

“The Moynihan Report and Research on the Black Community”
William Julius Wilson

This is a very important conference and I am proud to be a part of it. In a New York Times obituary for Daniel Patrick Moynihan in March of 2003, I was quoted as saying that the Moynihan Report is an important and prophetic document. I still stand by that statement. The report is important because it continues to be a reference for studies on the Black family and low-skilled Black males. It was prophetic because Moynihan's predictions about the fragmentation of the African American family and its connection to inner city poverty were largely borne out, and since 1990 social scientists and civil rights leaders have echoed his concerns about Black male joblessness. Yet, it is often said that there was nothing new in the report. After all Bayard Rustin, E. Franklin Frazier, and Kenneth B. Clark had previously presented arguments highlighted by Moynihan. Like Fraser, Moynihan argued that the problems of the Black family which present many obstacles to Black equality, derive from previous patterns of inequality that originated in slavery in the slavery experience, and have been maintained and reinforced by years of racial discrimination. Like Rustin, Moynihan asserted that as anti-discrimination legislation breaks down barriers to Black liberty, issues of equality will draw attention away from issues of liberty. In other words concerns for equal resources enabling Blacks to live comparably to white in material ways will exceed concerns of freedom. Moynihan maintained that the simple removal of legal barriers will not necessarily achieve the goal of equality. Despite being free in a legal sense, many social mechanisms perpetuate the subordinate social position of most African Americans.

And like Clark, Moynihan emphasized that family fragmentation, as revealed in urban Blacks' rising rates of broken marriages, female-headed homes, out of wedlock births, and welfare receipt, was one of the central problems of the Black lower class. Thus, far from being a document of original research the report effectively synthesized the writings of some of the most notable Black intellectuals of the 20th century. Why then was it so controversial?

Professor Wilson discussed some of the reasons for the controversy. I would also like to say that a lot had to do with the way the report was written. Bold expressions and attention-grabbing phrases sprinkled throughout the document were frequently quoted and embellished in editorials and media accounts. Given the racial climate in the mid-1960s, these press reports heightened concerns among Black leaders about the public's perception of African Americans. The issues are familiar to those who have read the report and followed the controversy, but for those who are not as informed, let me briefly review the developments.

The Moynihan Report was an internal document written for officials in the executive branch of government, not the general public. Unfortunately the report was not edited to reduce the chances of press distortions and the odds of offending civil rights groups. Understandably he had no idea it was going to be leaked. Dramatic statements drew press attention, and were often taken out of context. For example, in his chapter entitled, The Tangle of Pathology, Moynihan boldly stated, “at the heart of the deterioration of the fabric of Negro society is the deterioration of the Negro

family. It is a fundamental weakness of the Negro at the present time.” And “at the center of the tangle of pathology is a weakness of the family structure. Once or twice removed it will be found to be the principal source of most of the aberrant, inadequate or antisocial behavior that did not establish, but now serves to perpetuate the cycle of poverty and deprivation.” Also as Lee Rainwater and William L. Yancey pointed out in their excellent book on the controversy that surrounded the report, Moynihan's frequent use of words such as “failure” to describe the unsuccessful adaptation of many Black men to American society was seen in many eyes to connote individual responsibility rather than the structure of opportunity, racial discrimination, access to quality education, employment prospects and so on, for poor social outcomes.

Reporters and columnists organized their coverage around the attention-grabbing statements on the breakdown of the Black family and the predicament Black males, and readers who had not read the actual document would often have no idea that Moynihan devoted an entire chapter to the root causes of family fragmentation including Jim Crow segregation, urbanization, unemployment, and poverty.

Finally, a *Washington Post*-bylined article noted, according to White House sources, that the Watts riot in 1964 strengthened President Johnson's “feeling of the urgent need to restore Negro family stability.” Accordingly, as Rainwater and Yancey observed, by the time that many critics including Black critics got around to reading the report, “they could no longer see it with fresh eyes, but were instead heavily influenced by their exposure to the press coverage, particularly as this coverage tied the report to an official ‘explanation’ for Watts.” The critical reaction of many

African Americans to the report was also influenced by racial sentiments in the Black community flowing from the emergence of the Black power movement in the mid-1960s. Some Blacks were highly critical of the report's emphasis on social pathologies within poor Black neighborhoods, not simply because of its potential for embarrassment but also because it conflicted with their claim that Blacks were developing a community power base that could become a major force in American society, and would reflect the strength and vitality of the Black community.

