A Sociological Analysis

of the Debate Over the Prevalence

of Single Parent Family Structure Among African Americans
Over the years the evolution of the structure and functions of the family have made this institution a hotly debated topic in the public arena. The most combative of U.S. social policy has evolved around the idea of utilizing social policy to somehow "strengthen" the family by propagating traditional gender roles and nuclear family ideals or by addressing the various social and economic factors that act as push factors for familial change. In respect to the debate over the causes and solutions to the prevalence of single-parent family structure among African Americans, it seems as though the issue of causality has been divided along cultural and structural lines. Advocates of the cultural theory to describe the deterioration of a nuclear family structure amongst African Americans lend heavily to gender and racial ideology and propose solutions to the issue that reek of traditional American ideological bias. Proponents of the structural theory for the changing structure of African American families conversely root their ideas in concrete empirical evidence as well as first hand interviews with members of the culture in question. This paper will serve as an analysis of both the cultural and structural theories, and will also discuss the prevailing reasons why the structural theory and its proposed solutions will better serve the functions of public policy and the plight of African American people themselves.

The argument posed by proponents of the cultural theory simply serves to rationalize the deterioration of traditional family ideals amongst impoverished African Americans by pushing racial, gender and class ideology. This is most evident in Patricia Hill Collins' article "A Comparison of Two Works on Black Family Life", an analysis of Daniel Patrick Moynihan's report, "The Negro Family: The Case for National Action" and Bill Moyer's "The Vanishing Family: Crisis in Black America". Both works are exposed to lack in supporting evidence, and to pose claims about African American culture and resulting family structure that disregards the prevalence of middle and upper class family structures, fails to address alternative family structures, and under emphasizes the effects of racism and discrimination on the socioeconomic status of African Americans as a whole (Collins 1989, pg 2). The underlying assumption is that
the attitudes and ideals of white middle class Americans are the driving factors behind their socioeconomic successes, and the fact that African Americans lack these particular characteristics condemns them to poverty and familial dysfunction. According to Moyers and Moynihan, the deterioration of African American values is the primary cause of such phenomena as illegitimacy and the prevalence of mostly impoverished single-parent families. Maxine Baca Zinn, in her article "Family, Race, and Poverty in the Eighties" best describes the argument presented by such cultural theorists as "culture as villain", "family as villain", and "welfare as villain", the meanings of which will become apparent as we analyze this theory as presented by Moyers and Moynihan.

At the root of this supposed deterioration of values is the seemingly "backward" gender roles that typify African American families, also known as "culture as villain". The assertions of deviance lie on the assumption that traditional gender roles and the nuclear family structure that prevail in the United States are not only American norms, but necessities for the normal functioning of a family. According to Collins, the Moynihan report popularized and stigmatized the idea of a "Black matriarchy" as a deviation from normal gender roles where males dominate the household and females are subservient (Collins 1989, pg 3). Moynihan asserts that African American females are inappropriately socialized to exude masculine qualities, therefore prohibiting African American males from assuming their roles as family providers. Since African American females too often choose to head their own households, an idea otherwise named "family as villain", Moynihan contends that their male counterparts are forced into submissive roles that alienate them from participating in the rearing of their children, and undermine the authority typically bestowed upon them on the basis of gender. It follows that this same masculinization of the female role leads to higher levels of educational attainment, and therefore increased levels of economic contributions to the family, which renders them independent of their spouses, assuming that the division of power in the family is dependent on monetary
contributions and a breadwinner model. Conversely, but with the same consequences, Moyers asserts with a "welfare as villain" approach that it is the receipt of welfare benefits that foster the independence and dominance of African American females over their male counterparts—effectually leading to the increased prevalence of the female-headed, single-parent family.

