

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

---

Sociology Department, Faculty Publications

Sociology, Department of

---

February 1973

# Black Family Structures and Functions: An Empirical Examination of Some Suggestions Made by Billingsley

J. Allen Williams Jr.

*University of Nebraska-Lincoln*, [jwilliams2@unl.edu](mailto:jwilliams2@unl.edu)

Robert Stockton

*University of Nebraska-Lincoln*

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/sociologyfacpub>



Part of the [Sociology Commons](#)

---

Williams, J. Allen Jr. and Stockton, Robert, "Black Family Structures and Functions: An Empirical Examination of Some Suggestions Made by Billingsley" (1973). *Sociology Department, Faculty Publications*. 6.

<http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/sociologyfacpub/6>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Sociology, Department of at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Sociology Department, Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

The data presented in this report were collected as part of a larger study supported by the US Department of Housing and Urban Development. The authors wish to express their appreciation to Harry J. Crockett for his useful comments based on an earlier version of this manuscript. Any errors in the report are the responsibility of the investigators.

## Black Family Structures and Functions: An Empirical Examination of Some Suggestions Made by Billingsley

J. Allen Williams, Jr., and Robert Stockton

Department of Sociology, University of Nebraska–Lincoln

### Abstract

Andrew Billingsley in *Black Families in White America* has criticized much of the previous research on the black family, saying that social scientists have ignored the structural variation among families and have focused on a very limited number of family functions. To correct what he believes to be a distorted picture of the black family, he has suggested a typology of family structures and a large number of family functions which should be taken into consideration. This paper, based upon data collected from 321 black households, uses Billingsley's typology to examine the association between family structures and functions. It is concluded that a few modifications of the typology would expand its utility, that more detailed information about family structure does reduce the chances of distortion and contribute to greater understanding, and that Billingsley may have overemphasized the capacity of many black families to deal with their functional problems.

Social science is in a “revisionist period” regarding black Americans and a primary focus of the controversy is centered on the black family. With a few outstanding exceptions such as Frazier's (1939) monumental work and reports from community studies (Dollard, 1937; Davis *et al.*, 1941; Drake and Cayton, 1945), much of the research on the black family has been directed at “problem” families and a major emphasis has been placed on the female-headed household. Moynihan's (1965) report appears to have played an important role in touching off the current controversy (Rainwater and Yancey, 1967). Since 1965 a large number of articles highly critical of the earlier studies have appeared (Hyman and Reed, 1969; Staples, 1970; TenHouten, 1970; Scanzoni, 1971). Notable among the critical evaluations of previous research is an influential book by Andrew Billingsley (1968), *Black Families in White America*. The purpose of the present paper is to provide findings from an empirical examination of some of the suggestions made by Billingsley in this important work.

Billingsley maintains that one of the major shortcomings of previous research has been the failure to recognize the many variations in structures among black families. To help in correcting this problem, he suggests three general categories of families—nu-

clear, extended, and augmented—which are then subdivided into twelve types of family structure. The types are based on whether a family has a married couple or a single parent, the presence or absence of children, whether other relatives live with the family, and whether unrelated persons live with the family and function as family members. After indicating that many structures are possible and demonstrating their existence in the black community, Billingsley (1968:21) concludes that:

In every Negro neighborhood of any size in the country, a wide variety of family structures will be represented. This range and variety does not suggest, as some commentaries hold, that the Negro family is falling apart, but rather that these families are fully capable of surviving by adapting to the historical and contemporary social and economic conditions facing the Negro people.

Billingsley also suggests that social scientists have tended to focus on a limited number of family functions and typically the emphasis has been on the manner in which families are *not* functioning adequately. Drawing from Parsons and Bales (1955), he offers a framework which he believes will provide a broader and less distorted analysis. Functions are classified as instrumental, expressive, and instrumental-expressive. Instrumental functions are those

which pertain to relations of the family to its external environment. Included among instrumental family functions are having stable employment, adequate shelter, formal education, sufficient income, and proper health care. Expressive functions are those related to the "internal" affairs of the family. Functions of this type include maintaining a sense of belonging, self-worth, companionship, and good marital adjustment. Instrumental-expressive family functions, according to Billingsley, are those which involve an "inextricable mixture of instrumental and expressive qualities." He relates instrumental-expressive functions primarily to sex, reproduction, and childrearing and places his emphasis on the successful socialization of the child.

