

Blaming the Victim No More: African American Critiques of the Moynihan Report, 1965

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In 1965, Assistant Secretary of Labor, Daniel Patrick Moynihan conducted research to determine the cause for inequalities between black and white communities. Moynihan's research became known as *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*, more commonly the Moynihan Report. Raised by a single mother, Moynihan's childhood consisted of frequent moves, but his harsh childhood did not stop him from getting an education and becoming a successful politician. Moynihan saw the struggle to achieve a stable family in the United States through his own experience growing up, and his experiences encouraged him to research the cause of inequality between black and white communities. Moynihan's report focused on the difference in family structures between black and white communities. During the Civil Rights Movement, the acceptable family structure in American society was that of a patriarchal family. The patriarchal family is a family structure where the man is the breadwinner and the woman the housewife. Moynihan's report attacked African Americans because the majority did not have a patriarchal family. Moynihan argued that African American families consisted of a matriarchal family rather than a patriarchal family. Moynihan came to a conclusion that African American family structures were the cause of the inequalities between black and white communities. Moynihan's argument inspired scholars to revisit and analyze his report. Scholars like Aldous, Wilson, and Patterson accepted Moynihan's report, while scholars like Thaggert, Berger, Simon and Estes criticized the effects that the Moynihan Report had on African Americans in American Society in 1965. This paper explores the failure of the Moynihan Report to consider the historical context, going back as far as slavery, that shaped African American family structures. Looking at African American cultural sources such as Ebony Magazine and speeches from Martin Luther King Jr. and other Civil Rights Leaders, it is clear that the African American community of the 1950s and 1960s rejected the Moynihan Report.

Contemporary scholars of the 1960s and 1970s, such as Joan Aldous, author of the 1969 article "Wives' Employment Status and Lower-Class Men as Husband-Fathers: Support for the Moynihan Thesis", agree with Moynihan's argument. Aldous states, "The woman's sphere has been in the home, caring

for the children and keeping her family clothed and fed with the means to provide by her husband.”[1]Aldous argues that the women’s sphere has always been at home and that women need to stay at home and take on the household duties such as cleaning the house, cooking, taking care of the children and satisfying the husbands’ needs at home. The men are supposed to be the provider of the family while the women stay at home. Aldous also agrees with Moynihan’s argument that African American families are more matriarchal rather than patriarchal. Aldous states, “The wife who works, however, is less dependent on her husband for economic support, his primary role in the family, has less to reward him to involve himself in family activities.”[2]Aldous argues that African American women join the workforce and that causes African American fathers to separate from their family because he is unable to be the sole provider for the family. When the father abandons the family the women take charge of the family, income, and this creates a matriarchal family. Aldous also states that the gender roles are reversed once the women joins the workforce because that causes the men to lose his masculinity.[3]

In 1974, scholars Alan S. Berger and William Simon wrote, “Black Families and the Moynihan Report: A Research Evaluation.” They argue that Moynihan blames African American fathers for not being masculine. Berger and Simon state about Moynihan that “[h]e cites a number of studies to indicate that masculine-especially father-roles are weaker among blacks than among whites, that levels of educational aspirations and performance are low, and lower among black males than females-presumably as a result of the matriarchal family structure and that the absence of a father figure is more devastating for black than for a white children.”[4]Moynihan connected low education performance and masculinity to black families. Berger and Simon argue that Moynihan downgraded the education level of African Americans because they were unable to have a patriarchal family. Berger and Simon also argue that Moynihan considered African American men not masculine enough to form a patriarchal family.

Beyond the 1970s, silence unraveled until the early 2000s, when the Moynihan Report was discussed again. Steve Estes, author of the book *I AM a Man: Race, Manhood, and the Civil Right Movement*, published in 2005, disagrees with Moynihan’s argument on black families being the problem for the inequalities in American society. Estes discusses Robert Staples’ work who also analyzed the Moynihan Report. Estes states, “In other words, Staples argued that the power inherent in black men’s gender identity was an implicit threat to white dominance of society.”[5]Estes argues that American society tied family structure to racial superiority. Society started to praise patriarchal families in white communities and started discriminating against matriarchal

families in black communities. There was a fear in American society that African Americans would achieve greater things, therefore, discrimination occurred towards African Americans communities and their family structures.

