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E. Franklin Frazier's Theory of the Black Family: Vindication and Sociological Insight

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Despite many accolades, E. Franklin Frazier, the first African American to be elected to the American Sociological Society, is also an object of scorn. Specifically, some accuse Frazier of a view that blames the ills of the Black community on female-headed households, illegitimacy, and family disorganization. Some also accuse Frazier of characterizing the Black family as broken and pathological and the opinion that families must be formal and nuclear in order to be viable. This paper argues that these representations of Frazier are mistaken and offers a more accurate and holistic portrayal of Frazier's sociological judgements and theorizing regarding the African-American family.

E. Franklin Frazier, who in 1948 became the first African-American sociologist to be elected president of the American Sociological Society (now Association), was thirty-three years old and a seasoned social scientist by the time he came to the University of Chicago in 1927 to complete work on a doctorate in sociology. Frazier graduated *cum laude* from Howard University in 1916 before sociology was established as a curriculum. However, after working three years as a secondary teacher, Frazier earned a masters degree in sociology from Clark University. From 1920 to 1921, Frazier was a research fellow at the New York School of Social Work, where he conducted a study of the longshoremen of New York. Subsequently, from 1921 to 1922, Frazier studied in Denmark as a fellow of the American Scandinavian Foundation. Upon his return, Frazier accepted a position in Atlanta where he taught at Morehouse College and helped develop and direct the Atlanta School of Social Work.

Here Frazier began writing about the Black family, and by the time he received his doctorate in sociology from the University of Chicago in 1931, Frazier had at least forty scholarly publications to his credit (Davis, 1962, pp. 431–433; Edwards, 1968, pp. xii, 325–326; Platt, 1991, p. 4).

Frazier's prominence and importance as a sociologist are unquestioned, and it is rare that there is a sociological assessment of the African-American family without some reference to Frazier's work, especially his *Negro Family in the United States* (see Odum, 1951, pp. 233–239; Davis, 1962; Edwards, 1968, pp. viii–xx). Nevertheless, criticisms and misconceptions regarding Frazier's ideas on the African-American family abound. This paper examines these misconceptions and makes an effort to offer a more holistic and accurate presentation of Frazier's sociological views and theorizing regarding the African-American family.

Frazier as a Symbol of Scorn: Argument and Counterargument

Some scholars have examined Frazier's ideas on the African-American family for their historical importance and sociological insight, but for others, Frazier has become a symbol of an approach to the study of the African-American family that blames the ills of the Black community on female-headed households, illegitimacy, and family disorganization. Some believe that Frazier felt that the African-American family must always conform to the norm of the nuclear family in order to be viable. Still others blame Frazier for setting in motion the view that the African-American family is typically broken and pathological. Even scholars who recognize that Frazier's work has been misrepresented may be inclined to ignore Frazier for fear of being associated with the negative images that have been painted of him. There is no question that Frazier made errors in judgment and exhibited certain biases in his sociological endeavors, but too often criticisms of Frazier are based on popular misconceptions rather than on close readings of his empirical works.

Dorothy Roberts (1997), for example, in her study of race and reproductive rights, *Killing the Black Body*, seized upon Frazier's *The Negro Family in the United States* as a symbol of scorn. Refer-

ring to this book, she stated, "Frazier reiterated the thesis that dominant Black women, by perpetuating the slave legacy of unwed motherhood, were the cause of family instability" (Roberts, 1997, pp. 15–16). Curiously, nowhere in *The Negro Family in the United States* does Frazier characterize Black women as dominant, posit unwed Black women as the cause of family instability, or explain unwed motherhood as purely a legacy of slavery. Frazier did note, however, that despite conditions that resulted in variations in maternal caring, the African-American mother, on the whole, remained a stable and loving force in the care of her children throughout the slave period. He observed:

Generally speaking, the mother remained throughout slavery the dominant and important figure in the slave family. Although tradition has represented her as a devoted foster-parent to her master's children and insufficient to her own, it appears that, where this existed, the relations between the slave woman and the white child were similar to the relations which normally exist between mother and child. On the other hand, pregnancy and childbirth often meant only suffering for the slave mother who, because of her limited contacts with her young, never developed that attachment which grows out of physiological and emotional response to its needs. Nevertheless there is abundant evidence that slave mothers developed a deep and permanent love for their children, which often caused them to defy their masters and undergo suffering to prevent separation from their young. (Frazier, 1939, pp. 60–61)

