Semira Gibbons Family
Case Study

Family Background: Born in Mississippi of a traditional African-American family who owned their own small farm, Semira moved to Syracuse at the age of 14 years to live with her Aunt, Constance Green. Her parents sent her to her Aunt's (mother's sister) to remove her from danger as she had attracted negative attention (through no fault of her own) and was being threatened. Semira completed her high school education and entered the local state college with the intention of becoming a teacher. In her sophomore year, Semira became pregnant and left college. Her son, Lucas, was born healthy but small. Shortly after Lucas's birth, his father, Aaron Williams, joined the military and was transferred to Europe. There is very little contact between Lucas and his Dad, although he does know him. Small portions of Aaron William's military wages are garnished for child support. Lucas is now 11 years old and in sixth grade. Semira has birthed all 5 of her children by the age of 30. The last 2 children are with her live-in partner of 5 years, Ronald White.

Semira is the primary breadwinner in the family working as a teaching assistant in the local school district. Ronald, who is also African American, is finding it difficult to get or keep jobs. He is talented with his hands and finds temporary work as a carpenter on occasion. He primarily takes care of the children except on the two weekdays that Semira's Aunt Constance watches the younger one's. Aunt Constance is a steady support to Semira but finds Ronald to be less ambitious than she would want for her niece. She is also concerned that his lack of education is holding him back. He has never met Semira's family in the south. Semira, her children and, Ronald (infrequently) attend the AME Christ Memorial Church near their Aunt's home.

Semira's other children are Kayla (age 9), Denise (age 7), Ahem (age 4) and Kamaria (age 2). Lucas and Kayla are very helpful with their younger siblings and all the children appear to be very close to one another. They are well fed with the help of Food Stamps and seem to be healthy. Ahem may be showing signs of ADHD but Semira does not want him tested and resists any labels placed on him. She states he is fine and just needs discipline. Ahem is in a Head Start program. Kayla and Denise's father, Trey, was murdered about 6 years ago in a gang style killing. This event has affected Lucas the most; who was six years old at the time and very close to Trey. Semira was also very frightened at the time and moved her young family frequently. She was forced to take public assistance, as she was unable to work, care for her young children and keep them protected. It is through a work program that she secured her current position, which she loves very much. Semira receives no death benefits for Kayla and Denise because she was not married to their father.

Presenting Problem: A Child Protective Services (CPS) report has been called in on Ronald after a store clerk in Shoppingtown Mall observed him hitting Ahem for wetting his pants and then leaving Kayla (age 9) alone with Kamaria (age 2) while he went to the men's room to clean Ahem up. In addition, Lucas has been caught by the Truancy Officer for the 4th time in the last 2 months hanging out during school hours at a street corner known to be frequented by drug dealers. Semira has approached this worker for help in dealing with these crises. After a period of stability, she sees all that she has worked for falling apart. She is particularly concerned that Ronald's actions have been misinterpreted. As parents, she and Ronald believe in a good spanking when warranted but claims it is always done with love. Her pastor backs them up. Lucas she is truly concerned about and is contemplating sending him to Mississippi to live with her family and remove him from the evil influences.

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Familial Strengths and Stressors:

Couple Relationship Strengths and Stressors:

What are the African American Cultural factors present

What are the developmental tasks of this family (based on Minuchin's model)?

How do these tasks, good or bad, impact the couple relationship?

How, if any, does it (the impact of the couple's developmental tasks) "trickle down" to the children?

Alternate Possible Questions:

Is marriage in their future? Should they remain in a state of cohabitation (Edin, et al., 2004)?

Macro Social Forces:

What difference would it have made if Semira had received couple intervention prior to the birth of her children with Trey and again with Ronald (Dion, et al., 2004)?

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Familial Strengths:
Semira's education – some college education
Small child support stipend from Aaron Williams
Semira's stable employment as Asst. Teacher. Hours also support family life.
Extended family support in Aunt Constance.
Children care for one another. Children are close.
Connected to financial supports such as food stamps.
Religious affiliation.
Head Start affiliation

African-American Cultural Forces:
Shared parenting of children (Semira sent north to Aunt Constance)
Discipline Styles
Multi-generational involvement

Familial Relationships Stressors:
First son Lucas has little contact with Dad
Five children – large family. All born before Semira turned 30 years old.
Ronald accepts responsibility for the children
Aunt Constance does not totally support Ronald and Semira's relationship.
Father of 2 of children (Trey) was killed by a gang, Lucas lost 2nd father figure. No benefits for his children.
One child has "issues" maybe ADHD which Mother is denying.
Frequent moves when children were young – security issues and forced to be on public assistance
Lucas truancy and possible association with drugs/drug dealers

Couple Relationship Strengths and Stressors:
Strength – shared commitment to children, role flexibility (Ronald cares for kids)

What are the developmental tasks of this family (based on Minuchin's model)?

See attached chart

How do these tasks, good or bad, impact the couple relationship?

Negotiating and guiding the developmental tasks of children is difficult for Ron and Semira as Ron is not the biological nor legal father for 3 of the 5 children.

Extended family issues in terms of boundaries and approval with Aunt Constance

Strength – shared commitment to children, role flexibility (Ronald cares for kids)

In terms of clarifying family roles: Fathers are often seen as incompetent caregivers and at times not even necessary. This could impact how the larger society views Ron as well as Semira and Constance.

Organizing worklife – Semira as breadwinner and relatively new to the workforce. Ron is inconsistently engaged in work outside of the home. Is his role at home valued? Is his vocational needs being addressed?

How, if any, does it (the impact of the couple's developmental tasks) "trickle down" to the children?

Two parents working would provide more economic resources
Pregnancy and birth of a child are key life cycle points to strengthen a relationship

Is marriage in their future? Should they remain in a state of cohabitation (Edin, et al., 2004)?

Macro Social Forces:

Racism: Financial strain due to difficulty of Ronald in securing full time stable employement
Report made by Shoppingtown clerk

What difference would it have made if Semira had received couple intervention prior to the birth of her children with Trey and again with Ronald (Dion, et al., 2004)?

Preganancy and birth of a child are key life cycle points to strengthen a relationship