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African American Family Life in Societal Context: Crisis and Hope[1]

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Since 1965 hundreds of articles and books have been published about African American families. Nevertheless, our understanding of these families continues to be limited. There is a tendency to gloss over important within-group differences; thus, monolithic, stereotypic and inaccurance portrayals of Black family life are common. This paper sets aside debates of Black family pathology or viability, focusing instead on these families' essential character. The paper seeks to understand Black families on their own terms, locating them in relevant social, historical, political and cultural contexts. Key empirical patterns and trends reveal dramatic changes in Black family geographic location, headship, quality of life and socioeconomic status since 1950.

A complex picture is revealed. There has been gradual but steady overall improvement alongside persistent, extreme racial disparities and pronounced class disparities among Black families. The proposed Black Family Socio-Ecological Context model specifies and connects institutional, interpersonal, environmental, temporal and cultural facts that shape the essential character of Black family life in such a way as to produce characteristics simultaneously shared and idiosyncratic. The model also provides an organized, systematic accounting of research and public policy issues relevant to the study of African American families.

KEY WORDS: African American; family life; society; culture; class.

> The contempt we have been taught to entertain for the Blacks makes us fancy many things that are founded neither in reason nor in experience.

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Alexander Hamilton, Quoted in W.E.B. DuBois,
Negro-American Family (Atlanta, 1909)

INTRODUCTION

During the past 30 years, well over a thousand publications have been added to the research record on African American families in the United States. The count would be much higher if we adopted a broader interpretation of what qualifies as systematic, scientific study of African American families. To do so would require the inclusion of additional sources from a wide range of scholarly, literary, popular, and religious writings (Allen *et al.,* 1986).

Despite the voluminous research on Black family life, students of the area are uneasy. This uneasiness is caused by continued references to "The Black family." Such references ignore the extensive regional, ethnic, value, and income differences among Black families. It is an uneasiness with the theoretical and methodological shoddiness, bordering on suspension of the scientific method, apparent in so many published, widely circulated studies of Black families. This uneasiness is bred by entrenched, stereotypic portrayals of Black family life that not only persist, but dominate. It is an uneasiness due to a frequently demonstrated ignorance concerning the internal dynamics and motives of Black family life in this society.

Diversity and Stereotypes in the Study of Black Family Life

Much that is written about Black American families is flawed by the tendency of researchers to gloss over within-group differences. While prior research has explored Black/White family differences, information is relatively sparse regarding differences among African American families of different incomes, regions, life-cycle stages, and value orientations. As a result, monolithic, stereotypic characterizations of Black families abound. The Black family headed by a single mother with numerous children and living in a roach-infested tenement is a familiar stereotype. This image has been reinforced in the hallowed halls of universities, on the frenetic sets of movie and television shows, as well as in the august halls of Congress. That this stereotype represents but a limited slice of Black family life in the United States is bad; that it distorts the truth about female-headed households in the Black community is worse. Such stereotypes leave the genuinely curious searching for the true face(s) of Black family life in this country.

As a society, the United States is comfortable with stereotypes. Indeed, we revel in them. Stereotypes serve a useful function: they help reduce the

complexity, nuances, and dilemmas of life to manageable proportions. In this respect, Americans are no different from other people. Generally speaking, humans seek to organize reality by extracting neat categories of meaning(s). Thus, we become accustomed to loose usage of terms charged with unstated implications in order to summarize our day-to-day experiences. Designations such as "liberals," "born-again Christians," "fascists," "feminists," and "racists" are commonplace in our daily discourse. Rarely, in the next breath, are the intricacies of meaning apparent in such terms clarified. Why should they be? We all know what is meant by them . . . or do we?

Race is an area of inquiry in the social and behavioral sciences that is particularly affected by our willingness to accept simplistic, unsupported, and stereotypic statements at face value. Such scientific confusion may have complex explanations, such as the difficulty of disentangling race from culture from history; or the explanations may be more simple, as in the failure to recognize that race is not a perfect predictor of a person's psyche, values, or even experiences. Therefore, for both complex and simple reasons, race continues to be one of the most widely studied, yet most poorly understood, areas of scientific inquiry. As Frazier noted, and DuBois before him, ours is a society obsessed with color. How we think about and interact around race, therefore, exerts profound influence on the broader realities of individuals, groups, and institutions who are Black. These are topics requiring further study.

Predictably, Black family studies share many problems with the related area of race relations research. Writers in the area obscure much of the richness, complexity, and subtleties of African American family systems through their use of crude categories, poorly defined concepts, and negative stereotypes. Apparent in the literature are abundant references to "family disorganization," the "underclass," "culture of poverty," and "the Black matriarchy." Such terms are offered, picked up, and repeated as if they effectively summarized the reality of Black family life in this society. They do not. Unfortunately, with successive repetition, such concepts and the myths that they represent become more palatable and more believable. Equally dissatisfying are terms offered from the "other side" in the ongoing debate over pathology and well-being among Black American families. For me, the issue is not wholly reducible to whether Black families should be cast as good or bad, positive or negative. Both views pursued to an extreme tamper with reality, become stereotypic, and ultimately dehumanize Black families. In the most fundamental sense, life is a collage of good, bad, and indifferent; so, too, is Black family life.

I wish to set aside debates over Black family wellness or illness. The record of these families in ensuring the survival and development of Black Americans on these shores since 1619 is sufficient evidence of their adapt-

ability and viability. Instead, I am concerned with seeing the core of Black family life, with exploring their essential character. To this extent, the research question is recast, from "wellness" or "illness" to "is-ness." What are the significant qualities, characteristics, and dimensions of Black family life revealed in the research record from 1965 to the present? What environmental and historical conditions determine whether the tenor of a Black family's experiences are favorable? What are the distinctive features of Afro-American family life? In sum, the need is to understand Black families for who and what they are on their own terms.

