Child Sexual Abuse and Institutional Shame in Black Churches

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Abstract: In the wake of child abuse allegations surrounding Pennsylvania State University and Syracuse University, there has been renewed interest in the ways that organizational structures allow this type of abuse to occur. Within the Black Church, the child abuse allegations against Bishop Eddie Long, leader of New Birth Missionary Baptist Church, has led many scholars and members of the lay community to wonder whether the contemporary Black Church has the same relevance as in decades past. The purpose of this paper is to highlight how Black Churches consciously and unconsciously heighten feelings of shame among victims of child abuse and discourage these children and their families from seeking help. We integrate components of Reuben Hill's [1]. ABC-X model, Derrick Bell's [2] Critical Race Theory (CRT), and Black Feminist Theory as our foundation. In particular, we offer a theoretical framework that demonstrates and explains suspicion and/or knowledge regarding abuse (A), the resources to which the child and his/her family can rely (B), the meaning that the child and his or her family attributes to the abuse and abuser (C), as well as how race, power, oppression, and church teachings directly and indirectly endorse shame among child victims and their families and maintain and solidify power hierarchies within Black Churches (X). In addition to providing various conceptualizations of shame among victims of child abuse, we define "*The System of Black Religious Privilege*" and provide recommendations regarding how Black Churches can simultaneously protect the well-being of Black children without sacrificing the primary goals of the Black Church.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Although the World is Full of Suffering, it is Full also of Overcoming it - Helen Keller

Although child abuse has received national and scholarly attention over the past two decades [3], the media has given more attention to the courageous individuals that publicly admit they were victims of abuse as children. In the wake of the recent child sexual abuse scandal involving Pennsylvania State University,[1] there has been renewed interest in the ways that organizational structures allow this type of abuse to occur. Within the Black Church[2], the recent sexual abuse allegations against Bishop Eddie Long, former leader of New Birth Missionary Baptist Church,

has led many scholars and members of the lay community to wonder how much the Black Church protects its' most inexperienced and vulnerable members. In light of the increasing number of child abuse cases over the past decade, the Catholic Church has issued a statement. Bishop Gregory, one of the most powerful bishops in the Catholic Church, publicly issued a "zero-tolerance" policy regarding perpetrators, which some deem contradictory to the foundational Judeo-Christian tenant of forgiveness [4]. Given the historical and contemporary salience of the Black Church for African-Americans [5-15], it stands to reason that many African-American children counted in national child abuse statistics are members of religious organizations, or at the very least, have an affiliation with one or more members of the Black Church. Thus, focusing on the ways that child abuse operates within The Black Church deserves scholarly attention.

The purpose of this paper is to highlight how Black Churches consciously and unconsciously heighten feelings of shame among victims of child abuse and discourage these children and their families from seeking help. Using Reuben Hill's [1] ABC-X model, Derrick Bell's [2] Critical Race Theory (CRT), and Black Feminist Theory as our foundation, this manuscript offers a theoretical framework that demonstrates and explains suspicion and/or knowledge regarding abuse (A), the resources to which the child and his/her family can rely (B), the meaning that the child and his or her

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[1] On Friday, June 22, 2012, Former Penn State football coach Jerry Sandusky was found guilty of 45 of the 48 allegations of child sex abuse leveled against him by eight men. (abcnews.com).

[2] In this paper, we use the term "The Black Church" to refer to religious institutions within the Black community that have historically and contemporaneously provided physical, mental, emotional, social, and spiritual assistance to African-Americans. Further, our use of this term does not refer to one particular religion in particular, or Christian churches exclusively, but rather the various forms of support provided by different religious faiths.

family attributes to the abuse and the abuser (C), as well as how race, power, oppression, and church teachings directly and indirectly endorse various types of shame among child victims and their families and maintain and solidify power hierarchies within Black Churches (X). In addition to providing different conceptualizations of shame among victims of child abuse, we provide recommendations regarding how Black Churches can simultaneously protect the well-being of Black children without sacrificing the primary goals of the Black Church.

Before we do this, however, we begin by discussing the salience of the Black Church for African Americans. Next, we turn our attention to scholarly work related to child abuse, providing an overview regarding the examination of shame in the scholarly literature. After this, we discuss the components of the ABC-X model of family stress. Then, we discuss Derrick Bell's Critical Race Theory (CRT). Further, we discuss the relevance of Patricia Hill Collins' Black Feminist Theory to our current discussion. Lastly, we will provide a conceptual model, which includes shame, the ABC-X model of family stress, Bell's CRT, and Black feminist theory.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

2.1. The Black Church

Historically and contemporaneously, the Black Church has been one of the greatest sources of support for African Americans. In fact, from slavery until the present day, religious institutions are noteworthy in the level of material and psychological assistance that they have provided African Americans [7, 16, 9, 17, 12, 18, 15, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23]. In addition to "sowing seeds of social reform" [23, p. 8]. Particularly during the civil rights movement, the Black Church has been responsive to the needs of its community members (whose access to traditional social institutions has been restricted) as well as the source by which a great deal of material, emotional, and spiritual assistance is provided [7, 9, 10, 19]. Thus, through the Black Church, members maintain their cultural values, create and heighten a positive self-esteem, and have support for their beliefs and attitudes.

Added to the aforementioned, the Black Church was foundational to the institution of many forms of support that currently sustains members of the Black community. According to Lincoln and Mamiya [16], "The Black Church has no challenger as the cultural womb of the black community. Not only did it give birth to new institutions such as schools, banks, insurance companies, and low income housing, it also provided an academy and an arena for political activities, and it nurtured young talent for musical, dramatic, and artistic development" (p. 8). Essentially this "nation within a nation" [16, p. 8] helped further the interests of Black fraternities and sororities in 1907, the solidification of The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People in 1909, and the National Urban League in 1911. Thus, men and women that were inherently involved with the previously mentioned social movements utilized their association with the Black Church to introduce and solidify goals that individually and collectively move Black men, women, children, and families forward in society.

