

## **Distinctive Features of the African-American Family: Debunking the Myth of the Deficit Model**

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Throughout the 1900's, social scientists have debated the question of whether the African American family is an adaptative social system or whether it is pathological, perpetuating its poverty over the generations. This article examines the holistic perspective as the preeminent comprehensive approach in studying the African American family and provides empirical evidence of distinctive features of the African American family in support of the adaptation argument. The adaptation/deficit debate will probably continue as long as the scientific community fails to fully acknowledge and make the most of theoretical constructs that are holistic in principle and design.

An intense argument rages on whether the African American family is in a pathological sequence, perpetuating itself and its poverty over the generations. Lewis (1967b, 149) cites Frazier (1939) who states that the African American family unit "may take on protean forms as it survives or is reborn in times of cataclysmic social change."

Distinct theoretical perspectives and approaches have guided this debate over the years, and many scholars have

chosen sides in support for or against these paradigms. This article has the following objectives: 1) to provide a brief discussion on previous and recent theoretical perspectives on the African American family and 2) to present empirical evidence on kin interaction and the exchange of mutual aid and the informal adoption of African American children in support of the adaptation argument.

### **Theoretical Perspectives on the Study of the African-American Family**

Many misconceptions exist regarding the quality and nature of the African American family especially those concerning lower-class families (Taylor 1998, 19). Sweeping generalizations have been made without empirical evidence or the amount of systematic study given white families (Murray 1984; Loury 1984; Lemann 1986). It is interesting to note that although white family structure has been used as a norm by which black families have been compared, empirical evidence has not been forthcoming to support the assertion that white family structure and processes can be normative for the assessment of black family life.

During the twentieth century many models and perspectives were presented to describe and explain black family phenomena. Some of these perspectives were based on the work of notable scholars (Frazier 1939; Moynihan 1965; Allen 1972; Nobles 1978). One particular model that seems to have gained widespread support was the deficit model which paints a pathological portrait of minorities and other low-income groups (Hill 1993). It presumes that the crises they experience are innate rather than external. Valentine (1968) contends that this system of thought has a long tradition of presuming defects in the mentality of disadvantaged classes resulting from their internal deficiencies. According to Hill (Staples 1971b; Engram 1982), this perspective is known as the "blaming the victim" syndrome (1993, 4). This perspective is best highlighted in the work of Daniel Patrick Moynihan, *The Negro Family: A Case for National Action* (1965). Moynihan's work, based on the work of Frazier (1939) depicts low income African Americans as caught in "a tangle of pathology" because of the high rate of poverty, unemployment, single-parent families, welfare reciprocity, and

crime. Moynihan asserts that the matriarchal structure of black families is at the center of the tangle of pathology and is responsible for the problems in the black community (Staples 1971b,19-38).

To refute the deficit model, new conceptual frameworks and perspectives quickly emerged in the 1970s portraying another view of African Americans. Taylor (1998) states that during this time there was an increase in the quality and quantity of research on black families. He asserts that there was a “shift away from the social pathology perspective to one emphasizing the resilience and adaptiveness of black families under a variety of social and economic conditions”(21). According to Taylor (1998) Allen (1978) was one of several early scholars in this pursuit. In his analysis of African American families he proposes a typology of three ideological models— the cultural deviant, the cultural equivalent, and the cultural variant. The cultural variant model assumes that African Americans have distinctive family norms and values that set it apart from other family institutions in society and that the black kin network is a functional substitute for the two-parent family. This network serves functions usually associated with the nuclear family. In providing economic cooperation, childcare, and socialization it is particularly useful in adapting to poverty. Nobles (1978) introduces the African model that in several respects is a form of the cultural variant perspective. This perspective assumes that traits were transmitted by slaves brought from Africa to America and are manifested in the roles, norms, and values within the black family.

A current perspective that appears to be most promising in the study of African Americans is the holistic perspective. According to Hill (1993) the social and economic well being of African Americans can be enhanced based on a holistic approach. As a matter of fact this approach is not a current concept. W.E.B. DuBois introduced the concept as early as the late 1800s in his writing of *The Philadelphia Negro* (1899), and *The Negro American Family* (1908). DuBois asserts, “ A proper understanding of blacks in America could not be achieved without systematically assessing the influence of historical, cultural, social, economic, and political forces” (7). Unfortunately, Dubois’ recommendation to incorporate a holistic framework in

the analysis of African Americans has not been well received by mainstream contemporary social scientists. This comes as no surprise taking into consideration the historical legacy of African Americans in the United States and the implications of the holistic perspective.

