

# What Neighborhood Poverty Studies Can Learn from African American Studies

by

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*For the past twenty-five years, urban poverty research has not received sufficient attention from scholars in African American Studies, leaving this important research in the hands of sociologists, psychologists, and urban studies scholars, whose research focuses primarily on the detrimental effects of growing up in a poor neighborhood and paints a negative picture of poor people, in general, and African Americans, in particular. While the consequences of growing up in poverty cannot be ignored, African American Studies scholars can offer an alternative perspective by augmenting poverty studies with urban poverty residents' —who are disproportionately African American who can explain their perceptions about their environments to identify sources of strength and resiliency within low-income urban African American communities.*

Since the late 1980s, there has been a resurgence of urban poverty research among sociologists, psychologists, urban planners, and economists. Many sociologists ascribe the renewed interest in poverty to several events in the 1980s: the widespread visibility of homelessness in American cities, the publication of William Julius Wilson's (1987) *The Truly Disadvantaged, The Inner City, the Underclass, and Public Policy*, and sociology's subsequent resurrection of social disorganization theory<sup>i</sup> (Leventhal & Brooks-Gunn, 2000; Gephart & Brooks-Gunn, 1997; Furstenberg, 2001; Sampson, 2001; Brooks-Gunn, et al 1993; Massey, 2001). Wilson argued that "liberal" research on urban poverty had been curtailed for over a decade by the acrimony created by the debate over the controversial Moynihan Report, and he claimed that "liberals" were caught unaware when unemployment, rates of public assistance, and concentrated poverty all increased significantly during the 1970s and 1980s. On the other hand, Wilson maintained, "conservatives" had generated their own theories to explain the recent social changes that had occurred in urban areas, blaming liberal social policy for promoting "underclass," "welfare," or "ghetto" values and the subsequent perpetuation of what was popularly being termed the "urban underclass" (Murray, 1985; Auletta, 1983; Wilson, 1987; Peterson, 1991).

These conservative arguments were gaining public attention, so, as a liberal, one of Wilson's goals was to reorient discussions about urban poverty and the "urban underclass" to the structural constraints created by the larger society, such as discrimination in housing and employment. Wilson argued that in the context of dramatic macroeconomic shifts such as de-industrialization, globalization, decreased government commitment to sustain inner city institutions and out-migrations of the African American middle class, poverty had become disproportionately concentrated in African American neighborhoods during the 1970s and 1980s, creating spatially isolated communities of extreme "ghetto"<sup>ii</sup> poverty, or neighborhoods where over 40% of the residents live below the poverty line.

In the Northeastern United States, the proportion of African Americans living in areas where 40% or more of the residents living in poverty increased from 15% to 34 % in the 1970s. By 1980, in the five largest American cities, 68% of poor whites lived in non-poverty areas while only 15% of poor African Americans lived in non-poverty areas. By 1990, 11.2 million people lived in severely disadvantaged neighborhoods, and over 50% of them were people of African descent. In contrast, a mere 11.8% of the residents were white, even though whites comprise 75% of the population. Furthermore, nearly 40% of all poor African Americans lived in extreme poverty areas. Hence, urban African Americans were hit the hardest by the economic changes during the 1970s and 1980s (Massey & Eggers, 1990), prompting Massey and Denton (1993) to describe America's modern *apartheid*.

Wilson's work galvanized other social researchers, and studies on urban poverty, particularly *concentrated* urban poverty, have proliferated over the past twenty years. Until very recently, relatively few scholars utilizing perspectives from African American Studies have contributed to the discussions of neighborhood poverty, resulting in a body of literature that remains overwhelmingly focused on the extent to which poverty residents are "at risk" for negative life chances. While this area of inquiry is vital to understanding the effects of poverty on urban residents, "liberal" urban poverty research often suffers from a tendency to stigmatize poverty populations, a disproportionate number of whom are African American. Therefore, African American Studies scholars must become more active in the field of urban poverty studies, particularly neighborhood poverty studies, since a grass-roots intervention would be possible at the neighborhood level and congruent with the goals of community development.

