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Embracing Our Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) Family Members

By **Juan Battle**
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Introduction

In this chapter, we present research on the diversity of the black family and especially on the impact of sexual orientation within it. We argue that the non-traditional, or non-normative nature of black families has been seen by some as a reason to both patholigize such families and by others as a means "effectively developing our community's greatest strengths—its people." To shed light on the experiences of our lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) family members, we employ findings from the largest study ever conducted specifically on that population. Those findings will then be compared to other research in the area as well as findings from the United States census. Next, we'll explore a variety of issues pertaining to adoption and foster parenting within the black community, particularly with regard to LGBT concerns. Finally, we will assess the state of where the black family is in embracing our LGBT members as well as the state of where it could be.

Research on the Black Family

Contemporary discussants on "the state of Black America" concern themselves with myriad issues, from HIV/AIDS, to adolescent pregnancy, to incarceration, to failing public schools. Inevitably, it seems, regardless of where those discussions begin, they return to a focus on the black family as a central organizing unit in black communities, a source of black pride, a key factor in black progress, and the origin of black problems. The black family has been an object of contention for both researchers

and policy makers who have attempted to simultaneously explain the strengths of and structural limitations placed on black families.

Even a cursory review of the literature would show that this seeming paradox has yet to be resolved. By far, most studies have emphasized how and why black families are different from their white counterparts and, as a result, have reified the black family's non-normative structure. This approach has led to a preponderance of data and analyses on "the strong matriarch presence," "absent" fathers and other non-hegemonic forms of structuring intimate life in black communities.

E. Franklin Frazier[1] is often cited as the first serious researcher to engage in a sociological, in-depth study of the black family. For Frazier, it was the family's role in the socialization process, in particular in the area of race relations that made it the central point of his analysis. He attempted to argue for an evolutionary understanding of the black family, suggesting that its current structure and modes of operation resulted or evolved from a history of slavery, Jim Crow, and other systems of exclusion. Stripped of their cultural and familial ties, black families adapted their structures to meet their needs within systems they confronted. According to Frazier, this creation of new family forms highlighted the matriarchal structure of many black families, an adaptation in which women were said to dominate and men were described as marginal. It is important to remember that not only did Frazier emphasize the existence of "matriarchal" dominance in black communities, but he also sought to patholigize that family form, arguing that casual sex and marriage instability were closely associated with the form in general.

This pattern of patholigizing black families, and in particular black women, for supposedly non-normative arrangements has continued long after Frazier. Numerous recent researchers, regardless of their disciplines or the methods they use, look at the black family and search for its "detrimental" form. Much of this research attempts to explain limitations, deviance, and the failure of black families rather than adaptive structures, positive variations in family form, or the resiliency of sub-populations within the black community. This body of literature continues to be influenced by what is undoubtedly the most devastating report on black fam-

ilies in the contemporary period, the "Moynihan Report." In his analysis of the black family, Daniel Moynihan[2] describes a black community in disarray, largely because of its nonfunctional family structure. Specifically, Moynihan writes that "at the heart of the deterioration of the fabric of Negro society is the deterioration of the Negro family." For Moynihan, deterioration came in the form of such patterns as female-headed households, out-of-wedlock births, marriage instability, and the ineffective and absent male in black communities. Largely missing from Moynihan's analysis were the structural influences of slavery, Jim Crow, and a general group history of marginalization and exclusion. Unlike Frazier, who rooted the early dissolution of a "normal" family structure in black communities to slavery and its disregard for or intentional attack on black family ties, Moynihan's focus was primarily on individual or group blame.

Moynihan was widely criticized and many scholars and policy-makers have discounted his report as a seriously problematic public policy statement that reflected the neo-liberal racism of his time. Opposition to the general findings of not only his report, but the work of Frazier and others consumed with the non-normative nature of black families, has also been constant in the research on black families. For example, scholars such as Blassingame[3] used historical documents to establish the existence of black family ties and nuclear family structures during slavery. Similarly, the work of Gutman[4] found that far from matriarchal dominance, most blacks after slavery and during the early twentieth century were living in traditional nuclear family units. Similarly, the work of scholars such as Staples[5] sought either to challenge the "matriarchal hoax" in studies of the black family or at the very least to contextualize its presence, suggesting that this was a pattern found primarily among the "lower-class" both inside and outside of black communities.

Quite often, the contexualization or "recovery" project of the researcher included two components: 1) a discussion of the strengths of black families, and 2) an evolutionary or adaptive component, suggesting that because of dire economic, political, and social conditions, black people had been "forced" to adopt such family formations[6]. Interestingly, most of these attempts by researchers to confront what they perceived to

be either poorly researched examinations of black families and/or racist treatments of the subject, challenged such works by either proving the normative nature of black families—establishing the presence of nuclear black families in the history of black people in the United States—or explaining its "deviance" through some adaptive or evolutionary theoretical framework that recast the non-normative behavior as a strength. The assumption underlying most of this work—regardless of its approach—is that if black people were given all the necessary resources, they would continue to organize themselves in nuclear, heterosexual family units that approximate the structure and function of white (normative) family forms.

