Seen But Not Heard: Assessing Youth Perspectives of African Immigrant Parenting in the Diaspora

by

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Abstract

This article assesses youth perspectives on the methods that African immigrant parents use to raise them in the United States. Existing literature suggests that African immigrant parents in the diaspora are primarily concerned with preserving their culture and maintaining control over their children in the new context. However, the 28 youth who participated in this study were more concerned with issues of communication with their parents. Four parenting styles emerged, labeled authoritarian, permissive, absent, and communicative styles, that shaped parents' willingness to dialogue with their children. Youth with communicative parents offered the most favorable assessments, expressing appreciation for their parents' willingness to engage in discussion.

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With their numbers roughly doubling every decade since the 1970s, the total population of foreign-born African people living in the United States reached 1.6 million by 2012 (Gambino et al. 2014). Scholarly interest in this group has similarly grown apace, with several new studies focusing specifically on how African immigrant parents are raising their children in the diaspora. This study augments the emerging literature by focusing on the perspectives of the children (ages 13-35) of African people who were either born in the U.S. or arrived before the age of 18. How do these youth view their parents' methods for raising them in the U.S., and what can scholars, practitioners working with this population, and African parents in the diaspora learn as a result?

To answer these questions, I provide an analysis of information gathered from 28 youth (13 adolescents and 15 young adults) representing 21 African families from south of the Sahara that were part of a pan-African church called St. Augustine Lutheran Church in the small Midwestern city of Fort Wayne, Indiana. Interviews with 10 parents in the church also inform the study, although the primary goal is to reflect what the children had to say about their parents. These children, lacking a foreign accent and strong ties to their parents' homelands, often blend in easily among native-born African Americans, and yet their backgrounds differ significantly. They represent hidden diversity within the U.S. that needs to be better understood.

Whereas the existing literature suggests that African parents in the diaspora are primarily concerned about preserving their culture and maintaining control over their children in the new environment, the youth who participated in this study were more concerned about issues of communication with their African parents. To summarize these findings, I have grouped research participants' descriptions of their African parents into four categories, which I call "parenting styles" (or patterns of interaction between parents and children). The four styles include authoritarian, permissive, absent, and communicative parents, which I will describe and illustrate in detail below. These categories correspond in some ways to the typology developed by Diana Baumrind (1966), who conducted research among white middle-class American families with European backgrounds in the 1960s. Her categories include authoritarian, authoritative, and permissive parents. Later, Maccoby and Martin (1983) updated this list to include a "neglectful" parenting style, which was said to occur when parents met the child's basic needs but were otherwise disengaged. The Baumrind typology (and its expanded form) has been criticized for being too simplistic and failing to account for the values and norms of other cultures (Ochocka and Janzen 2008; Rombo and Lutomia 2016). Recognizing these flaws, I have adapted the typology to reflect the findings of this study. As with the Baumrind typology, the styles I observed differ by levels of "demandingness" (that is, parental control) and "responsiveness" (or emotional warmth toward the child), although I think it important to link "responsiveness" directly to issues of parent-child communication, which surfaced repeatedly in interviews as an issue of key importance to St. Augustine youth. Problems with communication characterized the first three categories, whereas regular and open parent-child communication was the essence of the fourth category (communicative parenting), which was the most favorably described.

Literature Review

Studies about African diaspora families from the parents' point of view provide an important starting point before considering their children's perspectives. This literature highlights parents' concerns about losing their children to Westernizing influences and a desire to counter that by instilling their own cultural values in their children – themes that are notably reflected in many other immigrant populations (Foner 2009).

In his seminal work on African immigration to the U.S., John Arthur (2000:117) writes that "parents fear that the values that they brought with them to America and that have sustained them thus far are being weakened and devalued by the second generation." He argues that African parents are especially concerned to discourage their children from adopting "many aspects of the urban hip-hop minority culture," which in their view does not sufficiently value things like education, responsibility, deferred gratification, and reverence for elders and authority figures (114-5). Some of the most extreme strategies some concerned parents use to ensure that their children are sufficiently "Africanized" include "transnational time outs" where children are sent to live with relatives in the homeland (Halter and Johnson 2014) or bringing grandparents to the U.S. to aid in raising the children "the African way" (Yenika-Agbaw 2009). Some parents may also restrict their children's cultural interactions with non-African families (Arthur 2000).