Moyers and Moynihan then pose two solutions to "fixing" the African American family, neither of which are practical or ideologically sound. The first solution involves the restoration of male dominance in African American family structure through an increase in employment and exposure to "real men" who wield traditional white patriarchal power (Collins 1989, pg 4). While failing to propose a strategy to increase the labor force participation of these disenfranchised males, Moynihan does suggest an interesting way to increase the African American male's sense of masculinity—military service. I fear that this solution harbors the potential to wreak havoc on the social structure of the black community which is traditionally a matriarchy, and would better serve the interests of the white American male by reinforcing the validity of patriarchy and paternalism by extending these ideas across racial and class lines. Moyers' solution to the deterioration of the African American family structure is based on constricting the influence of black female matriarchs by increasing their financial dependence on men. This proposition rests on the assumption of the breadwinner model as the principle structure of the American family, as well as the assumption that welfare breeds dependence and laziness and is detrimental to the development of appropriate gender roles. This solution also appears to reinforce patriarchal ideals by promoting female-on-male dependence, and also seems to serve the conservative right wing polity (who often oppose the spending of tax dollars on welfare programs and benefits) by deferring responsibility for the poor from the government into the hands of black men. Like the arguments posed by Moyers and Moynihan, these solutions have no basis in research or concrete empirical evidence and largely serve to impose traditional white middle class norms on the African American community.
In addition to "The Negro Family: A Case for National Action", Daniel Patrick Moynihan authored another work "The Tangle of Pathology" that reiterates many of the same biases rooted in the assumptions identified above. This article analyzes the changing structure of the African American family using many of the ideas presented in Moynihan's aforementioned article to support his claim that "the tangle of pathology is tightening" (Moynihan 1992, pg. 41). By exploring African American society and culture through manifestations in matriarchy, delinquency, crime, and alienation, Moynihan develops an argument for black males' enlistment in military service. Central to his explanation of this "tangle of pathology" is the idea that the will of the "Negro People" was broken under slavery and although it has been reasserted in the recent history, the future of their community is doomed until the "viability of the Negro family is restored" (Moynihan 1992, pg. 33). Based on the assumed dominance of the nuclear family and breadwinner model, Moynihan claims that the African American matriarchal family disadvantages the minority in a society that is structured to reward male leadership. Matriarchy is seen to be the root cause of poverty, the discrimination of colored men in occupational and educational attainment and the prevalence of illegitimacy in the African American community. The end result of these pathologies is framed to be a burden on welfare as he cites "migration into cities like Detroit, New York, Philadelphia, and Washington, D.C" (Moynihan 1992, pg. 35), without citing any studies or empirical evidence on the matter. Moynihan does succeed in quoting studies, statistics, and court cases that support his claims, but does so without sufficient analysis of underlying causal factors for the phenomena that plague the African American community. The article voices several ways in which military service would benefit African American males including being immersed in a masculine world where rewards are granted on the basis of merit (possibly an reference to the assumed dependency of blacks on stigmatized welfare programs and benefits), but poses no actual solution to the problems inflicting the black community. Overall, this article is based on the same generalizations about members of the black
community and assumption that white middle class patriarchal structure should be imposed on African Americans as "The Negro Family: A Case for National Action", and suffers the deficiencies that renders the argument illegitimate.

The cultural theory to explain the prevalence of single-parent family structure amongst African Americans is faulty at best. The failure of its proponents to cite relevant studies and statistics or use in depth interviews to illuminate the basis of their arguments insinuates that the roots of this theory lay in common racial and gender ideology. At first glance these articles appear to make a small claim for the causal factors influencing the prevalence of single-parent families amongst African Americans, but any appearance of validity is crushed under review of the work that explains the same phenomena employing a structural theory. The empirical evidence and use of individual experience provided to support the structural theory undermines every aspect of the cultural perspective's argument. The following section will detail the structural theory for the prevalence of single-parent family structure among African Americans and illuminate the various reasons this perspective eclipses that of cultural theorists.

Cultural theorists named slavery as the causal mechanism for the emergence of a matriarchal family structure among African Americans and the root of the deteriorated family structure, but in the book "Roll, Jordan, Roll", Eugene Genovese employs historical accounts to refute this claim and provide ample evidence in the contrary. The prevalence of single-parent family structure has been attributed to matriarchy, a weak sense of family, and the emasculation of black men, but records of slave holders and historical accounts of slaves themselves reveal otherwise. Genovese states that "Evidence of the slaveholder's awareness of the importance of family to the slaves may be found in almost any well-kept set of plantation records" (Genovese 1974, pg. 9) to conquer the myth of the absent family. He follows to cite evidence contrary to this popular belief, including court recognition of "the painful problems caused by the lack of legal sanction for relationships everyone knows to be meaningful and worthy of respect"
(Genovese 1974, pg. 9), and several instances when slaveholders chose to take financial losses in order to keep slave families together. Historical accounts of slaves themselves making demands for masters to purchase them along with their families while standing on the auction block further validate the essential importance of the African American family in history. Several states even moved to prohibit the sale of children away from their mother, and more often than not masters kept families together under the premise that slaves worked better under those circumstances (Genovese 1974, pg. 11). The information in this short section itself undermines the historical roots of the cultural theorists argument for African American's disregard for the importance of the family institution as the basis of deterioration of the family structure today.

