



**WESTERN  
MICHIGAN**  
UNIVERSITY

The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare

---

Volume 2  
Issue 3 *Spring*

Article 4

---

April 1975

## Some Socio-Cultural Aspects of Growing up Black

Joan S. Wallace  
*Howard University*

Samuel P. Wong  
*Howard University*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw>



Part of the Race and Ethnicity Commons, and the Social Work Commons

---

### Recommended Citation

Wallace, Joan S. and Wong, Samuel P. (1975) "Some Socio-Cultural Aspects of Growing up Black," *The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare*: Vol. 2: Iss. 3, Article 4.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.15453/0191-5096.1088>

Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw/vol2/iss3/4>

This Article is brought to you by the Western Michigan University School of Social Work. For more information, please contact [wmu-scholarworks@wmich.edu](mailto:wmu-scholarworks@wmich.edu).



## SOME SOCIO-CULTURAL ASPECTS OF GROWING UP BLACK\*

Joan S. Wallace and Samuel P. Wong  
School of Social Work      Institute for the Study of  
Howard University      Educational Policy  
Howard University      Howard University

### The Family as a Social Mediator

Black people, like other people, grow up in families. This simple observation is a surprise to people who are accustomed to associate the experiences of Black people with slavery, crime, delinquency, civil disorders. The Black historian, Benjamin Quarles (1967) has observed that white America tends to have a distorted perspective on Black life, and the fact of Blacks growing up in a family is a fresh approach to the understanding of socio-cultural aspects of growing up Black (cf. Billingsley, 1968).

The family is society's primary context for meeting a child's biological needs, directing his development into an integrated person living in a society, and transmitting to him its cultures (Lidz, 1974). It is also the setting in which a child's basic trust, autonomy, initiative and sense of industry toward life (cf. Erikson, 1959) are developed. The interaction between societal needs and individual wants (cf. Parsons and Bales, 1955; Winch, 1971) or between the demands of "super ego" and "id" defines the family as a mediational setting even though its structure is presently in transition (cf. Skolnick and Skolnick, 1971). Any attempt at studies of child development as an autonomous process, independent of the family, distorts as much as it simplifies the understanding of the growth process.

The family provides the earliest and most persistent influences that encompass the growing child for whom the ways of the parents and other adults in the family are the only way of life that the child knows. Subsequent experiences will modify these core influences but they can never fully reshape or replace them. These core influences are the realities for the growing child and the subsequent construction of his social world is

---

\*An earlier version of this paper was read by Joan Wallace at the University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee, December, 1974.

based on these primary realities (cf. Berger and Luckmann, 1966). Among the early lessons a child learns in his family are the rewards of renouncing one's own wish for the welfare of the collective, the hierarchies of authority and the relationship between authority and responsibility. Indeed, the reality principle operates initially in a family context at an early age of a growing child.

### The Resilient Black Family

Billingsley (1974) observes that "Black families are among the strongest and most resilient institutions in the nation. Were it not so, we would not have survived as a people, and the national society would be even more inhuman and inhumane than it is." The resiliency and strength of the Black family lies partially in its divergence from the patterns of family structure among the dominant group. Within the Black family, the constituents include not only people who are related and/or feel that they belong to each other in the same household, but also people who feel themselves to be closely related and live in different houses and often in different locations.

This intense feeling of being related is of course an expression of the "we-feeling" in social life, and its presence in American society is more than a reaction to the past and present repression of Black people by the dominant group. It is also an expression of Black people's African heritage in which the family is a central focus of community life (cf. Herskovits, 1938). In spite of the dehumanizing experience of enslavement, Black people have strong bonds of kinship and strong feeling of belonging to the same closely related unit, sometimes even in physical separation. Hayes and Mendell (1973) found that Blacks interact more with their kin, receive more help from their kin and have a greater number and more diversified types of relatives living with them than do white families. Social workers can recall their penniless welfare clients who made the long trip south because a relative had died or was in trouble or in need. The relentless forces of racism, poverty and violence of modern times continue to strain the Black family, but it responds with great strength (cf. Hill, 1971). The skewed presentations of Black family as weak, matriarchial, unstable, making no

substantial contribution to Black people or the nation (e.g. Moynihan, 1965) are inexcusable ignorant accounts of an important institution in the Black experience.

