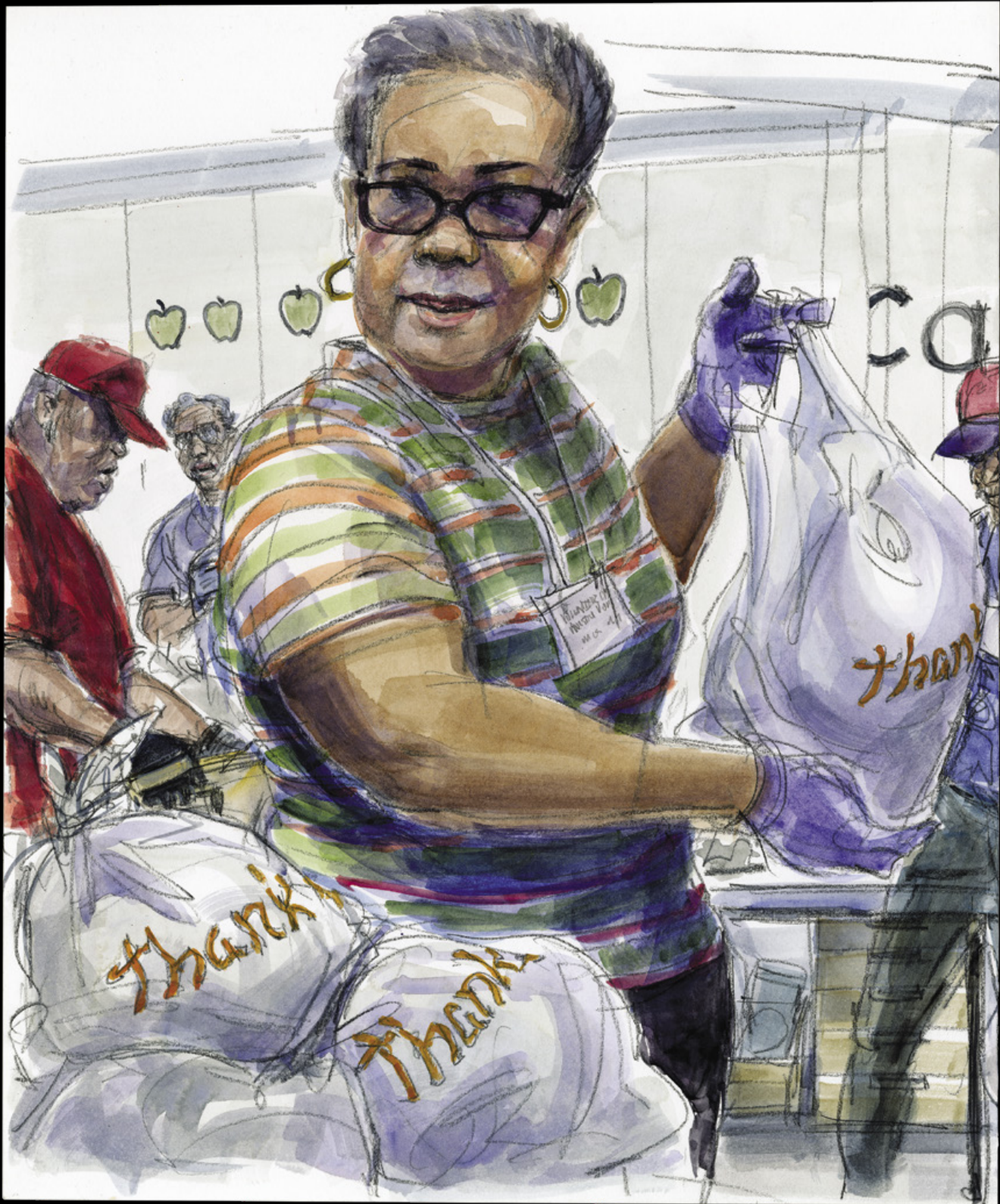
