

# THE BLACK FAMILY

Essays and Studies

THIRD EDITION



ROBERT STAPLES

# THE BLACK FAMILY

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## Essays and Studies

THIRD EDITION

Robert Staples

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# DEDICATION

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To my aunts—

*Geraldine Anthony*

*Arnisha Anthony*

*Harris Radcliffe*

*Virginia Self*

*Reva Staples*

# PREFACE

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Since 1960 the conceptualization and study of Black families has gone through three distinct stages. During the 1960s the Moynihan Report and its predecessors theorized that the Black family was a dysfunctional unit that was impeding the progress of all Black Americans. The report singled out the high rate of out-of-wedlock births and female-headed households, matriarchy, and Black male emasculation as pathological elements in Black family patterns. The second stage was characterized by the negative response to the Moynihan Report and a singular focus on positive elements in Black family life. During the 1970s researchers and theorists stressed the strengths of Black families in the form of extended family supports, role adaptability, healthy sexual patterns, and so on. The third—and current—stage can be seen as a problems approach to the study of Black families. Emerging in the 1980s, it diverged from the Moynihan perspective by singling out socioeconomic forces that had an impact on Black family patterns. The imbalanced sex ratio, unemployment among Black males, and misguided public policies often were cited as causes for the increases in out-of-wedlock births, marital disruptions, and female-headed households.

The previous two editions of *The Black Family: Essays and Studies* reflected the first two stages. A third edition was needed to mirror current trends in Black family theory and research. Certainly the Black family has become the subject of immense public concern in the eighties. From the president of the United States to the *New York Times*, the major civil rights organizations to grass roots groups,

the Black family has been a much-discussed topic. The third edition addresses many of the major issues concerning contemporary Black family life. It remains the most comprehensive book available on the subject, with a collection of articles that are accessible to undergraduate students.

In this new edition considerable space is devoted to the three major problems facing the Black family today. They are not new problems nor are they problems unique to Black families, but their incidence is more pronounced and devastating to the Black population. These problems are the tensions in the Black male/female relationships, which cause large numbers of Blacks to remain single and which dissolve a huge number of marriages each year: teenage pregnancy, which creates new families in which all members are at risk; and nonemployment and unemployment, which are the most serious of all the problems faced by Black families because they are the primary reasons for their poverty.

This new edition addresses, in a balanced way, the causes and nature of these problems. All of the articles are empirically based or are theoretical formulations that avoid blaming the victim for the problems of Black families. Many of them have not been published elsewhere or were published in diverse venues not accessible either to teachers or to students; more than two-thirds of the articles are new to this edition. Among the subjects that are new in this edition are the feminization of poverty thesis, teenage pregnancy, child abuse, working wives, and polygamy. Most of these new articles contain cur-

rent statistical data. It is a much improved, streamlined edition with enhanced value as a text in undergraduate classrooms.

For their help in putting together this book I am indebted to a number of people. Steve Rutter originally suggested the third edition and facilitated its publication. Sheryl Fullerton, the sociology editor, made invaluable suggestions and managed to put out the book we all are proud of. Attention to rudimentary details, a cheerful disposition, and the coordination of a hundred tasks made Liz Clayton a most valuable member of the production team, along with Robert Kauser, who handled permis-

sions. Jerilyn Emori, Helga Newman, Karen Rovens, and Merle Sanderson also contributed much to the book's final shape. I am appreciative of the technical assistance provided by David Barrows and Sally Maeth, who abstracted articles and typed the authors' introductions. For their help in reviewing the table of contents and new articles, I wish to thank Talmadge Anderson, Washington State University; David Fulton, California State University, Northridge; Dean Knudsen, Purdue University; and Patricia Bell Scott, University of Connecticut.

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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.

In the years since the publication of the Moynihan Report, the indices of Black family pathology have more than doubled, leading some students of the Black family to claim that Moynihan was right. One of them is Blanche Bernstein, whose article "Since the Moynihan Report..." updates Moynihan's statistics and reaffirms his conclusion that it is the Black family structure that has impeded the group's progress in the United States. Robert Staples, on the other hand, declares that structural conditions are what have torn the Black family asunder. In particular, it is the inability of Black men to secure employment that is largely responsible for the proliferation of Black female-headed households. He contends that only by enhancing Black males' employment opportunities can the family be made whole again.

## 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, 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 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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## THE TANGLE OF PATHOLOGY

*Daniel P. Moynihan*

*In this controversial and much-debated report on the Black family, the author claims that weaknesses in family structure account for many of the problems Afro-Americans encounter in American society. The reason for welfare dependency, out-of-wedlock children, educational failure, crime and delinquency, and so on, is the unnatural dominance of women in the family structure. Without tongue in cheek the author recommends, as remedy, increased involvement of Black men in the military.*

That the Negro American has survived at all is extraordinary—a lesser people might simply have died out, as indeed others have. That the Negro community has not only survived, but in this political generation has entered national affairs as a moderate, humane, and constructive national force is the highest testament to the healing powers of the democratic ideal and the creative vitality of the Negro people.

