Kinship and Family

The ruin of a nation begins in the homes of its people.

—Ashanti proverb


Natalie Hopkinson

The seeds for this weekend’s National Black Family Reunion Celebration were planted 16 years ago, in the mind of civil rights leader Dorothy Height. The now 89-year-old founder and president of the National Council of Negro Women read an article about the “dying Black family” and got mad about it.

“Her answer to that was that the African American family is not dying,” explains Shiba Freeman Haley, the regional coordinator for the celebration. “Ours aren’t always the typical mother, father, 2.3 children, but there is still much to celebrate.” Height responded by organizing the first annual National Black Family Reunion Celebration on the Washington Monument grounds, not far from the council’s Pennsylvania Avenue headquarters. In the tradition of summertime family reunions, the council invited families to spend the day outside, enjoy music and entertainment, and eat way too much food.

In addition to entertainment, ethnic foods, and an arts and crafts marketplace, the council organized activities aimed at strengthening the family unit, such as panels, seminars, and health screenings.

“We wanted to take all different aspects of the family—spiritual, health, economics, and so forth—and to have panel discussions and activities,” Haley continues. “To look at what is different and good about black families.”

Definitions and Historical Background on African American Families

As indicated in the news story, African American families are not the typical husband, wife, and two children. African American families are varied and diverse as will be seen in this chapter. Many disciplines including sociology, anthropology, history, and psychology are interested in the African American family and kinships. The family is the most proximal influence for youth and the primary institution for socializing them. In this chapter, we cover structural (i.e., who the family comprises and what the family looks like) as well as functional (i.e., what purposes the family serves) aspects of the African American family. First, we provide definitions of terms relevant to family. Then, we give a historical overview of how African American families have been studied, and we describe the functional and structural characteristics of Africans living in the New World during the period of slavery. We provide a snapshot of what African American families look like. We explore strengths and coping patterns among Black families and the impact of discriminatory institutional policies on them. Finally, we review methodological issues in studying African American families and summarize the main ideas of the chapter.

**DEFINITIONS**

More than half a century ago, Murdock (1949) defined the family as a social group characterized by common residence, economic cooperation, and reproduction. A family, according to Murdock, includes adults of both sexes, at least two of whom have a sexual relationship, and one or more children, biological or adopted, of the sexually cohabiting adults. Murdock describes the nuclear family as the most basic family structure, which consists of a married man and woman with their offspring. Murdock’s definition captures what has been thought of as a traditional family. As we will see, African American families differ substantially from the family described by Murdock.

Reiss’s (1965) definition of the family focuses on its functional aspects. According to Reiss, the one universal function of the family is the socialization of the young. Reiss defines the family as a small kinship-structured group with the key function of providing nurturance and socialization of the newborn. He acknowledges that this group is commonly the parents in a conjugal relationship, but occasionally it is the mother and/or other relatives of the mother.

Hill’s (1998) definition of the Black family emphasizes both functional and structural aspects. According to Hill, the Black family is a household related by blood or marriage or function that provides basic instrumental and expressive functions to its members. Families serve instrumental functions
by providing for the physical and material needs of the family members, such as providing clothing, shelter, and food. The expressive functions of a family take into account the emotional support and nurturance needs met by the family.

The family networks can include biological relations as well as non-biologically related members. The African American family is characterized as an extended family (Hill, 1998). The extended family is a network of functionally related individuals who reside in different households. The immediate family consists of individuals who reside in the same household, regardless of the number of generations within that household.

Fictive kin are often included as members of African American families. Fictive kin are those members of the family who are not biologically related nor related through marriage but who feel and function like family. Friends who are fictive kin are seen socially and emotionally as kin. A person who is considered fictive kin may be seen as a father, mother, grandmother, grandfather, uncle, aunt, sister, brother, or cousin, depending on the role he or she plays (Scott & Black, 1989). Fictive kin may be referred to as “play mother, play father, play sister,” and so forth.

**HISTORICAL APPROACHES TO STUDYING BLACK FAMILIES**

Much of the early writings on the Black family are found in the domains of history and sociology. Du Bois authored the first books on the Black family, *The Philadelphia Negro* (1899) and *The Negro American Family* (1908). In these books, Du Bois draws on African and slave experiences in discussing differences between Black and White families. Du Bois disputes the then-existing myth that Africa was not a source of culture and civilization. He describes the cultural survival of Africans in the New World and discusses how their language, religion, and practices survived the Middle Passage to the United States (Gadsden, 1999).

Frazier’s (1939) book, *The Negro Family in the United States*, is one of the first scholarly attempts to examine Black family life in the United States. In this book, Frazier describes the negative consequences of slavery on the disorganization of the Black family. According to Frazier, slavery created an unstable family unit that resulted in lasting damage to the African American family. During slavery, the biological family unit was not sacred. Children were sold from their biological parents, and male and female partners were kept from legal unions. The economical structure of slavery forced separations of man and woman partners, from each other and from their children.

The lack of family stability with its resulting problems among African American continued after slavery, as Blacks began the migration from the South to the North. According to Frazier (1939), the social welfare
measures to combat poverty in the 1930s had many negative consequences for families. Families became dependent on welfare and handouts and did not achieve self-sufficiency. Furthermore, many of the practices that were grounded in African traditions, useful in southern life, were not functional in the urban North. Frazier recommended that they be eliminated. He believed that a different approach was needed to survive in the urban North and that African American families could not progress until they changed their way of living.

The study of the African American family during the 1960s and 1970s was done in the context of the many social and economic barriers African Americans faced during this period. Two types of literature on the family were written during this period (Gadsden, 1999). One group of studies focused on the conditions and circumstances that prevented Blacks from social and economic mobility. Moynihan’s (1965) commissioned paper, “The Negro Family: Case for National Action” is illustrative of this approach. This paper portrayed Black families as pathological, with a structure that differs from the normative family structure within the United States. Normative family structure was based on middle-class European American family structure. According to Moynihan (1999):

In essence, the Negro community has been forced into a matriarchal structure which, because it is so out of line with the rest of the American society seriously retards the progress of the group as a whole, and imposes a crushing burden on the Negro male, and in consequence, on a great many Negro women as well. (p. 7)

The theme in Moynihan’s paper is congruent with Frazier’s disorganization theme in accounting for the conditions of Black families. Moynihan’s main point is that the deterioration of the Black family is responsible for the deterioration of Black society.