The acceptance or rejection of the holistic perspective by mainstream social scientists does not imply that the conceptual framework is not a compelling model from which to study African Americans. According to Hill such a framework could be a guide to research and policy development related to African American families. Moreover it has the potential for bringing clarity to mainstream social scientists on the resiliency and adaptive characteristics of African Americans families. Hill states that the holistic approach places emphasis on five themes: diversity, dynamism, balance, solutions, and empiricism. It is essential to discuss each of these themes in order to fully appreciate the potential of this approach as a viable construct for the evaluation of African Americans.

The first theme is diversity. Hill asserts that there is much variation in black families. He contends that some research has made assumptions about the homogeneity of "underclass" values and lifestyles without empirical evidence (Murray 1984; Loury 1984; Lemann 1986). In contrast the research of other scholars documents much heterogeneity in values and life styles (Lewis 1967a, 1967b; Liebow 1967; Valentine 1968; Ladner 1971; Stack 1974, 1996). Hill argues that the deficit model seems too focused on the underclass therefore failing to examine other social classes. The holistic approach examines all classes, including the working-class, middle-class, and upper-class (Willie 1976, 1985; Danziger & Gottschalk 1986; Landry 1987).

...a basic tenet of the holistic paradigm is that effective policies for remedying the crisis among black families cannot be developed without sufficient knowledge of their structural, class, regional, religious/attitudinal, and behavioral diversity (Engram 1982).

The second theme is balance. Unlike the conventional or the deficit model, which concentrates only on the perceived weaknesses of the lower class family, this element focuses on the strengths and weaknesses of both the lower and middle

classes. According to Wilson (1978, 1987) balanced treatment of black families meant emphasizing the positive characteristics of the black middle class and stressing the pathology of the black lower class. Hill rejects this sort of balance treatment in favor of an assessment of strengths and weaknesses of both classes.

The third theme is dynamism. This aspect of the holistic perspective indicates that black families as well as white families are in a constant state of mobility. That mobility might be vertical, downward, or horizontal (Coe 1978; Duncan 1984; Bane 1986; Levy 1987). Traditional views of black families on welfare at a given point in time give the impression that recipients are forever on welfare and never experience upward mobility (Wilson 1978, 1987; Murray 1984; Loury 1984). As Hill states, "Social policies designed to reduce poverty and welfare dependency will not be effective if they are based on the erroneous premise that low-income families are static and monolithic" (12).

The fourth theme is solutions. The holistic model does not in any way downplay the challenges confronting black families; however it does emphasize the need for empirical studies in seeking solutions to these problems (Billingsley 1968; Engram 1982). According to Hill (1993) there has been an increase in research on well-functioning low-income and middle class black families (Cazenave 1979; Lewis & Looney 1982; McAdoo 1983; Willie 1985; Thompson 1986; Landry 1987). This research is significant in refuting the deficit perspective characterizing minorities and low-income person as pathogenic. It adds credibility to the adaptive argument that black families have coping behaviors, property, resources, support networks, and self-help techniques (Stack 1974, 1978, 1996; Hill 1993; Martin and Martin 1978; Taylor 1998; Jewell 1988; Staples, 1994).

The final theme is empiricism. This element is very important in helping to rid the stereotype of black families as pathological. It provides an opportunity as well as challenges for social scientists creatively to construct innovative conceptual frameworks and to design unique quantitative and qualitative methodologies that might yield useful insight into the nature of African American families. More importantly it would help dis-

pel if not settle the adaptation/deficit argument, perhaps forever.

