ABOUT THE POOR

some facts
and
some fictions
ABOUT THE POOR

some facts and some fictions

ELIZABETH HERZOG
Chief, Child Life Studies Branch
Division of Research

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION, AND WELFARE
SOCIAL and REHABILITATION SERVICE • Children's Bureau • 1967

Provided by the Maternal and Child Health Library, Georgetown University
FOR over half a century the Children's Bureau has waged war in behalf of children—a war against the effects of poverty, ill health (both physical and mental), and ignorance. It has not fought directly against poverty, but has struggled rather against the results for children of circumstances and situations that this agency can publicize and deplore but cannot directly alter. Our weapons have been programs and services for children and their families, and publications designed to make known the needs of children and to promote better ways of meeting these needs.

Now that the war against poverty has been formally declared by our administration, the efforts of this Bureau have been reinforced by new resources and by new vigor born of new hope.

ABOUT THE POOR—some facts and some fictions is part of the Bureau’s program of presenting material designed to enhance understanding of the problems that create a need for services and programs, in the belief that in order to cope with them effectively it is necessary to understand both the problems and the people who are burdened by them. It draws upon a variety of sources, including national statistics, special studies, and discussions—formal or informal, published or gleaned from interviews and consultations.

The four sections of the publication are based on a number of papers delivered at different times and places, here revised, combined and updated where appropriate. Accordingly, in some places the figures cited are of more recent date than the original publications on which the present one is based.

Certain themes and motifs are recurrent, as in a symphony. And, as in a symphony, they are introduced each time in a slightly different context, with variations in supporting material and with full development only at one point.

Throughout the manuscript, especially in those parts relating to births out of wedlock, the author has drawn heavily on the analysis and formulations of Rose Bernstein, who worked with the Children’s Bureau in a review of tested information about unmarried mothers and their children. She has also profited richly by the privilege of
close contact with the research of Dr. Hylan Lewis, who was Director of the Child Rearing Study sponsored by the Health and Welfare Council of the National Capital Area, and who has granted permission to quote from published and unpublished materials.

The revised writing are brought together here in response to evidences of interest and continuing demand from individuals, practice agencies, and teaching centers. The publication represents one element in the dual tradition of the Children’s Bureau, which has been committed on the one hand to engage in and to promote action in behalf of children and, on the other hand, to contribute to the information and understanding upon which sound action must be based.

Katherine B. Oettinger
Chief, Children’s Bureau
SOCIAL and REHABILITATION SERVICE.
## CONTENTS

PROBLEM POPULATIONS: "THEY" AND "WE" .......................... 1

IS THERE A "BREAKDOWN" OF THE NEGRO
FAMILY? ........................................................................ 23

SOME ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT THE POOR .............. 35

UNMARRIED MOTHERS: Some Questions to be Answered
and Some Answers to be Questioned ........................ 55

BIBLIOGRAPHY ....................................................... 78
EVERY MAN, we are told, is an island unto himself. And—with some qualifications—this is true. But when a great many islands, crowded close together, are viewed from afar, they sometimes look like one homogeneous land mass. Their individual features and even their individual identities often blur into one undifferentiated whole.

This is a trick our eyes play on us. It doesn't necessarily mean that something is wrong with our eyes. It does demonstrate a need to know about optical tricks and to defend ourselves against them.

To help steer a course among those deceptively merging islands, I have set my sights on two subtitles: (1) "The Natural History of Stereotypes;" (2) "We, Too, Are Natives."

The comments grouped under those headings reflect an uneasiness produced by many statements and more assumptions in a good deal of recent literature explaining The Poor. Even though a considerable number of these statements and assumptions have some support in evidence, the uneasiness persists. Perhaps some hint of its origin is conveyed by the first subtitle.

The Natural History of Stereotypes

The effort to understand the poor is essential, and we need more of it. Yet the more we struggle to deepen our understanding, the more we seem to end up in a morass of stereotypes and clichés. This is natural and inevitable, but it is also sad.

The process repeats itself, again and again and again. Someone perceives freshly and sharply a relationship that had been unseen or ignored or perhaps only forgotten. He proclaims it, in print or from the platform. It starts people to thinking, it gives them a fresh insight. It is accepted, it is repeated over and over. Presently it becomes a label applied to all members of the group under discussion. It also becomes a catchall and carryall, pressed into service to explain any number of diverse phenomena. And it ends up oversimplified to the point of distortion, beclouding perception and deflecting programs, until a new revelation rights the wrong—only to be converted in turn, through the same process, into yet another stereotype—a neostereotype—crying aloud for correction.

A number of examples could be cited, but I will focus mainly on one, along with a few of its substerotypes.

As recently as ten or twelve years ago, a surprising number of our skilled caseworkers viewed so-called "reality factors" as second-rate factors, unimportant in comparison with strictly psychological considerations. In cultivating this view, they were turning their backs on a long and proud tradition of social work. Nevertheless a visible and very audible number—perhaps over-represented in the literature of that moment—did hold this view. In one of our best family agencies, for example, the idea that a client's income and education could have any relation to the length and success of a casework contact was rejected with scorn.

Then, through a series of insights backed up by studies, the Emperor's-new-clothes phenomenon set in. Social class was rediscovered. A whole cluster of correlations that had once been taken for granted and later were denied became visible—and respectable—all over again.* In probing these relationships, cultural background again gained status as a subject to be reckoned with. Finally, social class and cultural background were joined together under the rubric, the culture of poverty.

The culture of poverty gained high visibility after three social scientists discussed the subject at the National Conference on Social Welfare, in 1961. Each of these presentations, it should be noted, was remarkably free of oversimplification.** Perhaps it should also be noted that two of the speakers were anthropologists.

Before long, assisted by a number of events on our domestic scene, the culture of poverty was launched as a concept in good standing. It helped to explain a lot. It fostered the realization that different socioeconomic groups reflect different life experiences and life styles,

---

*Maas et al. 1955.
which result in different assumptions and different patterns of behavior. For a brief honeymoon period, a number of people saw with new eyes and perceived the existence of elements and relationships that had not been visible to them before.

But all too soon the recognition phase hardened into a new cluster of labels. The ideas that had stimulated thought froze into neat clichés that served to avoid the need of thinking. A set of fresh insights had settled into a creed that soon took on the earmarks of dogma.

Now a countercurrent is making itself felt. Occasional objections to the culture of poverty and its subthemes become audible.

Let me list some culture-of-poverty themes which were hailed by many as beacons in the dark, and are now being decried by a few as blinders:

The poor do not accept the values of the middle class, but live by a set of their own.

The poor are impulsive, living for the moment, incapable of deferred gratification and of planfulness.

Among the poor, especially the Negro poor, illegitimacy carries no stigma.

"The" low-income Negro family is in disarray, and rapidly deteriorating.

The broken family, so frequent among the poor, is by definition a sick family.

The Negro woman is dominant, economically and psychologically.

The family and sex patterns of the Negro poor are a direct reflection of the slavery heritage.

Each one of the themes is supported by some evidence. Then why is each one strongly criticized by a small but growing number of practitioners and social scientists?

Before trying to answer that question, let us look a little more closely at one of these generalizations—the one about time orientation. A low-income mother, or mother-to-be, belongs to a socioeconomic group that is considered unable or unwilling to plan and act for the future, deferring present gratification for the sake of future reward. According to some who hold this view, one of the cultural deterrents to obtaining prenatal care is a tendency to live in the present and take no thought for the future. We cannot, they say, expect a pregnant woman in this group to be much concerned about what will happen in nine months—not enough, anyway, to sacrifice present convenience.
for the sake of obtaining clinic care. If we could teach her to plan and work toward the future, this view holds, presumably she would be willing to travel as far as necessary and wait as long as necessary for an appointment.

However, some of them may be planning for the future more than we think.

For instance, there is Mrs. L. She belongs to a religious sect and is convinced that if she obeys the ten commandments—and a few others—in this life, she will be rewarded in the next. Unlike some of her friends and neighbors, she does live by the rules. She neither smokes, drinks, nor cheats, and her motivating force is her belief in the gratification that will be hers when she goes to heaven. She and many who share her faith are planning and acting for the future as they conceive it.

Then there is Mrs. G. She is determined that when she dies she will not be buried in potter's field. She belongs to a burial association and even if she doesn't have quite enough to eat, she manages to keep up her payments, scrimping today for the sake of tomorrow.

There are also Mr. and Mrs. M. They decided to use a considerable part of his pay check this week for a down payment on a rather fancy crib, since the new baby is due before the end of the month. However, his friend Jake got himself into trouble, and Mr. M. felt he must use all the money he could scrape up to join three other friends in putting up bail for Jake. Mrs. M. was dejected but went along with the decision. This is not pure affection and generosity on their part, for Jake is part of an intricate network of obligations. If you don't have a bank account and don't have credit, then you'd better have good friends who will help you in time of trouble. And the way to hold such friends is to help them out when a crisis comes. A number of investigators have asserted that an elaborate system of bookkeeping exists, none of it on paper and no details of it forgotten. This, too, is future-oriented planning and deferral of present gratification.

Mr. M.'s Uncle Ronny—unlike most of his friends—did very well at high school, and could have gotten a college scholarship. But Ronny looked around and saw the jobs that were held by other Negroes who had college diplomas. He decided that, even with a scholarship, it would be tough making ends meet at college, and where would he be then? So he took a very low level job that was offered him in a Negro insurance company and after years of striving and climbing, he made a lot of money. Now Ronny's son is going to college without a scholarship, and by the time he graduates he will have wider opportunities than his father had. In Ronny's case, refusal to defer gratification was not necessarily lack of planning for the future.

"Inability to defer gratification" is sometimes cited as a reason for failure of the poor to go through college and high school, as con-
trasted with the readiness of middle-class youth to continue their education. This attribution has been challenged on a number of grounds, especially in connection with the nonwhite poor. There was a time when relatively few Negro college graduates were able to get jobs commensurate with their education. "What good is a college education to a doorman?" one youth asked bitterly. We cannot comfortably say that things are entirely different now, but we can say that opportunities are opening up.

The difference was reflected in the comment of a Negro mother, recorded by Robert Coles:

They say we're lazy and we don't pay much attention to the law, and sure enough I have two boys to prove it and one to disprove it, so it's two to one against us in this family. But I'd like to tell people why I think my two boys went bad.

