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Sex and Gender Roles: Examining Gender Dynamics in the Context of African American Families

Safiya A. Jardine

There has been much controversy in recent years regarding sex and gender roles in the institution of family. As society continues to dictate the dynamic relationship between family patterns and cultural, economic and political forces, we find ourselves resisting the social constraints of societal norms. While few scholars and social scientists share their views from a functionalist standpoint on the well-defined responsibilities of both man and woman; the critical perspective challenges those views by recognizing the surrounding factors which are significant to understanding family structures. The critical perspective digs deep into the question of how gender roles vary amongst families of differing race and ethnic groups, as well as those from different socioeconomic classes. Gender roles established within African-American families often contradict the ideologies of the functionalist perspective.

The functionalist perspective depicts the family as an economic social unit, maintaining that the family in its entirety provides a set of universal functions to society such as: regulation of sexual behavior, socialization of children, care and emotional support, maintaining the economic system, and conferring social status upon its members. Essentially, functionalists continue to argue that in order to exercise these privileges, both men and women are expected to carry out their discrete instrumental and expressive roles. It was customary for men to get married and uphold the position of the primary breadwinner by means of providing physical resources such as food, clothing and shelter for their families; as well as making all decisions relating to issues within the family. In a traditional functionalist household, the man as the breadwinner and sole provider has final authority over all important decisions pertaining to the family.

Women and wives on the other hand were expected to fulfill their expressive roles by providing emotional support and encouragement to their husbands and children. As a homemaker, caretaker and nurturer, a woman was expected to be proud of her duty as both a wife and mother. Additionally, a homemaker wife was not in a position to contradict or dispute the decisions of her bread-winning husband in any way. Submissiveness and obedience were two mandatory qualities of a stereotypical homemaker. The functionalist view submits that each distinct role serves as an important function in maintaining a healthy flourishing family. Most significantly, clearly established sex roles within the family according to the functionalist perspective is determined by the individual's biological sex.

On the contrary, the conflict perspective challenges the functionalists' mythology of the supposedly stabilized and harmonious gender roles. Gender role which is socially constructed and not based on sex is learned behavior transmitted through socialization, and defined by culture. It is an acquired identity. As a result, we live in a society where institutionalized sexism becomes highly prominent. Consequently, the conflict view submits that these distinct gender roles forced upon us and presented by the functionalist perspective are often misleading as it introduces critical issues such as the subordination of women, violence in the family, perpetuation of the stratification system and delegitimization of variant lifestyles.

In examining sex and gender roles within African- American families, there is a paradigm shift in the Black family structure. Essentially, it is crucial to approach the African-American community in a multicultural and Afrocentric contextual framework, as both race and history play important roles. While it may be understood that the history of Western Europe impacted the social institution of European families, the cultural practices and functions of Black families were by all means shaped by the institution of slavery (Sudarksa, 2004, p.30). The emancipation of slavery was a crucial turning point as it marked some of the greatest changes in the structure of Black families. As millions of enslaved Africans were brought across the Atlantic to the Americas, families were deconstructed in many ways which affected the roles of Black men and Black women. Unlike Europe, which at that point had established itself as a continent of nation-states, Africa was more or less divided by tribes and large extended families, with each tribe having its own distinct dialect, culture and beliefs. With varying languages, traditional practices, beliefs and religions, Africans were stripped of their culture by Europeans. As a result, they were forced to conform to the traditional norms of the Anglo-Saxon community.

Slavery disrupted the notion of the Black family as families were separated and sold to their appointed slave masters. Prior to arrival in the United States, groups of African families were no longer organized around consanguinity. Whereas European ideology emphasized the need for conjugal relationships, the institution of family in Africa consisted of children, spouses, and children of the opposite sex, and divorced parents. Additionally, groups of people resided with extended families rather than nuclear families. Extended families therefore supported the notion of larger communities coming together to raise Black children, instead of relying solely on their parents. Here, a variety of gender roles were shared and distributed accordingly in a less rigid and less structured way than the European family. Regardless of gender, persons were expected to fulfill domestic and outdoor activities on an equal basis.

The roles of African women were not limited to domestic chores. They were expected to participate economically and socially in work and community affairs. In an influential article, Burgess (1994) points out that in today's modern society, the well-defined high expectations of a "woman's place" no longer exists; especially within the African-American community.