Although Billingsley suggests that the effective execution of family functions depends in part on the type of family structure, he does not systematically relate types of structures to the performance of the functions. At one point he implies that the inability to fulfill certain functions leads to restructuring the family so that the functions will be performed. Thus, the large variety of black family structures demonstrates the adaptive capacity of black people to deal effectively with their problems. On the other hand, Billingsley (1968:22) states that:

These functions are highly interrelated with each other, and their effective execution depends not only on the structure of the family, but also on the structure of the society and the place of the family in that social structure.

Apparently, he is suggesting that the family structure may be both an independent and a dependent variable in relation to the fulfillment of functions and that external conditions (*e.g.*, the structure of the society) also may play an important role in determining the success or failure of a family in meeting its needs. The goal of the present study was to examine the extent to which the various structures suggested by Billingsley serve to differentiate the performance of the different family functions. Billingsley has suggested that many studies have failed to recognize the large variety of black family structures and have focused on a limited number of functions. The result has been the development of a distorted picture of the black family. This study uses Billingsley's classification of family structures and examines the associations between structural types and a number of different functions. Following an examination of the findings recommendations are made regarding both the structural typology and the utility of this approach toward developing an understanding of the black family.

## **The Sample and Data Collecting Procedures**

The sample consists of 321 out of 324 black households living in one neighborhood of a large Southwestern city. This is 99.1 per cent of all the black households in the neighborhood and 97 per cent of all of the households. There were six Chicano households and one Anglo household living in the area. Thus, this is an area sample conforming exactly to Billingsley's (1968:21) suggestion that "In every Negro neighborhood of any size in the country, a wide variety of family structures will be represented." There has been a trend in the city in recent years for higher income black families to move to new residential areas on the periphery of the ghetto. Consequently, there is probably a larger proportion of working- and lower-class households in the sample than in the entire population of black households in the city. However, the neighborhood studied is not believed to be unlike other neighborhoods in the city's ghetto. A random sample of 100 households was drawn from the entire ghetto area and no socioeconomic differences were found between this sample and the neighborhood sample.

Household was generally defined as any individual or group of individuals who live and eat together in the same dwelling unit. However, this definition was used only as a focal point. For example, a person was not excluded as a household member if he considered himself and was considered by the others as a member of the family but could not ordinarily eat with them. The purpose of defining household in this way was to exclude individuals who rented a room or apartment in a house, but who were not functional members of the household from whom they rented.

An information interview was used as the data collecting instrument. Attempts to assure response validity included pretesting the schedule, intensive interviewer training (often lasting for several weeks), using only black interviewers, call-backs when information was not clear, duplicate interviews on selected households, and separate interviews with two adult members of selected households to compare responses. Parents were interviewed in households containing children.

## **Findings**

### *Household Structures*

The information presented in Table 1 shows the types of structures found in the neighborhood stud-

**Table 1.** Billingsley's Typology of Family Structures

Types of Family	Household Head			Other Household Members			Sample Frequency	Per cent of all Households	Per cent of Sample Households in Billingsley's Typology
	Husband & Wife	Single Parent	Children	Other Relatives	Non-relatives				
<b>Nuclear Families</b>									
Incipient Simple	X						50	15.6	26.0
Attenuated Extended Families	X	X	X				63	19.6	32.8
Incipient Simple	X		X	X			41	12.8	21.3
<b>Extended Families</b>									
Incipient Simple	X		X	X			15	4.7	7.8
Attenuated	X	X	X	X			4	1.2	2.1
Augmented Families			X				16	5.0	8.3
<b>Augmented Families</b>									
Incipient	X					X	2	0.6	1.0
Incipient Extended	X			X		X	0	0.0	0.0
Nuclear	X		X			X	0	0.0	0.0
Nuclear Extended	X		X	X		X	0	0.0	0.0
Attenuated		X	X			X	1	0.3	0.5
Attenuated Extended		X	X	X		X	0	0.0	0.0
									100.0
<b>Household Types Not Included in Billingsley's Typology</b>									
Widowed female living alone								40	12.5
Separated or divorced female living alone							15	4.7	
Single female living alone							6	1.9	
Widowed male living alone							4	1.2	
Separated or divorced male living alone							16	5.0	
Single male living alone							12	3.7	
Single male living with nonrelatives							16	5.0	
Single female living with nonrelatives							3	0.9	
Single male living with relatives							1	1	0.3
Single female living with relatives							16	5.0	
									100.0

ied. As can be seen, the structural types are defined in the table by the use of X's in the appropriate categories. For example, the incipient nuclear family contains only a husband and wife, the simple nuclear family contains a husband and wife and one or more children, and the attenuated nuclear family contains a single parent and one or more children.

