

History as Fact and Fiction

As an institution, the Black family continues to be a subject of intense and controversial public concern. This interest is generated in part by the lack of consensus on what its form and function should be. The controversy is heightened by the way scholars have depicted the Black family in the past and by an ongoing debate over how the family history of Blacks relates to their current situation. Before examining developments in earlier periods, it is necessary to place some parameters around this historical review. The areas of interest are the precolonial era in sub-Saharan Africa, slavery in general, and the various views on the impact of slavery on Black family life.

The Preslavery Period

There are several historical periods of interest in tracing the background of Black family life in the United States. One era is the precolonial period on the African continent, where the Black American population originated. The basis of African family life was the kinship group, which was bound together by blood ties and the common interest of corporate functions. Within each village, there were elaborate legal codes and court systems that regulated the marital and family behavior of individual members. The philosophical basis

of the family was one of humanitarianism, mutual aid, and community participation. Although no two tribes in Africa were the same, the continent was generally humane in its treatment of the individual and the creation of meaningful roles for each person (Kayongo-Male and Onyango, 1984).

In African communities, marriage was not just a matter between individuals but the concern of all family members. A woman, for instance, was not just a man's wife but "the wife of the family." As a result of this community control of marriages, the dissolution of a marriage was a drastic action and used only as a last resort. Most marriages involved the payment of a bride-price by the husband's family to compensate her family for the loss of her services and to guarantee her good treatment. This was not the purchase of a woman who became her husband's property. After marriage, a woman remained a member of her own family, since they retained a sincere interest in her well-being (Sudarkasa, 1981).

Regardless of the meaningful role of women in precolonial Africa, the authority pattern in the family was patriarchal. This male control in the family was based not so much on benign dominance as on the reverence attached to his role as the protector and provider for the family. His role was to perform the heavy manual labor and to make decisions for the family. Only if he successfully carried out these roles would respect and admiration be accorded him. On certain days, the wife and children would bestow as much respect on him as subjects would a king. If it was a fête day, his sons-in-law and daughters would be there to present him with some small gifts. They would pay him reverence, bring him a pipe, and then go into another room, where they all ate together with their mother (Frazier, 1939).

Children in African societies were considered symbols of the continuity of life. During their formative years, they enjoyed a carefree life. Until they reached the age of nine or ten, they had no responsibilities. Afterward, they began to learn their role requirements and responsibilities to the tribe. The boys would build small huts and hunt fierce game. Girls played house and cared for their "babies" (often a

younger sister). When they reached the age of fifteen, they were considered adults and would soon begin families of their own (Sudarkasa, 1981). The structure and function of the Black family was to change radically under the system of slavery. What did not change, however, was the importance of the family to African peoples in the New World. While the nature of marriage and family patterns was eventually taken from the control of the kinship group, the family nevertheless managed to sustain individuals in the face of the many destructive forces they encountered in American society.

The Causes and Nature of North American Slavery

The first two hundred years of slavery differed significantly from the final century. In the early centuries, few slaves grew cotton, resided in the Deep South, and embraced Christianity. Among the early arrivals were the Atlantic Creoles, people of African and European lineage who were transported to the new world by the Dutch West India Company. Middlemen in trade between Africa, North and South America, and Europe, they spoke not only numerous European and African languages but the common language of trade: Creole. Their previous interactions with Europeans meant that they understood their religion, complex patron-client relations, and general way of life. Thus, rather than the transatlantic journey eroding their skills as cultural negotiators, merchants, sailors, and trappers, it merely transported them to a somewhat familiar new world (Berlin, 2003).

With few exceptions, these Blacks entered the New World as unfree indentured servants, a status that many Whites shared. Indentured servants were people who had their passage paid to this continent and were contractually obligated to work for a specified period of time, usually three to seven years, for the people who paid for their passage. Once their debts were paid, the indentured servants were free to pursue their own interests. According to historians of this period, race played a significant but not central role in the social relations between White and Black indentured servants.

They worked together as equals and at times formed coalitions to resist the policies and cruel practices of wealthy landowners (Berlin, 2003; Hine, Hine, and Harrold, 2004; J. H. Franklin, 1987).

In the absence of both a well-defined racial order and a high-profit staple crop with its demand for mass human labor, seventeenth-century free and bonded Creoles in Dutch New Netherland, English Chesapeake, and Spanish Florida traded their knowledge and labor for favors unknown to nineteenth-century slaves. Caring only for short-term profits, companies such as the Dutch West India allowed its slaves to live and work independently in return for a stipulated amount of labor and annual tribute. Slaves used this marginal freedom to master the Dutch cultural ways, trade freely, accumulate property, convert to Dutch Reformed Christianity, and, most important, establish families. In New Amsterdam (present-day New York), twenty-five Black couples took their vows in the Dutch Reformed Church, and later their children received baptism in the church. Although by the mid-seventeenth century a fifth of Blacks in New Amsterdam, St. Augustine, and Virginia's Eastern Shore gained their freedom, escaping servitude was difficult. The Dutch company was willing to liberate the elderly, considered a liability, but not their children. Both Blacks and Whites protested this half-free status with partial success. By the middle of the seventeenth century, Blacks in New Netherland participated, however unequally, in nearly all aspects of life. In addition to marrying and baptizing in the established church, they created institutional family patterns that served their unique need; foremost among them were legal adoption agencies for orphaned Black children (Berlin, 2003).