More commonly, parents opt to establish their own alternative cultural communities, linking them to other immigrants who share common ties of ethnicity or African-ness in general, thus ensuring that their children are exposed to the desired cultural influences. These communities include hometown associations, ethnic and national associations, community centers, alumni associations, mosques and churches (Halter and Johnson 2014). Given that this study was conducted in a pan-African church, it is worth highlighting some of the literature on these institutions in particular. Saneta Maiko (2007:42) explains that in Africa the responsibility of parenting is shared by the community and is not viewed as "a one-person responsibility." He adds that African parents living in more individualistic Western societies often look to African immigrant churches to provide a community of mentors and support along with spiritual guidance. Similarly, Beryl (2014) found that born-again African Christian parents in Massachusetts focused on socializing their children to "know God" as a primary strategy for "coping with challenges and finding understanding, belonging and betterment" for themselves and their children. Churches also enable families to celebrate important rites of passage such as birth, naming, marriage, and death, in culturally familiar ways. Nevertheless, Biney (2011) highlights generational conflicts that can arise in the church, because children and grandchildren are engaged in an identity struggle about whether to embrace their parents' culture, the American culture, or some hybrid combination of the two. Elsewhere, I explore similar issues of identity confusion among St. Augustine youth who move in and out of church on a weekly basis as well as over time (Habecker forthcoming). As a result, church does not preserve their ethnic identities so much as it provides just one context among several (including school, the neighborhood, and eventually the workplace) in which they must navigate a range of cultural expectations and values as they seek to form their own identities.

African diaspora parents face the reality that regardless of their efforts to preserve their homeland culture and to keep out unwanted American influences, they are unable to control what their children are exposed to in the media and at school (Awokoya 2012; Yenika-Agbaw 2009). Western media often depict Africa as an untamed jungle full of savages. Meanwhile, media representations of African Americans focus on drugs, violence, and crime, negatively influencing public opinion about Black people in general regardless of their origins.

Many of these messages are reinforced in the school environment, sometimes even by teachers who say insensitive things about Africa or who hold up the African immigrant students as the "good black kids" in comparison to their African American peers, thereby creating a divisive situation and reinforcing negative stereotypes of Black people. African immigrant youth often feel pressure to fit in with African Americans, yet they typically do not share the same understandings and expectations of what it means to be black in America.

Meanwhile, cultural conflicts between African parents and their Americanized children typically play out in the mundane aspects of daily life. Yenika-Agbaw (2009:7) describes food as "the most challenging aspect of the immigrant experience for me as a parent." Children can use food as a way to assert or reject their Africanness, as they make decisions about what they will and will not eat. Children are also prone to comparing their household to those of their friends, noting how other children are disciplined and what freedoms they are given (Mbakogu 2014). Language can also be a contentious issue. Parents may view the use of the homeland language as an important way to preserve their cultural heritage, yet their children, immersed in English outside the home, may not value their language in the same way. Portes and Rumbaut (2001:114) note the widespread nature of this problem, describing the U.S. as a "veritable cemetery of other languages" due to the strong assimilative forces that push immigrants to monolingualism, usually by the third generation.

To be sure, some groups have managed quite successfully to transmit their cultural values to their children, which several scholars have tied to their impressive academic success. Halter and Johnson (2014:221) refer to these communities as "intellectual subcultures," in which parents' high aspirations for their children positively influence the actual achievements of their children. For example, Amayo (2009) describes how Nigerian parents successfully prepare their children for college by using "proactive parenting practices" that include regular supervision, naming practices, telling their children stories about Nigerian beliefs, and relying on supportive family collaboration to reinforce shared values. Similarly Adeniji-Neill (2012) describes how Yoruba immigrants from Nigeria instill the philosophy of *omuluabi* in their children, which is a "way of being" that priorities personal integrity, hard work, and respect for others. However, educational success varies by nationality and depends on language ability as well as immigration status. For example, the percentage of Anglophone Nigerian, Kenyan, and Ghanaian immigrants in the U.S. with a bachelor's degree or higher is 60.9%, 47.2% and 34.9%, respectively, providing them with many more advantages than Somalis, for example, who typically arrive as non-English speaking refugees, with 39.5% having less than a high school diploma (Gambino et al. 2014).

Nevertheless, culture and educational background do not explain everything about immigrant parenting, because the role of the new context in shaping parenting styles must also be considered (Ochocka and Janzen 2008). This is best illustrated by the issue of parental discipline, where African and American views often collide (Rombo and Lutomia 2016; Mbakogu 2014; Rasmussen, et al. 2012; Yenika-Agbaw 2009).

