

# **A FRESH LOOK AT E. FRANKLIN FRAZIER'S SEXUAL POLITICS IN *THE NEGRO FAMILY IN THE UNITED STATES*<sup>1</sup>**

**Anastasia Curwood**

*Program in African American and Diaspora Studies, Vanderbilt University*

## **Abstract**

This article brings Frazier's ideas about male and female family roles into focus. Although Frazier was at the forefront of arguing for racial equality in the 1930s, his ideas remained limited by his belief that African Americans should assimilate into the gender and sexual ideals of patriarchal U.S. culture. At the center of this article is Frazier's conviction that middle-class egalitarian marriages, women's participation in the waged work force, and increased consumption of material goods would perpetuate or worsen African Americans' family health. Importantly, this article argues that Frazier's socialist political alignments and his suspicion of bourgeois norms were inseparable from his suspicion of middle-class Black women and notions of morality. Ultimately, it suggests that his mistrust of women colors social scientists' treatments of Black Americans throughout the twentieth century.

**Keywords:** E. Franklin Frazier, Sexuality, Gender, Marriage, Middle Class

E. Franklin Frazier was an important voice in both African American and White liberal battles against racism in the mid-twentieth century. His arguments against an inherent racial inferiority were progressive in the 1930s. However, he grounded his racial thinking in a stable, familiar foundation of gender hierarchy.

Since the 1930s, Frazier's image of the poor matriarch has often been discussed, but his Depression-era analysis of middle-class Black working wives has received far less attention. This scholarly oversight is problematic because Frazier's opinion was that poor matriarchs were a temporary problem, while he thought that Black working wives were a more pernicious social ill that would harm African American families in the future. His Depression-era arguments about gender put a respected stamp of authority on social scientific beliefs in the naturalness of gender hierarchies.

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In *The Negro Family in the United States* (1939), two decades before his famous criticism of the Black middle class in *Black Bourgeoisie* (1957), Frazier laid the intellectual groundwork by explaining how women's increased economic and social authority within middle-class families harmed Black families. His chief point was that middle-class gender roles posed a grave danger: middle-class women's insufficient femininity and middle-class men's inadequate masculinity hurt the progress of the race.

This article examines Frazier's discourse about gender in the Black middle class in his early studies of African American families (Frazier 1929, 1932a, 1932b, 1939). Frazier implicitly and explicitly argued that if men were not the sole breadwinners and dominant decision makers in their families, something was wrong. He measured the health of African American families according to the power and the independence of their male heads. Because male authority was less well defined in the new "brown middle class," as Frazier termed it in the 1930s, he heavily criticized the Black professional and white-collar families of the era.

Contrary to what some of his critics have maintained, Frazier saw no inherent inferiority, whether moral, mental, or physical, within Black people that would prevent them from developing stable male-headed families, his benchmark for racial progress. Frazier did, however, believe in the inherent inferiority of women. Black women's developing economic and decision-making power in their families alarmed him. His racial analysis, revolutionary in its time for its strong endorsement of nurture over nature, did not follow the same pattern when it came to gender. Instead, Frazier pointed to slavery as having damaged Black men's rightful claims to authority within Black families.

Frazier wrote in the context of the Great Migration, the New Negro, and the New Woman. The Great Migration was the World War I-era geographical movement of Black Americans from the South to cities across the nation, and especially to urban centers in the North and Midwest. Out of this physical movement came a cultural movement: the New Negro. Named after a literary anthology that collected new African American writers of the mid-1920s, including Frazier himself (Locke 1925), New Negroes were more politically aware and less accommodating of White supremacy than southern and rural Black people. Oftentimes, New Negroes were assumed to be male. Frazier thought that the New Negroes were too concerned with arts and culture as the path to racial equality, in his opinion. New Women, on the other hand, were assumed to be White. These women sought expanded roles for themselves in education and the professions. At the intersection between New Negroes and New Women were New Negro Women, who were convinced that their increased power and autonomy were assets to their race. Middle-class New Negro women sought a voice not only publicly through print and the spoken word but also privately within their homes. In direct contrast to Frazier, they saw equality between men and women as central to the developing modernity of the race. Frazier's thinking, therefore, took place in a contested arena where Black men and women debated gender roles.

