Teaching the Classics in Family Studies: E. Franklin Frazier's *The Negro Family in the United States*

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Abstract:

This paper (a) reintroduces E. Franklin Frazier's 1939 book, *The Negro Family in the United States*, to family scholars and graduate students and highlights its importance as a groundbreaking and classic text, (b) provides both an introduction to the major thesis of this monograph and a reading of the text, and (c) discusses the challenges of reading classic works and suggests strategies that can be used to guide graduate students in a critical reading of classic works.

Keywords: Black families | E. Franklin Frazier | family sociology | graduate education | pedagogy

Article:

As we look ahead to consider innovations in graduate education, it is also important to look backward at the intellectual history of the field and at the ways in which classic works continue not only to shape contemporary family studies but also to remain relevant for the training of new family scholars. Although minority family studies, in many ways, remains on the margins of graduate education, this position belies both the history of scholarship in this area and its relevance. The classic work by E. Franklin Frazier, *The Negro Family in the United States* (henceforward, *The Negro Family*), published in 1939, is a pivotal text in family sociology and is situated at the bedrock of Black family studies. There is no single work that has been more influential in the field of Black family studies than Frazier's *The Negro Family.* In 2001, *The Negro Family* went back into print, making it once again widely accessible to family scholars and students. In response to the renewed accessibility of this text, the aim of this paper is threefold (a) to reintroduce this work to family scholars and graduate students and to highlight the importance of *The Negro Family* as a groundbreaking and influential classic text in Black family studies, (b) to provide both an introduction to the major thesis of the monograph and a

reading of the text, and (c) to discuss the challenges of reading classic works and to suggest strategies that can be used to guide students in a critical reading of *The Negro Family*.

In the reading and teaching of classic texts, it is important (a) to locate the work historically, (b) to understand both the theoretical influences that informed the work and the intellectual, political, and cultural debates in which it is engaged, and (c) to understand both what makes the work innovative and groundbreaking and why it continues to be relevant for contemporary students of the family. To provide guidance for instructors who want to incorporate a reading of *The Negro Family*, I, first, locate the monograph within the context of early 20th century family sociology and highlight the ways that race relations and the politics of race shaped this work and Frazier as a scholar. Second, I summarize the major thesis of *The Negro Family*, position the work with respect to the major pillars of the field of Black family studies, and illustrate the ways this monograph continues to be at the foundation of contemporary studies of Black families. I also highlight the critical paradigmatic debates in which Frazier engaged during his day and the paradigmatic shifts after the publication of the monograph that now inform our reading of this text. Finally, I present strategies I have used to guide graduate students in the reading of *The Negro Family*.

Reading Frazier: Race, Social Theory, and Early 20th Century Black Family Studies

The Negro Family tackles the most fundamental questions of (a) who, culturally, the African became in America and (b) the social evolution of a people's most fundamental institution, the family. Frazier engaged the question of how the Negro condition is shaped by macrostructural forces, including economic institutions (e.g., slavery), social relations (e.g., race relations), and social stratification (e.g., racial inequality). In overlaying the theoretical models of social processes that explained transformations in other populations, Frazier made the implicit case for viewing the Black experience as part of the human experience. In the foreword to the 1939 publication of *The Negro Family*, Ernest Burgess spoke of the contribution of this work (p. ix):

[It is]in fact, the most valuable contribution to the literature on the family since the publication of *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America*… For it is a basic study of the family … as a natural human association and as a social institution subjected to the severest stresses and strains of social change.

Despite its contributions, *The Negro Family* has been both heralded and vilified; what both these interpretations share is an understanding of the intellectual and political reach of the work. For more than half a century, both *The Negro Family* and the theoretical model Frazier articulated have defined the debate and the fundamental assumptions and questions about the evolution of Black families in America. Amid the Civil Rights Movement, 25 years after the publication of *The Negro Family*, the paradigmatic and political winds shifted. The result was the controversy surrounding the policy paper entitled *The Negro Family: A Case for National Action* (1965), also known as The Moynihan Report. In the debate that followed, more than a

generation of scholars would engage in the deconstruction and revision of the major theoretical planks of Frazier's work.

Theoretical influences on The Negro Family

Frazier (1894–1962) received his doctorate from the Department of Sociology at the University of Chicago and completed his early graduate training in Sociology from Clark University. In 1920, he was a research fellow at the New York School of Social Work. *The Negro Family* was an extension of his dissertation, *The Negro Family in Chicago* (1932), and the culmination of a career of academic scholarship (Platt, 2001). The theoretical influences of Robert Park, W. I. Thomas, Ernest Burgess, and Ernest Mower are integrated into *The Negro Family* and provide a theoretical foundation for the text (Howard, 1981). Hence, *The Negro Family* is also a study in the classic theoretical traditions that have defined family sociology.

