

**Evaluating Social Policy and  
Popular Representations of Black  
Families in the Media and Their  
Effects on the Structure of Black  
Marriages and Families**

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## **Abstract**

The Black family is an institution that has been subjected to excessive analysis and criticism for more than a century. Many scholars hunt for an answer to explain the differences between marriages and families in the African American community while using Caucasian families as a standard of measure. Relying on the media as a highly effective method of presenting the standards or norms accepted by American society, many people attempt to model their everyday lives by media representations. Considering this idea, one might ask how popular television programs relate to social policies that affect family structures within a given community. This project is designed to compare various black television shows over increments of time, along with the social policies established for family and child welfare, in order to draw conclusions about how they influenced family structure among African American families. Projected outcomes of this research are to be able to explain how the media has affected changes in the perceptions of black families and how both media and social policy help explain those perceptions. These correlations are important because they will indicate how perceptions of black families influenced social policy and they will provide understanding of the progression of black families to better inform future policies. Limitations of this study might include the fact that it concentrates solely on television shows and does not include literature or film. Some suggestions to enhance this study are to expand the study to include perceptions presented in other forms of media or to study all shows that present family values in order to obtain a more comprehensive study.

## **Introduction**

In American society there have always existed basic institutions fundamental to its composition. These include church, politics, and the

interlocking institutions of marriage and family. In fact many social norms that shape American culture derive from fundamental development established within the institutions of marriage and family. Not only that but, these institutions greatly influence many Americans to follow the traditions of marriage and family values. For instance, the United States is one of the most prone-to-marry societies in the world (Farrell, 1999). However, all is not well with the tradition of American marriage. Studies show that in recent decades young people have postponed getting married for a later stage in life than usual (Farrell, 1999). Also, having children outside of marriage has become more widely accepted in the United States than ever before (Farrell, 1999). Thirdly, of those relationships that do result in marriage, about half of them end in divorce (Farrell, 1999). A summation of these findings indicates that the once strong commitment to marriage and family has weakened. Nevertheless statistics also show that a majority of Americans still choose to marry despite the recent decline in marriage rates (Farrell, 1999). This revelation poses the question of why people still endorse conventional marriage and family values.

Contemporary reasons for getting married and establishing a family stem from both traditional and modern perspectives (Farrell, 1999). For example most societies view marriage as an effective way to ensure societal continuity through reproduction and socialization (Farrell, 1999). Also marriage connects one family to another, promoting the formation of alliances and societal extensions (Farrell, 1999). Marriage fosters survival for all societies as they need both intergenerational and *intragenerational* continuity (Farrell, 1999). Furthermore

socially recognized marriage is the only accepted situation for two people to conceive children, and, in most societies, it is the only way to form the nuclear family which serves as the core of the social order (Farrell, 1999). These evaluations maintain that marriage and family are essential elements of most societies in the world.

### **Ideals of the American Family**

In order to construct a strong and healthy family or household, a model family has to exist as a standard to follow. At one point in time people praised the white families created during the 1950s as the paradigm for the ideal family (Gilbert, 2004). The individuals who were married during the 1950s were products of the late 1920s and early 1930s, a time in the United States when all families struggled to endure the harsh realities of a severe economic depression (Gilbert, 2004). Many couples refrained from having many children to avoid not being able to take care of them (Gilbert, 2004). The conditions of that time period left little competition for those children born, as they later became adults and entered the workforce (Gilbert, 2004). The lack of economic competition led to an ideal situation to foster a strong “American” family (Gilbert, 2004).

