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SOCIOLOGIC FACTORS IN THE FORMATION OF SEX ATTITUDES

By E. FRANKLIN FRAZIER, PH.D.*

INTRODUCTION

SINCE both the sociologist and the psychologist have long been interested in the motivation of human behavior, they have both been concerned with the investigation of the subjective aspect of human behavior. But since the sociologist has assumed that an understanding of the collective life and culture of a people would explain human motivation, he has developed different technics and concepts from those of the psychologist who has sought within the minds of individuals for elements which would illuminate behavior. As the sociologist has undertaken to study more critically the influence of culture upon human motivation, he has developed the technic or tool known as the "life history" which would throw light on the meaning of values, customs and practices to individuals. This interest in mental processes or the subjective aspects of culture has caused the sociologist to study more closely the results of those psychologists, especially the psychoanalysts, whose chief concern has been the psychogenic aspects of behavior. At the same time, there has been a growing recognition among psychoanalytic psychologists that the cultural factor must be taken into account in the study of the complexes and other aspects of human motivation. As Professor Burgess pointed out nearly a decade ago: "The increasing recognition by psychoanalysts of cultural factors in human behavior parallels and facilitates the perception by the sociologist of the rôle of psychogenic influences upon conduct" [1].

In presenting this paper, the writer would like to state in advance that he is aware of the rôle of psychogenic factors in the

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determination of sex attitudes. The purpose of the paper is, however, to indicate how certain sociologic factors, as revealed in materials secured from life histories and family histories, have influenced the formation of sex attitudes. Unfortunately, the materials upon which this paper is based do not contain the data for appraising the influence of psychogenic factors, a task which would be beyond the competence of the writer if the data were available.

INFLUENCE OF THE FAMILY

The influence of the family in the formation of sex attitudes has been the foundation stone upon which the entire psychoanalytic theory has been built. In the psychoanalytic theory interest has been directed as Sapir has indicated to the "reactive system exhibited by the precultural child" which is determined by heredity or conditioning until they begin to be modified by cultural influences [2]. However, Sapir recognizes the interrelation of psychogenic and sociologic factors. This fact is important, of course, when we consider specifically the formation of sex attitudes. Davis and Dollard, in their studies of the personality development of eight Negro youths in a southern city, have undertaken to discover the early conditioning of sexual expression [3]. Moreover, and this is important for the subject at hand, they have undertaken to relate the conditioning of sexual expression to patterns of behavior which were characteristic of the class to which the family belonged. As they pointed out, the sexual code of the lower class is sharply differentiated from the sexual mores of the middle class. There is much sexual freedom among the lower class which is associated with an early knowledge of sexual matters. This precociousness concerning sexual matters is acquired in the family. Both husbands and wives in lower class families enjoy a certain freedom in sex relations. The children acquire not only an early interest in sex, but they expect adults to have an interest in sex which is foreign to the expectations of the children of the middle class. In the middle class families, the parents who, as Davis and Dollard point out, know that "sexual impulses are deep-laid and persistent", "throw the whole weight of their power against sexual exploration of their children" [4]. Not only do middle class parents

undertake to exercise strict surveillance over the relations of their daughters with boys but they often instill fear concerning sexual relations or define these relations as dirty and repulsive.

The findings of Davis and Dollard in regard to the effect of the family on the formation of sex attitudes are concerned primarily with the important function of the family in transmitting the culture patterns of a class or group regarding sex attitudes and behavior to the children in the family. Although the authors of this study indicate in one case how certain traditional magical beliefs have affected one of their subjects, their analysis of the sex behavior of their subjects is not concerned primarily with the influence of family traditions on the sex attitudes of individuals. In fact, sociologists have only begun to study the influence of family traditions on the behavior of individuals. In recent years there have appeared studies concerning the influence of family traditions on the choice of occupations, education, and the rôles which husband and wife were expected to play in family relations. From studies of not a strictly sociologic character, we have learned how traditions have created and perpetuated a Puritanical attitude toward sex and the effect of these attitudes upon neurotic expressions of sex. One of the purposes of this paper is to call attention to the influence of traditions upon the sex attitudes of women who were the inheritors and transmitters of a special tradition regarding sex. In the course of a study of the Negro family, it was noted in our interviews that some of the descendants of the quadroons in Louisiana often referred to themselves as women of great passion.* A study of both printed sources and case study materials revealed that this belief concerning themselves had been a part of a body tradition which had become the social heritage of certain families. These quadroon women who had been the consorts of wealthy white men were known for their beauty and passion. Their parents had made sure that their daughters cultivated, in addition to the art of conversation and playing the piano and other social graces, the art of love-making. The descendants of these women who are today classed as Negroes have inherited this tradition. What we want to emphasize here is that

