

Family Networks: Does Structure Effect Support?

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What is family?

I was brought up with a very traditional view of what a family is and does. In my small, rural hometown, a “family” consists of a mother, a father and several children. When one parent is absent, it’s usually for either a sad or socially unacceptable reason, neither of which is discussed freely. While my parents are very open-minded and don’t support that stereotype, I still believed for much of my life that non-traditional family structures were undesirable, even inferior. My family eats dinner together each night. I speak to them on the phone nearly every day, and share with them my successes and failures. At a point in my life where very little seems stable; my family is one of my greatest sources of strength and support. The constancy of my family structure means that I always have a strong network of support. Therefore, I believed going into this class that teens without a standard family structure might not feel as confident or supported as those with a “typical” home life.

In contrast to my very traditional family is Erica and Shawna’s¹ family. It is comprised of four children, each with a different father. The mother is currently married to the father of the youngest child, who was a strong presence in all of the children’s lives even before the marriage. Each of the children has a fairly close relationship with the husband, but very poor relationships with their biological fathers. Both girls identified their grandmother as a powerful role model and parental figure in their lives. They also repeatedly indicated the importance of extended family members such as aunts and cousins.

The purpose of this paper is to compare the definition of and support from family that I have with that of Erica Johnston and Shawna Pearson, two African American Pittsburgh teenagers who are half sisters. My traditionally structured family is a huge supporting factor in my life, and I wondered if their non-traditional one is as well. Is family a strong network of support for the girls? How, or is, that support affected by the fact that they’re half sisters? What is family to them? These are the questions that were on my mind going into my inquiry. To help me answer them, I invited a number of voices to my inquiry. Erica, Shawna, my mother and sister, several published sources, and, of course, my own experience and feelings, helped me to arrive at a reasonable conclusion.

In order to get a general sense of how they felt about their family as a support network, I asked Erica and Shawna to indicate which, out of the Forty Developmental Assets from the Search Institute’s list, were important and present in their lives. This simple action also gave me a great way to talk with the girls about their family without awkwardly posing some really personal questions.

To my surprise, both girls chose Positive Family Communication, Family Support, and Parental Involvement in Schooling as the three factors that they considered most important in their lives. This was almost unfathomable to me. Is it true that familial support is just as strong in Erica and Shawna’s family as it is in mine? Later, I spoke with the girls about their choices and asked them to tell me why they had chosen the three, and give an example of the presence of each in their lives. “Well,” Shawna said, “I just know that my mom’s there for me, and if there’s something at school, like a teacher not being fair, I call her and she’ll come take care of it.” Both teens said that they always feel like they have somewhere to go with problems. “I can’t tell my mom some stuff, but I can tell Shawna or my grandma, and they help me with it,” said Erica.

The choices the girls made and the reasons they gave weren't what I had anticipated. Their responses were very similar to mine. This was the first indication to me that our families might be similar functionally, even if not structurally.

Sibling rivalry or something deeper?

I am fortunate to have an incredibly supportive, free thinking, and loving family. I have wonderful relationships with both of my parents as well as my younger brother and sister. However, it wasn't until the last several years that my sister and I began to grow closer. We're close in age, only two years apart, and spent a great deal of time competing with each other over grades, boys, and the general attention of my parents. As we've gotten older, though, we've become the best of friends, supporting and helping each other rather than competing. I attribute a great deal of our closeness to my mother. For as long as I can remember, she has told stories of her three sisters and how well they all got along as they grew up. Through the stories, she established a sort of role model for how my relationship with my sister would be.

From the first day that I met Erica and Shawna, I noticed a tension between them. It was familiar to me, and I recognized it as the "sorta-mean-a-little-jealous-teasing" that had gone on for years between my sister and I. Erica smiled quietly in the corner while Shawna chided her for being silly. They called each other names, and pointed out each other's flaws to me. I noticed the constant power struggle between the two, each trying to make the other one go get her a snack or a drink. The competition between Erica and Shawna was readily apparent, but so, too, was the support. In our small group, they always sat together. They didn't say much to the group, but they had private conversations. Although they're not full sisters, they often address each other simply as "sister," calling much attention to the fact that they are related.

Being an analytical college student, I imagined that perhaps the tension between the two teens stemmed from their being half sisters. I guessed that they competed for the attention of their mother, and were distanced from each other by the fact that they aren't full sisters. I learned quickly that my assumptions are often not correct, and in this case, flat out wrong.