Although Black religious leaders have described the Black Church as "a hospital for the sick" [7, p. 5], we focus on the ways that this historical pillar of the African American community may consciously and unconsciously provide a context by which child abuse can occur. Extant literature related to the sexual abuse of children has primarily focused on four areas: (1) predictors of child abuse; (2) short and long-term effects of child abuse; (3) shame associated with child abuse; and (4) cultural considerations and child abuse. In the paragraphs that follow, we give attention to empirical studies in each of these areas, which will lead to our conceptualization of shame that combines stress, family structure, as well as ecological, psychological, legal, and racial identification and solidarity paradigms.

2.2. Predictors of Child Abuse

While there is no one strong predictor of child sexual abuse, there are some factors that increase the likelihood of victimization at some point. Hines and Malley-Morrison [25] state child sexual abuse relates to the desensitization that people experience due to the increased sexualization of children in movies and television. In addition, there may also be an increased risk of child sexual abuse associated with the increased exposure to child pornography available on the internet. Some individual predictors of child sexual abuse include substance use, homelessness, intimacy issues and body image [25]. Young substance abusers experience multiple risks. One risk associated with substance use is that users place themselves in situations where sex is the currency used to acquire their drug of choice. Another risk associated with substances relates to the vulnerability associated with the choices that they make when they are in an altered state of mind. As drugs reduce a person's inhibitions,

they may place themselves in situations that they might not otherwise. Moreover, they may also find themselves in situations where they lack the capacity to resist sexual advances due to the influence of drugs. Just as substance abuse places children in harm's way, homelessness is also a key predictor of sexual abuse. Many young people who are homeless often find themselves in situations where they are forced to trade sex for a place to stay or a meal to eat. They may also find themselves in a situation where they become the victims of sex trafficking [25].

According to Malley-Morrison and Hines [27], Black adolescents who grow up in poverty may be at greater risk of extra-familial sexual abuse. This may be a result of the "lack of parental judgment or inadequate parental supervision" [27, p. 181]. Crosson-Tower explains that parental judgment and supervision are not necessarily a result of neglect. For example, sufficient research shows molestation of youth occurs by someone the family feels like they can trust [28]. Therefore, the parent may have left a child in the custody of a friend or relative who then betrays that trust. Crosson-Tower also suggests that there may be times when the parent feels like a child is capable of taking care of him/herself and the child then finds him/herself in a precarious situation that he/she may not be prepared to negotiate. Lastly, there may also be times when the parent is unaware of the child's whereabouts because of a child going somewhere without a parent's permission.

Additional risk factors for child abuse are a mother that is absent or is not emotionally close to her child, is sexually punitive or religiously fanatic, never finished high school, or who keeps herself isolated [28] [29] [30]. In families where the mother is a drinker and the father is not, daughters are at greater risk of sexual assault, and thus more assaulted as well. This is primarily a function of the daughters being more vulnerable emotionally [25].

2.3. Short and Long-Term Effects of Child Abuse

There is a large body of scholarship that supports child abuse has negative short and long-term effects on these individuals in their adult lives. Since the 1990s, an increasing number of studies have examined the physical, psychological, emotional, and social effects of abuse on child victims [31-35]. While some studies have drawn attention to the perceptive benefits of this traumatic life experience [35] [36], most victims of child abuse experience significant harm. For example, short-term effects of child abuse on younger children include but are not limited to regressive behavior (e.g., return

to bedwetting) and thumb-sucking or soiling, sleep disturbances or nightmares, and increased fear. Furthermore, they may experience psychosomatic symptoms such as vomiting, abdominal pain, and headaches. Older children may become depressed or suicidal and may demonstrate conversion symptoms such as hysterical seizures and pain attacks. These children may also become prostitutes, substance abusers, runaways, delinquents or have trouble in school [34, pp. xiii]. In regards to the long-term effects of child abuse, the victims frequently have an increased likelihood of delinquency, mental illness, adult criminality, becoming abusers themselves, violent criminal behavior as well as decreased self-esteem, ability to trust others, and frequently experience difficulties establishing loving, caring, and trusting relationships in their adult lives [37]. Furthermore, abused children have a greater likelihood of being promiscuous, engaging in sex at a younger age than their peers are, and engaging in unprotected sex [38] [39]. One of the consequences of participating in unprotected sex is an increased risk of contracting a sexually transmitted disease, which may lead to psychological and emotional distress [40] [39]. In addition, females who are sexual abused are at greater risk for getting pregnant, either as a result of the sexually assault or as a result of sexual behaviors that may be related to a devalued sense of self [25].

This study suggests that there may be more gender similarities than differences in experiences of childhood abuse and relationship quality than what previous research has identified. More pointedly, as it relates to our current focus on protecting Black children from abuse within the Black Church, the findings in the Larsen *et al.* [37] study recognize the likelihood for Black boys and girls to be victims of abuse.

2.4. Shame Associated With Child Abuse

Since sexual abuse of children usually occurs within a context of trust, secrecy, and stigma, it is common for children to experience shame related to the abuse. Shame can be "best understood as an intense negative emotion having to do with the self in relation to standards, responsibility and such attributions as global failure [41]. Shame is elicited when one experiences failure relative to a standard (one's own or other's), feels responsible for the failure, and believes that the failure reflects a damaged self" [42, p. 126]. Research reveals several negative effects of shame, including poor emotional, social, and psychological well-being [34, 35, 43], self-blaming [34], social and cognitive

detachment [44], and prediction of PTSD symptoms and parent and teacher reports of internalizing behavior problems among children and adolescents [45, 46]. Negative effects of shame have also been associated with sensitivity to verbal humiliation and shame [47, 48], alienation, inadequacy, and hurt [49], family conflict and child maltreatment [50], and decreased resilience [51].

Since shame can also be described as "an acute arousal or fear of being exposed, scrutinized, and judged negatively by others" [42, p. 6], shame may cause child victims of sexual abuse and their families to function at a lower level and lead to their psychological and social withdraw from others [52]. Although most individuals exposed to traumatic life events do not develop long-term adverse outcomes such as posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) or depression, children, adolescents, and young adults may experience feelings of guilt, shame, or anger that may develop during and after the abuse no longer occurs [3]. Thus, as it relates to the current discussion, the direct and indirect messages that children receive regarding the salience of religious institutions as well as the adults that represent these institutions may directly (or indirectly) heighten feelings of guilt, shame, and anger. Therefore, the abuse may negatively affect the child's sense of self as well as his or her family.