Black feminist scholars have commented on the sexist implications of Frazier's work. They rightly point out that Frazier's work condemns women's power and encourages patriarchy (Cole and Guy-Sheftall, 2003; Giddings 1984; Wallace 1979). Despite his forward-thinking stance on race, he was indeed bound by the gendered thinking of his time, which was not unusual for "race men." While stratification based on race was unacceptable to him, he advocated a hierarchy of men over women. Since racist conceptions of African Americans' inferiority relied on seeing the race as feminized,<sup>2</sup> demonstrating the manliness of the race's (male) members was

crucial. Women's failure to act traditionally feminine (i.e., subordinated) was dangerous to the whole project of race work, especially when they failed at motherhood (Feldstein 2000). This is why disruption and restoration of gender roles lay at the heart of his work.

Although Frazier's longest work, *The Negro Family in the United States* (1939), was ostensibly about Black family structure, it was fundamentally an analysis of gender roles within Black people's class structure. Frazier was especially fascinated with the development of the African American middle class, a focus that persisted throughout his career. Prior to earning his PhD in sociology at the University of Chicago, Frazier had published two discussions of the Black middle class: one concerning Durham, North Carolina (Frazier 1925), and one characterizing the Black middle class as bourgeois (Frazier 1929).

Frazier reassured his readers that, although he was advocating Black families' equality (or potential equality) with White families, he was not advocating women's equality with men. He emphasized that one way that African Americans were advancing was through greater male authority and domination within the race—in other words, by assimilating into dominant U.S. gender norms. Patriarchy was not merely correlated with healthy families and sexual morality but was a cause of it. Marital-only sexual relations that allowed one to be traced back to a patriarch signified a strong family, and did not depend on economic status or wealth (Frazier 1939). Frazier made the argument that patriarchal gender relations were, first, within the grasp of the race and, second, would help the cause of racial justice. He constantly equated the feminine with the feudal and the naïve, and the masculine with modern and worldly. Although he did acknowledge the role of racism in African Americans' lack of economic and political power, he implied that African Americans themselves had crucial control over their intraracial gender and sexual relations.

While Frazier was relatively understanding of poor families who were only just escaping from the feudal South, the common thread throughout Frazier's work was that he devalued families like his own: middle-class families in which wives held some economic power. He reserved his sharpest criticisms for these families from 1929 to 1957 (in his inflammatory *Black Bourgeoisie*). From all indications, Frazier was uneasy with his middle-class status. And his socialist leanings, first developed during his undergraduate years at Howard University, led him to identify with skilled laborers and the Black working class. Some of his discomfort stemmed from his disapproval of racial accommodation, materialism, and isolation, which he saw as features of the middle class. However, his larger concern in the 1930s was with the Black middle-class's highly visible women professionals who worked, he argued, solely for the purpose of making more money to acquire more material goods.

Although his work has received more attention for its analysis of poor rural and urban families, Frazier's concerns with gender roles in the middle class betray his masculinist ideals for properly assimilated Black families and provide important ideological clues about his stance. Most notably, examining his stance toward middle-class gender roles shows that he saw poor matriarchs as less problematic than professional women, an aspect of his work that seldom emerges.

Frazier's intellectual biography helps to explain his analytical choices. Frazier was a native of Baltimore, Maryland, where he distinguished himself academically in high school, and was admitted to Howard University in 1912. At Howard, Frazier became a radical activist, with a socialist and antiracist bent. He was a member and officer of the university's NAACP chapter and of the Social Science Club and a member of the Intercollegiate Socialist Society. All three clubs attracted many socialist students, reflecting the popularity of socialism in the early decades of the twentieth

century throughout the United States. His classmates thought of him as a daring activist. On one occasion, Frazier opposed the organizers of Woodrow Wilson's inaugural parade, who planned to segregate colleges and universities by race, with White schools at the front and Black schools at the rear. The organizers offered a compromise of allowing Howard to bring up the rear of the White universities' section. Frazier's Howard comrades accepted the decision, but he remained unmollified and outraged and refused to march (Platt 1991; Holloway 2002).

After graduating from Howard in 1916, Frazier began teaching math at Tuskegee, but was frustrated with its Victorian atmosphere and racial accommodation. He was asked not to carry books across the campus lest he seem too intellectual, and the school quietly paid the Alabama poll tax for him that he had refused to pay on principle. He left in 1917, exasperated but with a heightened interest in civil rights. He subsequently took a series of other jobs, including teaching summer school at High and Industrial School in Fort Valley, Georgia, and teaching English and history at Saint Paul's Normal and Industrial School in Virginia. He hoped to avoid the draft, holding the unpopular position of opposing the First World War. He even broke with W. E. B. Du Bois, the NAACP, and Howard University—all war supporters—by siding with the Black socialists A. Philip Randolph and Chandler Owen and writing an antiwar pamphlet. He was eventually drafted and spent a few months as a secretary at Camp Humphreys, Virginia, then taught at Baltimore High School (Platt 1991; Holloway 2002).