In Florida, the Creole society acquired freedom for their families by joining the Spanish militia. Threatened by expansion of English settlement in the Carolinas, the Spanish created alliances with their own slaves. Black militia then raided their former Carolina plantations, freeing family members and friends. The Spanish Crown provided freedom to all slave fugitives who converted to Catholicism

and rewarded those Creoles who showed exemplary valor resisting the English. Membership in both the church and militia provided the catalyst for connecting Floridian Black people to each other and to the larger community. Pulling the lever of patronage, they skillfully afforded privileges for themselves and their families. Through the church, they sanctified their marriages, baptized their children, and selected Black and White godparents from the congregation. Their imbalanced gender ratio resulted in marriages with American Indians and newly arriving slaves from Mexico, Cuba, and Spain. After nearly one hundred years, the first generation of Floridian Blacks and their children (the Charter generation) was far more incorporated into the life of mainland society than were the Northern colonies (Berlin, 2003).

The Atlantic Creoles, Black indentured servants, and mulatto offspring of slaveholders numbered about half a million in the 1860s. Because they had opportunities for education, owning property, and skilled occupations, their family life was quite stable. They represent the early development of a Black middle class (Berry and Blassingame, 1982).

Atlantic Creoles' ability to trade freely, secure freedom, acquire modest prosperity, gain access to courts, and serve in organized militia was eroded with the discovery of products that could be sold internationally for high profits—sugar, rice, tobacco, and later cotton. This economic shift triggered the massive influx of slaves, strict slave codes, and dehumanizing racial ideologies to justify slave status. (Berlin, 1998, 2003; Graves, 2001). Taken from the deep interiors of Africa, the later generations of transported slaves were linguistically isolated and deskilled by the process of enslavement, and they suffered enormous psychological and physical degradation. The depth of their dehumanization is best understood in the light of the flourishing civilization they left behind—societies with mores and folkways for regulating the behavior of their members, communication systems, and an extensive network of trade relations throughout the African con-

tinent. This human tragedy was inconsequential to slave magnates, whose insatiable appetite for greater profit could be quenched only with a large-scale, inexpensive human labor force.

Slavery, despite the problems it posed in terms of regulating human labor in a coercive relationship, was the most profitable source of labor available. There was little concern, in the beginning of the slave system, for the racial composition of the enslaved group. Subordination and control was valued more than race. In the West Indies, Atlantic Creoles, for example, were rejected as too savvy in European ways to be trusted working among the mass number of slaves needed to cultivate the profitable sugar plantations. Whereas North America had not yet developed a competitive slave economy, would-be slaveholders snapped up these Creoles to work alongside Whites and American Indians in building forts, hunting, trapping, tending animals and fields, and transporting merchandise.

However, there were certain difficulties surrounding the use of the non-Creole groups. Whites, being part of the same racial group, easily escaped and avoided detection by assimilating into the non-slave society. They also disappeared into the frontiers of the virgin western territory, where their recovery was improbable. Enslaved Native Americans, decimated by European diseases and overwork, were soon found unsuitable. Despite the thousands captured, American Indians put up enough formidable resistance and could retreat when necessary into familiar territory (Berlin, 1998, 2003; Patterson, 1982). In the end, Black labor was ideal. Blacks were easily identifiable and unfamiliar with the terrain. An unregulated transatlantic slave trade provided an endless source of labor, which allowed masters to replace slaves who became useless from overwork. Moreover, enslaved Africans brought with them the essential skills and knowledge needed in growing tobacco and rice.

In Africa, rice was largely a women's crop. In disregarding this West African gender role tradition, planters reduced their profit margin. In slavery, male slaves with lesser knowledge of the process were assigned to milling rice. A task that took less than an hour

when performed by African women prior to the transatlantic enslavement demanded as many as six hours of arduous labor by slave men. This ignorance of female knowledge systems also resulted in slaves' having to adjust to new symbols of male-female propriety and role relations (Morgan, 2001).

Although slavery was not new to humankind or a North American invention, the enslavement of Africans and their brutal transportation to this country marked a new chapter in the history of man's inhumanity to man. Previous slave systems were not characterized by distinctions of race (Graves, 2001; Snowden, 1970). As Brown (1949, p. 34) says of the slave system in Greece, "The slave populations were enormous, but the slave and the master in Greece were commonly of the same race and there was no occasion to associate any given physical type with the slave status." Similarly, in Rome, slaves were not differentiated from free men in their external appearance. Authorities on the subject have noted that any citizen might conceivably become a slave, and almost any slave might become a citizen. In Europe and Africa, losing in battle often resulted in those defeated becoming enslaved (Graves, 2001; Snowden, 1970).

Basing slavery status on race made American slavery distinct. A racial ideology categorizing Africans as a subhuman race provided the justification for exploiting this ideal source of human labor. The blocked mobility of the nineteenth-century slaves was also peculiar to the United States. To illustrate this point, slavery in the United States is frequently compared to the same institution in South America. According to this view, the Spanish slave code and the Catholic church in Latin America provided safeguards for the slaves and their families and emphasized their worth as human beings. These two forces supposedly led to the encouragement of manumission and stable marriage among free and slave Blacks (Patterson, 1982). Slaves lost their freedom but retained the right to regain it. In the United States, Blacks were consigned to a slave status from birth to grave (Elkins, 1968). The American slave system abrogated all rights the Africans had as human beings. Slaveholders could not be punished

for the way they treated their slaves; families were broken up by the sale of one of their members; there was no legal marriage for slaves; the children of a slave mother were automatically slaves; and the status of a slave was a position from which no mobility was permitted (Patterson, 1982).