This critical reaction reflected a new definition, description and explanation of the Black condition that accompanied the emergence of the Black Power movement. This new approach, proclaimed as the Black Perspective, signaled an ideological shift from interracialism to Black solidarity. It first gained currency among militant Black spokespersons in the middle 1960s. By the early 1970s it had become a recurrent theme in the writings of a number Black academics and intellectuals. Although the Black perspective represented a variety of views and arguments on issues of race, the trumpeting of racial pride and self-affirmation was common to many of the writings and speeches on the subject. In this atmosphere of racial chauvinism, a series of scholarly studies proclaiming a Black perspective were published. The arguments set forth made clear a substantial and fundamental shift in both the tone and focus of race relations scholarship. Consistent with the emphasis on Black glorification and the quest for self-affirmation, analyses that described some aspects of ghetto life as pathological tended to be rejected in favor of those that emphasized Black strengths. Arguments that focused on the deterioration of the poor Black family were dismissed

in favor of those that extolled the strengths of Black families. Thus Black perspective proponents reinterpreted behavior described as self-destructive by Moynihan, Kenneth Clark, and Lee Rainwater, and instead proclaimed it as creative--creative in the sense that Blacks were displaying the ability to survive and even flourish in a ghetto community. Poor African Americans were described as resilient, and were seen as imaginatively adapting to an oppressive society.

The logic put forth by the proponents of the Black perspective explanation is interesting because it does not even acknowledge self-destructive behavior in the ghetto. This is a unique response to the dominant American belief system's emphasis on individual deficiencies rather than the structure of opportunity as causes of poverty and welfare. Instead of challenging the validity of the underlying assumptions of this belief system, this approach sidesteps the issue altogether by denying that social dislocations in the inner city represent any special problem. Researchers who emphasized these dislocations were denounced, even those who rejected the assumption of individual responsibility for poverty and welfare, and focused instead on the structure or roots of these problems. Accordingly, in the early 1970s unlike in the middle 1960s, there was little motivation to develop a research agenda that pursued the structural and cultural roots of ghetto social dislocations. The vitriolic attacks and acrimonious debate that characterized this controversy proved to be too intimidating to scholars, particularly to liberal scholars. Indeed, in the aftermath of this controversy and in an effort to protect their work from the charge of racism, or of blaming the victim, many liberal social scientists tended to avoid describing any

behavior that could be construed as unflattering or stigmatizing to people of color.

Accordingly until the mid-1980s and well after this controversy had subsided, social problems in the inner city ghetto did not attract serious research attention.

Although research and urban poverty has mushroomed in the last several years, lingering effects of this controversy on the willingness of social scientists to pursue a cultural analysis of life in poverty still remain. I will address this issue shortly, but first let me very briefly put Moynihan's concerns in current perspective to highlight the ways in which the document was prophetic. Several trends that had earlier worried Moynihan had become much more pronounced as shown in this figure. [*See slides.*] As you see in figure one, in 1965 one quarter of all nonwhite births (I say nonwhite because specific data on non-Hispanic Blacks were not available when Moynihan wrote the report) were to unmarried women. And by 1996 the proportion of non-Hispanic Black births outside of marriage reached a high of 70% and then dipped slightly to 69% in 2005. As figure two reveals, in 1965 25% of all nonwhite families were headed by a single woman. However, by 1996 the proportion of all non-Hispanic Black families headed by a single woman swelled to 47% but dropped slightly to 45% in 2006. Accompanying these trends has been a sharp increase in joblessness among low-skilled Black men, another one of Moynihan's major concerns.

I see no need to dwell on these issues because they will be fully addressed in papers presented at this conference. Just let me simply say that few serious scholars would

maintain that Moynihan's concerns were unjustified even though the percentage of non-marital births and single mother families has increased among whites and Latinos as well. What continues to be disputed is how we account for the fragmentation of the African American family and the social outcomes of low-skilled Black males. As I argued previously, the controversy over the Moynihan report resulted in a persistent taboo on cultural explanations to help explain social problems in the poor Black community. Allow me to elaborate.

