

Photos: Barry Fitzgerald

The female-dominated black family has been called pathological. It may be a healthy adaptation to ghetto conditions.

GHETTO FAMILIES

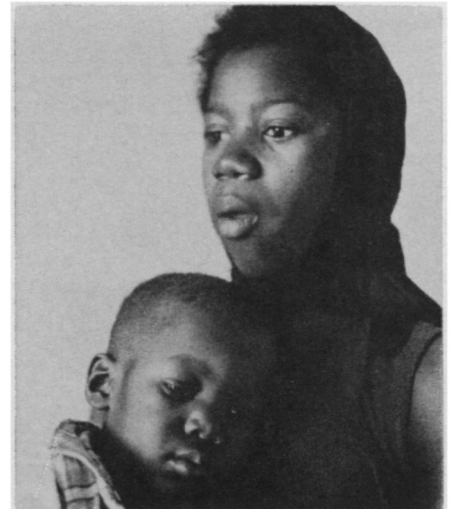
The Black Matriarchy

Healthy or pathological?

by Patricia McBroom



Usual family responsibilities . . .



. . . are widely shared.

Negro sociologists say black fatherless families may not be the cause of social disintegration that whites claim

One recent winter, a black man from a St. Louis ghetto walked the streets looking—in 135 places—for a job. He didn't find one. A white sociologist, Dr. William L. Yancey, who went with him for purposes of research, describes the case as extreme, but says that it nevertheless illustrates how severe is the economic stress that lower class black men must endure.

Typically, such stress causes black families to split, since only the mother has access to a steady, if small, income, by way of welfare. And she, in most jurisdictions, cannot receive welfare if there is a man in the house. Even if he

should eventually find employment, the returning husband must convince his wife that his job is as secure as her welfare check, which is usually not the case.

Constant or sporadic unemployment of ghetto men helps maintain a matriarchy in about one-fourth of the nation's Negro families.

Although this fact is not new, its importance has been obscured by descriptions of the black matriarchy as pathological or deviant—a contributor to social disintegration, delinquency and male emasculation.

Almost all of these studies have

viewed ghetto society through white, middle class eyes. The results, many Negroes feel, are inevitably distorted, finding sickness in healthy reactions to a bad situation.

Thus, Daniel Moynihan, in his 1965 report on the Negro family—which angered black professionals and social scientists—wrote: "The evidence . . . is that the Negro family in the urban ghetto is crumbling. A middle-class group has managed to save itself, but for vast numbers of the unskilled, poorly educated city working class, the fabric of conventional social relationships has all but disintegrated."

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. . . the ghetto family

Moynihan measured ghetto life with a white middle class yardstick; he failed to recognize that the fatherless, broken homes he saw might be an adaptation to poverty with intrinsic strengths of its own. The family is often an extended one, including grandmothers and aunts as well as children; it may be viewed as a source of social cohesion, rather than disintegration.

"Many social scientists have misled the public by describing Negro families as pathological," says Dr. Joyce Ladner, a black sociologist at Washington University. "Too often they fail to find its strengths."

Adds Dr. Yancey: "The broken family in the ghetto is a very stable form, more viable than a complete family. . . . Men end up in jobs that are highly unstable, so the father-headed family is in a perpetual financial crisis. Without economic stability, the male head is of relatively little use to the female in the family and may be lived without."

As graduate students at Washington University, Drs. Yancey and Ladner participated in a large-scale study of the urban poor, both black and white. Headed by Dr. Lee Rainwater, the project has, over a five-year period, included more than a dozen researchers. They have lived with families in the areas under study to find an inside perspective, then surveyed the populations on attitudes, values and life styles.

From that vantage point, Dr. Yancey, now at Vanderbilt University in Nashville, is able to compare the effects of economic security on both black and white families.

The white families were from the poorest white district in St. Louis, the Souldard area. Yet men there had little trouble finding jobs compared to the situation faced by Negroes. Not sur-



Paul Conklin

Economics more than race dictate the structure of the family.

prisingly, there were far fewer families headed by women in the Souldard district.

For both races, the relationship between the man's income and his place in the family was strong. No family in the Souldard area was headed by a man without a job or some income from disability.

For black families living in St. Louis' Pruitt-Igoe housing project, the situation was very much the same. Washington University researchers saw men losing their jobs, watched tension develop often to the point of marital separation, then went back to check on the men who were still living with their families, but without a job. In every case, the man had received disability income and had a legitimate reason to be unemployed.

If poor whites fall into economic trouble, they can usually get out of it, which is one of the major differences between the races, says Dr. Yancey. The white man who gets mad at his foreman simply leaves and finds another job. If stress becomes too great, he can always leave the city and go home, which in the case of Souldard residents is usually the South.

Dr. Yancey and his colleagues discovered that poor whites identified strongly with their former home and were much less committed to staying in the city. But Negro residents did not accept that alternative.

Another major difference between the two reveals even more clearly the effects of racial discrimination. Residents of the Souldard area were both older and less educated than their black counterparts. Whereas 40 percent of the white sample was over 50 years of age, half the blacks were under 40. In addition, the majority of blacks had at

least an eighth grade education, while 70 percent of the white men had less than eight years of school. Yet the median income for heads of families was \$5,000 for whites; \$3,350 for blacks living in the Pruitt-Igoe project.