The very small number of augmented families in the sample may be partly a result of the definition of household which was used. Billingsley expresses the view that unrelated persons often exert major influences in the organization of black families. Interviewers in the present study were sensitive to this possibility and made every effort to discover whether a particular nonrelative had any kind of "family" relationship with the other members of the household. In only three cases were unrelated individuals found to be functioning as members of the family. The most common situation found was an elderly woman renting one or more rooms to unrelated individuals. These individuals had very little contact at all with their landladies.

As can be seen from Table 1, 40.2 per cent of the households could not be classified using Billingsley's typology. This represents 18.1 per cent of all of the people in the sample. The classification scheme is concerned with family types and most definitions of the family would not include the large majority of these households. Nevertheless, 17 of these households involve a person living with one or more relatives, e.g., sisters living together, a widowed female caring for her nephew. Structures like these might be defined as families but they cannot be classified in the typology. Further, it is of more than passing interest to point out that a fairly sizable number of people living in the neighborhood do not live in family structures.

### *Family Functions*

Since there were few or no cases in seven of the structural categories (the simple extended type and all of the augmented types), an examination of the association between structure and function could not be done for these types. Functions were divided into instrumental, expressive, and instrumental-expressive and the functions chosen for measurement are those suggested by Billingsley.

*Instrumental functions.* The instrumental functions selected for examination are education, job stability, income, housing, and health care.

Although education and job stability are men-

tioned by Billingsley, it is reasonably clear that these are indicators of the family's resources for fulfilling functions—not indicators of fulfillment. Occupation was not used as an indicator of job stability because of the possible ambiguity of the categories. For example, a job title, e.g., porter, does not indicate whether the person is regularly employed or the number of hours he works per week. Thus, job stability was indexed by whether the household head had full-time employment, i.e., forty or more hours per week, and whether he or she had been employed in the same position for at least two years.

The income function refers to the financial security of the family. An index was constructed of the amount of money per family member per week. The cut-off point was selected at \$20 or more per week. This would provide a four-person family with a minimum of \$4,160 a year, a point slightly above the OEO poverty level for the city from which the sample was drawn. In addition, respondents were asked how much money they normally had left each month after paying bills and buying food. The amount of money per family member is a good indicator of a family's financial situation, but it is possible for a family to have overextended itself in various ways, e.g., large credit payments, high rent. Thus, adding the amount of money left after necessary expenses provides a check for the possible bias of the other measure.

Interviewers were trained to assess the condition of the dwelling unit as a measure of housing adequacy. Dwelling units were classified as above average, sound, deteriorating, or dilapidated. The interviewers were not trained appraisers, but their judgments compared favorably with those made by experts in an urban renewal area. Whereas the urban renewal agency classified 56.0 per cent of the houses substandard, interviewers classified 53.6 per cent substandard.

Health care was measured by whether family members had received a general medical checkup during the past year.

The findings regarding the fulfillment of instrumental family functions by structural types are presented in Table 2.

The somewhat smaller percentages with a high school diploma and having full-time employment among the two incipient types, compared with the simple nuclear type, are largely brought about by the higher percentages of older people in the incipient family categories. Thirty per cent of the household heads in the incipient nuclear and 20 per cent in the

incipient extended types are 65 years of age or older. Only 6.7 per cent of the heads in the simple nuclear type are 65 or above. Older people are less likely to have completed high school and are more likely to have either retired from work or to have moved to part-time work. With these two exceptions, the two incipient and the simple nuclear families are not very dissimilar from each other.

In terms of education, income, job stability, and health care, the two attenuated types are fairly similar to each other. Compared with the other structural types they have smaller percentages fulfilling these functions at the levels used in this study. In the case of the attenuated extended family, the presence of other relatives in the household may serve to lower the amount of income per family member compared to the attenuated nuclear family. Having better housing and less money per member in the attenuated extended family may appear contradictory. Possible light is shed on this by examining the composition of this type of family. In all but one case, the attenuated extended families in this sample are composed of a parent with a daughter who has one or more children. Typically, a woman and her children are living in the home of the woman's mother. The parent often has better housing than the woman might have been able to obtain on her own.

Overall, it would seem that the most salient factor differentiating these structural types by functional performance is the presence of both a husband and wife in the household.

