

The background of the cover is a light yellow-green color with several stylized, light green leaf motifs scattered across it. The leaves are simple in design, with a central vein and a few smaller veins branching off.

SURVIVAL OF THE AFRICAN AMERICAN FAMILY

The Institutional Impact of U.S. Social Policy

K. Sue Jewell

 **Greenwood**
PUBLISHING GROUP

Survival of the African American Family

This page intentionally left blank

Survival of the African American Family

*The Institutional Impact of
U.S. Social Policy*

K. SUE JEWELL

PRAEGER

**Westport, Connecticut
London**

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Jewell, K. Sue.

Survival of the African American family : the institutional impact of U.S. social policy /
K. Sue Jewell.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references (p.) and index.

ISBN 0-275-95769-1 (alk. paper)—ISBN 0-275-95779-9 (pbk. : alk. paper)

1. African American families. 2. African American families—Government policy.
3. African Americans—Social conditions—1975- 4. Family policy—United States.
5. United States—Social policy—1993- 6. United States—Race relations—Political
aspects. I. Title.

E185.86.J485 2003

306.85'089'96073—dc21 2003052895

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data is available.

Copyright © 2003 by K. Sue Jewell

All rights reserved. No portion of this book may be
reproduced, by any process or technique, without the
express written consent of the publisher.

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 2003052895

ISBN: 0-275-95769-1

0-275-95779-9 (pbk.)

First published in 2003

Praeger Publishers, 88 Post Road West, Westport, CT 06881

An imprint of Greenwood Publishing Group, Inc.

www.praeger.com

Printed in the United States of America



The paper used in this book complies with the
Permanent Paper Standard issued by the National
Information Standards Organization (Z39.48-1984).

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

For SiSi, Curtis II, and Valerie

This page intentionally left blank

Contents

<i>Preface</i>	ix
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	xi
1 Introduction	1
2 Social Policy and African American Family Structure	13
3 Informal Social-Support Systems	39
4 The Era of Liberal Social Policy	53
5 The Impact of Social and Economic Gains on African American Families	77
6 Expectations versus Realization	105
7 The 1980s: A Period of Social Conservatism and Social Reawakening	117
8 A Reaffirmation of Institutional Exclusivity: Removing the Façade	139
9 The 1990s: The Decade of Demystification	159
10 The Turbulent Twenty-First Century	211
11 The Future of Social Policy and the African American Family	231
<i>Bibliography</i>	279
<i>Index</i>	293

This page intentionally left blank

Preface

The primary focus of this book is on the limited progress that African American families have made several decades after the implementation of liberal social policies in the 1960s and 1970s. I also examine the continued hope and high aspirations of African American families who have remained committed to the belief that Democratic administrations will represent their interests and understand and attempt to remedy their continued experiences as the targets of institutional racial inequality, injustices, and even aggression. However, I present irrefutable evidence that these expectations and hopes are dashed as new administrations become even less committed to the elimination of institutional racial discrimination and structural barriers that prevent African American families from participating fully in mainstream American institutions, and that make them victims of institutional and individual racial inequality, which have a profound adverse effect on the stability of African American families. Institutional policies and practices such as racial profiling; financial institutions that deny mortgage loans to creditworthy African Americans; police brutality; policymakers permitting the increasing presence of predatory lenders in lower-income inner-city neighborhoods where African Americans become their chief prey; the mainstream media's continued practice of vilifying African American males and devaluing and negatively stereotyping and objectifying African American females; and the poor quality of urban education and health care-delivery systems provided to African American families are presented as further evidence of the deprivation, humiliation, and inequalities that African American families encounter on a daily basis. I also explore how some of the most

harmful, yet deeply entrenched, myths regarding the inferiority of African Americans have been dispelled as well as the myth that racism is no longer a problem as it has been virtually eliminated in American society. Nevertheless, African American families continue to suffer denigration and subordination through racial discrimination, inextricably integrated into institutional policies, practices, and laws. While acknowledging the importance of African Americans establishing coalitions and alliances with other marginalized groups, I believe that the impetus for change must come from within the African American community and that well-designed strategies will serve as the catalyst for meaningful, progressive, and effective social policies. Therefore, I propose practical approaches and solutions that must emanate from within the African American community, namely through the efforts of African American institutions, with African American families in the vanguard, as key agents of social change.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Jim Sabin, former Director of Academic Research and Development at Greenwood Publishing Group, for his patience and assistance in the preparation of this manuscript. I would also like to express my sincere appreciation to SiSi Jewell, Curtis Jewell II, Valerie Warren, Kathy Warren, and Michael Warren for their unconditional support, understanding, and patience, which has contributed significantly to the completion of this book.

This page intentionally left blank

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Recently, when I began to reflect on recurrent issues that were the focus of news reports, it became apparent that African American families were experiencing innumerable incidents involving racial, sex, and class inequality. What became increasingly obvious is that even African American families who are in the middle class and upper-middle class, like others within the African American community, were the objects of institutional forms of race and sex inequality individually and collectively. In fact, I was quite surprised at the systematic methods of oppression that were being perpetrated against African American families and their members.