2.5. Cultural Considerations and Child Abuse

Culture continually shapes the current and future experiences of humans. While culture includes people from diverse languages, religions, customs, and institutions, "culture is more than the sum total of institutions and language" and includes "an emphasis on certain virtues and ideals, certain mannerisms of independence and hospitality, general ways of looking upon the world" [53, p. 4]. More directly, "culture is a set of beliefs, attitudes, values, and standards of behavior that are passed from one generation to the next" [54, p. 477] and greatly defines what is natural and expected within a given group. On the other hand "ethnic culture" includes "language, world view, dress, food, styles of communication, notions of wellness, healing techniques, childrearing patterns, and self-identity" [54, p. 477]. Essentially, an "ethnic culture" creates a climate by which individuals within that culture develop an "us" versus "them" reality, which virtually ensures the perpetuation of the norms within a particular culture.

A growing body of scholarly work has given attention to how culture influences the disclosure of child sexual abuse [55-60] and how the cultural context may heighten the risk of child abuse. Through her exploration of shame issues for Latino children and their families who have experienced sexual abuse, Fontes [61] identified cultural concerns in this community that increase the likelihood of childhood victimization. In particular, this scholar found that attributions for the abuse, fatalism, virginity, sexual taboos, predictions of a shameful future, revictimization, machismo, and fears of homosexuality for boy victims, as well as how shame and sexual abuse intersect with societal discrimination to encourage a culture of silence among its victims. The salience of norms within a particular culture and its effect on child sexual abuse has been supported by Fontes' later work, as well.

Fontes and Plummer's [62] recent work in this area found that cultural norms (what is deemed appropriate or not appropriate by members of a particular community), often determine whether a child will disclose sexual abuse to an adult family member, or whether that adult family member will disclose the abuse to others. For example, according to Fontes and Plummer social norms strongly discourage Black women and girls from reporting issues of sexual abuse. While their focus was primarily on perpetrators within the family, this thinking could also extend to the church. Furthermore, Fontes and Plummer also state that in South Asian, East Asian, Latino as well as traditional Anglo-American families, children and families may be less likely to report issues of sex abuse out of respect or honor to fathers or those in positions of reverence. Likewise, since religious leaders generally enjoy the same respect, abuse may go unreported as not to bring shame to the family and the church. Essentially, since ethnic and religious culture has been found to influence affect child sexual abuse disclosure and reporting, both in the United States and internationally, it is imperative that conceptual models that describe childhood sexual abuse be rooted in both the "ethnic culture" [55, p. 5] and religious contexts.

3. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE CURRENT TOPIC

There are four reasons why this topic is important. First, the family structure of Black children places them at increased risk for child abuse. According to the United States Census Bureau [63], Black children are the most likely to be poor [64], to be reared in a single parent, mother-headed home [28, 65, 26], and are thus more likely to enter the foster care system [66]. According to Hines and Malley-Morrison [24] "children

in the poorest income category (less than $15,000/year) were 18 times more likely to be reported for sexual abuse than children whose parents earned more than $30,000 per year" (p. 112). Thus, these multiple forms of disadvantage may make Black children more vulnerable to abuse. Second, being in a poor, mother-headed, single parent home may make these families more likely to seek support from individuals outside of the family unit, and may thus make them more likely to seek support from individuals within the church, and experience abuse from individuals within this institution. Several decades ago, the sociologist Robert Hill [67] identified a strong religious orientation to be one of the cultural hallmarks of Black families, which other recent scholarships supports [9]. While we are not insinuating that religious institutions are definitive spaces in which child abuse will occur, multiple life stressors may substantially increase the likelihood that Black women will turn to the church for financial, psychological, material, and spiritual support and nurturance for themselves and their children. Even when instances of child abuse occur, the poverty and social and economic marginality of these families may cause them to believe that they have little mastery over the lives of themselves and their children [10]. Since familial regard for the church and the provision of social supports and networks have been found to be some of the most salient aspects of church involvement for African Americans with children [7], it is vital that Black children be protected within this space.

Third, the sexual abuse of children within the Black Church has potential short and long-term effects on the child, but also places great stigma on the family as well. Since "stigmatization is a public mark" and shame can negatively "effect those who are stigmatized but also those associated with the person so marked" [42, p. 131], it is possible that even when child sexual abuse is exposed, the perpetrator and members within the church will ostracize the child and his or her family. Lastly, we are aware of no conceptual models that integrate shame, stress, race, and the experiences of Black children who are victims of sexual abuse.

Given "the church's function as literal extended family" [12, p. 14] as well as "the sense of congregation as virtual blood kin" [12, p. 15], we believe that this increases the likelihood that single-mother headed families will turn to the church for various forms of support. In particular, these single mothers may seek men in the church to serve as surrogate fathers or father figures for their sons and daughters. Therefore,

ignoring the likelihood of child abuse by individuals within the church is detrimental to the physical, mental, and emotional well-being of Black children because it suggests that what has historically been a source of support for Blacks cannot simultaneously be a source of shame and abuse. Thus, we argue that due to their disadvantaged place in society, shame may operate differently among Black childhood victims of sexual abuse and their families as they may regard the Black Church as the only "safe space" to turn during times of need.

3.1. Conceptual Framework

As previously stated, the basis of our conceptual framework. Reuben Hill's [1] ABC-X model, Derrick Bell's [2] Critical Race Theory (CRT), and Patricia Hill Collins' Black Feminist Theory. Given the salience of these theories, we will briefly discuss each of these before presenting our conceptual framework.