In 2009, Julius William Wilson wrote “Foreword: The Moynihan Report and Research on the Black Community” and defended the Moynihan Report. Wilson states, “The Moynihan Report was an internal document written for the officials in the executive branch of the government, not for the general public. The report was not edited to reduce the chances of the press distortions and the odds of offending civil rights groups.”[6]Wilson argued that the Moynihan Report was meant for government officials to read and not the public and this caused controversy when the report was leaked. In 2010, historian James T. Patterson published *Freedom Is Not Enough: The Moynihan Report and America’s Struggle over Black Family from LBJ to Obama*, and also defended the Moynihan Report. Patterson states that Moynihan’s tone in the report was intended to be harsh in order to get the attention of government officials to take action and help African American communities.[7]Patterson argues that Moynihan was trying to get rid of the inequalities between black and white communities by exploiting the major problems in black communities and families.

By 2012 Miriam Thaggert’s journal article “Marriage, Moynihan, Mohogany: Success and the Post-Civil Rights Black Female Professional in Film”, argued that the Moynihan Report influenced Civil Rights groups to discriminate and downgrade African American women. For example, The Black Panther Party gave secondary roles to women in the movement because they did not believe that women should have bigger roles in the party.[8]Thaggert argues that Moynihan’s statements about women’s roles created divisions and discrimination for black women in Civil Right groups. Therefore, Thaggert blames Moynihan for discriminating against women’s roles and influencing Civil Rights groups to discriminate against African American women.

The Moynihan Report argued that the inequalities in black communities resulted from matriarchal family structures in African American communities. It caused controversy and influenced scholars to critique the report. Many scholars such as Aldous, Patterson, and Wilson accepted the Moynihan Report, others including Thaggert, Berger, Simon, and Estes opposed it. Perhaps most importantly, though, American society accepted the ideology that a patriarchal family was the norm and this led to discrimination in African American communities because they consisted of a matriarchal family. African American popular sources from the time period as well as speeches from Civil Rights leaders definitively counter this arguments.

It is not the structure of African American families that destroyed black communities, but rather the concepts and ideas that permeate American society. Civil Rights activist Martin Luther King Jr. disagrees with Moynihan's argument about African American communities being on the verge of destruction. In 1965, King stated in an interview with Alex Haley from *Playboy* that, "In the first place, there is no truth to the myth that Negroes depreciate property. The fact is that most Negroes are kept out of residential neighborhoods so long that when one of us is finally sold a home, it's already depreciated." [9] King argues that it is American society that destroys black communities and not African American families. The way American society destroys African American communities is through discrimination and the unwillingness to support and invest in black communities. In particular, American society ignores the problems that African American communities endure such as unemployment and education.

Another strategy American society uses to destroy black communities is by not providing inner cities with the taxes for the services to keep the African American community clean and protected. In the August 1965 edition of *Ebony Magazine* Whitney M. Young Jr. states in "The High Cost of Discrimination" that "[t]axpayers best able to help support essential services have abandoned our inner cities to those least able to support them—even though the white middle-class was for a time itself also "subsidized" by the generation that came before it." [10] American society created ghettos in black communities because wealthy whites left the inner cities creating a lack of services in black communities. The services such as police, fire department and garbage collection are not provided to the same extent in the black communities because the tax base is weak. [11] That is the difference between white communities and black communities. Whites are able to afford overpriced taxes and thus gain tax services to improve their communities.

Furthermore, black communities struggle because there is corruption inside businesses that affect black employees. In the September edition of *Ebony Magazine*, 1968, the article called "How The Ghetto Gets Gypped: Fuel For Riot Fires" by Warren G. Magnuson states that "[w]hen business and government—in fact, our whole enlightenment society—strain to give equal employment opportunities to the Negro, we should also be far-sighted enough to guarantee that his earnings are not stolen from him through unethical business practices and antiquated laws." [12] It is corruption that led to African American communities being unable to provide for the taxes required to provide the services that would help the community. It is not the family structure of African Americans that create inequality and poverty in black

communities, but the white businesses that use corruption and impose high taxes on black communities.