At any rate, despite a favorable social climate, the perfect families in the white communities of the 1950s were not at all what they seemed. At this time there were high poverty rates among children and the elderly; troubled youth were encouraged to drop out of high school while mentally and physically disabled children were sent to “special” schools and facilities; and the rate of unwed childbirths tripled what they are now, only then young mothers left town

during their pregnancies, had their babies, and then gave them up for adoption (Gilbert, 1999). In addition the American home did not serve as a haven for many white families as they experienced severe dysfunction (Gilbert, 1999). Many housewives suffered from anxiety attacks and deep rooted depression as they were subjected to spousal rape and domestic violence (Gilbert, 1999). Also psychiatrists diagnosed children with oedipal fantasies in response to incestual relations from sexual abuse (Gilbert, 1999). All in all unfortunate circumstances of family life in the past were a lot worse than what they are now. The discrepancy lies in the expectations between the two eras. Higher expectations for modern families now make today's family seem more troubled and unhealthy than before (Gilbert, 1999). The worries of contemporary families reflect how much better society wants the family to be, not how it used to be (Gilbert, 1999).

### **Perceptions of Black Family Structure in Theory**

Aside from the fact that white families were not following their own model, society insisted that they still portrayed images of perfection. Meanwhile, families of other races, particularly black families, were unable to neither conform to the standard nor wear the mask of perfection. This failure to measure up to typical family structure was due largely in part to social policy within the United States (Jewell, 1988). Over the last century social policy and reform attempted to repair the damage imposed on black families, as well as other minority families. But, most plans seemed to backfire or work against strengthening black families instead of helping them achieve society's approval. Liberal social policy contributed to the erosion of two-parent homes and extended households while

conservative social policy either assisted in further disintegration of a black family unit, or spawned other kinds of family structure (Jewell, 1988). One of the most common types of black family structure, the female-headed family, resulted from the affects of these policies (Jewell, 1988).

Two theories attempt to explain the large number of female-headed families in the black community. The first theory states that black families are perceived by society as deviations of normative family structure and that they are not nuclear (Jewell, 1988). The second conception includes the notion that black families are in fact nuclear, but they are scorned by harsh social and economic conditions (Jewell, 1988). In addition to all this social welfare programs contributed to an abundance of female-headed households by altering family values and belief systems (Jewell, 1988).

For the most part black families have been compared to white families in order to evaluate an adjoining theory of whether or not female-headed family structure is a norm of black families (Jewell, 1988). To this end one of the strongest arguments has been that black families have not/do not conform to traditional nuclear models of American families, and that failure to create a theoretical model for black families is due in part to the unbroken efforts of social scientists to make assessments based on a normative paradigm (Jewell, 1988).

Sue K. Jewell (1988), author of *Survival of the Black Family; The Institutional Impact of U.S. Social Policy* contends:

The primary difference is that black families, because of social and economic hardships, developed unique family arrangements. Hence, black families

became dependent upon external informal support systems to a greater extent than did their white counter parts (Jewell, 1988).

So, in theory the solution to understanding the black family has not been to compare and contrast it with the conventional model of the white families of American culture, but to realize that these units are two totally different creatures. In essence the mistake has been comparing apples to oranges.

### **The Influences of Media**

Although social policy places great influence on marriage and family structure, it does not act alone. In a recent study, one scholar discusses how family sitcoms of the 1950s were used as display cases and rubrics for modeling the ideal family (Farrell, 1999). Television was one of the first to introduce the roles of “breadwinner” and “homemaker” to the married couples of the time as they depicted the unrealistic standards that husbands and wives were expected to follow (Farrell, 1999). Though these ideals were difficult to live up to, they were strongly enforced by Hollywood, just as they were favored by the rest of society. However, since these depictions focused very little on the black family, to understand how television affected African Americans and their attitudes towards marriage and family a more thorough examination would have to be conducted, including the analysis of black marriages and black families on T.V.

### **Methodology**

This research is designed to evaluate the effects that social policy and the media have on marriage and family structure within the black community. To conduct this study, first a list of twenty five sitcoms that focused on black family values was compiled dating back to 1970. Then this list was organized

chronologically by both beginning and ending date. Next, each show was given an individual typology, based on its own social conditions and the correlating stereotypes of the current time, and then placed in its respective five year time span. Following that the social policies, the presidents that implemented them, were applied to each respective time span along with the corresponding rates of single-parent households, marriages, and divorces. Finally each time span was considered individually with its parallel information to compose a summary of the effects of the sitcoms in conjunction with the social policies. This strategy should produce accurate results that provide significant information for the issue presented.