Definition and Current Statuses of Black Families

Before we undertake to examine the experiences of Black American families, we must first decide how best to define these families. Properly, the criteria for definition will vary in accordance with the definition(s) used by authors whose research is being examined. Readers should therefore expect to see, and not be put off by, shifts in the parameters used to define Black family life. In some cases, location will be emphasized, thus defining family as coterminous with household. In other cases, blood ties will be relied on to define the boundaries of a given Black family. At still other points, functional ties such as shared emotional support or economic responsibilities will be used to define families. In our thinking, emphasis of shared location over, say, affiliational ties as the criterion for defining family relationship is an *analytic decision*. Such decisions do not alter the fact that Black families are defined by complicated overlaps between location, functional relations, shared values, affiliations, and blood ties. As such, Black families represent complex systems of relationships that transcend any one of these areas of life. Accommodation to multiple definitions of Black family life simply admits the current limitations in social science theory and methods requiring that researchers restrict their focus to smaller parcels of the family system which they seek to understand. However, a consistent feature across researcher definitions is the primacy assigned to blood ties. At root, Black families are seen as institutions whose most enduring relationships are biological.

Systematic examination of significant trends and patterns in Black American family life offer useful lessons for evaluating scientific research in the area. The history of Black Americans, like that of any people, is marked by change. Black Americans have experienced four major transitions over their history, and each left legacies that influence contemporary Black family life. The first and most obvious transition involved bringing captured Africans to this country as slaves. For enslaved Africans, this transition involved both gross (e.g., the loss of personal freedom) and subtle (e.g., exposure to

plantation agriculture) redefinitions. Out of these redefinitions was created a new people, African Americans, who represented cultural, social, and yes, biological hybrids. The second major transition in African American history involved emancipation: Blacks were freed from slavery. This status change was accompanied, however, by the equally demeaning and restrictive redefinition of Blacks as an "untouchable"-like caste group in American society. It is worth noting that, while over time the terms of reference (e.g., Negro, Colored, Black, African American, Afrikan) have changed, the degraded cast status of Black people has been an immutable constant.

On the heels of this evolution of Blacks from slavery to cast status came the geographic, socioeconomic, and cultural transitions of Black America from a Southern, rural, agrarian folk society to a Northern, Western, and Midwestern, industrial society. In four generations, or roughly 300 years, African Americans had moved from agrarian slavery into the industrial and urban heartlands of this country. They had become hybrids, combing the heritages of their African and American experiences.

The fourth major transition for African Americans involved the desegregation of U.S. society. This transition was most notably signaled by the string of presidential orders and Supreme Court decisions banning racial segregation in public life (e.g., the 1949 presidential order desegregating the military, the 1954 Court decision outlawing segregated public schools). A major impetus for the desegregation of American society were the activities and actors associated with the civil rights movement. However, efforts to desegregate U.S. institutional, corporate, and community life at all levels have so far proven to be only partially successful. Vestiges of past disadvantages and persistent discrimination in the present continue to restrict Black equality and participation in this society (Farley and Allen, 1989; Jaynes and Williams, 1989).

The Empirical Picture: Patterns and Trends

Government statistics convey valuable information about the contemporary faces of Black families. Such statistics are admittedly limited in what they reveal concerning the nuances of Black family life. However, these statistics do provide valuable insight into the broad patterns characteristic of Black families currently. By 1991, the Black presence in this country had grown to roughly 31 million, representing 13% of the total U.S. population and some 7.7 million households. A massive geographic redistribution had also occurred. Since 1945 there has been a sizable drop in the percentages of Black residents or born natives of the South (the figure declined from 80% to 50%); contemporary Blacks and their households are overwhelm-

ingly located in urban areas (nearly 85%). Recent statistics suggest sizable modifications in historically observed patterns: increasing numbers of Blacks will likely return to the South and/or move to suburbs or small towns (U.S. Census Bureau, 1992).

The trend toward increased numbers of female-headed Black households continued. By 1992, 46% of all Black households had female heads; in addition, the percentage of dual-parent households had declined to 47% (respectively, 18% and 77% in 1940). Consistent with shifts in family headship were declines in the percentage of Black children residing with both parents, from 75% in 1960 to 36% by 1992. Black childbearing rates continued their steady drop toward replacement levels, reaching an all-time low total fertility rate of an estimated 2.28 children per woman by 1975 (as compared with 2.62 in 1940). Finally, rates of marital dissolution and lifelong singlehood continued to rise among Black Americans during the period. The latter statistic certainly reflects, in part, the great imbalance between men and women in the critical marriage and childbearing years (in 1974, there were 100 men for every 116 women aged 20–54, not adjusting for men lost from the pool of eligibles for reasons of imprisonment, interracial preferences, homosexuality, etc.). By 1992, fewer than 3 of 4 Black women will eventually marry compared to 9 out of 10 White women (U.S. Census Bureau, 1992).

Along with shifts in geography and structure of family life among Blacks came important changes in the socioeconomic status. Median family income levels have been rising since 1947. By 1991, the real median income of Black families was $33,310 compared to $41,510 for White families. The 1991 real median income for Black female-headed households was substantially lower ($11,410). The percentage of Black family incomes below the poverty level also dropped steadily, from 41% in 1959 to 15% in 1974. By 1991, however, the number of Black families below the poverty line had risen to 32%.

Accompanying changes in family income levels were changes in the educational and occupational attainment of Black Americans. Since 1940, the median years of school completed by Blacks has doubled to 12.6. Some 83% of Blacks have four or more years of high school, and 11% have four or more years of college. Both of the latter figures represent a sixfold increase from 1940 to 1975. In the world of work, contradictory trends are observed. On the one hand, Black representation in higher status occupations has increased dramatically. From 1960 to 1972, the percentage of Black workers in white-collar jobs grew from 16% to 45%. On the other hand, since 1978 Black labor force participation rates have declined steadily, down to 70% for men and 58% for women by the year 1992. Unemployment rates have continued to rise, reaching crisis levels in many Black communities across the country (U.S. Census Bureau, 1992; Jaynes and Williams, 1989).

When attention turns to health, morbidity, and mortality statistics, major improvements are again noted for African Americans. Life expectancies for Black men and Black women are now respectively 65 and 74 years vs. 51 and 55 years in 1940. The infant mortality rate has been cut from 80 to 18 per 1000 live births, while maternal deaths in childbirth have been reduced eightfold (to fewer than .2 per 1000 live births). Black deaths due to so-called poverty diseases (e.g., tuberculosis, venereal disease, cirrhosis of the liver, and contagious disease) have also been drastically curtailed. Off setting these declines, however, are the rising numbers of Blacks contracting and dying from AIDS (Catania *et al.*, 1995: 1497-1498). Moreover, the percentage of Black families residing in substandard housing dropped from over 50% in 1940 to less than one-quarter by 1970 (U.S. Census Bureau, 1992).