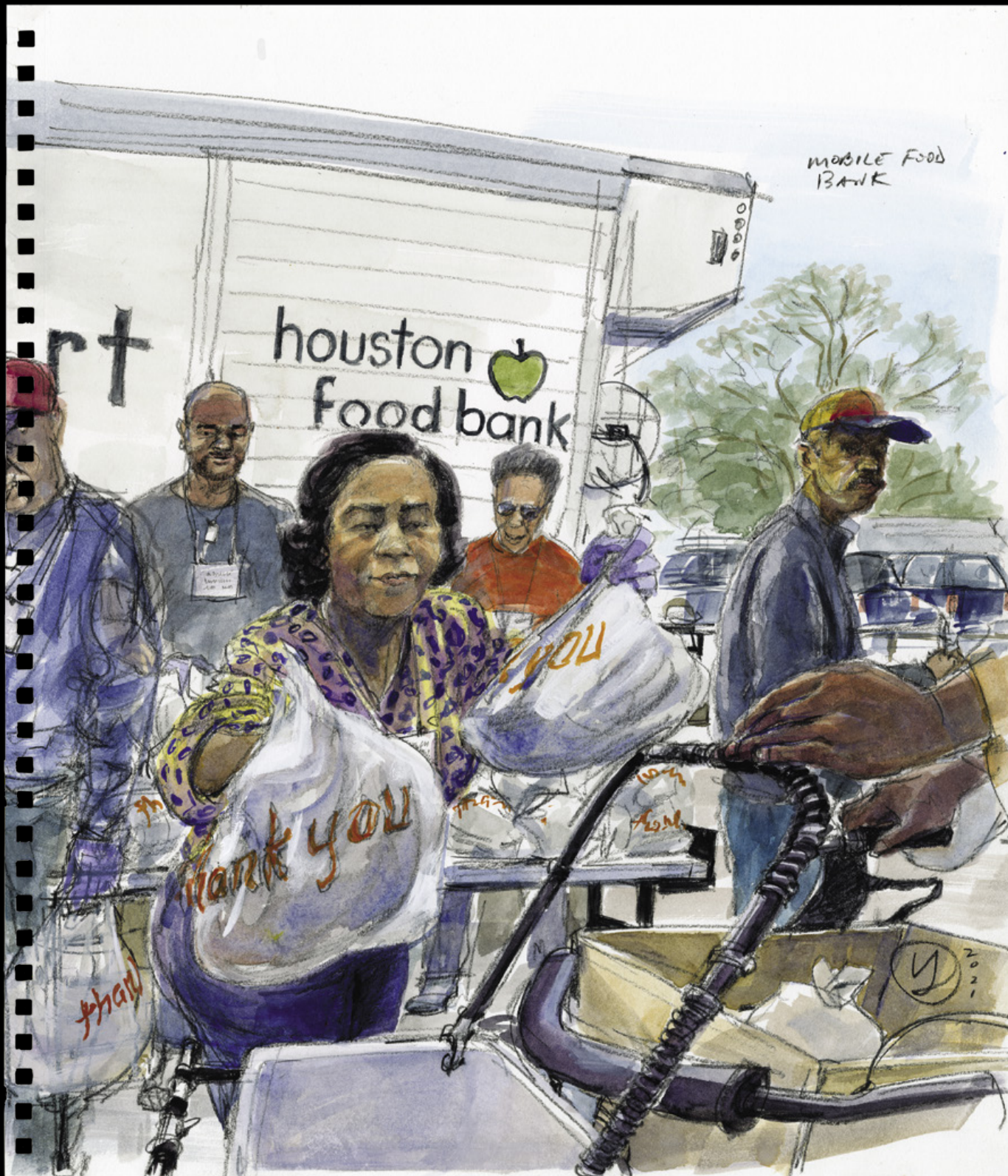




