



Harnessing Social Networks: Exploring the Strengths and Resilience of Black Mothers in Child Welfare, an Interview with **Dr. Abigail Williams-Butler**

Dr. Heather Fox

Welcome to the *Translating Child Welfare Research Podcast*. How can we better support Black mothers? Consider helping them to capitalize on the strengths of those in their social networks. Our guest today is Dr. Abigail Williams-Butler, who is here to share with us her research examining Black mothers' social networks and their resilience.

I'm Dr. Heather Fox, and I'm your host for this episode of the *Translations Child Welfare Research Podcast*. The goal of this podcast is to provide child welfare professionals with timely and quality research information that supports their well-being and the well-being of the families they serve. Each month, we invite a researcher to highlight one finding or implication from their research. Visit our webpage to explore our podcast, read guest biographies, and access information about the research we feature in this podcast. Today, we are talking with Dr. Williams-Butler about her research showing the relationship between positive social networks, resilience, and confidence experienced by Black mothers.

Welcome, Dr. Williams-Butler. We are excited to meet with you today. Can we start with a brief introduction?

Dr. Abigail Williams-Butler

Thank you so much for having me today. My name is Dr. Abigail Williams-Butler. I'm an assistant professor at Rutgers University. My research interests are roughly threefold. First, I focus on using science to identify mechanisms to promote positive developmental outcomes for families and youth at increased risk of contact with child-serving systems, such as the child welfare system, juvenile justice system, and mental health systems. I also examine the intersectional nature of development and factors that influence this development over time. Lastly, I work on identifying innovative approaches toward trauma-informed care for youth and families involved with, or at increased risk of involvement with, child-serving systems. Particularly, I focus on outcomes for Black families and youth and the role that intersectionality plays in fostering positive developmental outcomes, really focusing on that strength-based approach. This study we're going to talk about today hits on all of them.

Dr. Heather Fox

Well, I'm really appreciative of all the work you do. I know that the research I've read is brilliant. Could you provide a high-level overview of the research we are focusing on today?

Dr. Abigail Williams-Butler

This study explores the positive and negative aspects of social relationships as they relate to parenting outcomes for Black moms in contact with child welfare services. While most of the literature uses a risk or deficit-based approach, this study explores parental strengths in addition to parental deficits, particularly as it relates to Black moms.

Dr. Heather Fox

I think taking the perspective of strengths when talking about the families we work with is such a great approach. I'm really looking forward to hearing more about how social networks play an important role in supporting Black mothers. Can you talk a little bit more about that finding?

Dr. Abigail Williams-Butler

The one point I'd like to highlight about this study is that we found an unexpected result based on the literature. I really attribute it to harnessing the cultural strengths of Black moms in contact with the child welfare system. We examined social networks in their two polarities—positivity and negativity in social networks. What we did, and I might nerd out here a little bit, is we created four different dichotomies: aversive network ties, ambivalent network ties, indifferent network ties, and supportive network ties. Supportive network ties are those ties we expect, where the person makes you feel good when you're frustrated—you can go to them for comfort. Aversive network ties are all negative—these are the ones that bring stress and drama.

Dr. Abigail Williams-Butler

There are two other areas as well: indifferent, where it's neither positive nor negative; and ambivalent, where it's high in both positivity and negativity. Life is messy, and relationships are complex. What we found is that moms with ambivalent ties—high in both positive and negative—were more likely to have parental resilience compared to those with indifferent or aversive ties.

Dr. Heather Fox

That's fascinating, and I appreciate the idea that life is messy—relationships are complex. You mentioned cultural strengths earlier, and I think that's important. Can you give any examples of the kinds of things you were thinking of when you referenced Black mothers and their cultural strengths?

Dr. Abigail Williams-Butler

One of the things particularly salient for Black American populations is the role of kin and fictive kin. Kin are family members related by blood or marriage, while fictive kin are those who aren't related by blood or marriage but are regarded as family. These relationships are often expected to fulfill the responsibilities of extended family members. You might call someone your cousin or

aunt, even if they're not related by blood, but they play that role. Research shows that while there are positives to these types of relationships, negatives can also emerge—such as differences in parenting practices or financial strain.

Dr. Abigail Williams-Butler

Given the context of Black moms in the U.S. and the structural inequities they face—racism, poverty, sexism, housing discrimination, criminal justice involvement, subpar maternal and child health rates—we wanted to see how these moms adapted to survive these challenges. This study focused on moms who were reported for child welfare cases, but their cases were unfounded. So, these moms were already resilient in that they had been reported but didn't have a case substantiated.

Dr. Heather Fox

That's a perfect lead into the next question. How would you translate what you've learned into child welfare practices?