I preached and hollered at all three the same. Those older boys were good boys just like the little one, and I remember when they wanted to study and be somebody, just like him. But they never had a chance. They were born too soon . . .

They went to school until it didn't make any sense to stay there, because we had no money and they thought they should try to get jobs. So they left school and tried. They tried and tried and there wasn't anything for them.

I wonder, do people who never have to worry about work know what happens to you when you keep on knocking your head on a stone wall and there's still no work? I'll tell you what, your head bleeds, and you get tired; you get so tired that you give up. Then you have all those hours and whatever you can figure out to do with them . . .

. . . Now, it's all right if you're an older woman like me and you have children; you keep busy with them. But if you're a man, you don't have kids to occupy you. So what can you do? I'll tell you what happens, you just fold up and die.

That's what drugs and liquor mean. They mean you've died. I mean you've hung up on the world, because you keep on calling and there just ain't no answer on the other end of the line.

I watched my boys go bad like milk you know is stand-
ing too long; there's no use for it, so it gets sour . . .
Now, at least one is going to be O.K. And I'll tell you,
it's because he was born at the right time. I know it in
my bones that he would have turned out just like the
others except for what's happening now, with the in-
tegration and all that. He got chosen to go to a white
school because he was a quiet boy, and it gave him a
real chance, and now he's got that scholarship to college.

We all know he's going to be fine. And you know what
he says to his brothers? He says he's glad it happened
to him, but he feels bad because people think he's so
special; but the truth is he was given a chance and
his brothers weren't, so he feels dishonest sometimes.
But I tell him, it's not you who are dishonest, son, it's
the world, and they are finally coming around to know
it, so we should all thank God for that.*

Our national statistics already suggest some response to the
change for which this mother thanks God—although apparently the
young people are still ahead of the statistics. The figures show that
the proportion of nonwhite workers completing at least four years of
high school doubled from 1952 to 1965, and that nonwhite high school
graduates are much more likely than white graduates to have parents
who did not finish high school, and to come from low-income homes.
They show also that the education of the nonwhite labor force has
outpaced the entry of nonwhite workers into occupations which usually
demand high school education or more; and that in 1965 unemploy-
ment rates were higher for nonwhite high school graduates than for
white dropouts.**

On the other hand, some of the presumably deferred gratifi-
cations of the middle class do not necessarily represent Spartan self-
denial. Miller and Riessman cite the example of youths who “defer
pleasure” in order to continue their education. They ask, in effect,
just how tough is it to let your folks support you and pay for your car
a few years longer? Is it really deferring gratification to put off the joy
of earning your own keep?† True, a good many middle-class college
students are toiling and denying themselves today for the sake of the
future. But many who are enjoying college—and there are a lot—will
never again have it so good. Many will look back to these years of
presumably “deferred gratification” as the most pleasant of their lives.

*Coles, 1965.
†Miller and Riessman, 1965.
Some easy generalizations about time orientation, and also about culturally based attitudes as deterrents to prenatal care, are sharply challenged by reports concerning the response of very low-income mothers to programs of family planning.

The Chief of the Children's Bureau reports indications "that the institution of family planning services more than doubles attendance at postpartum clinics and, in some projects at least, seems to have a favorable influence in attracting women to prenatal clinics early, as word gets around that the services are available." In one rural area, she adds, "over 85 percent of the women delivered in a maternity and infant care program for women of rural counties have returned for the critical postpartum examination and 90 percent of these have asked for family planning advice."*

Whatever the explanation of readiness to seek postpartum care when it is associated with family planning advice, it cannot be lack of active concern for the future.

Others report similar responses, and impressive persistence in carrying out the prescribed measures. According to Frank and Tietze, "Between 70 and 83 percent (72 and 84 percent of nonwhite patients) [in a large metropolitan area] continued to take pills regularly 30 months after they came to the clinic." Hill and Jaffe comment that "This is an astonishingly high retention rate for any procedure requiring continuous self-administration of medication, and is testimony to the readiness of the poor generally, and particularly the Negro poor, to respond to well-conceived, energetically-delivered programs employing modern contraceptive methods."**

They also cite Bogue's report of an impressive decline in nonwhite birth rates in Chicago, which they describe as the "result of an intensive program of birth control service and education."

From Tennessee comes a statement that "the response of unmarried women is helping break the cycle of dependency, refuting a popular belief that unmarried women have additional children to increase the amount of their assistance grants."†

These examples are brought in here as they relate to time orientation, since family planning is strictly geared to the future. One is tempted to comment on implications with regard to services and the way they are offered, but at the moment we are not discussing services as such.

The various examples suggest that many of the poor are entirely able to plan for the future and to defer gratification, when they...
can see a chance to gain by it, but are not inclined to pour much effort into what looks like a losing game. After all, if you are convinced—and with some reason—that no amount of scrimping will put you in a position to improve your lot, then deferral of pleasure doesn't make much sense. As one boy put it starkly, "I see no future at all because there is no future."

The crucial point, then, is not ability or inability to plan for the future and act in a way to realize those plans, but rather the presence or absence of a clearly perceived probability that deferred gratification will pay off. Thus, one might find less frequency of future-oriented planning among the poor than among the prosperous and still not be able to conclude that future-orientation is nonexistent or repudiated, as behavior or as a value.

The examples mentioned have referred primarily to one specific culture-of-poverty theme. With a certain amount of variation, similar comments could be made about all the others on the list and a number not listed. For present purposes, however, the comments on time-orientation sketch in a basis for hazarding some answers to the question with which they were introduced: why do these generalizations begin as fresh insights and end under a storm of criticism? With regard to the culture of poverty and its subthemes, one important part of the answer seems to lie in an oversimplified, schematic version of culture.

Culture oversimplified

Some current discussions, practices and programs seem to reflect what I have called the cookie-cutter concept of culture—that is, the assumption that a culture molds all its members by identical forces, so that they turn out like cookies all produced by the same form.** Individual differences are overlooked, as is the interaction of manifold influences affecting an individual. (Actually, of course, even cookies cut by the same mold are not identical: one will be thicker, one thinner, one browner, and one lighter, one lopsided, another dimpled—as every cook knows.)

Another source of oversimplification has been the tendency to forget that the culture of poverty—to the extent that it can be called a culture—is really a subculture. This means that it exists within a dominant culture which, in this country, is that of the middle-class white population; and this, in turn, means that the value system of the dominant culture also pervades the subculture, so that its members are responding to more than one value system.

*Jackson, 1966(A).
**Some Assumptions About the Poor, p. 35.
There is nothing strange or special about that. Most of us live by a dual set of values, those we cherish and believe in and those that dictate the way we act. In this our poor are like our nonpoor. However, looking across a social distance, we often assume that they have only one, which is directly reflected in their behavior. Perhaps we figure that, just as the poor can afford only one suit of clothes, so they can afford only one set of values.

The value clashes that thrive within a complex culture coexist along with other complications. Most of us belong to a number of subcultures, representing social class, ethnic background, occupational group, peer group, religious affiliation, family and so forth. At different moments we cleave to the values of different groups, depending on circumstances and our own unique social, economic and genetic history—including the significant individuals who influence us from time to time: that unforgettable high school teacher, or our wayward Aunt Lucinda, or the boss on our first job. Which value wins out at a given moment depends upon the interaction of a great many factors. It is in this connection that one must beware the “cookie-cutter concept of culture.”

A familiar value conflict in middle-class America is the clash between the money-status-success complex and the value placed on personal integrity, or on considering one’s own tastes and talents or on contributing to the welfare of others. Part of the proverbial idealism of youth—and part of the gap between generations—stems from the quaint idea of some young folk that people should really live by the values they believe in.

We accept as normal, for ourselves, the kinds of value conflict we are used to—and we are quick to invoke the respectable term “realism” when we settle for the less lofty value. Even the few who refuse to abide by the money-status-success complex recognize the value clash. “Anyone who refuses a raise ought to have his head examined,” said a social scientist who had just turned down a flattering administrative job. And his decision was a matter of wonder to some of his friends, who nevertheless took a certain pride and joy in adding his name to the list of the few who resist the pull of the money-status-success complex. Probably most of us cherish a few such names on our private roster.

History and fiction throughout the centuries are full of value clashes: love vs. duty, God vs. mammon. According to one author, Columbus reached back to “the great example of Solomon” for help in resolving an uneasy feeling that “gold and Christianity do not always mix.” The kind of value conflict we are talking about now is a special

*Jones, 1964.
brand. It is likely to be one-sided, with little conscious struggle: where the individual pays homage to two conflicting values, but recognizes only one choice.

The dual value system is by no means novel in discussions of the poor and especially of low-income Negroes. It was highlighted by an anthropological study of the Deep South in the thirties.⑥

A more recent observer of another poverty group comments that "the lower class subscribes to the general values of the society and also has values unique to itself . . . " . . . legal marriage and a non-legal union . . . are two types of acceptable marital patterns . . . . This is not to say that these two patterns are equally valued." ⑧ A realistic picture of the relations between value preference and actual behavior must recognize both the acceptability of patterns that violate middle-class norms and the higher values put on those norms.

Practitioners, in their work, are probably well aware of these complexities and contradictions. But as soon as we begin to think about people in groups, and to talk about culture, we seem to forget that the poor — like the prosperous — may cherish and believe in a system of values that they feel they cannot always afford to act on in daily life.

Attitudes — real and imputed — toward illegitimacy are a case in point. It is often said — although perhaps less often than formerly — that among low-income Negroes no stigma is attached to unmarried motherhood. The statement usually carries the implication that no stigma means no penalty and that this means it doesn’t matter whether a pregnant woman is married or unmarried.

We have abundant evidence that this simplification simply is not true. The evidence does indicate that birth in wedlock occupies a somewhat lower rank in the value hierarchy of the poor—Negro or white — than of the middle class. But it indicates also that to be born in wedlock and to have your children born in wedlock is a decided social plus, and a gratification: and if it is part of a stable marriage, it can be a tremendous source of emotional support and pride. An interviewer in a Chicago study told about the unwed mother of several children who kept in the honor place of her room a large picture of her sister in full wedding regalia. She quickly made an opportunity to call attention to the picture, with the greatest pride and gratification, implying that her relationship to a regularly married woman was a status symbol worth displaying.

