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C. Loring Brace

FAMILIES

This essay focuses on the implications of race and racism for family functioning and family formation. Rather than attempting the impossible task of examining all aspects of race and racism as they apply to all racial-ethnic groups, the discussion here is limited to black families. Given both the historical significance of inequality for African Americans and the importance of research on the African American experience for the development of theory and concepts about race and racism, the focus on black families is easily justified.

The Negro Family (1965), often referred to as the Moynihan Report, is a foundational, if controversial, study in the modern literature on black families. The report, which emphasized high rates of teenage pregnancy, absent fathers, welfare dependency, and crime in the black community, concluded that the black family structure was weak due in large part to the disproportionate number of female-headed households, or a "matriarchal" family structure. This conclusion, not surprisingly, has stimulated an extensive body of critical research into the conditions of the black family. Two broad themes can be identified in this literature. First, without necessarily taking issue with some of the basic findings, many scholars argue that this conclusion ignores the impact of racism, classism, and segregation. That is, the black family is more fractured and less stable than the nonblack family for reasons linked to endemic structural and cultural conditions that disadvantage the black family. Second, others more directly attack the conclusion that the black family is somehow dysfunctional, and instead point to the *strength* of the black family structure, as evidenced, for example, by strong kinship networks.

This entry provides a brief historical overview of perspectives on the black family, then a brief discussion of the

contemporary black family, with a special emphasis on motherhood and fatherhood. The final section focuses on differences and diversity within and among black families.

BLACK FAMILIES IN HISTORICAL CONTEXT

A major misconception in the early literature on slavery and black families, as written by white scholars, was that slave owners understood the economic benefits of a strong nuclear black family and therefore tried to preserve the family structure of slaves. Researchers later "discovered" what the descendants of slaves already knew, that about one out of every three slave marriages ended because of partners being sold. This discovery questioned the validity of the idea that slave owners cared about the well-being of slave families and, more importantly, provides an example of how research can be seriously flawed if it is informed by racism and a world-view fostered by privilege. More recent scholarship demonstrates that slave owners often used specific strategies (i.e., labor migration, interference in marriage, and sexual exploitation) to endanger the well-being of African American families.

It is now known that some of the characteristics of the black family that have been both criticized and praised have their roots in slavery. Predominantly female-headed households were the norm during slavery primarily due to the forced migration of male slaves but also to gender-segregated slave quarters. This forced black families to rely on extended kinship and/or community networks for support. Despite these difficulties, enslaved families demonstrated remarkable resilience and worked hard to maintain a strong family unit.

Although emancipation freed slaves from bondage in a formal sense after the Civil War, it was a hollow freedom for many. Political leaders were more concerned with repairing the fractured relations with the white South than fulfilling their promises to the ex-slaves (e.g., ten acres and a mule) and making it possible for black families to thrive in freedom. Only a small portion of ex-slaves managed to reunite with their families, and conditions were such that many new families had to endure long periods of separation due to economic troubles, military service, or the demands of work.

THE CONTEMPORARY BLACK FAMILY

A traditional Eurocentric view of the family assumes that parenting takes place in a nuclear family where the mother is responsible for child rearing and the care of the home and the father is responsible for the economic well-being of the family. This is not a representative picture of the African American family, neither historically nor contemporaneously. And it is precisely because it is measured against the

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normative and idealized white nuclear family that the black family has so often been designated as dysfunctional. However, the structure of the black family not only has different historical roots but also has been persistently impacted by racism, whether overtly in policies against miscegenation or more covertly in color-blind institutional practices. As a result, the notions of motherhood and fatherhood have developed somewhat differently in the African American community than in a Euro-American context.

Motherhood. Mothers have long been praised and respected in the African American community. However, the idea that in order to be classified as “good mothers” women must make child rearing their full-time responsibility is traditionally much less pervasive in African American families. That is, in contrast to white women, black women’s standing as mothers is not threatened by their participation in the labor market. Moreover, strong women-centered networks have fostered an expansion of the notion of motherhood in the black community to include women who help care for the well-being of children outside the nuclear family, and others in the community as well. These networks make women less dependent upon, and concerned with, male participation, and hence strengthen their position within the family and in the community at large. Thus, the historical evolution of the black family, combining internal cultural developments with severe external constraints, has contributed to the much higher proportion of female-headed households among black families and the continued respect that women receive as mothers.

From the perspective of the white majority community, however, the strong woman who is celebrated in the African American community has often been turned into a threat. Historical images of the mammy and the matriarch and, more recently, the welfare mother are designed to oppress and control black women. Negative stereotypes such as the welfare queen are held up as examples of what is wrong with society and hence can be used as political weapons against the movement to achieve equality and eradicate racism. Moreover, because the image of the “welfare queen” designates a single mother without a husband, it can also be used to control men. That is, the continued reliance on explanations for the fractured black family that emphasize female-headed households and the absence of fathers and husbands implicates not only fathers but also black manhood.