The urban environment has been a focus of Sociology since its inception because early sociologists were interested in the effects that urbanization in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century would have on European, and later, American society.<sup>iii</sup>

European sociologists were concerned with urbanization, or on the historical and comparative analysis of the ways social activities “locate themselves in space and according to interdependent processes of societal development and change,” while American sociologists in the past century have focused more on urbanism, which “deals with culture, with meanings, with symbols, patterns of daily life, and processes of adjustment to the environment of the city, but also with conflicts, with forms of political organization, at the street, neighborhood and city levels (Gottdiener & Hutchison, 2006). During the first two quarters of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, African Americans became increasingly urban, and thus garnered the attention of urban sociologists, who often focused their research on social problems in the urban African American community. In 1973 Joyce Ladner and other African American social scientists called for “the death of white Sociology.” Although Ladner realized that the contents of her book by the same name did not signal an end to mainstream sociology as it was known in the late 1960s and 1970s, the book was an “attempt to publish a volume that would capture some of the debate and protest over the ways that traditional sociology (and some of the other social sciences) ha[d] stigmatized African Americans” (1998). Ladner was joining a group of African American social scientists who rejected the notion that sociology was “objective” or “value-free” and argued for a Black Sociology (Alkalimat, 1973).

Black Sociology is based on the premise that Black and white peoples have never shared, to any great degree, the same physical environment or social experiences. People in different positions relate to each other and to their physical environment differently. The result is a different behavior pattern, a configuration that should be analyzed from the view of the oppressed—not the oppressor (Staples, 1973, p. 168).

In the wake of the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements, many African American social researchers argued for a paradigm shift that would consider African American issues from the perspectives of African Americans themselves. Some rejected the positivist and empiricist<sup>iv</sup> tradition in Sociology and argued that there was a long-standing tradition in social science of associating negative behavior and cultural characteristics with people of African descent (Slaughter & McWhorter, 1985). Forty years later, this tradition is still alive and well among social researchers, and much of the research on African Americans and the African American family over the past twenty-five years has been quite contentious and largely centered around debates about culture (Allen, 1978). Debates over African American culture have tremendous implications for African American children, since nearly half of all African American children are living in poverty and African American families and culture are often blamed for their “failure” to prepare their children for participation in mainstream society (S. Hill, 2001). From a developmental perspective, the family is the first mediator a child has in navigating a complex and challenging environment and determines where a child will live, with whom he or she will come in contact, and to what degree the child is supported in his or her development (Garbarino, 1982).

One of the most controversial studies focusing on the African American family during the 1960s was published in 1965 by the Assistant Secretary of Labor, Daniel Patrick Moynihan. In “The Negro Family: A Case for National Action. Moynihan argued that “a national effort is required that will give a unity of purpose to the many activities of the Federal government in this area, directed to a new kind of national goal: the establishment of a stable Negro family structure” (1965). Although Moynihan and some of his contemporaries conceded that structural conditions in American society such as racism, and discrimination in employment, education, and housing caused many of the social problems that confronted African American families (see Gans, 1968; Valentine, 1968), ultimately, the so-called Moynihan Report blamed the problems experienced by African American families on the African American family itself, and many liberal and African American social scientists took issue with one of Moynihan’s central claims: “At the heart of the deterioration of the fabric of Negro society is the deterioration of the Negro family. It is the fundamental source of the weakness of the Negro community at the present time” (1965). Moynihan, borrowing Kenneth Clark’s term (1965), described a “tangle of pathology” in the African American family that was characterized by a preponderance of female-headed households--which he attributed to the matriarchal<sup>v</sup> character of the African American family. Journalistic accounts of the report frequently commented on the characteristics that Moynihan identified without including the historical and social context of his arguments, so the American public only heard about problems in the African American family, not the fact that American society was to blame. Negative characterizations of the of the African American family such as these are what prompted many African American social scientists to rally for a new perspective that called for an alternative to the notion that African Americans were to blame for the oppressive social conditions under which they were living.

