Is the Negro Family a Unique Sociological Unit?

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# Is the Negro Family a Unique Sociological Unit?

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165Sociology began as a general science of society for the discovery and definition of the laws controlling the evolution of human groups and, after passing through a period distinguished by controversies about its point of view, has entered a period of research and investigation.[1](#fn1) Although as late as January of the present year. Professor Flonan Znaniecki, in the \*American Journal of Sociology,[2](#fn2) could complain of a “complete chaos of methodological presuppositions manifested in general works of sociology,” and believes that, “No other science shows a similar multiplicity of disconnected viewpoints,” sociology has settled upon a unit for investigation; namely, the social group. A sociological group may be defined as “a number of people interacting or reciprocally influencing one another, thereby producing definite relationships among one another.”[3](#fn3) Among the groups which are subject to the sociological discipline the family holds a place of primary importance.

In order to answer the question of the uniqueness of the Negro family, it would be necessary to study its structure and the organization of attitudes within this group, with the view of finding out if these attitudes, which are of greater sociological importance than its structure, are the same as those in the white American family. Although the writer is not prepared to give any final answer based upon extensive research to this question, he will attempt to discuss those factors in the situation which have affected the organization of the Negro family. Before entering upon this discussion, some facts concerning the relation between culture and race should be emphasized in order that the popular fallacies concerning this relation might not prevent a clear understanding of the viewpoint of this paper.

## I

The intrusion of facts which might seem to be long more properly to academic discussions is not only justified by the nature of the subject, but by the fact that much administrative procedure and social policy are governed by dogmatic conceptions concerning the influence of race on culture. The wide currency given the preposterous theory that western culture represents the efflorescence of a single racial stock has helped to strengthen these false conceptions. Because sociologists and anthropologists have recognized the erroneous ideas that are consciously and unconsciously associated with the term “primitive” in referring to peoples possessing a simple culture, they have substituted the term “preliterate”, which is more nearly descriptive of their relation to peoples on a higher plane of culture.

The first fact which we would emphasize is that I there have been no important organic changes in the human race during the historic period. It is necessary to emphasize this fact, because most people who think in terms of evolutionary changes hold the opinion that the culture of a people represents their biological development. In this same connection it should also be made clear that there is no\* basis for the rather general erroneous belief that social evolution follows a definite course, each stage growing naturally out of the preceding stage because of some inherent principle. This second point needs emphasis because many people in discussions concerning the Negro’s acquiring western civilization express the opinion that we must wait on the process of social evolution. Authorities generally agree that all races have the capacity for acquiring western civilization; although some are in doubt as to whether all races are equally capable of enriching it. This is true not only of the material aspects of culture but also of the institutional forms. There has been much dogmatizing about the psychological unfitness of certain races for the institutional forms of western culture. There is no evidence to support a belief in fundamental psychological differences between races. The discredited “instinct psychology” which had much vogue recently was often called upon to support the belief that the sex instinct in the Negro broke through institutionalized sex controls. Culture is acquired in the social environment, and the Negro has taken on the habits of culture according to the environment stimulation to which he has been exposed. Therefore, any study of the Negro family which possesses value must study it historically and apply the method of cultural analysis.

## II

While the Negro lived under institutionalized sex and family relations in Africa, which represented a cultural adaptation, the African sex mores were thoroughly disorganized under the institution of slavery. Although it has been claimed that traces of the African tradition were detected in marriage ceremonies as late as near the opening of the present century,[4](#fn4) the history of the American family group begins with the introduction of the Negro in America. The Negro family during slavery was modelled to some extent after the monogamous ideal of the whites. This was true chiefly in the case of the house servants. The slaves on the plantations lived in the demoralized condition that naturally followed the destruction of the African tribal and family controls and the exigencies of the status of chattel property. Even in the case of the house servants the monogamous ideal was often violated by the masters who were the only models for setting up a new ideal of family life.

Since emancipation the family has tended towards the monogamous ideal. The process has been slow or rapid as one takes into consideration the different forces which have influenced the integration of this primary social group. Here the method of cultural analysis, which takes into account all the fac166tors, psychological, social and economic, which determine the character of any group, is the only approach to an understanding of the Negro family during slavery and since emancipation. It is the opinion of the writer that this approach to the Negro family would not show it to be unique; that is, based upon attitudes wholly different from the white American family. In other words, it would not present the unique characteristics which a family group like the Chinese, where the family is based upon blood, land, law and religion, and is the “practical unit of social control in the village,” [5](#fn5) would present if placed in the American social environment. The unique characteristics of the Negro family are due to the break in cultural continuity and the economic and social forces which have affected its integration in the American environment. These forces, it seems, are of sufficient weight to make the Negro family the subject for special study as a sociological unit.

## III

The first fact that makes the Negro family the subject of special sociological study is the incomplete assimilation of western culture by the Negro masses. Generally when two different cultures come into contact, each modifies the other. But in the case of the Negro in America it meant the total destruction of the African social heritage. Therefore in the case of the family group the Negro has not introduced new patterns of behavior; but has failed to conform to the patterns about him. The degree of conformity is determined by educational and economic factors as well as by social isolation. In the rural sections where the isolation is greatest, it is not uniformly true that he fails to live up to the monogamous ideal about him; for the primary controls of the country often maintain the solidarity of the family which is lost in the anonymity of city life. These are, of course, questions which can only be answered by research.

The second factor that influences the character of the Negro family is his economic and social position in American life. According to the 1920 census, 22.1 per cent of all Negroes over ten years of age gainfully employed were in domestic and personal services, and 45.2 per cent in agriculture. Elsewhere the writer has spoken of the influence of personal services on the family life of the Negro. There are many aspects of the plantation system of the South which have affected the integrity of the Negro family. These have never been the subject of extensive sociological study. Another aspect of race relations which has had important bearing on our question is the intermixture of the two races. This influences the family life by causing the segregation and inbreeding of mulatto communities; the creation of an added burden of illegitimacy and concubinage; and the break in family life by the crossing over into the white race of the light members of the family.

In the Negro family we have two forces at work; those causing its integration, and those tending to disintegrate it. The integrating forces are the social pressures which through education and the assimilation of American civilization are overcoming the disorganization of the past. At the same time the family is subject to the same forces which are destroying the semi-patriarchal family in America. These forces probably are not as extensive in their operation as among the whites; but they are operative.

Aside from these purely social factors there are certain biological aspects of the family which could well be studied. Although it is probably true that there has been no change in the biological make-up of African races during the historical period, there is ground for the opinion that the African environment favored the selection of certain racial traits. Many grotesque and dogmatic conjectures have been made on the basis of this assumption. Fecundity of Negro families and age of marriage have been influenced by the same factors as among the whites. Investigation over a large area alone can settle these problems.

In summing up his position on this question, the writer would say that while the Negro family is not unique in being based upon attitudes foreign to the American family; but because of the influences given above it requires special study as a sociological unit.

1. Cf. Park and Burgess: *Introduction to the Science of Sociology*, p. 44[↩︎](#fnref1)

1. *The Object Matter of Sociology*, Am. Jour. Soc. Vol. XXXII, p 530[↩︎](#fnref2)

1. *Country Life in South China*. Kulp IT, Daniel Harrison, p. 147[↩︎](#fnref3)

1. *The Negro Family*, Atlanta University Publications, No. 13, p. 21[↩︎](#fnref4)

1. *Country Life in South China*, Kulp II, Daniel Harrison, p. 140[↩︎](#fnref5)