Fatherhood. The celebration of motherhood does not necessarily de-emphasize fatherhood in the black community. The consistent absence of black fathers has been a major issue since slavery. More recently, high incarceration rates, the difficulties undereducated black men face in the job market, and various regulations in the welfare system that discourages marriage are among the issues

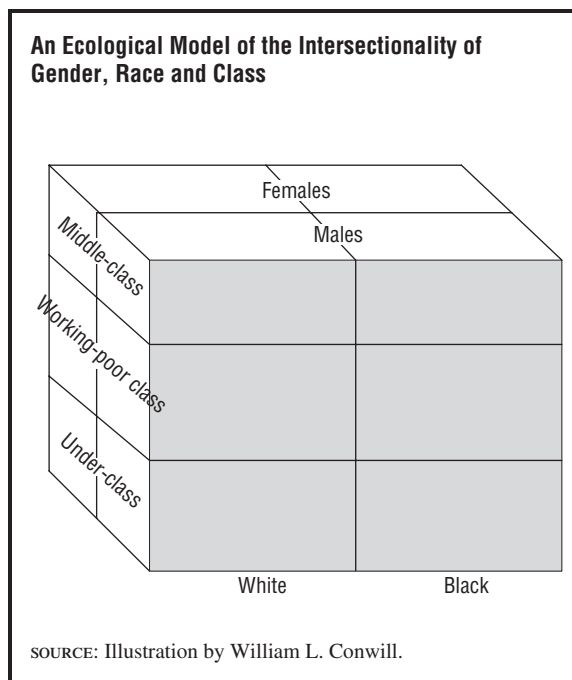


Figure 1.

debated both inside and outside the academy. For some observers, this picture constitutes a crisis in the black family, especially since absent or distant fathers are ineffective role models for African American boys and young men. The reintroduction of black fathers into the family, from this perspective, will foster a healthy and stable environment for black children.

Others suggest that although it may be unfortunate that black men play a more marginal role in family life than their white counterparts, the tradition of strong women makes the presence of husbands and fathers less critical for the stability of black families than for white families. The lesser reliance on men for economic support, however, does not necessarily mean an absence of men in the black family. On the contrary, the tradition of extended family networks makes each individual family less isolated than the ideal-typical nuclear family and hence facilitates the development of other male familial roles, such as brother, grandfather, cousin, and uncle.

FAMILY DIVERSITY

Following the lead of E. Franklin Frazier and, later, Daniel Patrick Moynihan, much of the twentieth-century research literature has focused on the conditions that impacted the black family uniquely and pushed it in different directions than the majority white family. More recently, however, researchers have started to pay attention to family diversity within the African American community, which requires

taking into consideration the interlocking systems of oppression that impact the lives of all African Americans, albeit in different ways. Gay families, interracial families, and young families represent a growing number of families within the black community, and these new family constellations raise novel issues and bring new challenges for family members and scholars alike.

Teenage Parenthood. While there is a fairly extensive literature on teenage pregnancy, generally speaking this is not a literature grounded in family studies; rather, teenage parenthood is typically approached as a form of youth deviance, not as a legitimate family form. This is the case especially regarding African American teenagers, who get pregnant and have children at significantly higher rates than their white counterparts. It is this particular family form that is so often referred to as a major cause of the vicious cycle of absent fathers and economic instability. Although there can be no doubt that parenthood brings hardship to many teenagers and that, generally speaking, children who live in two-parent households do better in many ways, the placing of the explanatory focus on the family form itself—a teenage mother with children—can easily distort a deeper understanding of the social forces that privilege some family forms and bring disadvantages to others.

Moreover, the pervasive assumption that teenage childbearing is essentially accidental and a result of poor planning, lack of information, inability to negotiate sexual encounters, and any number of other unfortunate circumstances has preempted research on teenage families in their own terms. At least some evidence suggests that black teenagers do not always view having a baby as stifling and/or debilitating; instead, they view it as a “rite of passage.” Moreover, rather than viewing a pregnancy as an unfortunate accident, some teenage girls are actively looking to replace something that is missing in their lives, whether a connection to a missing father or the prospect of a successful future.

Black LGBT Families. Much of the literature on black families has ignored the implication of sexual orientation on the structure of the family. Feminist scholars are currently working to remove the heterosexual bias that pervades the family literature. The use of the traditional nuclear family as a model for family research contributes to the marginalization and discrimination that LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered) families experience in social life, especially for black families. Not only are black LGBT families stigmatized in the white community, alongside their white counterparts, they are also stigmatized in the black community. Generally speaking, social institutions are structured to benefit those who conform to the nuclear family structure, which means

that LGBT families have difficulties accessing those benefits. In addition, the traditional linkage of strong black femininity with motherhood, in conjunction with fragile but sexualized black masculinity, has placed black same-sex families in a particularly uneasy position in the African American community. And yet, while scholarship is still fairly limited, at least some evidence suggests that same-sex families are neither less functional nor weaker, despite the multiple systems of oppression they face.