But this polarity of the two slave systems in North and South America does not consistently hold up under close examination. There was considerable variation among the Latin American societies in their use and treatment of slaves. In some areas of Latin America, there was very humane treatment of slaves, and in others, brutal treatment. As for the Spanish slave code, it was not only unenforced, but it was never promulgated in any of the Spanish Caribbean colonies. Moreover, some of the measures encouraging marriage among the slaves in South America were designed to hold the slaves to the plantation estates with family ties (Hall, 1970). Likewise, in North America, the slave-master relationship took on different forms and meanings over time and from place to place, depending on the centrality of slave labor to the economic goals of the slaveholder, pressures from competitors, the heightened anxiety generated by domestic and foreign slave revolts, and the effect of democratic and religious revolutions (Berlin, 1998). If not consistent in practice, there was one undeniable stark contrast: South America had humane secular and sacred codes, which North America lacked. Regardless of system, slavery was restrictive, and the slaves' welfare was secondary to economic gain. Yet with their modicum of freedom, slaves nevertheless managed to build a community and family life (Berlin, 2003).

The Slave Family

Slavery had its greatest impact on the family life of the Africans brought to the United States. Most of the slaves who came in the beginning were males. The Black female population was not equal to the number of males until 1830. As a result, the frequency of sex-

ual relations between Black slaves and indentured White women was fairly high. Some of these interracial relationships were more than casual contacts and ended in marriage. The intermarriage rate between male slaves and free White women increased to the extent that laws against them were passed as a prohibitive measure. Before the alarm over the rate of intermarriages, male slaves were encouraged to marry White women, since the children from such unions were also slaves, thereby increasing the property of the slave master (Stember, 1976).

In attempting to get an accurate description of the family life of slaves, one has to sift through a conflicting array of opinions on the subject. Scholarly contradictions partially stemmed from historians' using their findings from a particular region as typical of slavery across time and place. Recent findings reveal that at any point in slave history, family life varied as a function of gender composition, region, mode of production, the nature of the planter's business interest, size and location of the master's properties, and the slaveholder's commitment to family stability (Berlin, 1998; Schwartz, 2000; Stevenson, 1996). Yet certain aspects of the slaves' family life during the last hundred years are undisputed. Unlike the earlier periods, African slaves had no civil court of last resort and were not allowed to enter into binding contractual relationships (Berlin, 2003). Since marriage is basically a legal relationship that imposes obligations on both parties and exacts penalties for their violation, there was no legal basis to any marriage between two individuals in bondage. Slave marriages were regulated at the discretion of the slave master. As a result, some marriages were initiated by slave owners and just as easily dissolved (J. H. Franklin, 1988).

Hence, there were numerous cases where the slave owner ordered slave women to marry men of his own choosing after they reached puberty. The slave owners preferred a marriage between slaves on the same plantation, since the primary reason for slave unions was the breeding of children who would become future slaves. Children born to a slave woman on a different plantation were looked on by the

slaveholder as wasting his man's seed. Sometimes when two slaves desired to be together and it was advantageous to the master, the matter was resolved by the sale of one of the parties to the other owner. Yet many slaves who were allowed to get married preferred women from a neighboring plantation. This allowed them to avoid witnessing the many assaults on slave women that occurred (Blassingame, 1972).

Historians are divided on the question of how many slave families were involuntarily separated from each other by their owners. Recent historical work documents greater structural diversity than previously understood. In general, a slave master's business decisions created a variety of slave marital and familial relationships and structures. For those wealthy planters with hundreds or thousands of acres scattered throughout the colonies and the West Indies, production priorities, not slave marriages or families, determined slave residence. Any concern for imbalanced gender ratio or slave reproduction could be resolved through buying additional slaves on location. Smaller slaveholders had more reason for uniting slave couples, because a coresidential slave couple could substantially increase their human property through consistent childbearing.

Most vulnerable to being sold or rented out away from their families were children between the ages of ten and fifteen, when they showed the greatest mastery of adult work tasks and work potential. State legislatures supported the sale of all children capable of fieldwork. While slave owners viewed the maturation of enslaved children as positive, slaves considered adolescence a time of deep sorrow as a result of losing their children. Sales in the interregional slave trade increased for preteens through the twenties and began to decline as slaves moved into their thirties. The older the child, the more likely it was that family ties were discounted (Schwartz, 2000).

Despite some slaveholders' commitment to holding slave families together, the intervening events of a slaveholder's death, bankruptcy, or lack of capital made the forcible sale or renting of some spouses or children inevitable (Berlin, 2003; Schwartz, 2000; Stevenson, 1996). In instances where the slave master was indifferent to the

fate of slave families, he would still strive to keep them together simply to enforce plantation discipline. A married slave who was concerned about his wife and children, it was believed, was less inclined to rebel or escape than a “single” slave. Schwartz notes that in “trying to prevent their sale, some slave youths ‘fout an’ kick lak crazy folks’ when placed on the auction block” (2000, p. 171). Some slaves went further. When faced with possible separation from her infant child, one slave mother “took the baby by its feet. . . . And with the baby’s head swinging downward, she vowed to smash its brains out before she’d leave it” (Berlin, 2003, p. 216). Sometimes their threats and supplications convinced the owners or potential buyers that the cost of family separation was not worth completing the transaction. Whatever their reasoning or circumstances, the few available records show that slave owners did not separate a majority of slave couples (Blassingame, 1972; Fogel and Engerman, 1974). Although there are examples of some slave families’ living together for forty years or more, the majority of slave unions did not last long. They were dissolved by death from overwork and poor nutrition, the sale of one partner by the master, or personal choice.