Apparently the plus value of regular marriage is stronger in some circles than the minus value of no marriage. There is an old

⑥Powdermaker, 1939.
⑧Rodman, 1959; see also Goode, 1960.
†See Some Assumptions About the Poor, p. 35; Is There a "Breakdown" of the Negro Family?, p. 23.
Yiddish proverb that says: Money is not so good as the lack of money is bad. Here one might say: Lack of marriage is not so bad as having a happy marriage is good.

Hylan Lewis’ study of child rearing practices among low-income Negroes in the District of Columbia brings home again and again the complexity of attitudes toward pregnancy outside of marriage, and toward marriage itself: Mothers who feared “trouble” for their daughters, girls who took pride in not marrying the putative father of their unborn child, but waited until they were sure they loved him—even though the assurance came after the baby was born.

A public assistance recipient who had accepted full or partial responsibility for raising a large number of nieces and nephews told of her grief when, despite all her precautions, one of the girls became pregnant out of wedlock. The aunt took the father to court and “When the Judge asked Betty where she first had relations with the boy and she said ‘At home’ I couldn’t get my mouth shut. Then when he asked her ‘Where abouts’ and she said, ‘The front room,’ I just knew I was going to die.”

A mother whose daughter had married the putative father after the baby was born told of her shame and grief when the husband later deserted her daughter: “I didn’t tell ... nothing ... I certainly did not want (that lady) to know (Frances’) husband left her like he did ... (Frances) just sits in a very quiet way and she don’t know what to do. She told my sister that her husband comes here every night to see her ... because she is ashamed of what her husband has done to her and she doesn’t want people to know about it ...”

I am happy to report that later the couple were re-united.

One difference in the relative value systems of the poor and the prosperous has to do with stark need for food and shelter, and also with the longing for someone to stand by and help meet that need. As a married mother in Harlem put it, speaking of her unmarried neighbor—and perhaps of herself at a different point in time: “If you want somebody—oh, you want somebody—to help you—and there’s the children and the rent—well maybe then it doesn’t seem all that important whether you’re married or not.”

Value preferences, of course, are no more unanimous for the poor than for the prosperous. The Washington study reports in detail the thoughts and feelings of a woman who clung to her husband, even

**Jeffers. 1966.
though he drank heavily and abused her, because—as she put it—"I know children need their father and that is why I tried to stay with my husband even though I don’t like the way things go between me and him. But I stay with him so my children can have a father... ."

In this case, the investigators confessed to some question whether the children were better off with this father in the house than they would have been without him. The point here, however, is not the wisdom of a decision but the value placed on marriage and a two-parent home by a low-low-income Negro woman, who may not represent a majority of her socioeconomic group but, nevertheless does represent some of them.

Her husband, incidentally, is one of many Negro males who have not read current sociological treatises about the role and status of the Negro female. As he sees it, "Nobody’s got anything to do with how much I drink. I do drink and that’s all there is to it. I work, too... I am the man in this house and I’m not supposed to be responsible for taking care of these children and working, too." As for the alleged supremacy of the female, his comment is: "I ain’t got no education but I do have a lot of mother wit and I know that there ain’t nothing no more important to a woman than a man.”

If one listens to low-income Negro females and observes their behavior at close range, it becomes apparent that somehow the news of their victory over the male hasn’t come through to them, either. If women are the dominant sex among low-income Negroes, the women do not know it. On that score, one of them remarked, "I’ve heard a lot of women wish they were men but I never heard no man wish he was a woman.”

All this does not refute or even challenge the claim that it is easier for a Negro woman to get a job than for a Negro man, and that his economic disadvantage exacts a dire toll from family life and from his own self-esteem. On the contrary, the evidence generally supports such a statement—although the woman’s ability to get “a job” usually means that she can command a stable income at a lower wage than the male would rate—if he could get a job at all.** However, it is the assumed implications of the glib generalizations about female dominance that ride into difficulty. The defeat of the male, so the cliché chorus runs, means the victory of the female. On the basis of his downfall, she is billed as ascendant: the dominant female, the matriarch, the one who rules the roost, rears the children, holds the purse strings, etc.

This definition assumes that what one party loses the other wins,
as in what the game theorists call a zero-sum game. There are, however, situations in which both sides lose. There are even some in which both sides win—and if we were wiser there would be more such situations.

These observations and examples suggest some of the ways in which an oversimplified picture of values can bury a kernel of truth in layers of distortion, resulting in stereotype. They also point up the danger of assuming that, because a trait is more frequent in one group than in another, it is present in a majority—or in all—of the first group; or that it is a salient characteristic of that group; or that it is approved by that group.

The research fraternity of which I am a member has contributed grievously to this source of oversimplification, even though some members crusade against it. We are great respecters of variables, and often develop a myopic focus on discrete traits rather than on constellations and interactions and contexts. (For obvious reasons, since single variables are so much more manageable than configurations.) We are subject also to the sin of confusing statistical significance with practical significance—not to mention the Procrustean approach which cuts reality to suit the theory of the moment, and the error of equating correlations with causes. Moreover, we have fostered delusions of adequate controls for income and social status, where none existed, a point discussed elsewhere.*

All these sins contribute to producing reports that either present or invite conversion into an over neat picture of reality. This tendency is often deplored by professional social workers, though not as loudly or as stubbornly as one might expect. Clearly, each discipline needs the other to point out the mote in its eye. And probably, as Thomas Gladwin remarked, each discipline has less need to learn new principles than to use and really believe in the principles it professes.**

**Emphasis misplaced**

In considering why the culture of poverty themes so quickly lapse from fresh insight into stale stereotype, two other points demand recognition.

1. **Downgrading of "reality factors."** One is the downgrading of the so-called reality factors, despite their recent apparent rehabilitation—the readiness to attribute to culture-based attitudes and preferences behavior which actually represents response to the grinding elements

---

*Some Assumptions About the Poor, p. 35.
of physical deprivation or environmental stress. There is a tendency to forget, for example, that obesity and malnutrition—both of which thrive on a high-starch, low-protein diet—can foster apathy and lack of goal commitment; or that hunger, too little sleep, too much crowding in a home, can pull down school achievement as effectively as lack of parental stimulation and motivation.

Withdrawal, passivity, fatalism, are sometimes named as characteristics of the poor, as if these characteristics derived from deliberately adopted codes of attitude and behavior. Yet when such characteristics exist they are likely to be responses to life situations.

Schorr has discussed at length some psychological responses to physical facts of life. He quotes Jolliffe on the effects of prolonged malnutrition:

... various functional changes occur. These functional changes are manifested clinically by symptoms usually placed in the neurasthenic syndrome. They include such common complaints as excessive fatigability, disturbances in sleep, inability to concentrate, “gas,” heart consciousness, and various queer bodily sensations. ... Occurrence (of these symptoms) as a manifestation of tissue depletion of certain nutrients is undoubted. 

He also summarizes some effects that have been attributed to poor housing:

... a perception of one’s self that leads to pessimism and passivity, stress to which the individual cannot adapt, poor health, and a state of dissatisfaction; pleased in company but not in solitude, cynicism about people and organizations, a high degree of sexual stimulation without legitimate outlet, and difficulty in household management and child rearing; ... relationships that tend to spread out in the neighborhood rather than deeply into the family.

Others, including Strodtbeck, have described the realistic sense of isolation, loneliness and physical threat that oppresses some AFDC mothers, almost to the point of immobilization. Such reactions are

---

**Schorr, 1963.
†Strodtbeck, 1964.
no respecters of color but they do show a good deal of respect for income.

Reality factors are also to be reckoned with in connection with the much discussed child rearing practices of the poor. Without going into the validity of objections to specific studies, instruments, samples or definitions, the point can be made that some reported child rearing practices are the inevitable result of crowded homes where adults are harried, depressed or fatigued, or of a mother's realistic response to anxiety and fear.

This point by no means erases observed differences. It does, however, affect the way they are interpreted and the means considered appropriate for bringing about change when change is indicated. It seems relevant here that, typically, when the problems of the poor have been investigated in research studies, the poor defined their needs in terms of housing, jobs, income, etc., and social workers were more likely to define them as adjustment problems calling for casework and counseling.

Both kinds of definition could be right, but the perennial divergence in perception is thought-provoking.

2. Focus on weaknesses. The second point that demands notice is the tendency to focus on weaknesses and overlook strengths. Most of us incorporate in our own attitudes and assumptions a number of oversimplifications that we are likely to disown as soon as they become apparent to us. One series concerns either/or assumptions—for example, the assumption that a person is either healthy or sick, physically or mentally. When we stop to think we realize that it is possible to be both. A highly skilled and very wise caseworker once commented, "We should be grateful to our clients because they call forth the healthy part of us to serve the problem part of them."

Implicit either/or assumptions have led some commentators to focus on the problems of low-income families, forgetting their strengths, actual and potential. Protest against this destructive kind of oversimplification has come from various observers—for example, Erik Erikson, Frank Riessman, S. M. Miller, John Spiegel, Robert Coles.

Coles marvels at the fortitude and endurance of the Southern Negro children, some from very poor homes, who first broke the school segregation barrier. * That endurance was required of parents as well as children is underlined by the low-voiced comment of a Southern Negro father at the White House Conference "To Fulfill These

---

*Sauber and Rubinstein, 1965; Bernstein and Sauber, 1960; Morris, 1953.
**Coles, 1965.
"Shakespeare himself could not picture the agony of a parent whose child faces that hell day after day."

Erikson has spoken and written with eloquence about our blindness to demonstrated strengths. Why, he asks, do we hear so much about the absent father and so little about the present father—although the majority of fathers are present? Why do we hear so little about the presence of the mother and what she has achieved against staggering odds? If it were not for the magnificent strength of low-income Negro mothers, surely the family would have disintegrated by now. Why is so little said about the strengths of low-income families, and so much about their weaknesses?*

His questions bring to mind examples of mothering from some of these families. The mother who explained why she had kept her children home from school: "There was no food in the house and I didn't want them to have to go to school hungry and then come home hungry too. I felt that if I kept them home with me, at least when they cried and asked for a piece of bread, I would be with them to put my arms around them."**

Protests against approaches that focus on faults are likely to be coupled with reminders that, as Riessman puts it, "It is most inappropriate to attempt to involve people in change by emphasizing some alleged weakness in their makeup. People are much more readily moved through an emphasis on their strengths, their positives, their coping abilities, and they respond to forms and interventions that utilize these strengths."†

The principle is familiar to many practitioners and is employed in individual practice. Yet, as I have already remarked, when we talk of groups rather than dealing with individuals the principle becomes submerged. Much talk and a good deal of program planning appear to lead with the weaknesses rather than the strengths. This tendency has been the basis of some current criticism of educational programs, from preschool through college.