Diaspora parents quickly learn that corporal punishment may be interpreted in the U.S. as child abuse. If a child calls "911" to report parental abuse, Child Protective Services are likely to get involved. Therefore, parents must make choices about how to respond to the "recommended rules" in the West for disciplining children (Mbakogu 2014:48). Many worry that disciplinary approaches considered more acceptable in the West will not produce the same results as corporal punishment, potentially "breeding spoilt African children" (51). While these perspectives are essential to understand, this literature provides little sense of the children's point of view.

Research Context and Methodology

Any effort to define "African parenting" in the diaspora must take into account tremendous diversity among African immigrants from south of the Sahara. St. Augustine provides an ideal window onto that diversity. Founded in 1998, the church includes 75 to 100 people from 17 African countries, plus a few West Indians and white Americans. The role that immigrant churches play in helping members to redefine themselves in a new land has been well documented elsewhere (Olupona 2007), and at St. Augustine this new identity is proudly pan-African. The church works hard to emphasize the similarities among people with widely different cultural and socio-economic backgrounds. Like many African people in the U.S., most St. Augustine members had high levels of education, with 18 of the 21 families in the study having at least one parent with a college degree (or higher). However, not everyone benefited equally from this education. While some church members were successful professionals, those with foreign degrees not recognized by U.S. employers pursued what Halter and Johnson (2014) call "occupational detours" – common among African immigrants. Meanwhile, those without college degrees worked minimum wage jobs and struggled to make ends meet in low-income neighborhoods – a situation that made parenting uniquely challenging, as I will show.

My position as both an insider and outsider to this community greatly aided me in the research process. I am a member of another Lutheran church in Fort Wayne, born in Nigeria, and raised in Liberia and Kenya as a white child of American missionaries. My African background and Lutheran affiliation opened doors for me to adult church members who warmly received me as an adopted "African sister" and curious anthropologist. Meanwhile, the youth were more open, because they saw me as an outsider. When I initially met with the youth group, several said they would not feel comfortable discussing certain matters directly with their parents either because they did not know how to raise these issues with them or to do so might be viewed as a sign of disrespect. However, they were enthusiastic about participating in this project in hopes that their parents might be more willing to hear general findings collected anonymously by an anthropologist.

Working with two research assistants (also white American women), we used participation observation methods at multiple Sunday-morning church services and Saturday-night youth-group meetings over a six-month period in 2013.

We also conducted a combined total of 37 in-depth interviews (17 by me) with 10 parents and 28 children ages 13 to 35. Of the 28 children interviewed, 18 were female and 10 were male. Five were born in the U.S. (the "second-generation"), 16 were born in an African country but moved to the U.S. by age 12 (the so-called "1.5 generation"), and the remaining seven arrived as teens. They originated from nine countries: Nigeria, Kenya, Ethiopia, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Congo, South Africa, Sudan, and Angola. In several cases, we interviewed siblings and their parents (each separately), enabling us to corroborate information and gain a fuller sense of family dynamics as a whole. Data from interviews (which were all recorded, transcribed, and coded by theme) form the basis of this article. To ensure continuity of data, each interviewer used the same questions as a basic guide, adjusting it flexibly and adding follow-up questions as appropriate. To avoid a breach of confidentiality, I have given everyone an American pseudonym and do not refer to anyone by nationality since this would be an obvious identifier. I also refer to all parents as Mr. and Mrs. to acknowledge community norms of respect for elders.

Qualitative Research Results and Findings

1. Authoritarian Parenting

Regardless of St. Augustine's cultural diversity, authoritarian parenting emerged as the most prominent parenting style among African immigrants. Mrs. A explained it this way: "Authority in an African family is held by the father. And my kids, they feel like it shouldn't be like that. They feel like everybody is free. . . . Well, I understand this is not Africa, but you are in an African house even if you are in America." Authority is hierarchical in many African families, held first and foremost by the father who dictates his wishes and expects his children to comply with no questions asked. Adeniji-Neill (2012:14) underscores the importance of listening in Nigerian cultures in particular, and "not talking back especially to adults until you have had the wisdom of response," a theme that seemed consistent across African cultures represented in this study.