PSYCHOLOGY Social Resilien



Underserved Black communities are often depicted as dysfunctional. Their resiliency has long been overlooked

By Nancy Averett | Illustrations by Victor Juhasz

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OOD EVENING,” JACQUELINE MATTIS SAYS, SETTING A GLASS OF WATER down on a podium in the downtown branch of the Ann Arbor District Library in Michigan. The audience, mostly white and middle-aged, murmurs, “Good evening.”

“Oh, no, no, no, no,” Mattis says in a silky voice, holding up her hands in mock surprise. “I study religion. I study religion in the Black context, so let’s start this again: good evening!”

“Good evening!” the crowd exclaims in return.

Mattis nods, and when a man adds, “Amen!” her smile widens. “Better response,” she says, pointing at him. “Better response!”

It is January 2020, and Mattis, a professor of psychology and dean of faculty at the School of Arts and Sciences at Rutgers in Newark, N.J., is discussing her latest research subject: the transformative power of love and altruism among urban-residing Black people in the U.S. She shares a story about an interview she did with a young woman—referred to by the pseudonym “Saniyka”—who showed up at a homeless encampment when she was 15, along with her four younger siblings. The adults there quickly became surrogate parents, sharing their tents, washing the children’s clothes and providing food. They were persistent about education and an alternative vision of the future. By the time Saniyka was a high school senior, she had the highest grades in her class. Her tent-city parents saved money to fund her college application fees.

The audience is rapt during the story, as Mattis figured they would be. Although many appear surprised to hear that people with so little would give so much, she is not. Mattis grew up in majority-Black neighborhoods—first in Kingston, Jamaica, then in the Bronx—where people lacked access to the rights, resources and opportunities that were enjoyed by white residents nearby. Mattis had caring, hardworking neighbors who looked out for one another. Yet as a young adult, she noticed that the media often portrayed such places as rife with violence and dysfunctional families and populated by weak, despairing people. In col-

lege she struggled when her professors described depravity and chaos in poor neighborhoods but never mentioned the grandmothers who used what little food they had to cook a meal for someone down the street who had even less. “Growing up that way and then hearing the [media and academic] representation of those spaces,” she says, “I couldn’t make sense of it. What I was reading didn’t match my lived experience.”

That dissonance led Mattis to pursue positive psychology research, which focuses on individuals’ and communities’ strengths rather than their deficits. Mattis and other researchers are examining how people in poorer communities subject to discrimination can achieve high levels of social capital, which is the ability to solve problems and thrive by forming mutually trusting, engaged relationships and networks. These particular social ties often bring about desired outcomes that would not be achieved in isolation.

Some researchers, however, believe social capital is the domain of the middle class or wealthy; that distressed or low-income communities cannot manufacture it themselves and therefore rely on interventions to build social capital. In fact, Mattis and other Black researchers have found that even in the most resource-poor neighborhoods, high levels of social capital not only exist but are used as a means to buffer the community against systematic oppression. In a world racked by a pandemic and climate disasters, this form of social consciousness, they say, should be celebrated and deeply studied.

RESILIENCE FROM SOCIAL CAPITAL

THE ROOTS of social capital can be found in the musings of 18th- and 19th-century intellectuals such as Alexis de Tocqueville, who on a visit to the U.S. in 1830 discovered that Americans loved to join associations and that such groups had positive effects on their members. “Feelings and ideas are renewed,” he wrote, “the heart enlarged, and the understanding developed only by the reciprocal action of men one upon another.” The term first turned up in the social science literature in 1916, when L. J. Hanifan, a progressive serving as West Virginia’s state supervisor of rural schools, used it to argue for community involvement in schools. “The individual is helpless socially, if left entirely to himself,” he wrote. “If he may come into contact with his neighbor ... there will be an accumulation of social capital, which may immediately satisfy his social needs and which may bear a social potentiality sufficient to the substantial improvement of living conditions in the whole community.”

“Social capital” has been used among scholars of economics, politics, anthropology and psychology. It caught the greater public’s eye when political science professor Robert D. Putnam of Harvard University published his best-selling 2000 book, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. In it, Putnam laments the decline of mainstream America’s social clubs such as softball leagues, parent-teacher associations and Rotary Clubs, saying we have become so focused on individualism that we even bowl alone rather than in leagues. Putnam attributes this decline to such forces as suburbanization, increased television watching and generational shifts—people who grew up during the stress of the Great Depression and World War II, he says, felt the pull of community in a way that their children and grandchildren did not. He worries that this movement away from social and civic engagement has eroded democracy.

