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June 15, 2007
Social Stratification of the Deep South

The Household Structure of Black Families: Networks of Race, Gender, and Socio- Economic Status

The two distinctive features in the structure of African American families are the prevalence of single parents and extended families. There are more Black female-headed households than Whites. Recent estimates place Black female-headed households between 37% and 40% of the total, and White female-headed households between 11% and 15% of the total (Dressler 853). It is clear that the nuclear family isn't as prevalent in Black families as it is in white families. The household structure of Black families in America is notably different from other races and ethnicities with the female playing a major role causing economic hardships and disruptive childhoods.

There is a relationship between the cultural/familial sphere and the political/economic sphere in the United States. This relationship is crucial in understanding the persisting poverty in the majority of Black female-headed households (Brewer). Brewer points out that the nuclear family imperative is rooted in upper-class, white, patriarchal prerogatives that are unevenly shared across race and class lines. Many Black families headed by Black females are struggling in multiple ways because, "Black women are highly concentrated in the lowest paying and lowest status women's work" (Brewer 335). Unfortunately, the feminization of poverty which doesn't help Black families led by women. "Black women who have attended high school have less income than white men or black men who have attended elementary school" (Brewer 338). It's important to note that historically the black family has respected extended relations, including family forms involving higher rates of out-of-marriage births and female-

headed households. However, many black female-headed households are experiencing some of the highest poverty rates according to Rose M. Brewer's article, *Black Women in Poverty: Some Comments on Female-Headed Families*. Black mothers also are less likely to have adequate access to childcare. "Single mothers who are household heads, however, must have adequate child care in order to make extensive labor market commitments" (Tienda 381). Single White mothers and married Black mothers were about equally likely to report adequate access to childcare. The most disadvantaged group was the single Black mothers for whom only slightly better than one-quarter had adequate childcare. Hogan's research finds that Blacks more often receive half or more of their income from a kin or a friend due to the greater proportions of blacks who are single and/ or live with nearby kin who can provide support. When matched on marital status, fertility history, and kin proximity, blacks are less likely than whites to receive substantial income support. Overall participation in a support network is more common among Blacks than among whites and is much more common among single women than married women. Even with the prevalence of support networks for Black single mothers, the networks are inadequate to fully compensate the costs of single motherhood. (Hogan) In the regressions on receipt of public assistance, both Black and White mothers who live in a parent's home were significantly less likely to receive public assistance. (Folk)

Over the past two decades in America there has been an important change in family life including national statistics on divorce, lowered fertility, living arrangements, and women's labor force participation. (Tienda) Many Black children are more likely than non Black children to spend significant portions of their childhood in households that are not dual parent and are more likely to reside with extended relatives (Hunter). "It

is estimated that for recent birth cohorts 59% to 94% of Afro-American children will experience single-parent family status by age 18” (Hunter 419). There is more fluidity in living arrangements for Black children growing up and this disrupts patterns established later in life. However, it is important to realize that the high incidence of single parenthood and children residing without parents among blacks is not new. Ruggles claims that the pattern is clearly evident as far back as 1850 among free Blacks. Along with this analysis, there is one key question: why have the percentages of Black children with absent parents risen dramatically? Ruggles poses this question, “What is the source of this distinctive African-American pattern of single parenthood?” His alternate explanations for the origins of this startling pattern are that the residence of children without both parents could have been a response to the socioeconomic conditions faced by newly freed blacks after the Civil War and freed Blacks in 1850. His other rationale is the pattern could simply reflect a difference in social norms between Blacks and Whites which could have developed through slavery or cultural roots between Africans and Europeans. These patterns have been studied by many sociologists and Ruggles believes that the cultural explanations appear just as persuasive as the economic ones.

