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THE FUTURE OF MARRIAGE AND FAMILY IN BLACK AMERICA

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The discourse surrounding African American families during the past 30 years has primarily consisted of some form of reaction to the Moynihan Report (1965), which presented evidence supporting the contention that the Black family was falling apart. These responses, often by African American social scientists, usually represented some form of what I call “Yes, but” responses, including:

- a. Countering the attacks by focusing on the strengths of Black families (e.g., Billingsley, 1968; Hill, 1972), or more recently to focus on Black middle-class families (Landry, 1987; McAdoo, 1988).
- b. Agreement that there are problems among Black families, but placing emphasis on the structural conditions that caused them (e.g., Holmes-Norton, 1987). Earlier versions of this response tended to focus on what structural changes could be made that would directly affect Black families—increased employment opportunities for Black males for example. More recent versions have called for broader changes that would affect all families; Wilson (1987), for example, calls for a national child care policy that, while helping all employed mothers, will nevertheless “trickle down” to poor Black mothers who most need it. This latter version of the “structural cause/solution” response occurs as a result of increasing awareness of shrinking national resources and the accompanying shift in public opinion (Pinkney, 1984) that reduces the chance of providing direct assistance to the Black families.
- c. Acknowledging problems but focusing on what the Black community has done—or continues to do—to either perpetuate or alleviate these problems (Edelman, 1987).

But at the same time that these varying responses were emerging, two other forces were occurring: First, the evidence of “pathology” among African American families was increasing, to the point that a *Newsweek* article (Starr & Buckley, 1985, p. 30) describing a series of events marking the 20th anniversary of Moynihan’s controversial study was entitled, “Moynihan: ‘I Told You So.’ ”

Secondly, there was increasing evidence that White families were experiencing the same signs of pathology, that is, increase in divorce rates, female-headed families, and out-of-wedlock births. As a result of these shifts in White family structures and functioning, there has been a shift in the discourse surrounding “family,” with emphasis on the reconstruction of the meaning of the term to include diverse forms, and to acknowledge these as legitimate alternatives (Gutis, 1992; Kamerman & Kahn, 1988). Included in this new family discourse are descriptions of the “postmodern family” (Stacey, 1990), which appears to consist of women, their children, and related and unrelated “kin”—sound familiar?

For our purposes, one positive outcome of this new family discourse is the greater flexibility in the way we interpret the family experiences and structures of African Americans. For example, we can acknowledge, as Sudarkasa (1993) does, that there is considerable diversity within Black female-headed families.

I acknowledge and, in fact, celebrate this new family discourse and its implications for greater acceptance of the wide variety of living arrangements among African Americans—including female- (and male-) headed households, those who are voluntarily single, in stable gay or lesbian relationships, or in postmodern families. However, what of those African Americans who desire, or are attempting to maintain, a marriage with an opposite sex, same race partner? Thus, this article focuses on a specific component of Black family studies—marriage, or the lack of it—within the Black community. More specifically, the purpose of this article is to discuss the current reasons for the apparent difficulty that Black males and females have in establishing and maintaining stable relationships. This is not to suggest that men and women are not making the attempt. In an analysis of the National Survey of Black Americans (NSBA) data set, Tucker and Taylor (1989) examined

the probability of being married, having a main romantic relationship, and desiring a romantic relationship, and found that, although only about 42% of the respondents were married, another 42% were involved in a romantic relationship. Of those respondents who were neither married nor in a relationship ($N = 682$), 33% indicated that they would like to have one. Although the above findings clearly suggest that having a relationship—either in or outside of marriage—is important for Black Americans, the fact that 66% of those who were neither married nor involved *did not desire* to be in a relationship, is also of interest. Is it possible that these respondents have given up on the goal of a relationship? In any event, the focus of this article is to attempt to answer the following question: If participation in, and/or desire for, a relationship exists, why are Black Americans having a more difficult time establishing and maintaining these relationships?

The final section of the article will examine current trends that may influence the future of Black relationship, generally, and marriages, in particular.

THE PROBLEM

There is little question that Black males and females have had a more difficult time in establishing and maintaining stable relationships with each other during the 1990s. Evidence of this difficulty is indicated in lower marriage rates, higher divorce and separation rates, and lower remarriage rates. It is also indicated by the increasing separation between childbearing and marriage within the Black community.