## **Pathological/Pathogenic School**

University of Chicago-trained African American sociologist E. Franklin Frazier’s (1939) early study on African American family life was pivotal in the area of Black Family Studies, and he may have inadvertently laid the foundation (Karenga, 2002) for the pathologic/pathogenic school or what Valentine (1968) calls the “pejorative tradition.” Also called the deficit perspective or “blaming-the- victim<sup>vi</sup>,” this ideological perspective attributes the social ills afflicting racial minority and low-income groups to internal rather than external factors (Hill, 1993, Staples, 1971, Ingram, 1982). Although Franklin pointed to a myriad of social problems in low-income communities, he attributed their cause to the larger societal structure. Myrdal (1944/1964), in his influential work on the condition of African Americans, *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy*, also contributed to the pathological perspective when he described the inner-workings of the African American family and community as follows:

For the most part, he is not proud of those things in which he differs from white America. Moreover, in practically all its differences, American Negro culture is not something independent of general American culture. It is a distorted development, or an unhealthy condition, of American culture. The instability of the Negro family, the inadequacy of educational facilities for Negroes, the emotionalism in the Negro church, the insufficiency and unwholesomeness of Negro recreational activity, the excess of Negro social organizations, the narrowness of interest of the average Negro, the provincialism of his political thinking, the high Negro crime rate, the cultivation of the arts to the neglect of other fields, superstition, personality difficulties, and other 'characteristics' are mainly forms of social ill-health, which, for the most part, are created by caste pressures (in Rose, 1964, p. 294).

An underlying assumption in many of the early African American family studies was that the process of enslavement had obliterated African culture, and that what remained was a pathological imitation of white culture. The argument was that African Americans had been "made in America" (S. Hill, 2001; Frazier, 1939, Myrdal, 1944, Engram, 1982). The notion that African American culture (and the family) was a pathological by-product of slavery and race discrimination in America prompted a great deal of debate during the Black Power Era of the mid-to late 1960's, a watershed period in American society and academia. Partly in an effort to demonstrate that vestiges of African culture had survived the harsh conditions of the slave trade and enslavement, historians have contributed much to the research on African American families and have helped to substantiate that African Americans did maintain a strong family tradition that was able to survive the slave trade, legal segregation, discrimination, and enforced poverty (Franklin, 1989; Hill, 1993).

Blassingame (1972) challenged the notion that slavery had destroyed the African family by using evidence from slave narratives to show that despite disruptions during the slave trade and no legal basis for marriage, a functioning African American family did exist, provided role models and an important survival mechanism during slavery. Fogel and Engerman (1976) asserted that slave owners did not separate families as frequently as previously thought because it was more practical and profitable to keep them together. Genovese (1972) argued that both historians and sociologists had missed the mark by assuming a historical continuity and attempting to trace the Black ghetto of the 1960s backward. He argued that slave *law* had often been examined too closely to the neglect of actual practice, and that an examination of enslaved families on plantations illuminated the reality of the quarters: whenever possible, enslaved Africans formed families that served as sources of support.

In a survey of census data from urban areas from the 1880s to the 1920s, Gutman (1976), found that a large number of African American families were living in nuclear families, and that it was not until the urban migrations of the 1920s through the 1940s that the African American family structure began to see noticeable changes. During the same time period, African Americans' expansion into an urban proletariat helped to create a new Black middle class, changing some African Americans' experience with poverty as they moved into semi-skilled common laboring jobs in manufacturing, transportation, and trade. Still, during the Great Migrations of the 1920s and 1940s, northern African American communities developed within the context of poverty and residential segregation, and African Americans still experienced disproportionate rates of poverty (Massey & Denton, 1993). Although the emergent urban African American community was characterized by dilapidated housing, poor health care, vice, and crime, residential segregation served to produce communities that contained an African American middle class, providing stability and leadership (Trotter, 1993).

The above-mentioned historical studies demonstrated that there were stable African American families and that the "problems" that researchers like Moynihan cited such as out-of-wedlock birth and female headed households occurred simultaneously with the rise of the 20<sup>th</sup> century urban ghetto. After 1925, urbanization and migrations caused problems such as juvenile delinquency, welfare dependency, and female-headed households; it was during the second and third quarters of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century that the African American family began to experience more instability. Urban families were more susceptible to disruptions caused by the experiences of urbanization, reduction of family functioning, and loss of support from the extended family (Trotter, 1993). Thus, the recent "instability" in the African American family could not be attributed to some inherent cultural pathology.