The social and economic renditions which puts a strain on Black men unable to fulfill their fatherly role has broadened society's attitudes toward the multiple roles that Black women are faced with. A Black woman's place therefore is not only carried out in the home, but outdoors. The shortage of African-American fathers in the household and labor markets leaves Black mothers with no choice but attain the bread-winning role as well as the nurturer, homemaker and sole provider for their children. The change suggests that the expressive and instrumental dichotomy is diminishing.

In retrospect, many scholars have also pointed to the societal and racial oppression of Black men. Essentially, the rendition of patriarchy and white male dominance has been at the forefront of many of the problems associated with the reformation of the Black family structure (Hooks, 2004). Patriarchy dominates groups and individuals through ideologies and social systems. Society has traveled a great distance to ensure that persons are granted equal legal opportunities and rights through political progressions such as the Civil Rights Movement. This has become a public issue as theory of structure implies that the involvement of the government resulted from the call for action and change. However, in spite of the government's effort to promote equality, Black men today still continue to lag behind societal advancement. Educators continue to explain to us the issues that many Black men face; such as difficult childhood, violence, poverty and institutionalized racism and discrimination. Black men are so strongly chained to societal oppression that it affects their ability to take responsibility in the family.

Institutionalized racism play a significant role in the self-inflicted and self-destructive lifestyles of Black men. Hooks explains that power is an important attribute that was taken away from Black men at the time of slavery; simply because of their race (p. 47). Therefore, a certain lack of control and deprivation of dominance led to a feeling of worthlessness and humiliation. This harsh treatment figuratively emasculated Black men and took away the essence of what it was to be a man. As a result, partaking in violence and failure to contribute to their family was a way for Black men to reiterate their power in society. Black women have been considered more privileged and progressive than Black men.

Although they share the same race and have both struggled equally with white supremacy, Black women are positioned in a slightly different class. Black men have been dehumanized to an even greater extent and have been branded with negative stereotypes: rapists, murderers, thieves, uneducated, illiterate, uncivilized, and overall brutal. Black men struggle as they attempt to engage themselves in the same patriarchal class as white men. As a result, these complications have deep and long lasting negative effects upon the relationships between Black men and their families. The violence and persecution faced by previous generations of Black men manifests itself in Black households across America where acts of domestic violence are common. Black mothers are faced with the challenge of fulfilling not only expressive roles but instrumental roles due to the unreliability of their significant others. Boyd-Franklin's analysis

(2003) on the relationship between Black men and Black women holds that the many assumptions held towards Black men is that they are “unavailable”. A high percentage of Black men remain unemployed and this perception plays into the conception that the victim is to be blamed. Boyd-Franklin explains: This perception however, ignores the discrimination within the job market that often allows little access to jobs for poor African American men. Despite the gains of recent years, Black men are still unemployed in large numbers. (p. 88)

Evidently, while the theory of culture maintains that the individual is to be held accountable for the breakdown of the traditional nuclear family and that it is core issue of social disorganization, it fails to realize that Black men are unable to uphold jobs because of the constant discrimination they face.

Theories of structure implies that this has been the root of the Black job crisis. According to the Moynihan 1965 report institutionalized oppression and discrimination is highly prominent when it comes to the hiring (Ledger 2009) Scholars have found that employers hold misconceptions of Black men; therefore denying them of all sorts of applied positions. Being a Black man sooner affected the chances of one getting hired than having committed a crime (Ledger, 50) In addition, the act of discrimination was often exercised due to the fact that crimes were usually committed by Black men. The report holds that, “the United States incarcerates at a rate more than seven times that of Europe, and Black men in America are eight times more likely to be locked up than whites” (p 51). Consequently, not only are Black fathers discriminated and kept from hiring jobs, but also keeping them.

So far, many of the discussions presented by scholars have been primarily geared towards single parent female-headed households. It is important to keep in mind that other ramifications of change in gender roles also coexist in African-American *married* households where both parents are present; middle-class and upper-class. A 2009 qualitative study conducted by Randi Cowdery indicated that gender equality and distribution of power within African- American marriages, differ at a greater extent than the views of functionalists. The study found that Black husbands and wives intentionally disregard the norms of gender roles for the purpose of the family's well-being. In this study, fifteen African- American middle-class heterosexual couples with young children were interviewed on the subject of gender equality and roles in their relationships.