MARRIAGE, DIVORCE, REMARRIAGE

The late 1980s and early 1990s have witnessed a significant decline in the marriage rate among Blacks; in 1990, only 39% of all Black women ages 30 to 34 were living with a husband, compared to 65% in 1960. Over the same period, the percentage of 30- to 34-year-old women who had never married grew from 10%

to 35% (O'Hare, Pollard, Mann, & Kent, 1991). Even among those of prime marriage age (20-29), 72% of all Blacks in that age group had never married (Glick, 1988), and demographers estimate that 25% of Black women will never marry, nearly three times the rate for White women (Baca Zinn & Eitzen, 1993).

In terms of divorce and separation, in 1990 the divorce ratio was 28.2 divorces per 100 marriages among Blacks, compared to 13 per 100 marriages for Whites (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1991). These rates represent an increase of 403% for Whites and 455% for Blacks between 1960 and 1990 (Baca Zinn & Eitzen, 1993). According to Thornton and Freedman (1983), if present trends continue, about half of recent marriages among Whites and two thirds of marriages among Blacks will end in divorce. The separation rate is also higher for Blacks. In 1980, 16% of Black women between the ages of 18 to 44 were separated, compared to 4% of White women in that age group (Cherlin, 1981).

What about remarriage among divorced Blacks? In 1980, Blacks who were most likely to remarry were those with a partial high school education. But even among these, only 14% of those between the ages of 25 to 44 (the age in which remarriage is most likely to occur) had remarried. This is compared to 24% of ever-married persons of all races (Glick, 1988). A more recent study of remarriage among Blacks found that about 1 in 8 divorced Blacks, compared to 4 in 7 Whites, would remarry (Furstenberg & Spanier, 1984). To make matters worse, Glick (1988) also found that remarried Black women 35 to 44 years old were more likely to redi-
 vorce.

CHILDBEARING

Finally, there is evidence of an increased separation between marriage and childbearing among Blacks. We know that in the 1980s there was not merely a dramatic increase in the number of Black female-headed families with children under 18 (from 25% in 1965 to 56% in 1990) (reported in Baca Zinn & Eitzen, 1993), but a major shift in the reason for this growth: In 1965, the major cause was divorce or separation; today it is a result of an increase in births to unmarried women—of Black births in 1990, 57% were

to unmarried women (Pear, 1991). More specifically, in 1985, of the over 6.5 million Black women between the ages of 18 to 44, 70.3% had children. Of these, 40% were married, 29% were divorced, separated, or widowed, and 31% had never married. Clearly, a major reason that the unwed births represent a larger *proportion* of all Black births is the fact that there are fewer married Black women, and these married women are having fewer children (Bane & Jargowsky, 1988).

Overall then, Blacks are less likely to marry and, if they marry, are more likely to divorce or separate and less likely to remarry. These factors, combined with the increasing separation between childbearing and marriage help explain the dramatic decline in Black two-parent families with children: In 1990, only 39.4% of these Black families were two-parent families, compared to 64.3% in 1970 (Baca Zinn & Eitzen, 1993). Whether these are also indications of the "breakdown" of the Black family is debatable, but they are indications that Black males and females are having difficulty getting, and staying, together.

THE CAUSES

A variety of explanations have been offered for the lower marriage and remarriage rates, the higher rates of divorce/separation, and the resulting increase in female-headed households. These explanations have ranged from the structural causes, through the demographic, to the micro-level causes (those found within the Black community).

STRUCTURAL CAUSES

At the structural level, *economic changes* have produced major shifts in employment opportunities for Black males and females. Largely as a result of the technological revolution beginning after World War II, the reduction of manufacturing jobs and the increase in low-level white-collar jobs has produced a decline in the Black working class, an expansion of the Black underclass, and an unsta-

ble Black middle class (Billingsley, 1988). Also, 1986 was the first year in our history in which the average number of Black employed women exceeded the average number of Black employed men (Edelman, 1987). For Black males, the shifting structure of the economy, specifically the decline in manufacturing jobs, has led to a decline in their labor force participation rate—the proportion of employed Black men dropped from 80% in 1930 to 56% in 1983 (Wilson, 1987). Several studies by Wilson and his colleagues at the University of Chicago documented the relationship between male joblessness and (a) high divorce rates, (b) low remarriage rates, and (c) a high rate of unwed births. Additionally, for those who are employed, there is a greater chance of underemployment, sporadic employment, and lower earnings. Interestingly enough, among the hardest hit due to recent economic downturns are two-parent Black families with one earner and one homemaker (Crawley, 1988). In any event, all of this boils down to the fact that when men don't work or don't earn adequate wages they do not perceive themselves, nor are they perceived by Black women, to be marriage material.