The second type of literature that emerged during the 1960s and 1970s used a strength model to describe Black families. These writings used new ways of understanding the experiences of African American families (Billingsley, 1968). The patterns and styles that had come to be associated with African American families were seen as adaptive and functional for the survival and well-being of members of the family. This new work viewed flexible family structure, such as the extended family, as functional. Authors of this type of literature discussed the dynamic and positive interactional patterns and support systems within African American families (McAdoo, 1998). This research tradition continues today.

Research on Black families in the 1990s and 2000s tends to focus on structural factors such as the marriage rate of African Americans (Gadsden, 1999). These studies include studies of structural patterns and socioeconomic indicators, such as female-headed households and poverty
and adolescent mothers. Other current topics include African American extended families, child-rearing and socialization practices, poverty and vulnerability among Black children, and African American fathers.

African American Family Structure and Function

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Families During Enslavement

Although it has been assumed that there were no two-parent families during slavery, Burgess (1995) writes that the majority of families of African descent living in the United States in the 1700s and 1800s were two-parent households. By examining plantation records, Gutman (1976) observed the presence of a nuclear family among enslaved Africans that resembled that of the slave masters. Using 1880–1885 census data collected from Blacks in several cities, Gutman found that the majority of Blacks of all social classes were in nuclear families. Gutman believed that slavery did not destroy the Black family and that in fact enslaved families were stronger than thought. Although there were nuclear families, other family forms also existed because enslaved families were often separated through sales.

During slavery, the mother-child relationship rather than the husband-wife relationship was primary to family life. Within slave communities, members helped to raise children of single mothers. When parents were sold to other slave owners, other adults in the slave community took care of the children left behind. The biggest fear of families was the threat of a child being sold.

Although enslaved families were able to function as adaptively as feasible given their circumstances, the consequences of slavery were nevertheless devastating on the African American family (Burgess, 1995). Enslavement had several pervasive, institutional, and long-term effects on the family. These included earlier ages of intercourse, childbearing, and establishing a household. In African communities, natural spacing techniques such as breastfeeding and polygamous unions allowed women to space childbearing. Within the New World, there was an emphasis on increased economic production and thus human reproduction. Therefore, enslaved African women began parenting at earlier ages and had greater numbers of children than did their foremothers in Africa.

Permanent unions and marriages were not possible because slaves could be sold at any time. Marriages between Africans in the United States received no legitimacy from slave owners. Slaves were required to get permission from their owners before they could marry, even though their marriages were not legally recognized.
Black Families During Emancipation and Reconstruction

During the period from 1865 to 1898, African Americans began to own small businesses and farms, and to develop churches and some banking systems. Colleges were created and some literacy was achieved. Fathers who had been sold and separated prior to the emancipation reestablished relationships with their families. After slavery, there was an increase in two-parent households, as fathers rejoined their families and couples were legally able to marry (Burgess, 1995).

Migration North

From 1910 to 1930, families began to leave the South for what they thought would be a better life in northern cities. Although there were harsh conditions and Blacks could only obtain menial jobs for the most part, they were able to find some form of employment. Some African Americans developed businesses and were able to take care of their families (Burgess, 1995).

The Black family migration north and urbanization changed the makeup of the Black family (Staples, 1999b). By 1925, Blacks in the urban North no longer had the cultural practices that had enabled them to survive in the South. Around this time, new phenomena surfaced: children reared by mothers only, welfare dependency, and juvenile delinquency. According to Staples, about 10% to 15% of all Black families experienced these problems in the 1950s. Social policies that included welfare and poverty programs were developed during this period. However, many of these programs did not consider other factors that affected the African American community. For example, social policies were based on a “breadwinner” model that assumed that husbands would provide basic needs within families. This model did not consider the low wages and the low level of unemployment among African American men that made it impossible for them to take care of their families (Burgess, 1995). Thus, some of the early programs that were supposed to benefit families may have encouraged fathers to be absent from the home. For example, public assistance requirements prohibited male presence in homes in which public assistance was received.

What Does the African American Family Look Like?

Structural aspects of the African American family are described in several papers (Taylor, Tucker, Chatters, & Jayakody, 1997). These papers focus on with whom African American children live, the composition of household
members, family structure and poverty, and differences between African American and White family structure.

**SINGLE PARENT–HEADED HOUSEHOLDS**

There has been an increase in single-mother families over the past few decades for both White and African American households. In 2002 among Whites, 16% of families were headed by females compared to 48% for Blacks and 27% for Hispanics (see Table 3.1; Fields, 2003). Reasons for the increase in single female households differ for African Americans and Whites. Among White women, there has been an increase in divorce and a decrease in remarriage. Among African American women, the increase in single family–headed households is due to the fact that there has been an increase in the number of never married mothers. Never married women tend to have less economical stability than married women, as they are more likely to be younger and have less education.

A small proportion of African American children, 5%, live in single father–headed families (Fields, 2003). Single father–headed families tend to be more economically advantaged than single-mother families (McLanahan & Casper, 1995). Single father–headed families tend to have more support from others in the household than do single mother–headed families. About 80% of African American single fathers report they reside in either a subfamily, a cohabiting relationship, or with a related adult. This means that the majority of single African American males do not have the sole responsibility for child rearing, as is often the case with females who head households.

**FAMILY STRUCTURE OF HOUSEHOLDS WITH CHILDREN**

The household structure of the family that the child lives in is important to consider and has implications for the well-being of the child. For example, households with only one adult are more likely to be poorer and have fewer resources than households where there is more than one adult. Over the past decade, there has been a decline in two-parent African American households. Table 3.1 provides statistics on household structure by race.

