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Joyce Aschenbrenner

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By

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Foreword

About the Author

Joyce Aschenbrenner received her Ph.D. from the University of Minnesota in 1967, after having completed an M.A. in Philosophy at Tulane University. She has worked among Minnesota Chippewa, in Muslim communities of India and Pakistan, and in Black communities in Chicago and Southern Illinois. She is "action-oriented" in her approach, and has participated in Black and Native American community centers as a volunteer worker. She seeks new social perspectives by means of dialogue between social participants. She is presently teaching and conducting research at Southern Illinois University at Edwardsville and belongs to the Edwardsville chapter of the NAACP, the local Black organization in which White supporters play an active role.

About the Book

Many analysts of the Black family in the United States interpret it as primarily a product of slavery, poverty, and prejudice; as an adaptation to conditions that have left it stripped of resources for the proper socialization of the young or the satisfaction of adult members. The emphasis tends to be upon its matrifocal characteristics and on shifting conjugal alliances. Joyce Aschenbrenner takes a different view. She stresses the extended kin group rather than the nuclear family that is the norm among middle-class Whites. She shows how the consanguineal relationships are emphasized, as much as, or more than the nuclear ones in social and economic interaction, and how the mother-daughter tie is of particular significance. Paradoxically from the White point of view the deemphasis on the conjugal tie does not mean a deemphasis on the male-female love relationship. The description in Chapter 2 of the love relationship will leave some readers envious —not because these relationships are trouble-free, but because they are intense and satisfying. The need of women for men and of men for women is acknowledged and extends beyond sex, although the sexual dimension continues to be important.

The picture of the Black family that Dr. Aschenbrenner gives us is quite different from one that shows it as barren and devoid of satisfactions. What we are shown instead is a rich, complex, and functional family pattern, which is an integral part of Black culture, and is created out of many diverse elements from the past as well as from the present.

The strategy used by the author to present this picture is to provide detailed information on the social drama in Black family life in the context of Black culture in one northern urban center. As she says, ". . . this treatment is not

written so that one can skip over details and concentrate on generalizations; rather, the technique is to build up a mosaic of social reality through the juxtaposition of life experiences, in an attempt to convey a complexity that cannot be grasped through the bald statement of fact or theory."

The strategy, as the reader will discover, is quite effective.

GEORGE AND LOUISE SPINDLER

Preface

This account of Black family life is the product of a series of events, which were initiated when a Black fellow graduate student "got on my case." Through this rather traumatic, but very enlightening experience, I was ultimately led to forego my planned specialization in Muslims in the subcontinent. I turned instead to an intriguing and distinctive aspect of my own society, developed by its Black members. I found myself playing primarily a role of observer and, whenever possible, of helper in the coalition between Blacks and liberals in the late 1960s; the rewards of this experience and of my subsequent research, in terms of insight and knowledge of the realities of American society, have been great.

The present study is based on observation and interviews, over a period of one year, of ten individuals and their extended families, as well as on informal discussions and participation in events with friends and acquaintances. In important instances, I came to know informants through social networks, stemming from my work in a Black community center. The directors of The Way—Gwen Jones-Davis and Sylvester Davis—gave me the impetus to overcome my ignorance of an important aspect of American culture. Raymond T. Smith and David M. Schneider, directors of the project in which I took part, afforded me tools of analysis as well as sustenance. Finally, Ethel Lawrence, Henrietta Williams, and William Holmes have given me invaluable assistance and friendship, and the Black people of Chicago have given me a "special feeling" toward their "Black Metropolis."

JOYCE ASCHENBRENNER

Edwardsville, Ill.
September 1974

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Introduction

For decades social scientists have been writing about the instability of the Black family. To explain its infirmity, apologists have referred to the breakup of families during the time of slavery and to the poverty of the Northern ghetto.[1] Most writers, whether sympathetic or critical, have assumed that the Black family is disorganized; they have differed only on what they view as the cause for this disorganization.