* See the writer's *The Negro Family in the United States*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1939, pp. 205-208.

this tradition of the passionate mistress skilled in the refinements of love-making has shaped their conception of themselves as women and that they have tried to live up to the tradition in their sex life, both in and out of marriage.

INFLUENCE OF THE CULTURE OF THE GROUP

In order to explore further the manner in which the traditional culture of a group shapes the sex attitudes of individuals, we shall present an analysis of case study materials which were collected during field studies of the family life of the folk Negroes on southern plantations.

Before analyzing the influence of the folk culture of the Negro upon sex attitudes, it is necessary for us to point out certain features of this culture. First, it should be noted that the folk culture of the Negro on southern plantations is a body of practices, beliefs, and traditions which have grown up in response to the needs of the Negro in the American environment. Secondly, the extent to which this body of folk traditions is affected by the dominant American culture is dependent upon the physical and social isolation of a particular area during the past as well as at the present time. It is especially necessary to keep the latter fact in mind as we discuss the influence of folk traditions because as the isolation of the plantation areas is broken down and the Negro population becomes more mobile and more sophisticated, culture conflicts arise and as the folk culture disintegrates, social disorganization often results.

From the materials which we have collected among the isolated folk, where the institutional control of sex is at a minimum, sex is regarded as a natural appetite. Among the Negro folk an often repeated comment was that it was natural to "pleasure oneself." When this comment was followed up by further questioning, it was found that this statement did not mean that promiscuity was a sanctioned form of sex behavior. Sexual behavior was a natural form of behavior incident to courtship. Courtship among these simple rural folk was a phase of mating which grew out of spontaneous attraction, generally occurring when they were around fourteen or fifteen years of age. These attitudes toward the sex experience were taken over from their parents and could be traced back to

certain practices during slavery. The mothers generally warned their younger daughters of the danger of pregnancy not because it involved a violation of the mores or the loss of status but because their daughters were too young to assume the burden of motherhood.

For these people a certain distinction was attached to child-bearing or, to use their language, "being fruitful." To say that a woman "never did find anything," meaning that she had never had a child, might imply disparagement as well as commiseration. For them motherhood signified maturity and the fulfillment of one's function as a woman. But it should be noted that while this high value was placed upon child-bearing, marriage was not regarded as a preliminary to child-bearing nor, in fact, was it regarded with the same esteem. Pregnancy might lead to "marriage" with or without the benefit of law; that is, the couple might settle down to live in a separate household as man and wife. After marriage a woman was supposed to remain faithful to her husband and cooperate with him in the task of making a living. But if the girl was regarded by her parents as too young to assume the responsibilities of a wife, she would remain with her family and her child was incorporated into the household.

The situation which we have just described was found in the most isolated rural areas where there was little contact with such institutions as the school, which embody the attitudes and conceptions regarding sex of the larger American community. In a majority of rural communities this type of social isolation has been decreasing as the avenues of transportation and means of communication have penetrated the South. Moreover, as the children have been drawn into public schools they have acquired new conceptions of sex and marriage. This has resulted in a conflict between the definition of sex and marriage given in the folk culture and that given in the American mores. From our case studies it was possible to see the influence of these new definitions. For example, whereas the unmarried woman in the isolated areas spoke proudly of motherhood and expressed without shame the desire for children, the unmarried mothers in areas influenced by outside mores exhibited shame and guilt about such behavior. In order to conceal the illegitimate status of their offspring, the unmarried mothers in one community used the euphemistic term "adopted

children" in referring to their children born out of wedlock. As the result of being forced to reflect upon their sex behavior, the women lose their naive sex attitudes. The character of the redefinition of sex depends upon a number of sociologic factors to which we shall direct our attention later.