3.2. ABC-X Model of Family Stress

In the wake of the Great Depression, sociologist Reuben Hill [1] was interested in the factors that caused some families to dissolve yet others to become stronger, or resilient, in the face of adversity. The ABC-X model posits family stress begins with an initial family stressor (a), the resources on which the family relies during stressful times (b), the perception of the stressor event upon individuals within the family as well as the family as a collective unit (c), which in turn, determines the severity of the crisis on family functioning (X). Essentially, the more resources on which families can draw during times of stress and their ability to individually and collectively view the stressor as one that can galvanize rather than weaken the family would minimize the family from entering a period of crisis, or the state in which the family is overcome by physical, psychological, and social immobilization. Since the introduction of the ABC-X model, McCubbin and Patterson [68] extended Hill's [1] conceptualization of family stress by recognizing the many stressors, resources, and perceptions that may simultaneously exist within the family system. Since that time, an increasing number of scholars have used The Double ABC-X model to examine remarriage in blended families [69], individuals with physical disabilities [70], and elder abuse by family caregivers [71].

3.3. Critical Race Theory

Over four decades ago, Derrick Bell, the Black professor of Harvard Law Review conceptualized

Critical Race Theory (CRT). For this preeminent scholar, Critical Race Theory posits that race, gender, and the law are based on hierarchal systems that place whites at an advantage yet disadvantage Blacks and other minorities [72, 73]. Since its introduction, scholars in various fields of study [74, 75, 76, 77, 78, 79] have examined CRT. In this respect, "CRT establishes the fundamental role that the law plays in the maintenance of racial hierarchy, and it offers an opportunity to imagine processes that challenge these systems of domination" [80, pp. 1577-1578). In her article *Twenty Years of Critical Race Theory: Looking Back to Move Forward*, Kimberle Williams Crenshaw [81] called for a broader definition of this theory and the embracing of scholars from disciplines other than law [80]. Therefore, our conceptual model integrates race, the hierarchies that exist within the Black Church, as well as the legalities of childhood sexual abuse.

3.4. Black Feminist Theory

Fundamentally, Black Feminist Theory recognizes that race, family structures and dynamics, and the various hierarchies in which Black women operate are sustaining systems of oppression that frequently silence the experiences of Black women in particular, and people of color, more generally [82, 83, 84]. Even though empirical social science research has tended to view social class as a fixed, static system [85], social class, family structure, racial solidarity operate invisibly to facilitate and oftentimes perpetuate the victimization of children and their families within the Black Church. Therefore, our conceptual model will acknowledge that the marginalization of Black families places Black children at particular risk for childhood sexual abuse, stigmatization, shame, and internal forms of religious oppression.

3.5. Conceptual Framework Components

Since the focus of this paper is on preventing the abuse of children within the Black Church, an ecological framework can best explain the interaction between the Black child and various contexts. The first and perhaps most important system on the child is the family. Within this system, the child receives firsthand information regarding what is and is not culturally appropriate. Thus, within the family system the child learns and familiarizes to the values of the family. Recall, "A value orientation is a conceptualization that is both generalized and organized and greatly influences how groups and individuals regard and interact with the world" [86, p. 238]. Therefore, African American parents that highly value the Black Church

may organize their lives in a way that ensures that regular church attendance, and close association with various members within the church is a normative experience. Thus, value orientations can influence the frequency and quality of relationships between people [87] [86] [88], within and outside of the Black Church.

The second level of the model is the factors that increase the likelihood that a child will be a victim of abuse. Included in these are "the mother who is absent, who is not close to her child emotionally, who is sexually punitive or religiously fanatic, who never finished high school, or who keeps herself isolated is more likely to have a child who may be abused" [27, p. 133] [29] [30]. According to Hines and Malley-Morrison [24], daughters may also be a greater risk for sexual abuse when the mother is a drinker and the father is not. As previously mentioned, poverty and social and economic marginality frequently cause Black children and their families to believe that they have little mastery over the lives of themselves and their children [10], 1999b), so childhood sexual abuse victims and their families may be less likely to disclose the abuse to others. In addition to the shared religious experience that the Black Church provides, race may also serve as a conscious and/or subconscious deterrent in the exposure of child abuse.

To make this point clear, racial solidarity with the perpetrator may cause the child and his family to be reluctant to disclose the abuse to other members in the church or contact law enforcement. The reason for this is fear of having individuals perceive them not only as "race traitors," but also as "Black religious race traitors" in a society that has traditionally placed Blacks and other minorities at a legal disadvantage when compared to Whites [72, 73, 89]. Within this context, shame may cause the victim to feel that others will not believe them and resist disclosing the abuse to their parent. The parent may be reluctant to believe their child since he or she is alleging serious misconduct by a member of the clergy. Thus, once the abuse is public, the parent may feel the stigma associated with a child who has made the allegation, and maybe ostracized by the perpetrator and members of the church.

The third level of this model is the church culture, which reinforces how the Black Church, its religious leaders, congregants, and in particular children, are generally viewed by others. Inherent within this perception of the church culture is the general assumption that the pastor and church staff are closer to God and draw to the church because of a genuine

concern for children [91, 92, 93]. Within this environment, individuals may perceive crimes from African American perpetrators as "private" matters that should come under the jurisdiction of the church instead of the legal system. Thus, Critical Race Theory (CRT) recognizes that race (Black), gender (male), and the propensity for legal systems to penalize Black men (the law) work together to create a climate by which abuse is introduced, maintained, and disregarded.

Regarding Reuben Hill's [1] ABC-X Model of Family Stress, when the child experiences abuse or the parent learns about the abuse (the stressor event or A), the greater the number of resources available to that child and his or her family (B), within and outside of the church, the less likely this child and their family will perceive the abuse as their fault (C) and less likely to experience family immobilization, in the form of crisis (X) (Hill, 1949). Lastly, as it relates to Black Feminist Theory, the Black Church becomes an open context by which poor, single-mother headed households and the children within those households that are victims of abuse may be subject to forms of racial, religious, and social oppression that collectively minimize their individual and collective hardiness (resilience), and over time, silences them [87, 88, 89].

