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Andrew Billingsley
Howard University

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BLACK FAMILIES AND NATIONAL POLICY

Andrew Billingsley

Graduate Professor of the Social Sciences, Howard University

The family is both a source of society and a product of society. As a source of society the family produces individuals, values and a set of behaviors we call socialization which helps to build institutions which constitute the fabric of the larger society. As a product of society the family is highly influenced, conditioned and to a great extent determined by the forces which emanate from the institutional fabric of the larger society. Thus, what a family is, is to some extent determined by, influenced by, defined by the larger context of the society in which families function. Thus, the family is not an independent unit of society and it is not primarily a causative factor in society. It is, as sociologists term it, highly interdependent with the other aspects of society. In Black Families in White America, we have described this conception as a social systems approach to the study of childhood and family life. It calls attention to the total network of social reality within which families are structured and within which they function.¹

In earlier times during the history of our nation, the family was more of a source of society than it is today. Today the family is more a product of society than a source of it. This is due largely to the changes which have occurred in the world and in our nation over the past one hundred years in which we have moved from an agrarian society through an urban-technological society to what might be termed a post modern society where heat, light, sound, transportation and all forms of communication unknown or grossly underdeveloped a hundred years ago are everyday facts of life. The family is buffeted by all these forces. It is also aided by these forces to varying degrees depending on the nature of the family.

If the family may be perceived then as a product of the larger society, it is very important in our efforts to understand Black family structure and functioning to understand the nature of the larger society and the manner in which it impacts on Black families.

If we consider the nature of American society insofar as it influences family life, it will be necessary to observe some aspects of the society that are not commonly stressed, but which, nevertheless, have a great deal of basis in empirical analysis. First, the American society today is heavily individualistic in its orientation, heavily laissez-faire in its approach to human problems, heavily materialistic and highly adult-centered. Moreover, it is a society which is based more strongly on

competition than on cooperation. Each of these values or emphases in our society is on the increase and has important consequences for childhood and family life as we shall see later.

In his book, The Two Worlds of Childhood, Urie Bronfenbrenner has reminded us that:

The family is not the only possible agent of upbringing. The process typically begins in the home, but does not end there. The outside world also has major impact, as the child becomes exposed to a succession of persons, groups and institutions each of which imposes its expectations, rewards and penalties on the child and thus contributes to shaping the development of his skills, values and patterns of behavior.²

There is, in short, something about the society, about the institutions, and about the way they work that helps produce many of the social problems that we are concerned about when we think of family life in the United States today. Dr. Bronfenbrenner in his work has pointed to one of the major causes of this societal dysfunctioning. He points to the basic values growing out of the history and culture of the dominant group in American society today.

It is noteworthy that of all the countries in which my colleagues and I are working now numbering half a dozen in west and east, the only one which exceeds the United States in the willingness of children to engage in antisocial behavior is the nation closest to us in our Anglo-Saxon tradition of individualism. That country is England.³

In Black Families in White America and in Children of the Storm⁴ we have referred to the strong social pathology orientation which governs most of the work done by scholars on Black people and on poor people and particularly on Black families that are poor. The tendency is to approach poor Black families as if they are a problem and then proceed to describe this problem and the causes associated with it all within the context of the family and the Black community. This tendency among scholars is very strong. It has been described by the psychologist William Ryan in a book titled Blaming the Victim. He calls on some of the work of the early American sociologist, C. Wright Mills who was one of those scholars who was able to point up the manner in which social scientists have difficulty breaking out of their own conceptions of behavior as problematic because it deviates from what they consider to be normative behavior. In one of his studies he examined a series of textbooks on social problems and Professor Ryan has provided for us a summary of Dr. Mills' observations:

First, the textbooks present material about these problems, . . . in simple descriptive terms, with each problem unrelated to the others and none related in any meaningful way to other aspects of the social environment. Second, the problems are selected and described largely according to predetermined norms. . . . The norms themselves are taken as given, and no effort is made to examine them. Nor is there any thought given to the manner in which norms might themselves contribute to the development of the problems.