*Expressive functions.* The expressive functions are more difficult to measure than the instrumental ones. For the most part, the fulfillment of an expressive function is subjective and the investigator must rely on the attitude expressed by the respondent. Since, in most cases, only one respondent in a household was interviewed, there is no way of being sure that other members would have expressed the same attitudes. Whenever possible, these functions were indexed by measures which have been used in previous research and which already have some demonstrated degree of validity. The expressive functions chosen for examination are belonging, self-worth, adjustment to the marriage role, the companionship of the husband and wife, and family cohesion.

Belonging is measured by the social isolation subscale of alienation developed by Dean (1961). According to Dean, social isolation involves a feeling of separation from the group or of isolation from group standards. Thus, low scores on the social isolation scale should reflect a feeling of belonging to the group and contact with group standards. In the present study, scores below the midpoint of the range of the scale are defined as low.

**Table 2.** Family Structures by Instrumental Functions

Instrumental Functions	Types of Family									
	Nuclear Incipient		Nuclear Simple		Nuclear Attenuated		Extended Incipient		Extended Attenuated	
	%	N*	%	N*	%	N*	%	N*	%	N*
Education										
Household head has 12 or more years of education	34.0	(47)	50.0	(60)	22.0	(41)	33.3	(15)	20.0	(15)
Job Stability										
Household head employed 40 or more hours per week	54.0	(50)	79.4	(63)	46.3	(41)	60.0	(15)	43.8	(16)
Household head has had same job for 2 or more years	46.0	(50)	69.8	(63)	46.3	(41)	60.0	(15)	43.8	(16)
Income										
Family has \$20 or more per member per week	57.1	(49)	57.9	(57)	24.4	(41)	60.0	(15)	6.2	(16)
Family has \$50 or more per month after necessary expenses	32.0	(50)	30.2	(63)	14.6	(41)	46.7	(15)	12.5	(16)
Housing										
Standard housing, neither deteriorating nor delapidated	64.0	(50)	58.1	(62)	28.9	(38)	50.0	(14)	43.8	(16)
Health Care										
All members of family have had checkup in past year	24.0	(45)	22.2	(61)	9.8	(38)	13.2	(14)	6.3	(16)

\* N is the number of cases on which each percentage is based.

Self-worth is measured by the self-esteem scale developed by Rosenberg (1965). The scale consists of ten items which are then collapsed into six scores using a Guttman scale. High self-esteem is measured in the present study as scores of five or six, the two highest scores.

Adjustment to the marriage role is measured by using the three dimensions of role adjustment suggested by Gurin *et al.* (1960). The dimensions are problems in the role, a feeling of adequacy in performing the role, and happiness or satisfaction. The same questions used by Gurin *et al.* to measure adjustment to the marriage role were used in this study.

Billingsley (1968:25) suggests that "It is not at all uncommon for Negro men to engage in expressive functions with respect to the maintenance of family solidarity and to help with child rearing and household tasks." This seems to be at the core of what he means by the "provision of companionship." Companionship was indexed by determining whether the husband helps his wife with domestic chores, financial decisions, planning family celebrations, and with caring for the children.

Family cohesion was measured by asking the respondent, "Does your family usually do things together as a family or do you each have your own friends that you do things with?" Those answering "almost always do things as a family" were considered to have higher family cohesion than those saying "sometimes," "rarely," or "never."

Findings regarding the association between family structure and the fulfillment of expressive functions are presented in Table 3.

As can be seen, there is little difference among the nuclear family types in the percentages scoring low on the social isolation scale. There may be a greater likelihood for persons in the incipient extended family to satisfy their need for belonging. Perhaps the presence of other relatives in the household aids in the fulfillment of this function. However, if this is true, it seems clear that certain types of extended families are exceptions. The attenuated extended family appears to be associated with the greatest sense of social isolation. Respondents in attenuated extended families have the smallest percentage scoring high on the self-esteem scale. This