Moynihan also mentions in his report that there is a “tangle of pathology” or a disease in African American communities. The “tangle of pathology” refers to the idea that lower-class African Americans are influencing middle-class African Americans to create a matriarchal family. Moynihan states, “There is much evidence that a considerable number of Negro families have managed to break out of the tangle of pathology and to establish themselves as stable, effective units, living according to patterns of American society in general. E. Franklin Frazier has suggested that the middle-class Negro American family is if anything, more patriarchal and protective of its children than the general run of such families.”[13] Moynihan argues that the “tangle of pathology” is resolved when African American families adopt a patriarchal family structure. Moynihan states that middle-class African American families are more stable and far more successful than low-class African American families because middle-class African Americans have a patriarchal family.[14] Moynihan showed that American society accepted middle-class African Americans because they had adapted a patriarchal family rather than a matriarchal.

Moynihan also mentions that the “tangle of pathology” affected African American children. Moynihan stated, “The children of middle-class Negroes often do not grow up in, or next to the slums, an experience almost unknown to white middle-class children. They are therefore constantly exposed to the pathology of the disturbed group and constantly in danger of being drawn into it.”[15] Moynihan blames the lower-class African American communities for exposing middle-class African American children to matriarchal families. Moynihan, therefore, states that those middle-class families are in trouble of losing their status and their family structure if they live or co-exist with low-class African American families.[16] Overall, Moynihan’s argument is that lower class African Americans influence matriarchal families on middle-class African American families through the concept Moynihan described as the “tangle of pathology.”

Some, including Lincoln C. Eric, argued that matriarchal families were the byproduct of slavery. Lincoln C. Eric’s article, “A Look Beyond Matriarchy”, written in the August edition of *Ebony Magazine* in 1966 states, “So it was that the headship of the Negro family was thrust upon the Negro mother by the viciousness of a slave system which consciously sought the psychological castration of the Negro male.”[17] It was slavery that affected the family structure of African Americans and not the “tangle of pathology”. American society established the ideology that a matriarchal family was not acceptable,

but through slavery matriarchal families were forced on slaves. Slavery caused African American women to be the head of the family and that created matriarchal families. Eric also states, “Marriage between slaves was not recognized at law.”[18]This meant that there was no ideal family structure for African Americans. Matriarchal families were created during slavery because the women had to raise the children while the man worked on the plantation. In 1966, Martin Luther King Jr. would have agreed with Eric stating that the impact of not recognizing marriage resulted in African American men being sold to other plantations and forcing the women to take care of the family, creating a matriarchal family.[19]

The Moynihan Report also discriminates African American women because of the high rate of illegitimate births in black communities. Moynihan states, “Both white and Negro illegitimacy rates have been increasing, although from dramatically different bases. The white rate was 2 percent in 1940; it was 3.07 percent in 1963. In that period, the Negro rate went from 16.8 percent to 23.6 percent.”[20]Therefore, Moynihan argued that African American women had more illegitimate births than white women and blames black women for matriarchal families in black communities. Moynihan also makes a comparison between legitimate births and welfare. Moynihan states, “The steady expansion of this welfare program, as of public assistance programs in general, can be taken as a measure of the steady disintegration of the Negro family structure over the past generation in the United States.”[21]Overall, Moynihan’s ideology is that illegitimacy births are common in black communities and as a result, black families rely on welfare which leads to matriarchal families.

The problem with Moynihan’s argument is that he does not acknowledge the disadvantages that caused African American women to have more children than white women. Moynihan’s statistics only show the steady increase in childbirths in the black community, but he does not explain the reasons why these rates are increasing. In 1965, William Ryan, author of “The Savage Discovery”, explained the reasons why African American women had more illegitimate children. William Ryan states, “The services of adoption agencies and maternity homes are mostly for white mothers, who account for about 90 percent of agency adoptions of illegitimate children, and probably an even higher proportion of independent adoptions.”[22]White women could give up their babies to adoption centers, while African American women found the process harder. The advantage of having access to adoption centers meant that white women did not have to become single mothers, while African American women had fewer options and were more likely to become single mothers relying on welfare.