In the tradition of Thomas and Znaniecki's (1927) *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America*, Frazier followed the natural history of African Americans from the Africans' capture and enslavement to freedom, rural peasant life, and migration to the city. Thomas and Znaniecki's model of the processes of social change in terms of crisis (disorganization), reorganization, and adaptation under new social conditions is a theoretical template that runs through *The Negro Family*. Drawing on Robert Parks' work on cultural assimilation and race relations, Frazier also engaged questions both about cultural contact and the relationship between Black (African) subordinate culture and White (European American) dominant culture and the processes of cultural accommodation and assimilation. As Frazier considered diverse contexts of social change (e.g., slavery, urbanization) and processes of adaptation (e.g., cultural assimilation, family organization), his view of the family as a dynamic and flexible institution was consistent with Burgess' perspective and interest in family disorganization (Howard, 1981). As Frazier moved his analysis of the Black family forward in time, he asked questions about the ecological influences on family structure and organization. Both Burgess and Mower's theoretical approach and method is evident in Frazier's investigation of Black families in the urban context (Howard; Platt, 2001).

Frazier's intellectual influences also extended beyond the Chicago School to the work of DuBois (*The Philadelphia Negro*, 1899), who was actively engaged in empirical social research at the turn of the century and later in the Atlanta University Studies, which included a 1908 monograph on the Black family (Platt, 2001). Frazier, who had training and experience in social work, was also an avid student of family history, Black culture, and Black folkways. Frazier's interdisciplinary perspective and his interest in the social welfare are also evident in *The Negro Family*. Further, Frazier, a part of the Black intelligentsia and cultural elite, was very much part of the Black Renaissance of the early 20th century, and his career as an intellectual was also steeped in political activism (Platt). Indeed, in 1927, a biting essay on racism as a form of mental illness (Frazier, 1927) lead to his departure, under the threat of lynching, as director of the

Atlanta School of Social Work (Platt). Afterward, already established as an author, teacher, activist, and scholar, Frazier began his doctoral studies at Chicago.

From a position of racial caste, which defined his life and work, Frazier engaged and integrated the cutting-edge theoretical perspectives of his day. He believed that the condition of African Americans could not be understood without attention to the historical legacy and contemporary impact of racism and discrimination (Frazier, 1949).

Indeed, *The Negro Family* was also groundbreaking because Frazier put forth a theoretical perspective that challenged the prevailing view that the social position of the Black race (in the Americas) is genetically determined and reflects its intellectual, physical, and moral inferiority. However, despite *The Negro Family*'s contributions, Frazier's thesis of African cultural erasure, imperfect cultural assimilation, and Black matriarchy and family dysfunction has cast a long and, indeed, an oppressive shadow on the field of Black family studies. Platt (2001) has argued that representations of Frazier as the father of Black family pathology reflect an unwarranted and limited reading of *The Negro Family*. However, it is what most impresses the contemporary reader, and Frazier's analysis over time has become entangled—if not conflated with—pejorative readings and representations of Black family life. It is *The Negro Family*'s paradoxical role in Black family studies that, in part, makes it a provocative text. The challenge for the contemporary teacher and student is (a) to engage the texture and breadth of Frazier's analysis and (b) to reconcile the text as both a radical, progressive work on race and culture and a conservative treatise on class, gender, and the family.

The Negro Family and the pillars of black family studies

The breadth of *The Negro Family*, the continued relevance of the questions it addresses, and its connections to contemporary family research makes it an ideal text to use in a survey course on African American families. Further, a full reading of *The Negro Family* leads students to a greater awareness of the coherence of the field of Black family studies, and the interconnectedness of research questions (and theory) about the Black condition. The field of Black family studies has been defined by four major pillars of research, which include (a) culture, identity, and consciousness; (b) gender constructions and the family; (c) families within the urban context; and (d) family diversity and adaptation. What connects these pillars is the focus on the development and functioning of African Americans and their families and the ways in which race relations and social policy serve as a backdrop.

Culture, consciousness, and the evolution of the black family

The cultural origins of African Americans, the reach of an African cultural past, the distinctiveness of Black culture compared to the dominant culture (i.e., European American), and the role of culture in shaping the "Negro condition or problem" have been central questions in the field of Black family studies. In *The Negro Family*, Frazier immediately challenged the conventional thought that culture was genetically determined and that the Black condition in the

United States was a consequence of the cultural constitution of the African. At the same time, integrating a progressive analysis of African culture, he documented the complexity of African cultures, societies, languages, folkways, ways of life, and family systems. His analysis flew in the face of what still remained conventional perceptions of the uncivilized African savage. Thus, at the beginning of the monograph, Frazier stakes what is a radical position, that his work will not address the influence of African culture or genetics on the contemporary Negro American but rather the legacy of the American past, and what the Negro has become on American shores.

At its most intimate, *The Negro Family* is a social theory built on and told with an underlying personal voice and shaped around living memory. Frazier collected thousands of family histories, stories, and bits of folklore. This is most vividly evident in Part I of the monograph "In the House of the Master," where Frazier engages the critical question: Who did the Black African become in America? He chronicled the social evolution of the Negro from enslavement to the dawn of freedom, and established the theoretical template that would inform the entire text. Highlighting two critical processes, Frazier described the genesis of the Black family in America: (a) disorganization and adaptation under conditions of social change and (b) cultural contact, accommodation, and assimilation.

