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Toward an Empirical and Theoretical Framework for Defining Black Families*

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It is general knowledge for those who have examined the research literature on the black family, that for well over three-quarters of a century the issue of black family life has been a subject of scientific investigation. It is also equally known that during this period the examiners of black family life have consistently offered "evidence," "information," "theory" and "analyses" which focused on the so-called "problems" inherent in black family systems. Their conclusions invariably verified the belief that the black family system was an organization inherently laden with problems and inadequacies. Before questioning these historical conclusions, I should point out parenthetically, that the argument to follow does not support the conclusion that black family life in America is free of "problems." The obvious fact is that being black in a white, racist society is problematic by definition. Consequently, the family life of black people would be and is characterized by real and definite problems associated with racism and oppression. To recognize this while simultaneously calling into question the historical character of the research literature which overwhelmingly defines black family life in negativistic, problem-laden, pathological terms is not inconsistent. On the contrary, to call into ques-

tion the traditional work on the black family, while simultaneously recognizing that there are real problems associated with and reflected in black family life, is to recognize the complex nature of the phenomena and the inability of the traditional research models to accurately assess the reality of black family life.

THE LEGACY OF WHITE-DOMINATED RESEARCH

In his discussion of the distinction between black studies and the study of black people, Professor C. C. Clark (1972) makes a cogent argument for the existence of a critical relationship between the interpretive framework in scientific studies and the validity of the information acquired in such investigation. The position taken by Professor Clark is that one's ability to understand black reality is limited if the "interpretive framework" for the analyses of that reality is based on assumptions associated with non-black reality.

The orientations characteristic of the study of black families have been based on an understanding and perception of non-black reality. The primary orientations are: poverty-acculturation (Frazier, 1932; Bernard, 1966; Jeffers, 1967; Chilman, 1966); pathology (Moynihan, 1965; Bernard, 1966; Aldous, 1969; Rainwater, 1970), and victimization (Rodman, 1963; Liebow, 1966; Willie, 1970; Scanzoni, 1970). All of these orientations fall into this category of black families studied using non-black interpretive and/or conceptual frameworks.

Common to all three of these orientations is the assertion that black families are *made in America* (Nobles, 1976). In that acceptance of the idea that there is a singular homogene-

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ous American culture, each of these orientations contains the assumption that all families in this culture should have a common definition and, therefore, a similar conceptual character. Naturally, by assuming a common cultural reality between blacks and whites, one expects a common singular theoretical framework for interpreting their respective lifestyles. The fact that the condition of black American family life is different from that of white American family life, in turn, led to the conclusion that the differences perceived between black and white families represented a black deviation from the 'normative' culture.

The assumed cultural homogeneity between blacks and whites was, therefore, the primary "fiction" which influenced the scholarly treatment of black family life. In accepting this fiction as true, research on the black family has had to reconcile the: (1) real differences between these two family types; and (2) the belief that they *should* not be different. The means of reconciling this belief with the reality has been the universal acceptance of the idea of the "deviant" black family. Racist models and/or assumptions, coupled with unsophisticated scientific treatment and analyses of black family life in general, and the "deviance" assertion in particular, form the legacy contemporary researchers struggle with and are confused by in the current analyses of black family life.

The debilitating aspect of the legacy (*cf.* Hare, 1976) is that the uncritical adoption of non-black interpretive or analytical frameworks results in: (1) misdirecting the analyses of black family life; and (2) the acceptance of erroneous assumptions and "meanings" which define the phenomena under investigation. It seems evident that in order to break away from this legacy, one has to adopt a framework which will be consistent with the sociopolitical and psychocultural reality of black people.

SCIENTIFIC INQUIRY: EMPIRICAL AND THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS FOR DEFINING BLACK FAMILIES

Professor M. Jones (1976) of Atlanta University has noted that systematic scientific inquiry begins where common sense leaves off. In fact, common sense constitutes the base upon which scientific information is

built. In many respects, scientific inquiry is idiosyncratic to the people whose common sense it is built upon. The social scientist's role is, therefore, to present the "truth" in a scientific manner, that is, to extend or expand the common sense understanding of one's people with scientific understanding.