For example, the fact that African Americans were upwardly mobile; secured high-income, prestigious positions; and operated successful businesses did not shield them from assaults and abuses from societal institutions. For example, the practice of racial profiling affects all African Americans without regard to their socioeconomic status. Being denied loans for mortgages to purchase and refinance homes disproportionately affects African Americans who have higher incomes than African Americans who are less economically advantaged. In addition, ongoing micro-aggressions directed at African Americans, like rebuffs from teachers, scowls on the faces of judges, and the inability of African American men to hail taxis in major metropolitan areas, have made it increasingly obvious how the very oppressions that we had anticipated would be eliminated with social policies, laws, and executive orders generated during the 1960s and 1970s—the era of liberal social policy—appear to be increasing. It is also the case that while many liberal social policies were rescinded and their effects minimized during the Reagan-Bush administrations, they

have not been restored, replaced, or made more effective in subsequent Democratic administrations, as many African Americans had expected. Consequently, I realize that the problems and challenges facing African American families remain. And their attempt to enjoy the same rights and privileges as their white counterparts is still elusive, not because of their lack of aspirations, motivations, or efforts, but due to a monopoly of power and wealth by a small minority of Americans who unquestionably influence policies and practices of societal institutions as well as laws that are enacted in American society. Moreover, the unequal distribution of power and wealth in America manifests itself in wealthy families and corporations receiving an inordinate share of the resources, while others, especially African American families and other families positioned lower on the racial/ethnic hierarchy, receive considerably less. And despite their investment in terms of time, commitment, and playing by the rules, the rewards that African American families and their members receive are rarely commensurate with their efforts.

Accepting this premise, I examine liberal social policy along with subsequent social-policy reforms and their effects on African American families, as well as the extent to which new social policies and laws must be formulated and enacted respectively. Finally, I explore those actions that must originate in the African American community to bring about meaningful change that is necessary to stabilize African American families and other institutions within the African American community, and to consolidate the resources in our community to assuage the institutional assaults and various forms of cultural humiliation that have been directed at African American families and their members over the past 25 years.

Because I believe that socially and politically it is imperative for African Americans to identify their origins, rather than to have them inaccurately imposed as commencing during slavery in America, I use the cultural appellation *African American* throughout the book. Unlike numerous other families who have migrated to the United States and can identify a country from which they originated along with customs, traditions, values, and beliefs, most African American families have been denied this most valuable and cherished entitlement, yet we are able to identify Africa as our continent of origin, which means that we have a heritage, pride, and connection that is our birthright. However, on occasion, the cultural label *black* is used in discussing various institutions and organizations that continue to be identified with this label within the African American community.

LIBERAL SOCIAL POLICY DEFINED

Social policy is a topic that has joined the ranks of religion and politics in contemporary society, able to polemicize discussions among seemingly

homogeneous, congenial segments of the population. Perhaps one reason for the volatility that is apt to be generated by discussions of social policy, which on the surface appears to be an innocuous issue, is the direction it took in the 1960s and the constituency for which it became intended. Because African Americans petitioned the government to develop mechanisms to eliminate the barriers that prevented their participation in societal institutions, the government became involved in formulating, funding, and monitoring social and economic programs. In effect, a major goal of liberal social policy was to elevate the status of African American families in the United States. The scope of social and economic programs was not limited to African Americans but was extended to poor families irrespective of race or ethnic background. However, since an inordinate number of African American families were represented among the nation's poor, liberal social policy was by design intended to meet their needs.

While definitions of *liberalism* vary, here defined, it is a belief system that embraces the precept that the federal government has a responsibility to do all within its power to ensure that all its people receive equitable treatment and are given equal opportunities to participate fully in social, political, and economic institutions. Moreover, *liberalism* refers to the federal government's attempt to effect social justice for historically disenfranchised groups (such as African Americans, the poor, women, and other racial and ethnic minorities) by implementing and expanding social-service programs, passing civil rights legislation, and exercising rigorous enforcement powers. Liberal social policy, which is commonly associated with the period ranging from 1960 to the late 1970s but more accurately reflects a more expansive era beginning in the mid 1950s, is generally credited/faulted with having brought about major progress or major problems for African American families.

Heated debates that revolve around social policy surround efforts in the 1980s, 1990s, and the twenty-first century to rescind liberal policies and practices. The social conservatism characteristic of the 1980s set the climate for discussions regarding the effectiveness of liberal social policy, the benefits, and the costs.

This book examines the impact of liberal social policy on African American families in America. In so doing, I accept the premise that African American families have always been affected by social policy, even though, until the 1960s (with the exception of a brief period following emancipation), they had never been the intended recipients of a national social policy in this country. It is obvious that African American families, as well as families with membership in other racial and ethnic groups, are affected to some degree by any form of domestic policy. Due to their economically depressed status and inextricably related to their systematic exclusion from traditional institutions, African American families have

been especially vulnerable to public policy changes, as well as to fluctuations in other social, economic, and political events. Furthermore, social policy affects not only the structure of African American families but the dynamics as well. Just as social systems on a macro level are sustained and perpetuated by their interdependent relationships, institutions within the African American community are also mutually dependent. What affects one institution will surely impact to some extent on another. For example, when social policy impacts the African American family, one can be relatively sure that other institutions in the African American community (such as the Black Church, African American-owned businesses, etc.) are also affected. In addition to altering the structure of African American families, social policy also has had a profound effect on the dynamics of these institutions. An elaborate and complex series of adaptive mechanisms has evolved for the purpose of ensuring the survival and progress of African American families. Many of these systems and patterns of interaction emerged in response to the absence of a national social policy that would have provided essential goods and services to African American families. Mutual-aid networks, which represent a mechanism for the exchange of valuable commodities, are an example of one such process that has been responsible for the ability of African American families to function largely without support from sources external to the African American community.¹