As a student I had accepted the stereotype of the Black family; I became aware of its misrepresentation later, when a radical change in my environment occurred (in anthropological terms, the "rite of passage"). In my initial fieldwork in Pakistan, where I studied village social and political organization, I encountered an outside view of the American family that ultimately led me to reevaluate my own assumptions about the Black family. From the point of view of Pakistanis, the family in the United States is weak or even nonexistent. Pakistani women were critical of American women for working and neglecting their children. The practice of hiring a stranger to babysit was abhorrent to them: Where were the grandparents or aunts and uncles? Imagine a widow or a divorcee bringing up children by herself. What was the matter with her husband's brothers? Wouldn't her own family help her out? The high divorce rate in this country was repeatedly mentioned, as well as the lack of respect for parents and older people. The practice of staying in a hotel when traveling or visiting was also unthinkable; there were always relatives or friends who would be happy to share what they had, and insulted if you did not accept.

Obviously, the Pakistanis were looking at families from a different viewpoint than were the social scientists; otherwise, the Black family would not have been singled out so consistently in the literature as an example of family breakdown. On the contrary, as I worked among Black families in Chicago from 1969 to 1970, I found that the quality of relationships and the extent of obligations between family members were more similar to families in Pakistan than to most families I had known in the United States. My previous experience, while working at a Black community center in Minneapolis, had prepared me for a different outlook and value orientation among Blacks; however, I had not observed Black families for a great length

[1] Cf. Lee Rainwater and William L. Yancy, eds., *The Moynihan Report and the Politics of Controversy*. Cambridge, Mass.: M.I.T. Press, 1967; E. Franklin Frazier, *The Negro Family in the United States*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1939.

A fine-looking family

of time and the vitality of Black families as revealed in my interviews was thus unexpected.

I was introduced to the kinship interview techniques developed by David M. Schneider and Raymond T. Smith at the University of Chicago, where I worked as a Research Associate. Schneider had used the same techniques in studying American middle-class families[2]; Smith had investigated the family organization in British Guiana and Jamaica.[3] Together they were expanding their interests to include

[2] See David M. Schneider, *American Kinship: A Cultural Account.* Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1968.

[3] Raymond T. Smith, *The Negro Family in British Guiana.* London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1956.

lower-class families in Chicago: Blacks, Southern Appalachians, and Puerto Ricans. Since I interviewed Black people in Chicago as a part of this project, I became aware of the large network of relatives surrounding them and the extent of interaction and interdependence among kin.

Discussions of the breakdown of the Black family have usually focused on the marital relationship. This emphasis reflects the overriding importance of the marriage tie in our society, rather than any peculiarity of the Black family. In societies with extended families, other relationships, such as father-son, mother-daughter, or brother-sister, may be more important in terms of social and economic support than that of husband and wife. In Pakistan, a marriage is stable when it is actively supported by the extended kin group in order to maintain the social and economic advantages that were attained through the union. Among Black people in the United States, however, a marriage may endure partly because of support by family members, but also because the mates are well-suited and have a good "understanding," including social, psychological, and economic arrangements. In either case, the marital tie does not enjoy quite the central and absolute status it generally holds among middle-class Whites, who create a socially and economically independent family unit.

My work in Chicago suggested that the Black family is extended in character, often showing a bilateral tendency, but more frequently oriented toward the maternal side in the families I studied. A household may include members beyond the nuclear family—one or more grandparents, cousins, aunts, nieces, or nephews. When sons and daughters marry, they usually leave home, but they often remain in the same neighborhood as their parents and form closely-knit groups. In some cases, the newlywed couple may move to other cities where relatives are settled. These localized family groups are the focus of childrearing; they are an economic boon to working parents and are the agents of socializing the young. Children learn a variety of social roles and values within this extended group.