As seen in Table 3.1, almost half (48%) of African American children live in households with a single mother, whereas 16% of White children live with a single mother. African American children are also more likely to reside in a home where a grandparent(s) is present than are White children (U.S. Census Bureau, 2002: see Table 3.2). In about 11% of these households, grandparents are responsible for the care of at least one grandchild.
Family Structure and Childhood Poverty

Childhood poverty is linked to family structure. Poverty among children is highest among those who live in mother-only families. African American children who live with their mothers only are four times more likely to be poor than African American children who live with both parents (Hogan & Lichter, 1995).

Table 3.3 gives information on child poverty among children by household structure (Fields, 2003). As seen in Table 3.3, both African American and White children who live in married-couple families have less poverty than those who live in single-parent households. For example, in 2001, 7.8% of African American children in married-couple families lived in poverty compared with a high 35.2% of children in mother-only households. These large differences in poverty rates are also seen for White and Hispanic children who live in married-couples families versus female-headed families.

Consequences of Family Structure on Children’s Outcomes

Although many children reared in mother-only households do well, there may be adverse consequences for others (Taylor et al., 1997). Research suggests that children who live in female-headed households do not do as well on several social indicators; For example, there is a higher

Table 3.1 Percentages of Children with Single Parents and Cohabiting Single Parents by Race

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>White</th>
<th>Black</th>
<th>Hispanic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Single Mother</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single Father</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single cohabiting mother</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single cohabiting father</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Table 3.2 Presence of Grandparents in the Household by Race

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>White</th>
<th>Black</th>
<th>Hispanic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Presence of grandparent</td>
<td>7.6</td>
<td>20.2</td>
<td>16.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presence of grandparent</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>11.0</td>
<td>6.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


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school dropout rate among these children, and daughters are at higher risk of becoming teen parents themselves. Juvenile delinquency may also be higher because there may be less parental supervision. Fewer resources in mother-only households account in part for these differences. Many of these adverse social indicators can be moderated by support from extended family and friends.

**BIRTHS TO TEEN MOTHERS**

Teen mothers have special challenges in that they are more likely to have economic challenges compared with older mothers. The teen years also present some developmental transitions in terms of social, emotional, and physical development. Teen births across all groups have declined over the past 10 years (Martin et al., 2003). Birth rates for African American teens in 2002 were 68.3 per 1,000 compared with a birth rate of 118.2 per 1,000 in 1991. In 2002, teen births for African Americans were more than double that for birth rates of Whites but less than that for Hispanic females.

**FOSTER CARE**

Children are placed in foster care temporarily, and sometimes permanently, when their family cannot care for them. African American children are three times more likely than White children to be in foster care. A report from the Administration on Children, Youth, and Families indicates that 38% of the children in foster care in 2001 were Black (see Table 3.4).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>White</th>
<th>Black</th>
<th>Hispanic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1991</td>
<td>43.4</td>
<td>118.2</td>
<td>104.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td>28.5</td>
<td>68.3</td>
<td>83.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

NOTE: Rate per 1,000 women aged 15–19 years in specified group
Source: Martin et al., 2003.
Black children are also less likely than White and Hispanic children to leave foster care (see Table 3.5).

**Table 3.5** Children in Foster Care by Race

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS) data submitted for the FY 2001, 10/1/00 through 9/30/01.

**Table 3.5b** Children Who Exited Foster Care by Race

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS) data submitted for the FY 2001, 10/1/00 through 9/30/01.

Overall marriage has declined for both African Americans and Whites. However, there are substantial differences in the marriage rates of African Americans and Whites. Among women aged 15 and older, White women are twice as likely as African American women to be married (Kreider & Simmons, 2003). In 2000, 69% of African American women and 58% of African American men were not married compared with 45% of White women and 40% of White men (Kreider & Simmons, 2003; see also Table 3.6).

In studying the declining marriage rates among African Americans, James (1998) examined three economy-based explanations for declining marriage rates among African American males and females over the past few decades. One explanation focuses on declines in male economic viability. This explanation argues that the economic status of males contributes to marital outcomes. When economic opportunities are good, both men and women marry earlier. Subsequently, declines in marriage among African Americans may be due to a poor labor market for African American males. Over the past few decades, the increasing economic marginality of
African American males has made them less attractive as potential marriage mates. A second explanation for declining marriage rates is that African American females have become more economically independent and do not have economic needs that would typically be fulfilled within a marriage. This explanation focuses on the functionality of marriage to provide financial support for women. A third explanation for the declining marriage rate is that decreases in African American sex ratios have contributed to more available women than available men as marriage partners.

James (1998) explored these explanations in a series of analyses that looked at individual and market level variables on marital outcomes. Data collected from the 1970 through 1990 censuses were used. James looked at the age at which individuals entered marriage between 1970 and 1980, mate availability (i.e., number of males and females within a geographical area), and economic opportunity (i.e., number of African American males who were not in school or working) as market variables. James found support for the explanation that economic viability or employment is a factor in whether or not men married during the period from 1970 to 1990. The author also found some support that suggested as women obtain more economic opportunities, marriage levels decline. She found that for each decade, the proportion of females who were working full-time was negatively correlated with the likelihood of marriage among men. Contrary to what has been written regarding male-female sex ratios, James did not find that the ratio affected marriage rates.

### Divorce, Separation, and Remarriage

African Americans are more likely than Whites to be separated or divorced. When African Americans do separate, they tend to wait longer

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**Table 3.6 Marital Status by Race**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>Married with spouse present</th>
<th>Never married</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Men</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>56.8</td>
<td>27.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>34.2</td>
<td>41.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>42.7</td>
<td>38.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Female</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>53.2</td>
<td>20.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>27.5</td>
<td>39.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>46.2</td>
<td>30.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Census 2000 special tabulation.
than Whites before they become divorced (Bramlett & Mosher, 2002). Only 30% of African Americans divorce within a year of separating, whereas 60% of Whites divorce within a year of separating (Bramlett & Mosher, 2002). The longer period of separation among African Americans may be because remarriage is not as likely to occur, so there may be less motivation to divorce.