In recognition that the goal of science is to *understand* and not merely to predict and control phenomena, one of the tasks of scientific inquiry is to: (1) establish general laws about the phenomena which, in turn, serve as instruments for systematic explanation; and (2) provide the bases for dependable prediction. The source of difficulty in the establishment of these general laws (particularly for social phenomena; *i.e.*, black family life) has been a limited definition of the procedure for obtaining factual information and a limited capacity to understand the information obtained. In the domain of social science, both of these issues have limited our ability to develop an adequate theoretical and empirical framework for understanding the black family.

Limited Definition of Procedure

In the area of social scientific inquiry, it is generally believed that controlled experimentation is the singular best method for obtaining factual knowledge. It is, therefore, argued that advanced theoretical development cannot be achieved without systematic experimentation. Hence, the paucity of reliable laws found in each of the social science disciplines is seen as the direct result of the paucity of systematic experimentation.

It is, however, true, as Nagel (1961) points out, that in other branches of inquiry the lack of an opportunity or even desire to engage in controlled experiments has not prevented the scientist from arriving at well-grounded general laws. Nagel notes, for instance, that astronomy in terms of the stability of its comprehensive theory and accuracy of its predictions, as a science, has been judged superior to many other branches of science—a position it has obtained without (Nagel, 1961:452) "experimentally manipulating the celestial bodies."

The advancement of general reliable knowledge, however, does require a systematic procedure; a procedure which contains the essentials of scientific inquiry. The "controlled investigation" procedure outlined

by Nagel consists of a search for contrasting occasions in which the phenomenon is either uniformly manifested or manifested in some cases but not others and the subsequent examination of certain factors discriminated in these occasions in order to ascertain whether or not variations in these factors are related to differences in the phenomenon. This procedure, Nagel contends, meets the requirements of systematic inquiry while simultaneously eliminating the constraints of controlled experimentation on the social phenomena.

Nagel's expansion of the "procedure" associated with achieving reliable information, however, will not in itself result in general laws regarding, in this case, black family life, nor will it release us from the legacy of utilizing non-black interpretive or analytical frameworks. In order for this to be accomplished, one has to combine procedural expansion (*i.e.*, controlled investigations) with a culturally sensitive capacity for understanding the information obtained. This consideration raises the issue of the "differential capacity to understand" as a problem for scientific inquiry.

Limited Capacity to Understand

Merton (1973) has argued that the "capacity to understand" is central to the "insider/outsider" doctrine. In its strongest form, the insider/outsider doctrine puts forth the claim as a matter of epistemological principle that particular groups have a monopolistic access to certain kinds of knowledge and, therefore, have a greater capacity to understand. In short, Merton argues that because the outsider by definition has not been socialized in the target group's culture, nor been engaged in the panorama of experiences associated with the life of the group, he/she does not have the direct, intuitive sensibility necessary for understanding. The argument would hold, therefore, that as a matter of social epistemology, only black historians have the capacity to understand black history or only black sociologists have the capacity to understand the social life of black people. Merton (1973:106) goes on to point out that only through continued socialization in the life of a group can one become "fully aware of its symbolisms, definitions of socially shared realities, and meanings of behavior, feelings and values" which are critical to under-

standing the unwritten grammar of conduct and the nuances of the cultural idiom. Consequently, the proponents of the insider/outsider doctrine argue that the outsider has a structurally imposed incapacity to comprehend alien groups, cultures, societies, etc.¹ The result of this cultural incapacity is that the insider and the outsider must arrive at different (and presumably incompatible) findings and interpretations, even when they examine the same phenomenon. The insider/outsider doctrine would, therefore, predict that black and white researchers of the black family would arrive at different interpretations and conclusions about the black family. This, however, has not been the case. The reasons possibly lie in Merton's further discussion. Merton questions the position of the insider's privileged capacity to understand by noting that human beings in socially differentiated societies can, in fact, be located in a single social status category *or* in several categories. The crucial fact of social structure is that individuals do not have a single status but a complement of variously interrelated statuses, or what is called a "status set." In effect, individuals are both insiders and outsiders. Accordingly, Merton (1973:115) concludes that the idiomatic expression of the total insider doctrine (*i.e.*, one must be one in order to understand one) is "deceptively simple and sociologically fallacious." However, before dismissing the argument that one's possession of a status set reduces one's claim of a special capacity to understand, it is necessary to point out that the inadequacy of the total insider argument probably exists only in the domain of sociology. The "truths" of psychology, on the other hand, suggest that given the diversity of societal status and even multiple status sets, the differential "power" attributed to a single social status can render it as the filter through which all other perspectives associated with other statuses are screened. For instance, the psychological meaning or power associated with the ascribed status "race" (in a racist society) would, in all probability, be stronger or more influential in terms of perceiving reality than the achieved status of "middle-class." The psychological power which is given to a par-