An empirical study entitled "Race and the Retreat from Marriage: A Shortage of Marriageable Men?" espouses a research-based explanation for the prevalence of single-parent family structure amongst African Americans; that of the influence of changing employment circumstances among males. This study, that relies heavily on the Becker's rational choice model of mate selection and job search theory, is based on the idea that "non-marriage in the marriage market is the conceptual equivalent of unemployment in a labor market, and it occurs when there are mismatches between the demand for and supply of potential partners" (Lichter, McLaughlin, Kephart, Landry 1992, pg. 14). Of importance is the fact that this study rests on the assumption that all single women are looking for spouses and that women primarily choose partners on the basis of economic reasons. Research methods include an evaluation of the effects of the local quantity and economic quality of available men on transitions to first marriage among young women, the marital search model that incorporates microexplanations like the role of women’s increasing economic independence, and male marriageable pool hypothesis. This study finds supporting evidence that a decreased supply of marriageable men (as defined by economic attractiveness) is a more valid explanation for prevalence of single-parent family structure amongst African Americans than the receipt of welfare benefits, amongst other relevant factors.
These findings, evaluated in a broader socioeconomic spectrum including the fact that female economic independence is positively associated with marriage, leads to the conclusion that because of the shortage in marriageable men, public policy that advocates a living or family wage for impoverished men and women would be a better strategy for encouraging marriage and a traditional nuclear family structure than advocating marriage for the dependence of females on a male breadwinner, as previously proposed by Moyers and Moynihan (Lichter, McLaughlin, Kephart, Landry 1992, pg. 29).

Adding to the support of the previous study, William J. Wilson used Urban Poverty and Family Life Study (UPFLS) data to evaluate the ways in which single parent families perpetuate themselves through the effects of such family structure on decreased educational attainment and labor force attachment. The article entitled "The Fading Inner-City Family" assesses this process and uses interviews to illuminate cultural factors that affect the prevalence of single-parent family structure in African American families. In the black community, educational attainment is positively associated with marriage, but being raised by a single African American parent is also associated with high levels of poverty, likelihood of welfare dependency, and a low potential for educational achievement (Wilson 1996, pg. 47). Likewise, participation in the labor force as measured by economic worth is positively associated with rate of marriage, but being raised in a single parent household by a black mother is associated with problems of labor force attachment(Wilson 1996, pg. 47). Wilson refutes cultural theorists tendency to "blame the victim" by noting that scientific evidence fails to support the claim that welfare benefits promote illegitimate births, and by noting the rate of out of wedlock teen births nearly doubled since 1975, while the real value of AFDC, food stamps and Medicaid had fallen (Wilson 1996, pg. 48). This article also cites Mark Testa's finding that "the decreasing marriage rates among inner-city black parents is a function not simply of increased economic marginality or of changing attitudes toward sex and marriage, but of as Testa emphasizes, 'the interaction between material and
This article also illuminates a more personal account of cultural reasons members of the black community cite against getting married-namely that marriage is simply "not in the forefront of the men's minds" (Wilson 1996, pg. 51), and that women have a general distrust of men's motivations. And finally, Wilson touches on macrostructural reasons for the high rates of single-parent families in African American communities, the decline of the mass production system, and labor market conditions that supported the male breadwinner model-bringing us to Macine Baca Zinn's findings in the article "Family, Race, and Poverty in the Eighties."

Maxine Baca Zinn harnesses the structural theory for the prevalence of single-parent family structure amongst African Americans by assessing the influence of a decline in opportunity structures as reflected in patterns of employment, marriage, and community composition. Of primary importance is the identification of deindustrialization as the active agent in the marginalization of black people in the United States. Cities previously acted as "opportunity ladders" (Zinn 1989, pg.63) for under-educated workers because of the prevalence of manufacturing jobs that paid a family wage. The shift away from the production industry, particularly for automobile, steel and rubber industry employees, marked serious consequences for blacks because of so-called "structural racism" (Zinn 1989, pg.63). The rise of jobs in the highly technological global economy that requires extensive education and training has resulted in a weakened labor force attachment amongst inner-city workers in general and African Americans in particular (Wilson 1996, pg. 53), which has lead to increased male joblessness and female-headed households (Zinn 1989, pg.65). It is important to note that out of wedlock births are sometimes encouraged by families who fear that marriage would result in the addition of another dependent on the financial burden of the family, because this identifies the mother-only family structure amongst African Americans to be a consequence of poverty, instead of a cause (Zinn 1989, pg.65). Finally, Zinn's article examines how these changes in marriage and
employment patterns have bred changes in the social fabric of low income communities that have become isolated and suffer from what Wilson identifies as "concentration effects". These effects are the result of isolation from middle class role models who unite low income families with mainstream society outside the ghetto, and also of the loss of social capital and informal pathways to occupational attainment.

Zinn notes that Wilson's analysis of marriage in African American culture treats the institution as an opportunity structure that no longer exists for a large number of African Americans, instead of a middle class ideological imperative to be imposed on minorities. The essential element behind the structural theory that deems it more valid than the cultural theory is its roots in sociological and anthropological studies and statistics, as well as its avoidance of common ideology as fact.
Bibliography


