

**FIFTH EDITION**

**THE  
BLACK  
FAMILY**

**ESSAYS AND STUDIES**

**ROBERT STAPLES**

# THE BLACK FAMILY

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## Essays and Studies

FIFTH EDITION

Robert Staples

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# DEDICATION

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To my primary cousins

*Earl Anthony*

*Barbara Anthony Rhodes*

*Willard Anthony*

*Ronald Anthony*

*Rosalind Anthony Smith*

*Marcia Anthony*

*Sharon Anthony Banks*

*Carolyn Green*

*Sabena Carter*

*Gwendolyn Owens*

*Dorothy Chambers*

*Carolyn McGill Bates*

*Winston McGill, Jr.*

*Tony Anthony*

*Barbara Gray*

# PREFACE

---

As always, the Black family continues to change, away from the nuclear family model and toward an extended family form. The economic situation for Afro-Americans has not gotten any better, and that is reflected in its family structure. Fewer and fewer Black women can find desirable and employed males to marry, and an all-time low of 33% of adult Black females are currently married and living with their spouse. Many, however, continue to bear children, and more than 60% of children born to Black women in 1993 were out of wedlock. Conversely, the joint income of Black married couples with dual incomes in 1990 was \$33,893, giving them one of the highest standards of living in the world. But such couples represented a minority of Black households in 1993.

This fifth edition of *The Black Family* represents our effort to make this book a reflection of all the diverse trends in Afro-American family life. Almost one half of the articles are new. The new articles include scholarly analyses of sexual harassment; more coverage of Black family health issues; a new section on interracial marriages; and an article on Black sexual pathologies such as prostitution, date rape, and AIDS. As has been true for 23 years, the articles are a combination of empirical research and scholarly essays, accessible to undergraduate students and providing the reader with a comprehensive examination of this vital institution.

Once again I am grateful to the people who helped me put this book together. I have always benefitted from my conversations with Talmadge Anderson, and the book is enhanced through the reprint of articles from the distinguished journal he edits, *The Western Journal of Black Studies*. Dr. Erma Lawson of the University of Kentucky provided a number of suggestions on subjects and articles to consider and wrote an article for the book on short notice. Another helpful person was Dr. Ron Stewart, SUNY-Buffalo, who gave me the input of his students who used the book. Serina Beauparlant was supportive of this editor in resolving the problems posed by organizing a book of this kind.

I am also grateful to the following reviewers: Rose Brewer, University of Minnesota; Vivian Gordon, State University of New York, Albany; and Teresa Labov, University of Pennsylvania. I want to thank Jennifer Thomas, who helped in the typing and editing of the manuscript. Wadsworth employees who played crucial roles in the production process were Susan Shook and Debby Kramer. Last, and certainly not least, I want to thank Ms. Marla Nowick, the former Senior Editorial Assistant whose unusual administrative style provided a security blanket for me. She went beyond the call of duty in helping me make this book a success. As always, I remain the person responsible for the final content of the book.

Robert Staples

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# PART ONE

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## The Setting

Many changes have occurred in this country since 1954, covering a wide array of personalities, values, and institutions and bringing about a marked change in the functioning of society as a whole. These changes have been most dramatic within the institution of the family where they have had a most telling effect on our personal lives. We are all, to some degree, affected by increasing sexual permissiveness, changes in sex role expectations, a declining fertility rate, altered attitudes toward childbearing and childrearing, a continuing increase in the divorce rate, and the like.

One would not expect Black families to be immune to the forces modifying our family forms. There is ample evidence that they are not. At the same time, their special status as a racial minority with a singular history continues to give the Black marital and family patterns a unique character. Despite what many allege to be the positive gains of the sixties and seventies, the problems of poverty and racial oppression continue to plague large numbers of Afro-Americans. Black Americans are still spatially segregated from the majority of the more affluent white citizenry, and certain cultural values distinguish their family life in form and content from that of the middle-class, white, Anglo-Saxon model.

Nevertheless, the commonality of the two may be greater than the differences. We lose nothing by admitting this. Moreover, the variations within the Black population may be greater than the differences between the two racial groups. Therefore, it becomes even more important to view the Black

family from the widest possible perspective, from its peculiar history to the alternate family life-styles now emerging.