INFLUENCE OF CLASS STATUS

The sex attitudes of the isolated folk Negro are not the same as the sex attitudes which are apt to be found among the land-owning rural Negroes with traditions of stable family life and conventional family mores in various parts of the South, especially outside of the plantation region. Through the analysis of family and life histories it was possible to unravel the processes by which sex expression acquired a new meaning among this group. The parents and grandparents in many of these families had a social and cultural background similar to that of the folk. But these parents and grandparents were the more ambitious individuals who had bought land and for whom marriage and family life had acquired a new meaning. Moreover, the heads of these families had usually acquired skills and enjoyed a wider range of social contacts which had given them a different conception of themselves from that of the plantation Negroes. As the result of their new status, the enjoyment of sex began to lose its purely individualistic and hedonistic character. Then, too, the sex behavior of the wives and daughters of these men acquired a new meaning because of changes in the character of community life. Consequently, a new type of family discipline came into existence. This new family discipline was re-enforced by the churches and other institutions in which this new generation of patriarchs or semi-patriarchs played a leading rôle. For their daughters to become pregnant or bear a child out of wedlock became an offense against the integrity of the family since it involved the standing of the family in the community as well as the property accumulated by the family. It was also regarded as an offense against the mores of the community and was punished by expulsion from the church.

In some of these communities there flourished an indigenous type of Puritanism concerning sex and out of such social backgrounds emerged the class differences in regard to sex attitudes,

which, as Davis and Dollard have indicated, have important consequences in sex behavior. Originally the most important class distinctions among Negroes, it should be pointed out, were not economic or occupational but *moral*. Superior social status was based upon conventional sex behavior which was inculcated from childhood. Sometimes a solitary Negro family remained isolated from the rest of the community in order that their children might not become contaminated by the free and easy sex behavior of the masses. An informant whose parents built a school in Georgia under the auspices of the Congregational Church tells the following story:

Our life around M. . . . was very seclusive. Nowhere to go and nobody to associate with. We were taken away for the summer for vacation to see a little of the world. . . . The people in the community were mostly all Baptists. They said the Congregationalists were not Christians. Although the people there were thrifty and many of them owned their own homes, they had very low moral standards. Our mother and father kept us away from them. It caused hard feelings. We were not allowed to associate with the masses. There was a lot of factories there—canning factories and every child about fourteen years of age had to work. Every year about school time there would be so many illegitimate children born to these girls. My sister and I were the only two girls who didn't work at the factory.

What we have tried to show is that the building up of conventional attitudes in regard to sex has not been due simply to formal education or the acquisition of property but to the redefinition and new meaning of sex expression in the lives of these people. As the Negro has become urbanized and a more complex class structure has emerged in the Negro communities, these older Puritanical sex attitudes have lost their meaning and value. Economic and occupational distinctions are becoming more important than social distinctions based upon conventional sex behavior. Respectability and public decorum rather than sexual purity have become the mark of middle class (in the broad American sense) status.

INFLUENCE OF GROUP PARTICIPATION

In analyzing the sociologic rôle of the family or the effect of certain class patterns on sex attitudes, one must come ultimately to consider the effects of the participation of the individual in certain

groups upon his sex attitudes. From an analysis of numerous family and life histories, we are able to obtain some insight into the manner in which sex is defined by the members of the family group. For example, I cite the following excerpt from a life history document written by a woman college student.

The subject of sex was never hidden from me; in fact, as far back as I can remember, it had always been thrown before my face. Maybe my parents used the right approach, and maybe they didn't. I certainly did not appreciate their always talking about it.