As evident in the material presented in the following pages, men play a variety of roles and role types in Black families; they may be good providers (father or husband), family leaders (maternal or paternal uncle), sources of rivalry and support (brother), or focuses of pride or concern (son or nephew). One individual does not necessarily exemplify all of these role types during his lifetime. A widower or bachelor without children of his own may concentrate on keeping the larger family group together; a devoted husband and father may lose touch with his own relatives; or a man may never fully settle into any of the adult family roles, thereby remaining the prodigal son or younger brother throughout his lifetime. Within one extended group, however, the total range of kinship roles is generally present, with a wide variation in their performance. The child is exposed to a spectrum of activities and values of men that may be represented, on the one hand, by the apparently solitary, free-floating male, and on the other, by the pillar of the community, both of whom play a part in his socialization. Male family members reflect a variety of values and life possibilities; they serve as a foil to the women, who represent the necessarily circumscribed business of procreation and social continuity. The perennial conflict between these contradictory, yet complementary, functions creates the dynamics of the man-woman relationship. Thus, the Black child

learns about the many facets of his society, and its values are transmitted to him from within his kin group, which is not limited to the conjugal family of parents and children.

One might conclude from this and other studies of Black family life that the relationships between men and women are highly competitive and that there is a great deal of sexual separatism as a result of economic competition. It is true that Black women may earn as much or more than Black men (though they usually earn less) and that conflict frequently centers around finances. Also, the care and support of children is more directly the concern of women than men. The deeper level, upon which there is profound agreement and cooperation, should not be overlooked, however, nor should the strength of family ties that draw men as fathers, brothers, and uncles, to children. Although men may not support children as a matter of course, they are generous when asked for help.

The men and women described in these pages agree on the supreme importance of a love relationship between a man and a woman and on the necessity of caring and bringing up properly any offspring resulting from their union. Their disagreements stem from the means employed in expressing those values and, as in most relationships, a power struggle ensues. Even here, men and women know the terms of the struggle; and are able to communicate clearly with each other. Still, the conditions of the settlement are not known in advance, but are the outcome of a series of negotiations which must be reasonably acceptable to both parties. If all the ingredients for a successful relationship are present, it is only a matter of time to work it out. Otherwise, there are few external pressures holding a man and woman together.

Another role relationship in the Black family that may be misinterpreted by an observer with a White, middle-class background is that of mother and daughter. The relationship between a woman and her grown daughter counterbalances, and may conflict with, that between a man and a woman. In the absence of a husband and father, mother and daughter are made strongly interdependent by children born to either of them. Being a mother is a highly valued role in Black communities, as is characteristic of many societies in which recruitment to the socially important group is by birth. With motherhood comes responsibility, and shared responsibility brings adults together. A mother may not encourage her daughter to marry, since she will lose her support and a measure of domestic authority. A daughter may be looking for a father for her children, but will wait until she finds a good provider; in the meantime, her dependence on her mother may keep her from forming an attachment with a man. Most women choose to marry at some time in their lives, but if a marriage does not work, often a woman can turn to her mother or other family members for help.

Children brought up in the Black families I have come to know have an intimate knowledge of a wide range of social relationships, and experience a complexity of attitudes and values that are not encountered by children in the conjugal family setting. I would venture to infer from my association with them and from my knowledge of their family backgrounds that they develop a profound understanding of social situations and a strong social identity at a comparatively early age. Discussion and explanation of rules of social behavior occurred persistently within the

Black families I observed, and everyone supported his own firm opinion with arguments. Discipline is often strict and concerned with teaching children to show respect to their elders and to adult authority in general. The continuous assertion and contest of wills on the part of adults in Black families encourages the development of strong-willed individuals who, nevertheless, will give respect when it is due.