¹In a milder form, the insider/outsider doctrine maintains that insider and outsider scholars have a significantly different focus of interest.

ticular status can influence the "relevance" of all other statuses and become the dominant criterion for defining reality. Accordingly, one's perceptions about reality stemming from one's status as middle-class would be filtered through the more psychologically powerful screen (status) of blackness. Hence, psychologically, "being one is necessary if you are to *fully* understand one," or rather, having been socialized² in the psychocultural medium of a group, one is more aware of that group's symbolisms, definitions of socially shared reality and their meanings of behavior, feelings, and values than those of other groups. Hence, it could be argued that the "capacity to understand" is related to one's status as an insider (*i.e.*, a psychocultural insider).

One's status as an insider does not, however, guarantee an understanding of all phenomena. In fact, because of the racial and cultural oppression of black people, blacks are forced to examine the world through conceptual glasses ground to focus reality for white people.³

In his discussion of the scientific method, Mack Jones (1976:3) identified and noted, as did Nagel before him, that the fundamental purpose of the scientific inquiry is to "allow people to anticipate future events and to develop strategies to maximize our control over them." Jones argues that every researchable problem occurs within a network defined by a people's anticipation and control of needs.

The three critical points in this network are the people's: (1) world-view; (2) set of normative assumptions; and (3) frame of reference. In addition to answering specific questions such as who are we? where did we come from? etc., a *world-view* also defines what people believe to be their "nature" and the way in which they believe the world *should* operate. Growing directly out of their

world-view, the *normative assumptions* of a people summarize their perceptions of the nature of the "good life" and the political, economic, and cultural forms and/or processes necessary for the realization of that life. A people's *frame of reference*, which is more directly related to academic disciplines and scientific inquiry, serves as the "lens" through which people perceive the experiential world. It particularly determines the formation of major concepts, propositions and theories appropriate to the examination of reality. In fact, it prescribes the assumptions and issues which will be considered as "legitimate" areas of study, as well as how they should be studied. An analysis of these three concepts (world-view, normative assumptions, and frame of reference) is the key to unlocking or freeing ourselves from the legacy of white scholarship. These concepts also are necessary in defining black theoretical analyses of the black family.

TRANSUBSTANTIATION AND CONCEPTUAL INCARCERATION: EPISTEMOLOGICAL PROBLEMS IN THE ANALYSES OF BLACK REALITY

When we consider the process by which symbols, meanings, definitions, feelings, attitudes, values and behaviors are transmitted to each and every member of a group, we are immediately compelled to deal with the idea of culture. In global terms, culture is a montage of specific ways of thinking, feeling, and acting, which is peculiar to the members of a particular group. In its combined form, the dominant "tone" or unique "rhythm" of a particular cultural montage distinguishes it from other cultural montages. Specific to a people's cultural montage is a particular "belief system." Conversely, it is the people's belief system which reveals their cultural montage, and in so doing, reflects their world-view, normative assumptions, and frame of reference. Hence, it is through an accurate understanding of a particular group's belief system that the social scientist is able to accurately interpret the "outcomes" of that particular group's human processes.

"Transubstantiation" (*cf.* Von Lue, 1975) is a process wherein the substance of one culture is transformed into the substance of another culture. The process amounts to a kind of "elemental" transformation. When the social scientist or researcher does not

²In this case, socialized refers to the internalization (as one's own) of the "meaning" of that group's primary definition.

