Debunking Sapphire: Toward a Non-Racist and Non-Sexist Social Science

Patricia Bell Scott
University of Tennessee, Knoxville

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Patricia Bell Scott
Black Studies Program and Department of Child and Family Studies
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Introduction

The term "Sapphire" is frequently used to describe an age-old image of Black women. The caricature of the dominating, emasculating Black woman is one which historically has saturated both the popular and scholarly literature. The purpose of this paper is debunk the "Sapphire" caricature as it has been projected in American social science. By exposing the racist and sexist underpinnings of this stereotype, it is hoped that more students and scholars might be sensitized and encouraged to contribute to the development of a non-racist and non-sexist social science.

The novice to the subject of Black Women's Studies generally encounters feelings of frustration and aggravation, as she or he begins to explore the literature in quest of more knowledge relevant to the experience of being Black and female in America. One is almost overwhelmed with the depth and extent of the intellectual void that exists among social science scholars concerning the life experiences of Black women. Those persons who somehow manage to endure the frustrations involved in unearthing "bits and pieces" of data about Black women are further acerbated by the following observations:

1. Despite the fact that Black women have always played important roles in American society, they have been almost totally ignored by students of American society and human behavior. From reading the literature, one might easily develop the impression that Black women have never played any role in this society, and that they represent only a minute percentage of the total American population.

2. The experiences of Black women in both a historical and contemporary sense have been discussed from a very narrow perspective. Their lives have been examined from a "problems" framework. As a result of this approach, the student begins to see the experiences of Black women as being limited in nature, and certainly in no way a comparison to the "life and times of great White man."

3. The themes, hypotheses, and images used to explicate
   the experiences of Black women have not been signifi-
   cantly altered in the past forty years. As a result
   of the stagnant nature of the literature in this area,
   the beginning student might hastily yet erroneously conclude
   that the story of Black women in America is one which
   is uninteresting and outworn. Therefore, there is
   no point in delving for more insight into the dynamics of
   this situation.

These observations are reflective of a pervasive racist and sexist
bias in social science scholarship. The more one begins to investigate
the theoretical frameworks, concepts, methodologies, and jargon of
American social science, the more glaring and ungrounded the racist
and sexist assumptions become.

Trends in the Investigation of the Black and Female Experiences

Until recently, most of the research related to Black women that
has received any attention has been done by White male sociologists,
psychologists, and historians who have been interested in race relations
theory or the social structure of the Black family. From the literature
several trends can be identified--the most popular trend being the
emergence of an abundance of literature related to the role of Black
women as matriarchs. The Black matriarchy thesis or perspective is
representative of a "social problems" approach to the Black experience
which became popular in the 1960's in the work of Moynihan (1965),
though the notion of Black matriarchy has its origins in the early
works of DuBois (1908) and Frazier (1939).

According to contemporary Black matriarchy theorists, Black women
have had, and continue to have an unnatural dominant role in Black families,
and this role has had deleterious effects upon Black society (Bernard,
1966; Moynihan, 1965; Rainwater, 1970). For example, one social
psychologist has attributed the occurrence of juvenile delinquency,
self-hatred, low intelligence quotient scores, cultural deprivation,
crimes against persons, and schizophrenia among Blacks to the alleged
existence of a matriarchal family structure (Pettigrew, 1964).

Within the last six years, the Black matriarchy theorists have be-
come subject to a barrage of criticisms. Numerous scholars have cited
the gross problems in the statistical data, inferences, social concepts,
instruments, and methodologies used in support of the Black matriarchy,
(Billingsley, 1969; Herzog, 1970; Hill, 1971; Staples, 1970). Though
several of the critics of the Black matriarchy theory have indicted
its proponents as blatant racists, few scholars have given attention
to the fact that the Black matriarchy theorists have also been blatantly
sexist!

At numerous conferences on the Black family and Black women, I
have heard the statement made (usually by Black males) that "the Black

matriarchy theorists are merely trying to victimize and ostracize the
Black man by saying that he can't take care of his family." Given
the predominantly White, middle class orientation of most Black
matriarchy theorists, it is not difficult to agree with this state-
ment. However, at the same time that these theorists ostracize the Black
male and label him as deviant, effeminate, and passive, Black women are
also ostracized and labeled as doubly deviant, masculine, and unnaturally
superior.