The picture conveyed by this overview of key government statistics is one of gradual but steady improvement in the life circumstances of Black families. During the African American's transition from the rural South into the urban North, significant improvements have occurred in health, education, income, occupation, and housing. Lest a false sense of complacency result, however, it must be pointed out that deprivation and disadvantage are relative concepts. Black families continue to be extremely disadvantaged relative to White families in this society. Now, as earlier in this country's history, the occupational and educational attainment, health status, housing conditions, incomes, and life opportunities of White Americans are far superior to those of their Black brethren. When select subcategories of Black families (e.g., urban, lower income, aged, etc.) are compared to Black families in the general case, another level of inequality is revealed. Vast differences in resources, opportunities, and quality of life are often found among Black families of different incomes, regions, and headship status (e.g., two parent vs. single parent).

The aggregate statistics discussed above conceal a complex array of underlying relationships. For this reason, what a particular statistical pattern reveals about the nature of Black family life in this society is not always clear. Undoubtedly poor health, chronic unemployment, teen parenthood, paternal absence, and poverty have potentially negative consequences for Black family organization and functions. However, the relative impact of these factors on particular families are mediated by those families' resources, values, and situations. It is thus important to recognize that individual and family characteristics help determine whether certain conditions are positive or negative in the effects, and to what degree. We can now turn our attention to a consideration of the complicated interaction between class and culture in African American families.

CONCEPTUAL ISSUES: CLASS, CULTURE, AND BLACK FAMILY LIFE

Researchers have long debated the importance of economics and culture in the determination of Black family organization and dynamics. E. Franklin Frazier, University of Chicago (1939/1966), profoundly influenced our thinking about the interplay of class and race in Black family life. Writing in an era of social concern with the consequences of industrialization and rapid urbanization for families, Frazier focuses his attention on Black families. He rejects explanations attributing high rates of marital instability, desertion, and illegitimacy among urban Black families to innate, biological deficiencies. Rather, Frazier believes these disrupted family patterns were caused by a unique historical experience that left some Black Americans ill-prepared to cope with the exigencies of life in modern industrial society. Briefly, he argues that personal and institutional discrimination in society placed Blacks at a severe economic disadvantage, with ruinous consequences for their family life. Denied the skills necessary to insure economic viability, Black men fell short in the performance of their provider roles, thereby contributing to the break-up of families. Hence, Frazier largely attributes family disorganization among Blacks to economic factors, suggesting in the process that as Black families achieved higher economic status, their rates of disorganization would drop.

Certain features in Frazier's research make its application to the analysis of contemporary Black family life problematic. First is his failure to specify the societal-level processes thought to determine Black family patterns. At best, readers are left with vague impressions of such processes and their causal operation. Second is his consistent denial of legitimacy to aspects of Black family life representing departures from normative White family patterns. Third is his implicit attribution of cultural consequences to economic deprivation, such that the idea of cultural continuities in family disorganization is advanced. Black family disorganization, he argues, results from a self-perpetuating tradition of fragmented, pathological interaction within lower-class Black urban communities. A culture of poverty, if you will, is said to develop. Frazier basically proposes a socioeconomic/cultural deprivation model for interpretation of Black family life, as an alternative to then current biological deficit models. Unfortunately, Frazier's perspective is sometimes equally injurious to the image and understanding of Black family life. By treating racial discrimination in vague historic terms, denying the legitimacy of Black cultural forms, and fostering deterministic views of poverty and its consequences, his perspective lends itself to interpretations of Black families as pathological. Where Black families exhibit signs of disorganization, the tendency is to seek internal rather than external causes,

or for that matter, to not question the ethnocentric (and patriarchal) connotations of the family disorganization concept. Vivid illustration of this point is provided by Moynihan's (whose work is closely patterned after Frazier's) grim portrayal of Black family life and conclusion that

> At the heart of the deterioration of the fabric of Negro society is the deterioration of the Negro family. It is the fundamental source of weakness in the Negro community at the present time. . . . The White family has achieved a high degree of stability and is maintaining that stability. By contrast, the family structure of lower class Negroes is highly unstable and in many urban centers is approaching complete breakdown. (Moynihan, 1965:5)

While criticisms of Moynihan's conclusions were widespread (Allen, 1978a, 1978b; Gutman, 1976; Staples, 1971), perhaps the most penetrating and thought-provoking criticism was offered by Hare (1976:5). Hare suggested that Moynihan, by neglecting Frazier's crucial linkage of Black family pathologies with racial oppression, ". . . had stood Frazier's analysis on its head and made family instability the source of Black occupational and economic degradation." Again, African Americans were blamed for their depressed status in society (as well as any negative consequences deriving from this status), only in this instance, learned cultural, rather than innate biological, deficiencies were alluded to as causes. Rainwater (1970) and Bernard (1966) essentially concur with Moynihan's conclusions on the issue of culture and disorganization in Black family life. They also see an intergenerational "tangle of pathology" founded on historic racial oppression *but* perpetuated by present-day destructive, cultural, and interactional patterns within Black family life. However, Rainwater, Bernard and other adherents (Glazer, 1966; Schulz, 1969) to the "sociocultural determinism" perspective tend more so than Moynihan to explicitly restrict their generalizations to lower class, urban Blacks.

In contrast to proponents of sociocultural determinism, Billingsley (1968) and others emphasize facets of Frazier's writings dealing with the economic determinates of Black family organization. Writing from the socioeconomic determinism perspective, Billingsley and others argue that Black families — indeed Black communities — are economically dependent on and subordinate to the larger society. Recognizing the inextricable dependence of Black families on the society for resources linked to their sustenance and survival, Billingsley expands Frazier's original thesis, linking economics with family organization and function (Billingsley, 1992). The result is a typology outlining various structural adjustments that Black families make in response to economic imperatives threatening their ability to provide for family member needs. The idea of differential susceptibility to economic and social discrimination is integral to Billingsley's argument; thus, more severe resource limitations cause low-income Black families to

display higher rates of disorganization than middle- and upper-income Black families. To buttress this point, he presents case studies of middle-class Black families and their accomplishments. In each instance, the long-term economic stability of these families enhanced their ability to maintain conventional patterns of organization, fulfill member needs, and conform to societal norms. Ladner (1971), Rodman (1971), Scanzoni (1971), and Stack (1974) share this perspective through their stress on the primacy of immediate economic factors over historic cultural factors in the determination of Black family organization. This perspective, it should also be noted, views lower class, urban Black family departures — where these occur — from normative family patterns as valid, sensible adaptations to the attendant circumstances of racial and economic oppression.