In 1919 Frazier began work on his master's degree in sociology at Clark University. His thesis, "New Currents of Thought among the Colored People in America," optimistically predicted a rise in racial activism and militancy among African Americans. Frazier found that his time at Clark exposed him to intellectually rigorous sociology, even as he worked with two prominent thinkers in scientific racism: his advisor Frank Hankins and the university president G. Stanley Hall. Frazier and Hankins, despite their disagreement, were cordial: Hankins wrote positive references for Frazier, and he helped Frazier gain entry into the world of White sociologists (Platt 1991).

Over the next two years, Frazier seldom stayed in one place for long. He won a scholarship to study at the New York School of Social Work, where he conducted an extensive study of longshoremen, and a fellowship from the American-Scandinavian Foundation to study rural folk high schools. In the summer of 1922, he got a job teaching summer school at Livingston College in North Carolina. There he met his future wife, Marie Brown, a fair-skinned daughter of a Winton, North Carolina, Baptist missionary and educator. After a whirlwind courtship, the two were married that September (Platt 1991).

The Fraziers went to Atlanta immediately after their wedding, where Frazier took a job teaching at Morehouse College. He also was to serve as acting director of the Atlanta School of Social Work. But the situation changed suddenly. After Frazier arrived, the director of the Atlanta School of Social Work, Garry Moore, died unexpectedly. Frazier suddenly became the head of a social work school. Frazier single-handedly transformed the school into a vital program for Black social work students at the same time that he was beginning his own research into African American families. He also traveled extensively as a lecturer, took summer courses at the University of Chicago, and contributed to *The Crisis*, *The New Masses*, *Opportunity*, and *The Messenger*. Unfortunately, at Atlanta, Frazier's outspoken views against southern racism provoked a major professional crisis. Despite, or perhaps because of, his productivity and growing professional acclaim, Frazier was plagued by the racism of a colleague, the White social worker Helen Pendleton. After Frazier secured

funding for the purpose of accrediting the school, he became Pendleton's superior. Frazier's antiracism militancy and his role as her superior so incensed Pendleton that by the fall of 1926 she convinced the board to remove Frazier as director (Platt 1991; Holloway 2002).

This incident and his published writings on race relations gave Frazier a reputation as a controversial and opinionated scholar, which limited his professional options. He scared off some prospective employers, particularly those in the South. By the time Frazier's troubles in Atlanta were becoming serious, he was making preparations to get out. His friend W. E. B. Du Bois tried to help him get a job at Fisk, but Fisk's president, the White Quaker Thomas Jones, decided that Frazier was not diplomatic enough for the South.<sup>3</sup> Luckily, in the spring of 1927, Frazier learned that he had been awarded a PhD fellowship at Chicago. He arrived that June and began work immediately in the summer session.

While at Chicago, Frazier wrote his first sustained criticism of the Black middle class. "La Bourgeoisie Noire," published in V. F. Calverton's 1929 *Anthology of American Negro Literature*, sought to explain why African Americans were not aligned with radical labor politics. As an example, he criticized the New Negro cultural movement of the 1920s as both insufficiently engaged with economic issues and "emasculating" (Frazier 1929, p. 387) to those Black men whose art was used as entertainment by White audiences. This lack of attention to working-class politics and concerns came from the social history of Black people, Frazier said, and not from any innate temperamental characteristic. For one, those with property, education, and White ancestry did not see themselves as allied with the working class. Furthermore, rural Black people, as landless, mobile peasants, were ignorant through lack of "traditions" (social networks) and could not be expected to grasp or implement radical ideas. Also, domestic servants could not help but take on capitalist values, which "have robbed [them] of [their] self-respect and self-reliance" (Frazier 1929, p. 381). Most importantly, African Americans had often been excluded from industrial jobs, but radical labor politics were most powerful within groups of industrial workers, so it was not surprising that they were not involved in these movements. In the absence of the opportunity to participate in changing the terms of capitalism, African Americans sought to reap its benefits in the form of consumption, subscribing to bourgeois ideals. They sought some small measure of self-worth by pursuing the markers of wealth and status that would signify greater social standing.