Other scholars elaborated on Putnam’s hypotheses about increasing isolation. Harvard sociologist Theda Skocpol has argued that it is driven in part by wealthy Americans who may support professional nonprofits such as the Sierra Club or AARP but are less likely to participate in local grassroots groups. Matthew Crenson and Benjamin Ginsberg, political scientists at Johns Hopkins University, blame it on a range of factors that made it less likely citizens would band together to push the government to listen. For instance, a rise in litigation shifted the action of forcing legislators to change or enact laws from citizen organizing to advocacy groups working through the courts. And before the switch to an all-volunteer professional army, citizen soldiers who were drafted alongside their neighbors and friends made demands such as the expansion of voting rights to 18-year-olds.

Others fault social media for giving a false sense of civic engagement. In 2018 Eitan Hersh, a political science professor at Tufts University, found that a third of surveyed Americans reported spending two hours or more on politics every day. Yet those two hours were nearly always focused on consuming political news, arguing about politics online and thinking about politics. This “political hobbyism,” he says, threatens our democracy because it takes up the time of well-meaning citizens who might otherwise be pursuing real political power by attending local planning meetings or knocking on doors to engage neighbors.

Examples from other nations show that social capital often improves mental health. For instance, social epidemiologist Ichiro Kawachi of Harvard has found that older survivors of a Japanese earthquake who had to move to temporary housing and

therefore lost their long-standing social connections suffered greater cognitive decline than those who were able to remain in their homes. Epidemiologist Helen L. Berry of the University of Sydney has found examples of how collective responses to natural disasters can increase social capital. For instance, after Oxford, England, was inundated with floods six times in 10 years, an alliance formed in 2007 to work on flood-readiness projects. Berry insists that government leaders must address structural problems that harm communities. At the same time, when residents got together to learn how to install concrete blockades during flood warnings, it gave them a sense of achievement. “Acting for the greater good is powerfully protective of mental health,” Berry says.

Most social capital studies—as with most kinds of research—typically focus on white, middle-class people. Some researchers have even doubted that social capital can really take hold in marginalized communities because of pervasive poverty. For instance, in his 2015 book, *Our Kids: The American Dream in Crisis*, Putnam argues there must be an extremely low level of social capital among poor families in the U.S. because they often do not have two parents at home, are less likely to attend church, and find few opportunities to participate in youth sports, scouts and other activities. The examples he uses to make his argument—such as a boy who grew up in a New Orleans housing project who brags about beating up other kids—are the kind that frustrate Mattis.

She, along with other Black researchers and Black community leaders, argues that social capital can be found in poor and marginalized neighborhoods if one bothers to look. “There have always existed pockets of resilience and agency embedded within even the most marginalized urban spaces,” wrote LeConté Dill, a professor at Michigan State University, in a 2011 paper. While earning her doctorate at the University of California, Berkeley, Dill became interested in the protective factors that create resilience. She spent a summer observing the East Oakland Youth Development Center (EOYDC), where teenagers can participate in hip-hop dance classes, seminars on the Black experience, a “pathway to college” program, and more. One of those teenagers was Lanique Howard, who grew up in a single-parent household in one of the area’s poorest neighborhoods. While Howard’s mother was working double shifts, Regina Jackson, who is president and CEO of the center, would drive Howard to the only post office open late so she could mail off yet another batch of scholarship applications.

The first in her family to get a college degree, Howard recently earned her doctorate in social work, and this year she was chosen by the Biden administration to join the Department of Health and Human Services’ Administration for Children and Families. By supporting the development of individual resilience, Jackson has created a community of thriving young adults who then reach back to offer advice and encouragement—personal tours of their college campuses; job leads—to the current teens who are coming up through EOYDC’s programming. Dill calls this “bridging” social capital because it can improve the teens’ social mobility. She also identified a type of interpersonal social capital that people draw on to “get by” and cope with daily problems—what Jackson describes in lay terms as encouraging a sense of “personal sustainability” in the teens “so they believe that they deserve to be successful.” Jackson’s charges often return to the Oakland area to work so they can help their old neighborhoods, thus building even more community resilience.



Dill and Mattis, as well as other researchers in psychology, social work, epidemiology, public health, and other fields, are building up a body of published evidence showing that a current of collectivism runs through majority-Black enclaves that can help make people more resilient than they might be otherwise. Their work has sometimes met with skepticism. Mattis, for example, says peer-reviewers have accused her of making up the personal stories of altruism that she has gathered from people she has interviewed (she offered to let them listen to recordings), and some scholars have told her it is irresponsible to study goodness in poor urban spaces because it might give the impression that there are not big problems in places affected by structural racism and inequality.