Also at the structural level are *cultural value shifts* that call for greater emphasis on individualism, self-realization, and fulfillment. These value shifts make it more difficult to trust or make a commitment. At the same time, the expectations for family functions have expanded and now include sexual fulfillment, intimacy, and companionship. The combined higher expectation of personal and family happiness means it is more difficult for marriages to work. This is true for all races and classes, but these appear to be exacerbated within the Black community (Chapman, 1988).

Demographic shifts also have no doubt contributed to the declining marriage rate among Blacks. Although the unequal sex ratio in the Black community is not new—Black females have outnumbered Black males since at least 1850—this ratio has worsened since 1920 (Jackson, 1978). But even in 1960, for every 100 Black women between the ages of 20 and 22, there were 94 Black men; by 1985, there were 78 Black men. In fact, Robert Staples (1989) argues that Black men are an endangered species and uses the following data to build his argument: Although Black men constitute only 6% of the U.S. population, they represent 50% of male prisoners in local,

state, and federal jails—today there are more Black men in prison than in college (Cockburn, 1989)—more than 35% of Black men in U.S. cities are drug or alcohol abusers; more than 18% of Black males drop out of high school; more than 50% of Black men under the age of 21 are unemployed; 46% of Black men between 16 and 62 are not in the labor force; approximately 32% of Black men have incomes below the poverty level; the homicide rate of Black men is six times higher than for White men. When we add to this already low number the Black males who prefer White women over Black women as potential mates, we can see that there simply are not enough eligible men to go around. On the issue of Black men with White women, although they are not necessarily married to White women—in 1983, only 3.3% of all Black husbands had a White wife (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1991)—they do appear to be cohabiting; although cohabitants represent only 3.4% of all couples of all races, 21% of all Black man/White woman couples live together (Glick, 1988).

The impact of the unequal sex ratio is more far-reaching than simply lower marriage rates. According to Guttentag and Secord (1983), when men are in short supply they become a scarce resource; for that reason, men hold the balance of emotional power in a relationship. They do not have to work at a relationship or even commit themselves to one, because they can always find another woman. But more important, societies in which there are fewer men than women tend to encourage self-reliance in women; more of them go to school, get jobs, and become self-supporting and self-reliant. These societies are also characterized by higher divorce rates, many single-parent families, and illegitimate births. Thus the lower marriage rate becomes easier to understand.

One final point about the impact of the unequal sex ratio is that Black women who do marry are more likely to marry men who are older by at least 4 years, are of lower educational level, and have been previously married (Spanier & Glick, 1980). This lack of homogamy may help explain why these marriages have a greater chance of ending in divorce (Lindsey, 1989).

Along with the economic, ideological and demographic factors must be added a consideration of the impact of current *social*

welfare policies, which, if we are to believe the 1986 CBS Special Report by Bill Moyers (*The Vanishing Black Family—Crisis in Black America*), discourage marriage as a consideration for poor young Black mothers. Interestingly enough, these policies also reduce the historically strong extended family support for these mothers and their children and inadvertently contribute to the rise in Black female-headed households. Wilson and Neckerman (1986) cite Cutright's (1974) analysis of growth of female-headed households between 1940 and 1970, in which he argued that a major reason for the growth was the increasing tendency for unmarried mothers to form separate households. More specifically, Bane and Ellwood (1989) found that during the period of 1969 to 1973, 56% of White children and 60% of Black children born to unmarried women lived with grandparents; by the next decade only 24% of White and 37% of Black children did so. Aid to Families With Dependent Children (AFDC) payments, then, appear to have a significant impact on living arrangements of single mothers and their children (Wilson & Neckerman, 1986; Sudarkasa, 1993).