Black feminist scholars and researchers concerned with a different analysis of gender relationships in the black community continue to attempt to shift this approach. Their work continued the effort of providing historical accuracy to our understanding of the family structures that black people chose or were forced into during different periods. However, they also argued that it was critically important to challenge the hegemonic assumptions that white family structures were in fact better and that black family relationships should mirror those of the dominant society.

Unfortunately, what has often been left out of even these enlightened studies has been a questioning of the underlying assumption of the centrality and functioning of the nuclear family and its "heteronormative" bias. By that, we mean those personal interactions and larger political and economic institutions that declare and support heterosexuality and heterosexual relationships as fundamental and "natural" within society. For example, the ability to marry and all of the resulting benefits are reserved only for those in heterosexual relationships.

Absent from much of this research is an analysis of power that makes clear who benefits from perpetuating the myth on the inherent strength of the male-lead, heterosexual nuclear family. Clearly, in a society structured to benefit and reward those who choose and conform to a male-led nuclear family, there is a price to be paid by those choosing some other form of structuring their intimate relationships—but that does not mean that different family structures are inherently less functional, beneficial, or worthy.

Thus, as we more directly consider the family structure of black lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people, the information should also be read as a challenge to the assumption of the inherent or natural primacy of the heterosexual nuclear family structure. Black LGBT people are choosing multiple family forms not only as a way to adapt to the continued marginalization and exploitation of black people and black gay people in particular, but also as a reflection of their desires.

Family Structure

For several reasons, not the least of which is the historical framing of research on the black family in general, little is known about the family structures and parenting behaviors of black lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people. First, national surveys, which could potentially gather such data, fail to do so by not asking questions about sexual orientation. Second, textbooks focusing on the black family largely ignore the topic of black LGBT family members.[7] Third, there is justifiable fear and reluctance on the part of many blacks to participate in academic or scientific research. Such feelings should be understandable, given the history of abuse by scientific researchers, such as the infamous Tuskegee experiments in which black men exposed to syphilis were purposefully not treated to see how the disease would progress.

In order to remedy this enormous data gap and gather information about the particular experiences and policy concerns of black LGBT people, a research collaboration was initiated by the Policy Institute of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, several university researchers, nine black Gay Pride organizations, and other community organizations. The result of this collaboration, the Black Pride Survey 2000 (BPS2000), sought to provide a base of knowledge for a larger research and policy agenda concerning black LGBT people. The survey was conducted at nine Black Pride celebrations in nine cities across the country during the summer of 2000.[8]

Much like predominantly white Gay Pride celebrations in various cities across the country and throughout the world, Black Pride events are a mixture of social, educational, and political gatherings organized by and

for black LGBT individuals. This study made use of alternative sampling methods, targeting those attending Black Pride events in order to maximize the likelihood that respondents would fulfill the criteria and would be willing to reveal themselves to be LGBT people.[9]

It is important to note that this sample is not perfectly representative of all black LGBT people in the U.S. or of blacks who have same-sex sexual relationships but do not necessarily identify as LGBT people. As the very first attempt to collect basic demographic and political data on this population in a multi-city sample, the BPS2000 is merely a first step in a larger research agenda to survey, among other things, the attitudes and family experiences of black LGBT people. This sample is large and regionally diverse. A total of 2,645 surveys were collected, a large enough sample to offer insight into a wider range of experiences within the black LGBT community. All claims made with this data, however, are made cautiously.

Type of Parenting

Focused on family issues, the publication, *Say It Loud I'm Black and I'm Proud: The Black Pride Survey 2000* (BPS2000) asked whether respondents lived with children, and whether they had children. About 12 percent of respondents reported living with children, while 25 percent reported having at least one child. One in four women reported living with children, but only four percent of men and only three percent of transgender people.

Nearly 40 percent of women surveyed at Black Prides said they have at least one child, compared to 18 percent of men and 15 percent of transgender people. This included respondents who gave birth to or fathered a child; who were co-parenting a child with a partner; who were raising a niece, nephew, grandchild, or other child relative; and/or who once raised a child who is now an adult and/or no longer lives with that parent. Altogether, one in five respondents reported being biological parents (21 percent), and two percent reported being adoptive or foster parents. The average number of children that parents reported having was two.

Women were twice as likely as men to report being biological parents, 32 percent compared to 15 percent. Approximately 2.3 percent of respon-

dents reported being adoptive and/or foster parents. Women and men were similar in terms of the percentage that reported being adoptive and/or foster parents: 2.5 percent of women and 2.1 percent of men.