### The Changing Black Family

It is generally accepted that the precursor of contemporary sociological research and theories on the Black family is the work of the late Black sociologist E. Franklin Frazier. Although Frazier's investigations of the Black family began in the twenties, his works are still considered the definitive findings on Black family life in the United States (Frazier, 1939). As a sociologist, Frazier was primarily interested in race relations as a social process, and he sought to explain that process through the study of the Black family. Through his training in the University of Chicago's social ecology school under the tutelage of Park, Wirth, Burgess, and others, Frazier came to believe that race relations proceeded through different stages of development to the final stage of assimilation.

Since it is through the family that the culture of a group is transmitted, Frazier chose this group as the object of his sociological study. Using the natural history approach, he explained the present condition of the Black family as the culmination of an evolutionary process, its structure strongly affected by the vestiges of slavery, racism, and economic exploitation. The institution of enslavement and slavery virtually destroyed the cultural

moorings of Blacks and prevented any perpetuation of African kinship and family relations. Consequently, the Black family developed various forms according to the different situations it encountered (Frazier, 1939).

Variations in sex and marital practices, according to Frazier, grew out of the social heritage of slavery; and what slavery began—the pattern of racism and economic deprivation—continued to impinge on the family life of Afro-Americans. The variations Frazier spoke of are: (1) the matriarchal character of the Black family whereby Black males are marginal, ineffective figures in the family constellation; (2) the instability of marital life resulting from the lack of a legal basis for marriage during the period of slavery, which meant that marriage never acquired the position of a strong institution in Black life and casual sex relations were the prevailing norm; and (3) the dissolution—caused by the process of urbanization—of the stability of family life that had existed among Black peasants in an agrarian society (Frazier, 1939).

Most of Frazier's studies were limited to pre-World War II Black family life. His research method was the use of case studies and documents whose content he analyzed and from which he attempted to deduce a pattern of Black family life. The next large-scale theory of the Black family was developed by Daniel Moynihan (1965); it was based largely on census data and pertained to Black family life as it existed in the sixties. In a sense, Moynihan attempted to confirm statistically Frazier's theory that the Black family was disorganized as a result of slavery, urbanization, and economic deprivation. But he added a new dimension to Frazier's theory: "At the heart of the deterioration of the fabric of Negro society is the deterioration of the Negro family" (Moynihan, 1965:5). Moynihan attempted to document his major hypothesis by citing statistics on the dissolution of Black marriages, the high rate of Black illegitimate births, the prevalence of female-headed households in the Black community, and how the deterioration of the Black family had led to a shocking increase in welfare dependency (Moynihan, 1965).

This study of the Black family, commonly referred to as the Moynihan Report, generated a largely critical response from members of the Black

community. It drew a mixed response from members of the white academic community, some critically supporting most of Moynihan's contentions, others imputing no validity to his assertions (Rainwater and Yancy, 1967; Staples and Mirande, 1980). The reasons for the negative reaction to Moynihan's study are manifest. In effect, he made a generalized indictment of all Black families. And, although he cited the antecedents of slavery and high unemployment as historically important variables, he shifted the burden of Black deprivation onto the Black family rather than the social structure of the United States.

The Moynihan Report assumed a greater importance than other studies on the Black family for several reasons. As an official government publication, it implied a shift in the government's position in dealing with the effects of racism and economic deprivation on the Black community. However, the Moynihan Report did not spell out a plan for action. The conclusion drawn by most people was that whatever his solution, it would focus on strengthening the Black family rather than dealing with the more relevant problems of segregation and discrimination.

## Historical Background

The most ground-breaking research on Black families has been conducted by historians. For years the work of Frazier (1939), together with that of Stanley Elkins (1968), had been accepted as the definitive history of Black families and posited as a causal explanation of their contemporary condition. Using traditional historical methods based on plantation records and slave owner testimony, both historians reached the conclusion that slavery destroyed the Black family and decimated Black culture. The first historian to challenge this thesis was Blassingame (1972), whose use of slave narratives indicated that in the slave quarters Black families did exist as functioning institutions and role models for others. Moreover, strong family ties persisted in face of the frequent breakups deriving from the slave trade. To further counteract the Frazier-Elkins thesis, Fogel and Engerman (1974) used elaborate quantitative methods to document that slave owners did not

separate a majority of the slave families. Their contention, also controversial, was that capitalistic efficiency of the slave system meant it was more practical to keep slave families intact.