## **Culture of Poverty**

Although recent commentators on Moynihan, a self-avowed "liberal," have argued that his critics decried his as report racist, but neglected his statistical findings and the fact that he called for a plan for "National Action" to combat poverty and inequality, Moynihan's report nonetheless perpetuated negative characterizations of African American families and the theory that poor people had developed a culture of poverty whose work patterns and family processes perpetuated poverty (Wilson, 1987; Hymowitz, 2005; Gewertz, 2007). This "liberal" ideology was only slightly better than conservative theories in that culture of poverty theorists acknowledged that those who belonged to the culture of poverty did not create the culture. Built on the work of Oscar Lewis (1968), the culture of poverty thesis has been used to undermine the poor and, by extension, people of African descent. Lewis argued that poor people develop a subculture defined by some seventy social, economic, and character traits. Lewis, an anthropologist, looked at "poverty and its associated traits as a culture, or more accurately a subculture, with its own structure and rationale, as a way of life that is passed down from generation to generation along family lines" (1968, p. 187).

He argued that within the culture of poverty, people do not live by middle class values-- which are assumed to be superior--despite the fact that they are aware of and talk about the values and even claim some of the values as their own. Like Moynihan, who argued that “most of the aberrant, inadequate or anti-social behavior did not establish, but served to perpetuate the cycle of poverty and deprivation” in the African American family (p. 76), Lewis believed that once the culture of poverty was established, the effects on the children perpetuated the culture from generation to generation:

By the time slum children are age six or seven, they have usually absorbed the basic values and attitudes of the subculture and are not psychologically geared to take full advantage of the changing conditions or increased opportunities that may occur in their lifetime (p. 188).

And finally, he argued “Indeed the *poverty of culture* is one of the crucial aspects of the *culture of poverty*” (Italics mine, p. 197).

## **The Undeserving Poor**

By the late 1960s, negative characterizations of African Americans advanced by researchers like Moynihan and Lewis, especially those studies focused on African Americans living below the poverty line, had led to African Americans being labeled the “undeserving poor” (Gans, 1968; Katz, 1989). Despite the findings of the Kerner Commission<sup>vii</sup> (1968) following the rebellions in Watts, Detroit, and Newark in the late 1960s, Herbert Gans (1968) posited that:

The Negro poor, at least, are now seen by many whites as undeserving: they have rioted despite the passage of civil rights legislation and the War on Poverty and should not be rewarded for their ungrateful behavior. Observers who feel the Negro poor are deserving, on the other hand, claim that the rebellions stem from the failure of white society to grant the economic, political, and social equality it had long promised and that rioting and looting are only desperate attempts by the poor to obtain the satisfactions that the affluent society has denied them (p. 204).

Historically, the treatment of impoverished people in American society has depended on whether society deems those people deserving or undeserving of society’s help, and Americans have used different yardsticks to determine whether certain groups of people were worthy of assistance (Katz, 1989).

In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, distinctions were made between the disabled and widows, and between paupers, or those who were able-bodied, but chose not to work. The perception of the poor and the role of the federal government's responsibility for providing economic relief for the poor changed during the Great Depression under the New Deal. During the worst economic downturn in American history, when unemployment rates skyrocketed to an astonishing 25% in 1933, Americans began to understand that poverty and unemployment were not the fault of the poor, but rather could be attributed to macroeconomic conditions. Still, unlike many other industrialized nations of the time, the United States distinguished between social insurance programs like Social Security and public assistance programs like Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC). Gradually, Social Security became an "impregnable national institution," and by the 1980s, even conservative president Ronald Reagan perpetuated the belief that Social Security was an American entitlement, a perpetual insurance fund that would pay for itself. "For by dissociating social insurance from relief, they won public allegiance to welfare for the middle class" (Katz, 1989). According to Rodgers (1996), Americans are "very sympathetic to the poor, but don't like welfare and do not want social policy to be wasteful or to reward, support, or encourage indolence or immoral behavior," which is the type of behavior described by culture of poverty theorists.