Frazier (1939) also noticed that the experience of slavery schooled many African-American women in self-sufficiency and that "when emancipation came, many [African-American] women had to depend upon their own efforts for the support of themselves and their children" (pp. 125–126). Frazier simply acknowledged the resiliency and resourcefulness of African-American women who had to survive and care for their children in the absence of fathers and husbands. These fathers and husbands were usually deceased or separated from their families as a consequence of the system of oppression. Maternal or female-headed households and women who were self-reliant were simply examples of the many adaptations that African-American families made to prevailing social conditions. Frazier never suggested that these particular adaptations were pervasive or typical.

Again, Frazier did not blame African-American women as a cause of family instability.

It appears that Roberts has parroted many of the misconceptions about *The Negro Family in the United States* without having examined it for herself. She provided no specific examples to sustain her assertions. Interestingly, Roberts' chapter, "Reproduction in Bondage," would have found significant support from three of the chapters in *The Negro Family in the United States*: "Human, All Too Human," "Motherhood in Bondage," and "Hagar and Her Children" (Roberts, 1997, pp. 22–55; Frazier, 1939, 17–69). These chapters examined how the harsh conditions of enslavement affected sexual relations and the development of loving and caring relationships, variations in maternal caring, and African women who were forced to bear the children of the slave master. Roberts ignored these chapters completely and seemed not to know of their content.

Sociologist Robert Staples, who spent much of his career writing about the Black family, has more than likely read Frazier. He correctly observed that sociologist Daniel Patrick Moynihan helped to popularize the view in public policy debates that the Black family is characterized by matriarchy (Staples, 1971, pp. 154, 157). Moynihan further surmised that the development of the Black community is retarded by a pervasive matriarchy, which, he said, is dysfunctional in a patriarchal society (U.S. Department of Labor, 1965/1981, pp. 29–32). Moynihan claimed that Frazier's work on the Black family supported these views. I will not attempt to assess this or other conclusions by Moynihan regarding the African-American family—which are complex and varied in their accuracy—but Frazier's vilification is to some degree a function of his association with Moynihan's ideas. Staples (1971) also observed that "The Moynihan theory of the black matriarchy derives from his findings that 25 percent of all black families have a female head" (p. 157). This observation is only partly true because Moynihan argued that a matriarchy also was characteristic of double-headed households among Black families (U.S. Department of Labor, 1965/1981, pp. 29–32). Moynihan obviously did not limit his definition of matriarchy to family composition. Disappointingly, Staples (1993, p. 131), in subsequent writings, gave the impression that Frazier, like Moynihan, typified the

African-American family as matriarchal, a serious misrepresentation. Also, like some others, Staples (Staples and Johnson, 1993) cited *The Negro Family in the United States* to support his assertion that "the concept of the Black matriarchy emerged from the writings of E. Franklin Frazier . . ." (p. 131), but gave no page numbers or examples as support.

Taking a similar view, Joyce Ladner (1972, pp. 15–17) asserted that Frazier's work on the Black family began the focus on matriarchy, disorganization, the tendency to compare the Black family to White norms, and the inclination to emphasize Black family weaknesses rather than strengths. She stated: "E. Franklin Frazier asserted in *The Negro Family in the United States* that the family is matriarchal and inherently disorganized as a result of having inherited the legacy of slavery, and as a result of the mass migration to the cities which causes further disruption" (Ladner, 1972, p. 15). I have found no specific statements in this work by Frazier that characterized the African-American family as matriarchal or inherently disorganized. Frazier (1939; see "Part IV, In the City of Destruction") did identify social conditions that tended to demoralize poor families that migrated from the rural South to southern and northern cities. He (Frazier, 1939; see "Part V, In the City of Rebirth") also identified conditions that provided stability and strength to urban African-American families. Interestingly, when Ladner provided a lengthy quote in her book, *Tomorrow's Tomorrow*, to illustrate the strengths of Black families under slavery, she selected an example from Frazier's *The Negro Family in the United States* (Ladner, 1972, p. 31). Furthermore, Ladner (1972, pp. 16–17), in contradistinction to Frazier, gave praise to Andrew Billingsley's *Black Families in White America* as the first effort to assess the strengths of Black families and not simply their weaknesses. This is well-deserved praise, but Billingsley (1992, p. 23), a venerable elder in the study of the Black family, credited E. Franklin Frazier, among others, with recognizing the intense adaptive powers of Black people under the harsh conditions of White oppression. Also, he (Billingsley 1992, p. 101) contended that those who would argue that Frazier supported the notion that there was an absence of family life among Blacks during slavery have misread or have not read Frazier's works.