The African American story begins with the massive social disorganization that resulted as the African was enslaved and supplanted in America. Countering the view of slavery apologists, Frazier described the capture of slaves, the middle passage, and enslavement as brutal processes that led to, if not physical death, at least to the cultural death of the African. He argued that slavery stripped away African language, its material culture, and its institutions, leaving only a few scattered "forgotten memories" (2001, p. 3). What was left was something quite rudimentary and primitive. Without a strong cultural foundation and social control, Blacks were subject to their desires, and indiscriminant mating and family systems based on the mother-child bond resulted. Through the process of enslavement and the institutionalization of slavery, social reorganization took place among the former Africans, now bondsmen. The critical cultural force in this reorganization is the master class, which was cast as a source of both social control and cultural knowledge.

Frazier theorizes that cultural contact with the master class was the mechanism for culture assimilation and change. Rudimentary cultural variations begin to emerge among slaves under conditions of differential contact between slaves and master (e.g., house and field slaves), an emergent color caste system (i.e., mulatto children of master class), and the different statuses of free Blacks and slaves. Frazier, rather parenthetically, also points to individual talent and skills as a source of status differentials among slaves and suggests the emergence of shared identity among bondsmen. Hence, the origins of Black American culture were the variations in the assimilation of European American culture and the rural peasant folkways that developed under slavery.

Not unlike contemporary studies, Frazier addressed the role of cultural contact and assimilation of dominant culture and their implications for the economic and social mobility of Blacks and their families. On the question of Africanisms and the legacy of African cultural origins, contemporary writers, from Afrocentric theorists (Asante, 1989) to family and cultural historians (Genovese, 1974; Levine, 1977), break sharply with Frazier's analysis. Although genetically-based cultural arguments about racial inequality have fallen out of fashion, if not out of view (see, e.g., Herrnstein & Murray's *The Bell Curve*, 1994), questions about the role of Black culture, values, family structure, and socialization in the persistence of racial inequality have not. Indeed, some of the most provocative work of our day—from questions about Black academic underachievement and "acting White" (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986) to the Black underclass (Wilson, 1987)—engages these questions.

Gender constructions and black family organization

The institution of slavery, Frazier argued, supplanted the masculine authority of Black males with the authority of the master. This displacement, coupled with the privileging of the mother-child bond, from Frazier's perspective, is at the foundation of the evolution of Black matriarchal families. The thesis of the Black matriarchy and family disorganization has been the most controversial component of Frazier's analysis of African American families and has been the subject of more than a generation of revisionist studies. The firestorm of controversy surrounding The Moynihan (1965) Report, issued 3 years after Frazier's death, was a watershed moment in what would be the beginning of a paradigmatic shift in Black family studies. At the heart of this controversy was Moynihan's now infamous description of Black families as a "tangle of pathology." He wrote:

The Negro community has been forced into a matriarchal structure which, because it is so out of line with the rest of American society, seriously retards the progress of the group as a whole … (p. 75)

Hence, Black family pathology, thus defined, was viewed as a deviation from patriarchy in form, function, and process.

The Moynihan (1965) Report did little justice to the complexity of Frazier's analysis about gender and family relations among African Americans. However, Frazier (2001) and Moynihan (1965) did share the view that social mobility of African Americans was linked to patriarchy. They also felt that the ascendancy of the Black male required both the development of his skills, resources, and social capital and the economic subordination of women and their deference to masculine authority. Despite critics' emphasis on Frazier's perspectives on the Black matriarchy, he described a variety of family types under the two major rubrics of matriarchy and patriarchy. Indeed, at the core of *The Negro Family* is a study in (a) gender relations, ideology, and the structural features of African American family systems and (b) their evolution and development through social crisis and change and as antecedent and consequence of social adaptation.

Frazier argued that under slavery, matriarchal family systems were the predominant family system that emerged within the economic (e.g., chattel, no property ownership) and social (e.g., no marriage, male authority supplanted) constraints of slavery and as a by-product of cultural adaptation and the folkways that were developed. However, via various processes of social stratification under slavery, patriarchy also develops a foothold. Emancipation represented a profound transformation in the social order and an economic institution that would require new patterns of family and social organization. Frazier argued that adjustment to emancipation and the new economic life under freedom was in large part dependent upon the development of a patriarchal family system, where "authority of the father was firmly established" and the husband assumed the role as the "chief, if not the sole breadwinner" (2001, p. 107). In contrast, the emergence of "the house of the mother" was a by-product of loose marital relationships that did not withstand the crisis of emancipation: wandering men without family ties, mothers left parenting alone, and unmarried motherhood (2001, p. 87). As Frazier argued, alternative family patterns were a significant element of Black family life (Hunter, 2002); however the overwhelming majority of Black families, even in the early decades of freedom, conformed to a two-parent family structure (Gutman, 1976).

Frazier's conceptualization of the "matriarchate" focused on three interrelated areas: (a) gender ideology and gender relations, (b) family structure, and (c) the granny and matrifocal multigenerational family systems. Frazier began his discussion of Black matriarchy with an illustration of the defiance and political activism of Black women in Mississippi during the 1868 election. He wrote, "Neither economic necessity nor tradition had instilled in her the spirit of subordination to masculine authority …" (2001, p. 125). Although Frazier's illustration suggests some admiration for these traits, the latter was also an impediment to the development of marriage bonds and marital relations that would lead to patriarchal family systems.

