FAMILY, FEMINISM, AND RACE IN AMERICA

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Feminist scholarship has advanced our understanding of the family's relationship to the economy and the state over different historical periods. Theorizing about gender, class, and family life has led us to conclude that global explanations of the family are false. Our knowledge about the meaning of racial stratification for family life, however, still remains fragmented. This article asks, What does including race have to offer the study of the family? Analysis of two streams of revisionist family scholarship demonstrates the need for reconceptualizing racial diversity in a way that embraces the experiences of White families as well as racial ethnic families. Family upheavals created by industrialization and deindustrialization offer concrete examples of the importance of race in theorizing family life throughout American society.

Rapid social changes have often besieged families. Much of the contemporary crisis in American family life is related to larger socioeconomic changes. Upheavals in the social organization of work have created a massive influx of women into the labor force. At the same time, the removal of certain kinds of work have left millions of workers without jobs. Both kinds of change have affected the well-being of American families.

As debates about the context and consequences of family change reach heightened proportions, the racial ethnic[1] composition of the United States is undergoing dramatic shifts. Massive waves of immigration from Latin America and Asia are posing difficult issues for a society that clings stubbornly to its self-image of the melting pot. Changes in fertility and immigra-

68

tion patterns are altering the distribution of Whites and people of color, and at the same time, creating a nation of varied racial ethnic groups. In many cities and communities, Blacks, Hispanics, Asians, and Native Americans outnumber the White population. Their families are distinctive not only because of their ethnic heritage but because they reside in a society where racial stratification continues to shape family resources and structures in important ways. The changing demography of race in the United States presents compelling challenges to family sociology.

Questions about what is happening to families in the United States and how this country's racial order is being reshaped are seldom joined. Yet they are more closely related than either popular or scholarly discourse on these topics would suggest. The national discussion about the erosion of inner-city Black and Latino families has not been applied to our understanding of the family in general. Although many sources of this crisis are rooted in new forms of race and class inequality in America, the empirical data can sharpen our theoretical understanding of "the family" and its relationship to wider social forces. Instead of marginalizing minority families as special cultural cases, it is time to bring race into the mainstream of our thinking about family life in America.

For the past two decades, family scholarship has been in the throes of revision. Both feminist revisions (for reviews see Andersen 1989; Gerstel and Gross 1987; Glenn 1987; Komorovsky 1988; Thorne 1982) and revisions of scholarship on families of racial ethnic groups (for reviews see Allen 1978; Zinn 1982/83; Mirande 1977; Mullings 1986a; Ramirez and Arce 1981; Staples and Mirande 1980; Wilkinson 1987) have given us new perspectives, approaches, and explanations of American family life in this society. In contrast to discussions of the family two decades ago, issues of gender stratification are paramount today. Issues of racial stratification, however, have received little theoretical attention. While feminist scholarship has had a great impact on analysis of the family, revisionist research on minority families continues to be marginalized, absent even from much feminist scholarship. Without a framework for incorporating race and ethnicity into models of "the family," feminist reformulations cannot be inclusive.

In this article, I take a step toward incorporating race into the feminist revision of the concept of the family. One of its aims is to show that research on racially and ethnically diverse families can make an essential contribution to the study of the family. The intent is not to provide a theory of racial stratification and family life but to raise issues about the extent to which racial formation is a meaningful category for analyzing family experience.

THE FEMINIST REVISION

Feminist challenges to traditional family theory have been accomplished by decomposing the family, that is, by breaking the family into constituent elements so that the underlying structures are exposed. In doing so, feminists have brought into relief three aspects of that structure: ideologies that serve to mystify women's experiences as wives and mothers, hierarchical divisions that generate conflict and struggle within families, and the multiple and dynamic interconnections between households and the larger political economy (Glenn 1987, 358). An understanding of family dynamics has been transformed by exposing gender as a fundamental category of social relations both within and outside the family (Andersen 1989).

First evolved as a critique of functionalism and its emphasis on roles, the crucial impact of feminist scholarship on family research has been to recast the family as a system of gender stratification. Because roles neglect the political underpinnings of the family, feminists have directed attention outside the family "to the social structures that shape experience and meaning, that give people a location in the social world, and that define and allocate economic and social rewards" (Hess and Ferree 1987, 11). Once feminist scholars made it clear that gender roles are not neutral ways of maintaining order in family and society but benefit some at the expense of others, virtually everything about the family looked different. As Bridenthal (1982) said:

> Put another way, feminists have opened up a whole new vista by asking not what do women do for the family? (an older question) but what does the family do *for* women? What does it do *to* women? Whom does the family organization serve best and how? (pp. 231-32)

Rather than viewing the family as a unit shaped only by affect or kinship, we now know that families are settings in which people with different activities and interests often come into conflict with one another.