In the book, *All Our Kin*, anthropologist Carol Stack (1975) advanced the legitimacy of her own study of poor African-American families by asserting that studies by Frazier and others had overlooked the interdependence and cooperation of kinfolk in Black communities. This is true to some degree, but Stack (1975) further commented that "The underlying assumptions of these studies seem to imply that female-headed households and illegitimacy are symptomatic of broken homes and family disorganization" (p. 44). Stack's study, of course, was focused quite differently than Frazier's, and the failure to explain this difference or to explain Frazier's views on illegitimacy as an indicator of family disorganization tended to add to existing misconceptions about Frazier. For example, Frazier observed widely varied illegitimacy rates among African Americans in the rural and urban South in the 1920s. His analysis regarding these variations clearly acknowledged their limitations as indicators of disorganization. He stated: "These differences in illegitimacy rates, even where they are approximately accurate, are not a measure of the social significance of the phenomenon in the various communities, for statistics on illegitimacy are only an enumeration of the violations of the formal requirements of the law" (Frazier, 1939, p. 110).

Others have followed suit in their negative characterization of Frazier's work on the Black family. Sadye Logan (1996), in her edited book, *The Black Family: Strengths, Self-Help, and Positive Change*, stated, with no additional elaboration, that *The Negro Family in the United States* "confirmed the thinking of his [Frazier's] contemporaries that the personal lives of poor Blacks were dysfunctional and characterized by pathology" (p. 12). Without a more detailed and in-depth examination of Frazier's empirical findings regarding poor Black families, others can freely misuse Frazier's work to validate their own misconceived generalization of the Black family as pathological. Frazier, however, did not make such a generalization.

In *The Black Extended Family*, Elmer and Joanne Martin (1978) asserted, "We do think . . . that it was through Frazier's work that the pathology-disorganization perspective was firmly established in the social sciences" (p. 105). Unfortunately, this statement again assigns blame to Frazier for how others interpreted his work. Martin and Martin (1978, p. 105) also felt that Frazier

spoke of lower-class families in a condemning way and favored upper-class Blacks and mulattos. On the contrary, Frazier (1939, pp. 297–267) was also critical of mulatto and upper-class families, but he recognized the advantages they had in terms of their longer history of freedom, higher levels of education and home ownership, and self-consciousness regarding a family heritage. These advantages were byproducts of their familial connections to White propertied classes. Frazier also explored the complex issues of color prejudice and identity among these groups, as they became less isolated, subject to a more generalized White supremacy system, and encountered a more oppressed, landless, and demoralized Black peasantry. Speaking of the mulatto class, Frazier (1939) observed: “The development of family life on an institutional basis was closely tied up with the accumulation of property in these families” (p. 205).

Some scholars have tended to ignore Frazier, even though his work may have spoken directly to their theoretical concerns and empirical findings. Belinda Tucker and Claudia Mitchell-Kernan (1995a), for example, examined the current declines in marriage among African Americans and the substantial increases in African-American families headed by single mothers. Reviewing Frazier, they (Tucker and Mitchell-Kernan, 1995b) acknowledged that Frazier had been misunderstood, but they did not go very far to discuss the obvious parallels between Frazier’s findings and the findings presented in their book, *The Decline in Marriage Among African Americans: Causes, Consequences, and Policy Implications* (see also, Tucker and Mitchell-Kernan 1995c). They did not engage Frazier’s ecological analysis of the family and omitted serious examination of Frazier’s investigation of the relations between family structure and function. Instead, they asserted: “we do not hold the view that either the nuclear family or marriage is the only vehicle permitting the development of healthy communities and individuals. Yet we do view the dramatic decline in African-American marriage with some alarm” (Tucker and Mitchell-Kernan, 1995a, p. xix). Here Tucker and Mitchell-Kernan struggled to distance themselves from one of the criticisms directed at Frazier (the misconception that Frazier saw formal marriage as the only viable family form), while indicating that there is an important relationship between family structure

and function, a problem that Frazier explored with considerable sociological insight.