## **Results**

This section will present the findings of the analysis of each time period and its corresponding data. After presenting the information for a span of years, a brief discussion of the facts and their significance will follow. Finally, a comprehensive conclusion will be drawn on the entire research in order to evaluate the effectiveness of the methods used. All of the provided information is attached to this report in the form of a data table for a complete understanding.

The first time period evaluated was from 1971 to 1975. The black-concentrated shows on television at that time were *Sanford and Son*, *Good Times*, and *The Jeffersons*. While the first two shows focused on the woes and struggles of living in the inner-city, the third show showed a family that escaped poverty and excelled to middle-class economics. Under the administrations of Nixon and Ford the working poor were forced to utilize the Food Stamp program



in order to survive (Jansson, 2001). Also urban housing and education suffered as the civil rights provisions established ten years prior offered little help to existing problems (Jansson, 2001). However, many black families followed the traditional family model as they maintained marriage rates above 50% and divorce rates below 5% for both men and women. This information signifies that the sitcoms on the air at that time were created to accurately portray the socioeconomic climate and family structure within the black community (Jansson, 2001).

From 1976 to 1980 black sitcoms on the air included those mentioned in the previous paragraph in addition to one sitcom titled *Diff'rent Strokes*. *Diff'rent Strokes* was a show designed to portray a diverse family structure, providing a different perspective for black youth in family life. At this time many families were dependent upon Aid to Families with Dependent Children or AFDC, and high orphanage rates among minority children, disabled youth, and older adolescents existed (Jansson, 2001). These conditions explain both the persistence of the former shows and the emergence of the latter by displaying a need for government assistance and by highlighting the issue of foster care and adoption among American families. Moreover, as the number of single-parent households increased and the rate of marriages in the black community decreased, more and more families were reliant on federal aid. These conditions are presented in the various shows that portray poor single-parent-headed families.

During the period between 1981 and 1985 the sitcoms that graced television were *The Jeffersons*, *Diff'rent Strokes*, *Gimme A Break!*, *Webster*, *The*

*Cosby Show*, and *227*. While the first show listed maintained a story of a family gone from rags to riches, *Gimme A Break!* and *Webster* modeled after *Diff'rent Strokes* as they depicted families that contained both black and white members. In conjunction with these premises, the Adoption Assistance & Child Welfare Act of 1980 provided federal funds for facilities and families providing foster care (Jansson, 2001). However two new shows, *The Cosby Show* and *227*, portrayed black families that had both parents in the home and that enjoyed middle-class income. The families on these shows were designed to refute the stereotypical perception that black families drown in poor single parenthood.

From 1986 to 1990 black sitcoms included *Diff'rent Strokes*, *Gimme A Break!*, *Webster*, *The Cosby Show*, *227*, *A Different World*, *Family Matters*, and *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*. Under the administrations of both President Reagan and George Bush socioeconomic conditions seemed unpromising in the black community as there remained little money for public housing and half the children in female-headed families were poor (Jansson, 2001). In addition, the government expressed little concern for these issues alongside other problems existing in the inner-city. In response, the later TV shows shifted their focus from the current predicament of the black community to more progressive views. For example, the sitcom *A Different World* centered on the lives of black college students at a historically black university. This refreshing perspective brought a new hope to black youth, encouraging them to strive for higher education and aspire to gain professional careers. Additionally *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* presented a complete twist to black family structure portrayed on TV when it

showed a rowdy young man who left his home in Philadelphia to live with his rich aunt and uncle in Bel-Air, California. In retrospect it seemed that the contemporary shows of this period aimed at providing humor and entertainment while offering more positive perceptions of black families than their predecessors.