It would be foolish to argue that we should forget weaknesses and only remember strengths. But it would be sensible to remember both, and remember that both can exist at the same time, interacting with each other as well as with all sorts of environmental exigencies.

What I have said has not been intended primarily to credit or discredit any specific facts or assumptions. I have been trying, rather, to point up some problems of thought and assumption that beset all of

---

*Erikson, 1966.
**Jackson, 1966 (B).
†Riessman, 1966.

16

Provided by the Maternal and Child Health Library, Georgetown University
us in devising programs to increase the well-being of people, or re-
search to serve those programs. This brings me to the second subtitle:

**We, Too, Are Natives**

One way to get the feel of how stereotypes about the poor can be true and not true at the same time, or true in some spots and not in others, or true along with a number of equally true but apparently incompatible things, is to examine our own feeling about the stereotypes that others have of us. Charles Dickens and Mrs. Trollope in their day promoted some well-known stereotypes about The Americans—each with a certain amount of truth in it.

It's difficult, of course, to believe that others actually see us as natives, with quaint and not always attractive customs. Some of us, listening to the comments of visitors from abroad, may feel like the lady from Indiana who returned from a trip to England and exclaimed, "Do you know, they actually thought I had a funny accent! They just didn't seem to realize that I don't have any accent at all. They were the ones with the accent."

To see us as natives, with quaint and not always attractive customs, is likely to mean that they see us as one undifferentiated group—or perhaps at two such groups—each with a single value system which is expressed directly by our behavior. This is the price of social distance. Looking at us across a wide social distance, observers perceive that the nonpoor are dominant here, numerically and in terms of power. The nonpoor run this country, decide its policies and its programs. Accordingly, those who look at our policies and programs will interpret them as direct expressions of the values of the nonpoor. Such observers, assuming the kind of relation between our value system and our behavior that many current commentators have assumed between the values and the behavior of the poor, come to conclusions that do not accord at all with our own perceptions.

Take, for example, our social welfare programs. Such observers would conclude that we believe in punishing people for indigence by forcing them to live below subsistence level; and in perpetuating indigence by placing blocks before those who might want to climb out of

---

*I use the clumsy word "nonpoor" because, among those who are not actually poor, a very large number are not actually prosperous.
it. They would support this belief by pointing out that in 1963 the standards for AFDC were below the Social Security Administration's definition of poverty in all but six States, so that, despite recent advances, "most AFDC families must live at levels considerably below the most conservative estimates of deprivation." According to the 1965 report of the Welfare Administration, the "average income including assistance, of the more than 4 million men, women and children on AFDC is $1.15 per day," and this means total income, to cover everything.

This is no news to most of us. Any news value lies in realizing the impression conveyed to those who look from a distance and judge our values by our behavior.

If they look at other programs, their stereotype would be reinforced. Since we obviously can afford to give our children adequate education, they would look at our public schools—especially in slum neighborhoods—and believe we place no value on giving children the chance to develop their full potential. They would look at our jails and believe that we had no interest in achieving justice for rich and poor alike, and no interest in trying to avert recidivism. They would look at our overcrowded, understaffed training schools and conclude that we want to train boys to grow up into criminals.

The fact that we spend a great deal of money in all these areas would probably not impress those who look from a distance and judge our values by our behavior. For, as a proportion of total government outlay or of the gross national product, our expenditures for health, education and welfare lag behind those invested by a number of other countries. An American employee of the United Nations remarked airily that, when it comes to investing in the welfare of our people, the United States is an underdeveloped country.

It is painful to contemplate the conclusions our observers come to when they assume that we have a single value system and act on a coherent, consistent set of beliefs, with our actions always directly expressing our values. We, of course, know better about ourselves. We

---

*Schorr, 1966.
**Kahn and Perkins, 1964.
††They might read with interest Alfred Kahn's article about "The Untried Weapon Against Delinquency." The weapon, as some readers may remember, was simple application of things we already know, such as not keeping neglected children in jail with hardened criminals, not overcrowding our facilities, not offering vocational training for occupations no longer in demand; an application as desirable today as when it was published in the late fifties. (Kahn, 1958; The President's Commission on Law Enforcement, 1967.)
understand the conflicting considerations, the exigencies, the need to be “realistic,” to roll with the punch, to see what the traffic will bear, to trim our sails to the wind. We understand all these pressures so well that we sometimes fail to see the contrast between the highly differentiated picture we have of middle-class values in relation to middle-class behavior and the highly simplified picture of this same relation—the stereotype—we have when we look at “the poor.”

But Stereotypes Are Necessary

After dilating so fervently on the evils of oversimplification, I must now turn around and admit that, although we may regret living with it, we cannot live without it. In one sense, mental shorthand is an indispensable part of our intellectual apparatus. We are busy people, surrounded by a world already complex, that refuses to stand still while we decipher its complexities. It would be wasteful if at each moment we had to rethink anew the nature and interrelations of things. It would be as if we had to rediscover fire each time we wanted to switch on the electric light. Our simplifications serve for the mind the purpose that habit serves for the body. We cannot operate without them. Yet, if bodily habits become tyrannical we find ourselves in the grip of compulsion neurosis. And balance must be sought also with regard to habits of thought—especially the oversimplifications that end up as stereotypes.

Our illuminations, our moments of revelation, do not suddenly become untrue. But we may grasp at them so convulsively that other fragments of reality slip between our fingers and float away. Presently we realize that we are holding, not total revelation, but one scrap which has twisted and crumpled in our hands. Then we reach for other scraps. But sometimes it seems we can hold only one shred of truth at a time. . . .

The chief solution I can see is to recognize the situation and remain alert against mistaking a new shred for the total fabric. Forty-five years ago, Walter Lippmann wrote a landmark book that placed the stereotype on our mental map as a device which cannot be wholly avoided but must be used with eternal vigilance. His counsel still speaks with the accents of wisdom. “What matters,” he said, “is the character of the stereotypes and the gullibility with which we employ them. And these in the end depend upon those inclusive patterns which constitute our philosophy of life. If . . . we assume that the world is codified according to a code which we possess, we are likely to make our reports of what is going on describe a world run by our
code. But if our philosophy tells us that each man is only a small part of the world, that his intelligence catches at best only phases and aspects in a coarse net of ideas, then, when we use our stereotypes, we tend to know that they are only stereotypes, to hold them lightly, to modify them gladly."

These are the guidelines, I think, that can protect us against our own mental shorthand, and enable us to be masters of, rather than slaves to, the stereotypes and clichés in which we embalm our perceptions of reality: to recognize our coding of experience as a code, to hold it lightly, to modify it gladly, always with alert awareness that complexities and variations still unperceived continue to elude our "coarse net of ideas."

*Lippmann, 1922.
IS THERE A "BREAKDOWN" OF THE NEGRO FAMILY?
This page is blank in the original document.
MUCH has been said of late—and often with great heat—about the Negro family. Despite prevailing consensus on a number of points, controversy has been generated with regard to other points because one man’s fact is another man’s fiction. Some points of consensus deserve mention before points of controversy. First, it is generally agreed that a harmonious two-parent home is better for children than a one-parent home—and better for parents, too, in this society. It is agreed also that fatherless homes are far more frequent among Negroes than among whites and that in both groups their frequency rises as income falls.

Another point of firm consensus is that strong action is needed to remedy adverse conditions that have existed far too long, especially for low-income Negroes; and that these conditions bear especially on the low-income Negro man, whose disadvantaged situation takes heavy toll of himself, his children, their mother, and the family unit as a whole. All these statements have long been accepted by serious students of Negro family life.*

The controversy centers mainly on the following points: (1) whether “the” Negro family is “crumbling” at a disastrous rate, (2) whether the amount of breakdown that exists is primarily due to poverty, or to cultural inheritance, or to a cycle of self-perpetuating pathology, (3) whether the remedy is to be sought primarily through

improving the economic, social, and legal status of Negroes or primarily through conducting a remedial campaign aimed directly at the Negro family.

The Moynihan report

Impetus has been given to these and related questions by the much discussed "Moynihan report." Released to the general public in the late fall of 1965, this publication presents census figures and findings from some special studies to document the grim effects of poverty and discrimination and their impact on Negro families. It brings together all-too-familiar evidence that the frequency of broken marriage, female-headed families, births out of wedlock, and dependence on public assistance is much higher among Negroes than among whites. In doing so, it recognizes that these problems are most acute among the very poor and least acute at the middle- and upper-income levels. It points out also that they are more acute in cities than in rural areas and thus are intensified by continuing urbanization.

The report further documents the higher unemployment rates and lower wage rates among Negroes than among whites. It states, as others have done, the two-to-one Negro-white unemployment ratio that has persisted for years, the lower wages available to Negroes, and the fact that the median nonwhite family income is little more than half the median for white families. To this discrepancy is added the fact that the families of the poor tend to be larger than middle-class families. "Families of six or more children have median incomes 24 percent below families with three."* Other sources tell how heavily this fertility differential bears on Negro families: in 1963, according to the Social Security Administration Index, 60 percent of nonwhite children under 18 lived in poverty as compared with 16 percent of white children.++

The effect on marital and family stability of the man's economic instability is also discussed. The sad cycle has become familiar in the professional literature: the man who cannot command a stable job at adequate wages cannot be an adequate family provider; the man who cannot provide for his family is likely to lose status and respect in his own eyes and in the eyes of others—including his family. His inability to provide drains him of the will to struggle with continuing and insuperable family responsibilities. It is an incentive to desertion, especially if his family can receive public assistance only when he is gone.

A good deal of the Moynihan report is devoted to interpretation

---

++Orshansky, 1965(B).
of the documented figures and, quite naturally, it is on the interpretation that opinions diverge. It is not the purpose of this paper to summarize fully, to concur with, or to take issue with the report as such, but rather to consider some propositions that were in circulation before it was published and to which it has given increased currency. With regard to the report itself, its factual summary has shocked some Americans into new recognition of old and unpalatable facts about the toll exacted by poverty coupled with discrimination; and its interpretive sections have challenged us to an assessment of evidence—two substantial services. Some of the propositions attributed to it may be misinterpretations of the author's intended meaning. In any case, they have taken on a life of their own and are met frequently in other current writings. Accordingly, they will be considered here on their own merits, without reference to any particular document.