Interestingly, Susan George and Bette J. Dickerson (1995) addressed in their work the important role of the grandmother in single-mother families. They noted: "Grandmothers have been found to assume a variety of roles, ranging from becoming the primary parent to their grandchildren to sharing the burden of child care so that a young mother can finish her education to becoming the household 'manager,' overseeing and directing the activities of their daughters and grandchildren" (George and Dickerson, 1995, p. 152). George and Dickerson (1995) also observed that current social forces are "depleting the strength and resources of this form of intergenerational support" (p. 160). Their focus on African-American grandmothers is an enormously important line of research, but, unfortunately, George and Dickerson omitted a discussion of Frazier (1939, pp. 146–159), who was the first to examine, with sociological depth and detail, the stabilizing role of the grandmother in single-mother families. Telling the story of a grandmother who led her family to freedom during slavery, Frazier (1939) related: "The energy, courage, and devotion of this woman, who was nearly seventy, are characteristic of the role which the grandmother has played in the Negro family" (p. 146). Frazier also explained that the grandmother continued as a stabilizing force in the Black family during the modern, post-slavery period. He concluded: "The Negro grandmother has not ceased to watch over the destiny of the Negro families as they have moved in ever increasing numbers to the cities during the present century" (Frazier, 1939, p. 158).

More detailed conceptualizations of the African-American family have continued to circumscribe Frazier's ideas in distorted and truncated forms. Two examples are conceptualizations by Walter Allen (1995) and Jualynne Dodson (1997). Allen (1995), in his article, "African American Family Life in Societal Context," correctly noted that Frazier "rejects explanations attributing high rates of marital instability, desertion, and illegitimacy among urban Black families to innate, biological deficiencies" (p. 576). He also acknowledged that Frazier saw racism and economic disadvantage as disruptive to Black families. These facts are important

to differentiate Frazier's ideas from the racist thinking that blames African Americans for their own oppression.

However, Allen (1995) advanced several criticisms of Frazier that were profoundly flawed. First he argued that Frazier failed "to specify the societal-level processes thought to determine Black family patterns." Second, Allen contended that Frazier displayed a "consistent denial of legitimacy to aspects of Black family life representing departures from normative White family patterns." Third, Allen asserted that Frazier argued that Black family organization "results from a self-perpetuating tradition of fragmented, pathological interaction within lower-class Black urban communities" (p. 576), attributing a culture of poverty theory to Frazier. Further, Allen (1995, p. 578) tried to force a critique of Frazier into a debate between the relative importance of culture and class in the determination of Black family formations when such a debate was foreign to Frazier's paradigm. These descriptions of Frazier's ideas were unfair and ignored Frazier's ecological approach to the study of the Black family and his analysis of the relations between social organization and culture (see also, Frazier, 1957). In fact, Allen (1995) made an effort to advance an ecological model of the Black family, but this model paled in comparison to the theoretical relevancy and detail of the ecology-of-race-relations model in Frazier's comparative study, *Race and Culture in the Modern World*, and, of course, in his *The Negro Family in the United States*, which advanced a natural history of the Black family, a sociological conceptualization of the stages of growth of the Black family through time (see Davis, 1962, p. 434).

Dodson (1997, p. 67), on the other hand, divided conceptualization of the African-American family into two schools of thought: (1) the ethnocentric school and (2) the cultural relativism school. The former was assimilationist and assumed that the values, attitudes and behaviors of middle-class, Anglo-Saxon Protestants represented the norm of US life, and all want or should adhere to this norm. Although Dodson did not define or explain what she meant by values, attitudes, and behaviors of middle-class, Anglo-Saxon Protestants, she noted that the cultural relativism school said that families were different, not deviant and that it focused on strengths, not weakness. Further, the cultural

relativism school generally traced the origins of cultural distinctions among Blacks to an African cultural heritage (Dodson, 1997, p. 68). Dodson (1997, pp. 68–70) placed Frazier in the ethnocentric school.