After 1960, the stability of the Black family began to decline and become an issue for sociologists and others. “The key categories of black household structure; however single-parent and extended were remarkably stable, at least through 1960” (Ruggles 139). In the Dressler article, the most common female-headed household is a woman living with her children and grandchildren. Other examples are women living alone, women living with other relatives or non relatives, and women living with parents and grandparents. In Westside, a small Southern Black city used in the Dressler article,

among the four subtypes there was a total of 41.1% female headed households. (Dressler) Statistics show an extreme difference between single Black mothers and married White mothers. “56% of single Black mothers live in a household with other adult kinfolk as compared to only 8% of the married Whites” (Hogan 804). Black women in general have close relations to their maternal figures and single women of both races are less likely to live large distances from their mothers. Kin access is better among Blacks than among whites with Black single mothers having the best access to kin. However, being a single mother equally increases the likelihood of kin access among blacks and whites. This black extended family pattern is not simply a function of teenage childbearing or single motherhood, though it is increased by these facts. Hogan suggests it may reflect either a racial difference in the willingness and perceived desirability of living with kin or it may be a mechanism that reduces the costs of housing in light of low incomes. (Hogan) The following table summarizes the living arrangements found among white and black single mothers in the National Survey of Families and Households. (Folk)

LIVING ARRANGEMENTS OF SINGLE MOTHERS WITH CHILDREN LESS THAN AGE 18 IN THE NATIONAL SURVEY OF FAMILIES AND HOUSEHOLDS

	White mothers		Black mothers	
	-N	-%	-N	-%
Mothers who live alone with children	211	58.2	133	56.3
Mothers who live in parental home	42	11.5	39	16.7
Mothers who cohabit	65	17.8	22	9.3
Mothers who live with another adult	-45	-12.5	-42	-17.7
	363	100.0	236	100.0

$\chi^2=12.8, 3df; p<.005$

Note: N's are weighted.
Actual sample size = 834 whites and 545 blacks.

There have been studies conducted to examine and compare differences between households. In the article on the household structure in a Southern Black community, six categories of households were used to make comparisons. The categories were female-headed direct, male-headed direct, female-headed non direct, male-headed non direct, simple nuclear and extended family households. The fifteen variables used in this study included economic stressors, depression, anxiety, mass media use, religious beliefs, material style of life, alcohol use, smoking, extended kin support, extended kin interaction, socioeconomic status, and number of children. In this study, the conclusions are interesting because some of the types of households have more in common than others. On the socio-cultural and lifestyle variables, the one household type that stood out was the male-headed non direct. This category had the lowest religious standing and the lowest material style of life. However, it had the highest frequency of alcohol use and reported amount of smoking. The female-headed non direct households resembled the male equivalent. The significant differences between household types on the variables measuring social interaction derive primarily from the low levels of interaction and support reported for the female and male headed non direct. Age is useful in determining developmental trends. A household may begin in the Black community as either a nuclear family household or a female-headed direct household. As time progresses the prevalence of nuclear family households increases, as does the prevalence of female-headed non direct. Dressler gives four examples of how this occurs; one being that the head of a female headed direct household may marry and become a simple nuclear family. Another is that a female headed direct household may be absorbed into a simple nuclear family

and become an extended family. Third, the children in a female-headed direct household may die or be transferred to a kin's household, transforming that household into a female-headed non direct. Lastly, kin in the ascending generations may die transforming a female-headed direct into a female-headed non direct household. These patterns intensify as the age groups increase to 50 to 65 years of age. The conclusion of this stuffy was that household types in the Black community indicate that households change substantially over time and that this developmental change must be taken into account in future studies of the Black family. (Dressler)

Female heads from low income households participated in the labor force at a rate six percent higher than their counterparts from households with income levels above 150 percent of the official 1980 poverty threshold, but surprisingly, there were no significant differences among female heads according to living arrangements.(Tienda) This issue doesn't go beyond female headed households. Recent research by the Center for the Study of Social Policy suggests that the declining economic status of Black men is the "flipside" of the increase in female-headed families. Brewer points out that the center for concern should be the poverty experienced in all black households not just the prevalence of Black female headed households. "An emphasis on female-headed households misses an essential truth about black women's poverty: black women are also poor in households with male heads" (Brewer 334).

In the discussion of single mothers, it is important to note that single mothers are working. Most single mothers, regardless of race average 70 hours per week in employed work and household work, except those living with parents who average 65 hours per week. The next table will give in an in depth look into the economic and time resources

of all Black single mothers and by living arrangements. Overall Black single mothers had a mean income per adult equivalent of \$5, 150. (Folk)