### **The Strength of Black Families/Adaptive Vitality School**

In response to the negative characterizations of the African American family and preferring an alternative orientation to the social problems faced by African Americans, scholars in the field of African American family studies, African American sociologists, historians, and psychologists have spent the past several decades highlighting the strengths of African American families and African Americans' ability to adapt and cope in the face of limited opportunities, critiquing the problems with assessment methods used by the larger white society, and explaining the impact that racism, discrimination, and cultural difference have on interpretations of African American culture, families, and children (Billingsley, 1968, 1992; Hill, 1973, 1991, 1998; Allen, 1978; Ladner, 1971, 1973; Stevenson, 1998). According to R. Hill (1998):

A core feature of our holistic framework is a *solutions perspective* which involves identifying factors at the societal, community, family, and individual levels that enhance the resiliency of African American families to overcome and to resolve the major problems and challenges confronting them. Such an approach would facilitate the identification of cultural strengths and effective coping strategies in the African American community that enhance Black family functioning. Moreover, such a framework should involve identifying societal forces and policies which are likely to have the strongest effects on strengthening African American families (p. 18).



Furthermore, Hill (1998) argues many social scientists use a “conventional” perspective to study African American families, and cites the following problems in African American family research:

- (1) The African American family is treated peripherally, or omitted because it is not considered an important unit of focus
- (2) Social scientists accept the assumptions of the “deficit model”-- which attributes most problems in the African American family to internal pathological deficiencies in African American families.
- (3) They fail to incorporate recent findings from the 1970s and 1980s which contradict the basic tenets of the deficit model
- (4) They fail to focus on positive policies, programs, services, self-help effort and coping strategies that are successful in strengthening African American families (p. 23).

The strength-of-Black families school, or what Karenga (2002) terms the “adaptive vitality school” has been able to demonstrate that the African American family possesses many strengths that have facilitated their survival, such as a strong religious orientation, strong kinship bonds, strong work orientation, a high achievement orientation, and flexibility of family roles (Hill, 1972).

According to Wilson (1987), concomitant with the development of the adaptive-vitality school, was an alarming change in the structure of poverty in American society. During the 1970s and 1980s, poverty rates increased, poverty became more concentrated in urban areas, and among women, children, African Americans and Latinos. These structural changes affected African Americans disproportionately, who by the 1980s made up 34% of those urban residents living in concentrated poverty. Wilson’s argument is that while the strength-of-Black-families school spent the Civil Rights Era and the Black Power Era defending African American culture and emphasizing positive coping strategies among urban African Americans, and just as more opportunities were opening up for African Americans, three overlapping transformations occurred in the 1970s and 1980s: joblessness, crime and welfare dependency, and spatial isolation of the African American poor. After what he described as “acrimonious debate” over the Moynihan Report, Wilson (1987) argued that “liberal” researchers avoided studying behaviors that were seen as derogatory or stigmatizing to African Americans; consequently, urban problems, especially ones that were seen as unflattering to African Americans, such as crime, delinquency, and teenage pregnancy, were neglected until the late 1980s and 1990s (Wilson, 1987; Sampson, Morenoff & Earls, 1999; Gephart & Brooks-Gunn, 1997; Massey, 1991; Peterson, 1991; N. Hare, 1976; Staples, 1993). Conservatives had had no such reservations about studying urban poverty issues and publicly denounced the Great Society government programs for promoting “underclass” values.

## The Urban Underclass

The urban underclass was comprised of a growing class of people who were mostly of African descent, urban, and believed to be outside of the American class system. This class was believed to be different from the rest of the poor, especially in terms of their behavior. The popular media paraded members of the “Black underclass” before the American mainstream, who were shocked by the conditions of its nation’s cities. Underclass soon became a codeword for “socially immobile, unemployed, urban, and [B]lack” (Rolison, 1991, p. 288).