Although individual families may not have remained together for long periods of time, the institution of the family was an important asset in the perilous era of slavery. Despite the prevalent theories about the destruction of the family under slavery, it was one of the most important survival mechanisms for African people held in bondage (Blassingame, 1972). In their state of involuntary servitude, the slaves began to form a new sense of family. Whereas in African society, the family was based on the system of kinship within the tribe, under slavery it was in the community of slaves that individuals found their identity. The community consisted of abroad marriages (where spouses were not physically present from day to day), matrilocality, patrilocality, all-male households, and sibling households. Sibling households represented the most common form of nonnuclear households among Louisiana slaves. The most common form of extended family households in this region was that of families having a brother

or sister of one of the spouses in their households. All of these diverse forms found stability through the extended kin network. Both blood and fictive kin provided the glue holding together simple and nuclear families and singles of all types—young, old, widowed, or never married (Stevenson, 1996; Malone, 1992). At the broadest level of community identity, former tribal affiliation was reorganized to encompass those individuals bound together by the commonality of their race and their enslavement. In this context, many of the traditional functions of the family were carried out, and the philosophical principle of survival of the tribe held fast (Nobles and Goddard, 1986).

In the slave quarters, Black families existed as functioning institutions and as models for others. The slave narratives provide some indication of the importance of family relations under slavery. In the family, slaves received affection, companionship, love, and empathy with their suffering under this brutal system. Through the family, they learned how to cooperate with their fellow slaves and to retain some semblance of self-esteem. Some parents taught them submission as a way of avoiding suffering and death. However, they were not taught categorical obedience. Rather, they were frequently instructed to fight the master when their relatives were in danger. One example was W. H. Robinson's father, who told him, "I want you to die in defense of your mother" (Blassingame, 1972, p. 99).

When children stayed near their parents, they vicariously learned how to work at a pace that would not tax them to exhaustion while pretending to satisfy the unreasonable faster work pace of their overseers. Some parents taught their children pride in their African heritage. One father often boasted to his child that he had a pure strain of Black blood in his veins and could trace his ancestors back to the very heart of Africa (Frazier, 1939). Yet parents found their authority undermined by owners' using gifts and coddling to solicit the allegiance of young children. Masters attempted to get these children to spy on the social life in slave quarters, prompting parents to instruct children to monitor their conversations carefully outside their quarters. The master's attention meant better treatment of their children.

However, too much attention curtailed the ability of slave families to create a cultural space where children could be critical of servitude and learn standards of behavior that differed from those of their owners. Differential practices included the slaves' taboos against blood-cousin marriages, which were accepted among the elite planters. To the frustration of owners, slave parents shared with their children interpretations of the Bible favorable to slaves.

The struggle over the children's allegiance was ongoing. In order to minimize parental control without taking on child-rearing responsibilities themselves, owners sought opportunities to release parenting responsibilities from slaves. "Ungroomed or neglected" children provided owners with an excuse to turn the children over to others. A Sunday morning ritual enacted on plantations throughout the South was for masters and mistresses to call all slaves to the big house for inspection. White mistresses joined their husbands in blaming child neglect on the ignorance or laziness of Black women rather than the mothers' overworked schedules and poor clothing provisions (Gutman, 1976; Hine, Hine, and Harrold, 2004; J. H. Franklin, 1988; Schwartz, 2000).

A planter's success in reassigning child care duties from parents to others depended on the number of children, their ages, available nonparent adults who could be trusted, the planter's wealth, and the cycle of cultivation associated with the market crop grown. On rice plantations, masters were aided by the high prevalence of disease. Malaria was poorly understood, but planters knew that mortality rates rose for children who remained in swampy areas during the warmer months. Consequently, for weeks or months wealthy rice planters rented young children out to other slave masters located in distant camps. Unlike owners, slave parents did not accompany their children. Younger slave children experienced anxiety with these lengthy separations (Schwartz, 2000).

Parents of infants experienced other obstacles to their parenting. Breastfeeding competed with work production. Observing that infant and toddler care reduced the productivity of new mothers,

owners with sizable slave holdings shifted child care to unrelated slaves in nurseries, thus freeing mothers for tending the fields. Supervision in nurseries tended to be minimal. While caring for the children, owners expected adult slaves to spin, sew, cook, and care for the ill and elderly. Children as young as two or three years old were expected to rock babies or keep them from wandering off. Although women withdrew from the fields during the day to nurse their infants, work was given priority during the busiest times of year. And some infants fed regularly at the breast of their White mistresses when the slave mother's labor was indispensable. The rarity of this practice is clearly reflected in the cyclical infant mortality. Cotton plantation records show infant mortality highest at the peak of the cotton-picking season and lowest at harvest end, in November and December. The highest death toll occurred on rice plantations where the unhealthiest conditions existed and production called for year-round labor (Schwartz, 2000).

Much has been written about the elimination of the male's traditional functions under the slave system. It is true that he was often relegated to working in the fields and siring children rather than providing economic maintenance or physical protection for his family. Yet the father's role was not as insignificant as presumed. Ex-slaves often spoke of their affection for their fathers and the pain of separation. Young courting couples were often chaperoned by the father. "He sit . . . de boy in one corner an' de girl she sit in dis corner" (Malone, 1992, p. 234). This practice may have had African origins. Although they could not perform many of the functions traditionally assigned to fathers, there were other ways they could acquire respect from their families. They could gain the approval of their families and fellow bondsmen by making furniture for the cabin or building partitions between cabins that contained more than one family. Men worked together to construct houses for their families and in so doing strengthened their sense of community. Where possible, fathers could add to the family's meager rations of food by hunting, fishing, and raising domestic livestock. While

mothers taught girls domestic tasks, fathers taught boys how to trap animals, carve wood, and make baskets. Even if fathers lived on nearby plantations, they would come with animal game during their weekly visits and spend considerable time chopping and hauling wood for heating and cooking. Fathers used money earned from extra work to purchase blankets or cloth for keeping their children warm. In attempting to keep their families intact, fathers were more inclined than mothers to bargain with their labor (Blassingame, 1972; Lockley, 2001; Schwartz, 2000).