Mattis counters that it is misleading to ignore altruism and how it helps people cultivate social capital. During the COVID pandemic, scholars have noted how an extreme focus on individualism in American culture has led to tragic results. But that is too sweeping an assessment. “In the Black community, we have to take care of ourselves,” says Traci Blackmon, a Missouri pastor. In the early days of the pandemic, her church collected 30,000 masks and many gal-

lons of hand sanitizer to give to Black frontline workers such as bus drivers, grocery store clerks and cafeteria workers. “Black people, in my opinion, and all nonwhite people have this sense of community embedded in our DNA out of necessity that says we have to share what we have in order for everyone to be okay.” These altruistic behaviors, Mattis says, “reinforce the fact that you’re fully human in a world that doesn’t tell you that you’re fully human. That gives you a different picture of yourself.”

Because so many things in society—democracy, saving lives during a pandemic, action on climate change—work better when we have strong social capital, it makes sense to study how it is created and sustained. Understanding how it manifests in majority-Black communities, Mattis says, could inform efforts to strengthen society overall.

SPIRITUALITY IS WHEN YOU’VE BEEN TO HELL

COLLECTIVISM in Black communities—what some social scientists have called the “Black helping tradition”—can be traced back to at least the late 1700s, when two formerly enslaved men, Richard Allen and Absalom Jones, founded the Free African Society, a mutual-aid society that eventually led to the first U.S. Black religious denomination: African Methodist Episcopal. The society gave newly freed people goods and services they could not get elsewhere: money, jobs, education, clothes, health care and religious instruction.

Churches were some of the few places where Black Americans could gather safely for any kind of public discourse. Martin Luther King, Jr., famously used the church in the fight for civil rights, and the Black Panthers held free breakfasts for Black children in church basements. “For Blacks especially, churches provide an opportunity to be civically engaged with a protective covering of unity and support,” wrote Keon Gilbert, a behavioral sciences professor at St. Louis University, and Lorraine Dean, an epidemiologist at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, in their research looking at health and political advocacy.

Mattis began studying religion and spirituality and their connection to the psychological welfare of the Black community by using surveys and in-depth interviews when she was in graduate school at the University of Michigan. At the time, she was struggling with her mother’s exhortation—“You have a responsibility to tell our story”—and the often negative portrayals her professors shared about people in majority-Black neighborhoods. She knew from personal experience that religion and spirituality had helped instill resiliency in her neighbors, allowing them to remain hopeful despite their unjust circumstances and to create a sense

of responsibility toward one another. “It was the thing that helped everyone I knew live lives of dignity,” she says.

Her work has shown that many Black Americans take solace in a kind of racial righteousness—a conviction that racism is a sin in the eyes of God and that Jesus, who championed the oppressed, is on their side—and this belief is a source of optimism. She has also found a distinction between religion and spirituality. As one woman she interviewed put it: “Religion is what you do when you’re afraid of going to hell, and spirituality is what you do when you’ve already been there.” That sentiment, Mattis says, “captures what happens when life really pushes you to your limits. You develop a personal sense of what’s sacred, what’s important.”

She points out that it is a relationship that does not always sit well with mainstream, predominantly white psychology. Sigmund Freud notably described religions as escapist, illogical and pathological responses to adversity and existential angst. The push for psychology to become evidence-based has led many scholars to shy away from looking at religion and spirituality as relevant to mental health. Further complicating the matter is the fact that studies also show that psychologists and therapists overwhelmingly identify as atheist or agnostic. “As a young student, I learned early on that social work was a secular field and that people who have a strong faith background almost have to be prepared to tuck it in their pocket,” says Ratonia Runnels, an assistant professor of social work at Texas Woman’s University, who nonetheless studies how religion might be integrated into social work.

