The Black Family: A Generational Causality of War

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Abstract: Historically, the black family in the United States has faced several challenges given the destructive experiences throughout the diaspora. Despite several hardships such as slavery, the Great Depression and following migrations in American history, the black family was somewhat intact until the Vietnam War. During the period of the first fully integrated war in America, the family structure for blacks also changed. Ironically, the structural change occurred during a period when American also codified some civil rights for black Americans with the 1964 Civil Rights bill and the 1965 Voting Rights Act. This essay will give a brief review of some of the structural changes for the black family and consider war as a compelling factor in the rise of single parenthood in the American black family.

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1. Introduction

This essay will reflect on the writings of Hacker [2], Jones [23], and Williams [39] to consider the historical period in which the black family experiences a structural change at a large scale. As noted in the essay, typically the impact of war is usually not applied to discussions on the family. However, this essay will extend this conversation to reflect on how the Vietnam War along with simultaneous American deindustrialization had an impact on the American black family structure.

This conceptual essay is based on a review of historical events during the American Reconstruction Period, the Civil Rights Movement and the Vietnam War. This discussion aligns with what Sarkisian [31] deemed as disorganizational theories about how the black family had experienced some disintegration due to social and economic forces [3], [11], [23], [28]. The scope of this analysis included the changes faced in the American black family during the 1960s through the 1970s, which still have an impact on the contemporary family structure. Such an analysis can shed light on how war can tragically erode any family structure. The impact of war on the family remains contemporary topic within the constant service United States men and women serving in forward areas since 1987, inclusive of United States conflicts in the Persian Gulf, Iraq, Kosovo, Afghanistan, Iran, Pakistan, Yemen, and Libya.

2. Discussion on History

Through the late 1870s Reconstruction period, which brought lynch mobs and empty economic promises for 40 acres and a mule, the black family endured. Even through the great South to North migrations during 1915 through the 1960s, which included close to 3.35 million blacks [4] the black family structure often remained intact. With the inception of industrialization, blacks acquired blue-collar economic stability. From 1939-1959, the black earnings relative to white men improved by over one-third [2]. Though many were considered poor, a stable working class emerged with two-parent homes and orderly neighborhood environments.

In 1950, single female-headed households only comprised 17% of black families. Regardless of the financial strife, black families typically had both parents in the home, through formal marriage or even common law marriage [2]. "While the proportion of families headed by white women rose from 11% to 13% between 1970 and 1985, the proportion of families headed by black women jumped from 28% to 44%" [17]. The consequences left much of the black community with more health problems, poor education, and poor future employment prospects [19].

Given the history of blacks in America, the black family had endured over decades of injustice and unfair labor conditions. In fact, the 1960s brought the 1964 Civil Rights Legislations that prohibited discrimination on the job. In 1965, the Voting Rights Act also supposedly ensured rights for blacks and should have strengthened the black family with more political and economic power. In the 1960s, public policy seemed to make a contentious shift to black empowerment; yet in this same window the traditional black family structure started to erode.

3. Discussion on the Vietnam War

The discussion about black family structures and stability is typically not tied to the impact war has on the family. Lieberman stated "war and the family, two profoundly important social institutions which have been widely investigated… have rarely been studied together" [26]. Nonetheless, during the mid-1960s the United States was in the midst of political strife at home with the civil rights movement, and strife abroad with the Vietnam conflict.

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Potentially, an analysis of war and the black family structure can lend insight to how the black family began eroding at a period when the Untied States began to codify black Americans' civil rights.

According to Galbraith [14], President John F. Kennedy had ordered that the United States withdraw from Vietnam in October 1963, a month before his assassination. Conspiracy theorists believe this is a compelling factor in the plot to kill the president. In contrast, when Lyndon B. Johnson became president, the United States escalated the conflict in Vietnam, and on March 8, 1965, troops landed in Vietnam in the first official invasion [5]. In such a controversial war, the United States needed the manpower to populate the front lines. In the same historical window, 29% of the black population was unemployed [7]; therefore, drafting men from disenfranchised black communities seemingly solved two problems, providing jobs by enlisting men into the armed forces.