Until recently, the independent economic activities of slaves attracted little scholarly attention. Yet these informal economics had political and psychological meaning for both the slaves and their owners. Most plantations provided slaves with their own gardens as a means of making slaves responsible for their own diet and saving money for the owner. Tended primarily by bondswomen, these gardens were used not only to improve family diet, but provided the basis of an informal economy. Surplus produce could be sold to local shopkeepers, tavern keepers, and boatmen for cash, which could be used to purchase other goods. Bondsmen accompanied their wives to urban markets, and the wives sold produce while the husbands hired themselves out for unskilled labor or artisan work. Bondsmen had more occupational opportunities than their wives; hence their unskilled, semiskilled, and skilled labor enhanced the possibility of a better life for their families. In Georgia and other slave states, the growth of this informal economy gradually led to legislation protecting the interest of the slave master and imposing larger fines on those whites, often of the lower class, who hired slaves illegally. Although the slave code of 1755 limited slaves to trading only garden produce, fruit, and fish, loopholes provided slaves and White traders opportunities to trade much more (Berlin, 2003; Lockley, 2001).

Yet the modicum of independence etched from the informal economy could not compensate for the bondsman's limited ability to protect his family. And it was his inability to protect his wife from the physical and sexual abuse of the master that most pained him.

Yet few tried, since the consequences were often fatal. Nevertheless, it is significant that tales of their intervention occur frequently in the slave narratives. There is one story of a slave who could no longer tolerate the humiliation of his wife's sexual abuse by the master before his eyes. He choked him to death with the knowledge that it meant his own death (Absug, 1971).

The importance of the family is underlined by the numerous cases of fugitive slaves who ran away to find mates who had been sold away from them. In most cases, these couples were bound together by affection, not morality or a contractual agreement. These bonds were often very strong even when there was no legal marriage. As Nobles and Goddard (1986) have noted, the valid African marriage does not need any kind of ceremonial sanction—a bride-price or a sacred or secular ceremony—apart from the domestic consent. Yet slaves had a reverence for legal marriage and the protection the law afforded. Bibb states that “there are no class of people in the United States who so highly appreciate the legality of marriage as those persons who have been held and treated as property” (Bibb, 1849, p. 152).

After Emancipation

An indication of the importance attached to the family is provided by the numerous cases of freed slaves searching out family members from whom they had been separated during slavery. Sometimes they had been apart for as long as thirty years. The means used to reunite families ranged from placing ads in Black newspapers to the trek of one ex-slave who walked six hundred miles during a two-month stretch. Those Black men serving as Civil War soldiers pleaded with the secretary of war to provide their families protection in their absence. Many of the slaves who had cohabited made plans for a legal marriage with the knowledge that they no longer faced the possibility of exploitation and separation (Berlin and Rowland, 1997; J. H. Franklin, 1988).

There has been a prevailing notion that the experience of slavery weakened the value of marriage as an institution among Black Americans. Yet ex-slaves married in record numbers when they obtained this right by governmental decree. A legal marriage was a status symbol, and weddings were events of great gaiety. In a careful examination of census data and marriage licenses for the period after 1850, Gutman (1976) found that the typical household in New York and in Southern rural and urban areas was a double-headed kin-related household. Further evidence that Black people were successful in forming a biparental family structure are the data that show that 90 percent of all Black children were born in wedlock by the year 1917 (Bernard, 1966).

Many students of the Reconstruction era observed the strong family orientation of the ex-slaves. One newspaper reported a Black group's petition to the state of North Carolina asking for the right "to work with the assurance of good faith and fair treatment, to educate their children, to sanctify the family relation, to reunite scattered families, and to provide for the orphan and infirm" (Absug, 1971, p. 34). Children were of special value to the freed slaves, whose memories were fresh with the history of their offspring being sold away. After slavery, the slave-born generation of freed slaves cherished their children all the more and devoted their lives to providing them with land and an education.

During the late nineteenth century, the strong role of women emerged. Males preferred their wives to remain at home, since a working woman was considered a mark of slavery. But during a period considered the most racist of American history, Black men found it very difficult to obtain jobs and in some instances found work only as strikebreakers. Thus, the official organ of the African Methodist Episcopal church exhorted Black families to teach their daughters not to avoid work, since many of them would marry men who would not make, on the average, more than seventy-five cents a day (Absug, 1971). By 1880, approximately three times as many

Black women as White women were in the labor force (Goldin, 1983). What was important, then, was not whether the husband or wife worked, but the family's will to survive in an era when Blacks were systematically deprived of educational and work opportunities. Despite these obstacles, Black families achieved a level of stability based on role integration. Males shared equally in the rearing of children; women participated in the defense of the family. A system where the family disintegrates due to the loss of one member would be in opposition to the traditional principles of unity that defined the African family (Krech, 1982).

This principle was to be tested during the period of the great Black migration from the rural areas of the South to the cities of the North. The rise of Black out-of-wedlock birthrates and female-headed households is a feature of twentieth-century urban ghettos. The condition of many lower-class Black families is a function of the economic contingencies of industrial America (Litwack, 1979). Unlike the European immigrants before them, Blacks were disadvantaged by the oppressiveness of Northern segregation along racial lines. Furthermore, families in cities are more vulnerable to disruptions due to the traumatizing experiences of urbanization, the reduction of family functions, and the loss of extended family supports. Because of the higher level of racial discrimination facing Blacks in the South, they were less likely to retreat from the more vulnerable conditions of urban poverty in the North than White migrants from the South (Lemann, 1991).