Continuing in the vein of revisionist historical research, Genovese (1972) used a mix of slave holders' papers and slave testimony. Still, he concluded that Black culture, through compromise and negotiation between slaves and slave owners, did flourish during the era of slavery. Within that cultural vortex there was a variety of socially approved and sanctioned relationships between slave men and women. The alleged female matriarchy extant during that era was described by Genovese as a closer approximation to a healthy sexual equality than was possible for whites. Finally, the landmark study by Gutman (1976) put to rest one of the most common and enduring myths about Black families. Using census data for a number of cities between 1880 and 1925, Gutman found that the majority of Blacks of all social classes were lodged in nuclear families. Through the use of plantation birth records and marriage applications, he concluded that the biparental household was the dominant form during slavery. More important than Gutman's compelling evidence that slavery did not destroy the Black family was his contention that their family form in the past era had evolved from family and kinship patterns that had originated under slavery. This contention gives credence to the Africanity model, which assumes African origins for Afro-American family values, traits, and behavior.

Using a classical theory of slave family life, Stanley Elkins made a comparative analysis of the effect of slavery on the bondsman's family life in

North and South America. His thesis was that the principal differences between the two regions was the manumission process and the legal basis of marriage between slaves. That is, slaves could become free citizens more easily in South America and those who remained in bondage were permitted to have legal marriage ceremonies. The sanctity of the family was sanctioned in both law and the canons of the Catholic church. The reverse was true, he asserted, in the slave system of the United States. One should view the Elkins research critically since other historians contend that the slave code of which he speaks was not only unenforced but never promulgated in any of the South American countries. In fact, it is claimed, some of the measures encouraging marriage among slaves were designed to bind the slaves to the estates via family ties (Hall, 1970).

However, these historical studies demonstrate that the Black family was a stable unit during slavery and in the immediate postslavery years. The rise in out-of-wedlock births and female-headed households are concomitants of twentieth-century urban ghettos. A doubling of those phenomena is a function of the economic contingencies of industrial America. Unlike the European immigrants before them, U.S. Blacks were disadvantaged by the hard lines of Northern segregation along racial lines. Moreover, families in cities were more vulnerable to disruptions due to the traumatizing experiences of urbanization, the reduction of family functions, and the loss of extended family supports. In order to understand the modern Black family, it is necessary to look at how its structure is affected by socioeconomic forces.

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# 1 / The Changing Black Family

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## TRENDS IN THEMES OF AFRICAN AMERICAN FAMILY RESEARCH 1939–1989:

### A Synopsis

*Lenwood G. Davis*

*This paper reviews traditional themes dealing with the African American family. Some of the topics include slavery, matriarchies, illegitimacy, extended family, housing, economic conditions, and religion. In recent years a number of new themes have appeared in the literature. Some of the topics include aging, adoption, genocide, prison, polygamy, military family, stress, sickle-cell disease, and AIDS, to name a few. A survey of the literature reveals that more studies need to be done in order to better understand the impact that these recent topics have on the African American family structure. This paper discusses what research has been done on various aspects of the African American family, what research is presently being conducted, and what needs to be done.*

### Trends in Themes of African American Family Research: 1939–1989

Over the years there have been a number of themes dealing with the African American family. Some of the topics include slavery, matriarchies, “illegitimacy,” extended family, housing, education, occupations, single family, female role in the family, male role in the family, lower-class family, middle-class family, rural family, urban family, working-class family, economic conditions, and religion. This writer recently prepared a bibliography that discusses most of these topics (Davis, 1986). However, this paper presents brief discussions of the topics mentioned.

Some of the earlier writers on the African American family include W.E.B. Du Bois, E. Franklin Frazier, Allison Davis, Joseph H. Douglass, Charles

S. Johnson, Abram Kardiner, Wily B. Sanders, Edward Wakin, and Lewis G. Watts. In *The Philadelphia Negro*, published in 1899, Du Bois argued that the masses of African American people must be taught to guard the home (and family), to make it the center of social life and moral guardianship. In 1908 Du Bois wrote *The Negro American Family*. In it he declared:

*If there be a further transition from ignorance, poverty and moral darkness, to enlightenment, thrift, industry, and improvement of the individual and the Negro family, the Church and the home must unite in a more vigorous warfare to reduce to a minimum the prevailing evil of divorce. This they must do by teaching that all marriage and family life are not dependent upon selfish desire, or mere caprice, but are institutions ordained of God, and designed like other ordinances of God with a view to the education, the formation and discipline of character (Du Bois, 1908:153).*

Writing in 1939 in *The Negro Family in the United States*, E. Franklin Frazier argued that the disorganization of the African American family was caused by slavery (Frazier, 1939).