In discussions of liberal social policy, there is a tendency to confuse social welfare policy with more global social-policy initiatives. Furthermore, as with the stereotyped image of social welfare programs, the misconception that African American people have been the sole beneficiaries of liberal social and economic programs is quite pervasive. In this examination of liberal social policy I am referring to those programs that include social welfare services but that are not limited to public assistance alone. In the main, I am exploring those social and economic programs that were developed and expanded during the 1960s and 1970s. While I recognize that some of these programs were first developed in the 1930s, and that others were created in the decade preceding 1960, the primary focus is on the 1960s and 1970s because of the infusion of relatively large amounts of government funds into these programs during these two decades. Further, this period, unlike others, was marked by a more liberal pattern of administration, policies, and practices, which resulted in services being extended to larger numbers of individuals. It is important to note that although the period under consideration was, on balance, characterized by liberal policies, the entire time span was not. The Nixon and Ford administrations contained elements of both liberalism and conservatism, with emphasis on the latter. However, despite the interlude of the Nixon and Ford administrations, this new thrust in monetary allocations, innovative policy initiatives, and extended benefits encompasses our def-

inition of liberal social policy. Further, the scope of my analysis of the impact of social policy on African American families includes the passage of laws that were also designed to give disenfranchised groups access to institutions that had, prior to the 1960s, maintained a position of exclusivity and rigidity, thereby limiting the participation of African Americans, women, Hispanics, and other racial and ethnic minorities. Legislation that falls within this realm includes affirmative action; the voting rights act; fair housing legislation; *Brown v. Board of Education*, which made school segregation unconstitutional; and other laws passed to guarantee that all U.S. citizens are accorded the same opportunities for institutional participation.

When in this work reference is made to government involvement being "great" or "massive," it is done with a historical perspective in mind. While there is disagreement over what constitutes "great" or "massive" with respect to monetary allocations and total governmental involvement, the sheer magnitude of the investment made by the federal government during the 1960s and 1970s was unprecedented. It is with this knowledge that I use these descriptive terms. In this same vein, I remain cognizant of the fact that the percentages of moneys spent for federal programs must be viewed relative to other government expenditures during the period under consideration. It is not within the purview of this book to examine social policy within the context of its effectiveness or capacity to fulfill a social obligation based on monetary appropriations alone. This is not to suggest that the government's commitment to eradicate social injustices and to enable African American families to reach economic parity with white families is somehow unrelated to the amounts of money committed for such an endeavor. However, the ability of liberal social policy to effect necessary changes in the status of African American families and their members extends beyond the funds that the federal government has committed. In fact, the allocation of monies to social and economic programs is but one manifestation of the government's perception of its obligation.

The question addressed in this book is, Why did liberal social policy in the United States fail? If, as I believe, liberal social policy *was* ineffective, the questions I seek to answer are, Why? and, What evidence is there to substantiate this claim? Another question I shall attempt to answer is, What has been the overall effect of liberal social policy on the status of African American families? Finally, I explore those conditions that must be present if a social policy is to effectively enhance the status and functioning capacity of African American families and their members.

My premise that liberal social policy, as enacted in the United States, was unsuccessful is not intended to mean that liberal social policy enacted in parts of Europe, or that may emerge in other forms in the United States, is or will be ineffective. As such, inferences to that effect are unacceptable and not representative of my position. What I propose is that liberal social

policy initiated in the 1950s and expanded during the 1960s and 1970s did not accomplish the mission for which it was intended. Succinctly stated, social and economic programs that evolved from liberal social policy in the United States have failed to eventuate in full participation for African American and poor families in mainstream institutions. Although these programs had a broader-based constituency, the focus will be placed on the effects of these programs on African American families. My rationale for focusing on African American families is that inherent in my thesis is the belief that race was and continues to be a salient factor in determining an individual's life chances in America. Consequently, a holistic or generic perspective, designed to explain why social policy failed to prevent the perpetuation and growth of underclass families in general, would not sufficiently address racially based factors, which have systematically precluded African Americans from gaining equal access to opportunity structures. And to do so would be, in theory, to ignore a major purpose for which liberal social policy was designed. Before the 20-year period was over, a number of other disenfranchised groups, including Hispanics, American Indians, and white women, also became contenders for the redistribution of power and wealth initially sought by African Americans in the civil rights movement. Although these groups share a commonality of interests with African Americans in that they have all experienced systematic forms of social inequities, there are distinct historical experiences that have resulted in coping strategies that are somewhat unique to each group. It is these adaptive strategies developed by African American families, which encompass family structure and dynamics, that have been a response to social policy; as social policy has changed, the strategies have been changed as well.

