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B LACK FAMILY RESEARCH has a long and complex history. Scholarly investigations of the quality of black family life have ranged from challenging, even denying the very existence of, to panegyrical praise of the Afro-American conjugal group.

In examining the history of black family research two distinct approaches have emerged, *a mainstream and dissenting approach.* At times, these two frameworks have appeared superficially similar, with both approaches considering the black family in terms of poverty and acculturation. Articulators of the early dissenting perspective have pointed to slavery, the novelty and pressure of urban life and limited economic opportunities as hampering the black conjugal unit's stability. The contemporary mainstream argument diagnosed the ailments of the black family as economic and cultural deprivation. However, the analysis presumably depended on distinguishing the family as singularly responsible for perpetuating a "culture of poverty."

Early mainstream studies were based initially on the presumption that black culture was absent and that black people were void of any meaningful institutions, including the family (Frederick Hoffman, 1896; Howard Odum, 1910; A. H. Shannon, 1930; William Thomas, 1901). Blamed for the apparent demise of the black family was the destructive legacy of slavery and the so-called primitive African culture which blacks brought to the New World. In response to mainstream's overwhelmingly negative portrayal of Afro-American life, dissenting scholarship offered alternative explanations. These dissenting studies, beginning with DuBois's two notable sociological works, *The Philadelphia Negro (1899)* and *The Negro American Family (1908)* and concluding with the impressive 1945 Chicago study of Drake and Cayton, *Black Metropolis,* showed that the black family was servicing many of its members' needs, albeit under wretched conditions.

Although mainstream social scientists have acknowledged the presence of the Afro-American family, it is best understood as an inadequate version of the white family and a producer of social deviancy (Ernest Burgess and Harvey Locke, 1963; William J. Goode, 1964; Daniel Moynihan, 1965; Talcott Parsons, 1966). The devastation of slavery, migration and urbanization and the resulting social and intrinsic deficiencies are used to construct the cases that the black family represents the most loosely organized and easily broken conjugal group in the United States.

Yet many contemporary mainstream social scientists in a fashion similar to early dissenting scholars have clamored for the black family to adopt white middle-class familial values and norms. For E. Franklin Frazier and his colleagues, this constituted the only realistic alternative. The Afro-American family had, beside its slave experience, very few cultural resources in which to build stable, productive familial units. Of course, this assumes as Frazier emphatically did that the African family's customs and values were crushed completely upon its forcible removal to the New World. Frazier's premise of a feeble, primitive African heritage and a father-absent, matrifocal slave family structure inked an indelible and sordid impression of domestic arrangements among slaves. Essentially, Frazier misjudged the perpetuity and resiliency of the African culture and family system; consequently ignored such antecedents in his study of the Afro-American's belief system.

In exclaiming the lack of family heritage Frazier inferred that the elimination of familial chaos in the urban centers depended largely on the extent and rate in which blacks abandoned their "southern rural folk culture" for the industrialized urban culture of middle-class America. Yet, such conjugal confusion never appeared, for Frazier, irresolvable or pathologically interminable.

While Frazier and other dissenting investigators were inclined to convert pronouncements of alleged racial inferiority into statements of unequal racial treatment, their solution—the integration of blacks into the American social system—tacitly endorsed a policy of cultural domination. Admittedly, their efforts were designed to aid blacks politically; unfortunately they fed feelings of black inferiority and accommodated the Social Darwinist ideology of white supremacy.

II.

Yet in this ocean of black self-doubt and hatred, a wave of nation-

alism arose. However, as blacks increased their demand for greater involvement, the argument of innate racial inferiority lost some of its buoyance and mainstream social scientists shifted to a social pathology model to explicate Afro-American family patterns and lifestyles. The pathological labeling procedure which perceived the black family as an abnormal entity had been used "successfully" by psychiatrists and other members of the medical profession.

In many ways, the superimposing of the social pathology model on the racial inferiority argument of early Social Darwinist proponents caused little concern among mainstream scholars since the aim and ideological views remained unchanged. The Moynihan Report which epitomized research predicated on the assumption that the Afro-American family was socially ill, provided nothing in the way of new information or insights. Instead the research updated and modernized the superior-inferior discussion regarding black-white relations. Yet without question this Report, the centerpiece of the government's domestic strategy during the sixties, steered the direction of black family research. In fact, the bulk of the literature on the black family from 1966 to the early 1970's revolved around the Report, either lending support or refutating its basic premises. Nonetheless, the Moynihan Report succeeded in creating a contemporary rational for research looking at weaknesses and problems in the family lifestyles of blacks.