In summary, two competing perspectives, both derived from Frazier's earlier work, tend to dominate our thinking about relationships obtaining between class, culture, and Black family life. Sociocultural determinism attributes disorganization in Black family life to what were initially adaptive responses to economic deprivation, but over time have become ingrained, self-perpetuating cultural traits. By contrast, socioeconomic determinism views Black family disorganization as an outgrowth of immediate economic deprivation. Quite simply, the question concerns the relative importance of class and culture in the determination of Black family organization. Are Black family organization patterns most effectively explained in terms of current economic circumstances or persistent cultural values? In my view, it is wisest to assume that where rates of family disorganization (measured by conventional indices, e.g., divorce, desertion, illegitimacy, and nonsupport rates) are high among African Americans, it is more often due to economic deprivation than to values that esteem such conditions.

TOWARD A COMPREHENSIVE MODEL OF BLACK FAMILY EXPERIENCE

Many problems associated with distortions of African American family life in the literature owe to the inability, or refusal, of researchers to locate their findings within the settings experienced by these families (Hill, 1993; Billingsley, 1992). Black family patterns and outcomes are best understood when viewed in larger context. Historically, family researchers have tended to analyze and interpret Black family life from the perspectives of White middle-class families. The conclusions reached about Black families, not surprisingly, have been wrong. Seen outside rather than through the lenses provided by their special circumstances and experiences, African American family values, behaviors, and styles have been alternately misrepresented and

misunderstood. Without the perspective that attention to context provides, researchers who study Black families have mistakenly portrayed the positive as negative, the patterned as chaotic, and the normative as deviant.

The model proposed here responds to a felt need for systematic approaches that unravel the effects of sociocultural and economic-ecological context on African families in the United States. The necessity for developing models and strategies to assess the consequences of context for family functions and structure is obvious. In many ways, however, research on African American families offers unique opportunities for pursuing such questions. As even casual perusal of the literature will attest, few other areas compare in terms of the sheer magnitude of vehement and prevalent disagreements over data and interpretations. The special circumstances that characterize Black family life in the United States, both historically and today, warrant — indeed require — that these families be examined in relation to their environments. Where this is done, one can expect clearer understandings of Black family experiences. African American families display an incredible diversity of value orientations, goals, behavioral patterns, structural arrangements, geographic locations, and socioeconomic statuses. This is not to ignore the elements which are common to all African American families — those qualities that join them and distinguish them from other families in the society. Rather, I seek to identify significant factors that combine to define the essential character of the family life of Africans born and raised in the United States.

The model emphasizes two themes, stressing first the Black family's socioecological contexts and second, the dynamic nature of Black family experiences. These important themes are incorporated into the model through the use of multiple perspectives. The four perspectives used in combination are Social Systems Theory, the Ecological Perspective, the Developmental Conceptual Framework, and the Multiple Social Realities Perspective.

Social Systems Theory and the Ecological Perspective are used jointly to incorporate a focus on family environment. The model derives partially from a social systems view of African American family life. While Social Systems Theory as an approach to the study of family life was articulated and proposed much earlier (Parsons, 1951; Parsons and Bales, 1955), its most systematic application to the analysis of Black families came in 1968. Billingsley argues that the Social Systems approach to the study of Black families was necessary ". . . precisely because Negro families have been so conspicuously shaped by social forces in the American environment" (1964:4). He defines African American families as social systems that contain aggregations of people and their accompanying social roles, bound together by patterns of mutual interaction and interdependence. Billingsley sees these families as embedded in networks of relationships that were both

larger and smaller than themselves. Social Systems Theory is useful to the emerging model because it acknowledges the interdependent nature of Black family life in this society. It shows that Black families — and Black individuals — depend on systematic linkages with societal institutions for sustenance and support.

The Human Ecology Perspective is best articulated in the work of Amos Hawley (1950, 1971). This approach encourages the interpretation of family structure and process in relation to environmental constraints. Family organization and functioning are believed to represent adaptations that allow for the maximum exploitation of the physical and social environment. I was not able to identify contemporary research that explicitly applies the Ecological Perspective to the analysis of Black family life. However, Bronfenbrenner's (1979) research on child development using an Ecological Perspective provides a useful illustration. In this work, "the ecological environment is conceived as a set of nested structures, each inside the next" (1979:3). Bronfenbrenner identifies four levels of ecological environments: (1) the microsystem, a developing person's immediate setting; (2) the mesosystem, settings where the developing person participates; (3) the exosystem, settings that the person may never enter but where events occur to affect his immediate environment; and (4) the macrosystem, patterns of ideology and social organization characteristic of a particular society or culture. He places major stress on the interconnectedness occurring not only within, but also between, the different system levels. The Ecological Perspective's potential value for illuminating Black family experiences is embodied in Bronfenbrenner's assertion that

> . . . by analyzing and comparing the micro-, meso-, and exosystems characterizing different social classes, ethnic and religious groups, or entire societies, it becomes possible to describe systematically and to distinguish the ecological properties of these larger social contexts as environments for human development. (1979:8)

The comprehensive Black family model incorporates dynamism by merging elements of the Developmental Conceptual Framework and the Multiple Social Realities Perspective. The Developmental approach provides a framework for viewing family structure and process over the family life cycle. Families are viewed as traversing several developmental stages from their initial organization in marriage to their ultimate disintegration in divorce or physical death. Associated with each state in the family life cycle are distinct family tasks and resources to accomplish these tasks. The Developmental approach to the study of family life is best discussed as a perspective in Hill and Rodgers (1964) or Duvall (1977). Once more, I encountered difficulties identifying examples where this perspective was specifically applied to the analysis of Black family life. Nevertheless, this model's emphasis on the changes Black families and their members undergo over the family life cycle is drawn from the Developmental Perspective.

