Empowering African women in non-African agencies - Voices of African American women on the path of reuniting with their families

Introduction:

Since the 1960’s, when the concept of control started to emerge from the more ancient philosophical concept of will, many scales have been created to attempt to outline the dimensions of control (Rotter, 1966; Levenson, 1981; Wallerston, 1978; Shapiro, 1998). The Shapiro Control Inventory (SCI) has provided a metatheory of human control, from a psychological perspective, that incorporates diverse approaches founded on Rotter’s 1966 internal/external control scale. The SCI clarified the complexity of the concept of control by theorizing dimensions of control instead of the simplified, dualistic or Likert-scale measures. SCI, then, addresses: domains of control, sense of control, agents of control, modes of control and desire for control (Shapiro, 1994; 1998). Such theoretical complexity has been confirmed from research on a variety of different populations (cancer patients, mentally ill patients, elderly etc). The relevance of an individual’s relationship with control for his/her psychological health and well-being is now clearly admitted in the academic and medical arena.

Furthermore, although the concept of control has emerged in the psychological arena, it is as relevant to the social sciences as it is to psychology. Incorporating socio-cultural perspectives in psychological ones is just as important as the client’s psychological disposition is to the achievement of his/her social goals. Shapiro (1998) has emphasized how Western approaches have often been biased towards higher levels of control, wrongly identified with healthier human beings. Control is perceived differently in different cultures, social categories and genders.
The relevance on this study

In the study carried out here, respondents are mainly African American women who have lost their children to foster care. In the attempt to regain custody of their children they confront the difficult tasks of long-term personal growth and short-term pressures of an impersonal system. Working to Unite Families (WtUF), a job readiness program conducted by the Center for Social Policy and Community Development (CSPCD) in the city of Philadelphia, aims at helping parents who lost custody of their children achieve reunification by reinserting the parents into the workforce.

Research willing to engage the control profile of such parents is important for several reasons. Parents having lost temporary custody of their children are at a crossroads with many social issues that relate to control; they however, are challenged by a system that demands they engage them simultaneously and within a short time frame unless they loose their parental rights forever.

Many parents, upon enrollment in WtUF affirm they struggle with conditions that affect their sense of selves which research has related to issues of control. WtUF clients often list current substance abuse (11%), depression (43%) and being victims of abuse (19%) as a barrier to employment. Individuals with anxiety or depressive conditions have been found to have higher external loci of control (whether referred to powerful others or fate/chance) than normalcy (Kennedy, 1998; Young, 1993). The presence of depressive symptoms and external loci of control have also been found to affect parenting (McGroder, 2000). Furthermore, material conditions and poor work history (low social skills, problem solving, lack of employment, housing, childcare and transportation) are frequent barriers to self-sufficiency (experienced by WtUF clients) that are known to
affect a person’s concept of self-efficacy because of the delicate relationship between expectations versus outcomes (Bandura, 1977) and actual skills versus perceived skills (Keim, 2000).

The increased awareness of the link between psychological profile and social condition has encouraged the application of the concept of control to the social work arena. Control research has shown interest in various individuals who participated in job training programs including students with disabilities and welfare recipients (Keim, 1999; Li-Ping Tang, 2001). While Li-Ping Tang aimed at analyzing profiles of control in relation to working status, Keim assessed effectiveness of job readiness programs in relation to employability skills of the students.

Cultural context is just as important in looking at control profiles as psychological and social contexts. A connection between one’s relationship with control and cultural identity has emerged (Zea, 1995). In Ortega’s study on parents of different backgrounds, a positive relationship was encountered between the parent’s cultural connection and their control over parenting. Therefore, parents with strong cultural connections seemed to be better at parenting overall (Ortega, 2000). This new insight contradicts earlier tendencies that emphasized that African Americans were univocally more externally determined as an effect of being part of a stigmatized group (Hillman, 1992). The interaction between culture and control has also been observed in research among students of diverse ethnic background (Moneta, 2001; Wood, 1996).

Finally, gender is another variable to be taken into account in relation to issues of control. In fact, employment and gender seem to have peculiar interactions when control
is taken into account because of persistent racism and sexism in the workplace (Keim, 1999; Martin, 1992; Evans, 1991).

Although all the variables listed above (race, gender, social status, mental health and culture) have been addressed in control research, no studies address how they interact simultaneously; this is what make the study described below so unique.

**Method:**

Besides job readiness training for parents that have children placed in foster or kinship care, WtUF offers its clients referrals to several additional services that can facilitate entry in the workforce: childcare, housing, and literacy among others.

Almost each month, new students *(cycle)* are enrolled in WtUF. Enrollment consists in: orientation, 7 weeks of job readiness training, job development assistance and other referral services until employment is achieved for at least 6 months. For those who completed the 7 weeks of Workforce Foundation Skills (job readiness training), housing services (Philadelphia Housing Authority Section 8 vouchers) are available.