How did I, as a White female from a middle-class background, become aware of my original mistaken assumptions about the Black family and come to test them? With some experience of the essential dependence of the outside observer, I put my informants in the role of tutors: I made a decision early in my investigation to concentrate on a few people and to come to know them well, rather than to try to include a large number of families in my study. Most of those I contacted were friendly and open, and some of them became friends. My interviews with the latter were two-way exchanges of experiences, feelings, and ideas. By opening my own actions and ideas to comments from Black friends, I was apprised of differences in our respective viewpoints, and through our mutual friendships I gained an insight into the meaning of experiences to them. While my viewpoint, as modified by these experiences, is not and never can be identical to that of someone who has grown up and lived in a Black community, perhaps it carries a certain validity as an "outsider's view" with a degree of understanding of what it means to be Black. We need studies of Black communities by Black as well as White social scientists and studies of White communities by both Black and White investigators in order to gain a complete perspective on these major divisions within our society.

Discussions about the participant-observer and case study methods have focused on the validity of nonquantitative data and the reliability and significance of observations based on a small sample. In my view, these concerns are misplaced, since the role of participant observation and the case study is not primarily to test hypotheses, but to question and challenge assumptions on which hypotheses are based. It may be that an investigator asks the wrong or least penetrating questions because his or her assumptions are based on participant observation in his own social milieu; the intensive interaction of participant observation in a new setting opens the investigator to experiences upon which further hypotheses can be based and about which different questions can be asked. For example, countless quantitative data concerning illegitimacy, matrifocal households, and the weakness of the conjugal tie in Black families have been collected to test hypotheses about masculine identification, the social and cultural deprivation of Black children, and the consequences of the disorganization of Black family life, based on a conjugal-family model. Through my interaction in a number of Black households, I became aware of situations that could not be explained or understood on the basis of old assumptions about the Black family as a more or less "successful" reflection of a "dominant" American family type. In explaining and interpreting a few cases, I began to look more carefully at data whose significance had been overlooked—such as the relative strength of parent-child and sibling ties—and a new perspective developed out of this, according to which family strength is measured by considerations other than marital stability or illegitimacy. Based on these new assumptions, hypotheses can be developed, namely, concerning the sources of ego strength of Black men in a female-headed household and the bases of household organization

other than economic deprivation. Such hypotheses can be tested and generalizations formed by comparing with previous studies, looking for corroborating data whose significance may have been overlooked previously, and by generating new studies.

As has emerged from the case material in this study, Black family organization differs from White, middle-class family organization in that consanguineal relationships are frequently emphasized as much as or more than the conjugal tie. I have used the term "extended family," which has been widely applied by anthropologists in the study of other societies, to describe the Black family. Some writers have been cognizant of strong ties among Black kindred; they have focused on the makeup of households and on kinship networks as adaptive strategies, using concepts such as "matrifocality" and "personal kindred" to characterize them.[4] The Black family is viewed by these writers as essentially an adjustment to urban ghetto conditions, rather than as a continuing institution. The emphasis on household organization and on adaptation results in overlooking important aspects of family organization and structure, such as the maintenance of family ties through space and time by means of conscious and ritualized practices in funerals, reunions, and regular visiting patterns. Chapters 1 and 6 of this study emphasize this aspect of Black families, as do other descriptions of families throughout the text.

A comparison of my conclusions with those of studies of Southern and Caribbean families reveals similarities that support the view of the Black family as a cultural institution with a long tradition, rather than an adaptation to specific conditions. In a study of American slavery, George P. Rawick presents evidence for the existence of a strong kinship group among black slaves, as well as for the conscious maintenance of other African cultural patterns.[5] In British Guiana, and among the Black Carib, consanguineal ties are strong, and economic and social support among kin are the rule.[6] In her article, "Family and Childhood in a Southern Negro Community," Virginia Heyer Young stresses the functional and systematic aspects of the Black family, in which grandparents play an important role.[7] Family activities and the influence of a wide group of kin remain strong in the memories of my Chicago contacts from the South. From his comparative study of Black families in Chicago and Black families from the Caribbean, Raymond T. Smith concludes that in neither case is the nuclear family the norm, but rather it is an extended kin group.[8]