Such black-white comparisons have generally not been available with the over-riding emphasis placed on studying the ghetto—a source of anger among black social scientists who feel the Negro family has been dissected long enough.

Dr. Ladner believes a refocusing of the problem can be accomplished by sending black sociologists in to study middle class white communities. Since their sexual mores and monogamous, patriarchal habits are usually used to judge ghetto life, it might be well to look at the stresses and strains of that system from a black viewpoint, she says.

Dr. Ladner proposes that much of the behavior in the black community is quite distinct from that of whites. Through the years black families have made certain adaptations because men have been denied stable employment, she says. Strong women emerged, along with social and sexual attitudes that will not necessarily change even with full employment.

Compared to whites, for instance, people in the black ghetto "seem to have greater ability to adapt to relationships that do not follow strict patterns of monogamy," says Dr. Ladner. "Men can be supportive without going through matrimony, and girls are able to break off relationships without going through trauma."

She points out that unemployed men are not totally rejected. In many cases they remain close to their wives and there is a congenial relationship between father and children. Other re-



Job prospects make the difference.

. . . the family

searchers have noted as well some male figure is often around the matriarchal family, making the emasculation of youth another a tenuous one.

"But even if families remain close," says Dr. Ladner, "Parents will often find other mates."

Some behavior patterns in the ghetto represent coping strategies — adaptations to what is essentially a negative environment. Thus, men have developed manipulative strategies by which they are able to cope with forces in the street, explains Dr. Ladner. Faced with police hostility, for instance, men "have an emotional quality that allows them to take it, yet rebel." At the same time, the level of trust between individuals is low.

To the extent that such patterns stem from poverty, they can be expected to fade with better conditions. Nevertheless, Dr. Ladner and other black social scientists feel there are strengths, unknown in white, middle-class life, that will survive.

Dr. Joseph Scott, of the University of Toledo, for instance, sees no reason why blacks should adopt patriarchal patterns and would prefer that they did not. The black woman is a strength, says Dr. Scott. "There is no reason to believe that Negroes would be better off if women had less influence."

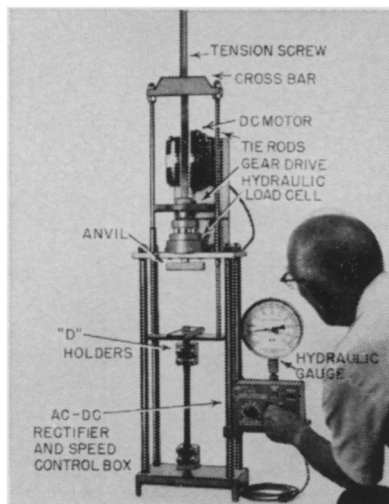
But while black sociologists argue the presence of distinct cultural strains in the ghetto, the over-riding stress of poverty clouds the issues.

As the Souldard data indicates, black matriarchies exist primarily because of the grueling experience that men face in the marketplace. Dr. Yancey adds that in a series of attitude tests black and white came out very much alike. There was the same level of distrust for other people, the same work ethic ("The lower class thinks work is more important than does any other class," says Dr. Yancey.) and the same expectations of delinquency.

The Souldard study, completed in August, has been presented to the Office of Economic Opportunity and should help correct some of the misconceptions of the "culture of poverty" thesis. One form of that thesis, promulgated by white social scientists, places the black family at the center of a cycle of pathology, and fails to see it as an adaptation to poverty conditions. But for the moment, it also challenges black contentions that the matriarchy represents a new emergent family, stemming from a non-white culture.

Until economic inequality for Negroes is corrected, other forces working on the black community will have to remain obscured.

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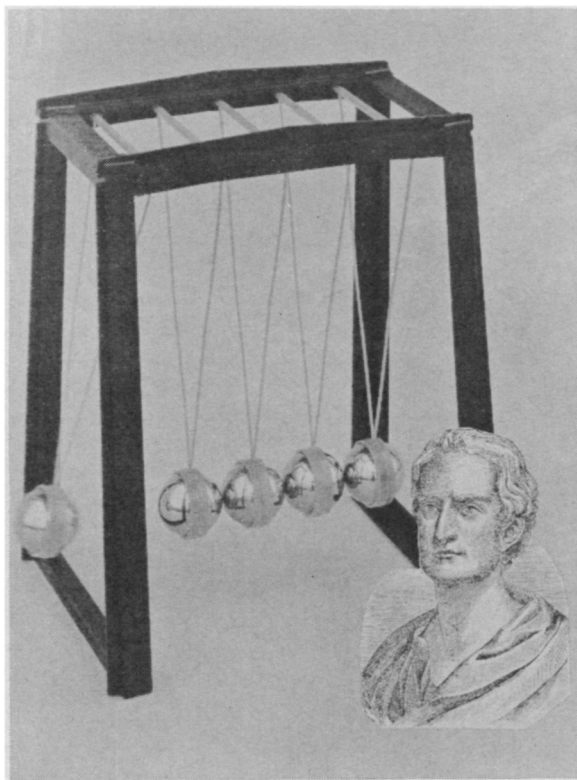
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