 60) | −.060 |
| Relative (n = 97) | −.031 |
| Mastery | −.199 |
| Affect Balance | −.130 |
| Hopkins Symptom Check List | −.075 |

Note: N = 109 for all variables except the family relationships for which the n is given. Variables: parental loss—0 = no loss, 1 = loss of one or both parents; education and occupation—7-point scale with 7 = highest level; economic and health status—4-point scales with 4 = positive; family and friendship integration and social resources—5-point scales with 5 = most integrated/highest resources; satisfaction with family and friends—4-point scales with 4 = most satisfied; Mastery—Pearlin Mastery Scale, with highest score the most mastery; mood—evaluated by the Bradburn Affect Balance Scale with high score as positive.

picted a life course enriched by warm and loving parents and a close-knit family, experiences that have had a lifelong influence on them. In some cases, family cohesion centered on the shared hard work of all family members. Family members were close because they shared the same hardships. “I enjoyed every minute of my childhood. We were up at 4:30 milking, splitting rails, plowing. We worked hard all day long.” “My parents were good people. We were close-knitted. But the Depression years were tough. We worked all day long, but the food we had was hardly fit to eat.” “We worked like the devil. I never had a fight in my life—never a curse from my father or my husband.”

Ninety-year-old Mrs. Brown described her happy childhood and how her parents served as her role models as hardworking and stably married parents. Daddy raised us to love one another. He was a hard worker, always paid his bills. My mother stayed at home, raised her children. Mama prayed to save all her children. I helped Daddy in the fields and my sister helped Mama. Later my sister helped me raise my children. I was so close to my oldest brother too—we raised our children together. We had two parents who were so good to their children, and they were very respected by all of us. We had it good. We were all so happy.

Mrs. Brown’s psychological construction of her life course was positive through the years, resulting in a life story that met her expectations. She traced her good fortune to her long-term happy marriage. She married at age 18 and reported having enjoyed her 64 years of marriage and rais-
ing eight “good children.” The continuity in her positive family experience was revealed in her description of her marriage. “My husband was just like my father. He was always a hard-working man. He didn’t go for no foolishness. He was a real man. We had our children and he worked for them.”

Some accounts were so positive that the participants reported that the happiest time of their life was their childhood with their parents. “Mama and Daddy worked hard in the fields to feed 13 children. Life wasn’t so bad. At age 9, I started helping Mama cook for all of them.” One woman aptly summarized the great strength of her parents: “Some people just grew up but I was raised.” Similarly, a man described his father: “I learned a lot from my Daddy, how to treat other people. He was good to Mama. I learned how to be a husband from him.”

Descriptions of early family life also emphasized parental role differentiation, and surprisingly most often these participants described their fathers as playing the expressive role. Fathers were usually the comforters and supporters, and mothers were the disciplinarians. “My father was calm; Mother was good, but she whipped us a lot.” “My Papa was nice and sweet, but my mother was very strict. She was fierce.” “Father was kind and loving. We had everything we needed, but not everything we wanted.” The role of the father as provider was often emphasized. “My father was a good man. He took care of us.” “Father was a wonderful provider. We never wanted anything. We always had food on the table and I never went to bed hungry.” These examples typify how one’s life story can be reconstructed to include mostly positive experiences. Despite early difficulties, for example, individuals can reinterpret potentially disturbing events by looking only at positive aspects and by placing the emphasis on the good parts of their childhood, such as never going to bed hungry.

Disrupted Families
Discussions by those who lost a parent in childhood revealed the disruption in their lives, yet one half of these respondents emphasized positive aspects of their childhood. In other words, the construction of a scenario or life story was central to their adaptation, as they analyzed their cumulative life experiences (Whitbourne, 1985). Such constructions also identify guideposts by which they evaluated their cumulative life experiences (Whitbourne, 1985). Such constructions also identify guideposts by which they evaluated their lives in terms of how their lives met societal expectations (Fry, 1999).

