The impact of fictive kin relationships on the development of attributional styles

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Fictive kin relationships provide a method of social support that is not fully understood or accepted in segments of society; however, these relationships have long been common in African American communities (Nelson, 2014).

An attributional style refers to the way in which an individual explains life events to oneself and is analyzed on three dimensions: internal, global, and stable (Lewis, Waschbusch, Sellers, Leblanc, & Kelley, 2014). The development of attributional style originates in experiences of trust or lack of trust with negative events adding to depressive symptoms and attributions of positive events acting as a protective factor in the development of depression (Rueger & George, 2017).

By engaging in fictive kin relationships, individuals develop a surrounding environment that provides dependable, supportive, stable, and loving relationships (Weeks, Heaphy, & Donovan, 2001).

Research has explored African American family relations with regards to socialization and social support from fictive kin as an adaptive response to social and economic challenges to a healthy family life (Garcia-Coll et al., 1996; Jarrett, Jefferson, & Kelly, 2010). Furthermore, social support from outside the family structure is commonplace among African Americans in communities overwhelmed with poverty (Jarrett, Jefferson, & Kelly, 2010). Fictive kin relationships create social ties based on neither blood ties nor by marriage thus providing social relationships in the form of positive emotional coping strategies (Jarrett, Jefferson, & Kelly, 2010).

Research revealed the development of fictive kin relationships within the African American LGBTQ community, where the intersectionality of stressors is displayed including marginalization, discrimination, and oppression (Weeks, Heaphy, & Donovan, 2001). Research among both African American (Anderson, 1978; Stack, 1974) and LGBTQ (Weeks, Heaphy, & Donovan, 2001) communities have documented the formation of networks of fictive kin relationships. For instance, in the Southern region of the United States, groups compromised of predominantly African American gay men and transwomen have bonded together to socially construct their own family networks (Weeks, Heaphy, & Donovan, 2001).

Fictive kin relationships are often seen in African American communities. Throughout history, these communities have faced discrimination, oppression, and marginalization which all have the capability to negatively impact one’s attributional style. The social bonds created through fictive kin suggest that these relationships are the foundation for engaging in helping behavior, a characteristic of positive attributional styles.

The current scientific literature on fictive kin relationships and the development of an individual’s attributional style suggests that these social bonds create positive effects on how individuals view life events. By making the effort to treat non-family members as if they are family members, individuals in fictive kin relationships develop the ability to engage with others from a positive aspect.