Questions were also organized on how family labor and work was divided, who made decisions, and how conflict in the family was resolved. Of the fifteen participants who were mainly professionals with college degrees; only two women reported being homemakers. And although they held the position of housewives, it was understood that they contributed in decision-making with their husbands. As the couples shared power, the idea of “pulling together” was a central theme that was often brought up. Rather than introducing distinct instrumental and expressive roles, husbands and wives of Black families were expected to assist and lend a hand in doing what was necessary for the good of the family.

They disregarded their idealized gender roles and worked together collectively to handle tasks. In regards to power and equality, the study reports: Over and over again, participants said that issues of power and equality were not of primary importance to them. The need for couples to pull together was more salient. Yet in all but two cases, family roles and responsibilities were shared and partners assumed that each would pull an equal share of the load (p 31)

As couples were interviewed, one husband commented, "We are both breadwinners." Many have held that both persons complete tasks on an availability and skill basis. Black husbands today are more engaged in household duties and likewise offer care and support for their wives and children. Furthermore, the study found that both husband and wife were employed, therefore contributing economically. In actual fact, few interviews indicated that there were Black mothers holding higher positions than their husbands; as accountants, nurses, and child counselors.

A similar study conducted by Faustina Haynes (2000) found correspondingly similar results. The results were for the most part in line with the findings of Cowdery: Black men and Black women pull an equal share of both instrumental and expressive duties. However, what is most fascinating about Haynes' study was that not only did Black husbands and wives share equal duties, but the men interviewed *expected* their wives to work just as hard as they did. Haynes states that, "the male and female respondents in this study have always expected egalitarian relationships" (p. 28). This contradicts many of the functionalist views on the stereotypical patriarchal family.

Moreover, the explanation for these findings is found more in issues of class than issues of race. Haynes' argument agrees with the theories of structure's conflict perspective. The decision by Haynes to focus on interviewing middle class African- American couples as opposed to those in the lower class, makes that the absence of egalitarian households is in social status. Haynes further argues that the emphasis on the study of lower class Blacks presents skewed data and is not representative of Black families as a whole. The findings of the survey conclude that middle class Black homes have much more in common with their white counterparts from theories of structure perspective than do Black families in general.

In conjunction with the expressive and instrumental dichotomy which is in many respects collapsing, the issue of how these gender roles amongst Black families are passed unto Black children needs to be addressed. The functionalist perspective as discussed earlier, addresses the socialization of children. However, Shirley Hill (1999) shares the conflict view that the construction of gender roles and socialization of children in Black families are very different. Hill contends that many have shared the view that most African-American families pass on the traditional gender ideology of the dominant white society. This view needs to be challenged.

First and foremost, in the 1960s, the traditional Eurocentric perspective depicted white women as submissive and dependent on their husbands. However, with Black women, the private and public sphere of Black men and women was never a tradition in the Black family. Therefore Black children were brought up differently. Black mothers taught their daughters to be “strong, resourceful, and selfreliant” (Hill, p. 484). Looking back at history, African-American children of both sexes were exploited as slaves to work in underpaid job markets. Consequently, race and inequality shaped the options of gender ideology for African Americans. In other words, the Eurocentric gender norms are so difficult to adapt since Blacks lack social and economic power. Regardless of sex, both Black boys and Black girls are parented to be hard-working, independent and at the same time nurturing. These distinctions contradict the functionalist and Eurocentric view which holds that daughters are to follow the footsteps of their mothers: get married, procreate, become a housewife. The same transpires for young white boys: fulfill the normative standard role of primary breadwinner and provider.

Essentially, there is a public and private dichotomy which separates the family/household from the labor market. This in turn shapes the distinctive gender roles within the private sphere of family. African- American mothers are faced with performing motherwork responsibilities in addition to the public sphere of providing for their family economically. Their approach as it relates to motherwork, “challenges the social constructions of work and family as separate spheres, of male and female gender roles” (Collins, 2004, 245). Although feminism aims at the movement of encouraging equal opportunities for women (politically, socially and economically), many continue to hold the failed assumption that women in general are economically secured by their husbands while enduring racial privilege. In many ways, this theory contradicts the Black family structure for women of color. Themes such as power, survival and identity factor into how Black women mother their children.