Interracial Marriage. In the United States, interracial marriage was illegal in more than twenty states until 1967. The removal of the legal barriers against interracial families did not automatically eradicate social disapproval of such unions, however. Although the number of interracial couples has increased dramatically over the last few decades, the proportion of interracial families is still very small. People opposed to interracial marriage in the black community typically look at the union from the standpoint of the historical evolution of race and racism and conclude that interracial marriage is detrimental to the existence of the black community. In contrast, white unease with interracial unions is currently framed more in cultural rather than racial terms, even though traces of racial superiority are clearly evident. Moreover, both black and white unease is linked to concern for the children that might result from interracial unions.

Neither perceptions nor practices of interracial unions are gender neutral, which is not surprising considering the violent history of such unions (lynching for black men and forced sexual subordination of black women). Couples in which the man is black and the woman white are much more prevalent than unions with white men and black women. This is so for several different reasons. Marrying outside the race is a form of betrayal to many black women, whereas black men have more freedom in this regard. Moreover, the intersection of race and gender lessens the status differential between black men and white women, but increases it for white men and black women.

SEE ALSO *Black-White Inter marriage; Motherhood.*

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FARMWORKERS

The history of farmworkers in the United States, as well as their current situation and their future prospects, reflects the complex ways in which labor-force dynamics interact with social classification systems to shape the intertwined and often-confused concepts of “race,” “ethnicity,” and “national origin.” In a global context, transnational migrants are almost always on the lowest tier of the economic ladder. In the United States, most farmworkers have historically been economically and politically disadvantaged, not so often as a consequence of their being racial minorities, but more because of their status as unauthorized immigrants. However, the high association between farm work and certain racial-ethnic minorities has reinforced negative racial views of these groups and often supported stereotypes about their abilities and employment preferences.

The relationship between farm-labor market dynamics and the farmworkers’ quasi-racial identity as the lowest-ranking occupational group in U.S. society is systematic, paradoxical, and in no sense accidental. Agribusiness representatives argue that immigrants are “naturally” more motivated or more productive than native-born workers. But the most recently arrived transnational migrant farmworkers are, in fact, remarkably unproductive, primarily because they have had no prior experience in contemporary labor-intensive large-scale agriculture. They are simply more easily exploitable because they will accept wages and working conditions that workers with

other options will not consider. Mexican immigrants’ experience in using extended family and social networks to secure employment in a highly unstable labor market allows them to navigate in an environment that is daunting to native-born Americans accustomed to more formal processes for securing and keeping a job.

THE LEGAL CONTEXT OF FARMWORKERS’ EMPLOYMENT

While the ethnic composition of the U.S. farmworker population is always changing, an unchanging reality is that the agricultural workplace is largely exempt from the framework of labor laws that protect mainstream workers. Farmworkers were initially excluded from the protection of the Fair Labor Standards Act when it was passed in 1938. Subsequent legislative “fixes” intended to bring the “rule of law” to the agricultural workplace have been undermined by an immigration policy crafted to allow continued influxes of unauthorized Mexican and Guatemalan migrant farmworkers while simultaneously effectively stripping these workers of human and labor rights.

While immigration status constrains the ability of farmworkers to organize to demand improvements in wages or working conditions, progress has been made in some cases. In 2005, for example, a national campaign by a Florida farmworker group resulted in an increase of a penny per pound in piece-rate wages for harvesting tomatoes. This was a 70 percent increase over their former earnings of 50 cents per 35-pound bucket.

The heavy reliance on farm labor contractors for recruiting, supervising, and serving as the employer of record for at least one out of every five farmworkers also distances agricultural producers from accountability for substandard working conditions and the irregular supervision of their workforce. Farmworkers employed by labor contractors have lower earnings and worse working conditions than any other subgroup in the agricultural labor market.

Although most farm labor contractors are themselves former farmworkers, they reject traditional Mexican norms of mutual reciprocity and consistently emphasize the rules of a market economy in order to justify a variety of exploitative practices, including overcharging workers for food, lodging, and drink, and in extreme cases employing a form of indentured servitude to assure that immigrants are unable to pay their debts to the *coyotes* or *raiteros* (immigrant smugglers) who helped them cross the border and find employment.

THE AGRICULTURAL PRODUCTION SYSTEM CONTEXT

The rapid increase in the size of the farm labor force is closely linked to the evolution of the U.S. food production