The remaining dynamic component of the model comes from the incorporation of the Multiple Social Realities Perspective. The roots of this perspective date back to Durkheim's discussion of social reality's multiple levels. He argues that there are five strata, or levels, apparent in social organization: (1) geographic/demographic bases; (2) institutions and collective behavior; (3) symbols; (4) values, ideas, and ideals; and (5) states of the collective mind (Durkheim, 1933/1964). Georges Gurvitch, the French sociologist, provides a useful modification of Durkheim's ideas for our purposes. Arguing that "in order to integrate the various aspects of social reality, sociological theory must provide a systematic account of the dialectical interrelations of micro-social processes, groups, classes and societies and their interpenetration at different levels of social reality" (1971:xxi), Gurvitch presents an excellent framework with which to approach the analysis of Black family dynamics (see Bosserman, 1968, for detailed elaboration of Gurvitch's framework). His framework speaks to the whole of social reality, differentiating these along two main axes, one horizontal and the other vertical. The horizontal axis corresponds to types of social frameworks, or categories, of which Gurvitch identifies three: *forms of sociality* (i.e., interpersonal interactions), *groups* (i.e., institutionalized forms of sociality, such as families or unions), and *global societies* (i.e., large combinations of diverse groups, such as nations). The vertical axis corresponds to levels of depth in social reality. Depth is determined by the accessibility of phenomena at each level to direct external observation. The tenth and deepest level is the collective consciousness (i.e., shared collective mentality), while the surface or first level is represented by social morphology or ecology (i.e., geographic or demographic characteristics). Of paramount importance here is the implication that families will maintain dynamic, ever-changing relationships with agents, groups, and institutions at various levels in the society.

In sum, the proposed comprehensive model of African American family life combines elements from various perspectives. The model is intended to reflect the ecological-environmental contingencies, as well as dynamic processes, of Black family realities in this country. Thus, the nature of African American family systemic relations, their responses to environmental factors, how they change over the life course, and their ongoing exchanges with other societal bodies are all emphasized.

The Black Family Social-Ecological Context Model

The Black family Social-Ecological Context Model seeks to specify and interrelate the variety of institutional, interpersonal, environmental, temporal, and cultural factors that merge to determine the essential character of

Black family life in this society. While Fig. 3 provides a full-blown presentation of this model, it is important to illustrate systematically the steps through which this final model was derived. Thus several figures, with accompanying discussion, precede our consideration of the model. The model seeks to be widely encompassing of variables and relationships, from the myriad of factors believed to influence African American family experiences. Although the model certainly fails to achieve this ideal goal, it does effectively outline the *major* parameters from which truly comprehensive approaches to the study of Black family experiences can result. Bronfenbrenner qualifies his attempt to develop an encompassing perspective on child development as follows: "It is necessary to emphasize in this connection that

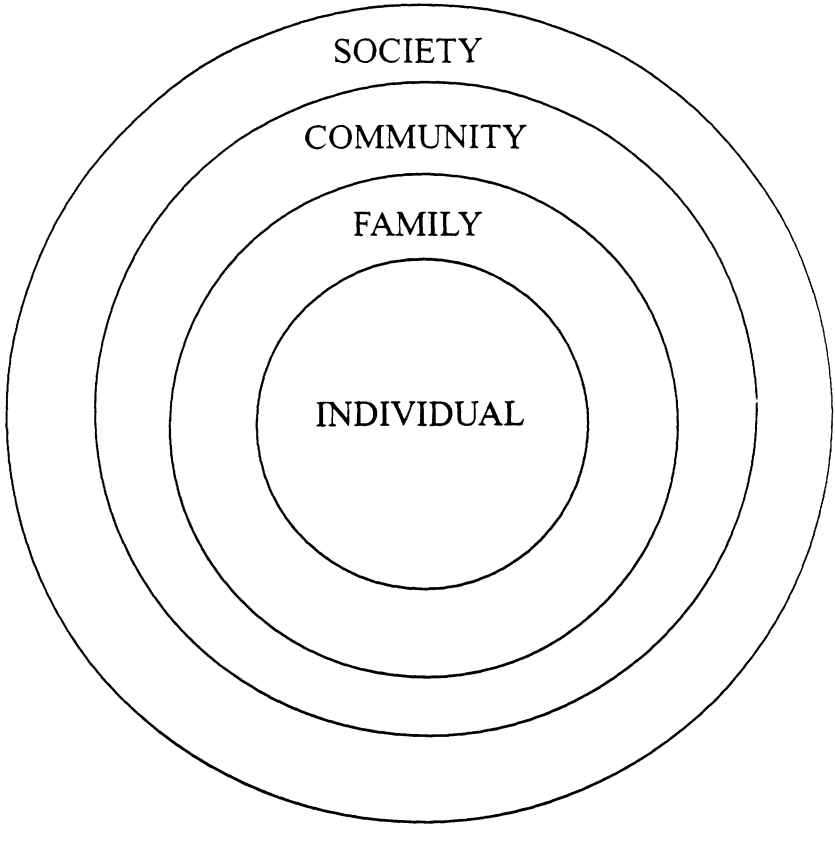

Fig. 1. Billingsley's "Social Systems Theory of Black family life."