Another approach in the study of Black women which has emerged in
recent times is the investigation of the "life and times" of prominent
Black women (Boanes, 1975). Proponents of this approach have concentrated
almost exclusively upon the public lives of nationally known Black women
such as Mary Church Terrell, Mary McCleod Bethune, Ida Wells Barnett,
Harriet Tubman, and Sojourner Truth. Implicit in this "life and times
approach" is a class bias. Though it is often argued that more papers
and data concerning prominent Black women are available for research,
the prevailing or resulting impression is that Black working class or
low-income women are inconsequential to the American experience. There-
fore, racist, sexist, and class biases are perpetuated in American
historiography. All this is not to say that the lives of prominent
Black women are not important; however, their lives represent only a few
of the least generalizable circumstances that Black women have experienced.
Most Black women have not been able to rise to prominence.

Another perspective which has been and remains popular among sociolo-
gists is the study of Black women in relationship to their familial roles.
Studies representative of this perspective have dealt with the economic,
political, and psychological experiences of Black women in the roles of
mother, wife, and daughter (Rainwater, 1970). Thus, research which has
grown out of this perspective has focused upon the economic difficulties
of the female-headed household, and the political powerlessness and
psychological problems of the married and unmarried Black female. This
approach completely disavows the existence of non-familial roles and
rol--related conflict among Black women; e.g. Black women as politicians,
religious leaders, and athletes have been unexplored.

Specific Indicators of Racism and Sexism in the Social Sciences

Though an attempt has been made to identify three broad approaches
to the study of Black women, several indicators or by-products of racism
and sexism in social science scholarship can be identified. These in-
dicators include:

1. An emphasis upon the Black Mother-son relationship and
   the impact of this dyadic relationship on the developing,
   Black male personality. Virtually no attention has been
   given to the Black father-daughter dyad. Implicit in the
   neglect of this relationship by researchers is the assump-
   tion that the sex role and personality development of Black
   females is unimportant.

2. The use of an overtly, sexist social science lingo. Rossi
   (1965) has pointed out the double standard which exists in
   the way social situations or phenomenon involving men and
   women are differentially described. For example, when the
   mother-child dyad is dissolved or impaired in some way, the
   term maternal deprivation is used to describe the situation;
   however, when the father-child dyad is dissolved or impaired
   in some manner the term "father absence" is generally used
   instead of paternal deprivation. "Father absence" sounds
   less innocous than maternal deprivation. Numerous researchers
   have cited other ways in which social concepts have been de-
   fined in terms favorable to the masculine tradition; e.g.
   The definitions of power, aggressiveness, and independence
   have a strong bias in favor of the male.

3. The use of instruments biased against the culturally different,
   women, and working class or low-income people. Instruments
   such as the Minnesota Multi-phasic Personality Inventory (MMPI)
   and the Stanford-Binet and Wechsler IQ tests, and various
   Masculinity-Femininity (M-F) Scales have been used to measure
   the psycho-social components of several "out-groups", and
   generally these instruments yield data which describe Blacks
   and women as deviant in some manner. Again, the real problems
   with these instruments are related to the conceptual frame-
   works upon which they are based--these frameworks being biased
   in terms of race, sex and class in many instances (Pleck, 1975).

4. The tendency to use male subjects in studies of a non-familial
   nature. Much of the literature in the sociology of work and
   occupations, and achievement motivation has been done on male
   subjects (Hochschild, 1971). Implicit in this tendency is the
   acceptance of the adage that "a woman's place is in the home",
   therefore there is no reason to investigate the experiences
   of women who are not in the family setting. Women who are in "a
   man's world," or the labor force are generally considered to be
   abnormal or atypical, and thus unworthy of scholarly attention.
   Until recently most studies of Blacks in business and other
   professions (excluding education) were concerned primarily
   with men.

5. A preponderance of social science literature being written
   by males. Prior to the 1950's, Black males were the primary
   writers in the area of Black family studies; however, since
   the late 1950's and early 1960's, White males have been most
   prolific in this area. It should be noted that the emergence
   of the White male scholar in this area is directly correlated
   with the popularity of the Black matriarchy myth. Fortunately
   since the late 1960's and early 1970's, several aware and
   sensitive scholars have appeared on the horizon (Jackson,
   1973; Ladner, 1972; Ryan, 1971; Staples, 1973). Such persons
   have refused to accept without question common notions about

the experiences of Blacks and women in American society.