Frazier's first book was his 1932 PhD dissertation, *The Negro Family in Chicago*. He added a new dimension to "Bourgeoisie Noire" by describing African Americans' class heterogeneity on the south side of the city. To illustrate his point, he broke the Chicago Black Belt up into small geographical units, a strategy of his Chicago teacher Ernest Burgess. He gathered statistical and case study data on each of the zones. He then correlated each unit with specific social, cultural, and economic characteristics. Finally, he examined family life in each of these zones, demonstrating the degree to which specific family patterns corresponded to specific socioeconomic characteristics.

Taking a cue from his mentor Robert Park, Frazier pointed out that upwardly mobile and less recent immigrants tended to move outward away from areas where the newest migrants predominated. In other words, Black people with different occupations, cultures, and class statuses segregated themselves in different zones. The reason for the greater financial and family stability in residents of the outer zones, he argued, was that by and large the families there had more established traditions. Many of them were descended from either free Black families or were mulatto families who were well-adapted individuals who had assimilated into the values of the larger society. The ancestors of these families had mitigated the demor-



alizing effects of slavery before southern emancipation, and it was them to whom Frazier looked as the forces of progress. An outstanding characteristic of these families was that most of them were headed by or descended from a male patriarch. Their relatively high rates of homeownership enabled the transmission of property to the patriarchs' descendants. In sum, he argued that although that discrimination explained why African Americans were contained within the Black Belt, the Black Belt itself was a highly heterogeneous area (Frazier 1939).

Frazier widened the geographical and temporal scope in his third<sup>4</sup> book, *The Negro Family in the United States* (1939), but kept the same emphasis on African Americans' class heterogeneity and historical circumstances. However, now he began to see gender relations as predictive, and not merely symptomatic, of family stability. Skilled male working-class laborers who maintained the right balance of male power at home were his family heroes. A male-headed household stood for a stable family, a family that was in its rightful place in the social and cultural order (Platt 1991).

The middle class of the outer zones no longer appeared to be the most evolved. Now, they were overly oriented toward consumption, and middle-class women were too dominant. Dominant women became the most important and most dangerous force within African American family life. Although he sought to avoid making value judgments on Black families, Frazier was, indeed, making a value judgment about appropriate forms of power stratification within cities. Racial stratification was not desirable, but gender stratification was: men should hold economic and sexual property in healthy families.

This shift in analysis perhaps grew out of Frazier's change of location. After finally securing a position at Fisk University in 1929, he moved in 1932 to the familiar world of his alma mater, Howard University. At Howard, Frazier had more freedom than at Fisk to voice his leftist political views publicly, and he was no longer under the supervision of the cautious Southerner Charles Johnson, who had been chair of sociology at Fisk. Frazier developed a group of friends in Washington nicknamed the "young Turks," otherwise known as the "thinkers and drinkers" faculty group. This cohort of young faculty believed in Marxism to varying degrees and were uniformly disgusted with what they saw as the petit-bourgeois shortsightedness of the Black middle class (themselves excluded) (Lewis 2000). Socialism remained central to Frazier's activities and scholarship for the rest of his life. He wrote *The Negro Family in the United States* against this backdrop of supportive socialist colleagues and their discourse of radical views on class and race.<sup>5</sup>

The basic narrative of *The Negro Family in the United States* is this: A system of maternal power developed under slavery, but a patriarchal system should now eclipse it. Patriarchal organization had developed embryonically among antebellum free Blacks, and now healthy patriarchy should spread to more of the population as Black people moved into the industrial age. Frazier equated femininity with disorganization, feudalism, savagery, and naïveté; he equated masculinity with reorganization, modernity, civilization, and worldliness. Frazier made no apology for his masculinist thinking, and none of his colleagues expected it. He saw this analysis of gender roles as the most important aspect of his work—so important that the original title of *The Negro Family in the United States* was "In the House of the Mother," as he wrote to his publisher in 1937.<sup>6</sup> The original title named the main problem with Black families as Frazier saw it.