According to Platt (2001), Frazier's view of family systems assumed an evolutionary model not unlike that of early social philosophers and social reformers, where "the nuclear family and patriarchal authority represented an evolutionary development, and masculine and feminine gender roles are naturally constituted" (p. xxvvii). Frazier described female-headed households after emancipation as both a legacy of antebellum family patterns and the result of the uncontrolled sexuality of women that led to unmarried motherhood. Hence, mothers without husbands must then rely on themselves for the economic support of their families. In addition, the cultural tolerance for both formal (marriage) and informal (cohabitation) partnerships and utilitarian conceptions of marriage were inconsistent with the stability of marriage and patriarchy.

Although female-headed households in urban areas exceeded those of rural areas, it is within the latter, where a modified plantation system continued, that Frazier argued, "We find maternal family functioning in its most primitive form as a natural organization" (2001, p. 127) and the development of matrifocal multigenerational family systems headed by the granny, a position of dignity that gave grandmothers "a peculiar authority in family relations" (2001, p. 145).

The establishment of patriarchy and family stability, Frazier argued, was facilitated through "economic subordination of the woman" and "the acquisition of property" through which the husband and father's interest (i.e., commitment) in his family was permanently established (p. 181). With respect to patriarchy and postemancipation families, Frazier pointed to several distinctive classes and family origins: (a) free Negroes, (b) mulattoes, as a privileged class within the color caste system, and "racial islands," mixed-race isolated communities, and (c) the "Black puritans." Free Negroes, prior to the Civil War, had established family organizations reflecting both the economic advantages of the free Negro and the legal ability for husbands and fathers to assume their role as head of their families. Mulatto or biracial classes, who experienced economic and cultural advantages under slavery via both support received from White fathers and close contact with the master class, were also advantaged in moving toward patriarchal family systems under freedom. Frazier also described isolated communities of mixed-race peoples who had a different history and cultural development than the Black American, in which different standards for living prevailed. Finally, the Black puritans were (a) those families who became members of the elite (upper) social classes and (b) moral conservatives who kept isolated from the Black masses and their "vices." Economically privileged, they maintained property, and the role of the father and husband was firmly established as head of the family.

The women's movement, and the emergence of feminist scholarship, has since critiqued patriarchal ideologies about gender and gender relations and hence turned the concept of matriarchy on its head. Although the question of matriarchy, as framed by Frazier, has lost its paradigmatic punch, contemporary studies have continued to explore how the economic marginality of Black men is implicated in the decline in marriage and the increase in rates of divorce, cohabitation, and unmarried parenthood among African Americans (Tucker & Mitchell-Kernan, 1995). Although feminist perspectives have reframed or made obsolete concerns about women's power (i.e., too much) and encouraged new perspectives on masculinity, there has been a continuation of studies of Black masculinity in crisis (see for review, Duneier, 1992). The post-Moynihan debate about the structure and functioning of African American families would ultimately be put to rest by social and family historians who revised our understanding of the Black family during slavery and the early decades of freedom (Genovese, 1974; Gutman, 1976). However, transformations in African American family demography over the past four decades and the continued racial differences in indicators of family stability have kept questions about the normative functioning of Black families at the forefront of family research.

Black families and the urban context

African Americans in urban contexts have been the focus of the earliest community studies, DuBois' (1899)*The Philadelphia Negro* and a series of other classic works, *Black Metropolis* (Drake & Cayton, 1945) and *Negro Family in Chicago* (Frazier, 1932), represent cutting-edge scholarship on urban community life. Arguably, Black families in urban communities, particularly the poor, have become the most studied demographic of African Americans and have been at the center of policy debates and the culture wars of the latter part of

the 20th century. Frazier, drawing in part on urban ecological studies of the Chicago School, examined the relationship between neighborhood and community indicators of social organization (e.g., poverty, family patterns, housing, gang activity) and individual and family indicators of well-being (e.g., juvenile delinquency, unwed motherhood) that are now well established in urban studies of the poor. However, Frazier also examined diversity in Black urban communities, from inner-city slums to the middle-class, and interclass relationships among Blacks, old residents, and new migrants—an emphasis that did not return to Black urban studies until the later decades of the 20th century (see, e.g., Patillo-McCoy, 1999; Wilson, 1987).

In the epic story of African Americans, the massive migration to the cities and northward is the last major social and demographic transformation that Frazier described, bringing his analysis forward to the 1930s. Frazier described the impact of urbanization on Black families in two major ways; first, with respect to disorganizing effects on rural southern migrants and second, via the economic transformations and social mobility made possible by the industrial opportunities in northern cities. These two processes of social change impacted segments of the Black population in different ways. Hence, the transformations taking place in northern and southern cities involved not only race relations but also class dynamics and relationships between Black old and new city dwellers, which reflected the divisions of color, caste, and class that historically have been sources of stratification within Black communities.

After emancipation, Frazier argues that masses of the Black rural population adapted to a modified-plantation system, developed stability in family and community life, and retained folkways and mores that supported ways of living. These rural family patterns included the accommodation of family traditions and lifestyles that were not patriarchal. The pull of better opportunities, wages, and urban life led to the migration of single men and women to cities, who, released from community and family control, indulged in casual and sometimes exploitative sexual relationships and "street life." Rural families, whose folkways and ways of living, Frazier argued, were less adaptive within the context of the disorganizing effects of urban living, were vulnerable to family breakup and desertion. New Black southern migrants did more often find themselves living in inner-city slums, where Frazier identified the highest levels of indicators of social disorganization. However, noting patterns of divorce among both the poor and the affluent, Frazier saw two tensions contributing to the rates of divorce: (a) the limitations of "traditional folk culture" and (b) the tensions created by class expansion and social mobility.