Some of the present-day writers on the African American family include Joyce Aschenbrener, Jessie Bernard, Andrew Billingsley, Reginald Clark, James Comer, William Gibson, Herbert G. Gutman, Jerold Heiss, Robert B. Hill, Jacqueline Jones, Theodore R. Kennedy, Jerry M. Lewis, Harriette P. McAdoo, Randall Miller, Daniel P. Moynihan, Constance E. Obudho, Lee Rainwater, Roger H. Rubin, Clifford J. Sager, John H. Scanzio, Carol B. Stack, Robert Staples, Alex L. Swan, Charles V. Willie, and Ann C. Zollar. Most of these writers disagree with Frazier's thesis on the African American family. Bernard stressed that data of Black families should not be viewed merely as deviance from the White norm. The best mirror of African American life, she surmised, is the African American himself (Bernard, 1966). Billingsley sees the goal of the African American family life as the ability to produce competent individuals who can conquer some major aspects of their inner and outer environments in order to sur-

vive to perpetuate the race and make some contribution to the larger society (Billingsley, 1968). Hill contends that strength and stability, not weakness and instability, are the model patterns for both low-income and middle-income African American families (Hill, 1972). Daniel P. Moynihan argues, the expanding unstable family life pattern inhibits Blacks' adjustments to American society (Moynihan, 1965). Many writers disagree with Moynihan's thesis. Rainwater and Yancey point out that at the center of African American institutional life there is the family. It is in the family that individuals are trained for participation in the culture and find their personal and group identity and continuity (Rainwater and Yancey, 1967). Robert Staples asserts that the future of the African American family may rest upon those African Americans who resist the notion that racism will determine their personal relationships. Otherwise, it seems clear that racism may have decisively determined the nature of the most intimate association between men and women (Staples, 1978). Whitney M. Young, Jr., made an interesting observation when he pointed out that considering the obstacles placed in its way by a hostile society and the persistent American attacks on African American manhood, the stability of African American families is extraordinary. The fact that the majority of all poor African American families could manage to hold themselves together and meet every test of middle-class American standards for stability is nothing short of remarkable. The African American family is not the one-fourth that is broken; it is the three-fourths that have held together under pressure that would devastate other groups (Young, 1969).

Perhaps more has been written about the African American family and slavery than any other topic. E. Franklin Frazier wrote on that subject in 1932. Since that time, many others have assayed the topic. Frazier suggested that even under the most favorable conditions of slavery, the family was insecure in spite of the internal character of the family (Frazier, 1932). John W. Blassingame, Andrew Billingsley, Herbert G. Gutman, Eugene D. Genovese, Paul D. Escott, John White and others argued that—although it was weak, although it was frequently broken—the slavery family provided an important buffer, a refuge from the rigors of slavery. The writers also contend that the African American family

structure was not destroyed during slavery. John White concluded that:

*Ironically, the "deterioration" of the Afro-American family was not, it now appears, the legacy of slavery, but of discrimination, racism, poverty, and "benign neglect," which succeeding generations of white Americans have bequeathed to their former slaves. (White 1974:390).*

African American matriarchy is another theme that is seen throughout the literature on the African American family. Robert Staples believes that the myth of the African American matriarchy was cultivated by America's image makers and is part of the divide and conquer strategy that ruling classes have used throughout history (Staples, 1978). Writers such as Joyce A. Ladner, Beth Day, Robert L. Perry, Lena Wright Myers and others agree with Staples.

Illegitimacy is another topic that much has been written about. Heather L. Ross and Isabel V. Sawhill declared that high illegitimacy among African Americans is due to a higher incidence of premarital intercourse, less utilization of effective contraceptives and abortion, less chance that the pregnancy will be legitimized through marriage, and a lower probability that the child born out of wedlock will be adopted (Ross and Sawhill, 1975). Andrew Billingsley surmises that the illegitimacy rate would be more effectively attacked by policies designed to build two-parent families involving men who exercise status authority and influence equal to that of other men outside of the home, and equal to that of their wives inside the home (Billingsley, 1968).

In recent years a number of new themes have emerged concerning the African American family. Some include: aging, adoption, alcoholism, genocide, homosexuality, violence, suicide, birth control, sterilization, prison, polygamy, hypertension, family planning, therapy, public policy, stress, mental illness, counseling, military family, sickle-cell disease, and AIDS. Since there are so many new topics, the writer will not discuss all of them in detail.

Aging is one new theme that much has been written about as it relates to the African American family. Jacquelyn J. Jackson is the leading authority

on minority aged and especially the African American elderly. Jackson and other writers observed that the African American elderly usually live with a family member and depend on their children for support, whereas the White elderly do not (Jackson, 1980). For a review of the literature, one needs to see a recent annotated bibliography by the author (Davis, 1989).