On the contrary, Frazier (1968a), like the cultural relativism school, saw the Black family as a functional unit (cf. Dodson, 1997, p. 73). For example, he explained:

Viewed from the standpoint of its institutional character, the family may be regarded as disorganized when it does not conform to socially accepted norms of family life. But if we also view the family as an organized social group or cooperating unit with which the various members are identified and this identification is recognized by the community, then family disorganization may be defined differently. . . . In many sections of the rural South, especially in the plantation area, there are Negro families which do not conform to the institutional pattern of the American family. But it would be a mistake to label them as disorganized since they are stable groups and carry on the functions of the family. Therefore, in discussing family disorganization we shall be referring to the disintegration of the family group or its failure to function as a cooperating unit. (Frazier, 1968a, p. 227)

Thus, Frazier observed that the legitimacy of family forms was defined by the state or by the community and that family organization and disorganization were defined by conformity to accepted norms or by the functional character of the group. Frazier recognized the former and emphasized the latter in his analyses and policy considerations. Therefore, in this case, Frazier took on characteristics of the cultural relativism school. Nonetheless, it is generally well known that Frazier did not believe that African culture had a principle role in the way the African-American family developed in the US. Frazier is usually contrasted with White anthropologist Melville Herskovits (1941/1958), who is often celebrated for his support of the idea that African cultural survivals or Africanisms persisted in the New World. However, we should understand that Herskovits recognized that disruptions to traditional forms of social organization could seriously disrupt culture, as did Frazier. Their differences often revolved around interpretation. For example, Frazier viewed common-law marriages among rural Blacks in the South as an adaptive

response to the American experience that was related to the degree of acculturation to mainstream norms. Herskovits related this behavior to African marriage practices where sanction and consent by families were required and not the approval of the state (Frazier, 1939, pp. 133–136; Herskovits, 1941/1958, p. 171). Ironically, however, Herskovits (1941/1958) observed: “It goes without saying that the plantation system rendered the survival of African family types impossible, as it did their underlying moral and supernatural sanctions, except in dilute form” (p. 139).

Dodson (1997) also asserted that Frazier wanted “to demonstrate empirically Robert E. Park’s race relations cycle” (p. 67), which theorized that Blacks would ultimately assimilate into a White culture. Dodson was in error here. Much of Frazier’s work was focused on the assimilation problem, but Frazier (1957, pp. 327–338) did not accept assimilation, which meant, for him, the loss of identity, as a forgone conclusion for African Americans. His study of the African-American family was an empirical examination of the assimilation problem, which revealed the conditions under which assimilation was most likely to take place (Frazier, 1939, see “Chapter XXII, Retrospect and Prospect”; Odum, 1951, p. 238). Let’s examine the context of the assimilation problem.

White sociologist Robert Park, Frazier’s mentor at the University of Chicago, was a leading theorist on race relations and was considered by some to be an expert on Black Americans. Park had been a secretary to Booker T. Washington and president of the Chicago Urban League. He (Park, 1919, p. 116) theorized that contact between Africans and Europeans proceeded through a cycle that resulted in conflict, accommodation, and assimilation. For Park, Africans had produced no significant culture of their own and had brought little of this culture with them to the New World. Therefore, he believed that African Americans had no cultural traditions that would impede assimilation into a European-based American or White culture.

Park (1919) explained that the appearance of cultural distinctiveness that he observed among African Americans was a consequence of their “racial temperament.” This temperament, according to Park (1919), was characterized by a “genial, sunny and social disposition, in an interest and attachment to external, physical things rather than to subjective states and objects of

introspection, in a disposition for expression rather than enterprise and action" (p. 129). Park referred to African people as the "lady of the races" since they presumably lacked the intellectual and pioneering characteristics of White men. Park theorized that through this racial temperament, African Americans selected aspects of White culture to which they had the greatest biological affinity. His fundamental concern was: "How far do racial characteristics and innate biological interests determine the extent to which one racial group can and will take over and assimilate the characteristics of an alien civilization?" (Park, 1919, p. 113).

Frazier, of course, rejected Park's notion of racial temperament in favor of a more environmentally- and socially-based conceptual frame. For Frazier, a distinctive African-American culture was a function of the persistence of a distinctive form of social organization. Furthermore, Frazier noted that assimilation also involved identification, a step beyond acculturation, the simple process of acquiring the cultural traits of another group. Thus, assimilation meant that one group would no longer see itself as distinct from another. For Frazier (1957, pp. 327–338), the end result of contact between Whites and Blacks was not automatically Black assimilation, the destruction of a distinctive social organization and identity. The inevitability of assimilation was an empirical question whose answer was to be found in the study of family life and the various forms of social organization that affected its development (Odum, 1951, p. 238). If social forces existed that would move African Americans toward assimilation, Frazier (1968b, p. 16) theorized that it was the family that would impede or facilitate this process.

