Extended Kinship Relations in Black and White Families*

WILLIAM C. HAYS AND CHARLES H. MINDEL
Center for Research in Social Behavior,
Department of Sociology,
University of Missouri, Columbia

This study is an attempt to compare and explain the differences in extended family cohesion of black and white families. The black family is not approached as deviant or pathological, but from the view of a separate subculture within a pluralistic society. Comparisons were made in terms of both intensity and extensity of interaction of black and white families with their extended kin. Specific comparisons were made of contact and help patterns, number of kin living in the household, and salience of kin. It is shown that the extended kin network is a more salient structure for black families than it is for white families.

In his recent decade review of the sociology of the black family, Staples (1971) severely criticizes the view of the black family as deviant or pathological. From the “tangle of pathology” perspective the black family is seen as malfunctioning and as producing “socially deformed” individuals. This perspective is perhaps best illustrated by the now well-known “Moynihan Report” (Moynihan, 1965; Rainwater and Yancy, 1967), which was a central document in the controversy surrounding the existence, predominance, and causes of the consequences of the “matrifocal” black family (see also Frazier, 1939; Rainwater, 1964, 1966; Rodman, 1964; Valentine, 1968; Bernard, 1966). From this perspective, the two-parent family, typically with father as breadwinner and head, which is often used interchangeably with the term “white, middle-class family,” is seen as the “normal” or “healthy” type, and the standard by which other families are evaluated. The assumption, apparently, is that if a particular family structure does not approximate the dominant American model then that family form is somehow pathological. This outlook, in part, derives from the view that a particular type of family structure best serves the needs of an industrial society.

While it may be argued, as it has been by Parsons (1943) and Goode (1963), that a particular type of family structure, i.e., the “isolated nuclear family” or the “conjugal family,” is the most functional in societies that have reached a certain level of industrialization, it does not necessarily follow that this form best fits the needs of all groups or subcultures within that particular society. For example, Winch (1967, 1968) argues that as a result of discrimination the Jewish extended family becomes more important and more extensive than the extended family of other ethnic groups. Thus it would seem that a view of a society that is as large and diversified as the contemporary United States should be approached from a more pluralistic viewpoint. Assuming only one form of family structure as “normal” or “healthy” in analyzing families in various ethnic and racial minorities within this society may indeed lead us away from a proper understanding of their structure and function.

From a pluralistic perspective the family structures of any particular group can be analyzed only in terms of the particular culture which serves as a boundary for the types of behavior that are appropriate and meaningful. Since individuals from different subcultures operate in different social situations, the salient structures that they finally use in the formation of their families are likely also to be different. The differences in the predominant type of family structure for differing ethnic and minority groups, then, can be analyzed and understood best from this perspective.

The black individual is in a situation different from that of his white counterpart, and, because of this different situation, he is faced with a different set of salient group structures available as choices. The family structures that
are available to the black individual are the products of an historical process that has placed him in a relatively disadvantageous position. At the same time differences in social structures, such as those of the family, can be partially attributed to the continuing process of racial discrimination. Within the black subculture both the different systems of meaning and the systems of structures appear to be due in part if not entirely to the historical and continuing state of minority group status.

It is the intention of the authors to avoid a possibly ethnocentric description of the black family which is characterized in deviant or pathological terms. Rather we shall describe these structures as meaningful and pragmatic choices in terms of the black individual’s life situation. The situation of the black individual can be interpreted as one of semi-crisis vis à vis the overall society. For example, Billingsley (1968) argues that

Racism limits the viability of Negro families in hundreds of ways. It prevents the newborn child from having an equal chance of being born in a healthy condition and it severely restricts his opportunities of getting a first-rate education. Even if the child surmounts these obstacles, racism prevents him from having an equal access to jobs that maximize his abilities. Even if he gets a good job, it limits his opportunity of getting equal pay with white workers. It increases his chance of dying early, and prevents him from being buried in the cemetery of his choice. Thus, literally from the cradle to the grave, the Negro family is threatened by the specter of racism.