The first time they approached the subject, I was about three or four years old. One day my grandmother had gone somewhere and had left my cousin T... with us. It was about the time that we should take our daily nap when we started playing with our sex organs. I guess we had noticed them all along, but this day we paid special note to them. S..., T... and I were in the room together that day. First T... would show his penis, then S... and then I. S... would say, "Let me see yours, B...." I pulled up my dress and showed mine. "Yours is made different from ours" and we all started laughing. About the time S... pulled his out and the last time mom walked in the room. She had evidently heard us all laughing. She was furious it seemed, but she didn't whip us. She explained what the organs were for and that it was nothing strange—nothing to be put on exhibition. "Sit down here on this bed and don't a one of you move your eyes from the other's until I tell you." It seemed hours, before she left the room and we didn't ever want to look at each other's organs again.

I always liked the approach that Mom used, but I hated the one that grandmother used. She used to make me so angry. Mom told me about menstruation and what to do when it should begin. I couldn't believe that such a thing could happen to me even though it happened to mom, but she said, "We'll see." I was in the seventh grade when it started and I told mom. She now told me things that she had never mentioned before. Some of these lectures that she gave me I can almost repeat word for word:

"You are at the age now when practically anything can happen to a girl. Don't go around with these boys in an intimate manner because after they have you then they are gone to look for someone else. They'll go and look for some other nice respectable girl then. Too many girls now like L... wish they had never done that (L... had had a baby and wasn't married.) I'd better never catch you with L..., because she doesn't have anything nice to tell you now. These girls go around here and wear themselves out with any and every fellow and when it comes time to get married they won't be any good for any one. If you ever feel that you have to do such, don't slip around and do things like that in the dark, get married first."

Mom told me, a little later, things that I had never heard her mention before. She said that it was normal to have sex desires, but that I didn't have to give way to them. She said that I wasn't old enough for such relations, but that

if I found out that I just couldn't restrain myself to be clean and decent about it and to use the protective methods that she had told me about. I felt sort of ashamed that she should tell me such, but it was nice to know that I could talk to her should anything happen to me. After talking to mom in such a manner I had a very strong will not to do such.

I actually hated my grandmother when she talked to be about such, because she didn't know how to approach me. She could have told me in a better, more intelligent manner, but instead, she always threw in my face the fact that she had reared four very decent girls and that I wasn't going to stray away from that path if she had to break my neck. She would say, "You'd better not go around here messing around with these little boys and get pregnant for if you do I'm going to put you out. I'm not going to have you disgracing this house as long as I'm here."

She was always fussing about something, even though sometimes she could be very sweet. She did some rather nice things for me, that is, she paid for my music lessons for two years and taught me how to crochet. She went away every summer on a vacation to some different northern city and whenever she returned she had something beautiful for me. When she and a bunch of other ladies got together she would always brag along with them about how nice I was.

She would give me anything she had but she could not make up for the frustration she had caused within me. Some nights she made me so angry that I went to bed crying. She didn't have to talk like that to me. After all, I wasn't being intimate with anyone. I had a strong desire, but I never did and it hurt terribly when she suggested such. Sometimes I actually felt like doing such just to get even with her, but I realized that I wouldn't be hurting her so much as I would be hurting myself.

A number of important factors of sociologic import appear in the above case. There is the more enlightened attitude of middle class parents concerning sex instruction. Then there is the harsher and less enlightened attitude of the grandmother who wants her granddaughter to conform to middle class sex mores. This document does not yield much information on the results upon the daughter of these conflicting types of discipline. We are only informed that the daughter was once inclined to have sex relations as an act of revenge against her grandmother, a fact of significance in the study of the meaning of sex behavior to the individual.

In many of the middle class families sex is not discussed openly or it is still a tabooed subject. One girl stated in her life history that she had never wanted children and regarded sex as something dirty and repulsive after her grandfather had refused to touch a new born baby in her family. He stated at the time that the baby

was unclean because of its recent association with the sex organs. About a half of our informants stated that they had acquired their first knowledge of sex from persons outside the family.