Research Priorities and Action-Oriented Strategies for Century III

Given the state of the social literature, there is a wealth of unexplored areas which must be investigated during the next century. There must be more examinations of the Black and female experience that are sensitive to the ways in which racism and sexism bear upon Black women. This would entail the development of theoretical frameworks that are not based upon patriarchal sentiments that view both Blacks and women as deviants or outsiders to the American experience. We can no longer allow the use of what Jackson refers to as a "Mother-God psychoanalytical paradigm" which attempts to explain how sick Black women really are.[1]

There must be more examination of Black women who are participants in non-familial roles. Such data would help to fill the gap in the literature on the sociology of work, occupations, and achievement motivation. Also, by exploring the roles of Black women in other societal institutions, we can learn more about the workings of racism and sexism at all levels of the American system.

There must be more exploration of the mental and physical health problems of Black women in all phases of the life cycle. Because Black women represent more that 50% of the total Black population, some knowledge of the social, psychological, and economic problems of this segment of the population would be helpful to public policy-makers in designing health care and social services for the Black community.

There must be more exploration into the Black father-daughter dyad, and sex role personality development among Black women. It will be only when we understand the dynamics of this relationship that we can speak more precisely about socialization in the Black community.

There must be more study of Black women in all strata of American society. We must know what the experiences of the masses are, in order to speak about the history of Black women. This will also entail a redefinition of several social concepts, such as power, weakness, and aggressiveness.

There must be more careful consideration of the implications of demographic trends of Black community. For example the imbalance in the sex ratio is one factor that will definitely influence the psycho-social experiences of Black women. Given the fact that there will be not an opportunity for each Black woman to enter into a permanent interpersonal relationship with a Black man, psychologists and other helping professionals must help to develop alternative support systems.

There must be more empirical and cross-cultural investigations
of the life experiences of women. In other words, we cannot speak
of a psychology or sociology or anthropology of women, if the frame-
works of these perspectives are applicable to White, middle-class,
or professional women only. Thus, those persons engaged in sex roles
research or the teaching of courses on women or Blacks must make cer-
tain that they address the situation and experiences of non-White and
ethnic women. Scholars and students in the humanities should also
address the treatment of women in literature, art, and music, as well
as the impact of women upon society as artists, musicians, and writers.

These research priorities must be coupled with some very practi-
cal action-oriented strategies. These strategies should involve the
sensitizing of members of this society to the "roots" and workings of
overt, covert, and institutional racism and sexism. Black males must
be made aware of the fact that sexism is not only a White problem, and
White feminists must also be made aware of the fact that racism and
class bias are not peculiar to White males only.

More Blacks and women should be encouraged to become scholars in
Black Women's Studies, in order that a different perspective might be
heard in academic circles. That is not to say that Whites or males
are to be discouraged from participation in this area; however, all
persons engaged in the investigation of the Black and/or female experi-
ence in America should be encouraged to raise questions about the nature
of many commonly held assumptions.

The movement of more Blacks and women into traditionally male-
dominated areas, most notably academia, should result in some changes
in the goals of professional social science organizations, and the litera-
ture which is published in journals. Much of the racism and sexism
which prevades American scholarship has to do with the preponderance of
males in positions of power and authority in professional organizations
and editorial boards.

Organizations, of parents, and other interested groups should be
encouraged to engage in discussions related to the media images of Black
women. Discussions of this nature should heighten our awareness of the
sexist and racist overtones in various television series and commerical
advertisements.

In summary, as we examine the past two centuries of the American
experience, there is no way in which the mark of the dual oppression
of racism and sexism can be ignored. These "isms" can be likened to a
cancer which has grown virtually uninhibited in a fertile host. As we
begin Century III, we must work toward the dissolution of race, sex,
and class bias in the American character. It is only through the eradi-
cation of these "isms," that we can move toward a more humanistic and
yet realistic philosophy of social science and society. I challenge you
to assist me in debunking Sapphire!

Footnote

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[1]In the article Black Women in a Racist Society (listed in the
references), Jackson contends that most of the research and investi-
gation into the lives of Black women have been based upon a conceptual
framework that is biased against women. When this kind of framework is
used, and behavior which is feminine or female-oriented is judged
abnormal. When Black families have been studied, social problems are
always traced to the existence of so-called, negative, female/motherly
and/or immoral influences.

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