Professor Ryan continues:

Within such a framework, then, deviation from norms and standards comes to be defined as failed or incomplete socialization - failure to learn the roles or the inability to learn how to keep them. Those with social problems are then viewed as unable or unwilling to adjust to society's standards, which are narrowly conceived by what Mills calls "independent middle class persons verbally living out Protestant ideas in small town America."⁵

What we are suggesting, then, is that social policy makers will need to look to some new sources of social science knowledge in order to develop sound and more effective programs to deal with problems associated with childhood and family life in the United States today, and particularly those which are associated with childhood and family life in the Black community.

Family Structure in the Black Community

Much of the concern about Black families in national policy formulations centers on a basic misconception about the structure of family life in the Black community and the causes and consequences of family structure. Students of the family, particularly in this country and in Europe generally consider the nuclear family normal and all other family forms deviant. Moreover, most of these students consider that there are only two major types of families. On the one hand, there is the nuclear family composed of the father, the mother and their children; and on the other hand, there is something which is called the broken family or the single-parent family, consisting usually of a mother and her children. The first of these family forms is considered to be functional, and the latter dysfunctional. This is a very naive conception of family life in the world. It is not even a correct assessment of American life generally, and it is grossly incorrect when it comes to an analysis of family life in the Black community.

In Black Families in White America, we have delineated twelve major types of family structures that are very common in the Black community today. First, we show that among Black families, the nuclear family is by far the most predominant pattern of family life. Secondly, we observe that extended families is still a very strong feature of Afro-American life. Thirdly, augmented families in the Black community persist partially as an expression of African communalism and partly as a mechanism of adjustment to contemporary realities. We point out that there are not one, but three sub-types of each of these family forms in the Black community today.

Robert Hill in Strengths of Black Families⁶ has found that strong kinship bonds characterize Black families and that Black families much more frequently than white families take other relatives into their household. We know, of course, that the extended family is an important historic feature of the Black community, which is still present today.

The manner in which the social context in which Black children grow up is a major handicap to them and to us. It has been described in a theoretical paper by Leon Chestang which he titles: "Character Development in a Hostile Environment."⁷ According to Chestang:

"Three conditions, socially determined and institutionally supported, characterize the black experience: social injustice, social inconsistency, and personal impotence. To function in the face of any one of them does cruel and unusual violence to the personality. To function in the face of all three subjects the personality to severe crippling or even destruction. These three crucial conditions, however, confront the black person throughout his life, and they determine his character development."

While any one of us might quibble a bit with wording and phraseology, and might add a variable or two to the basic conditions of life for Black people, I am convinced that in this work Chestang is moving toward the development of a major breakthrough in the development of social theory of a high order of sophistication which grows directly out of his own experience, and yours and mine and that of our children. He continues:

"Coping under the circumstances imposed by the society has required the development of ego-syntonic modes that are often at variance with personality trends considered normal by the majority group. . . . These skills include competence in a behavioral style designed to ward off the negative consequences of social inconsistency, social

injustice, and personal impotence." And further:

"The experience and condition of being black in American society has resulted in the development of two parallel and opposing thought structures each based on values, norms, and beliefs and supported by attitudes, feelings, and behaviors that imply feelings of depreciation on the one hand and push for transcendence on the other."

He concludes: "Effective social functioning and environmental reality require that Black individuals incorporate both these trends into their personalities- the one to assure competence in dealing with reality, the other as an impetus for transcending reality."

In short, Black children have to live in both the Black world and the white world. In order to do either is a full time job. To do both requires double duty and exacts a heavy toll from these children.