³This suggests a plausible explanation for why black social scientists have not determined an analysis and discussion of the black family significantly different from that of white researchers. Even though black social scientists have a special sensitivity to the psychocultural reality of black life, the formal process of examining that reality scientifically has placed real perceptual, and, therefore, interpretive constraints on our analyses.

respect the integrity of a people's "cultural perspective," he/she is prone to fall victim to what we have defined as the "transubstantive error," an error wherein one defines or interprets the behavior and/or medium of one culture with "meanings" appropriate to and consistent with another culture. For instance, if the cultural substance, or more understandably, the "belief system" of one culture as seen and defined by the people of that culture is translated or transformed into the cultural substance or belief system of another culture, then an act of transubstantiation has occurred. To the extent that a people's "understanding" of their world is misinterpreted in the "translation" of their belief system (*i.e.*, meanings, symbols, feelings, values, definitions, etc.), one has a transubstantive error. The potential for committing the transubstantive error is *decreased* as one *increases* the understanding of the cultural substance of a particular people as seen and defined by *that* particular group of people. In crosscultural research, one can only be sure of what one knows when one eliminates or reduces the transubstantive error.

The failure of black social scientists to recognize and respect our own cultural substance has not only caused us to commit the same "transubstantive errors" as our white counterparts, it has also led to a condition wherein our thinking has been defined by the cultural substance of white reality. It seems evident that, in the future, an accurate representation of black reality is dependent upon the black social scientist's realization that science in its true meaning is simply an amplification and specification of the common sense (that which represents the set or sets of systematic and cumulative ideas, beliefs and knowledge) of a people. Common sense, therefore, constitutes the basis upon which science is, or ought to be, built.

As a reconstruction, science serves as an amplification and specification of the shared, symbolic, systematic and cumulative ideas, beliefs, and knowledge of the people in question. Consequently, one should recognize that only when the scientist translates (reconstructs) the common sense wisdom of a people without compromising its empirical truth, especially the people's concrete historical condition, does one provide an understanding of the reality of the people in ques-

tion. The science (reconstruction) of a people must, therefore, be consistent with the essential definition of their common sense (culture). An accurate representation of black reality, therefore, depends on the black social scientist's ability to, independently of white conceptualizations, reconceptualize and reconstruct black common sense as science.

While black social scientists have been thoroughly trained in a method of scientific inquiry purporting to examine the complexities of the human condition, upon closer examination it only provides a limited understanding of the psychocultural reality of white people. In effect, black social scientists have been trapped in the conceptual assumptions associated with that analytical framework. This we have defined as "conceptual incarceration" of black scholarship.

This state of *conceptual incarceration* inhibits blacks from asking the right questions. Hence, we are limited in what we can know about black social reality by what we think we know about the dynamics of social reality in general (which more accurately should be called white social reality). The epistemological dilemma for black social scientists is that we find ourselves seeking an awareness of our own reality, yet the parameters of the definition of what constitutes knowledge about reality is defined according to non-black conceptions. To work without recognizing and resolving this dilemma is to be conceptually incarcerated.

In order, therefore, to free ourselves from the legacy of white scholarship and to begin the process of creating a black theoretical analysis of the black family, we must understand our cultural substance and build a theoretical and empirical analysis from our world-view, normative assumptions, and frame of reference. The remaining discussion in this paper will be a preliminary attempt to break with the legacy of white scholarship and define an empirical and theoretical framework for the study of black family life.

It is our contention that black culture in the United States is the result of a special admixture of a continued African world-view operating within another cultural milieu which is primarily defined by the philosophical assumptions and underpinnings of the Anglo-American community. Accordingly, it is that African world-view which is at the base of the black cultural sphere. Similarly, it is

the continuation of that African world-view which, in part, helps to define the design for living and the patterns for interpreting reality for black people. It is for this reason that a brief discussion of African culture and philosophy is necessary for the logical development of the task of defining a black empirical and theoretical framework for the study of black family life.