As of August 31, 2004 WtUF served 572 clients, mainly African American (89%) and mainly female (88%).

This study has two components: an ethnographic component and an experimental component. Data collection has already occurred, data analysis is to follow.

The ethnographic component of the study includes three methods of data collection: 1) ethnographic interviews with 10-15 respondents; 2) participant observations with individual clients (1-3 observations per client for a total of 5 clients); 3) participant observations of meetings and workshops at WtUF.
In order to reflect a variety of issues present in the lives of noncustodial parents, the sample is stratified in relation to age, number of children, reason for loss of custody, marital, housing and employment status. The interviews range from 45 to 180 minutes based on the clients' preference and are recorded. They will later be transcribed and analyzed. Participant observations were also conducted with the clients throughout a diversity of life experiences to assure representation of a variety of circumstances (court hearings, shelter living, interaction with social workers, weekly meetings with children etc.). Observations of the WtUF program include orientations, classroom activities, staff meetings, job-search related activities (job club, job fair etc.).

The grand tour question of this component of the study is: what has been the experience of the mothers within the system? How have they felt treated by agencies? How do they think people in the system see their role as African American women? What have they learned that they think would be helpful to other mothers?

While the sample for the ethnographic component was taken from clients enrolled in the past two years (and among 10 cycles) of the WtUF program, only two cycles of clients participated in the experimental component study: twelve clients enrolled in March 2004 and sixteen clients enrolled in April 2004.

Other than the services mentioned above that WtUF has been offering to its clients for the past 5 years, the students in these two cycles (two experimental groups) were offered bi-weekly lectures concerning issues that affected their lives such as male/female relationships, learning to use conflict positively, Blacks and religion, the role of rites of passages program. Activities included visits to museums and community organizations. All instructors were African American to allow students to have role
models of their same cultural background and to create a context where issues specific to the African American community could be addressed in an attempt to strengthen the cultural connection mentioned in Ortega’s study (Ortega, 2000). Questionnaires were handed out at most lectures/workshops to gain immediate feedback on the level of relevance and preference of the material.

An experiment was conducted with these two cycles and the Shapiro Control Inventory was used as a pre-test post-test instrument. Since the Shapiro Control Inventory does not address issues of African American identity, an Africentric belief scale was also part of the pre-test, post-test instrument.

Thirty-four respondents participated in this aspect of the study. The two experimental groups were handed the pre-test on their first day of class, after their job readiness training and before their first lecture (on the Black Woman) in their regular classroom. The coordinators of the program first introduced the researcher and the purpose of the study, then they were offered lunch while they signed consent forms and finally were handed the pre-test.

The post-test was administered to the two experimental groups and to a control group (which was not offered the cultural-based lectures and workshops) at the end of their last week of WFS, across the hall from their computer skills classroom.

To minimize discomfort of the respondents, all research procedures were carried out throughout the regular hours of instruction and as close as possible to the rooms on Temple Campus they used for regular instruction.
Data analysis should aim at answering the following questions:

1. What are the most common characteristics of WtUF clients upon enrollment as emerges from SCI test in relation to: sense of control, agency of control, modes of control and desire for control?
2. What are the most common characteristics of WtUF clients upon completion of WFS as emerges from SCI test in relation to: sense of control, agency of control, modes of control and desire for control?
3. Did the SCI of the WtUF clients change throughout the first 7 weeks of WFS?
4. Did clients become more positive assertive and positive yielding as opposed to more negative assertive and negative yielding?
5. Are there commonalities in the demographics (age, number of children), employment barriers (depression, housing, felony record) and/or program performance (attendance) of clients who show/do not show changes over the 7-week period?
6. Is there a relationship between demographics, SCI profile and employment status three to six months after completion of WFS?
7. Do WtUF clients show a weaker sense of control in certain domains of life rather than in others?
8. Is there any relationship between the LOC of WtUF clients and their responses to the Africentric belief scale?
9. Are there significant differences between the experimental groups and the control group?

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Results:
The results of this study could help assess the usage of the Shapiro Control Inventory with ethnically diverse subjects and encourage its usage with Welfare-to-Work populations in general and noncustodial parents in particular. This study aims therefore at impacting social research and social interventions rather than clinical ones. However, the SCI could be a starting point for those respondents who start individual or family therapy.
This research could also argue for more wholistic approaches to the challenges faced by noncustodial parents so that personality, psychology, and culture could be incorporated as indispensable tools for one's personal success in the workforce. Results of this study could argue for Welfare-to-Work staff to have more specific training on issues of control. This preparation could firstly, help them to individuate the psychological barriers affecting their client's lives; secondly, aide the workers self-critique so that they may avoid the control 'traps' that often affect psychotherapists. The control that social workers practice unwillingly over their clients in fact, may delay the improvement process of the clients.