Ryan also talks about the birth control disadvantage for African American women. Ryan states, "From the known data, we can conclude only that Negro and white girls probably engage in premarital intercourse in about the same proportion, but that the white girl more often takes Enovid or uses a diaphragm."^[23] White women were able to prevent pregnancy because they had access to a diaphragm. Black women did not have access to the diaphragm which resulted in more pregnancies and an increase in the statistics showing more illegitimate births among black women. African American women also had less access to abortions. William Ryan states, "It is estimated that more than 1 million illegal and unreported induced abortions are performed each year."^[24] These illegal and unreported abortions caused the statistics to show a lower legitimate birth rate among white women than black women. Moynihan did not mention the privileges or advantages that a white woman had in 1965 and discriminated black women for having illegitimate children. American society does not talk about the available resources that white women were able to obtain, such as the adoption agencies, the diaphragm, and abortion to prevent pregnancy or illegitimate births. Black women did not have access to these services or institutions to help them. The statistics in the Moynihan Report show black women having more illegitimate births than white women, but Moynihan does not acknowledge reasons for this trend.

The Moynihan Report also blamed the family role of African American fathers and their masculinity. Moynihan references a study regarding the effects of unemployment on family structures done in 1940 by Edward Wight Bakke, a Yale professor of sociology and economics, Bakke states, "The first two stages end with the exhaustion of credit and the entry of the wife into the labor force. The father is no longer the provider and the elder children become resentful."^[25] Moynihan uses Bakke's research to prove that the African American man is inferior to the woman when she joins the workforce. The father's masculinity is reduced when he is no longer the sole provider in the family. Bakke's study also states that the man's role in the family downgrades from the head of the household into an errand boy.^[26] Moynihan used this study to argue that gender roles are reversed when the women join the workforce causing the men to feel inferior. This sense of inferiority to his women causes the men to abandon the family resulting in a matriarchal family. Therefore, according to Moynihan, African American men were unable to be the provider in a patriarchal family.

In 1965 American society viewed African American men as "boys" and that downgraded their masculinity and created this ideology that white men are superior to black men. In the article "The Seven Stages of Negro Men" from

the 1960 September edition of *Ebony Magazines*, the author shows the discrimination that American society incorporates towards African American men. The article states, “The mature male may be ready to face retirement well established as an honest, law-abiding citizen, but if he is a Negro, he cannot sit back on his laurels. To some white people, he is still a boy.”[27]The article refers to the idea that in American society, African American men were not respected or considered mature until they reach the age of retirement. It also makes American society not respect elderly black males because they are seen as immature and this created discrimination towards them.

The Moynihan Report also blamed African American families for the low education in black communities. Moynihan argues that white children are able to achieve higher education because they have a mother at home to help them with school, while African American children are unable to succeed in school because their mother works.[28]Moynihan viewed the matriarchal family structure in African American communities as the cause for their children’s inability to get an education. Due to the low education in black communities, Moynihan states, “The overwhelming number of offenses committed by Negroes are directed toward other Negroes: the cost of crime to the Negro community is a combination of that to the criminal and to the victim.”[29]Moynihan argues that the lack of education created crimes in black communities. Therefore, Moynihan blamed black matriarchal families for the lack of education and crimes in African American communities.

Moynihan does not recognize that it is the American schools that fail African American children, not the family structures in black communities. For example, American schools teach African American children what the ideal American family structure is supposed to be. In the January 1966 edition of *Ebony Magazine* “A Man Around the House”, the author states, “At school, the young child learns to read from books that show suburban type families, white, with a loving mother, a strong father who is a good provider, a pretty home with sisters and brothers who get along well together.”[30]Schoolbooks teach and influence African American children at a young age the acceptable family structure in American society. This affects African American children because they start to question their family structure because it does not correlate with the family in the books. The books at school undermine African American children because they start to believe that they are different and inferior to white families because they do not have the same family structure as the white families in the schoolbooks.