The Importance of Social Class

While it is important to note the distinctions of family structure, it is also important to note that these structures are themselves highly related to the social class structure in America. Thus, the larger the share of economic and educational well-being, and the more historic is the kind of community support available to the family, the more likely the family form will approach the simple nuclear type. Among Black families where there has been a history of economic security and a high level of education and a great deal of acceptance in the larger society, the family forms will more nearly approach the simple nuclear form and the incipient nuclear form. Among those families at the bottom of life's resources there is likely to be a higher proportion manifesting the various attenuated forms of family life - whether nuclear, extended or augmented.

Thus, if we consider very poor families who have traditionally had very low incomes (with a 1969 income of under \$3000, a condition which nearly a third of all Black families still face), we will observe a very high incidence of attenuated family forms. Over half of the families in this income group were attenuated, most often reflecting a female head, but in a rather substantial number of cases a male head who cares for his children with the help of relatives. If we examined families whose income ranged between \$5000 and \$7000 a year (in 1969 dollars), the incidence of augmented families would have been reduced to about a quarter. In other words, three-quarters of the families in this still relatively low-income group, had men as

the head and stable feature.

If we examine the relatively high-income group of say, over \$10,000 a year, the incidence of family forms with male heads increases to over 90 percent. To put the matter another way, the difference between white families and Black families in terms of the incidence of male heads in this high-income group is less than three percent. But among the low-income group of under \$3000, the difference between low-income white families and low-income Black families is more like 28 percent.

Thus, social class can be seen to have an important bearing on the structure of family life. The lower the social class, the higher the incidence of attenuated families. The higher the social class, the higher the incidence of simple nuclear families and simple extended families as well as incipient families which have a male head. But it is important also to point out that social class does not itself account for all of the differences. The racial factor is seen in the wide discrepancy between family forms in the low-income Black and white communities.

If we can destroy some of the myths surrounding segmented families, particularly the low-income female-headed families, we would go a long way toward correctly understanding Black family life. Dr. Hill has exploded some of these myths in his findings as follows:

Contrary to the widespread belief in a "matriarchy" among blacks, our findings reveal that most black families, whether low-income or not, are characterized by an equalitarian pattern in which neither spouse dominates, but shares decision-making and the performance of expected tasks. . . .

Contrary to the belief that dependency is characteristic of most families headed by women, recent Census Bureau data indicate that three-fifths of the women heading black families work - most of them full-time.

Our study found that most assertions about widespread desertion in black families are not based on actual desertion rates. In fact, recent HEW data reveal that not even the majority of AFDC families can be characterized as "deserted": only one-fifth of the black families receiving AFDC in 1969 were so described.⁸

The fact cannot be stressed too strongly that an important condition for the effective functioning of Black families is to have sufficient economic, health, housing, educational and social supports - the kind of supports that are provided by the larger

society. Poor Black families have a great deal of difficulty in this society whatever the family structure, and families that have more support from this society fare much better.

Joyce Ladner, in Tomorrow's Tomorrow: The Black Woman⁹ has pointed out that Black parents often are unable to offer the kind of comfort and protection for their children in the economic and physical aspects of life because of their own "vulnerability to the discriminative practices of the larger society." This kind of powerlessness in the face of a society that does not care very much about Black people, or children, or poor people - rather than the structure of family life - is the most important burden faced by Black families.

In Children of the Storm, we have examined extensively the problems affecting the well-being of Black children, and the manner in which the society has gone about providing for these children. We have pointed out that children from these augmented families are likely to be on the increase in the years ahead and are in great need of community and social services. At the same time, children from more traditional types of families in the Black community are also in great need of care. We have outlined the obstacles to full development of services to meet the needs of these children, including the problem of racism, bureaucracy, sectarianism, and sometimes professionalism.

However, it is also pointed out in this book that the tendency, so strong in American society to blame the Black family for the difficulties their children endure, and get into, is a misplaced emphasis that prevents us, as a society, from solving the problems these children face. We have called, therefore, for a new set of family policies and a new set of child welfare programs, designed more nearly to meet the needs of these children, growing out of their own historical and contemporary realities - rather than simply imposing programs that were designed by and for other people.