The last point has had important ramifications for thinking about diversity and family life. Feminists have challenged the monolithic ideology of the family that elevated the contemporary nuclear family with a breadwinner husband and a full-time homemaker wife as the only legitimate family form. We now give equal weight to the varied family structures and experiences that are produced by the organization of the economy, the state, and other institutions (Thorne 1982, 2). Some of these alternative family structures and living arrangements are nonmarital cohabitation, single-parent households, extended kinship units and expanded households, dual-worker families, commuter marriages, gay and lesbian households, and collectives.

REVISIONS IN RACE-RELATIONS SCHOLARSHIP

The revisioning of American scholarship on racial ethnic families differ-ent from those of the White middle class has run a similar but not intersecting course with feminist scholarship. Like feminist scholarship, this revisioning began with a critique of functionalist accounts of racially and ethnically diverse families as dysfunctional units that acted as barriers to their groups' mobility (Staples and Mirande 1980). The sociology of the family has been noted for its absence of a strong tradition of theory and for being heavily normative, moralistic, and mingled with social policy and the social objec-tives of various action groups (Morgan 1975, 3). Nowhere is this tendency more apparent than in its treatment of racial ethnic families in the United States.

The model of the backward and culturally deviant minority family origi-nated within the sociology of race relations in the United States and its then guiding framework of assimilation and modernization. The preoccupation in race relations with "traditional" and "modern" social forms fit well with family sociology's preoccupation with the nuclear family, its wage-earner father, and domestic-caretaker mothers. Minorities and others whose family patterns differed from the ideal were explained as cultural exceptions to the rule. Their slowness to acculturate and take on the normal patterns of family development left them behind as other families in American society modern-ized. They were peripheral to the standard family and viewed as problems because of their failure to adopt the family patterns of the mainstream.

The "social problems" origin of family studies in the nineteenth century also contributed to this perspective. Family study as a new field emerged out of a deep concern with the need to solve such problems as rising divorce rates and the effects of slavery and industrialization on the family (Thomas and Wilcox 1987, 82). Social reforms of the times favored the modern family as a way of combating social problems, a belief that remains widely held in American society, if not in American family sociology.

Mainstream American sociology thus supported popular ideology by legitimizing the marginalization of racial ethnic groups in the social hierar-chy. As cultural holdovers in a modernizing world, minority families were relegated to the sidelines with no relevance to the core of family theory. Scholars of various disciplines have long refuted this culturally deviant model of family, arguing that alternative family patterns do not reflect deviance, deficiency, or disorganization and that alternative family patterns are related to but not responsible for the social location of minorities. Revisionist approaches have emphasized the structural conditions giving rise

to varied family forms, rather than the other way around. Differences in family patterns have been reinterpreted as adaptations to the conditions of racial inequality and poverty, often as sources of survival and strength (see, for example, Billingsley 1968; Glenn 1983; Griswold del Castillo 1984; Gutman 1976; Hill 1972; Ladner 1971; Stack 1974; Wagner and Shaffer 1980).

ASSESSING THE REVISIONS

The feminist revisioning of the family and the revisioning of studies of families in race relations scholarship have common origins. Both gained momentum as critiques of functionalism by an emergent critical sociology. The family was an important starting point in the development of women's studies, Black studies, and Chicano studies. In each of these areas, study of the family represented a vital thread in the evolution of critical scholarship. Both bodies of scholarship locate family experience in societal arrangements that extend beyond the family and allocate social and economic rewards. Both begin with the assumption that families are social products and then proceed to study their interrelationships with other social structures. Just as feminist theories have reconceptualized the family along a gender axis of power and control, racial ethnic family scholarship has reconceptualized the family along the axis of race, also a system of power and control that shapes family life in crucial ways.

Because they both locate family experience in societal arrangements extending beyond the family, these two streams of revisionist scholarship fall within the "radical critical" tradition. Although they are not commonly identified with this framework (see Osmond 1987, 119), they do adopt basic assumptions, major premises, and general directions of this approach.

Despite such fundamental similarities in their intellectual roots, the feminist revision and the racial ethnic studies revision have not been combined nor have they had the same impact on theories of the family. Feminist scholarship with its gender-as-power theme has had a far greater impact. Especially noteworthy in this regard has been the application of certain feminist insights to studies of minority families. In fact, gender-as-power and the racial division of labor have become key themes of recent studies of racial ethnic families. Nakano Glenn's study of Japanese families (1986) and Zavella's study of Chicano families (1987) are particularly meaningful because they explore the close connections between the internal dynamics of

women's family lives and economic conditions as they are bound up in broader systems of class and race inequality.