It has been pointed out in various research (Quarantelli, 1960; Drabek and Boggs, 1968; Schelsky, 1954) that in times of crisis individuals tend to rely upon the family as a source of material, social, and emotional support. Thus, the black family may in fact be surviving, as Billingsley states, “by adapting to the historical and contemporary social and economic conditions facing the Negro people” (1968:21). Whether or not this adaptation is “healthy” or “pathological” is disputable depending on what one cares to label as “normal.” However, as Adams (1970) has pointed out minority status tends to strengthen kin ties because of a need for “mutual aid and survival in a hostile environment.” Notwithstanding the improvement in the area of civil rights, the environment for most blacks is still more “hostile” than that of their white counterparts. The institutions that the white family might see as supportive, such as the police, city and other governmental agencies, the employment structure, the educational institutions, are often perceived as nonsupportive and exploitative by black families. If this is the case, there is a high probability that the family and its extensions would become more important to the black individual cut off from other forms of support that are meaningful to him. He should interact and depend on kin in place of some of the nonfamilial institutions that provide support to the white family. The family then, for such individuals, might be a more pervasive and encompassing structure meeting more needs and with more intensity than would be expected for white individuals.

Extended Kinship Relations:
Areas of Exploration

In the study to be reported, the extent to which blacks rely on their family and kin groups will be explored. In addition, the extent to which blacks differ from whites in their family patterns will be examined. We intend to demonstrate that the extended family in a number of ways offers a more salient structure for black families than for white families.

Extended family cohesion, we would argue, differs for blacks and whites in terms of the extensity and intensity of interaction and in terms of the salience of kin for family members. Intensity and extensity of interaction refers to differences in quality and quantity of interaction. Extensity implies a large variety of kin categories involved in help and interaction while intensity of interaction is a measure of its frequency.

The following are a set of working hypotheses which will be explored in the analysis to follow. They are illustrative of the various dimensions of extended family cohesion discussed above:

a. Black families have more contact with their kin than do white families.

b. Black families have more extended kin living in the same household than do white families.

c. Black families receive more help from kin in child care and rearing than do white families.

d. Black families have more frequent contact with a wider variety of kin than do white families.

e. Black families perceive their extended kin as more significant than do white families.

Research Design and Methodology

The data for this study are from a subsample of a larger study conducted in a middle-sized
Midwestern city in 1966. The original study was based on respondents selected from lists of seven nursery and preschool centers. A total of 395 parents were interviewed, 238 mothers, and 157 fathers. The information was gathered by interviews that took from six to eight hours for each respondent. The sample was not a probability sample.

This subsample consisted of 25 matched pairs of black families and white families. Six pairs of families were divorced women (12 respondents) and 19 pairs were sets of married husbands and wives who were living together (totaling 76 respondents).

The pairs were matched in terms of sex, socioeconomic status, and marital status. Whenever a choice of matching alternatives was available, the choice was made on a random basis. The matching helped to insure that race was the independent variable and that some of the other crucial factors were being properly controlled. Controlling for socioeconomic status, it is recognized, however, does not completely control for the general differences of the “black experience” (Billingsley, 1968). The status level was determined through the use of the Duncan’s (1961) Socioeconomic Index (SEI). Because the SEI was divided into deciles, a close match of socioeconomic status was possible. The distribution of the sample by socioeconomic status indicates that approximately 64 per cent of the white families and 64 per cent of the individually matched black families can be considered lower status while the remaining third of the sample are middle status.

An effort was made to control for the differential number of relatives of each black family as compared to each white family. A Wilcoxon matched-pairs signed-ranks test was performed on family size and was found to be insignificant. The mean number of relatives for black families was 25.4 and for white families 24.6.1

The problem of geographic mobility was taken into consideration in two different ways. The more mobile the family geographically, the less contact with kin should be expected, because of the dispersion of kin. Therefore, if the white families had a higher degree of mobility than did the black families, this might explain differences in kin interaction. Upon examination, however, the sample revealed that the black families were somewhat more geographically mobile than the white families, with 59.1 per cent of the black families having lived in the city for less than 11 years as compared to the white families where 47.8 per cent had arrived as recently as the last 11 years. The second way of considering the problem of geographic mobility was to ascertain the number of relatives that presently lived in the city.

A test of significance was again done on the matched pairs and found to be insignificant. The mean number of relatives in the city for black families was 10.64 and for white families it was 10.20. It was concluded then that the black families were slightly more geographically mobile and had slightly more kin present in the city, although not significantly so in either case.

Respondents provided information on what relatives were seen once a week or more, how often relatives helped with the care of the children, what relatives lived with the family, and the salience of relatives. The salience of relatives was the summated score on two Likert-scaled items. The first was “Do you respect his advice?” and the second was “What he thinks of me is important to me.” The respondents were carefully encouraged to cite all significant relatives—including siblings, parents, in-laws, aunts, uncles, cousins, grandparents, and any other relatives that were considered important.