Diana Baumrind (1966:890) includes authoritarian parenting in her typology and states that this style "attempts to shape, control, and evaluate the behavior and attitudes of the child in accordance with a set standard of conduct." Obedience is seen as a prime virtue, and the preservation of order and a traditional structure are highly valued. Verbal give-and-take is not encouraged, and the child is expected to accept his or her parent's word for what is right. Maccoby and Martin (1983) add that this pattern is characterized by "high demandingness" (that is, lots of control) and "low responsiveness" (or, little warmth). The African immigrant youth in this study referred to this style as "old school" or "traditional," and described these kind of parents as "extremely strict," "dictators," "basically like cops," and "more authoritative and disciplinarians." They typically compared and contrasted their own parents' methods to this approach.

African immigrant mothers also demand respect in the context of authoritarian parenting, although in most cases the mothers in this study played a more flexible role in the family. For example, Stanley (age 19) perceived his mother as adapting to the new context by joking with the kids, trying to have conversations with them, and texting them to see what was going on. However, he described his father as unwilling to change unless he has no other choice. Similarly, Phillip (age 24) described the difference between his relationship with his mother and father this way: "Growing up, it was a dad-son type of relation," he said, pounding the table with each word for emphasis. "Dad said, 'You do.' You talk back only when he's extremely happy. Otherwise you do not talk back. But with mom, you know, mom is more loving, so you tend to abuse that type of care. So I argued mostly with my mother." Only one person described her mother as the one who "wears the pants in the family," while her father was much more easy-going.

The use of corporal punishment often went along with authoritarian parenting, and while parents' concerns about being called in for child abuse are well documented, their children's perspectives on this matter have not been sufficiently addressed. When asked what the consequence would be for showing disrespect, several youth in this study said that their parents would "beat the crap out of us," or that they would get "whipped," "beat up," "smacked up," or "spanked." One person (age 20) said that his biggest frustration with his father was that he was "aggressive," especially in his treatment of the younger children in the family. However, other young adults interviewed said they now appreciated their parents' harsh disciplinary methods. For example, Joy (age 28) said that getting "your behind kicked" was "not abusing or anything, but they did it, and I'm glad they did it. I do appreciate it, [although] I don't do it to my kids as harshly as they did it." Similarly, Waters and Sykes (2009) found that West Indian immigrant youth who grew up in families where corporal punishment was an important parenting strategy now even consider using it in a toned down form with their own children in combination with other more American disciplinary tactics. One of Baumrind's (1969) main concerns about punitive nature of authoritarian parenting among white Americans was that it led to passivity, dependence, and cognitive and emotional problems in the children, but this assessment did not appear true among St. Augustine youth.

According to those in this study with authoritarian parents, their bigger concern was their inability to communicate with their parents about key issues. For instance, Stanley (age 19) lamented, "I can't even associate with [my father] or talk about, like, anything unless it has to do with Africa." Similarly, Rachel (age 16) viewed her parents as "overbearing" in all the same ways they would be in their homeland. She explained, "It's just like the same here as it is there. That's not a good thing. Yeah, like, kids are, like, kind of seen but not heard. And there's, like, nothing really to discuss. It's either your parents' way or, like, there's no way." She described herself and her parents as having "completely two different cultures," and in her view, "there's no way we can, like, come together and agree on anything." In Anna's (age 30) view, her mother did not talk to her about sensitive issues like sex or drugs not because she was unwilling, but because "maybe she doesn't even know how to talk to me about certain things."

Similarly, Joy (referenced above) said, "Sometimes in a way I hate the way I was raised…. They were too strict to the point I can't go to them to discuss *anything* with them. Like, my mom, she never had the s-e-x talk, and if we did, it was 'I will kill you' kind of talk." Growing up, Joy dutifully stayed home and did not go out with friends because her parents needed her to care for her younger siblings while they worked. However, when she went off to college, she felt ill-prepared to handle her newfound freedoms and came home pregnant at the end of her freshman year. This created a family crisis, and Joy felt abandoned by her parents who were furious about her choices. While parents may focus on the actions of wayward youth, these youth are saying that parents need to be willing to talk openly to their children about the trouble they are likely to encounter before it is too late.