### The Multi-faceted Black Culture

Among the many tasks performed by the Black family, probably none is more important for Black people (and for American society) than its transmission of a Black culture. It cannot be overlooked that, like white families, the Black family is both a repository of Black culture and an integral part of that culture.

The culture of a people is the totality of their way of life. It includes the basic conditions of their existence, their behavior, their life style, their values, preferences, creative expressions of work and play. Growing up in two separate and unequal Americas, Blacks and whites have no choice but to develop different ways of life within one nation. Perversely, the popular belief that Blacks do not have any distinctive culture has been advocated: "The Negro is only an American and nothing else. He has no values and culture to guard and protect." (Glazer and Moynihan, 1963:51); even Myrdal (1944) described the Black man as "an exaggerated American" whose culture is "merely a distorted development of a pathological condition" of American culture in general. Such observations are myopic, and they deny the humanity of a people (cf. Billingsley, 1968).

In fact, Black culture in America is unique, complex, and rich. It is a convergence and fusion of African, American, and European influences (Billingsley, 1974). Growing up Black in America is to grow in the context of Black culture. Within Black culture there is a diversity in the styles of individuals and families which is often overlooked and underrated in America (cf. Lewis, 1967). Perhaps the most prominent feature is the flexibility of family roles (cf. Hill, 1969; Billingsley, 1968; White, 1972). In the Black family, it is common to find that husband and wife are both employed outside the home, sharing the household chores of cooking, cleaning, caring for the children. The Black family is more accurately described as an equalitarian family rather than a matriarchy. In a single-parent family headed by a woman, she assumes the multiple roles of breadwinner, homemaker, and mother. In such households, Black men are

sometimes present in the form of "Uncle Joe," Cousin Pete," "Grandpa Moses," or the mother's boyfriend, and these men as members of the family also perform important roles. The movie "Claudine," for instance, illustrates the roles assumed by the mother's boyfriend.

### Developmental Tasks and Problems

As indicated at the beginning of this paper, growing up is a mediational process. A Black child growing through the various stages of normal development in the Black family within Black culture has to learn a vast amount of knowledge: knowledge of his own family, knowledge of the Black community, and knowledge of the larger society. The process is highly complicated and his socio-psychological senses are well honed from childhood through adolescence. If a Black child appears slow in his "negotiation" with the white world, it is possible that he is prematurely worn out in his prior mediational tasks. In this section, some of the developmental tasks and problems facing the Black child as he grows toward adulthood are discussed.

### The Bi-Cultural Child

The Black child is not marginal but bi-cultural (Chestang, 1972). He does not live on the fringes of a large society, he lives in both the larger society and the Black society. The experience of functioning in two cultures results in two deliberate ways of coping with life expectations.

The experience and condition of being Black and in America has resulted in the development of two parallel and opposing thought structures, each based on values, norms and beliefs of two cultures and supported by attitudes, feelings and behaviors of two people. Effective social functioning and environmental reality require that Black individuals incorporate both trends into their personalities, to assure competence in dealing with reality and to serve as an impetus for transcending reality. Thus, in the real world, the child is depreciated but must believe in himself. Growing up healthy in America is a problem for any child (cf. Goodman, 1960), but the description that Black children

who come from a background of poverty are likely to be emotionally blighted is a distortion. Coles (1964) found for instance, many poor Black children in the south and in the ghettos of the north display resilience, toughness, ingenuity, exuberance, and vitality. Such children come to school prepared to be active, vigorous, perhaps much more outgoing than the average middle class child. They quickly lose patience, sulk, feel wronged and cheated by a world that they have learned to be impossible, contradictory and uncertain. "By seven or eight, most Negro children know the score and have been seen drawing only faintly disguised pictures of the harsh future awaiting them."

The self-defense mechanisms that are an integral part of the childrearing process in the Black family act to protect the child against the external as well as the internal forces. When a parent berates a child for not defending himself on the playground when attacked by his peers, the child is prepared to use the same defense tactics against whites who launch a similar attack. Thus, Black children are more totally responsible for their own protection than their white middle class counterparts. The responsibility they are forced to exercise also lends itself to a deeper involvement of shaping the future and ultimately to rendering more control over their destiny. Almost by default, these children have been forced to become a vital part of the process that determines the kinds of individuals they will become. 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 dominant group. Having acquired the ability to care for himself, a Black child is understandably impatient and restless with the game playing atmosphere in the middle class oriented schoolroom. The ineptness of some educational practices is most ludicrous in the case of teaching a Harlem child to cross Seventh Avenue and 42nd Street when he has mastered the technique in his own neighborhood at Lexington and 125th Streets, or to do simple addition and subtraction with blocks and beads when he is able to carry on business transaction in the grocery stores in his pre-school days. A Black child from a background of financial poverty is an artist in self-defense by the time he enrolls in a school; he does not depend on his parents for protection. Even in the Black middle class the parents can never give their children the ultimate protection from racism which whites exercise.