The last level of this model recognizes three ways the hierarchies that exist within the Black Church that may subconsciously perpetuate child abuse. First, the professional and ceremonial garb frequently worn by Black clergy and their staff automatically sub-consciously signals to children and adults alike, that there is a clear distinction between "men of the cloth" and "regular church folk" like themselves. Second and directly related to the professional and ceremonial garb worn by Black clergy and their staff are the titles they generally receive. So, for example, titles such as Doctor, Reverend, Pastor, Bishop, Evangelist, Prophet, Apostle, and Disciple that are frequently used to address clergy consciously and subconsciously solidifies the distinction between members of the church and members of the clergy [90]. Third, the ritualistic practices that are generally associated with worship also signal to members of the Black Church that only the sacrifices or offerings provided by clergy are of spiritual value. Therefore, for example, that the pastor and church staff frequently lead the congregation in song, worship, public and private prayer simultaneously recognizes the position of these religious leaders, and may confer upon them a morally elevated status that may not necessarily exist.

Fourth, scriptural passages may inadvertently discourage the disclosure of child abuse. Scriptures like "Children, obey your parents in all things, for this is well pleasing unto the Lord" (Colossians 3:20, *King James Version*) or Hebrews 13:17: "Obey them that have the rule over you and submit yourselves" (*King James Version*) may discourage children, who desire to be "obedient," to refrain from disclosing abuse to their parents or other authority figures. Fifth, the racial solidarity that Black children and their families share with the pastor, church staff, and congregants provides a context of racial validation and expression that they usually do not experience to the same degree elsewhere. Stated more clearly, the Black Church provides a unique cultural context by which Blacks who share the same ethnic and cultural experiences can worship, pray, encourage, associate, and support one another.

In her groundbreaking essay the white feminist Peggy McIntosh [91] described "*White Privilege*" as an "invisible knapsack" that allows whites to secure many of the advantages associated with 'whiteness,' even though they are socialized to disregard how race provides them multiple advantages in society. However, we assert that "*A Black System of Religious Privilege*" exists within the Black Church (whose members are primarily Black) and may create a climate wherein abused children and their families are socialized to not publicly speak about the abuse of children. To be clear, "*A Black System of Religious Privilege*" is a system by which church members develop a shared psychological, emotional, scriptural, mental, and spiritual acknowledgement regarding religious leaders (e.g., pastors, ministers, or preachers). Specifically, this collective view assumes religious leaders are closer to God than other individuals in the church, are in the best position to provide spiritual support (e.g., prayer, sermons, bible reading, counseling), and are genuinely interested in the well-being of children. Moreover, since members within the church regard religious leaders as safe, altruistic, and exemplary models of fine conduct, individuals assume they would never purposefully inflict harm on any adult or child within the Church.

Essentially, the Black Church is perhaps one of the few places were Black ministers/pastors/preachers are exclusively privileged in that they can say and pretty much do what they want, without serious legal repercussions. In addition, even when they (representatives of the Black Church) engaging in inappropriate conduct, oftentimes members of the

church return to the trusted Judeo-Christian belief that all humans are sinners in need of forgiveness and that "men of the cloth," in particular, pastors, preachers, and ministers should receive the same grace. Thus, individuals in the congregation may feel or publicly state "Who are we to judge?" when allegations of misconduct, and specifically child abuse, occur.

Therefore, we assert this "Black System of Religious Privilege" makes poor Black children and their single-mothers more vulnerable to sexual exploitation and/or abuse. Since these individuals have few resources and greatly rely on the church for various forms of support, they may be may be less likely to report abuse lest others perceive them as being critical of religion and/or representatives of the church. In addition, this system operates on the micro level when single, Black mothers hear from the pulpit they should never be critical of religion and/or representatives of the church) and forgive child sexual predators for their inappropriate conduct. Essentially, these actions, whether direct or indirect, keeps children from speaking out and keeps families in a state of perpetual silence [See Figure **1** for a graphical representation of our conceptual model].
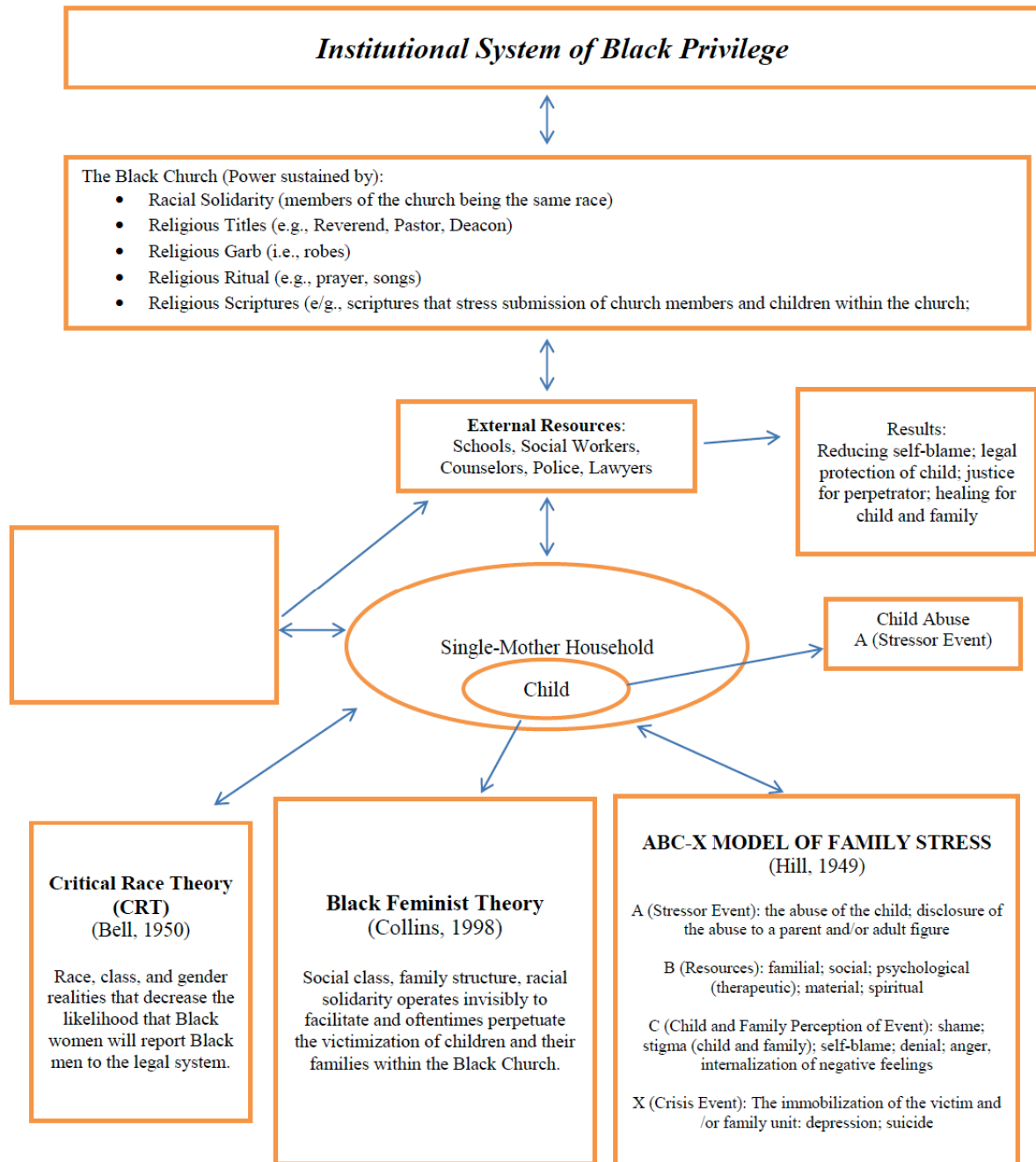