If the public release--I guess it's not accurate to say public release--if the leaking of the report to the public was untimely in terms of the changing racial climate, it was also unfortunately published at the time of heated debates over Oscar Lewis's work on the culture of poverty. Indeed the report quickly became a reference point for debates about the culture of poverty. This was especially true following the publication of an article, and later a book, both entitled *Blaming the Victim*, written by the Boston psychologist and civil rights activist, William Ryan, as a critique of the Moynihan report. "Blaming the victim" became a slogan repeatedly used by critics of the culture of poverty thesis, and they made repeated reference to the Moynihan report when voicing their criticisms. Although Moynihan devoted an entire chapter to structural causes for the fragmentation of the Black family, and the downward spiral of low-skilled Black males, a close reading of his report does reveal an implicit culture of poverty explanation as well. Let me briefly explain.

Relying on participant observation and life history data to analyze Latin American poverty, the anthropologist Oscar Lewis, described the culture of poverty as “both an adaptation and a reaction of the poor to their marginal position in a class stratified highly individuated capitalistic society.” However, he also noted that once the culture of poverty comes into existence, “it tends to perpetuate itself from generation to generation because of its effect on the children. By the time slum children are age six or seven, they have usually absorbed the basic values and attitudes of their subculture, and are not psychologically geared to take advantage of changing conditions or increased opportunities which may occur in their lifetime.” Although Oscar Lewis later modified his position by placing more weight on external societal forces than on self-perpetuating cultural traits to explain the behavior of the poor, conservative social scientists embellished the idea that poverty is a product of “deeply ingrained habits” that are unlikely to change following improvements in external conditions.

Like Oscar Lewis, Moynihan relates cultural patterns to structural factors, and then discusses how these patterns come to influence other aspects of behavior. For example, in the concluding chapter of his report, he states that the situation of the Black family “may indeed have begun to feed on itself.” To illustrate, he noted that from 1948 to 1962 the Black male unemployment rate and the number of new AFDC cases were very highly correlated. However, after 1962 the trend reversed itself for the first time. The number of new AFDC cases continued to rise, but Black male unemployment declined. “With this one statistical correlation by far the most highly publicized in the report,” states the historian Alice O'Connor, “Moynihan sealed the

argument that the pathology had become self-perpetuating. Pathology here measured as welfare dependency was no longer correlated with the unemployment rate, it was going up on its own.” Also like Oscar Lewis, Moynihan does talk about the adverse effects of children being exposed to the cultural environment, or as he puts it, to the tangle of pathology in the ghetto.

However, unlike many conservative social scientists, Moynihan does not imply that Black family fragmentation and the problems associated with it are immutable and cannot be changed through social policies. And his implicit argument on impact of Black family fragmentation, which many would associate with a culture of poverty, is part of a complex thesis on the African American family that combines structural and cultural factors. Is the integration of the cultural and factors of Black family fragmentation and the plight of Black males reflected in social science studies today? My colleague Orlando Patterson argues emphatically that in recent years cultural explanations have not received the serious attention normally given to structural arguments in studies of race and poverty. Patterson maintains that since the mid-1960s “a deep-seated dogma” in the social science and policy circles has led to “the rejection of any explanation that invokes a group's cultural attributes, its distinctive attitudes, values, and predispositions, and the resulting behavior of its members, and the relentless preference for relying on structural factors like low incomes, joblessness, poor schools and bad housing.” As Patterson points out, perhaps the main reason liberal social scientists avoid cultural explanations is that reactionary analysts and simple-minded public figures associate the problems of the poor with their

values, and therefore feel that taxpayers and the government should assume no responsibility for their alleviation. Culture as explanation, states Patterson, “languishes in intellectual exile, partly because of guilt by association.”

Patterson argues, and I strongly agree, that this “deep-seated dogma” against cultural analysis of the fragmentation of the Black family and the plight of low-skilled inner city African American males was caused in no small measure by reactions to the Moynihan report. It has resulted in a lack of attention to possible cultural continuities in the Black family that may be traceable back to slavery, as well as to the role of culture in accounting for how Black people respond to poverty, indeed how cultural practices may contribute to either the increase or reduction of poverty. Let me first briefly discuss the issue of cultural continuities.

As Patterson correctly points out, scholars such as W.E.B. DuBois, E. Franklin Frasier and Kenneth B. Clark, establish a long tradition of African American scholarship that partly explain the distinctive gender and familial patterns of African Americans as a continuity from slavery. However, following the Moynihan report, he states, “the ideological and scholarly tie turn sharply away from this claim of continuity toward a denial of any such connection.” The most persuasive and widely cited critique of this view was a book by the historian Herbert G. Gutman, who challenged Moynihan's view that the African American family was weak, disorganized, and matrifocal coming out of slavery. Relying on census data and historical documents, including letters and diaries, Gutman argued that far from being

weak, Black American families had been strong and resilient after emancipation. In the early 20th century most were married-couple families, and a majority of the children were born within marriage. “In the 50 years after emancipation,” Gutman wrote, “most African American families were headed by a husband and wife, most eventually married, and most children lived with both parents.”