Although there is no question that Black male/female relationships have been negatively influenced by all of the above factors, we must remember that two of these influences—economic instability and the unequal sex ratio—are not new. Although Black males have traditionally been more likely to be employed, their relationship to the labor force has always been tenuous, and their lower incomes have meant a continually higher poverty rate.

Neither is the unequal sex ratio within the Black community new—beginning in 1850 and worsening since 1920. It appears that, historically, Blacks responded to these conditions by coming together—either through marriage, which allowed both husband and wife to contribute to the survival of the family, or through drawing support from the extended family.

Why then, have Blacks more recently responded to worsening economic and demographic conditions by means *other than* reliance on (specifically) marriage? There are a number of possibilities, including the aforementioned ideological shifts that call for an emphasis on individualism, lack of trust, and unwillingness to make—or keep—a commitment. Although these broader value

shifts no doubt contribute to the problems within Black male/female relationships, I would argue that we must add to this list a number of factors that are for the most part unique to the Black community. Although these micro-level or (sub)cultural forces cannot begin to fully explain the difficulties that Black males and females have in getting and staying together, they must be included if we wish to build a comprehensive explanation for these difficulties.

FORCES WITHIN THE BLACK COMMUNITY

What messages do Black males and females receive about each other? About choosing a mate? About marriage in general? Or divorce? Or parenting? And where do these messages come from? Although we may acknowledge the role of the broader society in shaping our attitudes and perceptions about these issues, we cannot ignore the impact of socialization within the Black family, stereotypes about Black men and women that are perpetuated within the Black community, or specific expectations we bring to relationships, generally, and marriage, in particular.

The *socialization* of Black boys and girls no doubt influences their perception of the roles they are to fulfill as adults. For Black girls, there is a great deal of training that mothers give their daughters to exist, survive, and succeed (Joseph & Lewis, 1981). Although there are many possible ways to do this, including nurturing/pushing, cajoling, and trusting a man so that he can be the best he can be (with the assumption that the woman and offspring will benefit), Black women—unlike their White counterparts—have not had a significant number of models who have successfully used this method. They are, however, exposed to mothers, grandmothers, and other women who have either been the sole provider for, or contributed to the survival of, the family. Thus the lesson of focusing on independence and self-sufficiency is reinforced. There is even, albeit limited, evidence that Black fathers play an important role in the development of independence in their daughters (Baumrind, 1972).

Whether this sense of independence is viewed as an asset or a liability in marriage would, of course, depend on the socialization

of Black boys. Here the evidence is much less clear-cut, since, as Staples (Staples & Johnson, 1993) reminds us, the literature on the socialization of African American males is full of assumptions but little proof. Earlier works, such as those found in Wilkinson and Taylor (1977), suggest that Black males are forced to overcome obstacles both from within and outside the Black community in order to reach manhood. Further, much of their socialization occurs outside the home, within their peer group. Because of limited opportunities to develop a sense of masculinity as defined by the broader society—through economic success, for example—Black males develop alternative avenues, including “hustling” and manipulating women. More recently, Majors (1989) has argued that because Black males “look out on a world that does not positively reflect their image” (p. 84), they created a form of self-expression—the *cool pose*. This term refers to the ability to present oneself as emotionless, fearless, and aloof, and functions both to preserve the Black male’s pride, dignity, and respect, but to express bitterness, anger, and distrust toward the broader society. Although this behavior may be functional in protecting Black males from the pain of living in an oppressive society, Majors and Bilson (1992) note that it may be dysfunctional in relationships with not only Black women but other Black men and White men.

What about *stereotypes* that African American males and females have about each other? A wealth of literature is produced every few years that focuses on the conflict between Black males and females (Allen, 1985; Drake & Cayton, 1945; Franklin, 1984; Grier & Cobbs, 1968; Karenga, 1979; Staples, 1989; Wallace, 1979, 1982). A common theme in many of these works are the negative stereotypes that Black males and females have about each other. Joseph and Lewis (1981) found the Black women get both direct and indirect messages about Black men from their mothers, and the most prevalent message was that Black men are abusive, no good, and unreliable, but the assumption is that their daughters will end up with one anyway. More recently, Black females appear to have accepted the “kinder” version of the above: “Black males are endangered,” which supposedly would allow Black women to be more tolerant. In terms of stereotypes about Black women, Cazenave

(1983) found that the majority of his sample of middle-class Black men believed that Black women have more opportunities than Black men, and a large minority of the sample felt that Black women were in part responsible for the low status of Black men.