In our discussions, both girls admitted that they know their teasing probably hurts the other, just like I knew mine hurt my younger sister in years past. They each told me about their relationships with their fathers, Erica almost perfectly echoing Shawna's "I don't like him. I never wanna see him." This turned out to be a common bond for the girls. They each knew how the other felt about her father, and backed her up completely. "Yeah, I don't like her dad either – he's like mine," Erica said of Shawna's father. I was surprised yet again. Rather than being distanced from each other, Erica and Shawna had been brought closer together by their feelings toward their respective fathers. It is something about which they can completely relate to one and other – and probably only to one and other, thus creating a powerful and unique network of support.

Just the five of us. ...Or is it?

Another factor that came up repeatedly in our discussions is the importance of extended family. I'm very close to my immediate, nuclear family and my mother's youngest sister. I love and appreciate my large extended family, but don't have close personal relationships with them. On the other hand, Erica and Shawna rely extensively on non-nuclear family members for support and nurturing. The girls have a very large network of aunts, grandparents, and cousins with whom they have close relationships. Erica clearly expressed this during one of our discussions. I asked her two questions: whom she would go to first if she had a problem, and what she worries about. "My

grandma” was the definitive answer to both questions. Erica explained that because her mother needed to work to support the family, (the father wasn’t around), she had essentially been raised by her grandmother. I find it interesting that Erica may not have established such a close bond with her grandmother without her mother being forced to work out of the home due to an absent father. In this case, the non-traditional family structure actually fostered a supportive relationship that otherwise may not have developed to the extent that it did. Erica’s story coincides with what I found in a study in the book *Family Life in Black America*, which noted that the support of a large extended family even has a positive effect on the emotional health of many mothers. “...Mothers with a greater number of family members reported less need for emotional support from others... Grandmothers in African American families have been instrumental in providing for the needs of various family members, especially young, unmarried mothers and their children.” I was surprised by this passage because it basically said that what I see as non-traditional and different is actually commonplace in many African American families, indicating that race may be a factor, at least for me, in perceived levels of support.

Parental Influence – Trivial or Total?

I tried to go into this inquiry with an open mind. However, I definitely had assumptions as to what I thought would find out about family structure as a measure of support. As the inquiry progressed, and I found that the vast majority of those assumptions were incorrect, I began to wonder why I had thought such things. I consider myself a fairly liberal individual, and don’t like to fall prey to stereotypes, but that was exactly what was happening. Why hadn’t I expected Erica and Shawna to have the same level of support that I do? I spoke to my mother about it informally, and found my answer. When I brought up the girls and their family, my mother said, “Oh, isn’t that too bad, those poor kids have probably been through so much.” Her remark, although intended as sympathetic, opened my eyes to the effect that my parents have had on the shaping of my views on family structure. In my family, divorce and children born out of wedlock are “too bad.” They come with connotations of hard times and spent emotions. In making assumptions, I wasn’t judging Erica and Shawna’s family, but interpreting their situation in my context, which is not the same.

By example, my parents taught me that a family is a mother, father, sister and brother who help, love, and laugh with each other. Shawna and Erica’s definition is different, but their values and benefits are not.

And then I realized...

The support levels in my family and Erica and Shawna’s family are far more similar than I ever would have thought. My support comes from knowing that my parents will always be around and willing to help me achieve my dreams. Shawna and Erica’s also comes from knowing that their mother, grandmother, and stepfather are there for them for the same reasons. Sure, the figures are different, but the purpose and intent are the same. The girls depend greatly on each other for help and support through many of the trials and tribulations of adolescence, much as my sister and I did, and continue to do.

At first glance, I thought that my family was much stronger and more supportive than Erica and Shawna’s. Taking a closer, more personal look has made me realize that everything isn’t what it superficially appears to be. Although the path that my family has taken to provide me with a supportive and loving environment differs greatly from that of Erica and Shawna’s, the end result is the same. I would have never thought that what I consider to be a “broken home” could produce chil-

dren who felt confident and supported by a strong family network. If there's one thing that I've learned from this class as well as this inquiry, it is to expect the unexpected, especially when it comes to relationships. People are far too complex to be governed by the narrow stereotypes that exist so freely in our society.

I realize now that I can't make a broad generalization about the effect of family structure on levels of support because personal relationships aren't that easy to classify. It is people who determine the support and love in a family, not the titles that they have or the way that they live.

¹ Names have been changed to protect privacy.