THE GOVERNMENT'S ROLE IN SOCIAL POLICY

By explaining the effect that liberal social policy has had on African American families, I do not argue for the divestment of the federal government or any other levels of government in the funding, development, and supervision of social and economic programs. In fact, I maintain that government participation in the development, funding, and enforcement of social and economic programs is not only important but also essential if African American families are to substantially increase their level of participation in societal institutions throughout the United States.

Accordingly, the issue is not whether the government has a responsibility for ensuring that African American families—and all families—have an equal opportunity to participate fully in social institutions. Rather, the issue is identifying the most expedient way in which the government should fulfill its obligation to guarantee that all groups, irrespective of race, ethnicity, or gender, are granted fundamental civil rights.

The neoconservatives, who have vociferously attacked the government's involvement in social policy, have done so for the purpose of eliminating social and economic programs. Members of this political interest group offer diverse reasons for the failure of liberal social policy to result in economic independence for African American and poor families. Diverse as they are, these arguments are designed with one goal in mind: the radical revision of social policy in general and social welfare policy in particular. This "either-or" approach to social policy is an approach of no utility to the government, the recipients of such programs, or society at large. Few enterprises conduct business in this fashion; to do so would undoubtedly have devastating consequences. Instead, the goal of a well-run business is to enhance function to an optimal level through carefully calculated change. Accordingly, functional features or system components should remain, and those that do not function properly must be either modified and retained or defined as possessing little value and discarded. Rarely is a total system that has salvageable components defined as being of no utility and completely eliminated. Yet, in the 1980s conservatives proposed that liberal social policy was detrimental to recipients, as well as to the general population whose tax dollars supported social and economic programs. Blaming liberal social policy for a high federal deficit and an inadequate national security, conservatives pushed for a drastic reduction in funding and the complete elimination of social and economic programs.

THE AFRICAN AMERICAN FAMILY AND SOCIAL POLICY: ASCRIBING RESPONSIBILITY

Clearly, the factors identified as causing the failure of liberal social policy dictate the nature of the solution. For those who see the government as too permissive and African American families as the problem, understandably the solution is the elimination of such programs. Conversely, when the failure of liberal social policy is more correctly attributed to misconceptions regarding the recipients of social and economic programs, faulty planning, poor administration, ineffective enforcement, and the inability to develop mechanisms for overcoming institutional resistance, appropriate solutions focus on modifying the programs and identifying strategies that will make social policies and practices more efficacious.

Irrespective of factors that militated against social and economic programs achieving their desired ends, little benefit can be derived from ascribing blame for their failures. As such, what I offer in this discussion is a form of social criticism, not condemnation. Though the latter approach may be feasible for partisan politics, it is of no utility to those who are committed to developing strategies that will ameliorate social and economic conditions for African American families in the United States. In

fact, a nonpartisan effort is a requisite for the formulation of a social policy that will possess the capacity for the ongoing formation, implementation, and assessment of social and economic programs.

Perhaps one of the most rudimentary steps toward establishing an effective social policy is the reassessment of the positive and negative consequences of past social and economic programs. Before one can effectively develop a social policy designed to assure that African American families and their members are able to participate fully in social institutions, the plethora of data generated by past social and economic programs must be analyzed. Interestingly, those who oppose liberal social policy on the grounds that the government's involvement was tantamount to intrusion in the open market have been eager to conduct inquiries to determine the outcomes of such programs. While their findings are likely to be similar to those of liberals who advocate government involvement in social-service delivery, the interpretation and recommendations are generally quite different.

While polarization exists among various segments of the population regarding the role of government toward improving the plight of African American and poor families, there is a surfeit of individuals who have not yet established a firm position and for whom no answer is readily available. It has been argued that historically the masses have remained ambivalent regarding social policy and the plight of the less economically advantaged.² Much of this uncertainty is related to the adversarial nature of social policy. To a great extent, the proliferation of diametrically opposed views has confused the issue for the public. However, since the inception of liberal social policy, uncertainty over what should be done to improve the economic position of African American families has shifted to whom is responsible for doing so. In some quarters, the federal government is considered the entity that should assume this responsibility. Others maintain that African American families must resolve their own problems. And still there is the position that the problem cannot be adequately improved in light of available resources and the magnitude and institutionalization of the problem, and without the collaborative efforts of the government, African American families, and micro- and macroinstitutions. It is the last position that is set forth in this book.

THE ROLE OF ACADEME

In seeking solutions to social problems, policymakers have relied on academic scholarship. Although academic scholarship is intended to influence public policy, the converse is not without precedent. Thus, social policy has also served as the impetus for research, which tends to corroborate a priori social-policy decisions. It is difficult to conceive how those who utilize this approach can consider it a reliable method for formulating

social policy. Though academicians use scientific methods and instruments to gather data pertinent to social-policy decision making, the extreme divergence in interpretation of this data is reflected in contradictory findings and policy recommendations. While it is not realistic to assume that social scientists should agree on all or even most policy issues, the degree of disparity is far too great in general policy issues as well as in areas of specificity. This pronounced lack of agreement among academicians regarding social policy tends to be exacerbated when the unit of analysis is social policy within the African American community. While polarization is understandable within the larger society, where there is overt and conscious variability in terms of political interests, the role of objectivity and adherence to scientific rigor should result in more uniformity in the academy. Regrettably, such is not the case.