*The Negro Family in the United States* presented five evolutionary stages on the way to patriarchal norms, discussed in five parts. Beginning with slavery, in part 1, "In the House of the Master," he showed how the Atlantic slave trade stripped African cultural heritages away from slaves. The domestic slave trade further sepa-

rated blood kin, though slaveholders were less likely to separate mothers from children. In part 2, "In the House of the Mother," Frazier explained how a high incidence of female-headed households continued after emancipation. He called this trend "the matriarchate." A few former slaves who had lived in families where "the authority of the father was firmly established" were able to maintain patriarchy after emancipation and were sometimes able to buy land (Frazier 1939, pp. 106–107, 125).

When Frazier moved to part 3, "In the House of the Father," he began to discuss the families that had achieved male-headed organization. He first cited the cases of former slaves who managed to break the matriarchate by economically subordinating women upon emancipation. Whether they signed a contract with employers that included the labor of the whole family, purchased their own property in order to supervise the family's labor, or had purchased the freedom of wives and children during slavery, freedmen gained patriarchal authority. Moving on, Frazier showed how freemen (those not enslaved before the Civil War and likely to be of mixed race) were able to achieve economic independence, own property and, by extension, have what Frazier saw as a stable family life (Frazier 1939).

In parts 4 and 5, "In the City of Destruction" and "In the City of Rebirth," Frazier explained the destructive forces of urban life on morals and, in particular, family stability. He identified three groups with diverging fortunes: poor, matriarchal households; working-class, male-headed households; and the middle class, which had confused gender roles. Seeing poor migrants as naïve, he attributed their transformation into gamblers, pimps, and criminals to the loss of a folk outlook on life. To Frazier, departure from small communities of the rural South engendered an individualistic outlook on life and a hedonistic attitude toward sex. The consequences were illegitimate children, rebellious and delinquent youth, and easy divorce that cast families in disarray.

In Frazier's opinion, "By far the most important class which has come into existence in the Northern urban environment has been the industrial proletariat" (Frazier 1935, p. 305). By "proletariat" he meant male industrial and artisanal workers.<sup>7</sup> In the last section (part 5), it becomes clear that Frazier's family ideal was "the Black proletariat," the name of the book's penultimate chapter. Although this class contained a wide range of occupations and levels of family organization, he found in certain segments of the working class much hope for his vision of the modern, sophisticated Black family. He looked mostly to artisans and industrial workers who in the 1930s were increasingly involved in organized labor. In a 1935 *Journal of Negro Education* article, Frazier had predicted that true political power for Black people would result from more "realistic" racial politics that took economic standing into account. The working class would be able to realize class politics and change the terms of the fight for racial equality, initiating Black and White working-class cooperation in the struggle against exploitative employers.

Now, in his 1939 book, Frazier explicitly correlated unionized industrial workers with male-headed families. He argued that Black proletarian families were evolved families whose fathers earned a family wage that was enough for mothers and children to live on. These families, he hoped, would hold the key to more economic and, by extension, civil rights for African Americans, both through politics and a tradition of class and race pride (Frazier 1939). Frazier saw the Black proletariat as an indicator of new morals among working-class African Americans. When men held industrial jobs paying enough to strengthen their authority at home, their families began to assimilate the values of White workers, especially the value of women staying out of paid work. This gendered division of labor was the prime indicator of male authority and thereby family stability.

Finally, Frazier turned to the evolution of the middle and upper classes in the context of urbanization. The origins of these classes continually fascinated and frustrated him. While his socialism made industrial workers his heroes, as a Black scholar he could not escape the mystique of the old free Negro families. Too, he was interested in the new middle class that developed out of the Great Migration. This new “brown middle class” (Frazier 1939, pp. 420–446) was a White-collar, professional, and entrepreneurial group that he would later call the “Black Bourgeoisie” (Frazier 1957). The Brown middle class was a new class compared with the “old families” (Frazier 1939, p. 393), the elite who lived in northern and western cities before World War I and for whom Frazier had more respect. Now, with the Great Migration and the multiplicity of professional options that opened up after the war, more Black people joined the middle classes based on their occupations, and not on family prestige. As a wider range of occupations became available to African Americans, this new middle class based on certain occupations emerged: business people and white-collar workers, professionals, and public servants. The origins of members were diverse. Many members were of mixed Black-White ancestry, and where some might be from an old family, others might have grown up sharecropping on a southern plantation. Both classes emphasized light skin color, but where the class markers of the old families were respectability and European “high” culture, the new “brown middle class” relied on personal achievement, in the form of consumption and income, as class markers (Frazier 1939).