But it may not be supposed that the Negro American community has not paid a fearful price for the incredible mistreatment to which it has been subjected over the past three centuries.

In essence, the Negro community has been forced into a matriarchal structure which, because it is so out of line with the rest of the American society, seriously retards the progress of the group as a whole, and imposes a crushing burden on the Negro male and, in consequence, on a great many Negro women as well.

There is, presumably, no special reason why a society in which males are dominant in family relationships is to be preferred to a matriarchal arrangement. However, it is clearly a disadvantage for a minority group to be operating on one principle, while the great majority of the population, and the one with the most advantages to begin with, is operating on another. This is the present situation of the Negro. Ours is a society which presumes male leadership in private and public affairs. The arrangements of society facilitate such leadership and

reward it. A subculture, such as that of the Negro American, in which this is not the pattern, is placed at a distinct disadvantage.

Here an earlier word of caution should be repeated. There is much evidence that a considerable number of Negro families have managed to break out of the tangle of pathology and to establish themselves as stable, effective units, living according to patterns of American society in general. E. Franklin Frazier has suggested that the middle-class Negro American family is, if anything, more patriarchal and protective of its children than the general run of such families.<sup>1</sup> Given equal opportunities, the children of these families will perform as well or better than their white peers. They need no help from anyone, and ask none.

While this phenomenon is not easily measured, one index is that middle-class Negroes have even fewer children than middle-class whites, indicating a desire to conserve the advances they have made and to insure that their children do as well or better. Negro women who marry early to uneducated laborers have more children than white women in the same situation; Negro women who marry at the common age for the middle class to educated men doing technical or professional work have only four-fifths as many children as their white counterparts.

It might be estimated that as much as half of the Negro community falls into the middle class. However, the remaining half is in desperate and deteriorating circumstances. Moreover, because of housing segregation it is immensely difficult for the stable half to escape from the cultural influences of the unstable one. The children of middle-class Negroes often as not must grow up in or next to the slums, an experience almost unknown to white middle-class children. They are therefore constantly exposed to the pathology of the disturbed group and constantly in danger of being drawn into it. It is for this reason that the propositions put forth in this study may be thought of as having a more or less general application.

In a word, most Negro youth are in *danger* of being caught up in the tangle of pathology that affects their world, and probably a majority are so entrapped. Many of those who escape do so for one generation only: as things now are, their children

may have to run the gauntlet all over again. That is not the least vicious aspect of the world that white America has made for the Negro.

Obviously, not every instance of social pathology afflicting the Negro community can be traced to the weakness of family structure. If, for example, organized crime in the Negro community were not largely controlled by whites, there would be more capital accumulation among Negroes, and therefore probably more Negro business enterprises. If it were not for the hostility and fear many whites exhibit towards Negroes, they in turn would be less afflicted by hostility and fear and so on. There is no one Negro community. There is no one Negro problem. There is no one solution. Nonetheless, at the center of the tangle of pathology is the weakness of the family structure. Once or twice removed, it will be found to be the principal source of most of the aberrant, inadequate, or antisocial behavior that did not establish, but now serves to perpetuate the cycle of poverty and deprivation.

It was by destroying the Negro family under slavery that white America broke the will of the Negro people. Although that will has reasserted itself in our time, it is a resurgence doomed to frustration unless the viability of the Negro family is restored.

## Matriarchy

A fundamental fact of Negro American family life is the often reversed roles of husband and wife.

Robert O. Blood, Jr., and Donald M. Wolfe, in a study of Detroit families, note that "Negro husbands have unusually low power,"<sup>2</sup> and while this is characteristic of all low income families, the pattern pervades the Negro social structure: "the cumulative result of discrimination in jobs . . . , the segregated housing, and the poor schooling of Negro men."<sup>3</sup> In 44 percent of the Negro families studied, the wife was dominant, as against 20 percent of white wives. "Whereas the majority of white families are equalitarian, the largest percentage of Negro families are dominated by the wife."<sup>4</sup>

The matriarchal pattern of so many Negro families reinforces itself over the generations. This process begins with education. Although the gap

appears to be closing at the moment, for a long while, Negro females were better educated than Negro males, and this remains true today for the Negro population as a whole.

The difference in educational attainment between nonwhite men and women in the labor force is even greater; men lag 1.1 years behind women.

The disparity in educational attainment of male and female youth age 16 to 21 who were out of school in February 1963 is striking. Among the nonwhite males, 66.3 percent were not high school graduates, compared with 55.0 percent of the females. A similar difference existed at the college level, with 4.5 percent of the males having completed 1 to 3 years of college compared with 7.3 percent of the females.

The poorer performance of the male in school exists from the very beginning, and the magnitude of the difference was documented by the 1960 Census in statistics on the number of children who have fallen one or more grades below the typical grade for children of the same age. The boys have more frequently fallen behind at every age level. (White boys also lag behind white girls, but at a differential of 1 to 6 percentage points.)

In 1960, 39 percent of all white persons 25 years of age and over who had completed 4 or more years of college were women. Fifty-three percent of the nonwhites who had attained this level were women.