The term “underclass” was initially intended to be an economic one, and like other euphemistic terms such as “urban,” “inner-city,” and “ghetto,” underclass has invariably come to take on racial, spatial, and/or behavioral characteristics. Gephart and Brooks-Gunn (1993) define the “urban underclass” as usually being characterized by the following: (1) persistence and/or intergenerational transmission of poverty; (2) geographic concentration; (3) social isolation from mainstream society; (4) unemployment and underemployment (5) low skills and education, and (6) *membership in a minority group*. Gans (1990) argues that most people see members of the underclass as Black and Hispanic and associate numerous patterns of negative behavior with what was formerly an economic definition.

Almost always these patterns involve behavior thought to be undeserving by the definers.... Moreover, the researchers tend to assume that the behavior patterns they report are caused by norm violations on the part of area residents and not by the conditions under which they are living, or the behavioral choices open to them as a result of these conditions (p. 272).

In the 1980s and 1990s, academic discussions of the urban underclass centered on the varying characteristics of poverty, wherein some scholars agreed that there was a segment of the urban population that may never escape poverty (Lawson, 1992). What characteristics most distinguished them from the rest of the poor? Was it the length of time that they remained poor (persistent poverty)? Was it geographic concentration of the poor (concentrated poverty)? Was it their attitudes? Was it their behavior? What created underclass poverty? What sustained it? Was it simply a by-product of industrial capitalism? After sociology had gone through a period that Duncan (2001) labels “aspatial and unecological,” the publication of Wilson’s book helped to reorient poverty discussions from the individual, (and often African American) to the neighborhood, or structural, level (Leventhal & Brooks-Gunn, 2000).

Nonetheless, what seems to have happened is that somehow all urban (or even low-income) African Americans have become lumped together with the underclass—when the definers were talking about only a small segment of the poverty population.

Indeed, over the last twenty-five years poverty has become racialized. “Even though the majority of the poor are still white and working as they were in the 1930s and thereafter--The public impression is quite clearly the reverse: poverty wears a [B]lack face and is presumed to follow from an unwillingness to enter the labor force” (Newman, 2007).

### **The Negative Consequences of Growing up in a Poor Neighborhood**

In the late 1980s, because of the increase in concentrated poverty, the neighborhood became an important unit of analysis in social research. Researchers disagreed over if and how *neighborhood* poverty affected children. Both sociologists and psychologists have spent a great deal of time simply illuminating the risks associated with residence in neighborhoods of extremely concentrated poverty, and those who study African American children frequently focus on the development of deviant behaviors in very high-risk settings (McLoyd & Ceballo, 1998). Numerous studies have demonstrated that African American children living in high poverty areas are more likely to be exposed to violence and mental health problems, to experience abuse and neglect, to drop out of high school, and to have children in their teens (Kirkpatrick, 1993; Furstenberg, 2001; Coulton, Corbin, Su, & Chow, 1993; Sheidow, 2001; Connell & Halpern-Felsher, 1995; Crane 1991; U.S. Surgeon General, 1999; Mayer & Jencks, 1989). Still, sociologists are unclear as to what extent living in areas of concentrated disadvantage affects children and families. In a recent series on neighborhood effects, a sociologist admitted that most agree that something is going on at the neighborhood level, “but [w]e just don’t know exactly what it is” (Sampson, 2001).

Psychologists, on the other hand, have been more inclined to focus on protective factors and resiliency, although these aspects of neighborhood poverty have received a paucity of attention until quite recently (See Rutter, 1987; Beale Spencer, 1985, 2001; Haight, 1998; Brunious, 1998; Brodsky, 2001; Hale Benson, 1986; Jarrett, 1995). Spencer, a developmental psychologist who studies the adaptive coping strategies of low income African American male adolescents, was among few scholars in the 1990s who suggested that African American children’s perceptions should be taken into account when studying African American neighborhoods, behaviors, and outcomes. She warns that “a lack of understanding of cultural contexts leads to a misinterpretation of minority youth behavior and development” (2001, p. 53). According to Spencer:

Minority youth live, develop, and mature within high-risk environments that present systematic structural obstacles to success including family, neighborhood, school....The ways in which minority youth perceive their environments and cope with contextual stressors mediate the relationship between structural barriers and outcomes. These perceptual processes vary by developmental status. If we can understand the perceptual processes then we can design developmental and culturally sensitive interventions for promoting competence and success in spite of structural barriers.”