### **Kin Interaction and the Exchange of Mutual Aid Among African Americans**

There is much empirical evidence on kin interaction and the exchange of mutual aid among African Americans (Frazier 1932; 1939; Martin and Martin 1978; Stack 1972; Genovese 1974; Gutman 1976; Furstenburg 1975; Blassingame 1972). In addition, several studies document the pattern of strong family bonds among African Americans (Antonucci 1990; Bengton, Rosenthal, and Burton 1990; Hatch 1991; Hoyert 1991; Johnson and Barer 1990; Taylor and Chatters 1991; Taylor, Chatters, and Mays 1998; Hernandez and Myers 1993; Rossi and Rossi 1990; Tienda and Angel 1992; Staples 1994; McAdoo 1993, 1983, 1985; Billingsley 1988, 1992). According to Frazier (1932), the mutual aid system among African Americans is rooted within a larger cultural context evolving from African communities. And much of what is known about the extended African American family is based on ethnographic and historical research on African Americans (Martin and Martin 1978; Stack 1972; Genovese 1974; Gutman 1976; Furstenburg 1975; Blassingame 1972). Several other studies support the particular strength of family bonds among African Americans (Antonucci 1990; Bengton, Rosenthal, and Burton 1990; Hatch 1991; Hoyert 1991; Johnson and Barer 1990; Taylor and Chatters 1991; Taylor, Chatters, and Mays 1988; Hernandez and Myers 1993; Rossi and Rossi 1990; Tienda and Angel 1982; Staples 1994; McAdoo 1993, 1983, 1985; Billingsley 1988, 1992). An examination of the data shows that African American families have strong patterns of interaction and the exchange of goods and services. This research fits well with the solutions theme of the holistic perspective. Carol Stack (1972) offers a powerful argument that lower class blacks have adapted to poverty and the welfare system by a combination of flexible family patterns and strong kin networks performing many "nuclear family functions." She defines the "family" as the smallest, organized, and durable network of kin. Kin interact daily and provide for the needs of children, ensuring their survival. The family network may

include several kin-based households. Any fluctuations within household composition do not significantly affect cooperative familial arrangements. The urban poor attempt to survive day by day with only a gleam of hope of overcoming poverty. The resources of a given residential family may not stretch from one month to the next. One way of surviving poverty is through swapping resources within kin networks. Stack found that “the most important form of distribution and exchange of the limited resources available to the poor are through trading, or what people call swapping”(33).

Stack argues that kin perform economic and socialization functions and that parenthood is scattered among kin. The urban poor have an intricate kinship network bound collectively through the exchange of goods and services and the obligation to give. The more goods and services exchanged, the more obligatory the network becomes. As one receives, one is obligated to give in return. The obligation to give is vital to the survival of the kin network. Although an obligation to give is important, an individual’s reputation as an exchange partner is equally as important. The more a person gives, the more he obligates others to give. If one obligates a large number of individuals, he or she stands a better chance of receiving goods or services than one who limits his circle of friends.

Additional research findings accentuate similar patterns among kin. Aschenbrenner (1973) studied ten lower class black families in Chicago. Using interviews, more than fifty households were included in the data. Even though she does not present quantitative analysis of her findings, she found that her respondents described their kinship bonds as compatible, and that kin ties remained strong whether kin lived in nearby communities or in different states. And regardless of kin’s social and economic status, kin ties remained unbroken. For example, little pressure was put on couples to marry because of the security offered by the extended households or matrifocal households. If individual family members relocated, they usually lived with relatives until they were able to get settled. Once established, they were expected to assist other kin who relocated into the community needing a helping hand. Rituals and celebrations are occasions for renewing kin ties and providing assistance. For example, funerals are significant occa-

sions in which relatives usually travel long distance to pay respect to the departed and to offer assistance particularly to the family of the deceased. Aschenbrenner (1973) describes a funeral as "a blending of somber ritual and lively sociability representing vividly the dual aspects of recognition of personal tragedy and renewing of relationships among the living (265)." These various functions of the kin network may add greatly to life's meaning. McAdoo (1978) emphasizes the impact of kin interaction on socially mobile black families. Interviews were conducted using a sample of black families from both middle and working classes and those residing in urban and suburban areas in the District of Columbia and in the nearby town of Columbia. She found consistent levels of interaction between kin with no variation in families. Those in visiting distance claimed that "they enjoyed their interaction and indicated that they wished they had opportunity for more (775)." Two-thirds of all families felt it was easy for relatives to visit them and less than one-fourth felt they had some difficulty in visiting. Three-fourths felt it was easy to get in touch with relatives, with some claiming to have difficulty. Whereas Aschenbrenner's (1973) research focused on lower class respondents, Tatum (1987) studied 10 middle class black families living in a white community. She states:

...9 out of 20 adults (45 percent) stated that such ties are relatively easy to maintain because they have parents and/or siblings living in the same county. Though most of the parents moved to the area in search of economic and/or educational opportunity, several had been influenced in their decision by "trailblazers," family or friends who had already scouted out the area. For these individuals, kinship ties helped, rather than hindered, their mobility. For the others, even though at greater distances from their families, mobility has not required family cut-offs (90).