In addition, parents' unwillingness to dialogue sometimes resulted in their children feeling alienated within the home, particularly with regard to navigating parental cultural expectations. Anna (referenced above) added: "I think my parents did such a good job of raising us that when we mess up in the sense of not following tradition, they wonder why we didn't already know. They think we know everything, but we don't." As she has gotten older and passed through key life stages, she felt the problem has come to matter more. For instance, she did not know how to introduce her fiancé to the family in the culturally appropriate way. After the wedding when she got pregnant with their first child, she wanted to share the news with friends and family, not realizing that this would upset her parents who maintain a cultural belief that it is best not to jinx a pregnancy by broadcasting it. She wanted to understand why her parents feel the way they do, but she said: "So often my parents will tell us something, and they will say, you won't understand. It's a [nationality] thing. As if I am no longer [my nationality], you know what I mean? That doesn't feel good." These feelings of cultural inadequacy can be compounded for U.S.-born children growing up in homes with older siblings who lived in their African homelands for several years before migrating. Mary (age 13) had this experience, and she felt like she was "missing out on basically everything, other than the food and the clothes." She added, "I don't know exactly what my parents expect. I'm, like, what are you talking about?" While she understands the homeland language, she cannot speak it like her siblings, and she lacks the cultural reference points that they have.

Frequently, authoritarian parenting among African immigrant families is also gendered, with boys given many more freedoms than girls. John Arthur (2000:99) describes African immigrant households as primarily patriarchal, with boys receiving special treatment while girls are expected to help around the house, where they are protected from "sexual and moral degradation." This is certainly not unique to African immigrant families. Nancy Foner (2009:5) writes, "In general, immigrant parents are stricter with daughters than sons, seeking to keep daughters home or close to home and heavily monitoring and controlling their social activities." Vivian (age 29) can attest to that. She recalled that her brother never had a curfew in high school, while she always had to be home by a certain time.

When she asked her father about it, he said, "It's because you are a girl," and he refused to discuss the matter further. Esther (age 23) struggled too with an authoritarian father who continued to make major decisions in her life into young adulthood. "It's never really a choice with my father," she said. "I am still struggling with [my father's] cultural settings, what he wants culturally, and me being who I want to be."

While authoritarian parenting appears very effective in the short term since children are given no choice but to comply, this approach runs the risk of simply pushing some children to hide their activities from their parents. Usually this involves children lying about where they are going. Rather than ask for permission, which the child knows will be denied, he or she goes ahead with the desired action without the parents' knowledge and covers up activities of which parents would not approve. Another result of authoritarian parenting is that the child withdraws and does not even attempt conversation with parents. Rachel did this: "I feel like [my parents and I] just fight more if I see them a lot, you know. I think it's the same for my sister, so we, like, kind of stay in our rooms and read or something." In sum, while authoritarian parenting appears to enable greater parental control, it can leave children without a supportive parental guide as they navigate American society, and it can leave them feeling lost at home without opportunity to discuss and better understand their parent's cultural expectations.

2. Permissive Parenting

In contrast to authoritarian parenting, some African parents at St. Augustine were quite permissive, especially with their sons. Baumrind (1966:889) describes this style as "non-punitive, acceptant, and affirmative towards the child's impulses, desires, and actions." These parents have few rules, and they did not interfere much with their children's behavior. Maccoby and Martin (1983) say this style makes few demands and is highly responsive to the child. Among Euro-Americans, this style is portrayed as overly indulgent, but among African immigrants, it was more closely connected to "dissonant acculturation," which occurs when children outpace their parents' knowledge of the new environment. Portes and Rumbaut (2001) developed this concept to explain why some immigrant parents are better able to maintain respect and control over their children than others. When parents and children acculturate at the same rate together either within an ethnic community or the mainstream, parents are better able to maintain respect and control in the home – situations called selective acculturation and consonant acculturation, respectively. However, dissonant acculturation is more likely to occur when parents have limited English and education, requiring them to depend on their children to translate and to make key decisions. Families in this situation inevitably experience a role reversal and renegotiation of power, which often leads children to respect their parents less and to be more demanding.

The youth at St. Augustine with permissive parents were notably all sons, and they did not provide much information about how they viewed their parents. For example, when we asked how his parents would respond if he disrespected authority, one teen (age 15) responded, "I don't get in trouble anymore," which might have meant that he no longer disrespected authority, except for the fact that he got expelled from school not long after the interview. Based on his short replies to interview questions, it was difficult to tell what he thought about most everything, but his behavior in the youth group and at school suggested that he felt a great deal of freedom to do what he wanted to do, regardless of the consequences.

