

“Black Kinship Families and Culturally Appropriate Engagement” Transcript

Announcer:

Black Kinship Families and Culturally Appropriate Engagement. A conversation between Karyne Jones, president and CEO of NCBA, the National Caucus & Center on Black Aging, Incorporated – a partner of the Grandfamilies & Kinship Support Network – and Dr. Anita Thomas, executive vice president and provost at St. Catherine University in St. Paul, Minnesota.

Karyne Jones:

We're pleased to welcome a scholar, a university administrator, and an expert on African American families to our conversation today. Dr. Anita Thomas has led training seminars and workshops on multicultural issues for human service organizations, hospitals, and corporations around the country. Her acclaimed research includes the use of culturally affirming counseling approaches with African American families. Dr. Thomas is executive vice president and provost at St. Catherine University in St. Paul, Minnesota. And thank you so much, Dr. Thomas, for joining us today. We're honored to have you.

Dr. Anita Thomas:

Oh, thank you so much for having me.

Ms. Jones:

So let's just speak in generalities right now. What would be the first thing a representative, an employee with a human or social service organization should know about African American families?

Dr. Thomas:

Oh, that's a great question. I think that one of the first things that people should know about working with African American families is the importance of having a strength-based approach to working with families. We certainly know that historically, and even from the time of slavery, the systemic approach to separating families and the impact of all of that on our perceptions about African American families living in matriarchs has led to negative stereotypes about laziness and welfare moms and absent fathers. And actually, that's just not true. There are a number of strengths that African American families have, that collective sense of connection to each other, the importance of underlying spirituality, our sense of groundedness and harmony. Being rooted in that is really important. And so I would tell human service professionals that the negative perceptions, that deficit model, really is a detriment, a negative mindset to start working

with families. And that instead, we should really be looking from a strength-based approach to understanding the strengths, that sense of connection, and then really the strong bonds that African American families have based on that.

Ms. Jones:

Absolutely. And we know that millions of children in the United States are being reared by an older relative because children's biological parents cannot or are not willing to take care of them. So the term that we're using now is grandfamilies and kinship families. But this is a timeless tradition with African American families, isn't it?

Dr. Thomas:

It is. It's actually a tradition of all collective families. You can look around the globe and really think about that village approach to child-rearing and parenting. It's really just a different model in the United States and in other westernized countries where it's really the central nuclear family that is the base.

But traditionally, all heritage really focuses on the importance of those intergenerational connections and relationships and the importance of raising families. You see that in Indigenous and Native families here in the United States and really around the world.

Ms. Jones:

Yeah. I mean, nobody I know, particularly if they're Black, doesn't know somebody who wasn't raised by their grandmother.

Dr. Thomas:

Absolutely, absolutely.

Ms. Jones:

The terms Big Mama and all of those things all relate to how we related to family. And it was not out of the ordinary. It wasn't anything special. We know that whenever there was a child in need, it was just it automatically went to another family member, and they didn't have a title like grandfamilies or kinship families. It was just what we did.

Dr. Thomas:

Absolutely.

Ms. Jones:

Which is just part of our culture.

Dr. Thomas:

Absolutely. And I'm laughing. It really extends past. I mean, Nancy Boyd-Franklin is a psychologist, and she writes about five strengths of African American families, one of which is that fictive kinship network. So it's not just limited even to the extended family for African Americans. If you're raised in a religious household, it's everyone in the church. And I used to joke when I was young, everyone was aunt or uncle, certainly sir and

ma'am. And today I go, "Wait, they're not blood." But everyone connected in that larger extended African American community was important for your child-rearing. And you could be disciplined by anybody. You could be straightened out at any time by anybody. And I think that bolstered our sense of self, bolstered that sense of community and connection.

Ms. Jones:

I can't tell you how many play cousins I had. So that certainly went around with it. It's probably safe to say that most families do value their privacy, and particularly with African American families who are often a little leier with dealing with third party or outside interveners. Why is that?