Rutter (1987) described four protective mechanisms practiced among low-income African American families that are likely to enhance resilience among children:

- 1) reducing of negative outcomes by reducing a child’s exposure to risk or altering the risk
- 2) reducing negative chain reactions following a child’s exposure to risk
- 3) establishing and maintaining self- esteem
- 4) opening of opportunities

The extant literature on resiliency demonstrates that African Americans do utilize culture adaptive techniques to mediate the risks encountered in high poverty neighborhoods, and in the past two years, several studies published in the *Journal of Black Psychology* could signal an upsurge in poverty studies that focus on resilience (Haight, 1998; Jarret, 1995, Stevenson, 1998, Brodsky 2001; Lambert, Rowan, & Kim, 2005; Greer, 2007; Jones, 2007; Utsey, Bolden, & Lanier, 2007). Nonetheless, Utsey, Bolden, Lanier, & Williams (2007), argue:

The empirical research literature on risk and resilience among African American populations is in its infancy. Given the evidence that African Americans are at greater risk for adversity and life stress, more research is needed to uncover those factors that predict positive outcomes despite exposure to risk and adversity. Moreover, there is a need to expand what we know about the role of cultural factors in predicting positive outcomes for African Americans (p. 78).

## Finding a Balanced Analysis

According to Karenga (2002), “The tasks of an emancipatory social science are to develop a *critical and balanced analysis* [italics added] which reveals Blacks strengths and weaknesses as well as a prescription for self-conscious action to free themselves and to shape reality into their own image and interest” (p. 323). What this brief historical review of the African American urban poverty literature has attempted to demonstrate is that the research still lacks a balanced analysis. On the one hand, conservative theorists erroneously “blame the victims” of poverty, but on the other hand, liberals, in an attempt to illuminate the negative consequences of poverty, paint a derogatory picture of African Americans. Scholars from the adaptive-vitality school are rightly concerned that studying negative outcomes and behaviors will further stigmatize African Americans, and prefer to focus on the strength and resiliency of African Americans. Nearly nine-out-of ten (86.5%) of African Americans lived in urban or metropolitan areas in 2000 (Iceland & Weinberg, 2002). In 2006, while the official poverty rate for the United States was 13.3% (up from 12.1% in 2000), *one-out-of-four*, or 25.3%, of people reporting to be Black were living below the poverty line, currently defined as a family of four that earns less than \$20, 614 per year (American Community Survey, 2006). For urban dwellers, the poverty rate is higher at 16.7%, and urbanites comprise two out of five (39.9 %) of all people living in poverty (U. S. Census, 2000). In light of statistics such as these, Nathan Hare’s (1976) critique of emphasizing resilience to the exclusion of the problems that African American families and children still face is quite salient:

The strength of Black families orientation prohibits any recognition of pathological *consequences of our oppression*. Broken down to its barest ingredients, it constitutes a collective defense mechanism of simple denial....In the simplistic effort to prove that all is well with the Black family situation, Black intellectuals help make it easier for an oppressive society to ignore the heinous conditions it imposes on the Black family (p.5)

Hare believes that critics of Moynihan:

...harpd on his reactionary interpretations but wrote off his statistical findings involving the relationship between racio-economic oppression and Black family decay. Hence, the strength of Black families school has misled the Black movement away from an attack on the suffering of Blacks in their family situation and related conditions.....We must understand that this “pathology” is not a product of the inherent physiological uniqueness of Blacks but a consequence of our oppression, of our psycho-socio-cultural destruction.....There is really no need, after all, to complain about an oppression that leaves no mark on the psychic, the cultural and social character of its victims—and the more we have come to believe that curious premise the more we have not cried out as a people, the more had our righteous indignation faded into apathy and relative silence (p.12-14).