Perhaps the most fundamental point to emerge from the social pathology based studies was a re-affirmation of the mainstream's commitment to the maintenance of a colonial existence among Afro-Americans. The unwavering referral to black culture as a "culture of poverty" and to the black family as a "tangle of pathology" cemented this commitment. By pressing to confirm the subordinate status of blacks and denying any significant progress toward racial parity, the social pathology research supported and encouraged economic control and exploitation as well as political dependence and subjugation.

Obviously, the work of mainstream investigators has been used to buttress and explain society's action or lack of action in terms of the black community. Regardless of the action decided upon, the eventual loser in all of these social strategy maneuvers has been the black family. In the context of systematic inequality, describing the black family as different from the middle-class white family implied the Afro-American family's inferiority. On the other hand, viewing the black family as identical to its white counterpart overlooked the importance of cul-

ture-specific patterns and beliefs among blacks while acquiescing to the assumption of a cultureless mass.

III.

Dissenting research of the late 60's and 70's have attempted to incorporate several existing arguments of black family life into a new model. This paradigm, labeled by Nathan Hare as the "strength of the black families" model has allowed for the presence of an adaptive black culture and a resilient black conjugal grouping to exist vis-à-vis the family's assimilation of the dominant culture's values and norms.[2]

Generally speaking, this research has focused on the black family's strengths and resources by documenting, with varying degrees of elucidation, the ways in which the family has been able "to provide the necessary functions to members and non-members."[3] Carol Stack, in her urban anthropological study *All Our Kin* (1975), described vividly the patterns of kin organization among blacks. The study revealed the elastic quality of households built "around a consanguinal core (i.e., blood relatives) rather than around conjugal core (i.e., married couple) as are nuclear families." The pitfall in this documentation of inter-family cooperation was the tendency to attribute the "behavior" of these family groupings "to the relatively high cost and/or shortage of living accommodation in the city" (Sudarkasa, 1972).

Although the "strength-of-the-black-families" model was initially applauded as a more contemporary means of appraising the lives of black family members, criticisms have surfaced. Hare (1976) has complained that this approach has misled the black movement away from an attack on the suffering of blacks in their family situation and related condition."[4] An equally serious indictment levied against the school is that it prohibits any recognition of the injurious consequences of oppression. Understandably, researchers oriented toward analyzing the positive features of black family life must be sure not "to replace white myths with black myths" (La Rue, 1972).

Yet this model has been an impetus in debunking persistent myths and misconceptions concerning the lifestyles of black families. Gutman's historiography, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom* which belongs to this school of thought has questioned seriously the bulk of black family literature while advancing the need to re-think the cultural

and social importance of the black family and its kinship network.

Spurred originally by the Moynihan Report, the study condemns the conventional wisdom of the Report (as well as most other black family literature) that slavery decimated the family and left it imbued in pathology. The principle findings of Gutman's extensive probe were:

    a. that an adaptive, non-mimetic familial and kinship network developed among enslaved and freed blacks;

    b. and that there existed a predominance for long-lasting two-parent households both during and after slavery.

To a great extent, Gutman shows that Afro-Americans prevented dominant society from destroying or enveloping totally their culture. Also, he shows that dominant society unintentionally supported the black familial network's effort to preserve its heritage and lifestyle since society compelled the family system to act as the principle resource agent for servicing and caring for its members. Gutman's examination further reveals that the nuclear black family both during and after slavery was enmeshed in a complex web of relations; however he goes about dissecting this familial matrix to support his contention of a two-parent male-headed household. His over-concern with proving the predominance of the two-parent black family has several salient implications . . .

> First, it suggests that family life must be a monogamous conjugal union to be stable and resilient. This proposition returns us to the bourgeoisie, middle-class model espoused by George Peter Murdock and others that the nuclear "family is the building block of all other types of family structure (Sudarkasa, 1972).

> Secondly, this position assumes familial arrangements such as polygamous unions and single-parent families are unstable and therefore inferior. Yet polygamous unions and single-parent families were tolerated, perhaps in a manner similar to the acceptance of prenuptial intercourse and childbirth. Categorizing pre-marital activity as culturally compatible while suggesting that family groupings other than the two-parent form were ill-fated, deviant constructions seemed logically inimical.

Apparently, Gutman viewed myopically the cultural limitation of the two-parent model and therefore neglected to explore the cultural perception of blacks toward polygamous arrangements and single-parent households. Quite frankly, more detailed discussion of these family structures would have lent some direct support to the predominance of

two-parent black families; still it would have illuminated other types of adaptive strategies employed by various black family groups.