African American women are not as likely as White women to remarry (Bramlett & Mosher, 2002). After 5 years of divorce, the probability of remarriage is 58% for White women and 32% for Black women.

THE AFRICAN AMERICAN EXTENDED FAMILY

The African American family is often extended and multigenerational, with a cooperative and collective family structure (Wilson et al., 1995). Included within the family network are immediate family members, extended members, friends, neighbors, fictive kin, and church members. There is diversity in living arrangements that is beyond marriage, parentage, and children to include other adults and children in shared-resident situations. African American children may live in households with grandparents and other adults who are not members of the immediate family. Elderly African Americans are likely to be living with grandchildren. Young, low-income, and single mothers also are likely to be sharing a residence with other family members.

Wilson et al. (1995) note that extended family arrangements can provide resources and be a positive factor for African American families. The extended family members, particularly grandparents and adult siblings of single mothers, provide needed support and assistance in caring for, nurturing, and rearing children. The extended family promotes the welfare of dependent family members in dealing with both normal and unusual life events. The presence of an adult who is not the children's parent can provide additional economical and other types of help. The presence of a caring grandparent may be especially beneficial and serve to buffer children against stressors that may be in homes where a single parent may be rearing a child without adequate financial and emotional resources.

Studies show that emotional support from extended family members is helpful in child-rearing practices. In one study, mothers with higher levels of emotional support were less likely to scold or ridicule their children than those without emotional support (McLoyd, 1990a). Support from other adults may provide adults with the opportunity to discuss child-rearing practices such as discipline; it also may provide parents with an alternative interpretation of their child's behavior and give parents some help in supervising the child.
THE ROLE OF THE GRANDMOTHER

As noted previously, grandparents are present in the homes on many African American families. Grandmothers may provide an especially important form of extended family assistance in child rearing (Wilson et al., 1995). Grandmothers may be the primary caregiver of the children as well as the secondary caregiver. Flaherty, Facteau, and Carver (1999) identify seven functions of grandmothers who care for their adolescent daughters’ child. These are managing, caretaking, coaching, assessing, nurturing, assigning, and patrolling. Also, grandparents serve instructional (i.e., giving advice) and modeling functions for their teenage or adult children. They tell their children what to do and show them how to do it.

However, grandparents may feel some strain and resistance when rearing grandchildren. Burton and Dilworth-Anderson (1991) found that while parenting grandchildren is emotionally rewarding, there are also psychological, physical, and social costs incurred with these roles. In some families, grandparents not only have primary roles in caring for their grandchildren but care for other family members as well. Under these conditions, caring for grandchildren may create additional stress for grandparents. Young grandparents may also resent the timing of the grandparental role and the association of grandparenthood with being elderly.

AFRICAN AMERICAN HUSBANDS AND FATHERS

Research on African American Fathers

There has been a recent increase in research on the role of fathers in families. Traditional portrayals of African American men as husbands and fathers have in general been negative, focusing on stereotypical images that include uninvolved and financially irresponsible fathers. Research has been consistent with this portrayal. Many studies have been conducted on social problems of adolescent fatherhood, out-of-wedlock paternity, and child support enforcement with a focus on young men or young fathers (Taylor & Johnson, 1997). This focus does not account for the broad diversity of family, spousal, and parental roles found among African American men.

Research by J. McAdoo (1988) is an exception. His work focuses on middle-income fathers who are involved in socializing their children. McAdoo’s work indicates that African American fathers are actively involved in the socialization of their children.

African American Male Roles in the Family. Being an economic provider is a role that African American men identify as important. Taylor, Leashore,
and Toliver (1988) found that older respondents and those with higher personal incomes are more likely to have positive provider role perceptions than those who are younger and with lower incomes.

Concerns about being able to fulfill the provider role are associated with marital problems (Veroff, Douvan, & Hatchett, 1995). These concerns, which center on income and employment problems, may contribute to the tendency for African American males to marry later than Whites and to more likely be single, separated, or divorced. African American fathers have had difficulties as primary providers due to historical changes in patterns of racial discrimination. As the employment difficulties have changed from low-skilled work to chronic joblessness, there have been increases in marital and family problems related to the provider role (Bowman & Forman, 1997).

Bowman and Forman conducted a study that looked at the instrumental and expressive family roles of fathers by analyzing data from the National Survey of Black Americans. They examined several issues related to father roles among African American males. They were interested in fathers’ perception of their instrumental (i.e., financial provider) and expressive (i.e., nurturing and caring) roles. Bowman and Forman (1997) found that fathers had more personal income and less financial stress than did mothers. However, despite the higher income, they perceived greater difficulty than mothers as providers for their children. Fathers who were unemployed were the most worried about being able to provide financially for their families. However, unemployed fathers did not express difficulty in expressive roles. Perhaps, these fathers have more time to be with their children and to help them in their daily activities.

Quality of Life Satisfaction Among African American Fathers. Using data from the National Survey of Black Americans, Taylor and Johnson (1997) examined African American males’ perception of parental and spousal roles and overall satisfaction with family life. They found that in general, African American husbands and fathers were satisfied with their spousal and parental roles and very satisfied with their family life. African American males reported that performing well in these roles was important to them.

One of the realities for African American males is that many do not live with their biological children. Thus, traditional definitions of residential status and involvement may not adequately capture the extent to which African American fathers play critical roles in their children’s development. One must consider the role of the father outside of the traditional residential living arrangement with his children.

In terms of satisfaction with family life, African American males show diversity according to their life experience. Being older, married, and parenting a minor child are associated with higher ratings of family satisfaction (Broman, 1988). Persons who are divorced have lower levels of family satisfaction.
AFRICENTRIC PERSPECTIVE ON
THE AFRICAN AMERICAN FAMILY

Structural and functional aspects of the contemporary African American family can be seen in the African family. Parham, White, and Ajamu (1999) offer an African-centered perspective for understanding the functioning and beliefs of African Americans families. According to these authors, African family values have been present among African Americans since the Middle Passage. These values illustrate African cultural presence in this country. One core value that captures the African American family is “spiritness.” Spiritness has enabled families to be supportive and to work together for collective survival. According to Parham and colleagues, this spiritness captures members of individual family units but also helps to connect families across space and time. In other words, spiritness is an underlying process that is operative and connects all African American families irrespective of geographical location or time.