Frazier thought that because the new Brown middle class lacked both the stable traditions of the old families and “the folk culture of the masses,” “imitation and suggestion play an important role, and there is much confusion in respect to standards of behavior and consumption” (Frazier 1939, p. 419). Several pages later, he again mentioned “considerable confusion of ideals and patterns of behavior” (Frazier 1939, p. 429). This was his coded language for the loss of conventional gender roles. He disapproved of New Negro women and the egalitarianism within middle-class families, and theorized that women of the Brown middle class worked only in order to maintain unrealistic consumption levels. They could not avoid the pitfall of conspicuous consumption, however. Restraint in consumption, a key ingredient to healthy, evolved families, was now most often found in the male-headed households of the industrial proletariat. Consequently, in the waning power of the “old families,” the working class must take over the guardianship of healthy family life.

In this Brown middle class, husbands did not have proper authority as the sole breadwinners, and wives took jobs for the purposes of buying frivolous luxuries such as cars, furs, jewelry, and catering for parties. Sacrificing their rightful place in the gender hierarchy for bourgeoisie status, they emasculated their husbands in the process, and caused their marriages to stray toward moral deviance. Middle-class women colluded with capitalist exploiters and short-circuited growing racial solidarity among African American men. In other words, Frazier’s problems with the middle class stemmed from his judgment that it had two interlocking shortcomings: it failed to ally itself with working-class Black people for unified racial economic justice, and it practiced distorted gender relations. Both failings held the race back: in order to have a truly functional modern marriage, the spouses needed to be enlightened, class-conscious citizens who united together against the common enemy of capitalist exploitation, not conspicuous consumers motivated by female materialism.

Frazier also leveled charges of sexual impropriety against this group. He predicted that bourgeois gender egalitarianism in the Brown middle class led to irregular sexual morals and extramarital partners. His explanation of this phenomenon is worth quoting at length. First he, as usual, points to heterogeneity within the middle



class, showing that conspicuous consumption can sometimes involve keeping women out of the waged labor force:

Middle-class Negro families reflect in their organization and behavior the diverse economic and social backgrounds in which they are rooted. In the economically better-situated families the woman generally depends on her husband's support, especially if she comes from one of the old mulatto families in which it is traditional for the wife not to work. Moreover, this is especially true in the South, where leisure on the part of the woman is more or less a sign of superior social status among middle-class Negroes (Frazier 1939, p. 437).

But he then explains how many of these couples have unorthodox relationships:

Because of the fact that a large proportion of the middle class are salaried persons and there are few or no children in the families, relations between husband and wife, especially where both are employed, tend to be equalitarian, and a spirit of comradeship exists. This tendency is growing as occupational differentiation increases and the various occupational groups develop their own patterns of behavior and thus free themselves from standards set by the few wealthier members of the middle class. *On the other hand, there is a fringe on the middle class—generally childless couples—whose behavior approaches a bohemian mode of life. Husband and wife, both of whom are employed, not only enjoy the same freedom in their outside association and activities but, because of their so-called “sophistication,” indulge in outside sexual relations.* Although these people usually boast of their emancipation from traditional morality, it often appears that their actions are not based upon deep convictions (Frazier 1939, pp. 439–440; emphasis added).

In sum, the egalitarianism in these couples led directly to a lax sexual morality.

Frazier was right that more middle-class Black wives were sharing economic power with their husbands. Increased access to professions was responsible for a small but steady increase in the numbers of African American professional women of the middle classes. But Frazier was unable to see the possibility that, rather than emasculating their husbands or leading to sexual degeneration within families, these women were actually sharing power with them. The idea of female self-determination never entered Frazier's analysis. His own wife had given up a budding career in poetry, mentored by James Weldon Johnson, when she married Frazier (Painter 1974).

Analyzing Frazier's argument about the Brown middle class suggests that while much of his writing in *The Negro Family in the United States* is devoted to poor African Americans in desperate financial straits, his attention to middle-class families is crucial to understanding his sexual politics, because these people tended toward dual careers and egalitarian relationships. Frazier's treatment of the Brown middle class contrasts sharply with his analysis of working class and poor African Americans. His poor Black people were hungry, ignorant, and oppressed by discrimination. They would be saved through class and racial consciousness and fair-labor practices. Certain middle-class African Americans, however, chose how to live their lives. Frazier, as has been shown, found many of their choices, particularly regarding gender roles, disturbing. He used the specter of the matriarchy to show how female domination could harm Black families, and his discussion of the Brown middle class left no chance that the group would see itself as immune from gender troubles.