Two St. Augustine parents, both working minimum-wage jobs without college degrees, were caught in the predicament of permissive parenting, and they shed more light on how this situation occurred for them. Mr. B said he accepted that he is raising American children, and he allowed them to do American things like sleep over at their friends' homes, although he noted that they rarely brought American friends to his home. He also felt concern and discomfort that he never met the parents of his sons' friends. He seemed to think that requiring a parental meeting might unnecessarily strain his relationship with his sons and discourage them from having American friends. Mr. B also said that Americans often had trouble understanding his accented English, making these sorts of introductions difficult. Mr. C, in a similar situation, said he used to make demands of his children, just as his parents did. However, he added, "Here, kids ask why, and you have to explain. … You can't tell them what they don't want. You say this, and they say no. They have their right, and I respect that right." To illustrate his point, he explained that his children have threatened to call "911" when he tried to discipline them using corporal punishment.

Children with permissive parents enjoyed a great deal of freedom, but that freedom sometimes got them into trouble, and their parents often lacked the cultural competency to help them get out of it. Mr. C explained that his son had lived in a refugee camp until age 8 and was put into the third grade in the U.S. even though he had no prior schooling experience. From the start, his son was frequently in trouble at school, eventually landing in the county's juvenile center as a teen. Only part-time employed, Mr. C and his wife were often at home and available, but their son was not. As for Mr. B's son, he did not cause trouble at school, but he was often bullied. His father did not feel confident addressing the issue, so he allowed his son to transfer to another school without much discussion. His son had become increasingly withdrawn, but his father felt powerless to help. While both Mr. B and Mr. C have daughters, they did not discuss whether they used the same parenting methods for them, nor did they describe any problems with their daughters' behavior. As mentioned, research shows that immigrant parents are typically stricter with their daughters, and thus several of the girls and young women interviewed were more concerned about negotiating increased independence from their parents.

3. Absent Parenting

Absent parenting was also evident among African diaspora families. This category would be most closely linked to Maccoby and Martin's (1983) "neglectful" parenting style in their updated version of Baumrind's typology. Neglectful parenting is said to occur when parents meet the child's basic needs but are otherwise disengaged. In other words, parents are not demanding or responsive to their children's needs. In the context of African immigrant families, however, a broader category that I call absent parenting occurred for a variety of reasons that were neglectful in some cases but not in others.

The first scenario of absent parenting is the result of immigration realities that often separate families for long periods of time. In these instances, parents left children with grandparents, other relatives, or a spouse, and then arranged for them to come to the U.S. at a later time. Cati Coe (2012) writes about transnational child "fostering" practices among Ghanaian immigrant families and notes that fostering in the West African sense is not based on a Western nuclear family concept, but rather entails parenting across a wider distribution of people who assist in the process of childcare, training, and launching the child to adulthood. These separations are typically part of a broader, extended-family approach to child-rearing and are thus not necessarily experienced negatively as a type of abandonment. While we did not ask about the impact of these separations on families, younger children seemed to transition more easily than older children into their parents' care upon joining them in the U.S. after an extended separation. In contrast, two people interviewed spoke of personal situations where children grew up in their home countries and came to the U.S. in their late teens. In both instances, the children stopped talking with their fathers because they did not see eye-to-eye on many things.

A less well-documented form of absent parenting occurred when African parents remained in the homeland and sent their children to be educated in the U.S., where they lived with relatives or friends. Three of the young adults interviewed had experienced this scenario, with two sent to the U.S. and one left in the U.S. after his parents returned to their homeland. Although these youth experienced more controls during high school under the custody of relatives and friends, they had a great deal of freedom to make their own choices without family interference once they reached college. Elizabeth (age 25) said she used that freedom to "rebel against everything I know." She broke her "African code" and moved in with her boyfriend, joined the party scene, drank a lot, and stopped going to church until she eventually returned to her Christian faith, which has transformed her. In contrast, Phillip (age 24) continued to feel close to his family and regularly communicated with them. He did not describe their separation as having any negative effects.

A third form of absent parenting among African immigrant families resulted from parents busy work schedules. Providing for a family in the U.S. and fulfilling transnational obligations to support family and friends in the homeland, African parents in this study often worked long hours in order to make ends meet, thus limiting time spent with their children.