Although Frazier focused on the social transformation experienced by rural migrants, several northern cities also had older residents who populated diverse class-based Black neighborhoods and communities. In his ecological study of Black Chicago, Frazier found variations in literacy and occupational status, family patterns, color caste system, institutional life, and housing stock, across different city zones. Frazier noted that as families gained an economic foothold, they moved away from slums to areas that were more conducive to family life and stability. Interested in social stratification within the African American community, he examined variations in marital and gender relations, parenting, and lifestyle among the industrial working class and the

"brown" middle class. Later, he wrote a monograph about the Black middle class, entitled *Black Bourgeoisie* (1957). Although Frazier did view variations in patterns of family organization and stability found among urban Blacks as linked to differences in values, morays, and the degree of assimilation of the dominant culture, he also argued that the ecological characteristics of neighborhoods affected family organization and social problems.

Finally, Frazier saw the city as both a site of destruction and rebirth. Despite the social disorganization that came with urbanization, Frazier believed that the city held great promise for Black Americans with respect to an increase in economic opportunity and the possibilities for integration, assimilation, and mobility as racial barriers came down. The emergence of the Black industrial worker signaled a rise in economic opportunity and resources, which Frazier believed would influence family relations (i.e., male assumption of support, gender roles, family authority) as well as values and ideals. However, he argued that cultural assimilation and acculturation "will be limited by the extent to which the Negro becomes integrated into the economic organization and participates in the life of the community [the white world]" (2001, p. 488).

Teaching classic texts: a case study of *The Negro Family*

Three decades after The Moynihan Report, we have come full circle, as the criticism of *The Negro Family* has been revisited and scholars are taking a new look at this important and influential work. Indeed, with all its flaws, *The Negro Family* remains the most comprehensive and nuanced treatise on the sociohistorical evolution of Black families in America. It is important to work with students on how to excavate the layers of this monograph, how to engage the work, and how to manage themselves in relation to the text (Table 1). One of the challenges is to help students to understand and connect with the times in which a work was written. It is also important that students understand where a classic work fits within the intellectual history of a field, particularly the paradigmatic and intellectual debates in which it is engaged, and the work's influence over time.

Table 1. *Teaching the Negro Families in the United States*

Integrating Race and History

Learning objectives	• To understand the history of race in America and the social constructions and political meanings of race
	• To reflect on (and connect to) the social history and lived experience of African Americans
	• To understand how the above history informed *The Negro Family* and

	remains relevant for the study of African American families
Major challenges	• Knowledge of race and race relations in the American past may be limited
	• Difficult for students to draw on personal biographies, often no direct link or connection to living memory from the period
	• Feelings of anger, shame, and guilt (and denial) when confronted with the history of race in America
	• Dealing openly with language that is racist, sexist, or suggests class bias
Teaching strategies	• Overview the history of race and race relations in America
	• Review racial ideologies that informed intellectual thought and public life from the mid-19th to the late 20th century
	• Introduce materials that focus on the social history, lived experience, and voices of African Americans using a variety of mediums
	• Review E. Franklin Frazier's biography

Deconstructing Theory, Analysis, and Interpretation

Learning objectives	• To engage in a critical analysis of *The Negro Family*, as a theoretical text and a mixed-method study
	• To identify and deconstruct the underlying assumptions and theoretical model of the work and the social processes addressed
	• To identify and critique the analytical strategies and interpretative lens of Frazier
Major challenges	• The broad sweep and complexity of the work can overwhelm students
	• The text (language, writing conventions, and style) may create barriers to understanding

Teaching strategies	• *The Negro Family* is provocative and tends to evoke emotional responses
	• Interactively diagram the theoretical model underlying the monograph
	• Encourage the examination of discontinuities and contradictions in text
	• Discuss how Frazier's model of the evolution of the African American family would be reshaped if key assumptions differed
	• Encourage students to develop their own analysis and interpretations of the narrative and empirical data presented

Locating Paradigmatic and Intellectual Debates

Learning objectives	• To understand both the theoretical influences that informed *The Negro Family* and the intellectual, political and cultural debates it engaged
	• To recognize *The Negro Family* as an innovative and groundbreaking work and trace its influence on the field of Black family studies
Major challenges	• Students typically have a limited knowledge of the intellectual, political, and cultural debates of a bygone era
	• The instructor has the responsibility of filling in the debates that were in progress at the writing of *The Negro Family*
	• Potential bias against scholarship that is perceived to be "too old"
Teaching strategies	• Review paradigmatic debates in the field of Black family studies
	• Review the major theoretical influences that informed *The Negro Family*
	• Through lecture and the reading of other studies (past and present), illustrate the reach and influence of *The Negro Family*
	• Require students to read and review research on the pillars of Black family studies as conducted across several decades