What about the *expectations* that Black males and females have about marriage and what it means? It appears that men and women, regardless of race, will often say that they have, or would like to marry for the purpose of "building something together." Yet we have all heard stories from Black women about the men who "just wouldn't work with them" or who "didn't want to do anything"; "wouldn't pull his weight"; "kept undermining me"; or "wouldn't grow." There are also stories of Black women who are tired of the excuses used by Black men to justify their unwillingness to work at a relationship. Madhubuti (1990) suggests that the five most often used excuses are (a) you don't understand me; (b) yes, you're right, but . . . ; (c) you are too good for me; (d) I need my space; and (e) I don't have any money and I don't have the time. The specifics of the stories told and the excuses heard vary according to social class, but a common theme appears to be that the man is in some way not fulfilling his obligations for the family's survival. Interestingly enough, Black men have their own stories of women who "wouldn't take chances"; "wouldn't grow"; or "didn't have faith in me." Some of these may be "*Raisin in the Sun*" stories—that is, unrealistic, but others are quite legitimate. Again, the specifics vary according to class, but the common feature appears to be the perception that the spouse is or was unwilling to trust, have faith in her mate, or take chances that might benefit the family. Given these differing stories, is it possible that Black men and women have differing perceptions of what it means to "build something" together? That for Black men there is a tendency to take survival issues for granted and proceed to focus on both realistic and unrealistic goals of upward mobility? Or that Black women, although equally likely to talk of building something, are more likely to emphasize survival, as opposed to upward-mobility issues? This question implies a different interpretation of reality than that of Staples (Staples & Johnson, 1993), for example, who not only argues that Black wives are more likely to be the "chief consumptionists" in the family, but further implies

that Black women contribute to the greater indebtedness of Black married-couple families due to their desire for at least the material signs of upward mobility.

In any event, these gender differences may be explained, at least partly, by the fact that Black women have been most likely to be responsible for their children, which demands that they focus on the basic issues of food, clothing, and shelter. And they are more likely to have grown up in households where getting ahead was not as much the issue as staying afloat. Thus their preoccupation with survival and financial security, and the hesitancy about taking chances, is understandable.

Explanations for the Black males' apparent tendency to take survival issues as a "given" and proceed to focus on both realistic and unrealistic goals of success are harder to find. One possible explanation is that Black males have internalized a set of differing messages—one from outside the Black experience and one from within. Externally, Black males have received that message that a man is to pursue his goals, reach for the stars, and there are accompanying messages about how to do this; one must be a "risk taker." This message is reinforced within the Black community by examples of men who have taken risks and have become successful (through both legitimate and illegitimate means). But Black men have also observed their mothers, grandmothers, or other significant women in their lives who have demonstrated the ability to keep a family together—allow it to survive. These early experiences, combined with the internalization of broader society's definition of what it takes to be a successful man may result, at least at the subconscious level, in the belief that Black women can handle survival issues, leaving men free to pursue loftier goals.

Franklin (1984) suggests more broadly that most of the conflict between Black males and females is due to contradictory messages about appropriate gender role behavior. The message from the dominant society is that a "man" should be aggressive and dominant in his relationships, and a "woman" should be feminine and subservient. On the other hand, experiences within the Black community do not allow for complete observations of these expectations. Although Black women respond to the contradiction by becoming

more androgynous (assuming both masculine and feminine roles as required), Black males appear to selectively internalize the broader society's definition of masculinity. They may be aggressive in relationships but passive in the work force, for example.

In addition to the differential meanings attached to building something, I would like to briefly discuss another source of difficulty in Black male/female relationships: the contradiction between what Black men and women *say* they want from a partner, and what they *really* look for. Black women, regardless of class, geographical location, or other factors, tend to say that they are looking for a "good" man. There even appears to be shared agreement on the meaning of a good man—he is supportive, has a steady job, and treats women well. I would argue that these good men have always existed in the real world of Black women's lives. However, I would suggest that Black women have had few models of *women* who pursued, loved, and respected these good men for those specific qualities; in other words, the Black men most sought after by women were rarely these good men, and the women who had these good men may have treated them poorly. This in turn reinforces the idea that there are additional meanings or qualities associated with these men (i.e., they are weak, boring, etc.). This also appears to be the case with Black men who will readily say they are looking for a "good woman." They may also agree that they would recognize her when they saw her, but the chances are they have few models of Black *men* who loved, respected, and treated these "good women" well. Although the observation that these good women were dogged, or run over, by men may initially appear that the observer is sympathetic to the women's plight, it also reinforces the notion that these women are weak, to be taken advantage of.