A number of studies have revealed the extent to which children receive information concerning sex outside of the family. For example, in the White House Conference study of adolescents it was revealed that about 30 per cent of those studied had received their first information concerning sex from other children including brothers and sisters and playmates as compared with slightly more than 50 per cent who received this information from their parents. Here we are concerned specifically with the manner in which sex attitudes are influenced by the group participation of the individual. Some insight into the rôle of the play groups in the formation of sex attitudes was secured from a study of a group of unmarried mothers in Chicago. This group of unmarried mothers was in a special class established by the department of education because they were in school at the time of their pregnancy. All of these girls came from the lowest economic and social strata in the community and had had contacts with a social agency. The last fact is mentioned because in some of the cases the social workers had stated that these girls were "oversexed." Although the social workers did not give the basis for their statement, it is likely that it was due partly to the tendency to oversimplify the causation of sex behavior by ascribing it to biologic causes and due partly to the precociousness of these girls in regard to sexual affairs.

From the case histories which we collected there was no evidence that these girls were "oversexed" or had a "compelling sexual appetite" which caused them to seek sexual gratification. The sexual precociousness of two of the girls resulted undoubtedly from the early stimulation of the erogenous zones of their bodies as well as the loose sex behavior which they witnessed from day to day in their homes and in their neighborhoods. In most of the cases the initial sexual experience was made possible by the lack of parental supervision. But what is a more important point for our study is that the first sex experiences of some of these girls resulted from participation in groups of girls in which this type of behavior was approved. Most of the girls stated that they had no desire to have sexual intercourse and that they approached the initial experience

with fear. Moreover, in so far as we were able to ascertain, only in one case was the initial sex experience pleasurable. In the other cases it became pleasurable only after habituation. While persuasion on the part of other girls as well as the boys caused most of the girls to have their first sex experience, the desire to achieve status and acceptance in a group was the important factor in some cases in their yielding to this persuasion.

INFLUENCE OF URBAN LIFE

In addition to the influence of group participation on the sex attitudes of these girls, other factors of sociologic significance were revealed in the case studies of this group of unmarried mothers and unmarried mothers studied in other cities. Although the majority of the unmarried mothers on whom we have information had not gone beyond the eighth grade their ideas concerning sex had been influenced by the printed page. The literature with which they were acquainted was generally restricted to such magazines as *True Story* and *True Confessions*. Significant is the fact that several girls recounted in their life histories stories from these magazines that centered about the romantic career of unmarried mothers. Then, too, the sex attitudes of these girls had been influenced by the movies. A study by Blumer, *Movies and Conduct*, has revealed how the movies evoke passionate and romantic emotions in adolescents [5]. The same effects of the movies on the awakening of the imagination in regard to sex are found in the changing sex attitudes of the Negro in the city.

This leads us to refer to what was pointed out concerning the sex attitudes of the women among the folk Negro. It was noted that motherhood was considered as a sign of maturity and a fulfillment of a woman's function. Motherhood imposed the most important obligation that could exist between human beings. On the other hand, in the urban environment unmarried motherhood loses the meaning which it had in the folk culture and becomes a severe economic burden and subject to community disapproval. Consequently, motherhood as a consequence of unregulated sexual indulgence is something to be avoided by contraceptives, abortions, or even the destruction of the offspring. Not only does sexual behavior acquire a purely individualistic character but the passionate and

romantic elements become of supreme importance in sex expression. On the one hand, among the women on the plantation there was little evidence of passion and romance in their love-making and mating; while, on the other hand, in the cheap theaters and dance halls of the cities were found the "red hot mammas" who have sloughed off the cultural background of the folk Negro. Measured by the American mores, the mothers and grandmothers of these latter women were immoral but they were neither licentious nor lecherous as their more sophisticated daughters and granddaughters have become. This transformation of the sex impulse through new types of social experiences shows in a striking manner the influences of sociologic factors in the formation of sex attitudes.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the chief purpose of this paper has been to present a bare outline of the various areas of human relations in which sociologic factors play an important role in shaping the expression of the sex impulse. In our discussion we have undertaken only to present a number of hypotheses concerning the role of the family and traditions and the culture of the group in the development of sex attitudes. The limitations of our study are not due merely to the fact that a study of this nature can only reach tentative conclusions; some of the limitations are inherent in the character of our data. In order to make a crucial test of these hypotheses it would be necessary to secure not only a larger body of relevant data. It would also be necessary to obtain relevant data by more refined methods of interviewing and from family histories and life histories concerned primarily with the problem which we have undertaken to study.

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