Positive accounts.—Of those 51% who had lost a parent before age 16, one half reported few or no long-term negative memories of their childhoods. They usually reported that some compensations for the loss of a parent came from a kind grandmother, aunt, or stepparent, who in some cases was gentler than the missing parent. “I loved my stepfather more than my mother.” “My mother passed when I was 12. She was a whole lot rougher on me than my Grandmother. I don’t remember Grandma ever whipping me.”

Sometimes one kind and attentive relative compensated for poor treatment by others. “I never knew my father, my stepfather was kinda mean, my mother was quick-tempered, but my grandmother was nice.” “My parents separated when I was young, but my childhood was nice. I was raised by my father’s parents. Then later, my father and stepmother raised my daughter.” The absence of “mean” parental substitutes also compensated for their losses. “My mother died when I was 10. I went to live with Mother Hale. It was a good family. Everything they had I had, and nobody was mean.” The creation of fosterage, absorption, and fictive kin was reported throughout the interviews as examples of their function in expanding family supports and compensating for loss of a parent.

Positive comparisons were also used to rationalize a difficult childhood: so many others shared their situation of dealing with parental loss. “Both parents died young. I was raised by my grandmother. Most grew up like that.” As reported earlier, this cohort was at high risk of losing a parent in childhood (Kain, 1993), so it was not alone in this loss. Furthermore, compared with what might have been, life’s outcomes often exceeded expectations. “Growing up was tough. I left home at 12 or 13, but I was never a jail bird and I always made a good living.”

The surviving parent often performed both parental roles. “I never had a father but mother always had food on the table.” “My father took care of us six girls and one brother. I don’t remember my mother, but father told us, ‘I’m the mother, you can depend on me.’” Such parenting is part of the cultural context that permits flexibility in adapting to difficult circumstances. Another extolled his father’s teachings that had had a lifelong impact on him.

I was raised without a mother. Father taught us to be proud. Some people have been downtrodden and unsure. My father taught me that I’m somebody, a child of God. I don’t have to be downtrodden. That was instilled in me, regardless of circumstances, to never give up, to have courage.

Despite the hardships of the past, a resilience and a sense of survival were also inferred from these reports.

My mother died when I was born and my father died when I was 5. I was born on Friday the 13th, so I was brought up to be a survivor. I went from one house to another. My family experience was different from most. I lived with three different relatives. They only took me in because they needed someone to work, whoever needed a maid. I think that’s what made me better. My background helped me to become what I am.

Negative effects of parental loss.—In contrast to those who constructed a positive life course despite the loss of a parent, one half of the parental loss group described their childhood as stressful and unhappy. Those with negative memories and regrets identified four stressful events they experienced. First, death was a predictable childhood event often witnessed in person. “Before I was 10, I saw my mother die, then my sister and my brother. My sister bled to death by my father’s parents. Then later, my father and stepmother raised my daughter.” The absence of “mean” parental substitutes also compensated for their losses. “My mother died when I was 10. I went to live with Mother Hale. It was a good family. Everything they had I had, and nobody was mean.” The creation of fosterage, absorption, and fictive kin was reported throughout the interviews as examples of their function in expanding family supports and compensating for loss of a parent.

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tive to relative. I had a tough time. Mother died, so my father left us with Mother’s sister, who didn’t want us. She’d give us away to anybody.” “I lived with this one and that one, an aunt, an uncle, my father’s parents. They all died and left me. I had to go to work.” Consequently, extended family supports were not always forthcoming.

Third, others complained of mean or inattentive surrogate parents.

Daddy died when I was a baby. Mother left us with my grandmother who I didn’t like. Mama was only 15 then. She wouldn’t come to get me. When my grandmother died, I was pleased. I thought Mama would come for me. I kept writing her to come and get me, but I was almost grown when I finally went to be with her in California.