Findings

If the black family relies more heavily upon extended kin than do white families, it would be expected that the number of kin seen at least once a week would be higher for black families, and that the range of kin seen would be greater for black families. Table 1 indicates that the mean number of relatives seen is higher for black families than for white families in all categories except parents. In the case of black families, nonparental kin (except for cousins) are seen in greater numbers than parents whereas among the white families the parents are seen more often. It is also indicated that the total mean number of relatives seen at least once a week for all categories is greater for the black families (4.08) than the white families (2.00). It would appear that thus far the argument that black families have a more extensive and intensive kin network is supported.

The question of how often the relatives help
TABLE 1. MEAN NUMBER OF RELATIVES SEEN ONCE A WEEK BY RACE OF FAMILIES AND TYPE OF RELATIVES SEEN

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Relative</th>
<th>Mean Number of Relatives Seen</th>
<th>Black Families (N = 25)</th>
<th>White Families (N = 25)</th>
<th>Significance Level* of Differences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Parents</td>
<td>0.68</td>
<td>0.96</td>
<td>ns</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Siblings</td>
<td>2.12</td>
<td>0.84</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondary (Aunts, Uncles, Grandparents)</td>
<td>0.84</td>
<td>0.16</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cousins</td>
<td>0.44</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All Relatives</td>
<td>4.08</td>
<td>2.00</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Significance levels are based on results of the Wilcoxon matched-pairs signed-ranks test, all one-tailed tests and based on 25 matched-pairs.

TABLE 2. HOW OFTEN RELATIVES HELP WITH THE CARE OF CHILDREN BY RACE OF FAMILIES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>How Often Relative Helps</th>
<th>Mean Number of Relatives Who Help</th>
<th>Black Families (N = 25)</th>
<th>White Families (N = 25)</th>
<th>Significance Level* of Differences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Every day or several times a week</td>
<td>0.96</td>
<td>0.28</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Once a week or several times a month</td>
<td>0.84</td>
<td>0.20</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Once a month or less</td>
<td>1.12</td>
<td>1.32</td>
<td>ns</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Significance levels are based on results of the Wilcoxon matched-pairs signed-ranks test, all one-tailed tests and based on 25 matched-pairs.

with child care was used to determine help patterns. Help with child care would seem to be particularly useful because it includes at least two major components: practical considerations such as taking care of children to allow for the wife's employment, and emotional factors such as affection and socializing relationships with the child. This type of help we believe is as good a measure of help patterns as some other possible indicator such as monetary aid in time of crisis for which we had no reliable information.

Table 2 indicates that the mean number of relatives who help is significantly larger in the two categories where the frequency of help is greater. In the category of the relatives helping once a month or less, the black families' mean number of relatives is slightly lower (1.12) than the white families (1.32), but not significantly so. However, for the categories of every day or several times a week and once a week or several times a month the mean score of relatives who help is significantly different. Not only do more relatives help the black families with child care, but they help more often. The hypothesis that black families receive more help than do white families would seem to be supported both in terms of the frequency of help received by extended kin.

If extended kin are more important for black families than for white families it might be expected that a greater number of kin might live in the same household of the black families. Table 3 indicates several important findings. First, significantly more black families have kin other than their own children living in their home.

TABLE 3. NUMBER OF RELATIVES LIVING WITH FAMILIES OTHER THAN OWN CHILDREN BY RACE AND TYPE OF RELATIVE

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Relative</th>
<th>Black Families N %</th>
<th>White Families N %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Parents</td>
<td>0 0</td>
<td>1 50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Siblings</td>
<td>6 37.5</td>
<td>1 50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grandchildren</td>
<td>2 12.5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nieces and Nephews</td>
<td>6 37.5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aunts</td>
<td>1 6.25</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brother's Wife</td>
<td>1 6.25</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>16 100.0</td>
<td>2 100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Number of Families with Relatives Living at Home 7 1*

*Wilcoxon matched-pairs signed-ranks test p=.0078.
household than do white families. Twenty-eight per cent of the black families have kin living with them as opposed to four per cent of the white families (i.e., one family). Second, is the variety of kin found in the households. Curiously, the black families do not have any parents living with them, not even a mother, which is significant in light of the supposedly matrifocal character of the black family. Interestingly enough, it is one white family that has a parent living at home with the respondent. The relatives who are living with the respondents tend to fall into two major categories: siblings and children (consisting of grandchildren and nieces and nephews). Clearly the data suggest that the black family has assumed a childrearing function as reflected in the number of children living with them. In addition there appears to be a fairly high degree of sibling solidarity in evidence as measured by the close contact of siblings.