Mutran (1985) asks whether differences in kin aid between elderly blacks and whites are a matter of culture or socioeconomic location. The question is examined in regard to both giving and receiving aid. The types of aid received are aid when ill, running errands, advice, and receiving money or gifts. The types of aid given are taking care of children or grandchildren

when ill and offering advice. The independent variables are income, age, marital status, education, health, and respect or appreciation for kin over the generation. Using regression analysis, Mutran found that both giving and receiving aid are significantly higher for elderly blacks, even when income and education are controlled. The major effect of race on the giving of help is direct, but over half of the effect of race on receiving help is indirect, operating through education, income, health, marital status, and presence of children in the home. From these findings Mutran concludes that culture may account for black elders giving more aid, while the racial difference in receipt of aid is explained by socioeconomic factors and by need. Regression analysis shows women and higher-income respondents have a larger helper network. Older persons with children have larger helper network than older persons without children. Chatters, Taylor, and Neighbors (1989) studied the size of informal networks used during a serious personal problem. The sample is drawn from a national sample of black adults. They find that the most often used category of informal helpers during a serious problem is kin. Men have a greater likelihood of consulting brothers and fathers, while women more likely consult sisters. Men are less likely than women to utilize children of either sex (671). Ellison (1990) studied the relationship between kinship bonds and the subjective well being of black adults. Using regression analysis, he finds that perceived closeness of kin ties has a positive effect on life satisfaction among elderly blacks. Similarly, Hughes and Thomas (1998) studied the subjective well being of African Americans and report that the quality of life continues to be worse for African Americans, but evidence accumulated on several dimensions indicates that the subjective well-being of African Americans is equal to or better than for whites.

As for the exchange of mutual aid, three-generation households and localized kin networks are reported as being functional in the black lower class concerning the exchange of goods and services. Kin and three-generation households provide a variety of services to individuals, which support the adaptation argument. Research findings indicate that assistance from kin flows in two directions. First, parents provide both financial and social assistance to children during the early

years of their marriage. Subsequently, the younger generation provides financial and social support to older members of the kin network. Although the burden of providing support to the elderly has shifted somewhat from the family onto the government, kin still perform a crucial role. Goldscheider and Goldscheider (1991) examine black and white differences in intergenerational financial flow between parents and children after high school and beyond. Using multiple regression analysis, they find that black students receive significantly less income from parents for educational expenses than white students. Black-white differences in parental contributions are halved when differences between the two populations are controlled. Family income is significantly and positively related to the amount of income parents are able to contribute. Regression analysis indicates that when young adults make financial contributions to their parents, black-white differences remain significant (505). The more income young adults earn, the more they contribute toward their parents' household expenses. The more income that parents have, the less income young adults contribute. After income effects are controlled, the effects of parental family structure are not significant. More recent research reveals similar findings.

The findings of Lee and Aytac's (1998) research on intergenerational financial support among Caucasians, Africans Americans, and Latinos indicate that African American and Latino parents provide more to adult children with higher incomes and higher levels of education, suggesting stronger investment and exchange objectives. Furthermore African American and Latino parents are more likely than white parents to be concerned with the return on assistance, possibly in support of the well being of extended kin. Lee, Peek, and Coward (1998) studied race differences in filial responsibility expectations among older parents. Using bivariate analysis, they found that blacks have higher filial responsibility expectation than whites. They assert that some of this is attributed to aged black parents who might be less educated than whites, and that education is negatively related to expectations. After controlling for sociodemographic, health, and support factors, the effects of race remain. Similarly, Burr and Mutchler (1999) studied race and ethnic variation in norms of filial responsibility among eld-