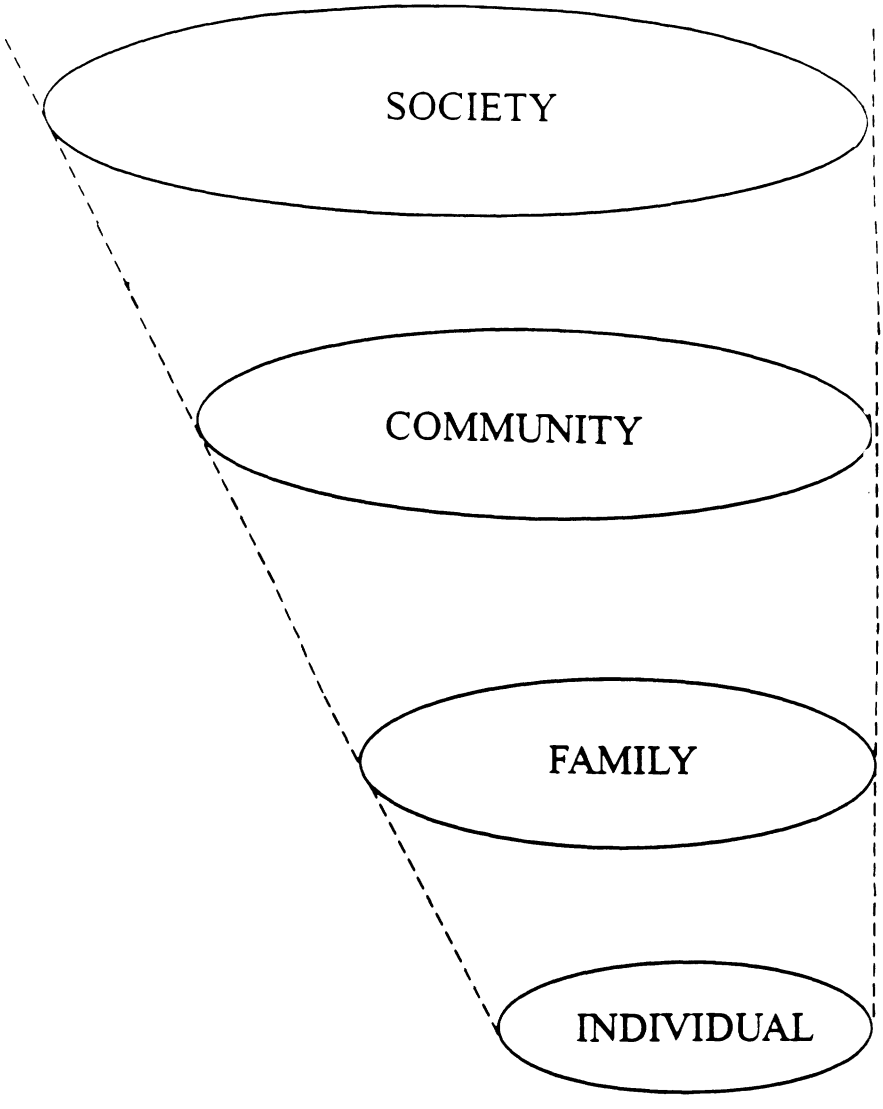

Fig. 2. Telescopic inversion of the concentric circles (systems) in model.

it is neither necessary nor possible to meet all the criteria for ecological research within a single investigation" (1979:4). In this same spirit, what is presented here is a best approximation of the most comprehensive model possible, given unavoidable limitations in resources and perspective.

A schematic representation of Billingsley's social systems perspective of Black family life is provided in Fig. 1. The concentric circles represent the embeddedness of African American families in this society. Individuals exist in the context provided by their families; families exist in the contexts provided by their communities; and communities exist in the contexts provided by the larger society. Central to this model are the twin notions of interdependence and interpenetration. In essence, the perspective views Black families as subsystems that are embedded in successively larger nested systems. The conceptual model takes this sequential subsystems view as the fundamental point of departure. The next step was to "telescope" the concentric circles of the social system model outward. Then, the telescoped subsystems are inverted in order to illustrate the increasingly restricted space and spheres of reference encountered as one moves from the wider macrosystems toward the innermost, smaller microsubsystems (Fig. 2). Here, the emerging model represents the different levels of social reality and demonstrates the fact that these levels are dynamically connected by their interdependence and interpenetration. Finally, Fig. 3 provides an elaboration and a systematic presentation of mechanisms and linkages through which the entire system of hypothesized relationships is tied into a codified whole.

The Black family social-ecological context model summarizes the system of relationships believed to determine the nature of Black family life in the United States (Fig. 3). As an approximation of these causal relationships, the model is flawed in many important respects. For example, it suggests that observed relationships are unidirectional, when in fact we know that these relationships are bidirectional, mutually influencing. By the same token, in its present form the model lacks the detail and specificity normally associated with predictive models. In short, the model is at best a gross approximation of complex linkages, direct and indirect relationships, situational factors, and interpersonal exchanges that form the experiential bases of Black family life. Nevertheless, this model serves effectively to organize and to orient our thinking about the Black family experience along more systematic and encompassing lines. The model also provides a framework within which these complex relationships can be examined.

This model of African American family life represents causal linkages as moving from larger systems down through successively smaller subsystems. Thus, it suggests that societal institutions (dichotomized into those that perform normative functions and those that perform maintenance functions) influence community settings. Further, community settings influence kinship