Figure 1: Institutional System of Black Privilege.

4. DISCUSSION

This paper provided a theoretical framework that examined the introduction and maintenance of childhood sexual abuse in religious institutions. To accomplish the goals set forth, we used Reuben Hill's [1] ABC-X model, Derrick Bell's [2] Critical Race Theory (CRT), and Feminist Theory to examine the introduction and maintenance of childhood sexual abuse within the context of a Black religious organization. In particular, we examined suspicion and/or knowledge regarding abuse (A); the resources to which the child and his/her family can rely in the wake of abuse (B); the meaning that the child and his or her family attributes to the abuse and the abuser (C); as well as how race, power, oppression, and church teachings directly and indirectly endorse various types of shame among child victims and their families, as well as maintain and solidify power hierarchies within Black Churches (X). In addition to providing different conceptualizations of shame among victims of child abuse and their families, in the following paragraphs, we provide recommendations regarding how Black Churches can minimize incidences of childhood sexual abuse as well as honor the primary goals of the Black Church.

4.1. Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework illustrates that the confluence of race, class and family structure in addition to the reverence that is often accorded to Black preachers may influence the way that congregants respond to allegations of child sexual abuse in the Black Church. As previously mentioned, the ABC-X Model of Family Stress provides a symbolic representation regarding how the stress associated with child abuse can negatively impact the child and his or her family. In the following paragraphs, we will discuss how child abuse heightens stress within the victim and their family, and possibly leads to family crisis, or the family's potential immobilization.

Essentially, the A, or the stressor event of Hill's [1] model is the child abuse, which would have a direct impact on the child in the form of shame and stigma. In addition to the negative effects that child abuse brings on the victim, the parent and/or various family members within the church may also experience "associative stigma". The "associative stigma" phenomenon occurs when members of the church have a very difficult time believing that someone in the church would sexually abuse a child, or in the worst case, refuse to acknowledge the abuse in the face of overwhelming evidence. The B part of Hill's [1] model is the resources on which the child and his or her family can rely. It is important to note here that these resources can be physical, emotional, social, or spiritual, or a combination of any of these forms of support. However, in order for the child to receive the help that he or she needs, it is essential that individuals believe the child in these situations. In this respect, the parent or parents must be a strong physical and emotional resource for the child, and must not automatically assume that the child is lying or misrepresenting the truth. In addition, schools, and in particular teachers, principals, and school counselors can be comforting social resources that children and their parents/families can rely during times like these. In addition, the legal system is a valuable resource that can simultaneously protect the child victim and bring the child abuser within the church to justice.

The C component of Hill's [1] model is how the victim and his or her family perceive the stressor event, or the child abuse. It is important to note that inconsistencies may exist between how the victim and his or her family perceives the abuse. The child may perceive the abuse a certain way, while the parents may perceive the abuse a different way. However, whether or not the family shares the same perception of the stressor event (the abuse) may be due in large part to how the child and his or her family perceive the Black Church, the religious leaders within that organization, as well as their perceptions regarding how prominent religious leaders in the church perceive them. To be clear, the child's parents may perceive the undivided attention a religious leader devotes to their child as admirable. Consequently, this may instill within parents a sense of pride (e.g., "There is obviously something special about my child for this religious leader to want to spend so much time with them and/or give them so much attention"), thereby viewing religious leaders (who are actually predators) as a "god send." However, when the abuse occurs, the child may internalize the shame and stigma oftentimes associated with abuse by perceiving the abuse as their own fault, or as retribution for something wrong that they did.

In her well-renowned book, *On Death and Dying: What the Dying have to teach Doctors, Nurses, Clergy, and their own Families*, Swiss American psychiatrist Elisabeth Kübler-Ross [92] identified denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance as the five stages that individuals generally go through when they learn about their impending mortality. Although our

mention of death may seem somewhat misplaced here, we believe that the anger part of this process is especially important for the injustice that motivates anger may impel the child victim and his or her parent to seek the help of external resources. Clearly put, anger motivates the child and his or her family to action. In addition, by seeking help from individuals outside of the church, the victimized child and his or her family may find the pathway to healing. The parent may initially deny the abuse, especially if they believe that religious leaders are naturally closer to God, altruistic, and do not have the capabilities to harm a child. However, we believe that denial is perhaps the worst form of behavior that a parent can exhibit on a child who has accused a religious leader of abuse because it states that the abuse never happened. Thus, the denial, simultaneously sustained by the parent, the perpetrator, and various church members essentially work together to silence the child and his or her parent. On the other hand, when denial turns to anger this may cause the parent to either become enraged that their child would lie on the religious leader, or may motivate them to involve others besides individuals within the church. Thus, parents that accept abuse or the possibility of their child being a victim of abuse by a religious leader within the church are in the best position because these parents will be more likely to look into the allegations and may thus be considerably more likely to avail themselves of external forms of support outside of the church. Essentially, when the child and the parent or parents do not perceive the abuse as their fault, they will be considerably more likely to involve outside entities, such as schools, social workers, counselors, police, and lawyers. When this occurs, the victim and his or her family are less likely to blame themselves for the abuse, avail themselves of the legal protections afforded child victims, obtain justice against the perpetrator of the abuse, and begin the healing process for the child and his or her family.