The Strengths of Black Families

In every likelihood the simple nuclear family will continue to be as important a feature of Black family life as in the rest of the nation for decades ahead. At the same time, however, it is fairly clear that other types of family forms will also continue to increase, and therefore, the proportion of nuclear families will be less. Some factors that help to produce attenuated families in the Black community are racism, economic exploitation, social discrimination, and political oppression. Unemployment, underemployment, lack of ownership, and job discrimination are just some of the most conspicuous indices of these conditions. These forces seem

likely to be sustained over the next decades, therefore the incidence of segmented families is likely to increase.

There is also some element of choice in the development of different family forms. In the Black community the stigma which is sometimes attached to different family forms in the white community, does not obtain. Thus, it is legitimate to have a mother or a father caring for children with the help of a grandmother, aunt, cousin, or other relative; and such families are not ostracized as they would be in the white community.

This is, in part, because the traditions of family life in the Black community are more extended than they are in the white community. The family has never been considered to be primarily a matter of a mother and a father and their children; it includes a larger segment of the community. Here the African heritage has influenced values and preferences even when they cannot be practiced because of the conditions of contemporary reality. What is not appreciated in the white community is that Black families, even low-income Black families, and even low-income Black families that are attenuated because one parent is not in the home at the time, function amazingly well, considering the conditions under which we as Black people live.

Moreover, our own research over the last six or eight years has demonstrated consistently that low-income Black families take much better care of their children than low-income white families. Often such families, headed by women of amazing strength and resilience, have been able to instill within their children values and behavior patterns that stand them in very good stead in the world at large. Many children from these attenuated family backgrounds have developed high aspirations for their own achievement in the world.

The study recorded by Robert Hill showed that 63% of the children of low-income female-headed families and 73% of the children from moderate-income female-headed families nevertheless aspired to the kind of education and preparation which would lead to high-level technical and professional occupations. Moreover, we know that the majority of today's Black college students have parents with less than a high school education, and nearly a third come from family backgrounds which are attenuated because of the absence of a father or mother from the home.

Thus despite the relative decline of the preponderance of simple nuclear families in the Black community; if the larger society can be persuaded to provide the necessary resources for family life, whatever the variety of family structure, the functioning of these families will be considerably enhanced.

Elements of a National Family Policy

A national family policy, then, enunciated by the federal government would designate the family unit, in all its variety of structure and forms, growing out of the cultural pluralism of the society and the varied and changing value systems, as the most important unit in society. We sometimes say that the family is the most important unit in society today, but there is no national policy or commitment to that view. Thus, a host of other units - corporations, individuals, markets, colleges, and others turn out to be more important in the sense that they get more attention, protection, admiration and support from the national society than families do. Another problem with our current conception of family is that we generally think only of the simple nuclear family. A family policy which sought to support nuclear families and discriminated against other family forms would not be responsive to the needs of family life in the Black community both historically and at the present time. The danger, then, is that such a family policy would still work better for white families than Black ones, and without intending to do so would have racist consequences. In this regard, as in many others, a color- or culture-blind policy is not objective, standard or fair, but may, in fact, defeat its very purposes of bringing about equity and parity in society.

The designation of the family unit as the most important unit in society would require a national commitment to use all the resources of the federal government at all levels and the private sectors of society as well, to enhance the functioning of families. Such enhancement would require a conception of adequate, optimum, and satisfactory functioning. If the family in all its variety is viewed as a subsystem of the larger society, then, the enhancement of the functioning of family life is a responsibility of the larger society more than of the individual members of the family. This is a hard conception for Americans to grasp. We are so individualistic in our value system, so prone to blame the victim, so laissez-faire in our conception of collective responsibility, and so hostile toward people who seem to be poor, weak, and relatively hopeless. Yet these approaches, and programs growing out of these approaches, have not solved the problems confronting family life in the nation today, and they do not seem likely to do so. Viewed in the context of a creature of society and a dependent unit of the larger society, it becomes fairly clear what the priorities are for the enhancement of the functioning of Black families in this society. Measures designed to enable the families to maintain their viability, that is to say, effectively meet the needs of their members, especially their youngest members must emanate from the most important systems of the larger society with a bearing on family life. Chief among these are the economic system, the systems of housing, health care and education. Others are important too, but these are critical. And, while all these systems are interrelated, a priority must be given to changes in the way the economic system functions for Black people. And, difficult as it is for white Americans to