Black children also are subjected to the second-class citizenship of their elders. Lower class Black children have received less of the protection from the law and have been the children in the United States least likely to benefit from the general concern with child protection. The standard conception of the protected and irresponsible child has never been possible for the majority of Black children. The consequences of the powerlessness of Black parents necessitated that they devise their own pattern of child socialization. These patterns were primarily predicated upon the principle that children in the Black community must be taught to survive in a hostile society.

### The Bi-lingual Child

Because of the capacity to acquire language is innate in humans and virtually all children learn to speak, the complexities of the process of learning language and the central importance of language to ego functioning are often overlooked by adults. To survive in this country, the Black child must learn the language and the heritage of his community and the language of the wider society. He must additionally learn a variety of behaviors that are acceptable within his community and behaviors that are acceptable within the wider society. As the languages and behaviors of the two cultures are not entirely and mutually acceptable, the child must know the proper context for the correct language and behavior. The bi-lingual learning of a Black child (or any children from the minority background) is a complicated and subtle task. Some children do not become bi-lingual and are able to communicate only in one language because their parents are mono-lingual (as are most white parents). Barred from learning the other language, e.g. de facto school segregation, some Black parents may be unable to pass on to their children what they do not possess. Adding insult to injury, some educators proceed to label the Black child as verbally destitute. Baratz and Baratz (1970), however, find that Black children of lower socio-economic background are neither linguistically impoverished or cognitively underdeveloped, although their language system is different and presents a handicap to their attempting to negotiate with the standard English, it is nonetheless a fully developed language system that is adequate for abstract thinking. Clearly, society demands more of the bi-lingual child, the child of "different"

parents, than it does of the middle class white child. A middle class child has only one language to learn; a Black child has two. Each language is the product of the cumulative experiences of an ethnic branch of the human race.

Language is the basic tool by which a child's social world is constructed (cf. Berger and Luckmann, 1966). In acquiring a language, the learner gathers in not only the symbolic referents of a vocabulary but also the value overtones of the language. Black children listen to words in standard American language which are demeaning to them and to their blackness. BURGEST (1973) found for example, the word white has 134 synonyms, only ten of which appear to have negative implications and these only in the mildest sense--whitewash, gray, wan, pale, ashen, etc. The word "blackness" has 126 synonyms, sixty of which are distinctly unfavorable and none of them mildly positive. Additionally, there are combined words such as "black ball," "black death," "black flag," "black hand," "black list," "black magic," "black mail," "black market," "black sheep," and the list is extensive. So the child not only has to respond to the wider society, becoming aware that his blackness is depicted as bad, but also to transcend the negative image for his own healthy development.

### Black, Female and Capable

The young Black girl growing up in this environment becomes consciously socialized into the role of a woman when she is about seven or eight years old (Ladner, 1971). She becomes cognizant of the fact early in life that she will not be able to achieve the culturally imposed goals of being soft, clinging and dependent to obtain a man who will support her, and provide for her an array of material possessions. How can she attempt to incorporate femininity as defined by the dominant culture into her own culture's definition of the female role?

In the dominant culture a sex role standard has been defined as a belief shared by members of the culture regarding the characteristics that are appropriate for males and females (Kagen, 1971). Specific behaviors have been ascribed as distinctly for females, e.g. dependency, passivity, conformity, nurturing, submissiveness, etc.

The sex role standard effects most notably the mastery of specific cognitive skills. From kindergarten through grade four, girls typically out perform boys in all areas of study. However, whenever the skills of an adolescent or an adult are tested, males consistently score higher than females. The adolescent girl, her parents, her girl friends or boy friends perceive success (as measured by objective, visible achievement tests) as antithetical to femininity. There is a growing body of knowledge that Black girls concentrate their occupational expectations toward being professional and usually reject the traditional role of housewife (Harrison, 1974).