Fourth, with the loss of a parent, the eldest children usually assumed a parentlike role, in some cases even before 10 years of age. In fact, some of these very old respondents concluded that they had never really had a childhood. The eldest son would be the head of the household.

I was in third grade when my father deserted us, and I had to quit school and support the family. I had to be Santa Claus, Papa, brother, and everything. I even taught my sister to read. I worked many jobs as a child, shining shoes, cleaning horse stables, washing dishes. I was only 13 when I moved the whole family to Cincinnati, where the jobs were better.

With the death of a mother, the eldest daughter commonly had to take over the care of younger siblings, prepare meals, and perform household chores, sometimes in the preteen years. A few women described how it affected their lives. “I raised my mother’s children after she died. Then I raised my sister’s children when she took sick. Then I raised a lot of White folks’ children. By that time, it was too late to have children of my own.”

An abbreviated social life was more often found among the parental loss group. For example, Mrs. Ames at 88 is blind as a result of glaucoma. Her general health is good, but she spends most of her time in her one-room apartment. Her mother died when she was 3, so she went to live with her grandparents. She eventually joined a stepsister in California where she first married for 1 year and then later remarried for 5 years. Both marriages ended because the spouse wanted to leave. Most of her adult life was spent living with her siblings. When they died, she entered senior housing. Her only family members were two nephews who lived 500 miles away. She also mentioned having a godson nearby; “He is nice, but if you need him, he’s a horse of a different color.” When asked about friends, she replied, “I don’t bother with anyone. The church people are nice, but we’re not close. I don’t have nobody but this old lady, me, me, me.”

Life Course Examples

Three examples of life course constructions are used to illustrate interactions between the childhood experience of losing a parent and the life situations in their later years. In some cases, deep regrets about their lives were still vivid in advanced old age. Mr. Allen at age 85 had been separated from his wife for 35 years. He said his wife left because of his daughter and himself. “My daughter was on heroin and I was running around.” Throughout his adult life, he gradually withdrew from family life. He had a son in southern California whom he never saw, and his daughter eventually died of a drug overdose. He had four grandchildren and “quite a few” great-grandchildren, but he did not know their names or anything about them. His only family contact was a sister who called daily to see how he was. His network consisted mostly of shallow relationships with his “street buddies,” but he never invited them to his home. He said, “I stay away from most people, because they try to run my life.”

He described his early life:

My mother died when I was 2. My grandparents took me in and I grew up with them. I had to go from town to country. I had it rough. I never had a mother. My father later remarried, but I never called his wife mother. My father was mean. I only went to school 3 months a year because I had to plant cotton.

His many regrets about his life were traced to his father’s parenting. “If I had had a good father, I’d never been a common laborer. I wanted to be band leader.”

Later he added,

Much of my life was spent on the streets. My daughter said to me, ‘Daddy, you’ve been on the street most of your life. Don’t you think it’s time to change?’ I did get a job with the city and worked from 1949 to 1957. Then I quit and drove a cab for awhile, then went back to gambling with my street buddies.

A mother’s death when the extended family resources were scant could have profound effects. As Mrs. Mitchell reflected on her life course, she minimized the difficulties, saying that everyone had a rough life at that time.

Mother died young. My sister and I were living with our grandparents. When my grandfather died, the White owners kicked us off the farm. We loaded our things in a wagon and went around looking for work and a place to live. Then my grandmother died, so my sister and I were on our own. We had trouble finding a place to live and food to eat.

Being left on their own at 12 and 14, she reported,

My sister and I got along as well as expected. My sister nursed White folks, and I took in wash. I always worked, but I was hungry sometimes. I had one dress for work and one for church. But people helped each other then. If sick, someone would sit up with you.

Mrs. Mitchell had two short-term marriages, the first at the age of 16. She never had children, and her sister died 40
years ago, so her two nieces were her only surviving family members. Mrs. Mitchell, who lived alone in public senior housing, was often lonely. She was content, however, most likely because as she reviewed her life, she expressed a strong sense of survivorship.