The X part of Hill's [1] model is the crisis that has the potential to immobilize the stability of the victim and the individuals within the family. Essentially this immobilization decreases the family's ability to think, act, and behave rationally and the family and the members within it stop functioning at their optimal level. During crisis, child abuse victims may exhibit some of the issues previously mentioned, such as depression or other behavioral problems, or in extreme cases suicide. In addition, it is also possible for child victims and their families who were previously highly involved with The Black Church to "lose their religion," or their faith in

God's ability to support them during time of difficulty. When this occurs, the child victim and his or her family may decrease or stop attending church, doubt the existence of God (agnostic) or no longer believe that God exists (atheist). Sadly, the family that has relied on the church for a great deal of financial, emotional, and spiritual support over the years may now retreat from their former level of involvement because the perpetrator not only refuses to publicly acknowledge the abuse, but sadly, has rallied others within the church to silence the victim. This immobilization may also be more complex due to the biblical teaching to "forgive" others and only allow other leaders within the church to handle the child abuse allegation, without involving outside (legal) authorities. Furthermore, this crisis is especially detrimental to the physical, emotional, psychological, and spiritual health and well-being of poor, marginalized Black children and their families that have traditionally relied on the church because it individually and collectively distances them from a form of support that they once regarded as safe, stable, and secure.

It is important to understand child sexual abuse from a Critical Race Theory (CRT) perspective because of the way that many people are silent because of a perceived devaluation of Black people in society. Just as Black women are less likely to report Black males to law enforcement because of a history of poor treatment of these men in the past, they may similarly be less likely to report Black pastors to law enforcement. Historically, Black pastors have been central to Black communities and have typically upheld the trust and responsibilities that many bestow upon them. Furthermore, as many Black people are taught not to judge Black pastors, it is often difficult to acknowledge the possibility that a pastor could be responsible for the sexual abuse of a child. In addition, in the event that the abuse is substantiated, parents may not be inclined to report the abuse to law enforcement for various reasons. Nevertheless, when perpetrators are not accountable for their actions, it sends mixed messages to victims. Additionally, in instances when individuals ignore sexual abuse, victims may be open to further trauma when the perpetrator/s and others expect them to pretend that the abuse did not happen.

Just as CRT examines the relationship among race, class and gender, Black Feminist Theory explains sexual abuse using these concepts. Numerous Black, female, single parent households often turn to the Black Church for various types of social and economic

support at different points in times. Hence, the leaders of these churches may play an integral role in the lives of the people who depend on their leadership and support. Furthermore, Black pastors are often viewed as positive male role models when the adult male is absent from many Black households. In addition, for families who are more involved in the church, these pastors may hold an even more significant role in their lives. For instance, parents may trust church leaders with the care of their children under the premise that these Christian leaders will love their children in a manner that is consistent with the teachings of the bible. Parents may feel like they know these leaders well and they may have no reasons to feel otherwise. However, some church leaders may take advantage of this trust to groom and victimize some of the more vulnerable members of the church. They may also use their position of authority to convince others that they did not commit these offenses against their accusers. Moreover, in some cases they may also use their status to seek forgiveness from the victim and the victim's family without receiving and legal punishment.

In some instances of child sexual abuse, it is also possible that members of the church will side with the pastor in a number of different ways. This may include people who live in denial and do not believe that the pastor is capable of committing such an unthinkable act. When this occurs, this results in the re-victimization of the accuser because this sends the victim the message that he or she has no voice. Another way that members may side with the pastor is by blaming the victim for the victimization and intimating that the victim is somehow responsible for the perpetration. Some may believe that the victim willingly participated in the sexual abuse for some type of personal gain. While the frequency of child sexual abuse in the Black Church has not been documented, any such abuses are too many. Because of the feelings of helplessness that often accompany social and economic marginality, many families who find themselves in these situations may feel like they are responsible for their own victimization. Hence, when children report abuse, they may be encouraged to remain silent because no one will believe them or they deserve what happened to them.

4.2. Recommendations

The primary goal of this paper is to identify ways that the Black Church may consciously and unconsciously produce and reinforce feelings of shame within childhood victims of sexual abuse and their families. Therefore, we provide the following three recommendations that can help protect the Black Church's most vulnerable members. Primarily, Black Churches must be aware of the potential for predatory members within and outside of their religious communities to abuse children. These churches should also be aware of the additional trauma that children may experience when they are unable to receive treatment because of social mores in the Black community. In the field of counseling, there has been a growing awareness of the important role the Black Church plays in African American communities; however, there seems to be little information regarding how counselors can collaborate with African American congregations to meet the mental health needs of African American clients. Given this reality, Adksion-Bradley, Johnson, Sanders, Duncan, and Holcomb-McCoy [93] place the onus on counselors. These scholars state "who are responsible for, or who desire to serve, African American Black Church congregants invest a considerable amount of time and energy in cultivating close relationships with African American churches, in general, and African American clergy, in particular, regarding the specific services that the counselors provide" [88, p. 152]. Specifically, these scholars recommend that counselors meet with church ministry groups, such as members of the usher board, trustees, deacons, choirs, and nurses guilds to during these meetings provide information regarding counseling referral procedures, provide tours of mental health agencies, and inform these individuals regarding the signs and symptoms of poor mental health functioning.