erly persons. Examining data drawn from the National Survey of Families and Households, they found that older African Americans and Hispanics are more likely than older non-Hispanic Whites to agree that each generation should provide coresidence assistance when needed. These generalizations are in line with Stack's (1974,1996) research and imply a strong sense of filial responsibility. Correspondingly, Uttal (1999) studied thirty-one racially diverse employed African American and Mexican American mothers and found race and ethnic difference in the use of kin based care. The decision to use kin-based care is based not only on individual need but on how families with young children are embedded in the socio-economic networks of the extended family. They note that black culture emphasizes informal support systems more than whites, and that formal support institutions viewed by whites as supportive might be view by blacks as exploitative. Therefore Blacks may feel a "cultural aversion" to formal services or less dependent on them because of their stronger informal networks.

The evidence suggests that frequency of interaction between kin and the exchange of mutual aid are significant for African Americans regardless of socioeconomic status. These patterns of interaction are adaptive responses to structural constraints. The evidence supports the idea that black American kinship is adaptive in the lower class, providing a fair segment of goods and services usually provided by nuclear families: making loans, cooking meals, giving clothing, providing housing, and child care. This network of kin may ease some of the role strain of solo parenting while contributing to the cohesion of the kin network.

### **Informal Adoption of African-American Children**

In the past adoption agencies have not served non-whites because of regulations imposed on adoptive parents. The regulations for adopting a child require an adequate social and financial history of the adoptive parents; therefore poor blacks have had difficulty adopting children through agencies in part because of their low socioeconomic status. In the face of the failure of adoption agencies African Americans developed their own networks for informally keeping related children; however

the informal adoption of children is not a recent phenomenon. Johnson (1939) contends that during slavery, many children were estranged from their parents but were taken in by other families. Even after slavery the convention of informal adoption of children persisted. Johnson (1939) points out that informally adopted children are granted extraordinary status in their new-fangled families. This may compensate for their parents' absence. In addition many adopted children are pitied by their adopted parents, which may result in parents bestowing more affection on the child.

The informal adoption of the children of kin, or "child keeping," appears to be even more frequent among lower class African Americans. Mitchell and Register (1984) found that after controlling for socioeconomic status and area of residence elderly blacks were more likely to take in grandchildren, nieces, or nephews than their white counterparts. Regardless of area of residence, blacks were more likely to take children into their homes (53). Furstenburg (1995) and Lempert (1999) show that family and kinship relations in the African American community are more likely to be behaviorally and functionally based, that is, you become a family member by acting like one, regardless of blood ties. Furstenburg (1995) studied fathering among African Americans in an inner city community and found a distinction between "fathers" and "daddies" that grants the sociological father an equal, if not an even more significant role than the biological father. Other researchers (Hairston & Williams 1989; Rompf 1993) indicate that patterns of informal adoptions and the acceptance of open adoptions are more frequent among African Americans than for whites. Additional researchers (Lovett-Tisdale 1996; Washington 1997; Jackson-White, Dozier, Oliver, & Gardner 1997) have explored factors that benefit the formation of African American adoptive families and found that the significance of community support and involvement in the adoption process is vital. Furthermore, Jackson-White and her colleague (1997) contend that the American child welfare system has failed to recognize and utilize the willingness of African Americans and the African American church in the adoption of children. If racial prejudice and discrimination and other aversive social conditions make life somewhat uncertain for African Americans, then informal

adoptions of children and strong community support are another adaptative strategy in support of the holistic perspective in the analysis of African Americans and the adaptation argument.

## **Conclusions**

As stated elsewhere in this article, there have been many theoretical models constructed to study the African American family. Of these the holistic approach is the most recent and more plausible paradigm to guide research and policy development related to African American families (Hill 1993). This approach emphasizes the following themes: diversity, dynamism, balance, solutions, and empiricism. All of these are integrated to a greater or lesser extent in this article, especially the empiricism and diversity themes. The holistic approach is the foundation from which additional substantive conceptual frameworks might be initiated. This approach provides for a more thorough, and positive comprehensive analysis of the African American family as a culturally adaptive subsystem. An adaptive subsystem striving to survive within the American society whose core cultural values according to Robin Williams (1970) include racism and group superiority.