A similar problem arises with differentiating the Afro-Americans' perceptions and beliefs from his/her behavior, both during and after slavery. How closely did the slave's action parallel the slave's beliefs is not explained. A prime illustration of this confusion centers on whether prenuptial intercourse and pregnancy was condoned because slaves felt powerless to curtail such behavior or because slaves through cultural guidelines absorbed these activities with no real stigmas. Gutman maintains that premarital sex and childbirth were culturally acceptable and did not represent a subversion to marriage. Yet critic James Anderson (1977) insists that Gutman's evidence at times appears to argue the contrary. For instance, Anderson cites several examples from the book which suggests slave preachers did not excuse pre-marital sexual activity; instead they were likely to censure such conduct by banishing the individual(s) either temporarily or permanently from the church.

This raises still another critical comment, the absence of a meaningful discussion of black religion. To promulgate the enduring qualities of black family life and to demonstrate the familial role in the intergenerational transmission of culture seems incomplete without showing the intimate role of religion in this process. (A similar argument could be leveled for not exploring such pertinent variables as intimacy and child-rearing).

Yet criticisms of this extraordinary study from the standpoint of what the study lacks are not entirely valid. Especially when one considers that it analyzes "the cycle of family destruction, construction and dispersal" over a period spanning more than two centuries. The study explains adequately the historical interior of the Afro-American family. Moreover, Gutman avoids the typical pitfall of reducing family life among blacks to a mere reaction to oppressive, external forces. By breaking away from the traditional conceptual frameworks, Gutman provides evidence of relatively long-lasting conjugal unions, of highly organized kinship and "fictive" kinship organizations and of a unique culturally-based naming practice.

While revealing the vitality of black culture, he also shatters several major arguments. The supposition as espoused, to varying degrees, by E. Franklin Frazier, Kenneth Stampp and Daniel Moynihan that slavery transformed Afro-Americans into a cultureless mass is effectively disarmed. So is the contention of Stanley Elkins that slavery

emasculated husbands and fathers and consequently debilitated, both psychologically and structurally, the formation of meaningful domestic unions. In addition, it retires Ulrich Phillips' thesis that blacks under the system of slavery were treated benignly.

IV.

Although Gutman's research has overturned several deeply rooted theses of black inferiority, the study generates as many questions as it answers. One gets the impression that this is another illustration of the study's importance, not only does it seal a lengthy chapter of black family research, it also provides the impetus and in some cases the direction for the continual investigation of the Black Experience.

NOTES

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[2] Assertion of the positive features of Black family life has come from such contemporary scholars as Billingsley, Cade, Hill, Ladner, Staples and Valentine. Billingsley writes:

> ... we do not view the Negro family as a casual nevus in a tangle of pathology which feeds on itself. Rather, we view the Negro family in theoretical perspective as a subsystem of the larger society. It is, in our view, an absorbing, adaptive, and amazingly resillient mechanism for the socialization of its children and the civilization of its society (1968, p. 5).

[3] Robert B. Hill has operationally defined family strengths:

> ... as those traits which facilitate the ability of the family to meet the needs of his members and the demands made upon it by systems outside the family unit. They (family strengths) are necessary for the survival and maintenance of effective family network (1971, p. 3).

Some of the strengths that are commonly found in the Black family include the following: strong kinship bonds, strong work orientation, adaptability of female roles, strong achievement orientation, and strong religious orientation. These five characteristics are identified by Hill as being functional for the "survival, advancement and stability of Black families." Though such characteristics are also founded in white families, it is argued that these traits manifest them-

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selves differently in Black families. In other words, because of the unique history of racial oppression experienced by Blacks in America, family strengths are achieved through different process, styles of interactions and relationships. The systematic analysis of these unique processes is needed and must be attended to if the pathological approach to the study of the Black family is to be effectively contradicted and disproven.

⁴ As early as 1963, E. F. Frazier warned Black social scientists to guard against "the pangs of inferiority" and not to allow such feelings to "preoccupy the scientist with petty defenses of the Black race." Wilson (1974) has echoed this warning in his attack on the strength-of-Black-families-school. Social scientists investigating the functional aspects of Black family life agree on several points. First, they are in agreement that the myths and stereotypes of earlier research must be erased. Secondly, they agree that the replacement of such spurious and erroneous information must begin with the identification of norms and values involved in family interaction processes. From discerning the mechanics of this process it is believed that the social scientist will be able to move closer to the objective, of ascertaining how family interaction processes are "related to the forces that have shaped it and its various expressions in American life" (Staples, 1971; p. 135).

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