Studying the intersection of gender, race, and class in minority families has enormously enhanced family scholarship. Now, in studying racial ethnic families, we routinely examine race and gender as interacting hierarchies of resources and rewards that condition material and subjective experiences within families (see, for example, Almquist 1987).

Interacting race, class, and gender ideologies have shaped prevailing models of minority families, appearing even in the culturally deviant explanations of racial ethnic families. As Collins (1989) explains, the new version of this argument is that because minority women and men do not follow dominant notions of masculinity and femininity, they are responsible for their subordinate class placement in society. As Bridenthal (1981) has put it:

> Black people have been called matriarchal (ruled by the mother) and Chicano families have been called patriarchal (ruled by the father). These supposedly opposite family structures and relationships have been blamed for the failure of many members of each group to rise to a higher socioeconomic level. In other words, black and Chicano families have been blamed for the effect of racial discrimination. (p. 85)

While revisionist research on racial ethnic families has incorporated many feminist insights, the reverse has not occurred. Knowledge about racial stratification has not been incorporated into much feminist research on the family, and race enters the discussion of family life only when minority families are concerned.

To be fair, feminist literature on the family does recognize the societal context of inequality that gives rise to distinctive family forms. Feminist rethinking of the family has dropped the cultural *deviant* perspective. But for the most part, it retains a *cultural* perspective. Most contemporary feminist thought takes great care to underscore class, race, and gender as fundamental categories of social organization, but when it comes to family patterns, race and ethnicity are used as elements of culture, not social structure. Descriptions of cultural diversity do not explain why families exhibit structural variations by race. While it is true that many family lifestyles are differentiated by ethnicity, structural patterns differ because social and economic conditions produce and may even require diverse family arrangements. Although the family nurtures ethnic culture, families are not the product of ethnic culture alone.

RACIAL INEQUALITY AND FAMILY LIFE

The feminist revision has been reluctant to grapple with race as a power system that affects families throughout society and to apply that understanding to "the family" writ large. As Nakano Glenn (1987) says, "Systematically incorporating hierarchies of race and class into feminist reconstruction of the family remains a challenge, a necessary next step in the development of theories of family that are inclusive" (1987, 368).

Social Location and Family Formation

In our quest to understand the structural sources of diversity in family life, we must examine all of the "socioeconomic and political arrangements and how they impinge on families" (Mullings 1986a, 13). Like class and gender hierarchies, racial stratification is a fundamental axis of American social structure. Racial stratification produces different opportunity structures that shape families in a variety of ways. Marriage patterns, gender relations, kinship networks, and other family characteristics result from the social location of families, that is, where they are situated in relation to societal institutions allocating resources.

Thinking about families in this way shifts the theoretical focus from cultural diversity or "ethnic lifestyles" of particular groups to race as a major element of hierarchical social relations that touches families throughout the social order (Omi and Winant 1986, 61). Racial stratification is a basic organizing principle in American society even though the forms of domination and discrimination have changed over time. Omi and Winant use the term "racial formation" to refer to the process by which social, economic, and political forces determine the content and import of racial categories and by which they are in turn shaped by racial meanings (1986, 61). As racial categories are formed and transformed over time, the meanings, practices, and institutions associated with race penetrate families throughout the society.

Social categories and groups subordinate in the racial hierarchy are often deprived of access to social institutions that offer supports for family life. Social categories and groups elevated in the racial hierarchy have different and better connections to institutions that can sustain families. Social location and its varied connection with social resources thus have profound consequences for family life.

If families are to be conceptualized in a way that relates them to social, historical, and material conditions, then racial stratification cannot be ig-

nored. We are forced to abandon conventional notions that racial ethnic diversity is a cultural phenomenon best understood at the microstructural level. Instead of treating diversity as a given, or as a result of traditions alone, we must treat racial stratification as a macrostructural force situating families in ways requiring diverse arrangements. These macrostructural forces can be seen in two periods of economic upheaval in the United States — industrialization and the current shift from manufacture to information and services. In both of these transitions, the relationship between families and other institutions has been altered. Despite important differences, these economic transformations have produced new relations among individuals, families, and labor systems that have had profound effects on family development throughout American society. Industrialization and deindustrialization are not neutral transformations that touch families in uniform ways. Rather, they manifest themselves differently in their interaction with race and gender, and both periods of transition reveal racial patterning in family and household formation. The theme of historical variation has become increasingly accepted in family studies, but theories of the family have largely ignored the new knowledge about race, labor, and family formation.