BACK TO THE ROOTS: AFRICAN CULTURE AS A BASIS FOR UNDERSTANDING BLACK FAMILIES

The African roots of black culture are not, as many believe, the retention of African artifacts, but the retention of an African attitude, an attitude based on a belief system which understood everything in the universe to be endowed with the Supreme Force (*cf.* Tempels, 1959; Forde, 1954). Thomas (1961) also points out that African belief systems traditionally understood that the very nature of existence was the Supreme Force. In fact, for Africans, the nature of the universe was believed to be vitalistic. Because all things are believed to be endowed with the same Supreme Force, Africans traditionally believed that all things were "interconnected" or "interdependent" (*cf.* Thomas, 1960, 1961).

A review of the African cosmological, ontological and philosophical understanding of the universe and how it relates to the family (*cf.* Nobles, 1976a) suggests that these particular orientations not only defined, regulated, and controlled the social psychological relations within the community (*cf.* Mbiti, 1970), but it also determined the structure, functions, nature and definition of the notion of "family." Osei (1970) has noted that in this regard, traditional philosophies and the world-view determined by them were primarily reflected in and reinforced by a deep sense of "family."

Ontologically, the African belief system contained the conception of all things in the universe as being "force" or "spirit" (*cf.* Tempels, 1959). It is logical, or at least consistent, therefore, that if one believed that all things, including humans, were endowed with the same Supreme Force, that one would also believe that all things are "essentially" one. For the African, this world-view is based on the ontological identification of "being (existence) in the universe," as being characterized by a cosmological "participa-

tion in the Supreme Force."

Therefore, for the African individual, the family constituted the reference point wherein one's existence was perceived as being interconnected to the existence of everything else. On this point, Mbiti (1970) observed that, for Africans, the individual owed his/her very existence to all members (living, dead and yet-to-be-born) of the family, tribe, or clan. Mbiti further notes that the individual was an integral part of the collective unity; *i.e.*, the family.

A natural feature of the universe is the multiplicity of forms and moments. What characterizes African people's understanding of the universe is, therefore, a simultaneous respect for the concrete detail in the multiplicity of *forms* and the rejection of the possibility of an absence or vacuum of forms.

The notions of the "oneness of being" and "interdependence" suggest a connection of humans and all the other elements of the universe as being essentially part of a unified and integrated (interconnected) whole. This, in turn, determines two fundamental or guiding beliefs. The first belief is that humans are part of, or in fact, "one with nature." The second is a conception of the universe as living and dynamic, or what is called a "vitalistic pneumaticism" (Thomas, 1960: 199). In accordance with these two concepts ("one with nature" and "survival of the tribe"), the African conceives of experience as an *intense complementary rhythmic connection* between the person and reality. All the African philosophical notions (*i.e.*, dynamism, interdependence, variety, optimism, etc.) suggest that the universe is mobile, dynamic, interconnected, and vitalistic. These concepts being reflected in African culture suggest the classification of African culture as being a culture of "rhythm" (*cf.* Akbar, 1975). It is the retention of these beliefs which constitutes the roots of black culture. Very little, however, is known about how this traditional African attitude was retained. Nevertheless, the evidence of its retention is quite clear.

Remembering that at the core of what we call "science" is a particular world-view, set of normative assumptions and referential frame, it is also important to note that the world-view, normative assumptions and frame of reference also combine to form a scientific paradigm. The scientific paradigm then becomes the formalized framework

which guides the assessment and evaluation of reality. A paradigm is, therefore, a perceptual, cognitive and affective achievement representing the *organizational process for understanding*. A paradigm becomes the singular screen through which all understanding is filtered.

One task of black social scientists is, therefore, to become aware of black consciousness (which is very different from being aware of "accepted" perceptions of reality). It is our job to develop an understanding of our intrinsic African apperceptions and then to make scientific inquiries and create a social science discipline which is (pre-) determined by the particular way in which blacks understand and are conscious of black reality.