• Highlight *Myth of the Negro Past* as a challenge to *The Negro Family*

Reading the Text

Learning objectives	• To engage in a critical reading of *The Negro Family* as science and story • To explore and develop strategies for a multilayered and interdisciplinary reading of the monograph
Major challenges	• The text (language, writing conventions, and style) may create barriers to understanding • *The Negro Family* is provocative and tends to evoke emotional responses
Teaching strategies	• Encourage treatment of the text as an object of study • Draw attention to and reflect on the "stories" that run through the text and underneath the analysis • Encourage an interrogation of "positionality," voice, language, metaphor, and narrative • Encourage exploration of how social locations (race, gender, class) and disciplinary training shape students' reading of *The Negro Family*

Integrating race and history

To look at African Americans, as seen through the lens of social science, requires that we directly confront how racial ideology, representations of race, and racial caste informed theory and research. Indeed, one cannot critically review classic or contemporary Black family studies without confronting the social constructions and political meanings of race. However, even among graduate students, historical knowledge about race relations in America may be modest. It is important that an instructor be prepared to supplement students' knowledge about race in the American past, including slavery, Jim Crow, segregation, racial violence, and the Civil Rights Movement. This is critical because it is this history that represents the source of tension in *The Negro Family*; it is what Frazier is writing against. Only by a reading of race and history can we understand *The Negro Family* as an oppositional and radical text.

The question is: how do we, as teachers, lead 21st century graduate students not to suspend their contemporary critical sensibilities but to position their reading, and themselves, in a time in which they have no direct connection, nor living memory. This is an issue I have struggled with increasingly as the age difference between my students and me grows. Born in the 1960s, I am two generations away from ancestors who were born into slavery, and I grew up on stories of early 20th century Black southern life. This oral tradition of storytelling and social theorizing embedded within the countless stories told and conversations overheard, gives me a cultural, historical, and narrative position from which to read *The Negro Family* that my students do not share. The challenge then, is to cultivate a sensibility about another time and to convince students that this has contemporary relevance.

There is a process of historical discovery that must occur alongside the reading of *The Negro Family*. As a teacher, my aim is then threefold (a) to introduce students to racial ideologies that informed intellectual thought and public life in the early 20th century; (b) to find ways to have students viscerally connect with the symbols that reflect these racial ideologies; and (c) to bring to life the ordinary lived experience and voices of African Americans, who lived, loved, and raised families under the weight of the oppression, segregation, and racial violence of pre–Civil Rights America. The use of (a) documentaries about racial imagery and representations (e.g., *Ethnic Notions*); (b) examples of their infusion into popular culture (e.g., *The History of Jim Crow* [www.jimcrowhistory.org]; Jim Crow Museum [www.ferris.edu/jimcrow], Ferris State University); and (c) images of racial violence (e.g., *Without Sanctuary* [Allen, 2000]), helps give a face to the system of beliefs, symbols, and imagery that were a part of the racial caste system and the racial oppression and violence that it supported. It is also important to pair this with materials that give students a window into the dignity, humanity, and agency of Black people. Personal narratives, essays, and memoirs that cover the antebellum period through the early 20th century give students a sense of Black people's voice and life stories during the period in which Frazier wrote. Gwaltney's (1980) *Drylongso*, a study in Black folk thought, is a collection of oral histories and personal narratives of ordinary people who bridged the slave past and the Black experience in the urban North. There are also two stellar radio documentaries that focus on oral history, *Remembering Slavery* (Berlin, Favreau, & Miller, 1998) and *Remembering Jim Crow* (Chafe, Gavins, & Korstad, 2001). In addition to published works, there are several online university collections available for students to access (e.g., *African-American Women*, Duke University; *Documenting the American South*, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill; *Race and Slavery Petitions Project*, University of North Carolina at Greensboro). To help students connect to Black expressive culture, it is useful to introduce them to collections of folk music, spirituals, and the blues (e.g., Lomax, 1998, *Southern Journey*, Vols. 12–13; see also Levine, 1977). Cinematic releases including works such as *Daughters of the Dust* and *The Piano Lesson* are examples of period pieces that focus on the family, culture, identity, social change (migration, urbanization), and the legacy of slavery.

In reading classic works, students are often confronted with language that is racist, sexist, and or ethnocentric. Although it may be tempting to have students disregard this because it reflects the times in which people lived and wrote, it is critical to deal with this issue head on. It is important to discuss how the ideologies that accompany this language may inform both the theoretical perspective and or analysis offered and the questions that are asked. For all its contributions, *The Negro Family* bewilders and angers some students, although producing guilt in others. Although Frazier is a Black scholar, his analysis and moralizing language strikes students as confirming racial stereotypes and as steeped in class-bias. African American students also often question Frazier's racial identity and his politics. Without creating a sense of biography and historical context (including intellectual history), Frazier's career as a radical intellectual and his work in *The Negro Family* are anachronisms students will have difficulty deciphering.