Another factor that American society imposed on African American children was the lack of motivation. The article “A Man Around the House” also states

that African American males drop out of school to help their families achieve the ideal family structure.[31] American society influenced young black males that only a patriarchal family structure was acceptable in American society. Therefore, young males lack motivation to continue getting an education because they want to work to achieve a patriarchal family. When African Americans drop out of school, they are stuck in low paying jobs, and this is what creates divisions and instability in black communities. It is American society that psychologically influenced young black males to be providers in a family and that lead African American males to drop out of school in order to work. Therefore, American society needs to encourage African American children to stay in school and further their education without trying to achieve the role of a provider in a family.

Upon concluding, the Moynihan Report discriminated African Americans because they did not have the ideal family structure. This ideal family structure consisted of the man being the breadwinner and the woman being the housewife. The patriarchal family structure was seen as superior and the norm in American society, while the matriarchal family was seen as unacceptable. Moynihan blamed black families for the inequalities in black communities and in American society as a result of not having a patriarchal family. Moynihan critiqued African American communities because he argued that they had matriarchal families, the “tangle of pathology”, illegitimate children, emasculate fathers, school dropouts, and crime. Yet, the Moynihan Report listed all the problems that African American families and communities faced without acknowledging the disadvantages African Americans had to deal with in American society at the time. African American popular voices such as *Ebony Magazine* and civil rights leaders strongly disagreed with Moynihan’s assessment and responded with a critique of their own, a critique that focused on the structural injustices and inequalities that African Americans were facing on a daily basis.

Endnotes

[1]Joan Aldous. “Wives’ Employment Status and Lower-Class Men as Husband-Fathers: Support for the Moynihan Thesis.” *Journal of Marriage and Family*31, no. 3 (1969): 469-76.

[2]Aldous, 471.

[3]Ibid.

[4]Alan S Berger., and William Simon. “Black Families and the Moynihan Report: A Research Evaluation.” *Social Problems*22, no. 2 (1974)

[5]Steve Estes. *I Am a Man! : Race, Manhood, and the Civil Rights Movement*. Chapel Hill, NC: Univ. of North Carolina Press. 2005. 126-127.

[6]Julius William Wilson. “Foreword: The Moynihan Report and Research on the Black Community.” *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 621 (2009): 34-46.

[7]James T. Patterson.*Freedom Is Not Enough: The Moynihan Report and America’s Struggle over Black Family Life from LBJ to Obama*. New York: Basic Books, 2010. 50

[8]Miriam Thaggert. “Marriage, Moynihan, Mahogany: Success and the Post-Civil Right Black Female Professional in Film.” *American Quarterly*64, no. 4 (2012): 715-740.

[9]Alex Haley. “Alex Haley Interviews Martin Luther King, Jr.” Alex Haley Interviews Martin Luther King, Jr. Former Civil Rights Leader And Activist. *Playboy Magazine*. Jan. 1965

[10]Whitney M. Young Jr. “The High Cost of Discrimination,” *Ebony Magazine*, August 1965. Web, 51.

[11]Ibid.

[12] Warren G. Magnuson. “How The Ghetto Gets Gypped: Fuel For Riot Fires,” *Ebony Magazine*, September 1968.

[13]Moynihan, 29.

[14]Ibid.

[15]Ibid.

[16]Moynihan, 30.

[17]Eric C. Lincoln. “A Look Beyond Matriarchy,” *Ebony Magazine*, August 1966, 112.

[18]Ibid.

[19]Martin Luther King Jr. "The Negro Family: A Challenge to National Action." *The Negro Family: A Challenge to National Action/ The Martin Luther King Jr. Center for Nonviolent Social Change*. Jan. 27, 1966. Transcript. Accessed September 07, 2017. <http://www.thekingcenter.org/archive/document/negro-family-challenge-national-action#>. Web, 4.

[20]Moynihan, 8.

[21]Moynihan, 14.

[22]William Ryan. "Savage Discover: The Moynihan Report." *The Nation*. Publication NAACP (Nov 22, 1965). 2017. Web, 460.

[23]Ibid.

[24]Ibid, 459.

[25]Moynihan, 19.

[26]Ibid.

[27]"The Seven Stages of Negro Man," *Ebony Magazine*, September 1960. Web, 96.

[28]Moynihan, 25.

[29]Moynihan, 39.

[30]"A Man Around the House" *Ebony Magazine*, January 1966. Web, 92.

[31]Ibid.

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