However, two major studies by social scientists from the University of Pennsylvania seriously challenged Gutman's thesis: one by Samuel H. Preston and his colleagues, and the other by S. Philip Morgan and several of his colleagues. Each study is based on national census public use samples which were released after, not before, the publication of Gutman's book. As Preston et al point out, these new data sets allow for a more fine grain analysis of the “consistency of various census items, and of the link among marital status, marital history, current fertility and fertility history.”

Using these data, Preston et al demonstrate that Gutman's use of straightforward census tabulations obscures the difference between the Black and white communities on marriage and childbearing, and therefore his portrait of stable African American families in the rural south prior to their mass migration to the urban north is overdrawn. Following this study, S. Philip Morgan and his colleagues found distinct differences in living arrangements, between native born whites and Black Americans, at the turn of the century that “were geographically pervasive, that are unmistakable in the north and south, in both rural and urban areas.” Socioeconomic factors such as poverty, female employment, and the lower earnings of African American males accounted for some of these racial differences, but it was clear from this study that

these factors, although clearly necessary, were hardly sufficient to explain these differences. Indeed both studies, Morgan et al and Preston et al, argued that more attention should be given to cultural historical factors. For example, Morgan et al pointed out that “most historians of the African American family have gone to great lengths to discount the possibility of cultural continuity between African and African American family systems” despite studies showing cultural historical continuity in the linguistic and religious behavior of African Americans, and despite studies of Caribbean societies that take historical and cultural influences on family patterns seriously. They note that some contemporary historians have argued that antebellum slavery reinforced the sub-Saharan African pattern of strong ties and obligations to kin, and thereby “making spouse absence and separation more acceptable among African Americans than among whites,” and that persistent residential segregation and the lack of racial interaction in the socioeconomic and cultural spheres tend to maintain or reinforce such differences. Thus, Morgan and his colleagues conclude that that an adequate explanation of contemporary African American patterns requires carefully synthesized arguments that weave together the influence of demographic, socioeconomic and cultural/historical factors.

A few years later Orlando Patterson made the same point in his provocative book, *Rituals of Blood*. However, in his zeal to demonstrate the importance of cultural continuity he downplays the importance of socioeconomic factors, such as male joblessness, in accounting for family fragmentation among African Americans, leaving the point raised by David Ellwood and Christopher Jencks unanswered: “why

these cultural legacies should suddenly have become more important in the last half of the 20th century.”

Questions about cultural continuity are even raised by scholars who have urged that more attention be given to the role of culture in study of human behavior. Their major concern is that the proponents of cultural historical continuity tend to define culture as a specific set of orientations and practices characteristic of a particular group. However, in their perceptive paper on how culture matters for the understanding of poverty, Michèle Lamont and Mario L. Small, two prominent cultural sociologists, question the idea that races or ethnic groups have a culture “in the sense of sets of values or attitudes that all or most members of a racial or ethnic group share.”

Pointing out that intragroup differences are often larger than intergroup differences, they maintain that it is not helpful to speak of an African American culture that differs from an Asian culture, Anglo-American culture in the study of racial differences in poverty. “Instead of imputing a shared culture to groups,” argue Lamont and Small, it is better to examine empirically “the range of frames through which people make sense of their reality, and how they use them to orient their action.” Lamont and Small further argue that cultural frames do not cause behavior, so much as make it possible or likely. In other words, cultural frames are necessary but not sufficient explanations for behavior. For purposes of pursuing a cultural analysis of life and poverty, I fully agree. However, if historical research suggests

cultural historical continuity in the linguistic and religious behavior of African Americans, how can we dismiss cultural continuity in trying to fully explain family patterns in the African American community? It is true that intragroup differences are often larger than intergroup differences. Nonetheless, when we consider the relatively high percentage of family breakups among both poor and middle class Blacks, relative to comparable whites, the relative importance of cultural continuity and contemporary socioeconomic factors in accounting for Black family patterns remain an open and important empirical question.