In many cases, slavery was replaced by sharecropping and debt peonage for landless Blacks. Their status changed from slaves to sharecroppers; the slave barracks near the big house became dispersed wooden shacks, and money lending charged against the value of the sharecropper's share of the crop became an economic surrogate for slavery. Through constant indebtedness, the ex-slaves were as tied to the land and the landlord as they had been under slavery. The planters saw to it that there was always a debt and therefore an obligation to remain. And, if necessary, they did not hesitate to use force to discourage their tenants from escaping (J. H. Franklin, 1988). Still, share-

cropping was an improvement over slavery, and there was considerably more freedom for Blacks to marry, assume custody of children, discipline them, spend more time with their spouses, and engage in family relations without the constant threat of family separation (Jones, 1985). However, J. H. Franklin (1988) claims that sharecropping and the great migration of Blacks to the urban North during World War I did not adversely affect the stability of the Black family to any significant degree. Until 1925, most Black families were intact, although extended and augmented households increased in importance.

In the transition from Africa to the American continent, there can be no doubt that African culture was not retained in any pure form. Blacks lacked the autonomy to maintain their cultural traditions under the severe pressures to take on American standards of behavior. Yet Africanisms survive in agricultural techniques, Black speech patterns, aesthetics, folklore, and religion (Herskovits, 1941; Morgan, 2001). These were combined with aspects of American culture. And out of the common experiences Blacks have shared, a new culture has been forged that is uniquely Black American. The elements of that culture are still to be found in their family life (Foster, 1983).

The Historical Role of Black Women

Anthropologists and historians tell us that most African societies were (and still are) male dominated. One should not assume from this fact that the role of women was unimportant. The historical deeds of Black women in the preslavery period of Africa are recorded on tombs of ancient Egypt, are enumerated by Semitic writers, and are part of Greek mythology. Women formed the economic bulwark of Nigerian society. In the Balonda tribe of southern Africa, women held a position economically superior to that of men (Sudarkasa, 1981). They played an important role in the political organization of various tribal societies in Africa, as reported in local chronicles and in the records of early travelers there. In West Africa, the ancestral

home of most Black Americans, the women of the Ashanti tribe were reputed to have founded small states such as Mampong, Wenchi, and Juaban. Among the peoples of Niger and Chad, women reputedly founded cities, led migrations, and conquered kingdoms. There are also accounts of the courage of the female legions who fought in the armies of Monomotapa (an empire located at the southern tip of Africa, later named the Republic of South Africa) and of the privileges they enjoyed (Steady, 1981).

Some cultural continuity exists between the roles of African and Black American women. But while African women had the opportunity to play a central role in their society, Black American women had their role fashioned out of the racial subjugation they endured and the need to assume the task of Black survival.

Until the middle of the nineteenth century, most Black slaves were male. Originally, the slave master's preference was for males who could perform the heavy duties required of bondsmen. Black men were encouraged to "marry" White women in order to augment the human capital of the slave-owning class. The intermarriage rate, however, became so high that unions between Black men and White women were prohibited. After that time, there was a marked increase in the number of Black women. The end of the slave trade also led to an increased emphasis on the domestic breeding of slaves, a task for which Black women bore primary responsibility (White, 1985). In addition, black women had the responsibilities of laboring in the fields and in the slave master's house. This was the beginning of their dual oppression as breeding instruments and captive labor force. Although the Black man was formally stripped of virtually all paternal functions except the biological one, Black women hardly fared better.

The slave woman was first a full-time worker for her owner and only incidentally a wife, mother, and homemaker. She was allowed to spend only a small fraction of her time in her quarters, she often did no cooking or sewing, and she was not allowed to nurse her children during their illnesses. If she was a field slave, she performed hard

labor daily in the fields even when she was pregnant and shortly after childbirth. Since the children were the master's property and did not belong to the parents, slave women frequently were breeding instruments for children who were later sold. During this period of slavery, the Black woman's body was forcibly subjected to the carnal desires of any male who took a fancy to her, including slave masters, overseers, their sons, or any male slave. If she was permitted a husband, he was not allowed to protect her. Essentially she was left defenseless against sexual onslaught by other males on the plantation. This was especially true of her relations with the White slave master. Children born from such unions were often denied knowledge of their paternity in the hope of protecting themselves and their children from reprisals by angry mistresses, who often took out their frustration on the slave women, thereby victimizing them twice (Schwartz, 2000; White, 1985). In her autobiography, Harriet Jacobs wrote, "I cannot tell how much I suffered in the presence of these wrongs, nor how I am still pained by the retrospect" (Hine, Hine, and Harrold, 2004, p. 91; Schwartz, 2000).

White Southerners justified violations of Black women's bodies in several ways. They maintained that Black women were genetically promiscuous and seduced White men. Others argued that exploitation of Black women by White men reduced prostitution and promoted purity among White women. Angela Davis (1971) has suggested that the sexual subjugation of the slave woman was the slave master's symbolic attempt to break her will to resist. According to Davis (1971, p. 13), "In confronting the Black woman as adversary in a sexual contest, the master would be subjecting her to the most elemental form of terrorism distinctively suited for the female: rape. Given the already terroristic texture of plantation life, it would be as a potential victim of rape that the slave woman would be most unguarded. Further, she might be most conveniently manipulable if the master contrived a ransom system of sorts, forcing her to pay with her body for food, diminished severity in treatment, the safety of her children, etc."

The sexual exploitation of the slave woman did not derive simply from carnal desire but from the slave master's design to intimidate the entire slave population. He wanted to assert his control over the entirety of the slave's being—over that of the male as well as the female slave. The rape of the slave woman brought home to the slave man his inability to protect his woman. Once his masculine role was undermined in this and other respects, he would begin to experience profound doubts about his power to break the chains of bondage (Davis, 1983).