Although age hierarchies within families often helped to shift parental responsibility to older children in the family, the net result was that children and parents often had little interaction. For example, Maurice (age 16) said, "My mom loves working all the time," and when she was home, she mostly slept. Similarly, Stanley said, "I hardly ever see my parents, to be honest, and [we] live in the same house." In these two cases, the teens were excelling in school and were well liked by parents and peers, suggesting that absent parenting does not automatically have detrimental effects. In Maurice's case, his grandfather and uncle who visited often had a strong positive influence in his life. As for Stanley, he was kept in line by an authoritarian father. Nevertheless, second-hand evidence at least suggests that absent parenting without other relatives or adults to intervene can leave children at risk. For instance, Suzannah (age 33) described African immigrant parents she knows who were too tired to engage their children at the end of long work days, only to find out too late that their children were in real trouble at school. She noted with irony, "We all want this American dream, but sometimes you wonder, was it worth it … chasing all these things and losing your family?" The bottom line in the above scenarios seems to be that youth with regular adult engagement in their lives, whether with a parent or some other surrogate, are more likely to stay out of trouble than those who have little adult supervision.

4. Communicative Parenting

Communicative parenting, the fourth category, corresponds closely to Baurmind's (1966) authoritative style. This style is regularly present and engaged in the life of the child, seeking a balance between demanding much but also responding to the child, respecting his or her questions, and using reason to direct his or her behavior. In other words, it requires reasoned obedience, not blind obedience. I call this "communicative parenting" because distinctions between authoritarian and authoritative parenting can easily be confused. In addition, the key ingredient in this style, from the children's perspective at least, seems to be parental willingness to communicate.

Taking the time to sit and talk about things is difficult in families where parents work long hours and children are busy with school, and yet it is an essential ingredient to good parent-child relationships that can successfully weather the difficulties of balancing two cultures in one household. For example, Phillip (age 24) grew up talking with his parents about all kinds of things. Sometimes they disagreed. His dad did not like his hip-hop clothing (common among male youth), even threatening to throw away his favorite jeans if he wore them too low. Phillip commented, "[My father] never understood [my clothing choices]. I believe he gave up then, and said 'Okay. Just don't get arrested. Don't get suspended. You're fine.'" Later as a freshman in college, Phillip's grades plummeted because he was more interested in playing soccer and spending time with his girlfriend. His father talked to him about the problem and finally issued an ultimatum: improve your grades "or else." Phillip did not say what the latter option was, but the implied threat was enough to make him change his behavior.

At the same time, Phillip also fondly remembered many other pleasant conversations with his parents, mostly at the dinner table: "That was a time where, you know, you could share anything and feel closer with each other. I mean, they would listen to me as the kid, you know? They would actually listen to my stories. And I would listen to theirs … and I guess the family got closer and closer." Thus, the conflicts with his parents have all been handled within a larger context of family communication, and as a result the son was able to say, "My parents are very understanding."

Families characterized by this kind of openness give their children a sense of security. Grace (age 24) grew up challenging her parents on many things. She described herself as the "rebellious bad one" among her siblings: "In high school, I was all about having friends and didn't care about my family." Her parents did not allow her to do whatever she pleased, which made her angry, but they did bend on certain things, like allowing her to date. In young adulthood, when she wanted to make bigger, more significant choices, they continued to listen to her and negotiated their wishes and her desires. Her father spoke in terms of winning and losing battles with his children over a whole range of issues. Now, as a young adult, Grace expressed deep gratitude for her parents' willingness to accept certain things that mattered a great deal to her as well as profound respect, especially for her father. She said, "[Age] nineteen is when I realized that Dad does really know everything." Grace added with confidence, "I know that whatever I do, my parents will always be there and let me come back home."

These examples illustrate that children with communicative parents were not necessarily better behaved than children parented in other ways, but they could talk to their parents about problems and figure out a way forward together. Paul (age 28) further illustrated how parental support in crisis can help a child learn to make better choices. He explained that his communication with his parents was always open, in contrast to other African parents he has observed. "There are some African parents that their kids are not as free to talk to them, which has always been different in my family," he said. Paul was never in trouble at school or at home until his freshman year in college, when he was arrested and charged for an offense involving alcohol. He did not tell his parents what happened, and they found out only by intercepting his mail. He said, "They responded a lot better than I thought they would." He had to deal with the consequence of his actions, but his parents remained supportive and communicated with him. Several years after the incident, Paul is a responsible husband, father, and employee with no subsequent offences.