Furthermore this article empirically examines distinctive patterns of the African American family in support of the adaptation argument. These patterns include kin interaction and the exchange of mutual aid, and the informal adoption of children. Keep in mind that the adaptation and the deficit arguments are opposing systems of thought about the African American family. The “adaptation” argument holds that the kin network and extended families carry out many “nuclear family” functions, in addition to emphasizing the positive, cultural aspects of the African American family. In contrast the deficit argument assumes that African American behavioral patterns are pathological, especially in patterns of female-headed households where the socialization of children is viewed most negatively. As with any family the procreation and the rearing of children are significant functions not only for the continuation of the family and kinship network but also for the continued existence of society. Therefore the deficit model places much emphasis on the socialization of children, particularly African American

males. Gordon (1999) refers to Gibbs (1988) who contends that African American men and boys are “depicted as a homogeneous, dysfunctional, alienated, and threatening subpopulation, which some have dubbed a threatened species.” He further asserts that the stereotype of “black males that dominates the popular media as well as the conceptualization that is generally advanced in the scholarly press is a picture of pathology bordering on hopelessness (ix). Whereas the deficit model views African American males reared in female-headed households as having no male role model, the adaptation model posits that the father or other males within and external to the household might assist not only in the socialization process, but in the socialization of identity for sons and daughters. According to Hill (1999) African Americans’ cultural heritage has fostered some degree of gender equality among African American sons and daughters; however research has been sparse. One reason for this is the gender roles of African Americans have been viewed as pathological (Hill 1999).

Hill states: “Culturally defined notions of the appropriate attitudes and behaviors for males and females shape parents’ expectations for their children and may even affect their perceptions of the parenting role” (104). Block (1983) studied sex role socialization and found that parents expect their sons to be “independent, self-reliant, highly educated, ambitious, hard-working, career oriented, intelligent and strong-willed” (134). Further research indicates that mothers view sons as more difficult to rear than daughters and that the mother of sons are more likely to believe that sons should work outside of the home (Downey, Jackson, and Powell 1994). Hill studied gender attitudes of a sample of 729 African-American and Euro-American parents. Overall she found a high level of support for gender equality among black and white parents; however black parents felt that gender would make their sons’ futures more difficult. She also found with less affluent and less educated black parents a tendency to emphasize happiness and self-esteem more for daughters than for sons and for affluent black parents to emphasize more respect and obedience for sons. As for the discipline of children all black parents emphasized the loss of privileges for sons more than for daughters. This pattern is more prevalent among affluent and educated black parents

who are in a better social class position to make available more privileges and thus are capable of decreasing privileges to their children.

Although these data show similarities and variation by race and class in sex role socialization, black masculinity of African American youth cannot be omitted a crucial element in the socialization process. The vital question is: how do parents or kin socialize their sons to be black in American society as well as to acquire a masculine sense of self? Charles Horton Cooley (1962) contends that what we think of ourselves is linked to how we think others perceive us. In other words if African American males think that others see them in a certain manner, it is likely they will think of themselves as such. And from most indications, especially in the press, African American males are not viewed positively. In *Nurturing Young Black Males: Programs that Work*, Robert Mincy (1998) states:

Young black boys need more. Historically, black males have had a difficult time in the United States. They have not been granted traditional masculine privilege or power. Social, cultural, and economic forces manifested in racism and oppression throughout American history have combined to keep black men from assuming traditionally accepted masculine roles. Black boys coming of age in neighborhoods surrounded by violence and poverty face insurmountable odds. Often this stressful and difficult environment is further compounded by educators with the predetermined negative views about black male youth and their learning potential ( 8).

Corbin and Pruitt (1999) state that the African American male identity can be shaped by a number of factors including ethnic influence, role models, and peer groups. Undoubtedly this means the influence of African American culture and role models in nuclear, extended families and the kin network. They contend that African American males compensate for insecurity in a Eurocentric society by redefining manhood. "For the most part this includes sexual promiscuity, machismo, risk taking and aggressive social skills" (72). Harris and Majors (1993) remarked that many of the academic problems of African Americans males are related to their rejection of academic

traits as European. The consequences of this rejection might include poor academic performance or pursuing other activities that may or may not be in their best interest. Taking into account the status of African American males, parents in need of mentors who would enhance the socialization process might enroll their sons in nurturing programs that serve young black males. More than seventy local and national nurturing programs through the Urban Institute are available throughout the United States for young African American males. Such efforts to assist African American young males embody the solution theme of the holistic perspective.