Fatherless families

One recurrent proposition concerns the "rapid deterioration" of the Negro family, often referred to as "crumbling" and presumably near dissolution. The frequency of fatherless families is used as the primary index of family breakdown. Although questions can be—and have been—raised about this index, such questions do not dominate the mainstream of the argument and will be disregarded here. But if one accepts the proportion of fatherless homes as a primary index of family breakdown, does it then follow, on the basis of the evidence, that the Negro family is rapidly deteriorating?

It is important to differentiate between sudden acceleration of family crisis and relatively sudden perception of a long-chronic situation, since the diagnosis of a social condition influences the prescription for relieving it and the context in which the prescription is filled.

Actually, census figures do not justify an alarmist interpretation. It seems worth while to review these figures, not because there is no urgent need for remedial action—the need is urgent, especially in the area of jobs for low-income Negro men. Rather it is important to keep the problem in perspective and to avoid feeding prejudices that can all too readily seize upon statistical misconceptions as reason to delay rather than to speed such action.

As already noted, census figures do show much higher rates of

*Midway between statistical report and interpretation is discussion of a "startling increase in welfare dependency," described as occurring at a time when employment was increasing. (U.S. Department of Labor, 1965, p. 12.) It would require extensive and sophisticated analysis to determine the extent to which this upswing in AFDC recipients related to changes in families, or to liberalization of AFDC policies following new legislation, or to changes in population distribution. Similarly, differentials in rates of juvenile delinquency would need to be controlled for income and analyzed in light of differential rates of apprehension and treatment of presumed offenders, white or nonwhite.
fatherless families for Negroes than for whites. The 1965 figures show almost 9 percent of white families headed by a woman as compared with 24 percent nonwhite families; a difference of this order has persisted for years.* The figures do not, however, document a rapid increase in those rates during recent years. On the contrary—and this is a point curiously slighted by commentators on both sides of the argument—they show a gradual increase from 1949 (19 percent) to 1959 (24 percent). Moreover, from 1959 to 1965 the proportion of female-headed families among Negroes showed virtually no net rise, standing at about 24 percent in 1965. The total rise from 1949 to 1965 was about 5 percentage points, that is, less than one-third of a percentage point a year. In 1940, the proportion was 18 percent.** Thus, an

### TABLE 1. FAMILIES HEADED BY A WOMAN AS PERCENT OF ALL FAMILIES BY COLOR SELECTED PERIODS, 1949–65

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Families Headed by a Woman As Percent of Total</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Families Headed by a Woman As Percent of Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Nonwhite</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1965</td>
<td>9.0</td>
<td>23.7</td>
<td>1957</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1964</td>
<td>8.8</td>
<td>23.4</td>
<td>1956</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1963</td>
<td>8.6</td>
<td>23.3</td>
<td>1955</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1962</td>
<td>8.6</td>
<td>23.2</td>
<td>1954</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1961</td>
<td>8.9</td>
<td>21.6</td>
<td>1953</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1960</td>
<td>8.7</td>
<td>22.4</td>
<td>1952</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1959</td>
<td>8.4</td>
<td>23.6</td>
<td>1950</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1958</td>
<td>8.6</td>
<td>22.4</td>
<td>1949</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*These figures are available for white and nonwhite rather than for white and Negro families. However, most of the nonwhite (over 90 percent) are Negroes.

**Percentages have been rounded. The exact rise was from 18.8 percent to 23.6 percent, or 4.8 percentage points. The 1940 figure was 17.8 percent, as recomputed according to the definition of "family" introduced in 1947. U.S. Department of Commerce, Current Population Reports, Series P-20 (1949–1962); U.S. Department of Labor, 1966; U.S. Department of Commerce, 1943.
accurate description would be that during the past twenty-five years there has been a gradual, waveriug rise, but not an acute increase in the overall proportion of broken homes among Negroes. (Table 1.)

Illegitimacy

Another generalization also related to family breakdown is met so often that by now it threatens to attain the status of "fact," namely, that there has been an "alarming rise" in illegitimacy. It is true that the number of births out of wedlock has soared. In 1965 the number was 291,000 as compared with 176,600 in 1954. This is a tremendous number, and the more distressing since there has been no services explosion to keep pace with the population explosion. However, in terms of people's behavior, the only relevant index of increase in illegitimacy is rate, that is, the number of births out of wedlock per 1,000 unmarried women of childbearing age.

The rise in rate (as differentiated from numbers) was relatively steady over several decades. This rise represents a long-term trend and not a sudden upsurge. Moreover, in the last eight years reported (1958-1965) the rate has oscillated within about two points, at about the same level, rising or falling one point or less annually, but in effect representing an eight-year plateau. Since all national illegitimacy figures are based on estimates, with a number of States not reporting, very slight changes should not be regarded as significant. Thus, the current picture is a large rise in numbers and a leveling off in the rate of nonwedlock births.** (The ratio—the proportion of live births that are out of wedlock—has risen for both white and nonwhites. However, ratio is far less meaningful than rate as an index of change.)

The recent relative stability of rate does not diminish the problems caused by nonwedlock births but it should affect the conclusions drawn from the statistics, the measures taken to act on those conclusions, and the attitudes of those who ponder the meaning of the figures.

Over half the children born out of wedlock are nonwhite, although only 12 percent of the population are nonwhite. The reasons for this difference have been much discussed and need only be mentioned here. They include (1) less use of contraception, (2) less use of abortion, (3) differences in reporting, (4) reluctance to lose a public assistance grant by admitting to a man in the house, (5) the expense of divorce and legal separation. It seems probable that, even if discount could be made for these and other factors, a difference would remain.

---

**See Unmarried Mothers, p. 55.
It would be a much smaller difference, however, and conceivably could still relate more to income than to color.*

If further evidence were needed on this virtually unchallenged relation between income and illegitimacy rates, figures on rates in high- and low-income tracts should be sufficient. Pakter and associates, for example, found that the proportion of births out of wedlock in relation to total nonwhite births varied from a high of 38 percent in the Central Harlem district to a comparative low of 9 percent in the Pelham Bay District.**

Attitudes toward illegitimacy and toward marriage are clearly linked with the economic position of the Negro male. A male head of house who is not a breadwinner and provider is a hazard to the happiness of the marriage, and his loss of economic status is so great a hazard to his intrafamily status that he may decamp, either to protect his own ego or to make his family eligible for support from AFDC. Some recent changes in the AFDC program are aimed against the latter reason for family desertion.

Slavery is not the explanation

Among the most frequent and most challenged generalizations relating to low-income Negro families is the assumption that their present characteristics are influenced more by the legacy of slavery than by postslavery discriminations and deprivations. One difficulty with this proposition is that slavery is a hundred years behind us—crowded years, during which many influences have affected the family life and sex patterns of us all. Another is that some characteristics lumped under the slavery-legacy label are characteristically found also among low-income whites.

This convergence is the less surprising when we consider that much of what is ascribed to the culture of slavery is inherent in what has come to be known as the culture of poverty. If Negroes had not been slaves in the plantation setting but had been in as depressed an economic situation as the majority of them have been during and since slavery, the behavior of the low-income segment would probably show some of the elements now ascribed to slavery.*

Adequate controlled comparisons within different income levels show that the differences associated with income outweigh those associated with color. Family structure, for example, differs more between different income levels than between Negro and white families.

*Some of these elements are discussed in Some Assumptions About the Poor, p. 35.
**Pakter et al. 1961.
The same is true of differences between Negro and white children in educational achievement, and—when income is controlled—the relative position of men with respect to women, economically and educationally, is the same for whites as for nonwhites.*

Descriptions of white families at the very low-income levels read very much like current descriptions of poor Negro families, with high incidence of broken homes, "mother dominance," births out of wedlock, educational deficit, crowded living, three-generation households, and failure to observe the norms of middle-class behavior.**

Such families are described by Hollingshead and Redlich:

Doctors, nurses, and public officials who know these families best estimate from one-fifth to one-fourth of all births are illegitimate.

Death, desertion, separation, or divorce has broken more than half the families (56%). The burden of child care, as well as support, falls on the mother more often than on the father when the family is broken. The mother-child relation is the strongest and most enduring family tie.

* * * * * * *

Here we find a conglomerate of broken homes where two or three generations live together, where boarders and roomers, in-laws and common-law liaisons share living quarters. Laws may be broken and the moral standards of the higher classes flouted before the children's eyes day after day..

These are descriptions of white families in the North, with no heritage of slavery to explain their way of life. It seems unlikely that the slavery-specific thesis is needed to explain the occurrence among Negroes of patterns so similar to those produced in other groups merely by poverty, and so often described in other contexts as "the culture of poverty."†

It is difficult to be sure how much—if any—difference would remain in proportions of female-headed families if really sensitive

---

**Miller, 1959; Warner and Lunt 1941; West, 1945.
†Hollingshead, 1949; Hollingshead and Redlich, 1958.
††Lewis, O., 1961.
comparisons were made between Negroes and whites on the same income level. Available income breakdowns employ rather broad groupings, and Negroes tend to be overrepresented at the lower layers of each grouping. It seems reasonable to assume that some differences between white and nonwhite would remain even with a more sensitive income classification. Yet it does not necessarily follow that they might be ascribed primarily to the legacy of slavery rather than to the hundred years since slavery. It seems more likely that differences between low-income white and Negro families, beyond that explained by income alone, may be attributed primarily to postslavery factors of deprivation and discrimination affecting every facet of life: occupation, education, income, housing, nutrition, health and mortality, social status, self-respect—the documented list is long and the documenting references myriad.*

The habit of analyzing data by color rather than by income level has helped to support the slavery-specific thesis. Since a much larger proportion of Negroes than of whites are on the lowest income levels, what look like statistically significant differences between Negroes and whites may also look like significant differences between different socioeconomic levels. But if the figures are presented only in one way, we don’t find out about the other. Studies of prenatal care, for example, indicate that in effect one is comparing the prosperous with the poor in all three of the following comparisons: white mothers with nonwhite mothers; married mothers with unmarried mothers; all mothers who do, with all mothers who do not, obtain prenatal care.**

All the points mentioned here, and some not mentioned, are important. However, the emphasis on rapid deterioration is so central to current discussion of the low-income Negro family and to means proposed for alleviating its current problems that it deserves major emphasis—along with the slavery-specific thesis to which it is so often linked.