Historically, fathers are expected to be the protector of their children and wives. Yet the slaveholder continuously challenged the male slave's protector role. Slave mothers played the traditional role of bearing and rearing children, and if only one parent was present, it was most likely the mother. It is this fact that led to the emergence of the notorious Black matriarchy hypothesis. A matriarchy is formally defined as a system of government ruled by women. This concept implies great advantages for women in the society. Instead of having any particular privileges under the slave system, Black women were, in reality, burdened with the dual role of laborer and mother. Hence, this is the origin of her two-pronged burden, which has been mislabeled a matriarchy (Collins, 1990; White, 1985). In reality, both male and female slaves' dependent status limited the amount of protection that they could provide. Nevertheless, within the restraints of their dependency, they defended their family as best they could, often at enormous risk to themselves (Malone, 1992).

The Historical Debate

Among other topics, the growing literature on Black families has focused on the impact of slavery on Black families. Historical studies have both developed and corrected many misconceptions about the nature of family life among the Black slave population. As was true of other investigations of Black family life, early historians constructed their view of slave family life from preconceived assumptions

and faulty methodology. A popularly held theory was that slavery destroyed the family traditions and values brought to the North American continent by Africans (Elkins, 1968; Frazier, 1939). There was much validity to the old historical research that found no legal basis for a marriage between slaves, that slave families could be and were disrupted by the sale of their members, and that the exercise of normative sex and parental roles was constrained. These findings were partly built on theories of history, which were supplemented by the use of plantation records and slave owners' diaries. But the new historical research employs a more extensive and reliable analysis of slave narratives and census records as well as the traditional sources.

African survival is a controversial theory that states that Blacks in the diaspora have retained many of the cultural traits they brought over from the African continent. Primarily associated with the late anthropologist Melville Herskovits (1941), it begs the question of how these traits have been maintained and in what form. The Herskovits answer was that some Africanisms, including practices such as voodoo, were retained by New World Blacks because they were practiced in secret. As to the form they took, he claims they were often disguised as a combination of cultural elements that had been integrated to form one cultural complex. This process of syncretism is expressed in Black American music, language, customs, food, and religion. In the case of Black American social organization and production skills, many characteristics regarded as European were actually African in origin. Respect for elders was central to African family life. The sophisticated soil and water management techniques used in low country South Carolina derived not from Europe but from the Upper Guinea Coast of Africa (Morgan, 2001; Foster, 1983).

However, no matter how convenient it might be to believe that Black Americans are an African people in their cultural behavior, there is not sufficient evidence to reach such a conclusion. The retention of African features has a stronger case in some Caribbean and South American societies, for reasons that are peculiar to them. Yet a group rarely is totally stripped of all its cultural heritage, especially

when they live the kind of segregated existence of American Blacks. Blassingame (1972, p. 18) provides a good evaluative yardstick for assessing Africanisms in Black American culture: "Whenever the elements of Black culture are more closely similar to African than European traits, we can be reasonably certain that we have identified African survivals."

For years, work by Frazier (1939) and Elkins (1968) was accepted as the definitive history of Black families and posited as a causal explanation of their contemporary condition. Applying traditional historical methods and using plantation records and the testimony of slave owners, both men reached the conclusion that the culture of the slaves was decimated and, in particular, that the family was destroyed under slavery. The first historian to challenge that thesis was Blassingame (1972), whose use of slave narratives indicated that in the slave quarters, Black families did exist as functioning institutions and role models for others. Moreover, strong family ties persisted in face of the frequent breakups deriving from the slave trade. To further counter the Frazier-Elkins thesis, Fogel and Engerman (1974) used elaborate quantitative methods to document that slave owners did not separate a majority of the slave families. Their contention, also controversial, was that the capitalistic efficiency of the slave system meant it was more practical to keep slave families intact.

Continuing in the vein of revisionist historical research, Genovese (1974) used a mix of slaveholders' papers and slave testimony. He concluded that Black culture, through compromise and negotiation between slaves and slave owners, did flourish during slavery. Within that cultural framework existed a variety of socially approved and sanctioned relationships between slave men and women. The alleged female matriarchy that was extant during that era is described by Genovese as a closer approximation to a healthy gender equality than was possible for Whites.

Historical demographers have also made contributions to our understanding of Black family history. Furstenberg, Hershberg, and Modell (1975) investigated the origin of the female-headed Black

family and its relationship to the urban experience. Basing their analysis on samples from the decennial federal population manuscript schedules for the period from 1850 to 1880, they found that Blacks were only slightly less likely to reside in nuclear households than native Whites and immigrants to Philadelphia.

It was the landmark study by Gutman (1976) that put to rest one of the most common and enduring myths about Black families. Using census data for a number of cities between 1880 and 1925, he found that the majority of Blacks of all social classes were lodged in nuclear families. Through the use of plantation birth records and marriage applications, he concluded that the biparental household was the dominant form during slavery. More important than Gutman's compelling evidence that slavery did not destroy the Black family was his contention that this family form evolved from family and kinship patterns that emerged under slavery, thus giving credence to the notion of Black culture surviving slavery.

Between 1990 and 2003, several slavery scholars stressed the developmental and ever-changing structure of Black family. Their studies built on the pioneering work of John Hope Franklin, John Blassingame, Eugene Genovese, and Herbert Gutman. From an array of diverse qualitative and quantitative sources, Berlin (2003, 1998), Lockley (2001), Stevenson (1996), Malone (1992), and others showed how the structure and function of slave families, as well as cross-racial interactions, varied with the mode of productions, interregional and foreign competition, and geographical region. Also, by giving attention to the informal slave economy and issues of class and gender within the societies of both Whites and Blacks, these later works teased out a complex cultural and economic context within which slaves sculptured their family life. Across these studies, far stronger support emerged for the presence of various forms of nuclear and extended family arrangements than for an all present and pervasive female-headed slave family system.