The Black Pride Survey data on parenting closely mirror another recent data set that provides information on parenting patterns among black lesbians and gay men. A study published by Vickie Mays and her colleagues[10] found that one in four black lesbians lived with a child for whom she had child-rearing responsibilities, while only two percent of black gay men reported children in the household. Their study went on to find that one in three black lesbians reported having at least one child, as did nearly 12 percent of the gay black men.

Another source of data on gay and lesbian parenting is the 1990 Census; data on the number of gay and lesbian parenting/families from the 2000 Census are not yet fully available. However, although the 1990 Census did not ask about sexual orientation, it did allow same-sex couples that live together to self-identify as "unmarried partners," providing a sample of 150,000 same-sex couples. According to the 1990 Census, 22 percent of coupled lesbians and five percent of partnered gay men had children in their household.[11] This figure is in accord with the Black Pride Survey's finding that 25 percent of women and 4 percent of men surveyed lived with children.

Black lesbian couples in the 1990 Census sample were more likely than white lesbians to report having given birth to a child.[12] However, the black lesbian sample was too small to be statistically significant.[13] More research is needed to determine if, in fact, black lesbians are more likely to have given birth than white lesbians and lesbians of other racial backgrounds. The BPS2000 data (in which 32 percent of black lesbians reported having given birth) and Mays, et al. research (in which about a third of black lesbians reported having children, though not necessarily living with them now) contrasted with the Census data for white non-Hispanic lesbians (23 percent reported having given birth).

There are reasons to believe that lesbians with children may be overrepresented on the U.S. Census but underrepresented at Black Pride celebrations and other Gay Pride events. Coupled lesbians and gays—the

only ones currently able to self-identify on the U.S. Census, as single gay people cannot check a box indicating their sexual orientation—may be more likely than un-partnered people to have children. Also, single lesbians and gay men with children may be more likely to move in with a partner than homosexual people without children, as a partner can help them with parenting duties. Some black Gay Pride events may not be as child-friendly as they could be, such that some parents—unable to arrange or afford childcare—skip the event. So it is possible that the prevalence of parenting among white lesbians as a group (as compared to white lesbian cohabiting couples) is lower than the 20-25 percent reported on the 1990 Census, and that the prevalence of parenting among black lesbians is higher than the 33-40 percent reported by BPS2000 and Mays, et al.

Why would this be important?

First, even if black lesbians parent at no greater rate than other lesbians, this documented prevalence of parenting debunks attempts to assert that "homosexual" and "family" are two mutually exclusive categories, as well as right-wing efforts to depict gays as intrinsic threats to children. Simply documenting the existence of black lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender-led families with children is important in and of itself. Second, if parenting is somewhat more prevalent among black lesbians than among white lesbians and/or lesbians in general, this means that anti-gay parenting policies may pose a particular threat to black lesbians or would-be parents. Anti-gay adoption policies may prevent a second parent from adopting her partner's biological child whom she has been raising since the child's birth. Also, a lesbian with one biological child may seek to adopt or foster another child in need of a loving home. The prevalence of parenting among black LGBT people, coupled with the overrepresentation of black children in the foster care system, indicates that anti-gay adoption bills may threaten the black community as a whole by significantly reducing the potential pool of foster and adoptive parents.

Adoption, Foster Parenting, and Co-Parent Adoption

As noted above, about 2.3 percent of Black Pride respondents were adoptive and/or foster parents, including 2.5 percent of women and 2.1

percent of men. How does this compare to the prevalence of adoptive and foster parenting among black people in general? There are very few national data available on adoption. In a widely used statistic from the National Health Interview Survey, 1.8 percent of never-married white women adopted children compared to 1.5 percent of never-married black women. Adoptions of children related by family ties were more common among black women, while unrelated adoptions were more common among white women.[14] A study by the U.S. Administration for Children, Youth and Families found that blacks adopted at a higher rate than whites: seven adoptions per 10,000 black families versus two adoptions per 10,000 white families.[15] When age of parents, family income, and family structure are controlled for, the differential is even greater—18 adoptions per 10,000 black families and four adoptions per 10,000 white families. Black sociologist Robert Hill has documented the history of extended families and informal adoptions among the black community, including individuals taking in the children of relatives and neighbors.[16]

Currently, there is an adoption crisis in the U.S., with a shortage of qualified adoptive parents. As of September 1999, there were 581,000 children in foster care and 127,000 children waiting to be adopted, according to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. However, only 46,000 children were adopted from the public foster care system during the 1999 fiscal year.[17] Black children are disproportionately represented in the foster care system: 42 percent of the children in foster care are black, though they represent only 17 percent of the children in the U.S.[18]

Two states effectively ban gay adoptions: Florida and Mississippi. Utah prioritizes heterosexual married couples for placement of foster and adoptive children in state custody. Arkansas bans gays from foster parenting, but not from adopting. Except for Utah, all of these states have black populations significantly higher than the national average.[19] As noted, laws and policies effectively banning same-sex adoptions disproportionately affect blacks because black children are over-represented among those children awaiting adoption.