There appear to be two major perspectives in academe, which mirror those within the larger society. As such, academicians tend to be proponents of either the liberal or conservative persuasion. Those who subscribe to the former generally express unswerving support for social and economic programs implemented in the 1960s and 1970s. In the other school of thought are conservatives, who oppose liberal social policy and believe that it is decidedly perilous to tamper with the open-market system. Split along these same lines are academicians who differentially assign responsibility for improving the economically dependent status of African American families: liberals expect societal institutions to improve conditions for African Americans while conservatives insist that African Americans must reach parity with whites through their own efforts, without government support. A careful analysis of the literature is likely to reveal considerable disagreement among scholars regarding the functions of various structures and dynamics within institutions in the African American community and the larger society. Clearly, if academic scholarship is to influence social policy within the African American community, it must overcome this impasse. To do so, however, means that academicians must become less vulnerable to the political pressures that exist within both the larger society and the academy. As such, those who are exponents of the liberal persuasion should have little difficulty identifying policy recommendations that entail the use of African Americans' assets, regardless of how infinitesimal. Moreover, scholars who adhere to the conservative viewpoint must be ready to concede that government involvement in the open-market system is sometimes imperative if other means of increasing private-sector participation have met with limited success. From this vantage point comes the recognition that academic scholarship should play a salient role in the formulation of social policy, rather than social policy affecting academic scholarship.

Academic scholarship relative to the study of any problem is dynamic and not static. The evolutionary nature of academic scholarship is rarely

questioned when scientific investigation in the physical sciences leads to policy decisions that later undergo modification, as improved measurement techniques are developed and new data are generated. But academic scholarship that results in policy decisions in the arena of social policy is, oftentimes, expected to be absolute, firm, and unchanging. Whether in the physical or social sciences, academic scholarship should operate within the same parameters. Accordingly, when changes occur that warrant new social-policy recommendations, researchers should willingly make changes without reluctance.

SOCIAL POLICY BY DEFAULT: ANOTHER BASIS FOR FAILURE

Social policy and the African American family were topics that had received considerable attention for many years. A significant portion of these discussions focused on the necessity for liberal social policy, which would reduce African American family dependency and enhance stabilization. As problems became apparent and the structure of African American families and other institutions in the African American community began to reflect the negative impact of liberal social policy, academicians and nonacademicians increased their examination of these phenomena. However, because liberal social policy evolved out of protests and demands of the 1960s, its proponents—whether academicians, policymakers, administrators, or recipients—have been placed in a position of defensiveness. Therefore, criticisms of liberal social policy by its advocates were generally considered self-defeating. Liberals refrained from criticizing social policies and practices, fearing that their opponents would consider such self-criticism a justification to eradicate social and economic programs and to eliminate government involvement. Equally important is the fact that those aspects of liberal social policy that were damaging to African American institutions, including the African American family, remained virtually unchanged.

The precariousness of this situation, whereby any criticism of liberal social policy was likely to be interpreted as total program failure, is evident in the appearance of problems that, with intervention, could have been prevented. Trepidation on the part of advocates of liberal social policy to enunciate the emergence of problems and the need for policy and administrative change represents an inherent flaw in liberal social policy in the United States. For this reason alone, it is unlikely that liberal social policy could have achieved the goals for which it was designed. This is not to imply that changes did not occur in the policies and administration of social and economic programs. But the belief, on the part of administrators, academicians, and supporters of liberal social policy, that the identification of problems in social and economic programs would have

jeopardized components in need of modification or elimination and would have imperiled social and economic programs in their entirety militated against the success of these endeavors.

The fact that liberal social policy was not able to elevate African American families to a position of economic independence is an issue that all too often is overlooked. Moreover, problems that have increased for African American families during the era of liberal social policy are not spuriously but highly correlated with the nature of programs developed and their administration. To continue to ignore the debilitating effects of these programs is likely to be even more devastating to the future of African American families and other African American institutions.

Thus, I undertake the task of dispelling the misconception that liberal social policy, in general, was beneficial to African American families. Associated with the myth that liberal social policy has been advantageous to African American families is the myth that institutions within American society are no longer exclusive but offer to African Americans, women, and members of all racial and ethnic groups equal opportunities to compete for societal rewards. Though changes were made in the practices of major institutions to afford access to minority groups, discriminatory practices, which continue to limit the participation of African Americans as a cultural group, remain. At the same time, there are African Americans who experienced individual success.³ Ostensibly, upward mobility for those individuals and families was also mitigated. Because an image of institutional cooperation emerged from government efforts to ensure social equity, African American families that are poor continue to be blamed for their social and economic status. Similarly, this sentiment is applied to African American families across all socioeconomic levels. Coupled with the fact that government efforts were devoted to seeking and implementing forms of redress for past racial injustices, some people feel that African American families have received special favors or opportunities denied to others. The combined effect attributes failure to African Americans for not taking advantage of these opportunities but does not recognize that liberal social policy failed to accomplish its objectives. Moreover, this notion of institutional cooperation belies the underrepresentation of African Americans in high-level occupations, business ownership, and other positions of power and wealth throughout the United States.