INDUSTRIALIZATION AND FAMILY STRUCTURE

The past two decades of historical research on the family have revealed that industrialization has had momentous consequences for American families because of massive changes in the way people made a living. The industrial revolution changed the nature of work performed, the allocation of work responsibilities, and the kind of pay, prestige, and power that resulted from various positions in the economy. The effect of industrialization on American family life was uneven. Instead of a linear pattern of change in which families moved steadily to a more modern level, the pattern of change was checkered (Hareven 1987). Labor force exploitation produced various kinds of family and household adaptations on the part of slaves, agricultural workers, and industrial workers.

Both class and race were basic to the relations of production in the United States in this period. Race was intertwined with class; populations from various parts of the world were brought into the labor force at different levels, and racial differences were utilized to rationalize exploitation of women and men (Mullings 1986b, 56). European ethnics were incorporated into low-wage industrial economies of the north, while Blacks, Latinos, Chinese, and

Japanese filled labor needs in colonial labor systems of the economically backward regions of the west, southwest, and the south. These colonial labor systems, while different, created similar hardships for family life.

All these groups had to engage in a constant struggle for both immediate survival and long-term continuation of family and community, but women's and men's work and family patterns varied considerably within different racial labor structures, with fundamentally different social supports for family life. Thornton Dill (1988) has compared patterns of White families in nineteenth-century America with those of racial ethnics and identified important racial differences in the social supports for family life. She finds that greater importance was accorded Euro-American families by the wider society. As primary laborers in the reproduction and maintenance of family life, these women were acknowledged and accorded the privileges and protections deemed socially appropriate to their family roles. While this emphasis on family roles denied these women many rights and privileges and seriously constrained their individual growth and development, it also revealed public support for White women's family roles. Women's reproductive labor was viewed as an essential building block of the family. Combined with a view of the family as the cornerstone of the nation, this ideology produced experiences within the White dominant culture very different from those of racial ethnics (Dill 1988, 418). Because racial ethnic men were usually unable to earn a "family wage," their women had to engage in subsistence and income-producing activities both in and out of the household. In addition, they had to struggle to keep their families together in the face of outside forces that threatened the integrity of their households (Glenn 1987, 53-54).

During industrialization, class produced some similarities in the family experiences of racial ethnic women and those of White working-class immigrants. As Smith (1987) has argued, working-class women during this period were often far removed from the domestic ideal. The cults of domesticity and true womanhood that proliferated during this period were ideals attained more frequently by those Euro-American women whose husbands were able to earn enough to support their families (Mullings 1986b, 50).

This ideal was not attainable by Blacks, Latinos, and Asian Americans, who were excluded from jobs open to White immigrants. For example, in most cities, the constraints that prevented Black men from earning a family wage forced Black married women into the labor market in much greater proportions than White immigrant women. By 1880, about 50 percent of Black women were in the labor force, compared with 15 percent of White

women (Degler 1980, 389). Furthermore, the family system of the White working class was not subject to institutional assaults, such as forced separation, directed against Black, Latino, and Chinese families (Glenn 1987, 73).

Racial ethnic women experienced the oppressions of a patriarchal society but were denied the protections and buffering of a patriarchal family. Their families suffered as a direct result of the labor systems in which they participated. Since they were a cheap and exploitable labor force, little attention was given to their family and community life except as it related to their economic productivity. Labor and not the existence or maintenance of families was the critical aspect of their role in building the nation. They were denied the social and structural supports necessary to make their families a vital element in the social order (Dill 1988, 418). Nevertheless, people take conditions that have been thrust upon them and out of them create a history and a future (Mullings 1986b, 46). Using cultural forms where possible and creating new forms where necessary, racial ethnics adapted their families to the larger social order. These adaptations were not exceptions to the rule; they were instead variations created by mainstream forces. One family type was not standard and the others peripheral. Different forms existed at the same time.

Once we recognize how racial stratification has affected family formation, we can understand why the idealized family was not a luxury shared by all. At the same time, we can see how some idealized family patterns were made possible because of the existence of alternative family forms and how all of these are products of the social and economic conditions of the times. Although Blacks, Mexicanos, and Asians were excluded from industrial work, all three groups helped build the agricultural and industrial base for subsequent industrial development. New ways of life and new family patterns sprang from industrialization. As Mullings (1986b) says, "It was the working class and enslaved men and women whose labor created the wealth that allowed the middle class and upper middle class domestic life styles to exist" (p. 50).