understand and permit, the national government must take the initiative in indemnifying Black Americans.

In order for the economic system to function as well for Black people as it now does for white people, three efforts are necessary which will benefit all American families. These are the elimination of poverty, the elimination of structural unemployment and underemployment, and the elimination of economic and job discrimination based on race, region and religion. A prime requisite for the fulfillment of these goals is an expanding and diversified civilian economy with full employment. Vernon Jordan, in a recent issue of Jet Magazine observed that:

What we are trying to do here at the Urban League is create options for Black people. Right now, we have no options. We want to create a situation where Black people can choose whether they want to live in a ghetto or in suburbia and can choose the kind of job they accept. What Blacks now want to deal with is the good job, the good education and the good house. These things are not generally dramatic on a large scale, but on an individual basis, they are very dramatic.¹⁰

In short: what the average Black man wants for himself and his family is a good home, good health and a good education for his children. These are the requisites of strong and viable family life in contemporary society. Black families function better, and they can take better care of their children when there is a variety of economic opportunity, including meaningful jobs for the adults in the family. There is no mystery about that. Illness, crime, and other forms of maladaptive behavior go up directly in proportion to the rise in economic insecurity and unemployment. And for most of the years since the Korean War, the unemployment rates in the Black community have exceeded the depression level unemployment rates experienced by the larger society. It is hardly worth asking whether the nation would have permitted such sustained high level unemployment in the white community. And it is hardly worth speculating on whether measures to increase meaningful employment and economic investment would do more than all the law and order measures to make the streets, institutions, and communities of the nation pleasant places in which to work and play and live.

The idea of a full employment economy is not new. It has simply not been taken seriously in national policy. Back in October of 1966 a group of distinguished Americans including both the then President and a past President of Howard University, and a host of economists and other experts designed a "Freedom Budget" which called for the abolition of poverty, guaranteed full employment, adequate minimum wages, high economic growth, and guaranteed incomes for all unable to work as a part of a

basic set of guarantees in order to bring about equity and parity in American society.

Concluding that fully 40 percent of poverty could be accounted for by inadequate employment opportunity, the panel called for employment options "for all able and willing to work, and for all whom adequate training and education would make able and willing." To this day, this call has not been heeded. According to this distinguished panel, full employment would have required "an unemployment rate below 3 percent by early 1968, and preferably 2 percent."¹¹

The present unemployment rate hovers around 6 percent, and in Black communities it is more than doubled, and among Black youth it is higher still. A strong corollary to unemployment is underemployment, where men and women work only part of the year, and where they work for wages which are clearly substandard, and where they work in situations and jobs which do not utilize their abilities and aspirations to the maximum. This particular problem is more pervasive in the Black community than is unemployment. It is the lot of a large segment of the working poor who constitute, in turn, the largest segment of the poor in the Black community. In the low-income Black community most families are headed by men who work every day and still are not able to move their families above the poverty line. Clearly what is needed is not a work incentive plan but a work opportunity plan with options and rewards commensurate with the aspirations of Black men. For the work ethic and the work orientation is strong among these men, stronger, in fact, than among white men as has been shown by several recent studies of work orientations.