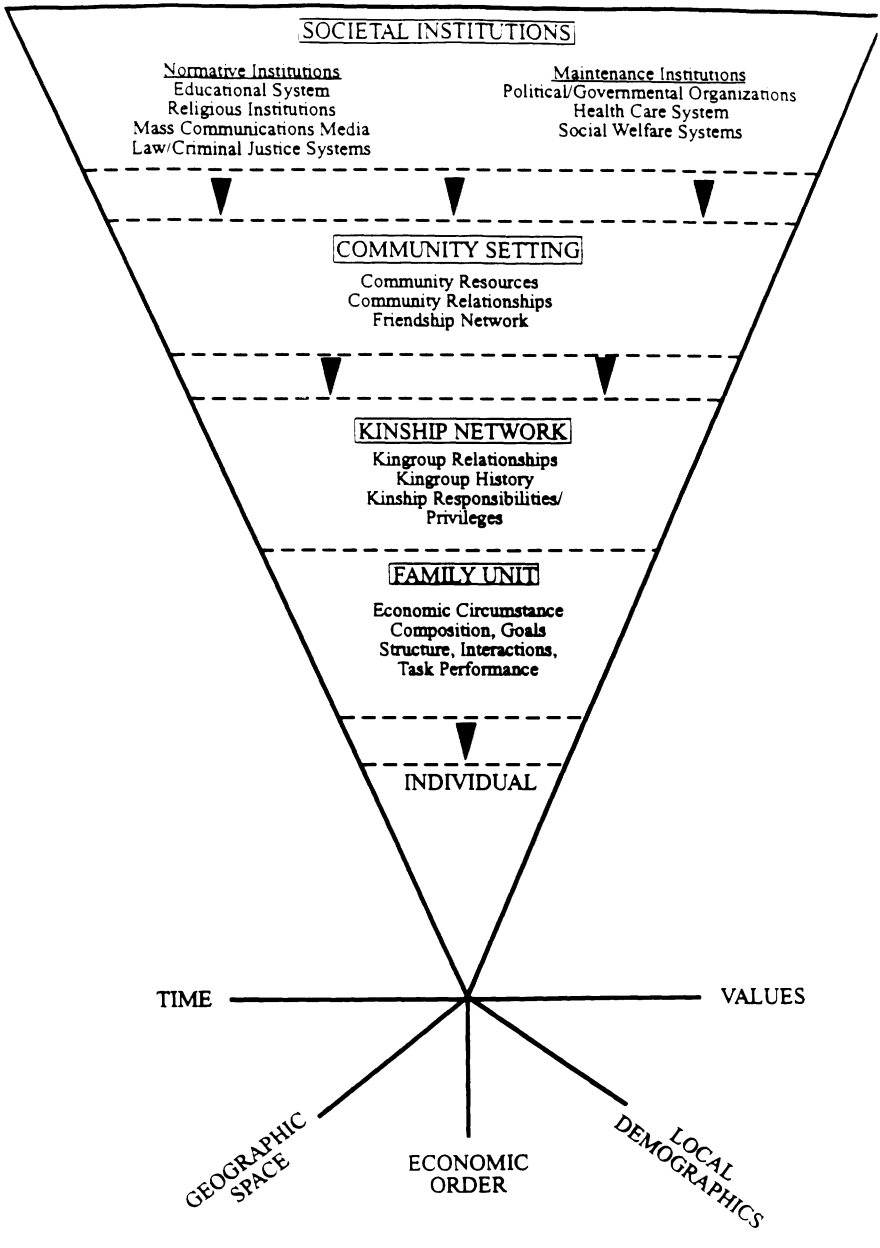

Fig. 3. The "Black family Ecological context" model.

networks, which in turn influence the family units. Finally, individual outcomes are seen as direct products of family units. Clearly the family realities abstracted in this model are much more involved than is shown. There is considerable interpenetration *between* levels, there are elaborate causal relationships *within* each level, and there is wide variation *across* families in terms of how strongly each of the different causal factors influences observed outcomes. Nevertheless, the general patterns outlined can be expected to assert themselves consistently in the construction of Black family outcomes. For all families, and for Black families in particular, one expects to find societal institution effects being mediated by community setting that, in turn, is mediated by dual levels of the family system (kinship network and family unit).

Once all of the linkages expressed (and implied) in this model have been taken into account, several additional determinants of Black family experiences would need to be addressed. These additional factors particularly involve the variation one expects, and indeed finds, to be characteristic of Black family experiences across different settings represented by economic status, time, space, and value orientation. Dependent on the historical period, economic class, spatial location, and value position of the Black families in question, one should expect to see the components in the model combining in distinctive ways and producing different outcomes.

IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL POLICY

Black children and their families currently face social and economic crises of such magnitude that their very survival is threatened (Hill *et al.*, 1993). Spiraling inflation, economic restructuring, and changing societal priorities greatly diminish the opportunities and quality of life for Black families and their children. Social scientists therefore have a special obligation to offer practical recommendations aimed at alleviating the crises currently experienced by too many Black (and minority and poor) families and children in this society. I offer these recommendations not as a disinterested, dispassionate, detached scholar, but rather as an African American professional who is concerned about the futures of our children and of our communities.

Social and behavioral research findings exert profound influence on public policy, which shapes the lives of an inordinate number of Black families and children. Too often this simple connection is overlooked. It would be naïve to think that research findings have no consequences for how key decision makers operate. Research findings taught in the classroom, published in popular scholarly journals, reported in the popular media, and discussed over cocktails, shape their ideas of both the appropriate and the possible. In making decisions that affect the lives of Black families and of

Black people, policymakers draw upon these ideas (in both conscious and unconscious ways). Past research on Black children and Black families has distorted their realities and has defined them as pathological. As a result, social programs informed by this pejorative research tradition have been less than effective. Public policies intended to help Black children have instead often proven harmful.

Ironically, the actions that this agenda calls for echo a similar call made by Allison Davis and John Dollard, University of Chicago, in 1940. In the ensuing five decades, much has changed in the lives of Black people; unfortunately, much has also remained the same. There are more Black millionaires, physicians, professors, private contractors, and attorneys now than ever before. However, there also continue to be unacceptably high numbers of Black children denied adequate health care, equal educational opportunity, and minimal living standards. The following recommendations suggest an action agenda that will ensure that Black (and minority) families who are currently disadvantaged receive their full benefits from this society. These recommendations are not intended to be all-inclusive. Instead, they present my view of key arenas for corrective action. These recommendations draw extensively from an earlier paper (Allen *et al.*, 1985).

Poverty

African American families continue to be disproportionately represented among this country's poor. From generation to generation, Blacks — compared to Whites — earn less, have fewer capital resources, and are caught in systems of economic deprivation. Poverty conditions the life chances and experiences of Black children in a variety of ways. In this society, the basic necessities of life — and any frills — are for sale. Those with limited or nonexistent purchasing power are therefore placed at a great disadvantage. Action is required to improve the economic circumstances of Black children and their families. Among the actions to be taken are the following: institution of an adequate guaranteed minimum family income, institution of a program of full employment involving the public and private sectors, and the equalization of worker salaries and earnings potential.

Health Care

African American children and their families are deprived of adequate health care in this, the world's most medically advanced society. Disproportionate numbers of Black children die in infancy, suffer poor nutrition, are not immunized, and die from accidents. Poor access to health

care ends many young Black lives prematurely and diminishes the quality of existence for others. Action is required to improve the health status and health care access of African American families. The specific needs include the following: alternative financing of medical and health care services to ensure their availability, regardless of ability to pay; expansion of health care outlets, including the location of health care facilities in inner-city areas and increased recruitment/training of African American physicians and health care professionals; and the establishment of comprehensive, preventive health programs emphasizing early and periodic screening/intervention.