DEINDUSTRIALIZATION AND FAMILIES

Vast changes in the social organization of work are currently transforming the American family across class and race groups. Not only are women and men affected differently by the transformation of the economy from its manufacturing base to service and high technology, but women and men in

different racial categories are experiencing distinctive changes in their rela-
tionship to the economy. This transformation is profoundly affecting families
as it works with and through race and gender hierarchies.

In the current American economy, industrial jobs traditionally filled by
men are being replaced with service jobs that are increasingly filled by
women. Married White women are now entering the labor force at a rate that,
until recently, was seen exclusively among women of color (Smith 1987, 16).
The most visible consequences of the increased labor force participation
among White women include declining fertility and changes in marriage
patterns. American White women are delaying marriage and childbearing
and having fewer children over their lifetimes, living alone or as heads of
their own households — living with neither parents nor husbands (Hartmann
1987, 36). The new economy is reshaping families as it propels these women
into the labor force.

In minority communities across America, families and households are also
being reshaped through new patterns of work and gender roles. The high level
of female-headed families among Blacks and Hispanics (especially Puerto
Ricans) is the outgrowth of changes in the larger economy. The long-term
decline in employment opportunities for men is the force most responsible
for the growth of racial ethnic families headed by women. Wilson's (1987)
compelling work has shown that the shortage of Black men with the ability
to support a family makes it necessary for many Black women to leave a
marriage or forego marriage altogether. Adaptation to structural conditions
leaves Black women disproportionately separated, divorced, and solely
responsible for their children.

Families throughout American society are being reshaped by economic
and industrial change: "The shifting economy produces and even demands
diverse family forms — including for example, female headed households,
extended kinship units, dual career couples, and lesbian collectives" (Gerstel
and Gross 1987, 7). Families mainly headed by women have become perma-
nent in all racial categories in America, with the disproportionate effects of
change most visible among Blacks and Latinos. While the chief cause of the
increase in female-headed households among Whites is the greater economic
independence of White women, the longer delay of first marriage and the
low rate of remarriage among Black women reflects the labor force problems
of Black men (Wilson and Neckerman 1986, 256). Thus race creates different
routes to female headship, but Whites, Blacks, and Latinos are all increas-
ingly likely to end up in this family form.

CONCLUSION

Knowing that race creates certain patterns in the way families are located and embedded in different social environments, we should be able to theorize for all racial categories. Billingsley (1988) suggests that the study of Black families can generate important insights for White families: Families may respond in a like manner when impacted by larger social forces. To the extent that White families and Black families experience similar pressures, they may respond in similar ways, including the adaptation of their family structures and other behaviors. With respect to single-parent families, teen-age childbirth, working mothers, and a host of other behaviors, Black families serve as barometers of social change and as forerunners of adaptive patterns that will be progressively experienced by the more privileged sectors of American society.

While such insights are pertinent, they should not eclipse the ways in which racial meanings inform our perceptions of family diversity. As social and economic changes produce new family arrangements, alternatives — what is sometimes called "family pluralism" — are granted greater legitimacy. Yet many alternatives that appear new to middle-class White Americans are actually variant family patterns that have been traditional within Black and other minority communities for many generations. Presented as the new lifestyles of the mainstream, they are, in fact, the same lifestyles that have in the past been deemed pathological, deviant, or unacceptable when observed in Black families (Peters and McAdoo 1983, 228).

In much popular and scholarly thinking, alternatives are seen as inevitable changes, new ways of living that are part of an advanced society. In other words, they are conceptualized as products of the mainstream. Yet such alternatives, when associated with racial ethnic groups, are judged against a standard model and found to be deviant. Therefore, the notion of family pluralism does not correctly describe the family diversity of the past or the present. Pluralism implies that alternative family forms *coexist* within a society. In reality, racial meanings create a hierarchy in which some family forms are privileged and others are subordinated, even though they are both products of larger social forces.

Treating race as a basic category of social organization can make the feminist reconstruction of the family more inclusive. The implications of this approach are also provocative and uncomfortable because they challenge some of our basic sociological and feminist assumptions about how families

in different races (and classes) are related to the larger society, to each other, and how they are all changing as a result of ongoing social and economic changes. These are important issues for social scientists, policymakers, and others to ponder, understand, and solve.

NOTE

1. The term *racial ethnic* refers to groups labeled as races in the context of certain historical, social, and material conditions. Blacks, Latinos, and Asian Americans are racial groups that are formed, defined, and given meaning by a variety of social forces in the wider society, most notably distinctive forms of labor exploitation. Each group is also bound together by ethnicity, that is, common ancestry and emergent cultural characteristics that are often used for coping with racial oppression. The concept racial ethnic underscores the social construction of race and ethnicity for people of color in the United States.

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