Finally, we have argued that extended kin are more salient for black families than for white families. Table 4 indicates the mean salience score for selected categories of kin.

We find that black families perceive their kin as more important in all categories than do the white families with the exception once again of the parents. The recurring importance of the parents for white families seems to indicate that a lineal, nuclear model is more appropriate to white families than is to blacks. The kinship system of white families appears to be organized around the parent-child relationship to a much greater degree than it is among the black families. The hypothesis that black families perceive their kin as more salient than white families thus appears largely upheld.

**Discussion**

This exploratory study indicates that in a matched sample of 25 black and white families the kin interaction of the black families is quite different from that of the white families, even when variables such as socioeconomic status, geographical mobility, marital status, and family size are controlled. While the sample was not randomly selected and therefore generalization to the total population is impossible, important clues about the differences between black and white families appear to have been indicated.

Black families interacted with extended kin more and perceived them as more significant. The black families were shown to interact with more of the extended kin in all categories of kinship except parents than did the white families. In addition, the black families perceived a broader range of their extended kin as more significant than did the white families. This interaction and higher evaluation of kin would indicate that extended family cohesion is more important for black than for white families.

Black families also received more help from more of their extended kin in child care and to get this type of help more often than whites. This would seem to indicate that the extended kin would be much more likely to play an important role in the socialization of the child in black families than is the case with white families, and this would tend to bind the kin network more tightly together for black families than for white families.

The number and type of relatives who live in the household was shown to be greater and more diversified for the black compared to the white families. This would, again, seem to indicate a much stronger binding together of the black kin network as compared to that of the whites, and this appears especially true with respect to sibling solidarity.

The findings in this study tend to support a view of the black extended family as a supportive structure which acts as a source of aid and comfort in what externally can be characterized as a somewhat hostile environment. We would reiterate our earlier statement that this structure represents a meaningful and

**Table 4. Salience of Relatives by Race of Families and Type of Relative**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Relative</th>
<th>Black Families Mean Salience Score</th>
<th>White Families Mean Salience Score</th>
<th>No. of Families</th>
<th>Significance Level*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Parents</td>
<td>5.62</td>
<td>5.63</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>ns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Siblings</td>
<td>6.19</td>
<td>5.64</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondary (Aunts, Uncles, Grandparents)</td>
<td>5.77</td>
<td>5.27</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cousins</td>
<td>5.70</td>
<td>5.21</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>.04</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Significance levels are based on results of the Wilcoxon matched-pairs signed-ranks test, all one-tailed tests and based on 25 matched-pairs.
pragmatic choice as determined by the black individual's life situation. These findings tend to reaffirm earlier research concerning the tendencies of individuals to rely more heavily on the family as a source of material, social, and emotional support in times of crisis.

Many questions, of course, remain unanswered by this study; most particularly is one that has relevance to the controversy surrounding the "pathological" view versus "pluralistic" or subcultural view of the black family alluded to in the beginning of this paper. We might, for example, ask whether this apparently supportive structure of the black families is related to "pathology" in the family (if it is at all possible to use this term outside of its many ethnocentric biases). Possibly those families which have the most supportive extended kin networks are the least likely to evidence family "pathologies" of the types suggested by Moynihan and others. On the other hand, the "pathologies" identified by certain researchers are possibly being ameliorated or "cured" through the existence of strong extended family structures. Typical evidence of family "pathology" is usually concerned with the breakdown of nuclear family relations most typically between husband and wife. It is worth suggesting that strong extended family ties might correct the consequences induced by this nuclear family disruption.

Future research should explore the relationships between extended family cohesion and such variables as marital stability and adjustment. Also, and perhaps equally important since scholars of the "pathology" view tend to see cyclical patterns through generations, the relationship between extended kinship relations and the well-being of children should be examined. Such areas as achievement motivation, emotional health, and aspirations to name but a few of the crucial variables should be explored. It is worth suggesting that strong extended family ties might correct the consequences induced by this nuclear family disruption.

This report has not investigated these areas. It has, however, found that black families have apparently developed a more pervasive and encompassing family structure which meets more needs with more intensity than was found among white families.

REFERENCES
Winch, Robert F. 1968 "Some observations on extended familism