Karenga (2002) contends that Hare has pointed to a serious dilemma confronting scholars of African American experiences: “How does one prove strength in oppression without overstating the case, diluting criticism of the system and absolving the oppressor in the process?” (p. 323). Wilson, however controversial, reminded researchers that unhealthy behavioral characteristics of the poor cannot be considered in isolation, but should be considered in light of larger structural realities. Still, critics of Wilson contend that he has only recycled the culture of poverty (Staples, 1993; Gould, 1999), and it is true that since the late 1980’s, Wilson’s theories have encouraged more researchers (many of them considered “liberal”) to focus on the negative impact of poverty on African American communities, families, and children. This important research has helped to demonstrate that concentrated poverty does indeed have a deleterious impact on children’s life chances. Be that as it may, urban poverty research must include subjective measures of life in these neighborhoods and identify sources of strength and resiliency, because some residents do escape poverty. Why not try to understand the attitudes and beliefs of the residents of low-income neighborhoods? Perhaps they can give policy makers insight on how to help residents help themselves.

The study of urban neighborhoods is truly a multi-disciplinary endeavor, and surveying the literature from all of the various social science fields involved is no easy task. Nonetheless, we must synthesize this research, or at the very least, engage in dialogue across the disciplines in order to create a comprehensive, holistic understanding of African Americans’ experiences in their neighborhoods. By coupling perspectives from African American Studies with both qualitative and quantitative methods from sociology, community psychology, developmental psychology, and social psychology, researching neighborhoods through residents own perspectives is likely to help identify positive social interactions that can serve as sources of resilience and intervention.

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<sup>i</sup> Social organization refers to the extent to which the residents of a neighborhood are able to maintain effective social control and realize their common goals. Introduced by criminologists Shaw and McKay (1942), social disorganization theory was prominent among criminologists in their explanations of juvenile delinquency during the 1950s and 1960s, but fell out of favor until the mid-1980s (See Bursik, 1988; Sampson, Morenoff, & Earls, 1997, Korbin & Coulton, 1995; Leventhal & Brooks-Gunn, 2000). Rather than blaming crime rates on the individuals residing within neighborhoods, Shaw and McKay emphasized the structure of neighborhoods that encourage or discourage criminal activity. Unfortunately, this theory has been used to label African American communities as *disorganized*.

<sup>ii</sup> The term ghetto was originally a term used to describe the Jewish section of sixteenth-century Venice, and later meant any Jewish section of the city. According to Kenneth Clark (1968), America has given its own meaning to the term: the confinement of persons to a “special area limiting their freedom of choice” based on race. “The dark ghetto’s invisible walls have been erected by the white society, by those who have power, to confine those who have no power and perpetuate their powerlessness.” (p. 11) Wilson preferred the term “ghetto” poverty to “underclass” poverty, but many scholars have taken issue with this classification

<sup>iii</sup> See Durkheim, E. (1933) *The division of labor in society*. Translated by George Simpson Glencoe, IL: Free Press [Original work published 1893]; Simmel G. (1950). The metropolis of mental life. In K Wolfe (Ed.). *The sociology of George Simmel*; & Toennies, F. (1957). *Community and society* [Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft] Edited by Chard P. Loomis. East Lansing: Michigan State University.

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<sup>iv</sup> For a discussion, see Alkalimat (1973); Asante (1990).

<sup>v</sup> The “matriarchal character” of the African American family has often been cited as one of the “pathologies” of Black family life, leading to high incidence of female headed households and strong women that marginalize men. Although the rise in single female headed households was identified as an African American “problem” in the 1960s, there has been an increase in single mother households across *all* racial groups over the past 25 years. See Rodgers, 1996. Female-headed households should be viewed as a “problem” only to the extent that family resources and the number of adults available to supervise children are reduced. In 1993, nearly 82% of poor African American children lived in single mother families.

<sup>vi</sup> This term was coined by William Ryan (1971) whose work of the same title was a response to the Moynihan Report.

<sup>vii</sup> The Kerner Commission was a panel assembled by President Lyndon Johnson to investigate the causes of civil unrest among African Americans in urban centers after a series of violent protests from 1965-7. Johnson believed that the rebellions were organized by outside agitators, but the commission, headed by former Governor of Illinois, concluded that African American residents were frustrated by lack of employment opportunities and horrendous conditions in African American ghettos. “White society is deeply implicated in the ghetto,” the 1968 report said. “White institutions created it, white institutions maintain it, and white society condones it.” “Our nation is moving toward two societies, one black, one white—separate and unequal.”