Adoption is another theme that is seen in recent writings. Delores Aldridge summed it up best when she declared:

*... until white-run agencies can modify their staff's attitudes toward Blacks and the differences in their lifestyles, and provide equal amounts of monies and energies in the adoptive process of Black children, there will continue to be a smaller percentage of Black children placed with Black families than white children placed with white families (Aldridge, 1974:410).*

Alcoholism is on an increase in the African American family. Thomas D. Watts and Roosevelt Wright, Jr., see it as relating to the increased pressure on the African American family brought on by the pressures of the society as a whole (Watts and Wright, 1985).

Stress is one theme that is seen more and more in the literature. Harriette Pipes McAdoo suggested that in spite of the stress and the frequency of changes in their lives, African American families exhibited a high level of satisfaction with their family life situation. These families studied preferred not to seek help outside of their wider family because they felt community agencies were unsympathetic to their unique stresses and because of the tradition of reliance upon family members, concluded McAdoo (McAdoo, 1982).

Homosexuality and the African American family is now being studied more and more. June Dobbs Butts argues that homosexuality is not a threat to either the stability or the future of the African American family. She concludes:

*Our internal problem and the real threat to the Black family is the violence of a few of us and the seeming indifference of the multitude. We need to "come home" to touch base*



*with ourselves by being men and women who respect one another for the ways in which we are alike as well as the ways in which we are different . . . "Gay" and "straight," we are the Black family. And we WILL survive (Butts, 1981:144).*

Little serious research has been done on homosexuality and the effects that it has on the African American family.

There apparently is an increase in violence not only in White families, but African American families as well. Yet, little research on that area has been done as it relates to the African American family. Some studies have been done on violence in the African American family as it relates to elderly African Americans.

Herbert Hendin wrote *Black Suicide* in 1969, and it remains one of the few full-length studies on that topic. Over the past three decades a number of articles have appeared on African American suicides. These studies show an increase in suicides among African Americans. Much of this is due to the pressures and conditions of society (Breed, 1970; Cazenave, 1979; Hamermesh, 1974).

Studies have shown that many African American women have unfavorable attitudes toward birth control. Preston Valien and Albetta Fitzgerald wrote an article forty years ago called "Attitudes of the Negro Mother toward Birth Control." Of the 131 African American mothers they interviewed, approximately one-half had unfavorable attitudes toward birth control practices. Religious or moral reasons and a belief that birth control practices were inefficient or injurious to health were the chief reasons given (Valien and Fitzgerald, 1949). In 1975, Robert G. Weisbord wrote a book entitled *Genocide? Birth Control and the Black American*. The author declared that African Americans have qualms about birth control projects. Another writer suggested that:

*. . . [her] findings suggest that Black females are not accepting the idea that to use birth control is to participate in the genocide of the Black population. It seems that the major issue is how to assist Black females in their expressed goals of limiting the size of their families (Harrison, 1977:145).*

One of the most recent studies done on African American prisons and their impact on the family was a doctoral dissertation by Alice P. Green. Green's case studies revealed that once a father/spouse is removed from his household, his roles and responsibilities are quickly assumed by his female spouse with assistance from a number of external resources that include kinfolk and social welfare agencies. The writer argued that although most families were harmed in some fashion by the arrest and long-term separation, some families and marital relationships appeared strengthened by the separation; this usually occurred in situations where the male had an alcohol or drug dependency. She concluded that the wives, of those African Americans who were incarcerated, were able to gain a new sense of self-reliance and independence that allowed them to maintain family functions and pursue other desired goals (Green, 1982).

Hypertension is on the rise in the African American family. A recent study by Myrna B. Williams found that like their parents there were not significant differences between any of the children groups in the total amount of inward or outward aggression expressed. Williams concluded that children with both parents having essential hypertension had significantly higher blood pressures than children of normotensive parents and that more hypertensives than normotensives were overweight . . . (Williams, 1980).

Few studies have been done on the military and its relationship to African American families. One study on the African American family and military observed that African American military families were found to resemble other African American families in the areas of household task allocation and decision-making structure. Ella T. Keller found that these African American military families did report infrequent use of military resources and a preference for civilian rather than military marital counseling. Keller concluded that African American military wives had low participation rates in wives' social and volunteer organizations. It was also pointed out that these families reported generally positive attitudes toward military life which was reflected in the number of husbands and wives favoring reenlistment (Keller, 1980).

Since the discovery of Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome (AIDS) is so new, little research