Aside from the lack of attention to cultural continuities, as Lamont and Small correctly point out, only a handful of recent studies seriously examine cultural responses to poverty, and how they may affect daily life. One major exception is Kathryn Edin and Maria Kefalas's book on low income, Black, white and Puerto Rican single mothers in Camden, New Jersey, one of America's poorest cities, and in eight poor neighborhoods in Philadelphia. Edin and Kefalas point out that unlike more affluent women, the poor women they studied do not view having a child out of wedlock as ruining their lives, because they feel that their future would be even bleaker without children. For these women, motherhood is the most important social role they believe they will ever play, and it is the surest source of accomplishment within their reach. Many of the women told Edin and Kefalas that they were headed for trouble until they got pregnant and turned their lives around because of the desire to be good mothers. Many of them said that having children was a life-altering experience, and that they could not imagine living without children. Whereas middle

class women put off marriage and childbearing to pursue economic goals, poor women have children in the absence of better opportunities they point out. The mothers in this study express confidence in their ability to provide for their children. However, because these mothers frequently fail to recognize the disadvantages that will affect their children's chances in life, this confidence is often unjustified. In this sense their cultural framing of marriage and motherhood not only shapes how they respond to poverty, but may also indirectly affect their children's odds of escaping poverty.

Edin and Kefalas' study provides a compelling argument for examining the role of culture under conditions of chronic economic subordination, and its impact on family life. And their findings on the similar views of poor African American, Puerto Rican and white women on motherhood and marriage, reinforce Lamont and Small's argument on meaning-making, namely that the empirical focus should be on cultural frames and how they orient action rather than on the shared values of members of a particular racial or ethnic group. Nonetheless, by one logic every woman, Black, white or Latino, is likely to respond to urban poverty by finding positive meaning in having out-of-wedlock children. By a different logic, the historic racial experiences of Blacks may have also influenced their cultural framing of marriage and motherhood in ways that were not captured by Edin and Kefalas. I tend to think that both logics apply. This is an area that cries out for further research, especially ethnographic research.

However, what about a cultural analysis of life in poverty to help understand the experiences of low-skilled Black males, a group that also received much attention in the Moynihan report? Orlando Patterson addresses this question head on. He asked “why do so many young, unemployed Black men have children, several of them which they have no resources or intention to support?” Patterson argues that sociologists need to pay more attention to what has been called the “cool pose culture,” which for many young Black men “is almost like a drug, hanging out on the street after school, shopping and dressing sharply, sexual conquest, party drugs, hip hop music and culture.” Patterson maintains that “cool pose culture” blatantly promotes the most anomalous models of behavior in urban lower class neighborhoods including gangster rap, predatory sexuality, and irresponsible fatherhood. “It is reasonable to conclude,” states Patterson, “that among a large number of urban Afro-American lower class young men these models are now fully normative, and that men act in accordance with them whenever they can.” For example, Patterson argues, that male pride has become increasingly defined in terms of the impregnation of women. But this is not unique to the current generation of young Black males. Several decades ago the sociologist Lee Rainwater uncovered a similar pattern. A majority of the inner city young Black male respondents he interviewed not only stated that they were indifferent to the fact that their girl friends were pregnant, but some even expressed pride because getting a girl pregnant proves that you are a man. The fact that Elijah Anderson and others discovered identical models decades later suggests the possibility of a pattern of cultural transmission.

Finally, Patterson argues, a cultural explanation of Black male self-destructiveness, not only speaks to the immediate relationship between their attitudes and behavior, and the undesirable outcomes, it also examines their brutalized past, perhaps over generations, to investigate the origins and changing nature of these attitudes.

Patterson maintains that we cannot explain the predatory sexuality and irresponsible paternity of young Black males without a deep examination of their collective past.

But the problem is not simply a lack of attention to culture. The problem is developing a framework that allows one to capture the complexity and multidimensionality of culture.

As Lamont and Small point out, studies of poverty need to go beyond vague conceptions of culture in terms of group norms, values and attitudes toward family and work. We also need to examine the micro-level processes of decision making and meaning-making among the poor to not only determine how cultural frames as well as cultural repertoires (habits, styles and skills) are shaped by poverty, but also how they, in turn, shape responses to poverty including those responses that may contribute to the reproduction of poverty.

In many respects Daniel Patrick Moynihan was trying to move us in the latter direction. His presentation certainly lacked elegance, but it was an attempt to synthesize structural and cultural analyses to understand the dynamics of poor Black families, and the plight of low skilled Black males. If the work of Lamont and Small is any indication, we may finally be seeing the beginning of a much more

sophisticated synthesis of structure and culture, more than 40 years after the public release of the Moynihan Report. Thank you.