Dr. Thomas:

It goes back to the legacy of slavery that I talked about. I don't necessarily say that it's a sense of privacy as much as anxiety that an outside entity, an institution, a system has power that could lead to separation in the family. So it's a guardedness and a protectiveness. This takes me back to that first question about, what should human service professionals know? I would say it's a protective paranoia. It's a protective anxiety and worry that really leads families to be much more private and to try to be more insular in what they share because of the history of families being separated and having systemic policies to enact that. When I was working with families as a psychologist, I would also talk to families about the importance of when I needed to make a report about something.

And I made a pledge as a psychologist in every family that I worked with where I might have to call in a Department of Children and Family Services, that I was going to do that with the family. And I was going to start as an advocate as their psychologist and say, "An issue has arisen. It probably needs to be investigated, but this family is here voluntarily already working with me. And my recommendation would be that I'm allowed to continue to provide them services." So when you think about our legacy of people being separated, the arguments we have about discipline and corporal punishment and those kinds of issues, all of which were actually protective for Black families, I think that families are not necessarily more private. It's nothing about privacy that we value more. It's a protective factor about not having children be taken away from the family.

Ms. Jones:

Absolutely. And so normally when something happens, wouldn't we turn more to our churches?

Dr. Thomas:

Absolutely.

Ms. Jones:

Our neighbors, our organizations that we know that we're familiar with rather than even go to a social service agency?

Dr. Thomas:

Yes, absolutely. I think that sense of the community coming together, as our legacy is, really has helped families to be able in hard times to get support, get resources, and to get that help. And you see that's one of those things against the system, even in Indigenous families, where there's much more of that child collective parenting where kids could be at multiple sets of households. From a dominant perspective and from a Child Protective Services, it looks like neglect. It's not. It's the culture wrapping their arms around the families and helping families to empower their own youth. So it's a value difference in that lens that really is important in terms of working with families.

Ms. Jones:

So let me just give you an example very quickly and then we'll be wrapping this up. A Black grandmother wants to know more about services that could assist her in financially or legally in rearing her grandchildren. Great nieces, nephews, what have you. What would be your advice to that grandmother?

Dr. Thomas:

Well, I do think actually starting with churches, with social support organizations, fraternities, sororities, for example, is the best way to go. It is important to find services that are culturally responsive. And I think if you start in our natural support services, you'll find connections to professionals, to social service providers who have that culturally sensitive lens, which is really critically important. I think that churches need to have a database of providers that they trust that they can then use as referrals to grandparents, families who need to have that support service. So we need to build our own sense of networks and communicate in that way. And I think that would be the first line for a lot of the families. I recommend a lot and tell my church we need our own directories of places to go so that that trust barrier is eliminated and people can then feel safe to get services.

Ms. Jones:

Sort of like a *Green Book* for grandfamilies.

Dr. Thomas:

Yes.

Ms. Jones:

So we're just working right now on trying to get those relatives who are taking care of younger children to even self-identify as a grandfamily or a kinship family. So we're just working on even the language that's out there, because they would see that and not necessarily know that that means me. That I can go there and get that kind of information. So we're working to try to improve that. And certainly the work that you're doing is going to help us because the research and certainly what you've done. So I just want to thank you very much for assisting us in this process. We certainly will be back in touch with you because of your knowledge and helping us moving forward to assist our community in taking advantage of all that's available to them.

Dr. Thomas:

Yes, it's been a delight. Thank you so much for reaching out to me.

Ms. Jones:

Thanks.

Announcer:

Additional resources are available at the Grandfamilies & Kinship Support Network website. That's gksnetwork.org. And at the website of Generations United, gu.org.

The Grandfamilies & Kinship Support Network: A National Technical Assistance Center (Network) helps government agencies and nonprofits in states, tribes, and territories work across jurisdictional and systemic boundaries to improve supports and services for families in which grandparents, other relatives, or close family friends are raising children whose parents are unable to do so. For more information, please visit www.GKSNetwork.org.

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