

# **The Strengths of Families of Color: Implications for Practice**

Robert B. Hill, Ph.D.

CalSWEC Fairness and Equity Symposium

April 4, 2005

## Summary of Keynote Address

When addressing issues of disproportionality, it is important to acknowledge that racism still exists. According to keynote speaker Dr. Robert Hill, individuals are contributing to the systemic bias that exists in child welfare, despite good intentions. One way to enhance strategies to be fair and equitable with clients is to recognize the strengths and assets of low-income people and people of color.

Dr. Hill provided examples for seven areas that he targeted for practice improvement. In each area, Dr. Hill identifies strengths that apply to African American, Native American and/or Latin American families.

1. Cultural Strengths
  - Among families in many cultures, children and their well-being are central values promoted within the group, with the group's needs taking precedence over the needs of the individual. Though often assigned negative labels, diverse family structures can increase mutual support and connectedness.
2. Alternative Family Structures
  - It is important to expand our definition of family beyond that of the nuclear family living in one household. Connected households, extended family networks, godparents and other fictive kin can represent a significant resource and strength within the family system. Both female-headed and male-headed single-parent families need to be supported to function better, instead of belittled for their family structure.
3. Diverse Child-rearing Patterns
  - Minority children are socialized about their own racial and ethnic identities as well as the external culture of American society. In many cultures, and in the case of informal adoptions, parents are not the only individuals within the family network with a responsibility for raising children.
4. Flexible family roles
  - Cultural strength can be seen in the resilience of single-parent families, support from both maternal and paternal relatives, and older children playing a significant role in raising younger siblings.
5. Functions of extended families
  - Extended families provide both tangible support such as money, child care, respite care, and housing, in addition to emotional support. Extended families are committed to family preservation and keeping children safe, and this commitment ensures cultural permanency.

- It is also important to acknowledge that when role confusion becomes extreme, it can have a detrimental effect. Sometimes family roles can become too flexible – with grandparents becoming overburdened and older siblings supplanting the parents’ role in the family rather than supporting it.

6. Examples of Cultural Insensitivity

- While studies do show that there is more abuse in lower income families, among low income families, black families do not abuse their children any more than white families. When studies have controlled for socioeconomic status, it has been shown that white families abuse their children more than black families. However, there are more black families in the system.
- It is also often not recognized that minority families informally adopt at least as much or more than white families.
- “Deadbeat dad” stereotypes do not take into account that many fathers are broke and may need support as they help to raise their children.

7. Examples of Cultural Competence

- We need a shift towards strengths-based risk assessments that recognize the assets and capacities that families do have, instead of focusing only on family deficits.