In regards to survival, African-American families often struggle for the survival of their children. Poverty has been a major concern as Black children are often raised in areas where crime, drugs, and violence are prominent. Hence, mothers become overprotective of their children; obtaining the role of a, “supermom” disposition. However in the process, the institution of power becomes a concern considering the racial tension that exists in society. For instance, being mother, or in most cases a single-mother, raising a child in poverty challenges the institutional policies put in place by white patriarchal governments.

The role of the government in the United States has significantly impacted the Black family structure and the associated gender roles that come into play. Traditionalists who hold onto theory of culture mentality continue to share the mindset of “blaming the victim” , and therefore fail to realize that many of the decisions being made by the government only affect the poor while benefiting the privileged. Walter Stafford (1996) argues that although organizations such as the Black Family Task Force and the Black Civil Society have been established as an agent to help Black families regain their strengths from acts of

discrimination, its representatives are continually ignored by the larger dominant society. In a city such as New York that is highly multicultural, the decisions made have been based around public policy issues (p. 12).

In addition, these decisions are discussed between the government and privileged groups, rather than encouraging involvement from Black organizations. It is critical that the government share an understanding of Black families, Black culture, and the Black community at large. As a result, many children from Black families are left without a mother and father, therefore not having gender role “role model” figures to look up to. We live in a society where there is an epidemic of homelessness in the Black community, as thousands of orphaned Black children are left without families to provide and care for them. As a result, these children will grow up to be adults that have no clear understanding of gender roles, functionalist or otherwise. The ramifications of this are long-lasting; as the cycle of confusion over gender roles will likely be passed down to their children as well. The government fails/ does not provide the necessary funding for Black organizations to expand/ help in the Black family. In the past, communities that have been formed such as the 1938 Negro Welfare, established to cater to the needs of Black children, and 1935 Harlem Riots have been poorly financed by government offices.

Another major issue in the institution of family today is the subject of child welfare and the role the government plays in its distribution. A growing concern is that welfare agencies have reduced the quality of welfare services. As welfare dependency continue to rise, the continuum of “fatherlessness” in the black community is institutionalized through the welfare system. Black mothers struggle financially and economically to a great extent when they are left alone to care for and nurture their children. As a result, there becomes a high rate of poverty as welfare constricts the opportunities of single Black mothers to explore higher education or otherwise look to advance themselves financially in a long-term and lasting way. The cycle, much like that with homeless Black children, repeats itself with children living on welfare, as their lack of resources prevent them from pursuing the same higher education and opportunities that were likewise denied to their single mothers. Welfare is not completely negative concept; however the manner in which it is imposed by the United States government addresses the problem without actually solving it. Welfare provides the children of single impoverished Black mothers the opportunity to survive. If properly funded, it should provide them with the chance to thrive and escape the enduring cycle of poverty.

The theoretical framework approach of the functionalist perspective/theory of culture provides a narrow, singular view of what a family dynamic should look like: A family with a breadwinning, domineering father and a caretaking, submissive mother in a monogamous relationship; providing both emotional care and support to their families and living in the suburbs with a white picket fence around their home. This idyllic view of how a family should look contradicts the conflict perspective, which takes into account issues of race, class and gender when determining family structure. It is an incorrect assertion that the functionalist

perspective can be applicable to all families; as this view fails acknowledge circumstances and historical context when describing how a family should operate.

For Black families, it is important to consider the history of their existence in the United States when discussing family structures. Blacks were enslaved, oppressed and dehumanized, putting them at a severe disadvantage versus white patriarchal families that operated as the nation's government and ruling class. The initial atrocities committed against the Black community have created effects that can still be seen today: High rates of incarceration amongst Black men, homelessness in the Black community, "fatherlessness" and a high rate of welfare dependency which has created a far different view of family structure than the white families upon which the functionalist perspective was based. As a Black female, I find my own familial experiences to contradict the functionalist perspective. Living in Antigua as a decidedly-middle class family, I had two parents who shared both economic and social responsibilities over myself and my three siblings. My father is a Computer Programmer and my mother also worked as an Airline Accountant. Additionally, my mother was a very independent woman and not under the control of my father. My family does not represent the family unit presented in the functionalist perspective. My family is an example of, but certainly not the only one, of family that exists outside the realm of the functionalist viewpoint. As a Black woman, I refuse to confine myself to the patriarchal ideologies that the functionalist perspective present before me.

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