During the period between 1991 and 1995 the black sitcoms on television were *The Cosby Show*, *A Different World*, *Family Matters*, *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*, *Roc*, *Martin*, *Living Single*, *Thea*, and *Sister, Sister*. With the exception of *Roc* and *Thea*, these shows focused very little on the negative aspects of black family life. Coincidentally, neither did the national government, as most of the concerns of the first Bush administration were concentrated on international affairs (Jansson, 2001). At any rate as a means of maintaining a positive attitude about black family life, the black shows of the time shed light on attractive aspects of black pop-culture. For instance, shows like *Martin* and *Living Single* portrayed the single lifestyle as one just as acceptable as marriage and family, considering that marriage rates for black men and women were under 50%. Furthermore, black sitcoms like *Roc* and *Thea* that were reluctant to show a more progressive view of the black community did not gain popularity among viewers and did not stay on the air long.

From 1996 to 2000 black sitcoms consisted of *Family Matters*, *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*, *Martin*, *Living Single*, *Sister, Sister*, *Moesha*, *The Parkers*, *Soul Food*, and *Girlfriends*. At the beginning of this decade Bill Clinton won the presidency, and as he entered the White House he brought a list of social welfare reforms with him. He planned to invest many funds into public projects as a

means of stimulating the economy, and he promised to implement health care reform that focused on public health, maternal health, and family planning (Jansson, 2001). Also Clinton attempted to activate welfare reform that paired strong work requirements with large subsidies for child care and job training (Jansson, 2001). In comparison, the black TV shows of this period were all diverse in their focus for family structure. These shows were not so concentrated on the nuclear family model. Instead, they underlined a single lifestyle and single family households along with teenagers and their commitment to excellence and education. Despite the variation from traditional family structures, the families on these shows were all portrayed as having middle-class income. This information indicates that diverse family structure within the black community became better received among the rest of society.

The final time period analyzed was between 2001 and 2005. The sitcoms on the air during this time include *Moesha*, *The Parkers*, *Soul Food*, *Girlfriends*, *The Proud Family*, *My Wife and Kids*, *One on One*, *The Bernie Mac Show*, and *That's So Raven*. These sitcoms try to appeal to teenagers and young adults, some more than others. After studying the premises of each of these shows it becomes apparent that black television draws a significant amount of its support from young viewers. As for one coexisting social policy, the number of single-parent households has decreased by 3% since 1991. This change is depicted in all the sitcoms listed in this era excluding *The Parkers*, *Girlfriends*, and *One on One* where each respective family contains a single parental figure. Nevertheless other social policies included large tax increases in education and

armed forces that led to other economic troubles, and the push for the privatization of social security (issues, 2005). Other than these domestic concerns, the federal government has spent a large amount of time, money, and energy dealing with foreign issues. This information signifies the idea that modern black sitcoms concentrate primarily on representing family structures that black America cannot only relate to, but even those examples that they can aspire to follow.

### **Discussion**

After reviewing all of the information collected for this research project, one might conclude that in the past social policy and popular representations of black families in the media were closely related, and that they maintained a cause and affect relationship. As it seemed, many shows were once constructed to accurately portray family life in the black community, exposing all of its negative aspects and so-called flaws. Overtime perceptions presented by sitcoms changed as did social policy, yet they did not run parallel. The data showed that however negative society portrayed the black family; the more positive the pictures of black families were drawn on TV. To this end the media's portrayal of the black family encourages society to accept the notion that there exist many different family structures within the black community, and that this theory does anything but indicate that the black family is pathological or dysfunctional. The conclusions of this study can help psychologists, sociologists, and other social scientists understand that there may not be one model or

standard to measure the institutions of marriage and family against and that each situation should be studied on a case by case basis.

Though this evaluation may have seemed thorough, there are a few details that might enhance this research. First one might consider including other forms of media such as film or literature to conduct this study. Second one might still concentrate on sitcoms and include *all* sitcoms in a specific time period that exhibit family life and values. Finally a more complete analysis of the demographics of each period might better develop the study.