The dilemma of being female for the Black woman is that she is urged by society in general to cultivate the traits that lend themselves to femininity. On the other hand, she is pressured by the political/economic system and the survival needs of the Black community to develop those traits which are contrary to the ideas of womanhood as prescribed by the sex role standard, i.e., independence, self assertion, persistence, etc.

Additionally, as she grows, she may be confronted with a community which may expose her to rape and violence, and neither parents nor community leaders have the power to eliminate these threats. In a similar manner, she may be forced to go hungry, without shoes and clothing and inadequate housing, due to the powerlessness of her parents who must vacillate between inadequate protection and over-protection. Some abandon the struggle in the context of an up-hill fight; others withdraw their children into the protective custody of the home. One Black mother justifies her strict supervision over her daughter, reasoning that there are too many bad people in the streets. Her experiences in the street as a growing youngster lead her to believe that children cannot adequately handle themselves when confronted by what is out there. On the other hand, the isolation of the child may stifle her and render her ineffective in handling traumas in later life (cf. Ladner, 1971). Growing up female in the Black community is a demanding task.

### Black, Male and Independent

Growing up as a mediational process is most vividly evident among Black boys. Coles (1964) raises a provoking question

about growing up male in the Black community: Is the sixteen year old boy who has lived in stark, unremitting poverty since age eight, earning a living since fourteen, married at fifteen, and soon to be a father still a child? Adolescence begins earlier for the Black child, particularly in the inner city setting or where he must deal with the dangers of the street. Although adolescence currently covers the teen-age period, its onset varies with physiological differences, and time of sexual maturation. Its duration is influenced by the social, economic and other cultural factors. The youth whose father is a laborer, who leaves school at sixteen to take a semi-skilled job and marries at eighteen has a very brief adolescence. In contrast, a graduate student who is undecided about his career at 23, and has three or four additional years of study, may be considered an adolescent even though he is biologically mature.

One of the crucial tasks of adolescence is the development and the crystallization of an ego identity (cf. Erikson, 1959). The growing boy has acquired a unique consistency of behaviors which permit others to have expectations of how he will behave and react. The achievement of ego identity usually acquires the concurrent attainment of a capacity to move toward inter-dependence with a person of the opposite sex, an intimacy that probably encompasses far more than the capacity to have sexual relations or even to enjoy orgasmic pleasure in the act. It concerns an ability to dare to form a significant relationship without fear of loss of self.\*

The young adolescent Black male is confronted with a variety of problems. In one sense, he is asked to become a man. In another sense, he is told he will never become a man. The struggle for identity for instance, is hampered by the reading materials he may be exposed to in school, as in the following excerpt from Huckleberry Finn:

---

\*The crystallization of an ego identity is of course equally important for the adolescent female. The discussion is focused on Black males because of the limitation of a short paper. Indeed, the negotiation between the sexes during the adolescent period is a highly developed art (cf. Staples, 1970).

"It warn't the grounding--that didn't keep us back but a little. We blew out a cylinder-head."

"Good gracious! anybody hurt?"

"No'm. Killed a nigger."

"Well, it's lucky! because sometimes people do get hurt..." (Twain, 1961, p. 195).

The inhumane treatment of Blacks is common in American literature. Though Jim, the slave, is considered by many as the hero, he is a powerless, castrated Black man. For a young man in search of a role-model and an identity, the school provides him models of castrated, good slaves.

During adolescence, the youngster goes through all kinds of biological changes. The increase in bodily height and width begins to approximate him to the adult world. The subsequent maturation of the secondary sexual characteristics tends to estrange the young man from his own body and soon thereafter he experiences the upsurge of sexual feelings. Traditionally, the boy in preparation for his adult role must overcome the dependency upon the mother in order to assume a "protective role" toward a wife and to fulfill his more instrumental roles in the family and in society. Can a Black man who uses the castrated slave "Jim" as his model ever protect his wife from racism and sexism? The school is short changing Black children.

The essential developmental tasks of adolescence are complex. Their true mastery usually take an extended period of time. It is a period of dependency when the teenager is still trying out ways of living and relating to others, testing out capacities and emotional limitations. He can still assume and shed roles, and can love without expectation that it will lead to a permanent attachment. The period involves considerable trying out with an implicit understanding that one is not yet playing for keeps. Lidz (1974) states:

"The adolescent is exploring his world and learning how to know himself, but the family is still available

to offer protection and guidance. Periods of regressive dependency upon them remain possible during recuperation from defeat or disappointment."