In addition to wanting to ban unmarried couples and single parents from adopting, several Bush Administration appointees have advocated

offering certain welfare benefits only to married couples with children. They also have proposed offering limited supply benefits—such as Head Start slots, public housing units, and low-interest student loans—to married-parent families with children first.[20] Only if there were anything left over would the children of single parents and same-sex couples be allowed to access these benefits. Policies which privilege favor married couple-led families over single-parent families or unmarried two-parent families pose a significant threat to the black community, and especially to black LGBT parent families.

Though only 3.6 percent of respondents indicated that they were helping to raise the child of their partner, it is important to address same-sex second-parent/stepparent adoption, or co-parent adoption. There are many reasons why it is important to grant parenting rights to individuals helping to raise their same-sex partner's child, such as providing health insurance and preventing potential custody battles in the event of the biological/legal parent's death. A majority of states ban same-sex co-parent adoption.[21] Nonetheless, there are many states, which do allow for same-sex co-parents adoption; in fact, California, Vermont, and Connecticut explicitly allow for same-sex co-parent adoption.

Conclusion

So then what is the state of the black lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) family? Well, since every black family has LGBT members, then whatever is the state of the "part" is the state of the "whole." The black family has successfully endured external attacks (racism) as well as internal ones (sexism and homophobia). But what harms are done, opportunities lost, and dreams deferred when we don't respect our diversity within? What happens when we don't support and embrace all of our family members? Is the black family strengthened by ignoring the role and contributions of our women, our youth, our elders, our relatives not born on U.S. soil, our economically disadvantaged, and/or our physically challenged? Are we not in fact empowered by recognizing these differences? History has shown that the black family defies the very principles of mathematics—we multiply by dividing.

What harm is then done to our family when we stand in our black churches—places historically known for empowering our community—and attack our LGBT family members? What talents are lost when we relegate and limit members of our family to choir stands or hair salons? Who benefits from a culture when the only way someone feels they can stand tall is if they are on the "down low"? Do we want to tell any of our family members that the only way we'll embrace all of who you are is if you "pass" as what we (think we) want you to be? Would we want any of our children to believe that visibility as a black family member is conditional upon the invisibility of something that makes you unique, special, and whole? Doesn't every child in the foster care and adoption system deserve access to loving parents regardless of the state that child lives in or sexual orientation of those willing to care for that child? How long are we willing to perpetuate the lie that HIV and AIDS is something that affects only a part of our community, while the truly most vulnerable suffer and the most powerful sit back in the false safety of their own silence?

The black family and the black community as a whole is empowered when "the boundaries of blackness"[22] are not dictated by some of us in order to benefit even fewer of us. The black family must be made available to every one of us and support ALL of who each of us is. Until this perspective is completely embraced by the sermons of our religious leaders, the policies of our politicians, the curriculum of our schools, the teachings of our parents, and the agendas of our individual and collective communities, the state of the black family and indeed the state of Black America will be less than it should be, less than it could be, and, therefore, more harmful than it ought to be.

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[19] In total, four states limit adoption and/or foster parenting by gays and lesbians in some way: FL, MS, UT, and AR. Three do it by statute, one (AR) by regulation. Florida bans homosexuals from adopting by law. Its statute reads, "No person eligible to adopt under this statute may adopt if that person is a homosexual." (Title VI, Chapter 63, 64.042, 2(d)3).

Mississippi bans same-sex couples from adopting by law. Its statute reads, "Adoption by couples of the same gender is prohibited." (Miss. Code of 1972 as amended, Sec. 93-17-3 (2).) Utah prioritizes heterosexual married couples for placement of foster and adoptive children in state custody by law. Its statute reads, "with regard to children who are in the custody of the state, the division shall establish a policy providing that priority for foster care and adoptive placement shall be provided to families in which both a man and a woman are legally married under the laws of this state." (Title 62A, Ch. 04a, Section 602 (5) (c).) Arkansas bans gays and lesbians from foster parenting, but not from adopting, by regulation. An anti-gay adoption bill was rejected by the Arkansas legislature in 2000. For more information see http://www.aclu.org/news/1999/n040699a.html.

[20] Ibid.

[21] According to the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, the states that do not allow for second-parent or stepparent adoption include: Nebraska, Ohio, Wisconsin, and Colorado. These states have ruled that such adoption is against the state adoption law. Idaho, Utah, Arizona, Wyoming, Montana, North and South Dakota, Kansas, Oklahoma, Missouri, Arkansas, Mississippi, Florida, Georgia, Tennessee, Kentucky, Virginia, West Virginia, North and South Carolina, New Hampshire, and Maine.

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