Another core value among African American families is the importance attached to children. Through socialization of children, families direct individual and collective purposes and goals. According to Parham and colleagues (1999), children represent the manifestation of the spirit because they “belong” and can “become.” Children are believed to be the opportunity for the future and to represent what has occurred in the past.

Parham and colleagues discuss how cultural values and practices from traditional African families are seen among contemporary African Americans in their family practices. Values of interconnectedness, responsibility, and cooperation can be seen operating within African American families much as they operate in African families. The elders of the family, usually the oldest male, have the authority to make decisions. However, in the absence of males, the oldest female usually holds this authority. Child rearing in African families was and is done by the extended family, and extended family members are also responsible for disciplining and punishing the child. The functioning of the extended family in Africa is not dependent on the survival of the conjugal unions, and the family relationships are the most influential for socializing the child. These cultural child-rearing practices are also found among present African American families. Family members outside of the biological parents socialize and discipline children.

Strengths, Coping, and Parenting Patterns

STRENGTH AND RESILIENCY
AMONG AFRICAN AMERICAN FAMILIES

Over the past few decades, family scholars have moved from a deficit view of African American families to a strengths-based model. Strengths
are viewed as culturally based beliefs and values unique to African Americans. Hill (1998) defines family strengths as those attributes that enable the family to meet both the needs of its members and the demands made on the family by outside forces.

Hill (1971) describes five strengths of African American families: (a) strong achievement orientation, (b) strong work orientation, (c) flexible family roles, (d) strong kinship bonds, and (e) strong religious orientation. According to Hill, these attributes are functional for the survival, stability, and advancement of African American families. While these attributes are found among other ethnic groups, they are likely to be expressed differently among African Americans because of their unique experiences in this country.

H. P. McAdoo (1998) also describes cultural patterns that contribute to strengths and resiliency among African American families. They include a supportive social network, flexible relationships within the family unit, a strong sense of religiosity, use of extended family, and the adoption of fictive kin. McAdoo cautions that although some commonalities exist, there is a great deal of diversity among African American families. She also believes that some of the cultural patterns that have promoted resiliency have been eroded because of poor economic conditions.

**Resiliency Model of At-Risk Youth**

McCubbin and colleagues’ (1998) family resiliency model has been used to understand and work with African American at-risk youth and their families and also youth offenders. An assumption of the resiliency model is that even the most chaotic and dysfunctional family system has competencies and abilities. These strengths, even if limited, provide a mechanism for the family to improve itself.

McCubbin’s resiliency model has been used in interventions with African American families and offending male youth in residential treatment. The model assumes that families with a youth member in residential care have to cope with the transitional problems that prompt changes in the way the family unit functions. The model also assumes that families have unique styles of functioning and patterns of behavior that can be identified. These patterns will affect success of the treatment for youth. Also, youth along with their families have specific and predictable styles of functioning that will also affect successful completion and long-term adaptation.

McCubbin (1998) examined more than 800 African American youth that were treated in the Michigan Boysville program, an agency that serves troubled youth. The Boysville treatment program emphasizes family therapy and the realignment of the family system for youth and adult participants. In this study, positive improvements among boys were associated with improvements among family members who successfully completed the program.
BUILDING STRONG AFRICAN AMERICAN FAMILIES

Parham et al. (1999) offer several recommendations for building healthy families. They note that current family structures differ from the family structure of the past in that modern families do not necessarily begin with marriage and/or living together. Thus, building healthy families must start with appropriate socialization of African American youth. They recommend that families:

1. Socialize youth to love themselves and to understand their relationship with the creator
2. Help youth to develop an identity and perspective of what it means to be a man or a woman that is culturally congruent and that affirms both males and females
3. Teach youth to recognize and model healthy family functioning. Youth are often exposed to dysfunctional family functioning that provide a distorted view of how a healthy family should function
4. Teach youth how to be successful in male-female relationships. Youth must be taught to relate to members of the opposite sex in a sincere, respectful, caring, and loving way and not to first focus on one’s own needs
5. Teach children that relationships should be sustained through difficult periods. When relationships are challenged during stressful and difficult times, tolerance and perseverance are needed
6. Teach youth to develop personal insight into themselves and help them to understand how past experiences affect their current ways of behaving

COPING AND ADJUSTMENT AMONG AFRICAN AMERICAN FAMILIES

Strong support from the family can help family members who are experiencing stress. Support can be emotional such as affirmation and acceptance, instrumental such as lending money or helping out with child care, or cognitive such as giving advice. Examples of these types of support are seen among African American families who assist family members to cope with chronic illnesses and disabilities (Belgrave, 1998) or to care for an elderly family member (Thornton, 1998). Many African American families have developed successful mechanisms for coping with stress that is caused by environmental challenges.
Care for Elderly Family Members

The family is the most important system within which health is maintained, and health decisions are made for the African American elderly by their families (Bowles & Kingston, 1998). The family is the primary source of social support and care of the African American elderly. Who are the African American elderly, and why is the family so important to their well-being? African American elderly represented 8% of the total U.S. population aged 65 and older (McKinnon, 2003).

There are few economic and social resources available for African American elderly because of restricted economic opportunities in their earlier life. African American elderly have less income and experience more poverty and more inadequate health care than do White elderly. In 2002, 23.8% of African American elderly lived below the poverty line compared to only 8.3% of White elderly (U.S. Bureau of Census, 2003).