A PLURALISTIC APPROACH

Although most analyses of this kind focus almost exclusively on the economic consequences of social policy, it is important that the social-psychological implications of social policy also be examined. It is far too simplistic to limit an assessment of the impact of liberal social policy on

African American families to one dimension alone. And to a large extent, the assumptions upon which social policy is based are sociological. To be sure, perceptions of African American families as structurally and functionally dysfunctional have been at the basis of both conservative and liberal social policy. While the failure of social and economic programs to overcome structural barriers has had a devastating impact on African American families, the perception of their social inadequacy also contributed significantly to the destabilizing effect of liberal social policy. Clearly, an effective social policy must eliminate societal barriers and do so by acknowledging the strengths of African American families.

NOTES

1. Andrew Billingsley and Jeanne M. Giovannoni, *Children of the Storm: Black Children and American Child Welfare* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1972), p. 46; Robert Hill, *The Strengths of Black Families* (New York: Emerson Hall, 1972), p. 56; Robert Hill, *Economic Policies and Black Progress: Myths and Realities* (Washington, D.C.: National Urban League, 1981), p. 79; Robert Hill, *Self-Help Groups in the African-American Community: Current Organization and Service* (unpublished paper, University of North Carolina School of Social Work, 1987), pp. 4–5; Carol Stack, *All Our Kin: Strategies for Survival in a Black Community* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974), p. 28; Herbert Gutman, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom: 1750–1925* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1976), pp. 213–214; Harriette Pipes McAdoo, “Black Mothers and the Extended Family Support Network,” in *The Black Woman*, ed. La Frances Rodgers-Rose (Beverly Hills, Calif.: Sage, 1980), pp. 125–127; Carrie Allen McCray, “The Black Woman and Family Roles,” in *The Black Woman*, ed. La Frances Rodgers-Rose (Beverly Hills, Calif.: Sage, 1980), pp. 70–73; and K. Sue Jewell, “Use of Social Welfare Programs and the Disintegration of the Black Nuclear Family,” *Western Journal of Black Studies* 8 (winter 1984): 193–195.

2. “Reagan’s Polarized America,” *Newsweek*, 5 April 1982, p. 19.

3. Derrick A. Bell Jr., *Race, Racism and American Law* (Boston: Little Brown & Company, 1980), p. 43.

CHAPTER 2

Social Policy and African American Family Structure

A discussion of the effects of social policy on the formation, maintenance, and dissolution of African American family structures can best be understood through a historical analysis of African American family patterns. The focus of this chapter is on the period covering the 1960s to the 1980s. In later chapters the effects of social policy on African American family structures in the 1990s and the twenty-first century are explored. Although U.S. liberal social policy contributed to the erosion of African American two-parent and extended families, conservative social policy and the absence of a national public policy that addressed the needs of African Americans have been responsible for the emergence and disintegration of other types of African American family arrangements.¹ Unquestionably, the absence of a national social policy resulted in the development of structures among African American families that influence their many configurations today. Interestingly, there exists a considerable lack of agreement among scholars regarding the origins and causes of African American family structures. Essentially two major perspectives relative to etiology and causation of African American family structures have been advanced.

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES ON THE STRUCTURE OF THE AFRICAN AMERICAN FAMILY

According to Herskovits and Nobles, the contemporary African American family is predicated on precolonial African culture, with its emphasis

on the clan.² Conversely, Frazier, Elkins, Moynihan, and Rainwater and Yancey argued that the vicissitudes of slavery destroyed African familial structures and gave rise to a multiplicity of African American family constellations that continue to exist today.³ Accordingly, the matrifocal character of African American families is offered as evidence that the patriarchal nature of traditional African families was submerged during slavery. Related to this perspective is the thesis of matriarchy as the primary cause of intergenerational poverty, crime, and other forms of social disorganization among African American families. Popularized in 1965 by Daniel P. Moynihan, then the secretary of labor, the analysis of African American family structures as a determinant of economic dependence served as a buttress for the reformulation of social policy. The myriad social welfare programs that ensued were based on Moynihan's research, which polemicized the issue of societal versus matriarchal culpability for the depressed economic status of African Americans. Although social programs were developed and expanded in direct response to the belief in African American family disorganization, there has never been any consensus regarding African American family structure, its origins, causes, or the ability of African American families to perform the functions to which they have been assigned. In fact, the debate over whether African American families are matriarchal and the extent to which they conform to the traditional nuclear family continues more than 25 years later.