Given the soundness of these recommendations as well as their likelihood to facilitating collaborative relationships between the Black Church and counselors, we extend the aforementioned by recommending that open dialogue occurs within and across three ecological systems. First, we recommend that church entities be aware that children can be victims of individuals within and outside of the church. In this respect, these entities must be aware that some individuals within the church may use the church as a means to develop inappropriate relationships with children, the same as individuals with a history of pedophilia are attracted to school settings where children abound. Although this statement may result in anger, disbelief, or hostility by pastors and church staff, it recognizes the multiple contexts by which child sexual abuse can occur. Therefore, such an acknowledgement must encompass sensitivity, as the intent is not to incite undue fear or suspicion within

church bodies, but rather, to make them aware of the many ways in which Black children are disadvantaged, and may be vulnerable.

Secondly, open and honest dialogue must occur between parents and pastors within the Black Church. Given the increasing number of individuals who have admitted that members within the Black Church abused them, it is imperative that church staff verbally express to parents their vigilance in protecting their children. Furthermore, during these discussions, parents should ask members of the Black Church the specific disciplinary actions that will take place should they learn of such abuse and the specific actions that they will take to prevent such abuse from occurring. Added to this, the Black Church must make it clear that although forgiveness is one of the fundamental tenants of Christianity, forgiveness must recognize legal consequences for illegal behaviors. Ultimately, the goal of this parent-Black Church dialogue is to underscore to parents and members of the Black Church a shared responsibility in protecting Black children within the church.

Protecting the vulnerable members of the Black Church also entails providing the children in the Black Church with the necessary tools to protect themselves and the support necessary to talk to someone if they experience abuse. Deblinger and Runyon [94] examined past literature related to shame and identified several recommendations for preventing childhood sexual abuse. In particular, these scholars recommend that children avail themselves of psycho education "regarding abuse, violence, and healthy and nonviolent relationships, including information indicating that child abuse laws are to protect children from harm" (p. 372). Essentially, this requires children and their parents to implement a safety plan, use this plan in the therapeutic and home environments, and that children share the details of the abusive experiences and process related-thoughts and feelings. Therefore, it is particularly important that children who are victims of childhood sexual abuse receive individual attention from professional practitioners and that the family be actively involved in the healing of the child.

Third, the Black Church should directly link with organizations, and if qualified, provide therapy for victims of child abuse and their families. Valerio and Lepper [95] provided a therapeutic model that may help women survivors of child sexual abuse to minimize their feelings of sorrow and shame and increase feelings of self-esteem. Since childhood sexual abuse

(CSA) is enshrouded in secrecy in the context of dysfunctional family dynamics, long-term therapy groups that have implemented Core Conflictual Relationship Theme (CCRT) have allowed practitioners to identify the consistency between individual therapy and group therapy. More succinctly, women who transferred the weight of abuse from themselves to others and their relationships with others experienced healthier levels of cognitive functioning. Other scholars have discussed the association between sexual abuse, shame, and the quality of relationships.

Wager [36] found that adults who suddenly remember abuse in childhood may, even in the wake of this emotional and psychological trauma, demonstrate resilience, wisdom, and express a strong desire to prevent this abuse from happening to others. Thus, in spite of the trauma that they have experienced in their lives, these studies highlight the ability of victims of childhood sexual abuse to demonstrate resilience, or strength in the face of adversity. Essentially, shame or a "spoiled identity" [100] may lead child victims of abuse to internalize the abuse, blame themselves for the abuse, and not seek help by revealing the abuse to others.

Clearly, a child's sense of self is shattered when someone they and their parents believe they can unconditionally trust sexually abuses them. Saha, Chung, and Thorne [101] explored how the sense of self evolves through the recovery process after intensive therapy that focuses on issues pertaining to childhood sexual abuse (CSA). Essentially, the four women who participated in the study had a 'traumatized self' characterized by shame and guilt, which inadvertently led to self-perceptions of being insignificant and undeserving. After these women received intervention, their former sense of personal inadequacy transforms into increased self-awareness, self-acceptance and self-confidence. Most important, after receiving an intervention, these women were able to disentangle themselves from the burdens of guilt that they carried by shifting the responsibility of the abuse from themselves to the abuser. In addition to this, these women found that being part of a group with similar experiences allowed them to connect with others on a deeper level, resulted in enhanced feelings of solidarity and commonality with other women, and instilled within them a sense of optimism about the future.

Lastly, open and honest dialogue between parents and children may be one of the most salient relationships in minimizing or reducing childhood sexual abuse. Parents who establish open lines of

communication with their children provide a platform for children to talk to them about difficult situations. Furthermore, when parents establish good communication with their children when children are younger, they are more likely to continue these patterns throughout adolescence. Open communication with parents is essential in developing the trust necessary to share information about issues of sexual abuse. Moreover, children will be more likely to disclose information about sexual abuse if they believe that they will be safe from future harm.

In addition to discussing how parents and their children must talk about how children can protect themselves from abuse, it is also important to talk about disclosure of abuse with them, as well as the various contexts by which abuse can occur. Particularly as it relates to the latter, parents must specifically tell their children that individuals who prey on children are present in neighborhoods, on schoolyards, in malls, on the Internet, and churches. This acknowledgement does not negate the historical and contemporary value of the Black Church, but rather recognizes predators are anywhere. Furthermore, children and adults must learn to examine their faith, as well as the ways that their faith supports, and sometimes silences them. Again, this statement does not devalue the salience of any particular religion, but rather, acknowledges how church hierarches, scriptural passages, and the salience of the Black Church for most African Americans work to unconsciously and consciously silence victims of childhood sexual abuse.

CONCLUSION

At the onset of the paper, we provided a quote by Helen Keller, the American author, political activist, and lecturer, and at this point, it is important that we address her statement within the context of the institutional shame that facilitates and perpetuates childhood sexual abuse within the Black Church. According to Keller, human suffering and resilience can co-exist. As Black family scholars, we believe that in spite of the financial, social, academic, and structural weaknesses of Black families, it is vital that all members of the Black Church - pastor, clergy and lay members - make it their personal responsibility to actively protect their most vulnerable and inexperienced members from sexual harm.

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