Within African American communities, informal care providers consisting of family, friends, and other unpaid help are responsible for providing a range of services for elders. These informal providers provide care and support that elders may not be able to receive through more formal health and social services. Thornton (1998) used national data collected by the Bureau of the Census to examine informal home health caregivers for various ethnic minority populations. The data were obtained on a representative sample of noninstitutionalized persons in the United States, 65 years and older, who received assistance with activities of daily living. Analysis reveals several patterns of home health care and how these patterns differ for African Americans and other ethnic groups. One, African American home health care providers spend considerably more time providing home health care than did Whites: Whereas African Americans spend an average of 29 hours per week, Whites spend 17 to 21 hours per week. African American health care providers spend an average of about 4 hours a day caring for an elderly person, oftentimes while working outside the home. Two, while home health care is most consistently provided by females, this is even more so among African American females. African American males spend about 20 hours per week in care.

Another interesting pattern is seen in caregiving to immediate family members versus nonimmediate family members who are elderly. Thornton found that African American caregivers spend more time caring for nonimmediate than immediate elderly persons: 30 versus 28 hours per week. This finding is consistent with the notion of extended family and fictive kin. The caring for and attachment to nonimmediate family members in a manner comparable to immediate family has policy implications. State and federal legislatures are examining family leave-of-absence policies that ensure job stability for family members who leave work to care for an
elderly family member. If the family member is limited to an immediate family member, it will not capture the range of persons that African Americans provide informal care for. Thornton notes that a failure to consider different systems of family care into family-leave policy would impose additional burdens on African American families, who often turn to members outside of the immediate family for support.

There may be no greater strain on the family unit than caring for a member with Alzheimer’s disease. Loukissa, Farran, and Graham (1999) conducted a qualitative study to examine how family members experience the caring for a family member with dementia. The authors conducted interviews and focus groups of care providers for African Americans and Caucasians with Alzheimer’s disease. Overall, African American caregivers reported lower levels of burden and depression and higher levels of caregiver satisfaction compared with White caregivers. Also African American caregivers reported using religion and spirituality to help them cope with stressors associated with caring for this family member. Family members were able to find positive experiences in providing care and reported that they had improved in their competence in providing care over time.

### The Role of the Family in Adaptation to Disabilities

Among African Americans with disabilities, the focus of adjustment includes family as well as individual processes. The goal of treatment or intervention is to adjust the family system and, by doing so, affect the functionality of the person. The kinship network system may be used as a coping resource for African Americans with disabilities. This may include obtaining emotional support as well as direct involvement of extended family members in the treatment and rehabilitative process. In a study of African Americans and Whites with disabilities, Belgrave, Davis, and Vadja (1994) found that African Americans are more likely than Whites to report receiving support from kin or extended family members. However, they found no differences between African Americans and Whites in the number of immediate family members who provide support. This finding is consistent with other findings that have shown the importance of extended family members in African American families. In this same study, African Americans reported more satisfaction with support from kin than did Whites.

African Americans with disabilities who receive support from the immediate and extended family tend to adapt better and achieve more positive outcomes. In a study of unemployed rehabilitation consumers, Walker, Belgrave, Jarama, Ukawululu, and Rackley (1995) investigated the relationship between social support and employment efficacy (defined as beliefs that employment could be found and maintained). The authors found that social support from family is linked to stronger employment efficacy. Social support from professionals is not linked to higher job efficacy among this sample. These findings and others suggest that the family
is critical to successful functioning, coping, and adaptation. It helps to have family support when there are elderly family members and when a family member has a chronic illness or disability.

**PARENTING ATTITUDES AND PRACTICES**

African American parenting practices differ from those of other cultural groups. Some of these differences may be attributed to class differences insofar as many studies have had African American samples comprising parents of low socioeconomic status. However, studies that have controlled for socioeconomic status suggest that some differences still exist between African American and White parents. Moreover, parenting practices and how the child adapts may differ for African Americans and Whites. Studies have traditionally examined differences in discipline, parental involvement or communication, parental attitudes, and child’s behavior.

**Discipline**

African American parents are more likely than White parents to use punitive methods such as physical punishment and assertion of authority (Bradley, 1998). The use of more physical and authoritative discipline among African American parents has its origin in slavery. During slavery, the responsibility of the parent or slave family was to instill in children that they were to be compliant and subservient slaves. The method for maintaining docility and obedience was shown by the White slave masters’ methods of disciplining slaves. Punishment was swift, harsh, and violent, no matter what the infraction (Lassiter, 1987). Thus, African American parents used harsh discipline as a survival strategy. In order to teach children how to avoid violent punishment at the hands of the White slaveholder, adults had to use a less severe but still harsh form of punishment with children.

Enslavement also impacted how children reacted to adverse conditions. Enslaved parents socialized their children to behave in ways that were age inconsistent in order to keep them alive. For example, children were not allowed to cry out loud when they were hurt or in pain. Children were expected to assume adult responsibilities, including caring for younger children and doing chores in the house and in the field. Following slavery, the pattern of harsh and physical discipline continued as a mechanism for maintaining docility and compliance so that the child could survive in a racist society.

There is diversity in the method of punitive disciplinary practices among African American parents. In a middle-class sample of African American parents, Bradley (1998) found that African American parents prefer to use nonphysical forms of discipline. They found that parents in
their sample only used the belt and spanking with the open hand as a means of physical punishment in severe situations. However, parents in the study were found to use the “order the child not to” as a disciplinary technique consistent with an authoritative approach. In other words, children are told (i.e., ordered) how to behave. The authors suggest that parents may believe that demanding that their children obey authority is important for their survival. This finding is consistent with the importance attached to respecting elders and authority figures found among people of African descent. These values are needed to prepare African American youth to function well in society.

Firm and controlling discipline with African American youth, when augmented with a warm and supportive style, is related to better child behavior. Baldwin, Baldwin, and Cole (1990) found a positive association between good child outcomes and a parenting style that is vigilant and restrictive, yet also warm. Restrictive parenting styles are also associated with positive mental health among high-risk Black adolescents (Baldwin et al., 1993).