Accordingly, the analytical framework developed to "understand" the phenomena within a culture must be "sensitive" to the dictates of that culture. Consistent with the axiomatic contention of a continued African world-view operating within the cultural milieu of white American culture, we suggest that the black family system should be thought of as African in "nature" and American in "nurture" (*i.e.*, Nobles, 1974a). The intrinsic nature or *integrity* of black family systems is, therefore, African. This "integrity" of black families, we have termed the sense of "Africanity" (*i.e.*, Nobles, 1974b).

In implying that black social scientific investigations must be rooted in the nature of the black culture, which in turn is rooted or based on an African world-view, it is further implied, consequently, that the dominant aspect of black social scientific inquiry must reflect an African-American world-view, normative assumptions, and frame of reference. Black social scientific inquiry must be consistent with our language, customs, knowledge, ideas, values, beliefs, and symbols. A task such as this, in itself, requires new theory, new analytical frameworks, and new research models.

AFRICANITY: A THEORETICAL AND EMPIRICAL FRAMEWORK

The proposed theoretical and empirical framework for defining black families recognizes that an African cultural spectrum or attitude forms the foundation of the black cultural sphere and that of the wider (white) mainstream. American culture serves as the medium in which the black cultural sphere

must operate. Accordingly, this framework allows us to recognize that it is the combined "continuation" of an intrinsic African (black) value system *and* its reaction to the cultural imperatives of the wider American cultural milieu which determines the special features observable in black family life. The observable outcomes, therefore, must be interpreted in terms of: (1) the African nature or basis for "behavior," and (2) the American conditions which influence the development and/or expression of such behavior. This point is extremely important because it defines the model as an interactive model.

Without question, the fundamental proposition historically affecting black people in the New World has been cultural domination. The twin instruments of this domination have, of course, been "racism" and "economic exploitation." Parenthetically, it should be emphasized that racism and exploitation are at the source of any ontological changes in black people. However, because the examination of black reality has been done with non-black analytical instruments, the real changes in black people have not been revealed or recorded.

The real consequence, therefore, of operating within the world-view of white Americans, has been that our scientific understanding of black social reality, particularly black family life, has been for the most part determined by the indices and frames of reference (*i.e.*, racism, white supremacy and exploitation) of the world-view of the traditional white social scientist.

As noted above, however, it is our contention that black culture in the United States is the result of a special admixture of our continued African world-view operating within another cultural milieu which is primarily defined by the philosophical assumptions and underpinnings of the Anglo-American community. It is suggested, therefore, that what determines the special form that black families take and the unique relational patterns expressed by black family systems is primarily the sense of "Africanity." It should be noted that the sense of "Africanity" in black families does not require the presupposition of a homogeneous, monolithic black family type. There is diversity within black families. However, within that diversity, one is able to discern a comprehensive cultural theme which has historically characterized black

families. It is this cultural theme which we refer to as the sense of "Africinity" within black family life.

Given this sense of "Africinity," the study or research on black family life must take as its theoretical and/or conceptual framework the African philosophical world-view as reflected in contemporary black family life. Hence, the black family (or what is meant by the term which classifies a particular set of biological, spiritual, physical and behavioral patterns and/or dynamics) is partially defined by the traditional and contemporary African world-view. This philosophy or cultural world-view is the basis for the family's nature or integrity. Thus, an empirical and theoretical framework for the study of black family life must be created which: (1) explicates the philosophical positions (*i.e.*, world-view, normative assumptions, and frame of reference) which determine the intrinsic nature or integrity of black family systems; (2) reveals the particular way in which that world-view helps to answer questions such as, who are you? where did you come from? how should you behave? how do you develop? etc. and (3) provides an empirical "instrument" through which black people can "accurately" perceive the experiential world. The theoretical and empirical framework for defining black social reality must also be based on

African cultural residuals as reflected in the world-view, normative assumptions and frame of reference of black people. Several features (see Figure 1) should be considered in any theoretical and empirical framework for the analyses of black families.

AN AFRO-CENTRIC ANALYSIS OF THE BLACK FAMILY

Research based on this theoretical framework is just beginning the process of defining the special forms found in black families. For that reason, judgment of the scientific value of this research must be withheld until all the evidence is evaluated. Its value will be demonstrated by the validity, relevance, and utility of the information it provides.