However, the gap is closing. By October 1963, there were slightly more Negro men in college than women. Among whites there were almost twice as many men as women enrolled.

There is much evidence that Negro females are better students than their male counterparts.

Daniel Thompson of Dillard University, in a private communication on January 9, 1965, writes:

*As low as is the aspirational level among lower class Negro girls, it is considerably higher than among the boys. For example, I have examined the honor rolls in Negro high schools for about 10 years. As a rule, from 75 to 90 percent of all Negro honor students are girls.*

In 1 out of 4 Negro families where the husband is present, is an earner, and some one else in the family works, the husband is not the principal earner. The comparable figure for whites is 18 percent.

More important, it is clear that Negro females have established a strong position for themselves in white collar and professional employment, precisely the areas of the economy which are growing most rapidly, and to which the highest prestige is accorded.

The President's Committee on Equal Employment Opportunity, making a preliminary report on employment in 1964 of over 16,000 companies with nearly 5 million employees, revealed this pattern with dramatic emphasis.

*In this work force, Negro males outnumber Negro females by a ratio of 4 to 1. Yet Negro males represent only 1.2 percent of the males in white collar occupations, while Negro females represent 3.1 percent of the total female white collar work force. Negro males represent 1.1 percent of all male professionals, whereas Negro females represent roughly 6 percent of all female professionals. Again, in technician occupations, Negro males represent 2.1 percent of all male technicians while Negro females represent roughly 10 percent of all female technicians. It would appear therefore that there are proportionately 4 times as many Negro females in significant white collar jobs than Negro males.*

*Although it is evident that office and clerical jobs account for approximately 50 percent of all Negro female white collar workers, it is significant that 6 out of every 100 Negro females are in professional jobs. This is substantially similar to the rate of all females in such jobs. Approximately 7 out of every 100 Negro females are in technician jobs. This exceeds the proportion of all females in technician jobs—approximately 5 out of every 100.*

*Negro females in skilled jobs are almost the same as that of all females in*



*such jobs. Nine out of every 100 Negro males are in skilled occupations while 21 out of 100 of all males are in such jobs.<sup>5</sup>*

This pattern is to be seen in the Federal government, where special efforts have been made recently to insure equal employment opportunity for Negroes. These efforts have been notably successful in Departments such as Labor, where some 19 percent of employees are now Negro. (A not disproportionate percentage, given the composition of the work force in the areas where the main Department offices are located.) However, it may well be that these efforts have redounded mostly to the benefit of Negro women, and may even have accentuated the comparative disadvantage of Negro men. Seventy percent of the Negro employees of the Department of Labor are women, as contrasted with only 42 percent of the white employees.

Among nonprofessional Labor Department employees—where the most employment opportunities exist for all groups—Negro women outnumber Negro men 4 to 1, and average almost one grade higher in classification.

The testimony to the effects of these patterns in Negro family structure is widespread, and hardly to be doubted. . . .

### **Duncan M. MacIntyre**

*The Negro illegitimacy rate always has been high—about eight times the white rate in 1940 and somewhat higher today even though the white illegitimacy rate also is climbing. The Negro statistics are symptomatic of some old socioeconomic problems, not the least of which are underemployment among Negro men and compensating higher labor force propensity among Negro women. Both operate to enlarge the mother's role, undercutting the status of the male and making many Negro families essentially matriarchal. The Negro man's uncertain employment prospects, matriarchy, and high cost of divorces combine to encourage desertion (the poor man's divorce), increase the number of couples not married, and thereby also increase the Negro illegitimacy rate. In*

*the meantime, higher Negro birth rates are increasing the nonwhite population, while migration into cities like Detroit, New York, Philadelphia, and Washington, D.C., is making the public assistance rolls in such cities heavily, even predominantly, Negro.<sup>6</sup>*

### **Robin M. Williams, Jr., in a Study of Elmira, New York**

*Only 57 percent of Negro adults reported themselves as married—spouse present, as compared with 78 percent of native white American gentiles, 91 percent of Italian-American, and 96 percent of Jewish informants. Of the 93 unmarried Negro youths interviewed, 22 percent did not have their mother living in the home with them, and 42 percent reported that their father was not living in their home. One-third of the youths did not know their father's present occupation, and two-thirds of a sample of 150 Negro adults did not know what the occupation of their father's father had been. Forty percent of the youths said that they had brothers and sisters living in other communities; another 40 percent reported relatives living in their home who were not parents, siblings, or grandparents.<sup>7</sup>*

## **The Failure of Youth**

Williams' account of Negro youth growing up with little knowledge of their fathers, less of their fathers' occupations, still less of family occupational traditions, is in sharp contrast to the experience of the white child. The white family, despite many variants, remains a powerful agency not only for transmitting property from one generation to the next, but also for transmitting no less valuable contacts with the world of education and work. In an earlier age, the Carpenters, Wainwrights, Weavers, Mercers, Farmers, Smiths acquired their names as well as their trades from their fathers and grandfathers. Children today still learn the patterns of work from their fathers even though they may no longer go into the same jobs.