Furthermore, future studies could focus on a longitudinal analysis to observe whether the parents' LOC changed over a longer period of time (such as one or two years). A longer period is likely to show more significant changes in relation to control.

Finally, ethnographic interviews seem to suggest the existence of a vicious cycle of foster care, where adults who once were foster children tend to have their own children placed in foster care. Future research could administer SCI to family units rather than to parents alone. This could help identify the issues of the children in foster care before they become parents. Timely interventions could help break the vicious cycle.

**Finances:**

As mentioned above, in this study, data has already been collected. Grant money will be used for data entry and data analysis and to disseminate results at conferences.
References:


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Title: Empowering African Women in Non-African Agencies: Voices of African-American Women on the Path of Reuniting with their Families

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Overall Significance/Relevance – This study seeks to examine control dynamics in a population of African-American women who have lost their children to foster care, and test the relationship of control in this population to other variables including race, gender, social status, culture, and mental health. As the applicant notes, this study has the potential to add to our understanding of control dynamics in ethnically diverse populations and in particular the relevance and applicability of the SCI for these populations. Furthermore, the study could serve to inform future clinical efforts with these populations by highlighting the potentially important role of control and sense of control.

Does Study Test the Multidimensional Aspects of Control Theory & Research? – Yes (see above).

Methodology – This study has two principal components – an ethnographic component and an experimental one. The applicant reports that data collection has already occurred. The ethnographic component consists of 1) interviews with 10-15 respondents; 2) participants observation (1-3 observations per client for 5 clients); 3) participant observation of meetings and workshops at the job training program, Working to Unite Families (WTUP).

Overall Comments/Suggestions –
1. It is not clear the extent to which the ethnographic and experimental aspects of the study are related (e.g., is data from one being used to inform the other; did the ethnographic interviews and participant observations consider or include control-related issues or factors/dynamics or was this not focused upon).
2. On page 5, the applicant states that 28 clients participated in the experimental groups. However, on the following page, it is stated that 34 people participated in this component of the study. This discrepancy should be clarified.
3. I am wondering if the experimental groups were led by the applicant and if not, by whom.
4. Page 6 refers to an “Africentric Belief Scale.” It would be helpful to have some explanation of this scale since as the applicant notes, it is being used to supplement the SCI.
5. In several places (e.g., page 7), the applicant uses the terms “LOC.” It is not clear whether locus of control was what was actually being referred to. The applicant should clarify her use of the term LOC since the SCI does not utilize this term though it does assess “agency of control” (which closely parallels LOC) as one dimension of the control construct.
6. Page 8 – applicant uses the term “individuate” which I believe should read “identify”
The applicant led the experiment. I asked the coordinators of the program (who were African American) to introduce my work and me after their skills training on their first day of class. I introduced the study, the consent forms and handed the pre-test to those who were willing to participate. The first workshop followed and all those present were welcomed to participate.

4. Page 6 refers to an “Africentric Belief Scale.” It would be helpful to have some explanation of this scale since as the applicant notes, it is being used to supplement the SCI.

Grills and Longshore in 1996\(^1\) created the Africentric Belief scale to extend the relevance of culture in social services to include the degree to which individuals participate in their own culture. Specifically, this instrument was meant to address the individual variations in which African Americans adhere to Afrocentric values. Such values were based on the Nguzo Saba. The Nguzo Saba contains 7 principles fruit of the African American community experience and nationalistic ideology which include: Unity, Self-determination, Collective work and responsibility etc. This instrument was appropriate for this study because of some considerations Grills and Longshore made when creating the instrument: 1) It is a brief instrument that could be added to other assessments (in this case SCI); 2) It allows for assessment of change if used as a pre-test, post-test (as occurred in this study). In one of the studies performed by Grills and Longshore showed the presence of three factors within the Africentric Belief scale. These factors were: 1) general dimension of Africentrism, individualism-communalism and cooperative economics. In this study it will be assessed whether or not there is a relationship between these factors and SCI results (Grills and Longshore, 1996).

5. In several places (e.g., page 7), the applicant uses the terms “LOC.” It is not clear whether locus of control was what was actually being referred to. The applicant should clarify her use of the term LOC since the SCI does not utilize this term though it does assess “agency of control” (which closely parallels LOC) as one dimension of the control construct.

Issue 8 on page 7 should read: Is there any relationship between the agency of control of WiUF clients and their responses to the Africentric belief scale?

Page 8 should read:

Furthermore, future studies could focus on a longitudinal analysis to observe whether the parents’ agency, sense, desire and modes of control changed over a longer period of time (such as one or two years). A longer period is likely to show more significant changes in relation a control profile, especially dealing with modes of control.

6. Page 8 – applicant uses the term “individuate” which I believe should read “identify”

Yes, I have corrected this.