When parents were willing to change parenting tactics and take a more communicative approach their relationships with their children were also transformed. Vivian's experience demonstrates this well. Vivian's relationship with her father was stormy, especially in high school. Her authoritarian father demanded a great deal from her without providing room for dialogue or discussion, especially with regard to her school performance. He expected her to get As and would complain even about A-s. She said, "I think I went through a phase where I just gave up, and I was, like, 'Nope, don't care."

When she told her father she did not want to go to college, he said, "You're joking" and refused to discuss the matter further. She did ultimately go to college but struggled to pass her classes and transferred schools several times. During that period, her father gradually began to shift tactics and celebrated when she simply passed a class, rather than demanding perfect grades. Vivian described the subsequent transformation in their relationship like this: "Now that I'm older, he's way more mellow. And he sits and talks about things, and he's *very* different, like a *totally* different person." When Vivian's father used an authoritarian approach, Vivian stopped talking to him for weeks and failed to perform well in school. When he developed a more communicative style, he not only salvaged his relationship with his daughter, but she fulfilled his expectation to complete college.

Conclusion

Nancy Foner (2009:1), who has extensively studied intergenerational relationships in immigrant families, writes, "It has become a cliché to talk about immigrant children in pitched battles against tradition-bound parents from the old country," but she warns against accepting this assumption uncritically. While tensions and conflict are part and parcel of immigrant families making a life for themselves in a new place, she adds that many immigrant parents and their children also find ways to work out "accommodations and compromises." The evidence that I present here illustrates Foner's point, showing how some parenting styles enable better intergenerational relationships than others among African families in the diaspora.

According to the children interviewed, the most effective parents used a communicative style that set high expectations for their children but was neither too harsh (like authoritarian parenting) nor too lenient (like permissive parenting) and was always engaged (unlike absent parenting). These parents taught their children to think for themselves through a process of verbal give-and-take. Several St. Augustine parents lamented that in the U.S. they face the challenge of raising their children more or less alone. Thus, if their children got into trouble, it was the police who were called first rather than a family member or friend. Given this lack of community support, immigrant children in the U.S. have a high need for communicative parents who can support and help them learn to make wise choices. Children with these parents demonstrated a high level of respect and appreciation for them.

Nevertheless, authoritarian parenting stood out as the most common form of African parenting in the diaspora. While parents who used this style typically had obedient children who did well at school, the perspectives of their children indicated that the long-term costs of this approach were great. Children ordered to obey unquestioningly often found hidden ways to rebel against their authoritarian parents, potentially undermining the success of the method. They also found themselves ill-equipped to make wise choices when they reached young adulthood.

And perhaps worst of all, they felt alienated from their parents, unable to talk with them about things they did not understand or concerns and fears they had. They also felt unsure of their parents' cultural expectations and did not feel free to ask. In short, authoritarian parenting may produce successful children, but not parent-child relationships marked by understanding and emotional support.

The least effective parenting style was a permissive style, which was less of a parenting choice and more the result of dissonant acculturation in families where parents lacked the linguistic and cultural skills required to help their children navigate U.S. society. These parents were more likely to lose the respect of their children (particularly sons) and found that they could no longer control them. Their children were the most likely to get into trouble, without the parental support needed to learn from their mistakes. Meanwhile, absent parenting proved a more complex parenting style because it occurred for a variety of reasons. Immigrant realities of long family separations as well as financial obligations that lead them to work long hours often resulted in parents having limited time with their children. If other supportive adults were available to guide the child, or the parent found alternative ways to communicate, these absences did not appear to result in negative effects on the children. However, preliminary evidence suggests that parents who leave their children to their own devices for too long risk losing their children to a variety of destructive behaviors.

These findings mark only a beginning effort to illuminate what African immigrant children perceive as the most essential elements of the parent-child relationship in the diaspora. Given the church context of this research, it is noteworthy that spiritual matters were hardly mentioned by both the children and parents interviewed. This observation stands in stark contrast to Beryl's (2014) findings where African parents in a Massachusetts church were steeped in the language of training children "to know God" and the importance of being a "praying parent." Further research is needed to assess what factors might contribute to a more spiritualized form of parenting in one African church context relative to others. Additionally, further study could determine the extent to which the categories I propose are generalizable in other African diaspora contexts and whether other parenting styles exist. Organizations (both ethnic and mainstream) who regularly engage African immigrant families might also consider ways to use these findings to provide parental support and to help parents in modifying their parenting strategies in the new context. This research shows that parents can learn to use a more communicative approach, leading to better relationships with their children and more favorable behavior from them.

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