Table 3
ECONOMIC AND TIME RESOURCES OF ALL BLACK SINGLE MOTHERS AND BY LIVING ARRANGEMENT

	All mothers (n = 236)		Mothers who live alone (n = 133)		Mothers who live with parent(s) (n = 39)		Mothers who cohabit (n = 24)		Mothers who share (n = 42)	
	Mean	S.D.	Mean	S.D.	Mean	S.D.	Mean	S.D.	Mean	S.D.
Economic resources										
Mother's annual earnings (in 1000s) (median)	6.29 (2.00)	8.87	7.06 (3.60)	9.83	4.09 (0.38)	6.12	6.21 (2.00)	7.79	5.62 (0.40)	8.03
Household annual income (in 1000s) (median)	10.83 (8.50)	10.40	10.62 (8.46)	10.57	-- ^a	--	15.74 (15.65)	10.53	9.50 (8.10)	9.36
Household annual income as % of poverty line	1.13	1.21	1.19	1.30	-- ^a	--	1.50	1.06	0.74	0.79
Receives public assistance (yes = 1)	0.36	0.48	0.42	0.50	0.25	0.44	0.38	0.50	0.32	0.47
Time resources										
Employed (yes = 1)	0.55	0.50	0.54	0.50	0.45	0.50	0.66	0.48	0.57	0.50
Hours worked/wk (for hrs > 0)	39.05	9.12	38.97	8.32	35.77	13.03	41.80	7.19	39.91	8.95
Household work hrs/wk Employed	28.38	15.74	30.74	15.98	19.73	14.11	28.64	12.37	28.02	17.22
Nonemployed	30.30	19.97	30.02	20.47	25.18	21.39	47.16	17.50	32.86	16.82
Household work hrs/wk of other adult	6.17	13.14	--	--	24.59	16.62	14.08	15.57	19.24	17.42
Household work hrs/wk of children	8.20	11.04	9.11	11.06	7.00	12.86	7.14	10.81	8.77	9.77

^aHousehold income and poverty line not available in NSFH for respondents who live with parent(s).

There are multiple factors that affect the level of economic resources and education is one that is used most often. Education was positively related to income adequacy for both blacks and whites, with each year of education adding a little more than \$1,000 to income per adult equivalent. Being older and having fewer children also had a significant effect on income adequacy for white mothers, while being employed had a large positive effect on income adequacy for black mothers. Living arrangements were related to income adequacy differently for black and white mothers. (Folk) This information connects with the article on network of race, kin and assistance to mother-headed families.

In all this, children somehow take the back seat literally and figuratively because so much emphasis is placed on who heads the household instead of who is a part of the actual family. In a study down by Hunter and Ensminger, they state, "Hence, exploring

the diversity in family structure and the fluidness of household boundaries in Afro-American communities is an important area of inquiry in family research.” In their study, the focus is on Urban Black communities but the same phenomenon of unstable living arrangements exists in rural Black communities as well. Also, this is prevalent in Northern and Southern communities. The prevalence and stability of two-parent nuclear family households has changed for all Americans and the forces of change have been particularly pronounced in African American communities. In the article by Hunter, there was a community defined sample to explore the diversity and patterns of change in urban Black children’s living arrangements in two developmental contexts, early childhood before entering the first grade and ten years later during adolescence. The Woodlawn Longitudinal Study, on which the research was based, is a community epidemiological study targeting children and their families who share age-graded developmental tasks. (Hunter) Cities like Woodlawn that are almost totally African American and ranked as one of Chicago’s most impoverished neighborhoods have become targeted cities for research in this topic. The study done in Woodlawn reveals that there were 86 different combinations of adults living with first graders. “These patterns indicate the diversity in Afro-American families with urban communities and the variations in living arrangements black children may experience” (Hunter 422). The living arrangements of the Woodlawn children ranged from two-parent nuclear to non-kin guardian: both parents are absent and the guardian is a non relative. With the focus being on children, the rise in single-parent households reflects two patterns in the evolution of children’s living arrangements. First, more than two thirds of the children who began first grade in single parent nuclear households were in this type during their

adolescence. Second, when children's household family structure changed, one-parent nuclear was the destination. The main point is that determining the impact of family structure on urban and rural Black children's development requires recognition of the potential diversity and fluidness of children's living arrangements as they age. (Hunter)

“The disadvantaged position of blacks is not the consequence of single-parent families, but rather the cause of them” (Ruggles 137). The household structure of Black families in America is unique and has many dynamics. African American children, women and men all have many obstacles to face in growing financially strong nuclear families. The phenomenon of the high incidence in single-parenthood among Black Americans must cease to stop this trend of cases like Woodlawn.

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