This is however not always true for the child who has been forced to grow up prematurely. For some, especially Black teen-agers, the adolescent period is a brief interval in life.

### Growing Up Black

Eventually, all adolescent boys and girls enter young adulthood, assuming their positions in society. For the Black man, the transition from adolescence to adulthood is a small step. Without the extended societal moratorium, he assumes the adult roles at an early age. The journey he travels from childhood to adulthood has been on tortuous and thorny roads, but he never travels alone and he is not alone. He grows up in a family, he lives in a culture, and he will overcome the obstacles in life, and grow in strength knowing that his brothers and sisters face similar odds. What is true for the Black man is also true for the Black woman, for above all else, they are both people of the Black culture and children of the Black family.

### References

- Baratz, Joan and Stephen Baratz. "Compensatory Education and an Example of Institutional Racism." *Harvard Educational Review*, XL (Winter): 1970, pp 29-49.
- Berger, Peter L. and Thomas Luckman The Social Construction of Reality. New York: Doubleday, 1966.
- Billingsley, Andrew. Black Families in White America. Englewood Cliff, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1968.
- \_\_\_\_\_. Black Families and the Struggle for Survival. New York: Friendship Press, 1974.
- Burgest, David R. "Racism in Everyday Speech and Social Work Jargon." *Social Work*, 18 (July): 1973, pp 20-25.
- Chestang, Leon. Character Development in a Hostile Environment. Chicago: University of Chicago, School of Social Service Administration, 1972.

- Coles, Robert. Children of Crisis: A Study of Courage and Fear. Boston: Little Brown, 1964.
- Erikson, Erik H. "Identity and the Life Cycle." Psychological Issues, Volume 1, Number 1, 1959.
- Glazer, Nathan and Daniel P. Moynihan. Beyond the Melting Pot. Cambridge, Mass.: The M.I.T. Press, 1963.
- Goodman, Paul. Growing Up Absurd. New York: Random House, 1960.
- Harrison, Algea O. "Dilemma of Growing Up Black and Female." Journal of Social and Behavioral Sciences, 20 (Spring): 1974, pp. 28-40.
- Hayes, William and Charles Mendal. "Extended Kinship Relations in Black and White Families." Journal of Marriage and the Family, (February): 1973, pp 51-57.
- Herskovitz, Melvine J. The Myth of the Negro Past. Boston: Beacon Press, 1958.
- Hill, Robert. Strength of Black Families.. New York: Emerson, 1971.
- Ladner, Joyce A. Tomorrow's Tomorrow: The Black Woman. New York: Doubleday, 1971.
- "Black Women in Poverty." Journal of Social and Behavioral Sciences, 20 (Spring): 1974, pp. 41-51.
- Lewis, Hylan. "Child Rearing Practices Among Low Income Families in the District of Columbia." Culture, Class and Poverty, Washington, D. C.: Communicating Research on the Urban Poor, 1967.
- Lidz, Theodore. The Parson. New York: Basic Books, 1968.
- "The Family as a Developmental Setting." The Child and His Family, edited by E. James Anthony and Cyrille Koupernick. New York: Wiley-Interscience, 1974.
- Moynihan, Daniel P. The Negro Family: The Case for National Action. Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1965.

- Myrdal, Gunnar. The American Dilemma. New York: Harper and Row, 1944.
- Parsons, Talcott and Robert F. Balce. Family, Socialization and Interaction Process. New York: Free Press, 1955.
- Quarles, Benjamin. Jet Magazine, 33 (December 28) quoted in Black Families in White America by Andrew Billingsley, 1967.
- Skolnick, Arlene and Jerome Skolnick. Family in Transition. Boston: Little Brown, 1971.
- Staples, Robert, ed. The Black Family. California: Wadsworth, 1970.
- Twain, Mark. Huckleberry Finn. New York: MacMillan and Co., 1961.
- White, Joseph. "Toward a Black Psychology." Black Psychology, edited by Reginald Jones. New York: Harper and Row, 1972.
- Winch, Robert F. The Modern Family. New York: Holt, Rinehard and Winston, 1971.