To summarize, it appears that the "explanations" for the current difficulty Black males and females have in establishing and maintaining stable relationships are numerous. They include the economic shifts and trends that allow more Black women, but fewer Black men to work. Increased employment opportunities for Black women (albeit largely in low paying jobs), means that they are now earning 80% of what Black men earn, and—at least according to Reynolds Farley (Farley & Bianchi, 1991)—they have less of a

financial incentive to marry. As debatable as that is, it is less debatable that Black men are not faring well in the economic sphere, and are thus less inclined to marry. Although one obvious solution might be to encourage the growth of economic opportunities for Black males, we must be cautious about advocating this solution because it not only perpetuates the existing job discrimination against Black women, who because of the unequal sex ratio need to provide economic support for Black children, but ignores the chauvinism that so often causes Black women to leave relationships in the first place. To encourage Black males to regain their "manhood" through employment is merely to perpetuate patriarchy (Omalade, 1986).

The unequal sex ratio in the Black community, combined with the incarceration, drug abuse, homicide, and interracial dating patterns of Black men, means that the pool of eligible Black men is shrinking. This must be part of any explanation of lower marriage rates among Black Americans.

Ideological changes, which make it more difficult for all groups to trust, to make commitments, is an added explanation, as are changes in social welfare policies, which influence young, poor Black mothers' decision to remain single.

Finally, specific forces within the Black community, including the gender differences in socialization, stereotypes about the opposite sex, and differential expectations that Black males and females bring to a relationship, must be added into the equation.

FUTURE TRENDS

A number of trends may have an impact not only on marriages within the Black community, but on the Black family as a whole. These include the continued growth of the Black population, which is expected to increase from 12% of the U.S. population today, to 14% by 2020. Currently, a disproportionate number of Blacks are unemployed or stuck in low-paying dead-end jobs; they are undereducated, overrepresented in prisons, and are less healthy. These negative effects are especially damaging to the life chances of Black

children. In 1990, 55% of Black children lived with one parent, and 44.8% of all Black children under age 18 lived below the poverty line compared to 15.9% of Whites (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1991). Further, Baca Zinn and Eitzen (1993) point out that although Black and Latino children make up the majority of recipients of AFDC, real AFDC benefits have decreased by 13% since 1970. Yet benefits from the other major form of assistance available to children, Survivors Insurance (SI), have increased by 53% since 1970, and the majority of children receiving SI benefits are White.

An equally alarming trend in terms of its impact on Black families generally, and children in particular, is crack abuse among Black mothers, which has reduced many previously single-parent families to "no-parent" families. Not only has crack use among women of child-bearing age threatened the lives of infants born to these women, it has also contributed to the removal of Black children from their homes and placement into foster care, as well as contributed to the glut of Black children awaiting adoption (Staples, 1991).

Edelman (1993) reminds us more generally that Black children today are even worse off than they were in 1980; they are more likely to be born into poverty, lack early prenatal care, have a single mother or unemployed parent, be unemployed as teenagers, and not go to college.

Given this poor start, many of these Black children will grow up as society's losers. With the proportion of these disadvantaged groups increasing in the next 35 years, if intervention policies are not developed, and if the number of good jobs continues to shrink, the underclass will continue to expand, and economic hardship, instability, and especially single parenthood will result. Projections are that an even larger proportion of Black families will be female headed in the future, because the proportion of "marriageable" Black males will continue to decrease.

This negative picture is partially offset by the declining fertility rates, higher abortion rates, and greater educational and economic gains for Black women, which may well mean that there will be fewer female-headed families, and that these families may be less likely to be poor. Although there are no signs that the unequal sex

ratio will disappear within the Black community, there are (admittedly) small signs that Black women are becoming more willing to marry outside the race.