I never expected to live so long. I’m on my way to 93. Life for me I say is wonderful. I couldn’t beat it. I got food and raiment. I am surprisingly happy. When I can look back where I came from, down on my knees scrubbing floors, I’ve come a long ways. I just make myself content. When I get to feeling lonesome I get up and go sit downstairs and count the cars going by. I have more wisdom with experience. People come to me for advice—they want to know how I made it. The doctors tell me I’m alert for my age. They all love me.

Considering her childhood losses, she showed impressive survivorship skills; as she reconstructed her life course, she emphasized the positive aspects of her old age as compensations for her earlier unhappiness.

Some in the parental loss group became increasingly withdrawn from social involvements but sought compensations from their religion. Mrs. Long’s early life as an only child was very fragmented.

My mother died when I was very small. I got shuffled from one family member to another. I went to live with my mother’s sister, and then she died, so I got sent to my father’s mother. She died, and I don’t remember after that. I just kept getting sent from one family member to another. What else is there to say?

Now at 86 years of age, Mrs. Long, a childless widow, has also lived alone in subsidized senior housing for the past 20 years. Her days consisted of “my meals, my medicines, and TV.” When asked whom she might hear from on her birthday, she responded, “No one.” Having lacked meaningful ties of attachment throughout life, she was now frail, tired, and lonely, but resigned to her fate. Her only solace was her trust in “the good Lord. I don’t have anyone to turn to but God. I’m doing okay so far, I don’t have any other choice.”

Ameliorating Circumstances

An examination of the lives of those who lost a parent and had no such negative effects from a parent’s death suggests three important ameliorating factors. First, the effects of the early loss of a parent can be moderated by the provision of good surrogate parenting from close relatives, extended kin, or, in a few cases, nonkin, for example, “My godmother took good care of me and saw to it that I had things.” Ronald Taylor (1999) used the term appropriation to refer to the incorporation of persons into the family who are unrelated by blood or marital ties. These fictive family members are central to the kinship group in the Black community (Chatters et al., 1994).

Second, the support systems of Black families have been characterized as deeply rooted in the church (Bagley & Carroll, 1998; Taylor, Chatters, & Jackson, 1997). Black churches provide not only extensive social resources but also a meaningful ideology that interprets unhappy life experiences. In spite of family deprivations in childhood, support from religion can be powerful. “I got saved in the church at a young age and the Lord said ‘I’m going to bless you.’ I see every day as a blessing. God is good.”

Third, from their perspective of advanced old age, a meaningful ameliorating factor is pride in survivorship.

I feel happy that I’ve lived to be this old. It’s an honor. So many have left here in their young life. It makes you feel that the Lord loves you, that He wants you to stay in the world this long. I’m staying here longer than my older brother and sister.

Not only are the Black oldest old proud of their longevity in having outlived their peers, but they are also proud of having survived “coming up hard.”

I’m glad for being my age. I’m not hungry, shoeless, and bedless. God has blessed me and held on to civilize me. I wished I’d started civilized. It’s wonderful to sit here and talk about it though. I never thought I’d make it to 90.

Fourth, as noted above, recently researchers on Blacks have used the term resilience to refer to positive behavioral patterns and competence that individuals demonstrate when responding to difficult circumstances. Resilient individuals function in the face of adversity in the process of overcoming disadvantages. McAdoo (1998) has identified the cultural attributes that contribute to resilience. These include strong supportive social networks, flexible family relationships that can change as needed, a strong sense of religiosity, the adoption of fictive kin, and a strong identity with the racial group.

Respondents’ descriptions of their lives were consistent with resilience as well as the capacity to take personal responsibility. As one women described,

Life is peculiar, life is up and down, hard times and good times. I’ve taken the bitter with the sweet. My background helped me become what I am. I am not a giver upper. We are a family of people who never give up.