**Table 3.** Family Structures by Expressive Functions

Expressive Functions	Types of Family									
	Nuclear Incipient		Nuclear Simple		Nuclear Attenuated		Extended Incipient		Extended Attenuated	
	%	N*	%	N*	%	N*	%	N*	%	N*
Belonging										
Respondents scoring "low" on social isolation scale	52.2	(46)	50.9	(55)	53.8	(39)	78.6	(14)	40.0	(15)
Self-worth										
Respondents scoring "high" on self-esteem scale	75.5	(49)	65.5	(61)	61.5	(39)	60.0	(15)	53.3	(15)
Adjustment to Marriage Role										
Respondents reporting no problems in marriage	75.0	(44)	54.5	(55)	—	—	58.4	(12)	—	—
Respondents reporting no doubts about being a good spouse	80.9	(47)	67.8	(55)	—	—	69.2	(13)	—	—
Respondents reporting being very happy with marriage	56.3	(48)	52.5	(59)	—	—	54.5	(11)	—	—
Husband-Wife Companionship										
Husband helps with domestic chores	37.5	(48)	28.3	(60)	—	—	23.1	(13)	—	—
Husband helps with financial decisions	79.2	(48)	80.0	(60)	—	—	61.5	(13)	—	—
Husband helps with planning family celebrations	83.3	(48)	88.3	(60)	—	—	76.9	(13)	—	—
Husband helps care for children	—	—	55.9	(59)	—	—	36.4	(11)	—	—
Family Cohesion										
Respondents reporting "Almost always do things as a family"	84.1	(44)	77.6	(58)	41.7	(36)	69.2	(13)	37.5	(16)

\*N is the number of cases on which percentage is based

finding, along with the finding that this structure has the largest percentage scoring high on social isolation, suggests that the attenuated extended family is the least functional in fulfilling expressive needs among the types being examined. As mentioned, in this sample the attenuated extended family typically is a three-generation household with a grandparent, a parent, and one or more children. Since the attenuated nuclear family appears to be no less able to fulfill these expressive functions than the types having a husband and wife, it would seem that the absence of a spouse is not the explanatory variable. Further, the attenuated extended family is as proficient in fulfilling the instrumental functions as the attenuated nuclear family. Perhaps there is a difference between parents who choose to live with their parents (assuming they have a choice) and those who choose to live separately. A more likely explanation, in the opinion of the investigators, is that the attenuated extended structure has a greater potential for interpersonal conflict than the attenuated nuclear family. For example, in the attenuated extended family, of the type found in this study, there is the potential for conflict between the parent and the grandparent (typically the parent's mother) over the care and socialization of the children. Also, it is possible that the elder parent may make her child feel guilty over having had a child out of wedlock (four of the cases) or for having been divorced or separated (the rest of the cases). Conflict of this sort could result in lowered self-esteem and a feeling of social isolation.

By definition, the attenuated families cannot fulfill the expressive function of good marital adjustment. According to the findings for the other family types, an absence of marital problems and a feeling of adequacy as a spouse are more likely to be fulfilled in the incipient nuclear family whereas the simple nuclear and the incipient extended families are similar to each other. There does not appear to be any difference among the three types in happiness with the marriage. Since the simple nuclear family category includes a much larger percentage of young married couples and since children are present, one might expect the parents to be more likely to have problems and self-doubts about their marriage roles. The incipient extended family has nearly as high a percentage of elderly married couples as the incipient nuclear family and, of course, neither of these types have children in the household. Further, these two types are about equally proficient in fulfilling instrumental functions. Thus, the only obvious difference which might account for the higher percentage having marital problems and self-doubts about

adequacy as a spouse in the incipient extended family is the presence of other relatives in the household. Some additional support for this suggestion comes from an examination of the findings regarding companionship.

Inspection of the percentages reporting that the husband helps his wife in selected family tasks indicates that the husband may play a less active family role in the incipient extended family. This does not mean that the tasks are not being performed in these families, but only that the husband is less likely to have a part in doing them. It is possible that the other relatives in the incipient extended family make it less necessary for the husband to help. However, it also is possible that the presence of other relatives (typically the wife's relatives in this sample) serves to reduce the husband's decision-making power in the family. If so, this may play an important part in the higher percentages in this type of family who report marital problems and a feeling of inadequacy as a spouse.

The percentages high on family cohesion are the largest among the structural types having both a husband and wife in the family. One might expect the man or woman in the attenuated family to be more likely to have friends outside the home than in families containing other adults in the household. Doing things with persons who are not family members may be necessary for the fulfillment of the psychological needs of the adult in the attenuated household. However, apparently the children are generally excluded from these activities and this may have consequences for the fulfillment of certain instrumental-expressive functions. Among the nonattenuated families, the incipient extended type has a smaller percentage of families who do things together. Perhaps this is related to the less active family role of the husband.

*Instrumental-expressive functions.* Among the instrumental-expressive functions, Billingsley stresses the successful socialization of children. Indicators of the fulfillment of this function chosen for use in this study are the education of the children, adjustment to the parent role, and the mental health of the children.