Deconstructing theory, analysis, and interpretation: models and diagrams

One of the challenges in reading classic texts is that they do not conform to the conventions of contemporary scientific writing. It is not only a matter of format but also of writing style and the use of language. As a result, students may not always be clear on the theoretical assumptions, premises, and or the social processes that are a focus of the scholarship. A strategy for deconstructing the theory and analysis in classic works is to have students work collectively (in class) on modeling the underlying theory and or interpretative analysis. For example, in my graduate course on African American families, I ask students to diagram the underlying theoretical model in Part I of*The Negro Family* because embedded within this section is the theoretical template and interpretative approach that informs the entire work (see Figure 1). The result is a model that illustrates the processes of organization, disorganization, and reorganization, and the evolution of the Black family from enslavement to freedom. We also highlight parts of the model that reflect the major theoretical influences discussed (e.g., Chicago School) and segments of the model that represent paradigmatic shifts. Deconstructing a classic work in this way helps create the perspective students may need in order to look at a classic work critically.
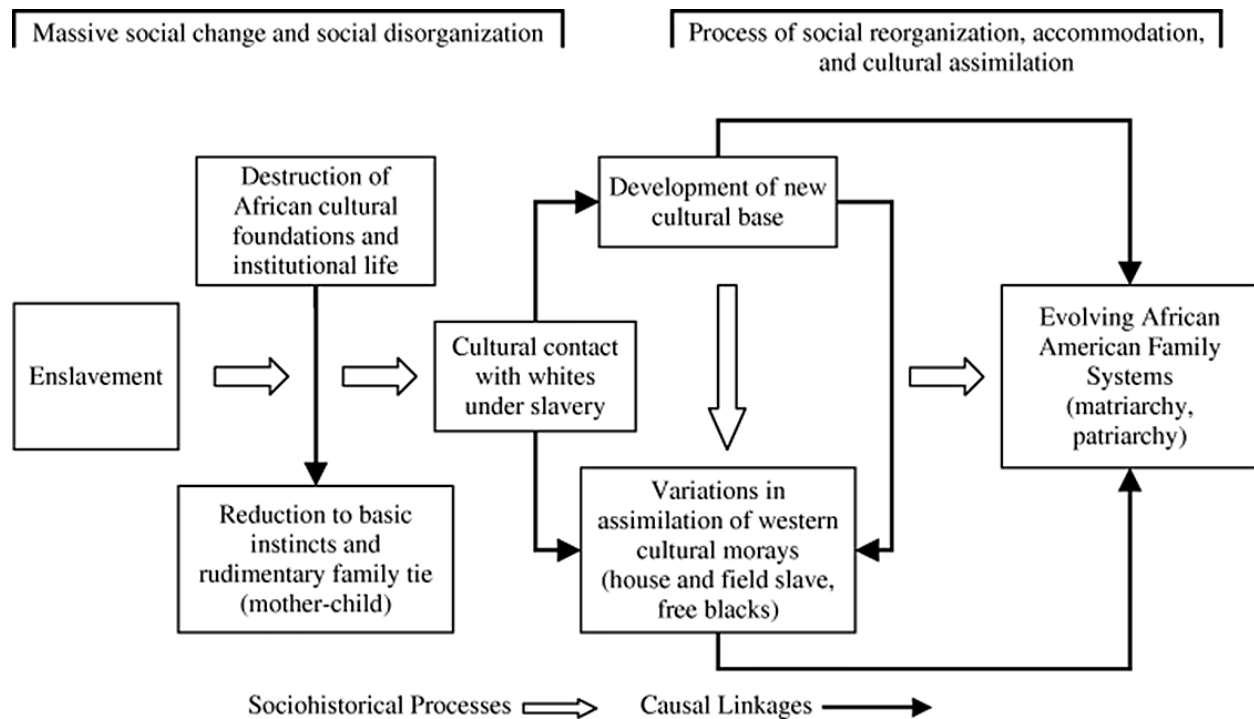
Massive social change and social disorganization

Process of social reorganization, accommodation, and cultural assimilation

Destruction of African cultural foundations and institutional life

Development of new cultural base

Enslavement

Cultural contact with whites under slavery

Evolving African American Family Systems (matriarchy, patriarchy)

Reduction to basic instincts and rudimentary family tie (mother-child)

Variations in assimilation of western cultural morays (house and field slave, free blacks)

Sociohistorical Processes ⟹   Causal Linkages ⟶

Figure 1. Enslavement, Acculturation, and Social Adaptation in *The Negro Family*: Model of the Origins of African American Family Systems.

The strategies students typically use to critically analyze contemporary work are also sometimes less useful in reading classic texts, for students are less clear on how to apply the same principles to a critical reading of an early work. An example of strategies that I use to facilitate a critique of *The Negro Family* is to ask students to (a) consider whether there are discontinuities between Frazier's theory, interpretation, and data; (b) consider the implications of Frazier's theoretical model for contemporary Black families; (c) explore contradictions in the text; and (d) consider how Frazier's model may be reshaped if fundamental assumptions (e.g., impact of slavery on African cultural retentions) were viewed differently (e.g., from the perspective of Herskovitz, 1941 or Levine, 1977). On the latter point, we examine Frazier in juxtaposition to revisionist studies, particularly in the area of family and slave history (e.g., Genovese, 1974; Gutman, 1976) and cultural studies (e.g., Levine, 1977). We also read the new school of Black families studies (post-Moynihan) that emphasize cultural diversity and strengths, and adaptation (e.g., Billingsley, 1968; Stack, 1974).