## TV Shows and Social Policies

<b>Years Span</b>	<b>TV Shows</b>	<b>Type of Show</b>	<b>Social Policies</b>	<b>President</b>	<b>Black Demographics</b>
1971-1975	-Sanford and Son  -Good Times  -The Jeffersons	-Living in the Ghetto  -Living in the Ghetto  -Rags to Riches	-Working poor utilized Food Stamps -Nixon's Family Assistance Plan shot down -Civil rights provisions no help to urban housing or education problems	Richard Nixon Gerald Ford	-Single parent households= 38% -1970 marriage rates= 57% M; 54% F -1970 divorce rates= 3% M; 4% F
1976-1980	-Sanford and Son  -Good Times  -The Jeffersons  -Diff'rent Strokes	-Living in the Ghetto  -Living in the Ghetto  -Rags to Riches  -Diverse Family	-Many families dependent upon AFDC -Orphanage among minorities, disabled youth and teens and adolescents high	Jimmy Carter	-Single parent households= 44% -1980 marriage rates= 49% M; 45% F -1980 divorce rates=6% M; 9% F
1981-1985	-The Jeffersons  -Diff'rent Strokes  -Gimme A Break!  -Webster  -The Cosby Show	-Rags to Riches  -Diverse Family  -Diverse Family  -Diverse Family  -Wholesome Family w/ Attachments	-Adoption Assistance & Child Welfare Act of 1980 provides federal funds to foster care -Social welfare programs take a nose dive	Ronald Reagan	-Single parent households= 51%

	-227	-Wholesome Family w/ Attachments			
1986-1990	-Different Strokes  -Gimme A Break!  -Webster  -The Cosby Show  -227  -A Different World  -Family Matters  -The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air	-Diverse Family  -Diverse Family  -Diverse Family  -Wholesome Family w/ Attachments  -Wholesome Family w/ Attachments  -The College Life  -Wholesome Family w/ Attachments  -Rags to Riches	-Housing and urban development money decreases -The Family Support Act of 1988 provided funds for training projects and childcare to help AFDC recipients enter the work force -Neither Reagan nor Bush expressed concern for inner-city problems -51% of children in families headed by women were poor in 1989	Ronald Reagan George Bush	-Single parent household= 54% -1990 marriage rates= 47% M; 37% F -1990 Divorce rates= 10% M; 1% F
1991-1995	-The Cosby Show  -A Different World  -Family Matters  -The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air  -Roc	-Wholesome Family w/ Attachments  -The College Life  -Wholesome Family w/ Attachments  -Rags to Riches  -Living in the	-Bush took little interest in homeless population; took few steps to address housing needs of low-to-moderate income families - Few social reform initiatives enacted due to conservative nature of Bush	George Bush Bill Clinton	-Single parent households= 57%



	-Martin  -Living Single  -Thea  -Sister, Sister	Ghetto  -The Single Life  -The Single Life  -Single Parent Home  -Super teen	administration and its concern with international affairs		
1996-2000	-Family Matters  -The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air  -Martin  -Living Single  -Sister, Sister  -Moesha  -The Parkers  -Soul Food  -Girlfriends	-Wholesome Family w/ Attachments  -Rags to Riches  -The Single Life  -The Single Life  -Super teen  -Super teen  -Single Parent Home  -Extended Black Family  -The Single Life	-Clinton administration concentrates on delegating funds to job training, education, and public improvements; his plan to spend money on public projects for economic stimulation -Promised health care reform focusing on public health, maternal health, and family planning -Attempted activation of welfare reform that paired strong work requirements with large subsidies for child care and job training -Proposal of tax	Bill Clinton	-Single parent households= 56% -2000 marriage rates= 43% M; 36% F -2000 divorce rates= 9% M; 2% F

			increase for families making \$115-\$140 thousand		
2001-Present	-Moesha -The Parkers -Soul Food -Girlfriends -The Proud Family -My Wife and Kids -One on One -The Bernie Mac Show -That's So Raven	-Super teen -Single Parent Home -Extended Black Family -The Single Life -Super teen -Wholesome Family w/ Attachments -Single Parent Home -Diverse Family -Super teen	-Bush moves to privatize social security; claims that it will go bankrupt -Proposes that young workers should seek to create private retirement accounts in order to avoid poverty after retirement -Many tax cuts are made in education and unemployment rates are at an all time high -Primary concern in foreign affairs	George W. Bush	-Single parent households= 54%

Sources

Jansson, 2001

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