Likewise, a man described his life,

Mother died when I was 9. I left home at 15 and became a longshoreman. What I am now is what I developed myself. You must have courage to do what you want to do. I try to overcome negatives in my past. Experience is better than education.

Another man’s resilience involved repression.

Some of my past is so bad, I forget about it. Everything is good now, my bad days are over. I don’t look behind, I’m wise about where I’ve been. I’m thankful
EARLY PARENTAL LOSS AMONG AFRICAN AMERICANS

about what I’ve come through, the discomforts I’ve lived through.

Conclusions

A life course model was used here to present scenarios or life stories of very old Black Americans. These personally constructed life stories function as an effective mechanism to ameliorate the effects of earlier unhappy experiences (Whitbourne, 1985). Such constructions organize experiences so as to come to terms with the past and evaluate one’s own life as it compares with conceptions of what life should be like. Such a model is evident in reminiscences about the past, when a dominant theme concerns the hardships of early life, oppression, poverty, and loss. Yet in late life, these burdens were described as positive forces that led to a sense of accomplishment at having overcome hardships.

The study of the oldest old, of which this sample of Blacks was a part, found that very old people cognitively develop a sense of self that includes an array of thoughts, feelings, values, and attitudes about who they are, who they were, who they would like to be, and who they do not want to be. With this active interior world, the oldest old constantly think about their past and evaluate it in terms of their current situation (Johnson & Barer, 1997).

Such resilience is possibly the result of both objective and subjective factors. Objectively the supportive institutions, such as the church and the extended family, provided a protective armor against negative forces. In advanced old age, however, those who had lost a parent in childhood had a lower level of social integration than those who did not. Subjectively, as noted above, a sense of pride in survivorship was also common. Over half experienced disrupted families in their childhood, but now in old age half reported no negative effects. The other half of the sample who grew up in a two-parent family tended to extol their parents’ efforts in raising them under difficult circumstances.

Because these findings come from a relatively small non-random sample, broad generalizations about the relationship between losing a parent and adaptation in late life are inappropriate. Nevertheless, the respondents’ commentaries about their past lives and their current adaptation suggest that such broad themes can be used inductively to design research projects that explore such connections between the distant past and the present. Some years ago, social scientists rejected psychoanalytic theories about early childhood determinants. Given the current strong interest in the life course and developmental processes, however, gerontologists would most likely benefit by considering connections between early life events and adaptation throughout life.

At the outset, we posed the issue that the experiences of Black Americans differ greatly from those of the dominant group, differences that have resulted in a value system different from that of the dominant group. This is particularly apparent in analyzing their life courses. Namely, most of the very old individuals in the study experienced the typical treatment of Blacks in the South early in this century, the early loss of a parent, the stresses of their later migration to California, and lifelong discrimination in housing and employment. That one should stand on one’s own two feet and exercise control over one’s life and be independent of others is a foreign idea to them. Instead, Blacks are typically more embedded in family and community life than Whites and thus are interdependent with others rather than independent of them.

It is necessary to turn to the social and cultural context in which these very old Blacks experienced their life course. The impact of the early death of a parent included being forced prematurely into adult roles as surrogate parents or family wage earners or having to fend for themselves. Likewise, the cultural context is also evident in these reports of the life course trajectories of those who experienced the early loss of a parent. In some situations, young persons may have suffered the consequences of unkind parental substitutes, economic deprivation, limited education, and, in adulthood, an erratic work history. In old age, the shrinking social and economic resources and health problems could potentially have cumulative effects that undermine well-being. However, such is not the case for most of these long-lived respondents, who found compensations from their heritage, their sense of survivorship, and from Black community institutions.

Acknowledgments

This article stems from research funded by the National Institute on Aging.
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*Rceived January 18, 2001
Accepted July 25, 2001
Decision Editor: Fredric D. Wolinsky, PhD*