Locating paradigmatic and intellectual debates

Pointing to the ways in which Frazier was engaged in intellectual and political dialogues on a variety of fronts illustrates for the students how radical and challenging *The Negro Family* was and helps them to begin to understand the intellectual reach of this work. As is true for scholars today, Frazier was involved in multiple conservations with social theorists, and he was engaged in political debates within and outside the Black community. It is difficult for students to get a

sense of these different conversations that are taking place in a bygone era. Hence, an important role of the instructor is to fill in these conversations and to illustrate the dialogues in progress at the time. For example, the absence of African cultural retentions is quite central to Frazier's thesis. Although African cultural erasure was a component of the paradigmatic shift away from racially conservative views, it also represented a departure from the liberal progressive views of Africanist and anthropologist Herskovitz (1941), cultural elites of the Harlem Renaissance, and Black nationalist political movements. Herskovitz, in many respects, is the paradigmatic foil to Frazier, with respect to the question of African origins, in his 1941 monograph, *The Myth of the Negro Past*; he directly addresses Frazier and Parks' perspective on the question of African retentions. He writes, "African culture, instead of being weak under contact, is strong but resilient …" (p. 18). Frazier's perspective remained ascendant; however, contemporary studies (e.g., Levine, 1977) suggest that Herskovitz's model most closely describes the processes of cultural retention, change, and transformation that led to the development of African American culture.

As critical as understanding the intellectual dialogues of the period, is tracing the ways *The Negro Family* continued to shape and inform Black family studies for more than one-half century. *The Negro Family* became the definitive model of the evolution of the Black American family and was virtually unquestioned for almost three decades. Although post-Frazier scholars emphasized the impact of macrostructural forces on the Black condition rather than biogenetic factors, they also collectively supported the thesis of Black cultural and family pathology (i.e., matriarchy and dysfunction), which at times was class specific (e.g., the poor), and at others generalized to the entire Black population. Mydral (1944), in his seminal work on American race relations, *The American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy*, wrote:

In practically all its divergences, American Negro culture … is a distorted development, or a pathological condition, of the general American culture. (p. 1)

This example was neither particularly controversial nor radical because it generally represented conventional academic thought. Indeed, between 1940 and 1970, the reach of *The Negro Family* is evident in any variety of studies of Black life across disciplines. To illustrate this, students can be asked to review examples of research from 1940 to 1970 in an area that is of interest to them. This exercise also illustrates how intractable pejorative representations of Black people have been, even in the face of great diversity and conformity to mainstream family patterns.

Reading the text

Frazier, like many early scholars, used prose that tends to be more literary; displays stronger uses of narrative, imagery and metaphor, and is less dispassionate than that of contemporary academic writers. *The Negro Family* also has a readability that is almost journalistic in nature, which for the naïve reader may betray its theoretical complexity. Further, in the tradition of other Black

scholars—such as DuBois, Carter G. Woodson, and John Hope Franklin—Frazier has created a sweeping multidisciplinary epic. He draws on a wide range of data, including the census, primary and secondary historical sources, oral histories, family stories, and songs. It is what we would describe today as a fully integrated mixed-method study. He uses the full variety of data sources to support his interpretative analysis, and in the process he gives the reader access to a chorus of diverse Black voices. In short, there is a great deal going on in this monograph, and not surprisingly, students do not respond to *The Negro Family* in a dispassionate way.

Students may find *The Negro Family's* narrative style, complexity, and scope disconcerting at first; however, it also opens up opportunities for them to use a variety of reader sensibilities to critically analyze the text and to engage it as both science and story. I encourage students to (a) examine the text itself (i.e., to pull out passages they are drawn to, have questions about, or want to read aloud in class, to illustrate a point); (b) listen to the stories that Frazier tells about the experiences of African Americans in slavery and freedom, which run underneath his analysis; (c) interrogate how Frazier positions himself within the text (e.g., insider versus outsider) and the ways this may shift, and how he relates to or connects with the stories he includes in the monograph; and (d) explore the use of language, metaphor, and imagery in the work. In addition, because *The Negro Family* is based on a rich qualitative database (e.g., personal accounts, case studies, interviews, oral histories, family stories) and because extensive passages are integrated into the text, students have an opportunity to develop their own interpretative narratives. That is, I encourage students to explore what the multiple narrative voices included in the monograph may reveal, independent of Frazier's analysis. These passages also offer multiple linguistic examples of Black vernacular, from dialect to standard speech.

There are multiple readings that one can bring to *The Negro Family*. It has been my experience that the level of student (graduate, undergraduate), disciplinary training, racial composition of the class, and student's age, gender, and race all have a significant influence on the reading of this classic work. For the contemporary reader, *The Negro Family* is experienced as a deeply personal text: one that angers, bewilders, and, for some students, evokes a deep sense of pain and loss and, for others, guilt. It challenges students not only to have a conversation about race but also a conversation about class and gender and how these constructions are implicated in our contemporary discussion about families. Further, it reminds us that we, scholars of the Black family, like Frazier in 1939, remain engaged in similar questions about the Black condition and the continuing legacies of exclusion.

In conclusion, as we look ahead toward innovations in graduate education in the field of family studies, it is important for students to be aware of the classic works on which the field was built and which continue to have relevance for the work we do today. Focusing on Frazier's classic work, *The Negro Family*, I aimed not only to reintroduce this work as an important pillar in the history of the field of family studies but also to highlight the importance of a graduate education that includes the classics.

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