While these historical works have successfully challenged the Moynihan (1965) view that slavery created the conditions for Black

family disorganization, the prevalence of marital breakups at the hands of slave owners means that many marriages were not stable. And even the use of slave accounts does not eliminate bias in slave history. Many of the slave narratives were edited by Northern abolitionists, and they constitute the reports of highly literate slaves. This raises questions about ideology and its role in the conceptualization of Black family organization. The role of ideology is not unique to the field of family history. Under the rubric of the sociology of knowledge, it has been asserted that the social location of individuals within a given society will influence the knowledge they possess (Mannheim, 1936). Since the study of Black families has been dominated by White middle-class males, a debate centering around the insider-outsider thesis has arisen (Merton, 1972; Staples and Mirande, 1980). One side contends that Blacks possess a special capacity to understand the behavior of their group, while the other side contends that the use of objective scientific methods nullifies the racial membership of the investigator as a significant factor. Those holding the latter view often choose to conceptualize this whole issue as a conflict between ideology and science (Zollar, 1986).

Other questions concern the division of historical researchers according to methodology. Many of the Black researchers have used the slave narratives as their main tool in understanding slave families. In part, this is due to a need for a broader understanding of the behavioral processes that constitute the historical background of American Blacks. Since White males have dominated the historical studies of slave families, they have often dismissed their Black counterparts with the charge of being polemicists who substituted speculation and ideology for objective data. This question of objectivity versus ideology would be beyond cavil were it not for the fact that Black families were treated pejoratively in the historical literature for the longest time.

As of the 1990s, there ceased to be a clear-cut racial division in the study of some aspects of Black history. Many of the corrective historical studies were undertaken by White historians such as Berlin

(1998, 2003), Gutman (1976), and Genovese (1974). However, with the exception of the work of the White anthropologist Herskovits (1941), their research did not change until America's racial climate changed. This fact led novelist and author-historian Chancellor Williams (quoted in Toure, 1991) to assert, "There are two widely different schools of scholarship. Members of the orthodox majority develop their work faithfully in line with the authorities in the field, relying on them as sources of final truth. . . . The other school dares to challenge much of this authoritarian scholarship by subjecting the masters to critical analysis, raising all kinds of questions . . . and even inquiring about some fundamental presuppositions which underlie and color so much of their work" (p. E-1).

The fact must be accepted that the Black family cannot be explained by the use of normative historical methods. For the most part, history has been a traditionalist science operating with the acceptance of the status quo models. What this means is that the traditional approach to the study of Black family life has been to define the history of Black American family behavior on the basis of standards set by the White community—not by the White community in general, but by White middle-class people in particular. Rather than using a more objective approach and accepting the fact that Black families are different and that one must understand the way they function and their values and standards—other values and standards—White norms have been imposed on the historical study of Black family life. The result has been that the Black family continues to be defined as a pathological unit whose unique way of functioning sustains the conditions of its oppression.

However, there is no definitive evidence of a racial polarization of historical research on the Black family. The purveyors of the pathology view have belonged to both racial groups, just as the defenders of the Black family have. The difference most likely arises from adherence to a class ideology and values rather than a value-free approach to the study of Black family history. A problem remains that much of what we know is an oversimplification of popular stereotypes

about Black family life, which serve to inculcate in the public mind a host of useless and invalidated generalizations—and there is much that we need to know that has not yet been explored.

Summary

Sorting out the validity of different historical theories and research on the evolution of Black American families is a daunting task. Just as historians are challenged by the task of determining the nature of historical events, it is difficult for us to evaluate the validity of their interpretation. What has been learned is that slavery, particularly in the nineteenth century, radically altered the family system known to Africans before their forced transplantation to the Americas. However much they may have attempted to maintain their family organization under slavery, the vicissitudes of bondage made an indelible mark on the type of family life they were allowed to have. That slavery made its mark on Black American families is unquestionable. Whether the experience of maintaining family life over a period of three hundred years in bondage left much of a legacy continues to be debated.

The classic historical theories that slavery created the basis for a deinstitutionalization of marriage and an inversion of gender roles in the family seem to have been successfully challenged by the neo-historical theories of Blassingame (1972), Genovese (1974), and Gutman (1976) and confirmed by general consensus of historians in the 1990s. Their research has the advantage of letting slaves speak in their own voices and of using census data and government records that more effectively document marriage and out-of-wedlock birth-rates. The fact that 75 percent of Black families were intact up to 1925 serves as a strong antidote to the historical generalization that the institutional role of marriage was destroyed under slavery. If one accepts the hypothesis that slavery created the conditions for a Black matriarchy, more current research on power relationships within Black American families provides strong evidence to the contrary.

Finally, we must examine how history illuminates the role of class and race in influencing Black family patterns. Traditionally, historians have posited race as the dominant variable, because certain historical experiences (slavery, Jim Crow) were unique to Black Americans and were thought to have created a pathological culture and personality in Black communities. Yet slavery was first and foremost an economic system. Black slavery occurred in the Americas because it was the cheapest and “best” economic system from a certain standpoint (Patterson, 1982). It acquired its racial characteristic in its latter stages to serve economic ends (Berlin, 2003). Given the social class traits that differentiate intact and broken Black American families, it seems apparent that current economic conditions supersede historical events as the main factor in Black family disorganization.