An interesting alternative possibility for the direction of Black male/female relationships is what we would now have to define as *role reversal*—simply because there are no labels in our reality that are not value laden. Consider what would be the easiest way to resolve existing dilemmas between Black males and females: If Black women are able to provide for their children—through work or welfare—and Black men are not, could Black men not focus on developing the skills and qualities that independent women need—nurturance, supportiveness, child care, and so on, which they could exchange for economic support? There are signs that this is already happening, at least unofficially; there are also some indications that Black professional women would be interested in these kinds of men.¹ The problem now appears to be the lack of social support for this role.

But when we observe the marriage and family trends within the broader society, it appears that support for alternative gender roles is part of our future, as are expanded definitions of “family” to acknowledge diverse forms—including single parenthood and gay and lesbian parents (who could be viewed as a potential pool for foster and adoptive care for Black children). Later marriage, a continued increase of women in the labor force, and the resulting changes in gender role expectations means that there will be more options available in living arrangements for all Americans. Clearly, the first wave of change regarding gender roles has focused on expanding the woman’s role; we are beginning to see signs of the second wave, which will no doubt expand our definition of masculinity to include nurturance. This means that the differences between the broader society’s perceptions of gender roles and those existing within the Black community are disappearing. White women are becoming more like Black women in their pursuit of independence and self-sufficiency and are increasingly asking the same question, “where are the men in the family?” As this image becomes the norm, Black women may gain a greater sense of legitimacy within the broader society, which will not only contribute to an

improved self-image for Black women but may serve to reduce the conflict between Black males and females.

Other changes include continued advances in contraceptive methods that will allow for voluntary parenthood to become the norm, which will in turn allow for expanded definitions of both the mothering and fathering role. Divorce may also become more firmly entrenched as a normal stage in the life cycle; mandatory child support laws will help slow the trend of children in poverty. Finally, a National Child Care Policy may be the inevitable result of acknowledgement of the importance of women's role in the labor force.

All of the foregoing serves to remind us that the meaning of "family"—perhaps the meaning of "marriage"—is being re-constructed to acknowledge a wide range of experiences. As a chronic observer of family shifts within American society, it has been interesting to note the indications that marriages and families within the broader society are increasingly coming to resemble those of African Americans. As indicated at the outset, one result is a shift in the discourse surrounding marriage and family structure and functioning including a dropping of negative labels, such as "pathological" and "illegitimate," to be replaced by more neutral terms, such as "alternative family structure," "nonmarital births," or "voluntary motherhood." It will be interesting to see how long it will take before these neutral labels are applied to African American family patterns.

NOTE

1. One indication of the possible willingness of Black professional women to consider nontraditional relationships with Black men was found in the results of an informal workshop held during the Black Family Conference in Louisville, Kentucky in 1988. This workshop, led by L. Dickson and J. Gaston, consisted of dividing participants into same-sex, same-age-range groups. Each group was given a written description of a hypothetical member of the opposite sex. Members of the groups were given 20 minutes to discuss the hypothetical person and come to a consensus on whether this person would be appealing as a partner. At the end of the 20 minutes, everyone came together and a representative of each group then talked about their hypothetical person, including their decision about his or her potential as a partner and how this decision was reached, to the audience as a whole. One group of Black women (age range 35-50, mostly professional) were given Butch, who was described as tall, attractive,

pleasant, treated women well, a good lover, great with kids, loved to cook, but he could not keep a steady job; another group of women (22 and younger, college students) were given Robert, who was described as a single father (four children), a police officer with a good income, owned his home, and was well respected in the community (no physical description was given). Both groups agreed that their hypothetical person had great potential as a partner. Even when all participants came together and heard the other's descriptions, they maintained their position. The professional women argued that, because they did not need financial support, they could focus on the positive qualities found in Butch. They also indicated that Robert would not be appealing because he probably wanted a mother for his children. Of equal interest was the response of the male participants. Because they were fewer in number, they represented one group (25 and over, professional), and were given two hypothetical descriptions: (a) a 23-year-old welfare mother of two who was described as attractive, nurturing, and in need of financial help with her family; and (b) a 33-year-old divorced mother who had a good job with the Postal Service, was independent, but looking for a positive relationship. The males overwhelmingly chose the welfare mother.

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