The research gives recognition to the elaboration of the African-based scientific network (world-view, normative assumptions, and frame of reference) provided above. The research on black families was begun with the belief or assumption that the acceptance of a continuous African-based cultural theme was important to the development of an accurate reflective analysis (*cf.* Nobles, 1976b) of black family life. In recognition of the elaboration of the African-based scientific network and the emergent definition of science, this research model has begun to utilize an African paradigm or what we have defined as the

FIGURE 1. AFRICAN-BASED SCIENTIFIC NETWORK

<u>World-View:</u>		
Cosmological Aspect	—	Oneness of Being
	—	Notion of Interdependence
Ontological Aspect	—	Nature of Being is Force or Spirit (Energy)
Axiomactical Aspect	—	Man in Harmony with Nature
<u>Normative Assumptions:</u>		
Ethosic Order	—	Harmonious (rhythmic) fusion between elements
	—	Seek the Synthesis
Basis of Awareness (Understanding)	—	Subjectivity
	—	Synthesis between Man and reality; <i>e.g.</i> , I feel it.
Validity	—	Found to be true in Nature
<u>Frame of Reference:</u>		
Way of Organizing Awareness	—	Synchronous
	—	Analogic
Point of Reference	—	Communalistic
Relational Focus	—	Synthesis (connection)
	—	Contradiction (antagonism)
Universal Relations	—	Participation by Resemblance
	—	Participation by Difference

Africinity model.

Accordingly, the thrust of this research has been to define the special features found in African-American (black) families. Thus far, four critical positions in conjunction with several special characteristics have been isolated. These positions are that: (1) the traditional black family is a unique cultural form enjoying its own inherent resources and/or features; (2) the family performs important social and psychological functions; (3) some of its features may be situational (*i.e.*, caused by the pressures of the moment) or adaptational; and (4) in periods of "crises" or at "ceremonial" times, the "African nature" of the family is most visible, and provides needed emotional and economic support for its constituent members.

Though in no way an exhaustive listing, the special characteristics of black families are identified as: (1) they are comprised of several individual households, with the family definition and lines of authority and support transcending or going beyond any one household unit which comprises the "family;" (2) they are structurally expanding and diminishing in response to external conditions (elasticity); (3) they have a child-centered system (the general organizational purpose of the family focuses on, if not requires, the presence of children); (4) they have a close network of relationships between families not necessarily related by blood (family networking); (5) they have flexible and interchangeable role definitions and performance (in childrearing a clear distinction is maintained between role definition [sex-linked] and role performance [sexless]); and (6) they have multiple parenting and interfamilial consensual adoptions.

The explanatory importance of the Africinity model becomes more evident when it is noted that only in analyzing the concrete historical conditions of the black family *and* the cultural (intrinsic) nature of the family can we understand its behavioral outcomes. Clearly, for instance, the model reveals the observable behavioral outcomes of family networking as the result of both the retention of an African attitude which respects the Oneness of Being *and* the concrete historical condition of American racism and hostility toward blacks. Accordingly, the model reveals and structurally defines the black family as "elastic" (Nobles, 1976a). The elasticity notion of the black family stems from the

ability of the model to recognize that the family size or membership (family networking) expands and diminishes in response to pressures of the moment and/or external conditions, and that this response is culturally consistent with the black family's intrinsic nature. The model would not argue, as many have (*cf.* Adams, 1970), that black "family networking" was the result of kinship ties being created out of the necessity of poverty (*i.e.*, "we either hang together or hang alone").

An African Proverb: "He who can not dance will say the drum is bad."

It seems clear that for too long, studies and research about black family life have been done by "people who could not dance." It is understandable that their conclusions have consistently resulted in a negative opinion about the drum (black family). The importance of a culturally consistent theoretical and empirical framework lies in its ability to clarify and amplify the phenomena associated with a group of people. The issues discussed in this paper are offered as the beginning steps toward the amplification and clarification of black family life. It is only through such an amplification and clarification that we will come to understand black family life. And, it is only with a culturally sensitive empirical and theoretical framework that such an amplification and clarification can be obtained.

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