Four indicators of the potential success of formal education of the children were chosen. First, parents were asked, "If you had your wish, about how much school would you like your children to have?" After a parent had answered this question, he or she was asked, "Do you expect that they will actually get that?" This provides a measure of both parental aspirations for their children's education and their educational expectations for their children. Third, parents were asked whether their children were having



any problems in school. School-related problems were measured by asking parents, "What sorts of problems, if any, do your children have in regard to their teachers, school officials, or just the school in general?" Common responses included such things as the child refusing to study, not liking school, not doing satisfactory work, and obedience problems. Finally, parents were asked whether any of their children had ever failed a grade in school.

Adjustment to the parent role was measured by using the three dimensions of parental role adjustment suggested by Gurin *et al.* (1960). These include whether the parent perceives life being changed positively, negatively, or not at all from having children, whether the parent reports having problems with the children, and the parent's feeling of adequacy as a parent. The same questions used by Gurin *et al.* to measure adjustment to the parent role were used in this study.

Mental health was measured by a checklist of 21 items developed by Glidewell *et al.* (1957). The list contains items believed to be symptomatic of behavior disorders. Glidewell and his associates concluded that an interview in the home of the child's parents provided reliable results when checked against the opinions of school teachers, psychiatric social workers, and a psychiatric team in a Child Guidance Clinic. Their general conclusion for children between the ages of 6 and 12 was that those

having three or more symptoms were likely to be emotionally disturbed. In the absence of an independent measure of maladjustment in the present study, there is no way of being certain that reported symptoms have the same meaning for black children. In the case of the attenuated extended family, in this study, the children being discussed are the grandchildren of the household head, but the information about the child was obtained from the child's parent. For this measurement, the analysis includes only one child between the ages of 6 and 12 per family. For each family having more than one child in this age range, one was randomly selected. This procedure was used to give equal weight to each family.

The findings regarding the fulfillment of instrumental-expressive functions by family structure are presented in Table 4. As can be seen from the table, for the three types of families having young children, approximately 90 per cent of parents in each type hope that their children will attain a college degree. However, somewhat smaller percentages of parents in attenuated families actually expect their children to attain the level of education which they desire for them. Nevertheless, the percentages for all three types are quite high and there is not a great deal of difference among them.

On the other hand, a considerably larger percentage of parents in simple nuclear families than in the

**Table 4.** Family Structures by Instrumental-Expressive Functions

Instrumental-Expressive Functions	Types of Family					
	Nuclear Simple		Nuclear Attenuated		Extended Attenuated	
	%	N*	%	N*	%	N*
Education of the Children						
Parents want a college education for children	91.5	(59)	89.7	(39)	90.0	(13)
Parents expect children to attain level of education desired for them	91.5	(59)	84.6	(39)	84.6	(13)
Parents reporting children having no problems in school	83.7	(44)	57.7	(26)	58.3	(12)
Parents reporting no child has failed a grade in school	72.7	(44)	61.5	(26)	66.7	(12)
Adjustment to Parent Role						
Parents reporting child has changed life in a positive way	46.6	(58)	15.0	(40)	15.4	(13)
Parents reporting no doubts about being a good parent	63.2	(57)	44.7	(38)	23.1	(13)
Parents reporting no problems with children	51.7	(58)	15.8	(38)	38.5	(13)
Mental Health of Children						
Parents reporting less than three symptoms of behavior disorder	58.3	(36)	47.6	(21)	12.5	(8)

\*N is the number of cases on which percentage is based

attenuated types report that their children are not having problems with school and a somewhat higher percentage say that none of their children have failed a grade in school.

A larger percentage of parents in the simple nuclear family report favorable adjustment to the parent role than do parents in attenuated families. Looking only at the attenuated families, it appears that parents in the attenuated nuclear family are more likely to report having problems with their children whereas parents in the attenuated extended families are more likely to have doubts about their adequacy as parents. About the same percentages in the attenuated types say that their lives have either not been changed or have been changed negatively as a result of having children.

The simple nuclear family has a larger percentage of children with fewer than three symptoms of behavior disorder than the attenuated types. The most striking finding, however, is the large percentage of children in attenuated extended families who would be classified as emotionally disturbed compared with both the simple and attenuated nuclear families.

