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The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare

Volume 27
Issue 3 September

Article 17

September 2000

The Strengths of African American Families: 25 Years Later.

Robert B. Hill.

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Recommended Citation

(2000) "*The Strengths of African American Families: 25 Years Later.* Robert B. Hill.," *The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare*: Vol. 27 : Iss. 3 , Article 17.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw/vol27/iss3/17>

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Book Notes

Robert B. Hill, *The Strengths of African American Families: 25 Years Later*. Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1999. \$49.00 hardcover, \$19.50 papercover.

Twenty five years ago, Robert Hill published a short volume contesting the popular belief that African Americans were challenged by a host of social pathologies as revealed in high rates of poverty, welfare dependency, crime, teen pregnancy and single parenthood. Although it was true that the rates of these pathologies were higher among African Americans than the white population, Hill pointed out that the vast majority of African Americans were not living in poverty; nor were they on welfare or in jail or living as unmarried, single parents. In fact, the vast majority lived normal lives and went about their business much as their white counterparts did. However, the media consistently presented the view of African Americans as poor, deviant and immoral. This reinforced racist attitudes and the equally reprehensible liberal tendency to patronize African Americans by insisting that they needed charity and other forms of 'help'. Worse, the institutionalization of the social pathology view obscured the real strengths of the African American community. By emphasizing these strengths, Hill presented a very different image of African Americans as family centered, religious, hard working and community oriented.

Although Hill's contribution was not properly recognized in either media or academic circles, it is today more widely accepted that the social pathology perspective has presented a biased and racist view of the African American community. With the wider acceptance of a strengths perspective in social work and social policy, more emphasis is now being placed on people's capacities rather than deficits. While many will continue to dismiss Hill's contributions, his argument is a powerful one which has important implications for social work and social policy.

Hill's book shows how a proper understanding of the strengths of the African American community can inform policy makers. He does not challenge the fact that there are many

problems to be resolved but he contends that they can best be addressed by harnessing strengths rather than assuming that African Americans should be treated as passive recipients of services. For example, the plethora of local community development projects operated by African Americans shows how solutions based on a strengths perspective can address the community's pressing needs. Many other examples are given. This slim but important book contains important lessons and should be widely read.

Flora Davis, *Moving the Mountain: The Women's Movement in America Since 1960*. Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1999. \$21.95 papercover.

Social scientists have produced elaborate theories to explain social change. These theories often focus on wider, interpersonal social and economic forces emanating from the social fabric of society. While these forces play a critical role, the role of individual human effort is frequently overlooked or downplayed. This is unfortunate for, ultimately, social change depends on human action, and the struggles of those who seek to modify existing social arrangements.

Many academic analyses of the resurgence of feminism in the last thirty or so years have been published and they have shown that complex social and economic factors have contributed to what many feminist writers call the 'second wave' of the women's movement. Unlike the first wave, which was primarily focused on political rights, the second wave has been characterized by a more wide ranging attempt to address reproductive rights, promote economic equality and address the issue of poverty and deprivation among women.

In this engaging book, Flora Davis explicitly states her intention to avoid theoretical and academic speculation and to focus instead on the women who struggled and campaigned for enhanced rights. Davis offers a very readable and illuminating narrative showing how ordinary people confronted with injustice sought to right wrongs and change the prevailing culture which relegated women to subordinate roles in many sphere of social and economic life. They may not have changed the world but, to a significant extent, they succeeded in overturning deeply entrenched practices and beliefs.