In sum, two major disparate theoretical formulations have been proffered. On one hand, African American families are perceived as deviations from the normative family arrangement—that is, the nuclear family—because slavery destroyed the traditional African family. The opposing view holds that in general African American families are primarily nuclear, and that African American nuclear families represent variations brought about due to harsh social and economic conditions. Sudarkasa cites the validity in both models and suggests that a thorough study of African American family organizations be undertaken.⁴

In either case, the controversy surrounding African American family structure is related to the inordinate proportion of African American families with female heads. The fact that African American families have always had a larger percentage of females maintaining households than white families has raised numerous questions regarding its functioning capability, particularly in the area of socializing male children.⁵ Yet, concern over the ability of African American families to function at a level comparable to white middle-class families has not been limited to African American families maintained by females. Augmented, extended, and other variations of African American families have also been characterized by some social scientists as being incapable of performing at a level on par with the traditional nuclear family.⁶

Over the last two decades, a considerable amount of time and energy has been devoted to arguments and counterarguments as to whether African American family structure is deviant, variant, or congruent with the idealized nuclear family. Even more alarming is the recognition that social policy has been predicated on these apparent inconsistencies and misconceptions, which plague African American family studies. Whatever their theoretical perspective, social scientists representing both schools of thought have attempted to verify or refute the matriarchal culpability theory. In the past, many liberal sociologists who challenged the matriarchal culpability theory, which placed the onus for African American deprivation on female-controlled African American families, accurately repudiated the prevalence of matriarchy.⁷

Frequently, efforts to confirm or deny the prevalence of African American matriarchy has led to the systematic comparing of African American families to white families, for the purpose of establishing gross similarities or differences in terms of structure and functioning. Still, a thorough analysis of the structure and dynamics of African American families has yet to be conducted. Clearly, scholars who have developed elaborate paradigms in defense of African American family structures, comparing them to white families and explaining variability as solely due to economic factors, are as guilty of proliferating misconceptions about African American family structure as are those who attribute social ills confronting African Americans to African American families alone. Whether one subscribes to the belief that African American family structures are matriarchal, predicated on African cultural tradition, or hybrids of white American familial structures, it is difficult to refute that African American families are unique and do not conform to the traditional nuclear model.

The failure on the part of social scientists to develop a conceptual model that explains the causes and nature of African American family structures and the dynamics that affect the maintenance of African American families is due largely to continuous efforts to analyze African American families using the normative paradigm. Theoreticians, those in the cultural deviance and relativism schools, continue to examine African American families using a middle-class, nuclear model as the barometer. But not all factors that affect white family structures impact similarly upon the structures of African American families. The primary difference is that African American families, because of social and economic hardships, developed unique family arrangements.⁸ Hence, African American families became dependent upon external informal support systems to a greater extent than did their white counterparts.⁹ Even the most progressive and upwardly mobile African American families have achieved success due to social-support systems that are outside their immediate families. In other words, African American families have not been autonomous units; rather

they have historically relied on informal social-support systems for survival. Thus, to compare African American families to white families, either to confirm or rebut theories purporting deviance or relativism, is akin to comparing apples to oranges.

Clearly, social policy dictates the availability of fundamental resources and strongly mediates the provision of goods and services by institutional and noninstitutional service providers. Because African American families, like white families, are dependent on external sources for survival, the survival of all families is to a greater or lesser degree inextricably related to social policy. However, because race is a salient factor that determines differential access to economic opportunity structures, social policy is likely to have a greater impact on African American families. Whether social policy is conservative or liberal, African American families must rely on entities outside of their primary familial unit for essential goods and services. But social policy can and does alter the nature of the exchange relationship between the African American family and institutional and informal social-support systems. In the case of liberal social policy, in which numerous social and economic programs were developed and entitlement was liberalized, government social welfare programs replaced mutual-aid networks, transferring dependency from noninstitutional support systems to institutional ones. In theory, governmental agencies were neither intended nor designed to supplant these informal social-support systems but were developed as emergency measures to bring about economic independence by supplementing existing informal social-support systems.

In addition to their failure to bring about social and economic parity, social welfare programs drastically altered noninstitutional support systems and modified value and belief systems, thereby accelerating the demise of African American two-parent and extended families and the growth of African American female-headed families. Moreover, the introduction of a plethora of social programs did more than modify the structure of African American families. It radically changed the life cycle of African American families.

Before explaining the process by which the structure and life cycle of the African American family adversely underwent modification, it is necessary to dispel two common myths regarding African American families. First is the myth that African American and white families are similar in terms of structure and dynamics. This notion came about largely as a means of refuting the thesis of the matriarchal character of African American families. Still, there is no empirical evidence to support this contention. As early as 1932, when E. Franklin Frazier criticized lower-class African American families for the disproportionate number of female-maintained families, scholars were quick to note that the majority of African American families, like white families, were nuclear.¹⁰ Later, when

Moynihan advanced his thesis on the matriarchal character of African American families, a number of sociologists hastily pointed to the majority of African American families that, they argued, were like white families relative to their nuclear structural arrangement. Gutman added further corroboration to the argument that African American families should not be labeled social anomalies and pathological, based on the fact that many were headed by females; he used census data to establish that as early as 1890, 90 percent of all African American families were of the nuclear type. Unlike many social scientists, Gutman's use of the concept "nuclear type" also implied that African American and white family structures must be considered in relative and not absolute terms.¹¹