Education

Educational attainment has steadily risen among African Americans. There is reason to believe, however, that the qualitative gains in their education have been less pronounced — certainly the economic returns on the educational gains are lower than for Whites. Black children lag behind Whites on most objective measures of achievement: their suspension rates are higher, and college entrance rates are lower. The educational experiences of Black children are impaired through their enrollment at schools with larger numbers of underachieving students, more frequent violence, fewer experienced teachers, and substandard facilities. In order to improve the school experience and educational outcomes for Black children, there is a need for alternative financing approaches to eliminate current economic inequities between school districts, the development and implementation of individualized remedial/instructional programs, and the implementation of school accountability systems that establish target achievement goals and assess progress toward these goals.

Media

The electronic media in the form of television and radio exert an influence on African American children that at times exceeds the influence of parents. Children spend substantial amounts of time absorbing the content of the most recent television programs and the most popular songs. Yet parents and the Black community exert at best minimal influence over the content of these messages. There is ample evidence that media messages are often detrimental to Black children's healthy development. The negative effects include advocacy of violence, sexual indiscriminations, and conspicuous consumerism.

Steps must be taken to maximize the positive effects of media and to minimize any negative effects. There is need for parents to regulate their

children's media habits and exposure, and for the community to monitor media broadcasts so as to encourage positive programming.

Child Care

If the model of a full-time homemaker/wife ever had applicability in African American communities, that time has long since passed. The majority of Black mothers who can find jobs are employed outside the home. At the same time, the character of extended family involvements has changed so as to lessen the viability of these as child care alternatives. The result has been an increased need for child care services by Black families. Limited availability of child care options, high costs where these are available, and large numbers of Black children in foster care make the provision of child care services to Black families necessary. Recognizing the facts, this requires the following: the expansion of low-cost/community-based child care programs to serve the needs of working parents, the institution of training programs and referral resources for child care providers, and the revision of guidelines regulating Black child placements in foster homes or group-care facilities.

These are but a few of the many public policy initiatives to be pursued. If implemented, these social policies and other related initiatives should vastly improve the circumstances of African American families in the United States. To the extent that family circumstances are improved, we can reasonably expect to see improvements in the quality of life and outcomes for African American families. This social policy agenda speaks mostly to the responsibility of government for improving Black family life. Beyond this lies another set of initiatives that are more properly the responsibility of the Black community.

Responsibilities of the African American Community

African American communities have responsibilities extending to and beyond each of the problem areas above. African Americans must pool and organize resources to ensure that, even where the government and larger society fail to fulfill their commitments, the needs of Black children and of Black families do not go unmet. Self-help activities based in churches, social clubs, private homes, and available public meeting places must become the rule rather than the exception. This is a call for the creation and expansion of community-based tutorial programs, social welfare cooperatives, and mutual support organizations of the sort commonly found in Black communities at an earlier point in our history. It is a terrible irony that African Americans possess economic resources, educational achieve-

ments, and technical skills that would place us among the top 15 countries in the world were we an independent nation. Yet we mobilize the merest fraction of these vast resources in cooperative activities aimed at self-benefit. We continue to depend far too much on others for the fulfillment of our needs and for the protection of our young.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Thirty years ago, D. Patrick Moynihan issued a call for national action to respond to real threats to African American family life. Citing the declining fraction of households headed by married couples, he forecast the destruction of African American family and community life unless action took dramatic government. The trends identified by Moynihan have continued; now nearly half of all Black families are headed by a single female. More often than not, these families are mired in poverty and beset by the social problems associated with severe economic deprivation.

Time has proven the trends in African American family life to be much more complex and elusive than Moynihan predicted. In fact, what has happened since 1965 is a hastening of two currents in Black family life and in Black communities. On the one hand, many Black families have sunk deeper into abject poverty. Associated with their impoverishment is their isolation from the societal mainstream. They and their members are increasingly outside the educational system, without jobs, consigned to high crime areas, leading dead-end lives and facing limited futures. On the other hand is the group of Black families who were able to escape the cycle of deprivation and destruction forecast by Moynihan. These families and their members have moved into areas of American life previously off limits to Black people. With their fantastic success and unrestricted access has come unrivaled social and economic mobility.

Hence, two contrasting realities are presented for contemporary African American families. Middle-class Blacks require little more than the continued commitment of the society to equal opportunity. Given a fair chance, they are, by virtue of their educational, economic, social, and political resources, able to compete successfully. At the other end of the continuum are the poor urban Black families, whose needs are legion. Denied or deprived of gainful employment, adequate educational preparation, and safe, healthy productive communities, these families find it challenging to maintain even a semblance of normal family life.

The case for national action on behalf of urban poor African American families is indisputable. The nation must mobilize its resources and resolve first to ease and then ultimately to erase the frightening deterioration of

viable family and community life among poor urban African Americans. The problems contributing to this deterioration are not entirely — or sizably — of Black people's making; therefore, these problems cannot be left solely to Black people to solve. Industrial decline, the proliferation of guns and illegal drugs, the failure of the public school system, and massive unemployment loom large in the equation of Black family crisis. African American families face problems of epic proportions and, unless these problems are solved, the negative effects will continue to be felt by the whole nation. Black families have historically nurtured and sustained African Americans under extreme conditions, ranging from enslavement to impoverishment (Billingsley, 1992). With critical assistance from government and the rest of society, these families will continue to produce citizens able to help this society advance.

While the case for concerted action concerning research on African American families is not so sharply drawn, it is nevertheless of weighty importance. The empirical record cries out for correction. Time and time again, it has shown how researchers have distorted Black family life and misinformed society about its essential elements. The result of these flawed studies has been to cripple society's understanding of African American families and to hobble attempts to address the problems that confront these families. It is imperative that additional, more sensitive empirical studies of African American families be undertaken. Further, these studies need to employ alternative theoretical, methodological, and ideological approaches that will help clarify the socioecological context within which African American families function and illustrate how these families respond to such constraints. A period of revisionist scholarship is required in order to challenge and to supplant a literature which portrays African American families as pathological. The strategy will not be to replace this literature with one that says all is well and perfect with African American families in America. Instead, the attempt will be to produce studies to illuminate the essential nature of Black family life, showing not only its obvious characteristics but also its subtle variations. From such research will come reliable information to guide attempts to shape social policy that improves the circumstances of African American families.

> Faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.
>
> St. Paul

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