The Dynamics of Social Organization and Culture as a Method of Analysis

Frazier divided his *The Negro Family in the United States* into five parts, which represented variations in the type of social organization under which the African/African-American family had to adjust (see Semmes, 1992, pp. 43–51). They were: "In the House of the Master," "In the House of the Mother," "In the House of the Father," "In the City of Destruction," and "In the City of Rebirth." These topics represented the broad societal levels of

social organization that affected the Black family through historical time, which included slavery, emancipation; post-slavery, rural life; migration, and urbanization. Frazier examined these variations in social organization in terms of their natural history and their implications for institutional viability. He revealed how socio-historical phenomena provided disorganizing influences to the African family and then identified conditions that tended to restructure or reorganize the family. Thus, Frazier's objective was not to characterize the African-American family as either organized or disorganized but to discover the conditions under which one or the other took place (see Frazier, 1939, p. x).

Frazier's first chapter, "Forgotten Memories" under Part One, "In the House of the Master," gave some insight into how he developed his analysis. Frazier theorized that an African cultural heritage could not be sustained because slavery disrupted African systems of social organization. He observed that slave traders had little regard for family bonds and ethnic distinctions. Frazier felt that seasoning, the process of conditioning captive Africans for slavery, and the scattering of Africans among the smaller plantations in the North American South, tended to erode African culture. Also, for Frazier (1939, pp. 21–22), if there were surviving elements of African culture, they were inclined to have little influence on family structure and function under the newly emerging conditions of life in the New World.

Despite some lack of accuracy regarding the persistence of African cultural survivals (cf. Stuckey 1987; Holloway 1990), Frazier's focus on social organization was theoretically powerful and empirically useful. For example, Frazier (1939, pp. 3–85) was able to identify five areas through which the conditions (variations in social organization) of enslavement shaped the Black family. First was the organization of the plantation that produced a distinctive division of labor. Second was the variety of natural relationships that grew up as men and women sought to fulfill their sexual desires. This included the sexual domination and exploitation of the African women by the White male. Third was the imposition of a European-American social heritage (in the presumed absence of an African heritage) through European Christianity; and fourth, there were the implications of the natural bonds that grew up between mother and child. The fifth was the system of domination

itself that promoted White supremacy and the intrusion into Black family life by White oppressors.

Frazier observed that slavery disorganized African family life in the New World, but the emergence of new forms of social organization, even under harsh oppression, could provide some stabilizing features to the family. He (Frazier, 1939) found, for example, that the "mother remained the most dependable and important figure in the family" (p. 41), and despite the harshness (Frazier, 1939, pp. 43–47, 50–52, 60–61) of child bearing, enslaved African women exhibited strong maternal caring toward their children. Also, unfettered sexual hedonism, for example, could and did in some instances spawn caring and sympathetic relationships (Frazier, 1939, pp. 23–29). Additionally, despite the fact that slavery was an economic institution, the plantation system took on a social character, through which some elements of family life could be achieved.

Emancipation provided new disorganizing experiences because it removed the economic basis for survival. Social relations were torn asunder as former slaves were displaced from plantations, denied land of their own, and moved about on a mass scale to test their new freedom, find new means of survival, and reconstruct their families (Frazier, 1939, pp. 93–95). In the midst of this new form of social disorganization, Frazier observed the emergence of female-headed family forms, headed by single and widowed grandmothers, which kept multiple generations of family members together, took in orphaned children, and provided the basis of a stable and viable family (Frazier, 1939, pp. 146–159).

Further, Frazier (1939, pp. 146–159, 163–181) observed that because of emancipation, the Black male, for the first time, could assert authority in the family and provide an economic role. In the context of American society, the male (father-husband) role facilitated the economic viability and protection of the family, which gave strength to the affective and socializing components of the family. However, because Frazier (1939, pp. 146–159) had already identified stabilizing features of female-headed families, it was clear that he saw no inherent instability in this family form. What is important is that Frazier wanted to identify the social and historical conditions that disorganized and stabilized Black

families, and he described the character of the social organization that contributed to and resulted from these conditions.