There has been little disposition to challenge the ample evidence that family structure and functioning in our society are strongly linked with social and economic status. The questions raised, as Robert Coles put it, have to do with which is the cart and which is the horse.† The alleged rapid acceleration of family breakdown has been cited as evidence that among low-income Negroes the family is the horse. Therefore it is important to recognize that, according to the

---

**Herzog and Bernstein, 1964.
†Coles, 1965.
chief index used by proponents of this view, no rapid acceleration of family breakdown is evident.

If there has been no substantial change in family structure during the past two decades, then there are no grounds for claiming that a new "tangle of pathology" has set up a degenerative process from within, over and above response to the long continued impact of social and economic forces from without; and that this process is specific to a Negro "culture" inherited from days of slavery.

Two views—and two remedies

Both sides of the controversy agree that there is urgent need for strong action to increase the proportion of sound, harmonious two-parent homes among low-income Negroes. They disagree on whether that action should be focused primarily on intrafamily or extra-family problems. The acute-crisis view suggests that primary attention be given to the family as such. The other view suggests that the best way to strengthen low-income families, as families, is to give primary attention to building up the economic and social status of Negro men.

According to this view, a number of noneconomic supports can and should be given to low-income Negro families, pending the time when fewer of them are fatherless. Such helps should include, among other things, (1) aids for the overburdened mother in her multiple role as homemaker, child-rearer, and breadwinner; and (2) effective male models introduced into the lives of children—girls as well as boys. A number of new ways for providing both kinds of support have been proposed. In the long run, however, according to this view, what these families need most is jobs for Negro men—jobs with status, with stability, with future, and with fair wages. No one claims that this can be achieved easily, quickly, or cheaply; but many believe it can and must be done.

What is new for the white majority is not that it is suddenly faced with an explosive breakdown of "the" Negro family. What is new is the recognition of a long-standing situation, plus the determination to do something about it. If we are able to achieve that recognition and determination, however belatedly, then surely we must be able to act on this basis rather than to galvanize ourselves into action by believing that suddenly the Negro family is a bomb or a mine which will explode in our faces if it is not quickly defused. Surely we are able to act, not because of panic but because action is long overdue, and inaction flies in the face of decency.

What is new for the Negro minority is not a sudden acceleration of family breakdown. What is new is an injection of hope that attacks apathy and fatalism and sparks insistence on full justice. It is not increased family breakdown that activates outbreaks like those in Har-
lem, Watts, and elsewhere. It is the recognition that the families of the "dark ghetto" no longer need to continue to accept the ghetto and what it does to them.

It must, of course, be recognized that "the" Negro family is itself a fiction. Different family forms prevail at different class and income levels throughout our society. In addition, at any given level a wide variety of families are found, each with its individual characteristics—some of which are and some of which are not class linked. When the great diversity among low-income families is ignored, there is danger that the deplored characteristics of some will be imputed to all. At the same time, most writers—including the present one—find it almost impossible to avoid falling into the oversimplified form of reference to "the" Negro family that constantly risks oversimplified thinking.

It is necessary also to caution one's self and others that, while problems must be discussed and attacked, strengths must not be forgotten. Problem-focused discussions, however necessary and constructive, also invite distortion. Not all fathers are absent fathers among the poor—in fact, about two-thirds of them are present among low-income Negro families. And, as Erik Erikson reminds us, there are impressive strengths in many Negro mothers. Robert Coles, after living among low-income Negroes for months, wrote:

I was constantly surprised at the endurance shown by children we would all call poor or, in the current fashion, "culturally disadvantaged." . . . What enabled such children from such families to survive, emotionally and educationally, ordeals I feel sure many white middle-class boys and girls would find impossible? What has been the source of strength shown by the sit-in students, many of whom do not come from comfortable homes but, quite the contrary, from rural cabins or slum tenements? +

One may go on to speculate: What are the sources of strength and self-discipline that make possible a Montgomery Bus Boycott or a March on Washington, conducted without violence? We do well to ponder such questions, for we shall have to mobilize the strengths of families in poverty as well as the wisdom of accredited problem solvers, if we are at last "to fulfill these rights."

*Lewis, H., 1967 (B). See also Some Assumptions About the Poor, p. 35.
**Erikson, 1966.
+Coles, 1965.
SOME ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT THE POOR
This page is blank in the original document.
SOME ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT THE POOR

THE PEOPLE DISCUSSED in this paper are commonly referred to by a number of names, preferably polysyllabic. They are called "the underprivileged," "the disadvantaged," "the culturally deprived," "the low SES group," "the low-income group," "the lower class," and so on. Recently, however, there has emerged a refreshing tendency to call them "the poor"—a usage that seems worth accepting, at least for present purposes.*

The main purpose of this discussion is not to support or to attack, but rather merely to look at a few assumptions about the poor, to review some of the testimony for and against them, and to consider how it seems to stack up. The writer cannot claim to have reviewed all the evidence, but only to have pondered what has been reviewed. Moreover, others have had far more opportunity to check the written or spoken word against firsthand observation and contact.

Of course one problem is that, although certain kinds of experience must take precedence over hearsay, experience itself is not always reliable. This was demonstrated not long ago at a small, select conference of social scientists and physicians engaged in studies of child development. One of the physicians remarked, "Whenever you see Negroes you see happy people." When a fellow participant ex-

*For ease of reference, those who are not poor will be called "the more prosperous," "the nonpoor," or "the middle class." For we know a good deal more about the middle class than about the upper class, and in some ways the middle class is the one that most embodies what is often called "the American way of life."

Reprinted, in slightly revised form, with permission, from The Social Service Review, Vol. XXXVII, No. 4, December 1965, pp. 389-402.
pressed surprise at so sweeping a generalization, a child psychologist chimed in: "That is absolutely true. I grew up in Africa, and I know." When asked whether they had read Richard Wright or James Baldwin or Claude Brown or Kenneth Clark they said they had. And one of them added: "Did you ever see them dance? Did you ever hear them sing? Anyone who dances like that and sings like that is happy." As far as they were concerned, their conclusion was based on evidence observed at first hand.

Most of us are familiar enough by now with problems of sampling and reliability and validity that there is no need to belabor the point that even firsthand observation needs to be systematically assembled and systematically checked. This is just one small example of the problems we confront when we try to assess evidence of any kind on any subject. In view of the fact that whatever we are studying is likely to change even while we study it—and sometimes even because we are studying it—there is some excuse for believing that truth is elusive and facts are slippery.

This, obviously, is no reason for giving up the chase. But any good hunter knows that understanding the nature and habits of his quarry is a necessary—though not a sufficient—prerequisite to tracking it down. The little example of the invariably happy Negro was startling because it happened in the sixties and involved social scientists committed to the rules of evidence. It is useful here merely as a reminder that it is respectable to distrust easy generalizations and to keep on looking for answers and continuing to test them even after they seem to be safe in the net.

We have heard a good deal recently about the culture of poverty and the ways in which those who have too little money are also cheated of some less-tangible benefits. The recognition that poverty can be a disadvantage is not new. Even in biblical times it was not new, although the Bible took a somewhat more favorable view of poverty than do the commentators of the 1960's. Much later than the Bible, but a good deal earlier than the 1960's, Disraeli made a comment that might serve as a text today. A character in one of his novels declares that Queen Victoria reigns over not one nation, but two: "... two nations between whom there is no intercourse and no sympathy: who are as ignorant of each other's habits, thoughts, and feelings as if they were dwellers in different zones or inhabitants of different planets: who are formed by a different breeding, are fed by a different food, are ordered by different manners, and are not governed by the same law—The Rich and The Poor." Michael Harrington was referring to that

*Disraeli, 1845.
conversation when he titled his book *The Other America* and called the last chapter "The Two Nations."*

We have developed a number of assumptions about that other America. It will be possible to consider only three of them here and to give in each instance some basis for accepting the assumption and some basis for rejecting it or at least qualifying it. These are the three:

1. **There is a culture of poverty.**

2. **The family and sex patterns of the poor differ from those of the middle class.**

3. **The family and sex patterns of poor Negroes differ from those of whites on the same socioeconomic level.**

What is said here about these three statements will be confined to the United States and to the urban part of its population. Reference to the poor does not, of course, mean the lower layer of a three-way breakdown into upper, middle, and lower socioeconomic groups. We have had abundant evidence that this lower segment of the traditional three-way break is itself divided into a number of layers. We have evidence, too, that the life-ways of the very lowest layer differ from the others in this same band more than the so-called upper-lower differs from the lower-middle.

No effort will be made at this point to define precisely what is meant by "the poor," since this review draws on a wide range of studies, which themselves use a variety of indexes and cutting points. It should be said merely that those under discussion live at, or near, or considerably below what is commonly regarded as the subsistence level and that this group constitutes a much larger segment of the population than many had realized until recently. Estimates vary about the exact size of that segment. According to the poverty index of the Social Security Administration, 12 percent of the white families with children under 18, and 48 percent of the nonwhite families in 1964 could be categorized as poor.** Among the poor, a much larger proportion of nonwhite than of white families and persons had annual incomes of less than $1500.†Money income is not the sole determinant of membership in this segment, but it is one of the easiest to define and establish and one of the few variables almost always used by investigators. Some others will be mentioned.

In general, the ill-defined group referred to as "the poor" does

---

*Harrington, 1962.
**Orshansky, 1966.
not include the stable, respectable working class. Nevertheless, some of the characteristics discussed below are derived from studies of the working class, since these particular characteristics have also been found in more marked degree among the poor. This blurring of class lines derives partly from life and partly from ignorance. It derives from life because, for all our insistence on differentiations, certain characteristics do seem to occur in inverse relation to income from top to bottom. It derives from ignorance because so much of our information comes from studies based on inadequate breakdowns, and we do not yet know enough to be as precise as we would like.

The term, "the culture of poverty," seems to have flared into prominence in the early sixties—at least in the field of welfare research. At the 1961 National Conference on Social Welfare, Oscar Lewis gave an excellent paper entitled "The Culture of Poverty."* At the same session another anthropologist, Thomas Gladwin, gave a paper on much the same subject; and an anthropologically inclined sociologist, Hylan Lewis, in addition to discussing Gladwin’s paper, reported on his ongoing study of low-income families in Washington, D.C.** Anyone who listened to these three sessions probably came away with a fresher and deeper realization that in a number of respects the rules of life and the ways of living are different for the poor.