The role of the unmarried mother is not observed as pathological according to the adaptation argument. Instead, as Ladner (1971) points out, if an unmarried woman gets pregnant, she is likely to carry the pregnancy to full term and live off welfare. An unmarried mother living off welfare temporarily is no indication of that becoming a permanent lifestyle. Furthermore becoming a mother is viewed as a step up in status rather than an act of deviance. From this perspective the unmarried mother is looked at as a positive role model, at least in her capacity to bear children and receive public support in the face of economic hard times and the sex ratio imbalance. The unmarried mother may obligate herself to others in the kin network for child keeping during a crisis or hardship or overseeing children's play. These examples and others revealed before young girls help to develop within them a sense of value toward motherhood and reinforce the notion of "obligation" to the kin network. These patterns do not suggest pathological behavioral on behalf of the unmarried woman but rather show that non-marital birth is appreciated as a cultural element.

The adaptation argument views the role performance of single parent mothers in African American families as it would any mother, single or married. Some single mothers may be overloaded with obligations and suffer role strain. The same could be generalized about mothers in two-parent families. Thus many single-parent mothers may move in with extended kin where obligations are shared by older sons and daughters, grandmothers, grandfathers, and other adults. These same persons may provide socialization, discipline, and other care giving activities. These patterns of interaction ease some of the

strain of a single parent mother and perhaps reduce her stress level. The large number of adult members counterbalances inadequate maternal supervision of children viewed by the deficit perspective, making the supervision of children less problematic. If a single parent mother is employed, very young children may be left with a resident grandparent who supervises their daily activities such as feeding, playtime, and other social activities while the mother works. The mother may in return assist with the payment of rent or house payments. Children may be taught domestic or social skills by a grandmother, grandfather, or an uncle. Kin may fully cooperate in childcare activities during times when children do not live with kin. Not only adults but also older boys and girls may be given the role of caretakers for young children. If a mother has several children and is employed, the oldest daughter or son becomes the leader of the “children’s gang” which is composed of younger brothers and sisters. The leader of the children’s gang cooks and prepares meals, supervises playtime, and safeguards the children from harm. Often children of non-residential kin are embodied in the children’s gang. Not all single-mothers have children old enough to care for younger ones. There may be a “family life cycle” pattern in which single mothers receive help at some point from their parents, from other kin, or from older children. (Antonucci 1990; Bengton, Rosenthal, and Burton 1990; Hatch 1991; Hoyert 1991; Johnson and Barer 1990; Taylor and Chatters 1991; Taylor, Chatters, and Mays 1988; Hernandez and Myers 1993; Rossi and Rossi 1990; Tienda and Angel 1982; Hill 1999).

In addressing frequent poverty of female-headed households the adaptation model asserts that kin swapping or exchanging goods and services alleviate poverty in single parent households and among kin. The larger the kin network the greater the potential for the exchange of goods and services. The exchange of aid among black families is a pattern of adaptation rather than deficiency and is viewed as a common pattern among African Americans. Because of these exchanges, kin are the most utilized category of informal helpers. Women and persons of higher income have the larger helper network. As individuals give they obligate others to give in return. The exchange is more promising if individuals have a reputation as

a good exchange partner. The adaptation model argues that kin may assist and take over the economic function and child-rearing functions of the “traditional” family among the poor. According to Hatchett and Jackson (1993), many researchers contend that the African American extended kin network is both an adaptive response to situational constraints in America (Aschenbrenner 1973; Stack 1972, 1996; Hill 1971; Billingsley 1968/1988; 1992) and an element of West African culture (Herskovits 1941; Nobles 1974; Sudarkasa 1980). The adaptation model has different evaluations and different empirical assertions of the African American family and kinship. It argues that the deficit model leaves out important “domestic structures”—the kin network. The adaptation/deficit argument is not a settled issue. Perhaps it will never be. However the empirical evidence presented in this article is a clear indication that the functionality of the African American family in the United States has been one of adaptation in response to numerous ills including slavery, Jim Crowism, and de jure segregation.

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