In 2011 Runnels published a study looking at how Black survivors of Hurricane Katrina used spirituality and religion to cope. She and her co-authors analyzed interviews with 52 Black survivors and 98 service providers described as government officials, therapists, social workers, pastors, case managers and volunteers. Their work showed that the secular providers were surprised by the survivors’ deep faith. They also found that some pastors were treated with hostility. One pastor said he was rebuffed when he tried to counsel survivors at a shelter; officials told him they had medical staff to take care of physical needs and mental health workers to take care of mental health needs. The man said he pointed out that there was another component, people’s spiritual needs, but was turned away.

As a Black woman who is religious herself, Runnels understands that the spirituality found in Black churches—a belief that a higher power is looking out for the congregants—inspires people to be the embodiment of that power by taking care of one another. Black liberationist theology, which emerged during the Civil Rights Movement, emphasizes that social action on behalf of the Black community is part of the spiritual responsibility of the faithful. And because worshippers share a similar identity and values—two things that Putnam says are key—social capital flows in such spaces.

Charles X. White of Houston, a school safety consultant by day and a community worker by night, sometimes uses churches to hold his long-running series of community breakfasts focused on civic engagement. The attendees, mostly older women, recite a pledge in which they promise to work to better their neighborhoods. Between bites of biscuits and gravy, they listen as White, who speaks in a deep baritone, introduces speakers such as politicians looking for help getting out the vote, city health and human services workers explaining how to file pollution complaints, and county police officers demonstrating evacuation techniques for extreme weather events. The last is a crucial topic to his audience. After suffering through Hurricane Harvey in 2017,

people want to be more prepared for the next storm, but they are not confident that they can be. Some worry that if they are too pushy—say, insisting that public works employees clear debris from drainage ditches near their homes to prevent flooding—city workers might retaliate by sending police to harass them. “There’s a lot of fear,” says White, who encourages his attendees to overcome anxieties and take action by giving them hard facts such as a copy of the city code on drainage-ditch maintenance. “When people are uncertain, they don’t push,” he says. “But most people get emboldened once they know they’re right. They’ll hold up this piece of paper and say, ‘Hey, look, man, this is what the code says!’”

There is evidence that White’s breakfasts are doing exactly what Kawachi and Berry say social capital does: bolstering people’s psyches. Two months after Harvey hit, Garrett Sansom, an associate professor at Texas A&M’s School of Public Health, came to a breakfast meeting to see whether he could gauge how a group of Houston’s low-income Black residents were faring after the storm. Sansom administered the 12-item Short-Form Health Survey, a standard public health tool that measures physical and mental health, to the 153 people in the audience. The results surprised him. The survey almost always shows a correlation between physical and mental health scores—if one is low, so is the other. “That’s been shown across lots of different communities, including the African-American community,” he says. “But what we found was that in this group, even though they had greatly reduced physical health scores ... they actually had higher mental health scores.” In other words, despite living in neighborhoods that suffered some of the worst impacts of the storm, they were less depressed, traumatized and anxious than other people in the area.

Mattis knows well the positive effects of social capital on mental health. Yet she cautions against using conventional definitions of success as proof of resilience. At the library in Ann Arbor, her story about Saniyka, the valedictorian, doesn’t have an obvious fairy-tale ending. Saniyka still dreams of going to college but for a variety of reasons has not yet attended one. Nevertheless, the young woman is employed at a nonprofit that works with vulnerable people. Having been homeless herself (she now shares a one-bedroom apartment with four people she met in the tent city), Saniyka has thrived in this position, according to Mattis. Saniyka approaches people she meets on the street and engages them in conversation, hoping to learn their hidden talents and encourage them to contribute to her organization. She recognizes that every person has something valuable to offer—a perspective that Mattis shares.

If academics, policy makers and others in the mainstream fail to see the social capital in marginalized communities—the ways people cope and even thrive in very difficult circumstances—then society as a whole suffers, she says. “You see people who are much better resourced than [Saniyka], who sort of lapse into this mindset of hopelessness and selfishness in the face of adversity,” Mattis explains. “And she, instead of looking inward and becoming isolated, takes all those experiences and decides to focus outward on changing the world so it doesn’t have to look that way for others.” SA

FROM OUR ARCHIVES

The Biggest Psychological Experiment. Lydia Denworth; July 2020.

scientificamerican.com/magazine/sa