Dr. Abigail Williams-Butler

I think, again, focusing on strengths. Current literature finds that negativity in relationships outweighs positivity in most cases, especially in deficit-based research. But our study, looking at this population, found that positivity in relationships played a significant role, even in the presence of negativity. These moms had more supportive relationships than not. So, we need to shift paradigms from focusing on deficits to recognizing and building on what's going well.

Dr. Abigail Williams-Butler

When we talk about community support, it relieves some pressure from moms. Even in the most supportive families, traditional gender norms place a lot of responsibility on mothers. Expanding support to include grandmothers, aunts, and cousins provides more equitable care and allows for thriving instead of just surviving.

Dr. Abigail Williams-Butler

Really, the key takeaway for child welfare professionals is to identify the strengths within the families they work with and capitalize on them.

Dr. Heather Fox

I love the examples of strengths you gave. It's critical to understand what people bring to the table, and I love the idea that relationships can be both supportive and complex. Can you talk a bit more about supporting positive social networks in child welfare?

Dr. Abigail Williams-Butler

Absolutely. What's important is recognizing the universal aspects of development while also considering culture and gender specificity. While this study focused on Black moms, there are applicable lessons for all mothers in care. Understanding what each family needs, instead of

assuming, is key. We need culturally and gender-responsive interventions that focus on the relational well-being of Black women, mothers, and youth in care.

Dr. Abigail Williams-Butler

Taking race and gender into account when interacting with clients is essential. Black moms, for instance, often live with the trauma related to racism, sexism, and other structural inequities. Child welfare interventions should consider these factors.

Dr. Abigail Williams-Butler

Focusing on culturally and gender-specific interventions that emphasize community and relationships can be transformative for these families.

Dr. Heather Fox

You mentioned earlier the paradigm of deserving versus undeserving mothers. Can you elaborate on why centering our work on strengths is important for child welfare?

Dr. Abigail Williams-Butler

Social welfare policy is often based on deservingness, where some mothers are seen as worthy of support while others are not. This deservingness is influenced by characteristics like race, marital status, and the number of children, and bias plays a significant role. An intersectional lens helps us better tailor interventions and meet the unique needs of mothers from various backgrounds.

Dr. Heather Fox

I agree. Sometimes cultural norms can skew how we perceive strengths. Collaborative childcare across apartments, for instance, could be seen as a lack of supervision, when in fact, it's a strength. Can you talk about cultural competency in this context?

Dr. Abigail Williams-Butler

Yes! I tell my students it's less about cultural competence and more about cultural humility. Cultural competence assumes you know what a group of people needs, but cultural humility involves asking, "What do you need?" Understanding that everyone is different—even within cultural groups—is critical.

Dr. Abigail Williams-Butler

When caseworkers come from different backgrounds, bias can creep into decision-making. It's essential to distinguish between surveillance and support.

Dr. Heather Fox

That speaks to the dangers of white saviorism, where the desire to help can overshadow the voices of those being helped. How do we avoid this in child welfare?

Dr. Abigail Williams-Butler

It's about asking what families need and recognizing that social networks may not look like what caseworkers expect. We need to step back and evaluate our judgments to ensure we're truly meeting the family's needs, rather than imposing our own biases.

Dr. Heather Fox

What are you thinking about for your next research project?

Dr. Abigail Williams-Butler

I'm continuing to explore the strengths of Black mothers in child protective services, focusing on trauma-informed parenting, intervention development, and addressing barriers to mental health service use.

Dr. Heather Fox

That's incredible. Where can listeners learn more?

Dr. Abigail Williams-Butler

The study is published in the *Journal of Social Service Review*, and it's open access, so anyone can read it.

Dr. Heather Fox

We'll link to it on our website. Thank you so much, Doctor Williams-Butler, for sharing your research.

Dr. Abigail Williams-Butler

Thank you, and I'd like to thank my co-authors, Dr. Rayco Boyd and Dr. Kristin Slack, for their collaboration.

Dr. Heather Fox

Your work is so important. Thank you for being with us today.

Dr. Abigail Williams-Butler

Thank you so much.

Dr. Heather Fox

Our gratitude goes out to the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign School of Social Work for its support of this podcast series. To our listeners, if you have feedback on the podcast, a topic you'd like to learn more about, or research to share, contact us at dcfs.orc.w@illinois.gov. Thank you for listening to the *Translating Child Welfare Research Podcast*.

The University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign School of Social Work is providing the content of this podcast series, with funding and support by the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services. The views, thoughts, and opinions expressed in this podcast are the speaker's own and do not represent the views, thoughts, and opinions of the University of Illinois or the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services. The material and information presented here are for general information purposes only and do not imply endorsement of or opposition to any specific organization, product, or service.