In general, the attenuated families in this sample do not appear to be fulfilling the instrumental-expressive functions as well as the simple nuclear family. The two attenuated types do not appear to be very different from each other in fulfilling these functions except that a much larger percentage of children in attenuated extended families are reported to have three or more symptoms of behavior disorder. The feelings of parental inadequacy and the symptoms of the young children in the attenuated extended family may result from the structural characteristics of this type of family found in this sample. As mentioned above, a three-generation family of the sort found may have a greater potential for interpersonal conflict. If, for example, the grandparent and the parent disagree about the socialization of the children, both could develop feelings of parental inadequacy and the conflict between the two could produce strains which result in or are expressed as symptoms of behavior disorder by the child.

### Conclusions

Classification of families by their structural characteristics has a long history in anthropology and sociology. Billingsley has simply urged researchers engaged in the study of black Americans to be more sensitive to the importance of structural characteristics when reaching conclusions about black fami-

lies. Billingsley's typology of family structures provides considerably more precision than has been used in most research reports. However, the present study has shown that a few minor modifications of the typology are in order. First, the typology requires that a household head must either have a spouse and/or be a parent. There are groups of related individuals living together who meet neither of these criteria, e.g., siblings living together, a child living with an aunt or grandparent. Since a basic purpose of the classification scheme is to allow for an examination of the fulfilling of functions within a structural context, it would be a mistake to exclude certain groups of people from that analysis. Thus, for example, consideration might be given to changing the heading "single parent" in the typology to "single parent or surrogate." Children living with individuals other than a parent could then be included. Also, some consideration might be given to adding another category under household head where the head is neither married nor a parent or surrogate parent. Second, even if modifications in the typology were made so that all groups of related individuals living together could be included, there is still the problem of individuals living alone and individuals living with unrelated individuals. While these categories of people may not meet the definitional criteria of a "family," it is clear that these persons do live within social structures and have biological, psychological, and social needs. Any research directed toward developing an understanding of the conditions which hinder and facilitate the fulfillment of functional requirements within communities must include such persons whether or not they live in "families."

At the present time, few public documents provide enough information about family composition to use Billingsley's typology of family structures. Further, investigators using survey research methods may encounter some rather difficult sampling problems if they wish to include a sufficient number of cases for analysis within the family categories. Extension of public data-collecting procedures and some procedures (e.g., stratified sampling based on family structural characteristics) in survey research will almost certainly require greater effort and expense. On the other hand, if less detailed classification systems produce a badly distorted picture of the black family, or of any family for that matter, then both scientific knowledge and social policy may be badly distorted as well. This raises the important question of how much precision is necessary to allow a minimum of error while at the same

time not developing a classification scheme which is unnecessarily cumbersome or expensive. The present study is seen as one step toward answering this question.

The indices used to measure family fulfillment of instrumental functions did not differentiate very much among the three types of families containing a husband and wife. The differences which did appear between the simple nuclear and the other two types could be attributed primarily to the difference in the ages of the household heads. For the most part, the two attenuated types were considerably below the others in fulfilling instrumental functions and these two types were not very different from each other.

The expressive functions which applied to all of the family types, belonging, self-worth, and family cohesion, did not show consistently large differences among the types. There is some indication, however, that the attenuated extended family may be less able to fulfill these functions than the others. The fact that the attenuated families had smaller percentages saying that they almost always did things as a family is not particularly surprising since one would expect persons to seek friends outside the home if they were not available in the family. It is possible that activity outside the household may have negative implications for the successful socialization of the children.

The measure of adjustment to the marriage role indicated that the simple nuclear and the incipient extended families may have more marital problems and doubts about adequacy as a spouse than the incipient nuclear family. Such factors as age, length of marriage, and the presence of children in the family may account for some of the problems in the simple nuclear family. The presence of other relatives in the household in the incipient extended family may account for some of the marital problems and feelings of inadequacy in this type compared to the incipient nuclear family. Further support of this proposition is given by the measures of husband-wife companionship. The husband appears to be less likely to have an active family role in the incipient extended family. Also, this type of family has a smaller percentage who say that they do things together as a family.

In terms of the instrumental-expressive functions measured in this study, the attenuated nuclear and extended families appear to be fulfilling these functions less well than the simple nuclear family. In the attenuated families smaller percentages of the children are without school-related problems and have passed all school grades. Parents in these families are less likely to be adjusted to the role of parent and

smaller percentages of the children, particularly in the attenuated extended family, would be classified as emotionally well adjusted.