Often, the poor and disenfranchised were sent to the front lines and forward areas in war. Lieberman considered the Vietnam War at the time of his publication, the longest and most costly war to record in the United States [36]. Further, the higher rates of unemployment among the black community led to higher rates of blacks in the armed forces. In turn, "blacks at all age levels have higher rates—about 75 percent higher—of death and disability than whites" [26].

In this window, Muhammad Ali attracted international attention for denouncing the war. He remained vocal about the Vietnam War being a 'racist enterprise" [12]. To Ali's argument, Ernst and Baldwin [12] wrote that the draft "inducted 64% of eligible blacks, but only 31% of eligible whites in1967, and was particularly biased against blacks" [12]. Even the Vietcong openly questioned why blacks were fighting for a country that did not respect the black community [15].

The civil rights legislation to some extent counters the argument about the United States historical denial of civil rights for blacks. Therefore, potentially the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Laws and 1965 Voting Rights Act was to assuage blacks and make fighting for the United States a palatable option. One may reflect on the escalation of the Vietnam War, drafting disproportionate numbers of black enlisted men, and the timing of the new civil rights legislation. Note the United States had not passed a civil rights bill in close to 80 years since the passage of civil rights laws in the Reconstruction period. These events together seemed more than a coincidence for the Johnson administration left in the wake of an assassinated President Kennedy who refused to escalate the war in Southeast Asia.

Though going to war may have been perceived as a valiant way to defend America and feed a family, the effects of war-related posttraumatic stress syndrome (PTSD) also extended to veterans' family members. For many families of U.S. military veterans, wars created a trauma that extended past the soldiers' tours of duty. War trauma could affect families at each stage of the family life cycle [32]. The cycle can affect the marriage and family [13]. Consequently, the family can experience emotional trauma and extended absence of the father and husband from family life [16]. Consequently, returning veterans experienced more distress and anxiety and brought such distress to the family. Given the disproportionate numbers of blacks sent to Vietnam, a disproportionate number of blacks and their families faced the ills of PTSD when veterans returned home [29].

Wilhelm wrote that Vietnam was the first truly integrated war for the United States with blacks and whites fighting alongside each other. "So many blacks died in the first two years that the front lines were forever dubbed "Soulville." From 1965 to 1967, blacks represented only 11% of the U.S. population but roughly 23% of the war's combat casualties" [36]. As the war continued, blacks comprised 18% of casualties and then later 14%. However, the rate of blacks killed in Vietnam was significantly higher than their white counterparts [37].

4. Discussion on deindustrialization and war

Deindustrialization and the return from war left black men economically inert and floundering around metropolitan centers unemployed or underemployed. Even when black men invested in education, there were no guarantees of jobs, or even that jobs would reward educational efforts [20]. During the 1960s and 1970s, the deindustrialization for America's employers had physically or even mentally moved great numbers of jobs out of the reach of black men.

The new educationally intensive positions recruited white men first, then white women. Third preference was for black women then black men. Black men, especially those lacking proper educational preparation, were shunned in the academic environment [21]. Being on the margins of employment preferences intensified fiscal anxieties for blacks. Hence, the original problem of plant closure and relocation became doubly troublesome with educational and labor preferences complicating black economic stability and the black family structure.

American employment had shifted from blue-collar employment to "knowledge-intensive jobs such as advertising, finance, brokering and law. For example, between 1953 and 1984, New York City lost 600,000 jobs in manufacturing, but gained 700,000 in white -collar jobs; Philadelphia lost 280,000 manufacturing jobs, but gained 178,000 white-collar jobs" [39]. Those with a better education obtained the more stable and more lucrative jobs. These time periods coincided with Vietnam veterans return from the conflict in Southeast Asia.

Even without the stigma of being a veteran from an unpopular war, black men historically have struggled to find white-collar jobs [18]. Hacker stated, "Paul Robeson turned to acting because he had no serious offers after graduating from Columbia Law School" [2]. Consequently, blacks only comprised 0.9% of the architects, 2.7 % of the biologists, 3.0 % of the physicians, and 3.2% of the lawyers.