Is there a culture of poverty?

Oscar Lewis summarized succinctly his reasons for believing that there is a culture of poverty, when he said:

In anthropological usage, the term culture implies, essentially, a design for living which is passed down from generation to generation. In applying this concept of culture to the understanding of poverty, I want to draw attention to the fact that poverty in modern nations is not only a state of economic deprivation, of disorganization, or of the absence of something. It is also something positive in the sense that it has a structure, a rationale, and defense mechanisms without which the poor could hardly carry on. In short, it is a way of life, remarkably stable and persistent, passed down from generation to generation along family lines. The culture of poverty has its own modalities and distinctive social and psychological consequences for its members.*

He was talking about a culture of poverty that cuts across national borders, including those of the United States, to which the present comments are confined. Our first question concerns his thesis: Is there a culture of poverty?

One way to approach this question is to list a number of traits or characteristics attributed to the poor by different investigators and supported at least to some degree by evidence. The summary given below is by no means exhaustive. It does not include all the traits or characteristics attributed with supporting evidence. But none which is mentioned has been put forward without some supporting evidence, even though the quality and quantity of the evidence may have been far from conclusive.

The poor, by definition, are described as having little money, virtually no savings, no economic security. This means, among other things, buying often and in small amounts—and getting less for their money than do the rich. (One anthropologist threatened for years to write a treatise on “The High Cost of Poverty,” an intention eventually carried out by a sociologist.*)

Poverty involves underemployment and scattered, irregular, miscellaneous employment, often at undesirable occupations; it involves extensive borrowing through formal and informal sources, use of second-hand clothing and furniture, and overcrowded dwellings and lack of privacy. The poor have a higher death rate, a lower life expectancy, lower levels of health—physical and mental—and of nutrition, than the prosperous: they depend more on home remedies and folk medicine, since medical care is expensive and frightening; they are relatively unlikely to be members of labor unions, political parties, and other organizations; they are more inclined to excessive drinking and to violence than the prosperous.**

These are familiar variables. Equally familiar is the inverse relation of education and income, the fact that education has been, at least until recently, the most useful single indicator of socioeconomic status. Sometimes it almost seems as if all the other differences flowed from that one, so overwhelming are its apparent results in the lives and thoughts and feelings of the poor. Associated with low education are low school achievement, inadequate verbal skills, lack of intellectual stimulation, lack of motivation to education—often coupled with unrealistic aspirations and unrealistic faith in education as an open sesame to getting on in the world.†

---

*Caplovitz, 1963.
†Dell-Dora, 1962; Masland et al. 1959; Reiss and Rhodes, 1958; Riessman, 1962; Toby, 1957.
Because of the key importance of education, it seems appropriate to indulge in one quotation that suggests a good deal more than it says about this crucial variable. This is the comment of an unregretful school dropout, some years after he left school:

Well, I never wanted to do nothing but have my own business, and that's all I ever wanted; you know like a restaurant or something. I figured I just wanted a regular income of my own, you know, where I wouldn't have to get out and work for nobody else. . . . That's what I still want, so all I had in mind was any way that I could get a dollar. That was it. See, I couldn't see nothing in the book, because I used to tell the teacher, "Where am I gonna need no fractions?"—you know. If I have my own business, I don't need no fractions. All I need is whole penny—you know. And which right now is still the way I feel. I don't see why I need no fractions. If I got my own business I don't need that. You see at the time that's what I was thinking. If I got my own business, I don't need nothing else. Take French or something like that—I said I don't need to learn no French. Cause all I ever wanted was a place of business to myself.*

Another set of variables having to do with family life, child rearing, and patterns of sex behavior will be discussed presently.** However, I know of no investigator who denies that there are characteristic and distinctive patterns of sex and family life among the poor.

Psychological characteristics associated with poverty.—Less obvious but nevertheless supported by empirical evidence, are certain psychological characteristics attributed to the poor. A number of investigators have presented evidence to show that the poor tend on the whole to be more authoritarian than the prosperous; more given to intolerance and prejudice; more given to black-and-white thinking; more anti-intellectual; more prone to action and less to contemplation; more inclined to personal and concrete rather than impersonal and abstract thinking; more given to resignation and fatalism; more subject to anomie; more inclined to a concrete and magical emphasis in

*This and all the following comments by respondents are from field materials collected by the Child Rearing Study, directed by Hyman Lewis, sponsored by the Health and Welfare Council of the National Capital Area, and supported by Mental Health Projects Grants, 5-R11-MH278-4, from the National Institutes of Health, Public Health Service, U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare.

religion; more provincial and locally oriented in attitudes and opinions; more distrustful of governmental authority; more suspicious and hostile toward the police; less developed in imaginative and logical powers; more given to economic liberalism and more reactionary in noneconomic matters; less eager to preserve civil liberties, if they themselves are not members of a minority group.

We are told, too, that among the poor we find more hostility, more tension, and more aggression than among those who live well above the subsistence level. One report comments that, in encouraging their children to fight back, these mothers show a realistic understanding of the social problems in their neighborhoods. This view receives support from a low-income father who said of his son: "I . . . knock the hell out of him, 'cause he can't be no sissy and grow up in this here jungle."

Two other generalizations are often made and seldom challenged, though both of them have been challenged. One is that the poor have less belief in their control over their own destinies than the prosperous—less sense of autonomy. The other is that their time perspective is shorter, that they are present-oriented rather than future-oriented.

This is an incomplete listing of various kinds of attributes that have been mentioned as differentiating the very poor from the more prosperous. They are listed here chiefly as background for considering the usefulness of that currently popular phrase, the culture of poverty.

All of the items on the list have a bearing on culture. No account of a culture could ignore these traits and those which cluster with them. If we accept—as this writer does—the relative accuracy of most of them in differentiating the prevailing patterns of the poor from the prevailing patterns of the prosperous, then it seems clear that cultural differences do exist—differences in family and sex patterns, in daily life, in modal patterns of character, personality, and belief.

The question remains: Are there aspects of culture that are lacking from the picture known as the culture of poverty? The answer seems to be that a few minor ones and a major cluster are lacking. The classic account of a culture includes, for example, art and artifacts. A case could be made—though a rather flimsy one—for attributing some art forms to the poor. As for artifacts, the tools of living, the whole apparatus of the poor differs from that of the prosperous chiefly by default. Things are lacking or battered or old; but to the extent that they exist at all they differ from those of the prosperous only by being inferior, not by being different.

**Wortis, 1963.
†For comment on time orientation, see Problem Population, p. 1.
Lack of a distinctive technology and possibly of art forms constitutes a real but trivial defect in the concept of a culture of poverty. More substantial is the lack of the basic core that gives to a culture its identity as a culture: the sense that its members have of belonging to a culture entity with its institutions, patterns, and shared beliefs; a sense of that entity as good—a sense of allegiance as well as of identity. There are cultures whose members want to break away, but if they do break away at least they have the feeling that they are separating themselves from an entity that exists and that claims them as members. Corollary to this is the sense of sharing and participating in the life of a broad group, of sharing in a system of beliefs and practices. This positive aspect of culture, the sense of belonging, with its corollary elements of sharing and of participating, seems to be absent from the so-called culture of poverty.

Some of the closest students of slum life emphasize the unincorporated quality of the individuals who make up the slums. There are gangs and cliques composed of some members; but the neighborhoods, they say, consist of people who happen to live near each other. The lack of worldly goods, according to these observers of large city slums, does not create a sense of community, of common institutions and customs, practices and beliefs.

The few people who challenge the idea of a culture of poverty assert that in great cities the poor live relatively isolated lives: that, as Disraeli said, “there is aggregation, but aggregation under circumstances which make it rather a dissociating than a uniting principle,” and that the life-ways of the slum dwellers represent, not a system of culturally evolved patterns, but rather a series of disjointed pragmatic adjustments to exigencies perceived as unpredictable and uncontrollable.*

These represent the chief qualifications to the concept of culture applied to the poor. They do not destroy the usefulness of the concept, provided its limits are recognized. They do, however, reduce the usefulness if these limits are not recognized, for failure to recognize them invites a neostereotyping, which in turn invites distortion and misapprehension.

The culture-of-poverty concept is so helpful that some of its sharpest critics would not block its acceptance even if they could. They would, however, urge that, in order to use it most constructively, one must remember that it represents an analogy or a simile rather than the thing itself. To the extent that the word “culture” is appropriate, the culture of poverty should be thought of as a subculture rather than

*Disraeli, 1845; Gladwin, 1961; Lewis, H., 1961.
as a culture in itself—a distinction made, in fact, by Oscar Lewis in the paper quoted above.

Whether we call it a culture or a subculture, it is always important to avoid the cookie-cutter view of culture, with regard to the individual and to the culture or subculture involved. With regard to the individual, the cookie-cutter view assumes that all individuals in a culture turn out exactly alike, as if they were so many cookies. It overlooks the fact that, at least in our urban society, every individual is a member of more than one subculture; and which subculture most strongly influences his response in a given situation depends on the interaction of a great many factors, including his individual makeup and history, the specifics of the various subcultures to which he belongs, and the specifics of the given situation. Thus, although we find prevailing regularities in what might be called culture-character and behavior, and although it is highly useful to recognize these regularities, it is also useful to remember the vast range of individual differences that coexist with these prevailing patterns of thought, feeling, and behavior.

With regard to the culture as a whole, the cookie-cutter concept again assumes a spurious homogeneity. It forgets that within any one culture or subculture there are conflicts and contradictions and that at any given moment an individual may have to choose—consciously or unconsciously—between conflicting values or patterns. A familiar conflict in middle-class American culture, for example, is that between the value placed on family life and the value placed on success. Both are viewed as good, but at times an individual has to decide which should come first in a given situation.

The anticookie-cutters have to remember also that most individuals, in varying degrees, have a dual set of values—those by which they live and those they cherish as best. We all have constant evidence of this duality in our own daily lives, although it is sometimes easier to observe in someone else. The classic example is the man who lectures his son about the evils of lying and then adroitly fixes up his own income tax. This point—duality of values—has been made and documented repeatedly about the culture of poverty. The poor, we are told, to a large extent accept and believe in the standards and values of the middle class, but many of the poor regard those standards as a luxury appropriate only to those who can afford it—like a yacht or a mink coat. And so it is possible, without too much discomfort, to behave as if these standards did not exist and at the same time to prefer those standards to one’s behavior.*

Our tendency to look for statistically significant correlations

*Goode, 1961; Powdermaker, 1939; Rodman, 1959.
and clutch them to us, like drowning men clasping a raft, sometimes leads us to forget that a small correlation, even if significant, reveals a large amount of variation and that even a strong correlation may coexist with a significant minority of deviant cases. The infinite variety of individual differences and of intracultural conflicts in values and behavior patterns tends to be forgotten in the cookie-cutter view of culture. Difficult as it is, somehow we have to be able to recognize and profit by the prevailing regularities to be found in any culture or subculture, and at the same time to remember the countermores, the value clashes, and the deviant cases.