Frazier's gender and sexual politics, with his emphasis on hierarchical gender roles and the practice of normative heterosexuality, while not unusual for his time, are notable for the fact that his work has heavily influenced scholarship and policy debates on African American families. Most notably, he was linked with *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*, more commonly known as the (Daniel Patrick) Moynihan Report (1965)—a U.S. Department of Labor publication from the War on Poverty era. Much of the controversy surrounding the Moynihan Report equated Moynihan's views and Frazier's views from *The Negro Family in the United States*. After all, no other full-length, sustained study of Black families had appeared in the years between 1939 and 1965. However, it is important to note that the Moynihan Report was not based entirely on Frazier's work, and Moynihan used most of the quotations he took from Frazier out of context. The Moynihan report quoted only sparingly from Frazier's *The Negro Family in the United States*, *Black Bourgeoisie*, and from a 1950 article in the *Journal of Negro Education* (Frazier 1950), and relied heavily on other prominent sociologists and anthropologists. The phrases Moynihan quoted came out of Frazier's complicated and sometimes contradictory arguments. In Moynihan's usage, Frazier seemed to be saying that irreparably deviant Black families caused other racial problems.

Moynihan painted a sweeping picture of generalized Black male emasculation by Black matriarchs, ignoring Frazier's leftist argument that bourgeois' lack of racial solidarity and women's ambitions were the biggest threat to Black family health. Moynihan did not understand Frazier's distinctions between poor, working-class, and middle-class Black families, and assumed that all Black people were poor. Moynihan missed Frazier's guarded optimism that Black matriarchy was a symptom, not a cause of family stresses in poor families, and would eventually disappear. He also missed Frazier's criticisms of middle-class families. Instead Moynihan placed blame for Black economic and political disenfranchisement squarely on the shoulders of a mythical Black matriarch.

In one chapter, "The Tangle of Pathology," Moynihan concluded that it was matriarchy that was holding "the Negro community" back. Black youth were "caught" in this tangle. He correlated lower intelligence scores and the likelihood of juvenile delinquency with the absence of a father, and suggested that enlistment in the armed forces could counteract the effects of such a disorganized and matrifocal family life. The military would also enable Black (male) youth to "feel like a man" (Moynihan 1965). While Moynihan mentioned poverty and unemployment as problems for Black people, he clearly thought that Black women's power had become the worst hindrance to racial equality.

Moynihan's single-minded focus on Black matriarchs forced those who responded to him to adopt the same focus, whether they agreed with Moynihan or not. Herbert Gutman's 1976 *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom 1750–1925* sought to refute the matriarchy hypothesis, but in the process Gutman ignored the sexist implications of Frazier's indictment of Black middle-class women. Gutman's historical analysis remains the most famous study that has questioned the Moynihan report, despite being over thirty years old. *The Black Family* was widely acclaimed and is still well-read today. It was not, however, a feminist interpretation.

Gutman sought to dispute Moynihan with historical data that showed the health of male-headed African American families during and after slavery. He challenged the idea that slavery had irreparably damaged the Black family. Gutman built upon the argument put forth by John Blassingame in *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South* (1972) to argue that slaves moved in a bicultural world; that is, they behaved under coercion according to the cultural mores of their masters but held beliefs that grew out of a cultural world of their own (Gutman 1976).

Gutman questioned Frazier's and Moynihan's assumption that slavery had been responsible for the present state of African American families at all. In direct contradiction to the Moynihan report, Gutman pointed out that if slavery had been responsible for the failings of the Black family in 1965, then family disorganization ought to have been worse in the years closest to slavery, during the Civil War and Reconstruction. Presenting evidence of the heroic efforts of Black soldiers and their families to stay together, attempts by husbands to protect their wives from sexual and physical molestation, parents' attempted protection of their apprenticed children, the high numbers of postwar marriage registrations, and the high numbers of exslaves' children who paid \$1 to license their own marriages, Gutman argued that postwar family disorganization was a myth. Furthermore, he asserted that the overwhelming majority of postbellum Black rural southern households had two parents, and that sociologists had exaggerated the importance of the small but significant minority of single-parent households. Matrifocal households, consisting of a grandmother, mother, and daughter, were quite rare, he found.