Overall, a particularly salient structural variable is the presence of both a husband and wife in the family. Attenuated families generally have smaller percentages fulfilling functions and, for the most part, these are "father-absent families." In other words, then, studies which have compared male-headed and female-headed families have focused on an important structural characteristic. Nevertheless, other structural characteristics play a part and ignoring these characteristics could very well lead to distortions. In this study, for example, among nonattenuated families the incipient extended family appears to have greater difficulty in fulfilling expressive functions, and, among attenuated families the attenuated extended family appears to be less able to fulfill certain expressive and instrumental-expressive functions. Generally, Billingsley's suggestion that more attention be given to the structural variation among black families is supported by the findings in this research.

Finally, the authors would like to offer one other point for consideration. As discussed above, Billingsley has stated that black families are "fully capable of surviving" and he indicates that the wide variety of structural types is evidence of this belief. Billingsley (1968:2 1) goes further and states that, ". . . the Negro family has proved to be an amazingly resilient institution." It is easy to empathize with this statement knowing the context within which it probably was made. Some writers have generalized from lower-class black families to all black families and some have given the impression that the black female-headed household is the rule rather than the exception. Further, given the conditions which many black people have had to face in American society it is almost amazing that the black family has continued to exist at all. Nevertheless, the investigators do not believe the data from this study (and from many other studies) show a picture of resilient families successfully coping with their problems and fulfilling necessary functions. It is true that the neighborhood studied contains a disproportionate share of working- and lower-class black families, but they do not believe that this neighborhood is atypical of the great majority of black neighborhoods in the city. And, the picture is not one of resiliency. *This does not mean that the black family is responsible nor does it indicate that emphasis should be placed on "strengthening" families.* This can be said with considerable assurance. Whereas some family types ap-

pear to be meeting their needs better than others, none of the structural types show an exceptionally high percentage meeting even, the minimal standards of functional fulfillment used in this study. For example, in the simple nuclear family 57.9 per cent have as much or more than \$20 per member per week and only 30.2 per cent have \$50 or more left after paying bills and buying food each month. Over 40 per cent of these families live in substandard housing and only 22.2 per cent had medical examinations in the past year. About half of the simple nuclear families scored high on social isolation and over one-third scored low on self-esteem. More than 25 per cent of the simple nuclear families with school-age children have one or more children who have failed a grade in school and over 40 per cent of these families have children who would be classified as having a behavior disorder. The major source of these problems does not appear to be in the family structure, but in the larger society. The most obvious source is the oppression of black people. Pointing out that there are many black families fully capable of handling their functional needs has been useful in correcting a somewhat distorted literature. It would be equally distorting to carry this to the other extreme.

### References

- Billingsley, Andrew  
1968 *Black Families in White America*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall.
- Davis, Allison *et al.*  
1941 *Deep South: A Social-Anthropological Study of Caste and Class*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Dean, Dwight  
1961 "Alienation: its meaning and measurement." *American Sociological Review* **26** (October): 753-758.
- Dollard, John  
1937 *Caste and Class in a Southern Town*. New York: Harper and Brothers.
- Drake, St. Clair and Horace Cayton  
1945 *Black Metropolis: A Study of Negro Life in a Northern City*. New York: Harcourt, Brace.
- Frazier, E. Franklin  
1939 *The Negro Family in the United States*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Glidewell, J. C. *et al.*  
1957 "Behavior symptoms in children and degree of sickness." *American Journal of Psychiatry* **114** (July): 47-53.
- Gurin, G. *et al.*  
1960 *Americans View Their Mental Health*. New York: Basic Books.
- Hyman, Herbert and John Reed  
1969 "Black matriarchy reconsidered: evidence from secondary analysis of sample surveys." *Public Opinion Quarterly* **33** (Fall): 346-354.
- Moynihan, Daniel  
1965 *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*. Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office.
- Parsons, Talcott and Robert Bales  
1955 *Family, Socialization and Interaction Process*. New York: Free Press.
- Rainwater, Lee and William Yancey  
1967 *The Moynihan Report and the Politics of Controversy*. Cambridge, Mass.: The M.I.T. Press.
- Rosenberg, Morris  
1965 *Society and the Adolescent Self-Image*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.
- Scanzoni, John  
1971 *The Black Family in Modern Society*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon.
- Staples, Robert  
1970 "The myth of the black matriarchy." *The Black Scholar* **1** (January-February): 8-16.
- TenHouten, Warren  
1970 "The myth of the black matriarchy." *The Black Scholar* **1** (January-February): 8-16.