



# Characteristics of African American Families

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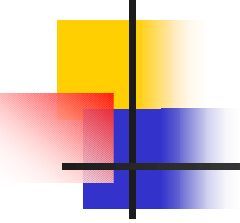
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While African American families share many features with other U.S. families, the African American family has some distinctive features relating to the timing and approaches to marriage and family formation, gender roles, parenting styles, and strategies for coping with adversity.



# Explanations of these differences center around:

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- West African cultural history
- A history of involuntary immigration and enslavement
- Four centuries of social and economic oppression
- Contemporary social conditions (i.e. poverty, economic inequality, etc.).

# Historical and Cultural Influences



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- 3 different sets of forces are used to account for the dynamics and structure of the contemporary African American family:
  - Integration into family life of cultural practices adapted from West Africa
  - Structural adaptation to slavery
  - Past and current discrimination and economic inequality

# Characteristics of West African Families



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- Tightly organized into extended family units
- Marriages involved contractual agreements between entire families, not individual men and women
- Matrilineal organization of family
- This “family as clan” organization can be seen as the predecessor to the extended family structures of modern African American communities



# Family Life During Slavery

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- Part of the control mechanism of slavery was to strip African Americans of identity, language, and the culture of their homeland.
- This was done by undermining and replacing family structures with transient ones built around identity as slaves.



# Family Life During Slavery

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- This undermining was not, however, entirely successful, as many slaves organized themselves into family structures very similar to nuclear families.
- Further, when slaves were able to secure their freedom, they often worked to get money to buy the freedom of their spouse and children.



# Contemporary Social Influences

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- Some of the contemporary forces that shape the dynamic of the modern African American family include:
  - Rural to urban migration during the 20<sup>th</sup> century
  - Racism
  - Poverty
  - Urbanization
  - Recent Immigration





# Rural to Urban Migration

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- After emancipation, many African Americans moved to Northeast and urban Midwestern cities to find jobs
- This trend was so massive that, by 1998, only 55% of African Americans lived in the South.
- 1/2 of the states with the largest African American populations are outside of the deep South
  - #1 = New York (3.2 million people)
  - #2 = California (2.4 million people)



# Rural to Urban Migration

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- The transition from a rural environment to an urban one entailed, for many African Americans, a shift from a cohesive community to a state of relative anonymity.
- The effects of urbanization (long work hours, entry of women into the labor force) disrupted tradition family structures.



# “New” Racism

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- Many African Americans in the city also had to contend with a form of discrimination very different, yet just as insidious, as the racism that characterized the deep South.
  - Labeled “new racism,” this covert discrimination was subtler, but had more deleterious effects than the blatant racism of earlier years.



# Poverty

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- The migration to urban centers did not, for many African Americans, reduce their poverty
- Today, low SES, underachievement, underemployment, teen pregnancy, divorce, health problems, and problems with psychological adjustment are formidable problems for African Americans.
  - These conditions weave together to form a net of adverse social conditions that impact African American family life.



# Poverty

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- In 1997, the median annual income for an African American family was \$25,050.
- In 1998, 26.5% of African American families lived below the poverty level.
- Poverty itself is a hardship as it is related to marital distress and dissolution, health problems, low educational attainment, and deficits in psychological functioning.



# Recent Immigration

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- Starting in the 1990s, a large influx of immigrants from the Caribbean and parts of Africa has changed the face of the African American community.
- This wave of immigration brings new tensions of assimilation and cultural identification to both recent immigrants and African Americans who have been in the U.S. for generations.

# African American Families in the New Millenium



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# Timing of Family Formation

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- Within African American families, the formation of a household often begins not with marriage, but with the birth of a child.
- 56% of African American children are born into families where the mother is not married to the biological father.
- In 1998, single women headed 54% of African American households.





# Marriage

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- Over the past 10 years, marriage rates have declined significantly within the African American population
  - In 1998, 41% of African American men and 37% of African American women over 18 had never married.
- Experts attribute this decrease to factors including a shortage of marriageable African American men and to structural, social, and economic factors.



# Marriage

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- Throughout history, the population of African American women has outnumbered that of African American men.
  - By 1990, within the African American population, there were only 88 men for every 100 women.
  - In addition to this uneven ratio, a sizable percentage of African American men are un- or under-employed, addicted to drugs or alcohol, mentally ill, or otherwise “undesirable.”
- These realities decrease an African American woman’s chances of finding a marriageable mate.



# Marriage

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- Though much of the decrease in marriage rates has an ideological basis, there are definite class and gender breakdowns.
  - For lower-income women, the constraints against marriage are usually unavailability and undesirability of potential husbands.
  - Among middle class women, the desire not to marry is higher, because such women have earning power equal to men and thus don't have the motivation to marry for economic support.
  - Staples (1997) suggests that the greater a woman's educational level and income, the less desirable she is to many African American men.



# Extended Family Structures

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- The importance of extended family and kin in maintaining family cohesion is often overshadowed by negative portrayals of African American family life.
- Studies have found that African American families display about 70 various structural formations, versus about 40 among white families.
  - This comparison points to the variability of the African American family structure and to the flexibility of family roles.



# Fathers

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- The relationship between the mother and biological father largely dictates how much contact non-custodial fathers have with their children.
- Even if the biological father is not present, African American children generally have contact with uncles, male cousins, and other men in their community.



# Parenting and Discipline

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- African American families tend to be more hierarchical and are more likely to be strict, to hold demanding behavioral standards, and to use physical discipline.
- Such strictness is, however, balanced within a context of strong support and affection.
  - Physical punishment among African American families usually doesn't result in the same negative outcomes as it does for white children.



# Grandparents

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- Grandparents, especially grandmothers, play a crucial role in the maintenance of the African American family.
- When mothers cannot fulfill their role, grandmothers often step in to parent children.
  - In 1998, 1.4 million African American children (12%) lived in their grandparents home (either with or without their parents).
- Grandparents care is often reciprocated in old age – African American families are much more likely to care for aging or dying family members.



# Siblings

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- Older siblings play a key role in African American households.
  - Older children, especially female, are often pressed into helping their mother with the care of the household.
- These responsibilities are both a source of maturation and strain for these siblings, who are most often the oldest female child in the household.





# Cultural Resources for Families

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- Spirituality
- Mutual support
- Ethnic identity
- Adaptive extended family structures
- Church as offering both ideological and instrumental support



# References

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- Barbarin, O. (in press). Characteristics of African American families.
- Staples (1997). An overview of race and marital status. In McAdoo, H.P. (Ed.) Black families (3<sup>rd</sup> ed., pp. 269-273).