Gutman argued instead that, although repression under slavery interfered with slaves' families, slaves did everything they could to conduct their family lives according to beliefs they held closely. They placed paramount importance on family and kinship ties, shown by practices that bestowed names of family and kin on children and surnames on individual families, and the recognition of cousins as blood kin and therefore forbidden marital partners. Gutman also sought to refute the notion that urban migration had destroyed African American families. He conceded that these families changed shape in the years 1880–1930, but that the majority of families had a heterosexual couple at their core. The main difference in the city, he found, was an increased number of subfamilies or augmented families living under the same roof, and he hinted that perhaps this was due to limited finances and a shortage of housing in the city.

As had many of the historians and sociologists up to that time, Gutman defined *family organization* as the presence of a male head of household, a wife, and, usually, children. Gutman sought to dispel the myth of matriarchy and male emasculation by showing that men had authority within their families throughout this period. Without directly stating the necessity of a patriarchal male head of household, he reinforced the notion that female-headed households were bad. He echoed others' assumptions that gender hierarchy was good for the race.

Attention to Frazier's matriarchy thesis and responses to it in subsequent debates have tended to drown out the fact that Frazier saw matriarchy as merely a soon-to-be-outgrown stage of African Americans' assimilation into U.S. society. On the other hand, his more pointed critiques of middle-class working women have escaped sustained analysis, and his fundamental assumptions about appropriate gender roles within the Black middle class, and among African Americans in general, have gone largely unchallenged. This article has attempted to document how elements of his personal, scholarly, and political background led him to strengthen the case for gender hierarchy within social science. Attention to his historical and ideological context reveals his preoccupation with men's authority as early as the 1930s. His context—which included socialism, the ideals of manhood among race men and New Negroes, and the autonomy of New Negro women—led him to fear not matriarchy, but women's equality with men.

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**Corresponding author:** Professor Anastasia Curwood, Department of African American and Diaspora Studies, Vanderbilt University, VU Station B, Box 351516, 2301 Vanderbilt Place, Nashville, TN 37235-1516. E-mail: a.curwood@vanderbilt.edu

## NOTES

1. I wish to acknowledge the generous assistance of Karen Campbell, Carol Skricki, and my colleagues in African American and Diaspora Studies, Vanderbilt University, in the preparation of this article. All errors are my own.
2. Frazier's own mentor Robert Park, at the University of Chicago, famously referred to African Americans as "the lady among the races" (Park 1950, cited in Miller 2003).
3. Thomas Jones to W. E. B. Du Bois, April 11, 1927; E. Franklin Frazier to W. E. B. Du Bois, January 18, 1927; W. E. B. Du Bois to E. Franklin Frazier, January 21 and 22, 1927; Frazier Papers, Box 131-9, Folder 6, MSRC. Also see versions of this story in Platt (1991) and Holloway (2002).
4. In the meantime, Frazier had published his second book, *The Free Negro Family* (Frazier 1932b). This was a short analysis of free Black families that eventually became chapter 10, "The Sons of the Free," in *The Negro Family in the United States* (Frazier 1939).
5. When Frazier applied for a UNESCO job in 1961, he was investigated by a U.S. Government loyalty board, which found him associated with twenty-four organizations that were considered to be communist or communist front. He was asked to explain his association with a list of sixteen left-leaning individuals, including W. E. B. Du Bois and Paul Robeson. Frazier, in his signature style, was unafraid of such accusations (see Frazier Papers, Box 131-4, Folder 41, MSRC). Frazier even reorganized a 1951 birthday dinner for Du Bois after it was faced with cancellation because Du Bois had been associated with communists. The dinner, moved from the Essex House to Small's Paradise in Harlem, turned out to be a splendid success, vindicating Frazier's perseverance (Lewis 2000).
6. G. J. Laing to E. Franklin Frazier, July 21, 1937; E. Franklin Frazier to G. J. Laing, July 24, 1937; E. Franklin Frazier to Ernest Burgess, July 24, 1937. Frazier Papers, Box 131-39, Folder 12, MSRC.
7. Frazier uses this term to refer to the working class in general. Not coincidentally, W. E. B. Du Bois had used the concept of the Black proletariat in *Black Reconstruction in America* (1935). In chapters 10 and 11, Du Bois studied Black laborers during Reconstruction in a Marxian framework. The Black proletariat played a heroic role, creating a labor movement in 1869, conducting themselves without violence and in dignity, and becoming the wisest voice in Reconstruction politics (Du Bois 1935).

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