Frazier's concern with assimilation as a social problem and with factors that enhanced the stability and viability of the Black family directed him to an examination of miscegenation and its relationship to values, racial identification, and social stratification. For example, Frazier observed that an early Black elite had its origins among Blacks who were free prior to the Civil War. These African Americans were disproportionately of mixed racial heritage, having primarily been the products of unions between slave owners and enslaved African women. Among this group, social privilege, usually based on the ownership of property, and a group consciousness based on physical features and the acquisition of a culture different from the masses of Blacks were associated with familial connections to wealthy White families. Also, African-descent populations, absorbed by miscegenation into Native American and White communities, exhibited variations in their levels of racial identification. Some saw themselves as Black; others saw themselves as neither Black nor White, even within the same family. Some Blacks passed for White. How the broader society defined these groups, which included the imposition of harsh segregation laws under a system of White supremacy, also came into play. What is important with respect to family stability is that miscegenation often led to color (phenotypical) stratification that resulted in economic and social advantage. This economic and social advantage became associated with the elevation of male authority in the family, which, in turn, contributed to male interest in the family and greater family viability (see Frazier, 1939, Chapters X, XII, XX, and XXI).

Urbanization (Frazier, 1939, pp. 271–390), like the process of enslavement and the experience of emancipation, posed new problems for the survival of many Black families. As part of his emphasis on variation in social organization, Frazier (1968b, pp. 19–20) identified two major family forms, the natural family and the institutional family. The natural family consisted of the single-mother household, which was held together by parental affection and sympathetic ties. The institutional family was usually two-parent, generally but not always based on formal marriage, and characterized by greater stability and continuity. Frazier

concluded that natural family forms held together by peasant folkways and mores were least able to withstand the disorganizing influences of urbanization, which involved massive groups of migrating rural people who were becoming urban dwellers. The resulting disorganizing influences included separation from familial and communal supports and controls, disruptions to identity due to the quest for status in a new environment, increasing social differences due to rapid social mobility generated by growing occupational differentiation, the separation of sexual gratification from human feelings and commitment, the imposition of poverty and racial segregation, the encounter with more individualistic and hedonistic values, and the like (see, for example, Frazier, 1939, pp. 284–285, 336–339).

Again, Frazier (1939, pp. 393–475) identified the seeds of reorganization within the disorganizing influences of social life. In Part Five, "In the City of Rebirth," the final section of his study, Frazier observed that urbanization produced a new Black middle class and an urban proletariat, which presented new opportunities for African-American males to gain authority (not dominance) in the family and to contribute economically to the family. He (Frazier, 1939) explained that the Black male industrial worker "assumes responsibility for the support of his family and acquires a new authority in family relations" (p. 475). These observations were consistent with Frazier's sociological concern with the conditions under which males (husbands and fathers) gained an interest in the family. With regard to an emerging middle class, Frazier (1939) concluded: "Because of the fact that a large proportion of the middle class are salaried persons and there are few or no children in the families, relations between husband and wife, especially where both are employed, tend to be equalitarian, and a spirit of comradeship exists" (p. 439). Also, for Frazier, a critical component of family stability, along with the maintenance of a social heritage, was the degree to which racial barriers would fall, and Blacks could achieve economic integration into American society.

In conclusion, the reactive and disparaging portrayal of Frazier's work on the family is unfounded. Fortunately, there are those who see Frazier's work differently and who seek to build on that work in a more sociologically productive manner. Robert

Hill (1993), for example, who is known for his focus on the strengths of Black families, observed, "Frazier's ecological studies of Chicago and Harlem revealed that black families were diverse rather than monolithic. . . . His analyses consistently attributed the primary sources of family stability to external forces (such as racism, urbanization, technological changes, and recessions) and not to internal characteristics of black families" (pp. 7–8). Hill (1971) stressed that Frazier's work did not indicate that "disorganized patterns are characteristic of the majority of low-income blacks . . ." (p. 1). He also was concerned that scholars do not test and update Frazier's findings but use Frazier's ideas selectively to support their theories of pathology and matriarchy (Hill, 1971, p. 57).

An examination of why so many have misinterpreted or misrepresented Frazier's work on the Black family is beyond the scope of this paper. However, I suspect that the negative reaction to Frazier is more a reaction to how some have used Frazier to blame African-American families for the effects of poverty and racism suffered by Black communities. In addition, it is probably the case that a Eurocentric bias continues to play a role in graduate education in the social sciences, such that a close and comprehensive reading of Frazier, one of America's greatest sociologists, is routinely omitted.

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