Deater-Deckard, Bates, Dodge, and Pettit (1996) asked the question of whether or not differences in parental discipline and children’s problem behaviors differ by ethnicity. An earlier study had found that authoritarian parenting is associated with more negative socioemotional outcomes for European American girls but not for African American girls. Deater-Deckard et al. tested the hypothesis that there are ethnic differences in the association between harsh parental discipline and child externalizing problems (i.e., aggression, acting out). They conducted a study using a sample of 585 African American and European American families and followed these children from kindergarten to third grade. Physical discipline was measured by interviewer rating, that is, by having parents respond to hypothetical vignettes, and by a questionnaire. Information about the child was obtained from his or her mother, teachers, and peers assessed the child’s externalizing behavior problem. The authors found that there was an association between harsh discipline style and externalizing behaviors such as aggression in the school setting for European American students only. There was no significant relationship between teacher and peer ratings of externalizing problems and physical discipline for African American children. The findings of this study suggest that a more authoritative harsh discipline style may not necessarily be associated with poorer child outcomes for African American youth, at least within the school setting. The authors caution that the ethnic group differences in the effects of harsh discipline on externalized outcomes is only true for nonabusive discipline. Harsh discipline that is physically abusive is a strong predictor of aggressive behavior among children irrespective of ethnicity.

The meaning of discipline may differ for African American and Whites. Among Whites, harsh discipline may be seen as parents being out of control, a non–child-centered household, or both. For African American parents, discipline may be viewed as a necessary component of one’s role as a parent.
Parenting Attitudes and Involvement

Studies on parenting attitudes have looked at factors such as parental support for their children, warmth, acceptance, and expectations. In general, the literature reviewed by Magnus, Cowen, Wyman, Fagen, and Work (1999) suggests few differences between African American and White parents in parental attitudes. One exception is on the variable autonomy. African American parents are more likely than White parents to value and stress autonomy among their children. One positive implication of this is that children may be socialized to function independently, which may be useful when parents are not immediately available. However, parents who stress autonomy may be less likely to attend to minor distress signals from their children.

In summary, parenting practices of African American parents may include more discipline and punishment than parenting practices of other ethnic groups. These practices are viewed as necessary for successfully raising the African American child.

RACIAL SOCIALIZATION

The process of racial socialization is the process by which parents and families socialize African American children in how to function in this society. This process involves making children aware of their race and of themselves as Black or African Americans as opposed to simply being Americans. Parents who racially socialize their children assume that their children will be in a hostile environment, at least at some times in their lives, and that they must be comfortable with being Black. Racial socialization includes specific messages and behaviors that families provide children about being African American, including group and personal identity, intergroup interactions, and their positions within the social hierarchy. These messages are both implicit and explicit (Thornton, Chatters, Taylor, & Allen, 1990).

Certain demographic factors influence the extent of racial socialization (Thornton, 1998). Mothers socialize their children about race issues more than fathers do. This is attributed to general levels of maternal responsiveness among mothers in preparing children to function in the world. Parents with higher levels of education are more likely to socialize their children than those with lower levels of education.

According to Boykin and Toms (1985), the socialization process is related to identity. African Americans must be socialized through three experiences in order to acquire a racial identity. One, they must participate in mainstream American culture. In order to achieve this, Black parents teach their children that which is American. Within this context, parents teach their children necessary life skills, including personal qualities such as confidence, respect, and achievement. An example of this strategy is when parents teach children the importance of studying at school.
The second method of socialization used by African American parents is to teach their children about being an ethnic minority and to prepare them for an oppressive environment. African American parents prepare their children for what may be an unsupportive world by building their self-confidence and helping them learn how to cope with prejudice and discrimination. These parents also teach their children the value of a good education and that injustice may occur because of their skin color. The final strategy identified by Boykin and Toms (1985) is to socialize their children within the Black cultural experience. These parents socialize their children to value and identify with what is African centered. An example of this is when parents discuss historical events in their family’s life or discuss famous Blacks and Africans. Racial socialization can serve a protective role for African American children because it provides support and affirmation for being Black in a racist world (Stevenson, Cameron, Herrero-Taylor, & Davis, 2002).

Impact of Oppression and Discriminatory Policies on African American Families

SLAVERY AND THE JIM CROW ERA

We discussed the impact of slavery on African American families earlier in this chapter. Families were not protected, as there were no legal unions between males and females, members could be sold at any time, and children could be taken away from parents.

The policies and laws of the Jim Crow era from 1876 to 1954) and continued discrimination had an impact on family life. Males in particular had few employment opportunities and could only get jobs that were not desired by Whites. These jobs paid little and offered few advancement opportunities. African American women during this period tended to hold jobs that were in the service industry. Many continued to care for White households and served as nannies, housekeepers, and cooks for long hours with little time off to take care of their own families. While the institution of slavery and Jim Crow laws had direct effects on the well-being of the African American family, other more contemporary institutional policies and practices have been subtler yet have also had an adverse impact on African American families.

CURRENT INSTITUTIONAL DISCRIMINATORY PRACTICES

African American family life has been affected by several societal factors that are discriminatory (Hill, 1998). These structurally discriminatory
social policies have had a disproportionate negative impact on African American family life.

**Age at Retirement**

An institutional policy that discriminates against African Americans is retirement age. The increase in the eligible age for retirement with full benefits to 67 years of age by the year 2022 may be discriminatory against African Americans. This change was instituted in 1983 by Congress to benefit the Social Security Trust Fund. On the surface, this policy may not appear discriminatory, but it has differential consequences for Whites and African Americans. The African American male’s current life expectancy is 68 years—much lower than for White males and Black females. This, in effect, means that many African American males will not live long enough to collect full benefits or will collect benefits for only a short period of time.

**Adoption Policies**

A second example of institutional bias can be found in the adoption regulations of many child welfare agencies. Many require adoptive parents to be husband-wife couples, younger than 45 years old, of middle income, with no children of their own. Many African American prospective parents are not likely to meet these criteria and are screened out of the potential applicant pool. This contributes to a large number of African American children remaining in foster care or in African American families having to jump through additional hurdles to adopt a child, as they are not as likely to meet the standard criteria.

