

BOOK REVIEW

Willie, Charles Vert. *A New Look At Black Families*. General Hall, Inc., 1976. Pp. vi + 211.

In *A New Look at Black Families*, Professor Charles V. Willie challenges the findings of Daniel P. Moynihan's "The Negro Family in America: A Case for National Action." The Moynihan Report, which in the eleven years since its release has been the center of much debate, asserted that deficient family structures, especially matriarchal families, have precipitated an intergenerational perpetuation of poverty. In his refutation of this thesis, Willie argues that the dominant structure of black families mirrors the white pattern in being patriarchal and two-parent. The differential in stability between black and white families is a consequence not of historical circumstances such as the slavery experience, but of economics and racial discrimination. Thus, Willie eschews historical inquiry, and contends that a fuller understanding of black families can be achieved "by examining the environmental settings within which they live, and the groups with which they interact" (187).

Part I of this work comprises interview data, collected by undergraduate students at Syracuse University, which show the life styles of twelve black families, from the middle, working and lower classes. These classes, defined by family income, represent 75% of black society; the upper classes (over \$20,000 per annum), and the "under-class" (under \$3,000 per annum), are omitted from the study.

This section is the least satisfying of the book, as several methodological problems are apparent. The technique for selection of interviewees, whereby each interviewer was given the responsibility for "locating a black family" (6-7), raises doubts as to the randomness of the sample, and whether the findings can be generalized. Further, the inexperience of the interviewers is evident in the biases, subjectivity, and questionable editing policies which are apparent in the interviews.

The second part of the book, which focuses on black families at the poverty level is a well-argued refutation of the theses of Moynihan and Andrew Billingsley. Willie contends that "poverty is a function of inadequacies in the operations of social systems" (170), and the key to explaining the disadvantaged position of blacks is the racist perspective of the white population. Whereas he felt Moynihan's "culture of poverty" obscured the issue of racism, Willie advocates deliberate institutional changes to eliminate racial discrimination, thereby increasing economic opportunities for the black population.

Willie's perspective is assimilationist, perceiving a commonality of values between black and white, and arguing that the poverty imbalance *vis-a-vis* black society can be solved by creating equality of opportunity for attaining these shared values. In explaining the consequences of discrimination in the adaptation to society, Willie draws heavily on the structural functionalist theories of Robert K. Merton, whose "typology of modes of individual adaptation" is, he feels, applicable to the adaptations exhibited by the three socio-economic groups which comprise his study.

Although the author recognizes that *A New Look At Black Families* is not a definitive work, even its exploratory or seminal approach would have benefited from an attempt to fit the entire spectrum of black family life into the scheme. The "under-class" especially warranted fuller consideration, not only because of their numerical importance, "about one in every five blacks in [the] nation" (11), but also because of their importance in Moynihan's thesis.

Understanding the black family and its position in black society as a strong and viable institution requires a fuller historical perspective than Willie's present-oriented structural functionalism permits. Herbert Gutman's recent study, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1750-1925*, shows the strength and vitality of the black family both during and after slavery, and its importance to black society in the maintenance and development of Afro-American culture. The importance of this cultural heritage and its relation to contemporary black family structures should not be neglected.

As Willie recognizes, his findings are based on limited data, and consequently must be regarded as tentative. However *A New Look At Black Families* is an important contribution to the debate on black family structure by virtue of the stimulus given to further research by these challenging hypotheses.

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