Though the list grew long for positions that excluded blacks, there existed a number of jobs in which blacks were overrepresented. Blacks were 30.7 % of the nursing aids and orderlies, 25.5% of the taxi drivers, 24.8% of hotel maids and housemen, and 23.4 % of the bus drivers. Quite frankly, blacks were routed into jobs which whites were reluctant to take. Though black women may have been perceived as being more palatable, they still were relegated to work specific workspaces [22]. Jobs with high turnover, low pay, and more openings tended to be the leftovers from which blacks had to choose.

Jones [23] commented that these were also the jobs, which have the least amount of benefits. "The problem lay not with an overly generous welfare state but with paltry wages and benefits that were the hallmark of 'free

enterprise'" black women "mak[ing] a relatively greater contribution to family income than their white counterparts" and "a steady decline in job options for black men" creates a familial shift, a shift to black female-headed households [23].

One might consider that education and the GI Bill access to education through community college and other trades would help. However, college degrees for blacks seem to have little effect; blacks with college degrees had a jobless rate 2.24 times that of whites [2]. Even blacks who could find work often were trapped involuntarily in part-time jobs or jobs with fewer hours a week and fewer weeks a year. Resultantly, even gainfully employed black men earned $731 for every $1000 that their white counterpart earned. Once again, a college degree did little to bridge this gap; college educated black men only earned $798 to every $1000 that his white counterpart earned [2]. Society had neutralized the black man's ability to care for his family. As a result, the shift in income and employment has resulted in a shift in the black family structure. The war followed by rapid deindustrialization seemed to have a compelling effect on black men's ability to support a family, leaving black women as the head of the household.

5. Discussion on black families

Before World War II, two-parent headed homes were the predominant types for both whites and blacks with only 10% and 18% of homes being headed by females respectively. After a civil rights period that supposedly empowered blacks and women, black families emerged as a disenfranchised group where 68% of births to black women ages 15-25 were outside of marriage [2]. Further note, just before this rapid increase in single black motherhood, was the period when a disproportionate number of black men were sent to war to return mentally or physically disabled or in a body bag. A generation of black men was drafted away from their positions in the black family, often unable to return to economic stability a contributing factor in the single black family.

Loss in employment for black men is directly related to the sharp rise of female-headed households. A shrinking pool of "marriageable" (employed) men had evolved, disintegrating traditional black family structures. Though blacks were finding work in some areas, even education often failed to equip black men to earn comparable incomes. To compensate, black women returned to schools at higher rates, earning more money than black men. Black women by contrast, who earned less than their white women counterparts, took on more supervisory and managerial positions in the 1980s [10]. This shift occurred, deindustrialization was driving down men's manufacturing wages, disproportionally affected black men's wages [38], [9]. All of these factors, including the historical educational gap between black men and black women served to destabilize the black family [27].

6. Conclusion

Equal opportunity and access to the American dream seemed to escape the black community despite civil rights legislation, education, and career ascension. Even new fields in technology and digital coding have left blacks behind as such intricate jobs require expensive and sometimes exclusive education which is often out of reach for disenfranchised groups [21]. Opportunities to serve in the military had increased along with the opportunity for more

death and destruction of the black community. In addition to the disproportionate numbers of black causalities in Vietnam, the trend continued into the Persian Gulf War 1990-1991 where blacks were 17.2% of casualties were black men [18] though blacks were only 12% of the United States population [34]. Consequently, black men continued to lose their positions within their family structures and communities when the war destroyed their lives, and the lives of generations after them.

Some researchers have examined the impact of the Vietnam War and subsequent posttraumatic stress on veterans of color [1], [24], [25], [37]. Researchers also have been examining the black family structure and the various social ills that have adversely affected the black family [6], [8], [30], [31], [33], yet these discussions are not inclusive of how the Vietnam War was a compelling element, which disproportionately hurt the black community and its families. This conceptual essay highlights the supported needed by veterans and their families. Such support is beyond financial, but the entire family should have access to emotional and psychological support. While this essay is a unique approach to considering the erosion of the American black family, it is limited to an analysis of previous research. This analysis can be expanded with qualitative inquires which invite families to share their lived experiences in relation to financial, psychological and emotional transitions that the family experiences when veterans re- enter society. Such studies can better support Veterans Affairs and other agencies tasked with supporting young men and women returning to their families from war.

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