**Historical Impact of the Welfare System on the Role of the Male in the Family**

Although the welfare system was originally designed to assist families who were living in poverty, it has not provided enough jobs, job training, or economic assistance to pull African American families out of poverty (Scott & Black, 1989). Scott and Black maintain that the “unemployment” system and the welfare system have combined to push African American men from the center to the periphery of family kin networks. Often single African American males have become either part-time or floating members of other people’s households. Many of these single males do not own or rent their own residences and from time to time must be housed, clothed, and fed by female heads of households. These females may include biological relatives or friends.

In short, the welfare and institutional policies have not been supportive of African American males achieving economic parity such that they can
function as contributing members of their households. When economic needs are not met through traditional sources, other, sometimes illegal avenues may be taken. The disproportionate number of African American males incarcerated is a strong indicator of poor economic options.

Methodological Issues

There are several methodological issues to consider when studying African American families. Many studies have examined African American families over a short period of time and have failed to consider historical perspectives when examining contemporary African American families (Hill, 1998). One cannot truly understand African American families without considering historical, cultural, social, economic, and political practices and institutional practices. In this chapter, we have examined historical, cultural, and economic patterns as they affect African American families. For example, understanding that enslaved African women were made to procreate early helps us to understand the earlier age of childbirth among contemporary African American females. Understanding economic conditions helps to explain marriage rates among African American men and women.

African American child-rearing practices have been compared either directly or indirectly to the child-rearing practices of European American parents, with European American child-rearing practices seen as the norm. African American child-rearing practices have been viewed as inferior and nonnormative (Bradley, 1998). However, as we have shown in this chapter, there are cultural as well as functional reasons for African American child-rearing practices. A more authoritarian parenting style may be functional for raising children who live under oppressive conditions.

Another methodological problem is that socioeconomic class has been confounded with ethnicity in studies of the African American family and childrearing (McLoyd, 1990b). Research has oversampled low-income African American families and generalized findings to all African American families. Among low socioeconomic and single-parent family structures, physical punishment has been found to be associated with child externalizing problems (Huston, McLoyd, & Coll, 1994). However, there are several potential risk factors for problem behaviors among children from low-income families, regardless of ethnicity, including inadequate health care, discrimination and prejudice, and parental stress and lack of resources (Deater-Deckard et al., 1996). In this case, socioeconomic status has been confounded with ethnicity. In summary, it is not possible to study the African American family without considering the myriad historical, social, cultural, and economical influences that have shaped the family.
Summary

The proverb at the beginning of the chapter, “The ruin of a nation begins in the home of its people,” conveys the message that families are important institutions. In this chapter, we have examined several aspects of African American families.

Hill defines the Black family as households related by blood, marriage, or function that provide basic instrumental and expressive functions to their members. Much of the work on the Black family conducted during the first part of the 20th century viewed the Black family as disorganized and dysfunctional. Later, starting in the 1960s, family scholars wrote on the strengths of the Black family, noting that the flexible family patterns created natural support and resources for family members. Slavery had a long-lasting adverse impact on the Black families due to the lack of legal recognition of unions between male and female slaves and the fact that children could be sold from their parents. Despite the fact that slavery had adverse effects on the African American family, it supported a flexible and extended family and kinship system that continues today.

Migration north and urbanization during the early 20th century contributed to many problems faced by African American families. These problems continue today. They include (a) higher levels of mother-headed households and a high percentage of poor African American children who reside in these households, (b) high employment and menial jobs for African American males that result in the residential separation of African American males from their families, and (c) social policies such as welfare and poverty programs that do not contribute to the economic viability of the African American family.

The African American family is likely to be headed by a female. Children who live in mother-headed households are more likely to be poor than those who live in households with both parents. African American children are more likely than White children to live with their grandparents and to reside with someone other than a biological parent. African American parents, compared with White parents, are also more likely to be unwed as well as teen mothers. Marriage rates are lower for African Americans than for Whites, and African Americans are not as likely to remarry.

The African American extended family includes immediate family members, extended members, friends, neighbors, fictive kin, and church members. There is diversity in structural living arrangements. The extended family can serve as a resource for African American families, especially those who are coping with stressors. Grandmothers, in particular, serve an important role in extended family living.

African American fathers and husbands report satisfaction with those roles. However, given that many fathers may not be in the same residential
setting as their children, alternative ways of thinking about their roles should be considered.

An African-centered perspective for understanding the behavioral value system of African American families incorporates the concept of spiritness that has allowed families to be supportive and to work together for collective survival.

African American families have been viewed from a strength perspective. Strengths among African American families have enabled the family to survive despite adversity. Family cohesion and support are associated with better outcomes for troubled youth. Families are also important in helping African Americans to cope with other stressful situations, such as chronic illness or the care of an elderly family member. African Americans spend considerable more time than Whites caring for elderly and infirm immediate and extended family members and report more satisfaction with doing so.

The parenting practices of African Americans differ from those of other cultural groups. African American parents may engage in more punitive disciplinary practices than White parents. This practice had its origins in slavery when slave children had to learn quickly the importance of following the rules and obeying authority. Physical punishment does not seem to be linked to problem behaviors among African American children to the extent that it is among White children. African American parents are also more likely than White parents to socialize their children to be autonomous.

African American parents engage in racial socialization to prepare their children to do well in a racist and discriminatory environment. Racial socialization involves making children aware of their race and of themselves as Black or African American.

Several public policies that discriminate against African American families have been identified. African Americans, especially males, are more likely to die before they are able to collect retirement benefits from social security. Adoption policies that favor two-parent households work against African American single-parent households. Finally, the welfare system has not provided the level of economic and training support necessary for African American males to contribute to household income.

There are methodological problems to consider with conducting research on the African American family. Often, research does not consider the historical, social, economical, and political context of African Americans, and this research may paint a pathological picture of the African American family. Often, low-income African Americans are included in research studies, and findings are generalized to all African Americans despite the fact that African Americans of different socioeconomic status differ.