The way one interprets the same data, either as evidence for a continuing tradition or as confirmation of the view that the Black family represents an adaptation of a middle-class norm to conditions of poverty, depends upon one's own orientation: whether or not one accepts the idea of a Black culture within American

[4] Cf. Nancie L. Gonzalez, "Toward a Definition of Matrifocality"; and Carol B. Stack, "The Kindred of Viola Jackson: Residence and Family Organization of an Urban Black American Family," in Norman E. Whitten, Jr. and John F. Szwed, eds., *Afro-American Anthropology*. New York: Crowell-Collier-Macmillan, 1970.

[5] George P. Rawick, *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography*. Vol. 1: From Sundown to Sunup: The Making of the Black Community. New York: Greenwood Publishing Co., 1972.

[6] See footnotes 3 and 4.

[7] Virginia Heyer Young, "Family and Childhood in a Southern Negro Community," *American Anthropologist*, vol. 72, no. 2, April 1970, pp. 269–288.

[8] Raymond T. Smith, "The Nuclear Family in Afro-American Kinship," *Journal of Comparative Family Studies*, vol. 1, no. 1, 1970, pp. 55–70.

society, which was created out of many diverse elements from the past and the present. In his article, "Black Culture, Myth or Reality," Robert Blauner presents a strong case for such a view.[9] While working among young Black people, I have observed the development of new social perceptions and conscious creative efforts, both social and artistic; such activities generally accompany cultural innovation and the modification of a tradition. The regularities and ritual aspects of Black social organization, may be obscured by terms such as "adaptive strategy" and "adaptive subculture," which imply strategies for survival. In Chapter 7, the concept of adaptation is viewed from the perspective of the rational choice according to cultural values and alternatives, rather than in instrumental terms only.

The "culture of poverty," an essentially negative concept, is also insufficient: surely mere poverty cannot account for the richness and variety in the Black cultural tradition.[10] The strength of Black people stems from a social organization that has been created in the face of adversity, and not merely in adjustment to it. Blacks have neither passively endured poverty nor made it a virtue or a basis for their lives.

Among the families in these pages are those that are or have been relatively affluent, and others that have known only poverty. While class differences are represented here, I have stressed the values and concepts that they share while attempting to give due recognition to individual differences and variation in social patterns. Despite differences in opinions and value conflicts, I have found similar themes in the lives of friends and informants. On the basis of these observations, I have opted for a view of the "Black experience" as a complex phenomenon in a heterogeneous society, creating in many ways a unique way of life for Black men and women in our society.

In presenting my findings about Black families in Chicago, I have relied on life histories and on the presentation of "social drama," described by V. W. Turner as "a limited area of transparency on the otherwise opaque surface of regular, uneventful social life."[11] He regards the depiction of dramatic events as of utmost importance in the study of social organization: "Through it we are enabled to observe the crucial principles of the social structure in their operation, and their relative dominance at different points of time."[12] Frankenberg[13] characterizes social drama as the prime contribution of anthropology to the study of complex societies. The participant-observer records the face-to-face encounters present in all societies, whether complex or simple; by observing and analyzing crisis events, ceremonials, and daily encounters between individuals the anthropologist is describing social process, leading to a dynamic view of social organization. Accordingly,

[9] In Norman E. Whitten, Jr. and John F. Szwed, eds., *Afro-American Anthropology*. New York: Crowell-Collier-Macmillan, 1970.

[10] Cf. Charles A. Valentine, *Culture and Poverty, Critique and Counter-Proposals*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968.

[11] V. W. Turner, *Schism and Continuity in an African Society*. Manchester, Eng.: Manchester University Press, 1957, p. 93.

[12] *Ibid.*

[13] Ronald Frankenberg, "British Community Studies: Problems of Synthesis," in Michael Banton, ed., *The Social Anthropology of Complex Societies*. ASA Monographs 4. London: Tavistock Publications, Ltd., 1966.