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Sociology and the Race Problem: Failure of a Perspective. James B. McKee. Reviewed by Charles Jaret, Georgia State University.

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The holistic perspective offered in this book provides a solid understanding of the causes and nature of the current crises among black families that can lead to their address if, indeed, this country is serious about making a difference that will positively impact all citizens of this country. The holistic perspective will require careful examination of the separate and combined effects of societal factors, social policies, and factors at the community, family, and individual levels. This book must be read by all persons who are seriously interested in positive change for African-American families and communities and inevitably for all families and communities in this country.

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James B. McKee, *Sociology and the Race Problem: The Failure of a Perspective*. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1993. \$39.95 hardcover, \$16.95 papercover.

As a new century approaches many sociologists have thought about, or been asked to speculate on, new social patterns and changes lying ahead. Before saying much about future developments in U.S. race relations, they would be well advised to read James McKee's analysis of how specialists in race and ethnicity failed to accurately perceive or interpret race relations during most of this past century. McKee begins in the 1890s and early 1900s, when most scholars and "progressive" whites omitted "the race problem" (black subordination and exploitation) from their agenda of social reforms. He carefully and critically scrutinizes the subsequent conceptual and empirical twists and turns sociology took in its analysis of black-white relations through the mid-1960s. Reading this book takes you through sociology's attic, showing you all the "old stuff"—some of it long forgotten, some of it well remembered. McKee summarizes and explicates each decade's sociological work on race (by Odum, Hankins, Park, Reuter, Warner, Frazier, Johnson, Myrdal, Williams and many others). His commentaries on the quotes from these force us to decide what's worth keeping, what we should recant, what we're

proud of, and what we're embarrassed by. All in all, this trip down memory lane with McKee as our guide humbles, if not humiliates, sociology as a discipline claiming special expertise in race relations.

As the book's subtitle indicates, McKee argues that most sociologists who analyzed race relations were unable to "get it right," and he attributes their failure to faulty assumptions and inappropriate conceptualizations of the issues, which led to flawed observations and misguided theories. McKee's central thesis is that specialists in race relations failed to anticipate and were unable to explain the changing pattern of race relations that emerged in the U.S. after World War II. These scholars "had not simply failed to predict a specific event; rather, they had grievously misread a significant historical development. The race relations that appeared in their writings were incongruent with the race relations to be found in the society around them" (p. 2). More specifically, what they were unable to see coming and lacked an understanding of was the bold assault African Americans made on segregation and the accompanying growth of black identity and cultural consciousness.

McKee contends this intellectual failure came about because the perspective on race relations that dominated sociological thinking for most of the 20th Century was unsound. He asserts that most of what scholars "knew" and took for granted (either as assumptions or as empirical facts) was, in reality, wrong. Chief among these were the beliefs that (a) various forces in the process of "modernization" will gradually produce the decline and disappearance of racial-ethnic identities and groups; (b) white prejudice was so strongly anti-black and the white power structure was so dominant that blacks could not directly challenge them, and must instead work with white allies for gradual reforms; and (c) black communities were culturally deficient and crippled by lack of education, apathy, poor leadership, and poverty.

McKee acknowledges that he is not the first to make these observations and criticisms. What distinguishes his work is his effort to do a full historical and sociological analysis of American sociology's study of race relations to account for what went wrong. He succeeds admirably, and his intellectual honesty in dealing with scholars of the past, in particular by resisting temptations to make

strawmen of their arguments or to take cheap shots at them, is commendable. Although McKee believes most sociologists failed in their efforts at comprehending race relations, in each decade he recognizes a few who he thinks were on the right track (e.g., Robert Park, Charles Johnson, E. Franklin Frazier, St. Clair Drake and Horace Cayton, Herbert Blumer, Lewis Killian, and Robert Blauner).

McKee's goal did not include discussing or critiquing contemporary work on race or ethnicity, and he does not argue for or against newer theories today's researchers are working with. In an epilogue he suggests that given our changing racial-ethnic compositions, the key question sociologists must address is "how does a culturally diverse people interact in order to agree upon and accomplish the common good?". McKee believes sound answers must take into account a structurally changing global economy that has been worsening the plight of poor blacks and contributing to the decay of inner cities.

If it is true that people, including sociologists, learn from previous mistakes, then by laying out the discipline's errors McKee has done us a service. It would be good if every instructor teaching a course on race relations would read this book. For many readers of this journal who are more interested in social work and applied sociology, I can not recommend it so highly. For them McKee's discussions of the connection between sociologists and early practitioners of "intergroup relations" and civil rights activists (e.g., the National Association of Intergroup Relations Officials) would be of interest, along with his chapter on the application of sociology in desegregation cases. But in both cases he'd have to go into much greater detail than he did to fully satisfy readers with a strong applied/social work orientation. In addition, since McKee's analysis of "sociology and the race problem" focuses exclusively on blacks and whites (this is what most of the sociological literature of that era dealt with), some readers may be disappointed over the lack of attention given to other groups that were also socially defined as racially different.

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