Although some researchers have gone to great lengths to establish that the African American family is typically structured like the white family, in many instances subfamilies and variable forms are mentioned. For example, Billingsley developed an extensive composite of familial constellations that exist as autonomous units or within African American families.¹² For instance, female-headed families have been found to coexist within a nuclear or extended structure. When subfamilies are found to coexist with nuclear families, the entire structure is redefined, becoming an extended or augmented nuclear family. In fact, the various types of African American familial arrangements that are found independently or within another family arrangement are too numerous to mention. The issue is not that these structures are not found among whites, for they are. Instead, the controversy is over the prevalence of diverse structural arrangements within the African American community. According to traditionalists, the larger the percentage of families of the simple nuclear type, the greater is conformity to societal expectations. Conversely, the lower the percentage of nuclear families, the greater is the use of the deviance label in describing these families.¹³ Understandably, the desire to identify African American family structure with that of white families, thereby employing the cultural equivalent perspective, is related to eliminating the deviance label assigned to African American families. If African American families do not differ significantly from white families, then social scientists, policymakers, and society at large would have difficulty maintaining negative labels and stereotypes that affect the treatment of African Americans in society.

There is a surfeit of evidence suggesting that African American families are unique, and while they may approximate those of white families, they are different in composition, structure, and dynamics over the life cycle of the family unit. In addition to Gutman, researchers including Billingsley and Hill recognized that while African American families were largely nuclear in type, their structures did not strictly conform to that of the traditional white nuclear family.¹⁴ Ostensibly, occupants of a socially and economically disadvantaged status are not in a position to maintain an

autonomous structural arrangement such as the nuclear family *ad infinitum*. Therefore, although husband and wife may be present in the home, African American families in general have not conformed to the ideal "nuclear" type of familial structure. Perhaps one major reason for the unique qualities of African American nuclear-type families has been their willingness to modify their structure based on the needs of their consanguine and fictive kin. Thus, referring to African American families with both husband and wife present as nuclear generally requires qualification. Until recently, white families defined as nuclear were more likely to contain a husband, wife, and children over a longer period of the family life cycle than corresponding African American families.

The second misconception about African American families is that their structures are static. Heretofore, African American families have been viewed as static. While it is true that white families, until the 1970s, have been relatively static, African American family structures have been transitory. Over the African American family life cycle, a variety of changes are likely to occur within the family structure. While the frequency of structural change is related to socioeconomic status, African American families are characterized by changing structures across all social classes. Hence, a developmental approach is a necessity for analyzing African American family structure.

According to Billingsley and Hill, the diversity of African American family structures represents adaptations that are necessary to ensure survival.¹⁵ Thus, it is important to note that African American families, with their flexible and dynamic structures, have manifested optimal levels of functioning. Despite adverse social and economic forces, the flexibility of the African American family has ensured its stability and perpetuation. Failure to understand African American families and the propensity among policy makers and social practitioners to mold African American families into an ideal nuclear model through liberal social and economic programs contributed to the deterioration of viable African American family structures.

When the federal government began massive intervention into social-service delivery to ensure equity and equal access to opportunities for African Americans and the poor, there was little agreement on or understanding of the social forces that had created African American family structures. Policymakers and human-service administrators did not understand that the absence of social policy and later the trend toward conservative policy, in conjunction with limited opportunities for African Americans to achieve economic independence, had created African American families that were malleable and mutually dependent on informal support systems for survival and progress. In the case of the majority of African American families that were labeled "nuclear," there was also a failure to recognize that these families, while appearing on the surface to

be structured according to the idealized family model, were more likely to undergo structural change over time. And they, like other African American families, were held intact by dependence on noninstitutional support systems. In effect, the thread that kept African American families together was a social-exchange network embedded in a value and belief system based on the norm of reciprocity. It was also this commitment to collective cooperativism that eventuated in the unique structures and dynamics characteristic of African American families. Taking in new members and permitting the coexistence of subfamilies is evidence of the interdependent relationships of African American families and members of informal support systems.¹⁶

The foregoing myths, along with the misconception of the matriarchal character of African American families, became firmly entrenched in social policy in the 1960s and served as the basis for government expansion of social programs. Thus liberalization of social policy was designed to bring about economic independence by transforming matriarchal African American families into patriarchal structures, with African American males legitimately usurping power from African American women through economic privilege. Regrettably, social programs, while based on the need to destroy what was purported to be the African American matriarchy, ironically created it. In so doing, African American institutions and cultural value systems, which were responsible for keeping African American two-parent families intact, were undermined.

DEVELOPMENTAL CHANGES IN AFRICAN AMERICAN FAMILY STRUCTURES

In 1960, before the liberalization of social policy, 74 percent of all African American families were maintained by a husband and wife, 22 percent were headed by women, and the remaining 4 percent were families maintained by African American males.¹⁷ By 1980, approximately two decades after the introduction and expansion of social programs, African American families had undergone considerable change. A dramatic increase in the rate of marital dissolutions through separation and divorce resulted in the decline of African American husband-wife families and the growth of African American families headed by women. The percentage of African American families maintained by married couples had declined to 55 percent in 1982, while the number of African American women heading families rose to 41 percent in this same period. In roughly 10 years following the implementation of a plethora of social programs (designed to stabilize African American and poor families), the divorce rates for African American couples escalated from 104 per 1,000 in 1970 to 220 divorces per 1,000 married couples in 1982. By 1980, divorce had become endemic to African American couples, with African American college-educated