Contrary to popular belief, even in the Congress, poverty cannot be abolished by work incentives and even work opportunities alone. The Freedom Budget panel estimated that roughly 40 percent of poverty could be accounted for by persons who are unable to work because of disabilities, youth, or child-rearing responsibilities. A family policy designed to enhance the functioning of families would not insist that mothers of young children abandon them against their will and go to work at meaningless jobs in order to insure that their children are properly fed. Family solidarity would be more highly valued than work, per se. Nearly 15 percent of poor families in the country and nearly a third of poor families in the Black community are headed by women with young children who should not be forced to go out to work. The need, therefore, is for a program of family assistance which guarantees all American families a minimum income which will support a safe and sanitary standard of living. In 1972 a family of four required an income in the neighborhood of \$6,500 per year.

A policy and program of guaranteed family income adequate to the family's need, must be tailored to the variety of conditions which exist in various parts of the country. By the government's own standards \$2,400 a year is not

enough to move a family of four out of poverty. Indeed, it is less than half enough. A more realistic approach has been taken by the National Welfare Rights Organization. They have called for a minimum income of \$6,500 a year, a position which has also been unanimously supported by the Congressional Black Caucus. A simple test of how close the President's proposals come to reality as compared with those of the National Welfare Rights Organization and the Black Caucus may be observed by reference to the following data. According to a Gallup Poll conducted in 1970, a national sample of Americans estimated that the minimum income necessary to support a family of four was \$126 a week. In a similar poll conducted in 1971, the estimate was \$127 a week. The federal government's own Bureau of Labor Statistics estimated in 1970 that a minimum of \$136 a week was necessary for a family of four in metropolitan areas to maintain a minimum level of health and safety. The following Table shows the minimum amount needed for a nonfarm family of four according to national studies done in each of the following years:

TABLE I
MINIMUM AMOUNT NEEDED BY FAMILY OF FOUR¹²
 (Nonfarm family)

Median Averages		
<u>Year</u>	<u>Amount per Week</u>	<u>Annually</u>
1937	\$ 30	\$1,560
1947	43	2,236
1957	72	3,744
1967	101	5,252
1969	120	6,240
1970	126	6,552
1971	127	6,604

As we may observe, then, the National Welfare Rights Organization demand for a minimum income of \$6,500 is much closer to the minimum needs of families

for health and safe living conditions than the proposals of the President or the Congress. Moreover, if we consider the aspirations of families to live beyond the level of minimal existence, we may be informed by another study done by the Bureau of Labor Statistics which indicates that in 1970 in New York and New Jersey it took a gross income of \$12,134 to maintain a family of four in a moderate standard of living. The Bureau published what it calls a lower budget which requires \$7,183 a year, an intermediate budget which refers to the \$12,134 and a higher budget which requires \$18,545 a year for a family of four to live well. The following Table shows the proportion of these funds which families have to pay for food, housing, transportation, medical care, taxes, etcetera:

TABLE II
WHERE THE DOLLAR GOES
NEW YORK - NORTHWESTERN NEW JERSEY¹³

Urban 4-Person Family, Three Budgets, Spring 1970

Percent of Annual Income Spent for:

	<u>Food</u>	<u>Housing</u>	<u>Trans- portation</u>	<u>Clothing and Personal Care</u>	<u>Medical Care</u>	<u>Taxes</u>	<u>All Other</u>
Higher Budget \$18,545	19.1	25.7	7.0	9.2	3.4	24.1	11.6
Intermediate Budget \$12,134	23.0	25.3	7.1	9.5	4.9	19.6	10.5
Lower Budget \$7,183	29.1	19.3	6.0	11.3	8.3	15.9	10.1

It must be clear from the above discussion that none of the current proposals before the Congress for family assistance policies come even close to approaching the real needs of the people who live outside the American dream. It is our view that such policies are not likely to be formed or supported nationally until there is some basic change in the basic value constellation of the collective American character. The question, then, becomes not so much which specific programs should be recommended, as how to change the basic American values toward a collective concern for the common good.

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