With regard to our first statement, then, in the view of this writer the culture of poverty is a very useful concept, if and only if it is used with discrimination, with recognition that poverty is a subculture, and with avoidance of the cookie-cutter approach. It should be added that these provisos have been met by the investigators most responsible for giving it currency. They have been neglected chiefly by those who annex inspired phrases with less than the amount of blood, sweat, and tears required to make the most of inspiration.

**Family structure and sex patterns associated with poverty**

Our second statement is that the family structure and sex patterns of the poor differ from those of the nonpoor. There is a good deal of empirical evidence for this statement. There is evidence that not only separation and desertion but also divorce vary in frequency in inverse proportion to income and that family size also varies inversely with income.* There is evidence, too, that families headed by women are far more frequent among the poor than among the prosperous and that births out of wedlock are also far more frequent among the poor. There is evidence that childrearing practices differ, with physical punishment and ridicule being more frequent as one descends the social-economic scale.** Few, if any, serious investigators would challenge these statements. Although a number could be added, these seem enough to justify accepting the second assumption—namely, that the family and sex patterns of the poor differ from those of the middle class.

This does not, of course, tell much about how they differ. When one gets into that question, one is bound to become involved in our third statement. Accordingly, it seems simpler to consider them together. The third is: The family and sex patterns of poor Negroes differ from those of whites on the same socioeconomic level.

---

*Epstein, 1961; Goode, 1951; Orshansky, 1966.

**Bronfenbrenner, 1958; Kohn, 1959.
One of the big obstacles to assessing that statement is the fact, mentioned before, that adequate controlling of socioeconomic factors is rarely found.* An example of inadequate control was found in a study of marriages among Negro and white working-class couples. All the subjects were of the group carefully classified as working class. Yet it was quite clear that most of the Negroes ranked below most of the whites in education and in occupational status. These differences were ignored in the analysis and the reader was presented with a contrast between two kinds of marriage, which were described as white and nonwhite; yet there was no adequate evidence that they did not in fact represent two somewhat different socioeconomic layers, even though both layers were in the segment marked "working class."

Another study compared the adjustment and achievement of Negro and white children of working-class parents. The investigator remarked that in education and in occupational status the Negroes were consistently at a disadvantage as compared with the whites; yet no account was taken of this in the analysis or conclusions and again the differences were presented as differences between white and nonwhite children. The same situation appeared in a large study of unmarried mothers in New York City. Differences were presented as differences between Negroes and whites, with no attempt to take socioeconomic discrepancies into account.

These are mentioned merely as a few examples of a practice that has been extremely widespread. They are mentioned, not by way of scolding about them, but as one explanation for saying we do not really know certain things that certain investigators thought they had demonstrated rather conclusively. It should be noticed that "thought" is in the past tense—because by now some of these very investigators may not be so sure, and some may even be trying to make more adequate comparisons.

We find, then, that some reports of differences in Negro and white family and sex patterns are based on inadequate matching. This does not mean that there are no differences, but merely that these particular studies have failed to document the existence and extent of differences. In each of these studies, it happened that the patterns usually ascribed to lower socioeconomic levels were stronger among the Negroes than among the whites.

A different kind of evidence comes from studies of available figures on marital stability and on fertility. Thomas Monahan, after careful analysis of statistics on divorce and on premarital pregnancy, came to the conclusion that there is higher incidence of divorce among Negroes than among whites, even when socioeconomic factors are con-

*For one of the rare examples, see Gebhard et al. 1958.
trolled, but that the slavery-legacy theory is probably not tenable.*
Some others report that the differences seem wholly attributable to
socioeconomic factors. Our National Vital Statistics Division reports
fertility rates much higher among nonwhites than among whites—a
finding generally accepted and often referred to.** On the other hand,
a review of information on differential fertility, although it under-
writes the familiar belief that fertility rates rise as one descends the
socioeconomic scale, adds that when socioeconomic factors are con-
trolled the alleged higher fertility rates among Negroes are revealed
to relate to socioeconomic status rather than to race.† These are two
very different kinds of variables, though they both relate to the color-
versus-class question.

A few other researchers have tried to compare both by socio-
economic indexes and by color. Clark Vincent has attempted this in
his studies of unmarried mothers, as have Jones, Meyer, Borgatta, and
others.‡ The findings here showed that both color and socioeconomic
status exerted an influence, but that the influence of socioeconomic
status was considerably stronger. The studies are few enough and
limited enough to cause one to want more evidence. Nevertheless they
are encouraging steps in the direction of learning what we need to
know.

A different group of studies is relevant here—namely, poverty
studies that deal entirely or predominantly with white subjects. Again
and again one reads descriptions of the lower class that sound exactly
like patterns often ascribed to lower-class Negroes—and often (it
might be inserted) ascribed to the heritage of slavery. Plainville, U.S.A.
describes the group referred to by the citizenry as "people who live like
animals." No mention is made of color, but it is clear that those de-
scribed are white. The same can be said of the lower-class described
by Hollingshead, Warner, and others.¶

Finally, there are some investigators who have studied both
Negroes and whites and who (so far) report no substantial differences
in family and sex patterns at the same socioeconomic level. Walter
Miller is one of these.§ The published accounts of his Roxbury study

†Dreger and Miller, 1960.
‡Vincent, 1961; Jones et al. 1962.
¶West, 1945.
§Hollingshead, 1949; Warner and Lunt, 1941.
§Miller, 1959.
reviewed so far do not make a point of differentiating between white and nonwhite; but in discussion he has been emphatic in the conviction that the patterns he describes are related to socioeconomic rather than to ethnic characteristics. Publications based on the study of low-income families in Washington, D.C. also favor the view that the family and sex patterns observed relate mainly to class rather than to color.*

Oscar Lewis, in describing what he means by the culture of poverty, lists some family characteristics that he ascribes to poverty in any urban Western society. He includes a trend toward mother-centered families, a relatively high incidence of the abandonment of mothers and children, a belief in male superiority with an accompanying cult of masculinity, frequent resort to violence in the settlement of quarrels, frequent use of physical punishment in the training of children, wife-beating, early initiation into sex, free unions, or consensual marriages. All of these characteristics are found in studies of our urban poor, whether white or Negro.

Three "marital axioms"

The Washington study of low-income families directed by Hylan Lewis offers a feature seldom found among studies of the poor in this country—namely, repeated and extended interviews—sometimes as many as twenty—with the same respondents with free use of tape-recording and with evidence of excellent rapport between interviewers and respondents. The respondents are predominantly Negro, but include some white families. Inevitably, in a study of this intensity, the number of respondents is small. In some respects the research method is closer to the classic anthropological than to the classic sociological approach.

From this and some other studies emerge three propositions about marriage that seem to be regarded as axiomatic among the very poor. Available evidence suggests that the following three "marital axioms" represent points of convergence rather than differences between family and sex patterns among low-income whites and nonwhites.

The first is that a good marriage is far better than no marriage. The second is that a bad marriage is far worse than no marriage. The third is that for a girl to bear a child out of wedlock is unfortunate, but does not necessarily impair her chances for a good marriage.

The positive value put on a good marriage and the negative value put on illegitimacy have escaped a number of observers, because both differ from those found in the middle class. The social and

psychological plus of a good marriage is extremely high. The negative value of birth out of wedlock, for mother and for child, although it exists, is not nearly so strong. (Sometimes we fail to recognize that a variable can be much stronger on the plus side than on the minus, or much stronger on the minus than on the plus.) Moreover, neither marriage nor birth out of wedlock stands as high on the value pyramid of the poor as do a number of other values. They are important, but not the most important.

All the mothers interviewed in the Washington study, white and nonwhite, were asked at some point how they would feel if a daughter of theirs became pregnant out of wedlock. The answer was unanimous: they would feel terrible. It would be pain and grief. "That's why I always prayed for boys," one mother said. But they were almost as unanimous in declaring that they would not urge the prospective parents to marry unless they really loved each other. "An unhappy marriage," they agree, "is worse than no marriage at all." But a good marriage is important.

The classic dream of marry-and-live-happily-ever-after is implicit in the remembered fantasy of an unmarried mother, who said:

Do you know something? It sounds so silly. But I played with dolls until I was thirteen. I always wanted to get married and have children—and sew for them. And my husband was going to have fine patches. That must have been from seeing my mother patching clothing. I, of course, was going to patch better. Needles were scarce. They'd hide the one or more we had away from me. Then I'd try to sew with a pin—and the head would tear holes in the cloth, and I'd cry. I could just see myself making little baby's clothes with real fine stitches.

Both the value put on a good marriage and the fact that out-of-wedlock pregnancy need not prevent a good marriage are evident in the following statements made by mothers about their daughters:

She's over twenty-one, so if that's the way she wants it, that's the way she wants it! Sometimes I think she might have it in mind that, if he marries her now, it might look as if he had to. But if they just got married later, why then it would be what they wanted to do.

I had one child before I was married. I wouldn't marry his father. I told him I wouldn't have him. I didn't love him. I stayed with my mother.
Alice had three children without being married, before she straightened up. But she really did straighten up—I'll give her credit. And she's working hard, now, to help keep these straight. She tells them how being so fast and hardheaded had hurt her and everybody else.

Eloise was very lucky. Because she was in Buffalo, visiting, when she was pregnant with Alex, and she met her husband, Brown, there, and he fell for her. She told him all about it, and he waited until after Alex was born, and married her. Little Susie Jane is theirs. Brown's a wonderful man—steady and hardworking. And he's good to her and her children. All four of them go by the name of Brown.

Attitudes toward both marriage and illegitimacy are obviously interwoven with many other ingredients of that deceptively simple phrase, family and sex patterns. Two that must be mentioned are the war between the sexes and the cult of masculinity. They ought to be discussed at greater length, along with a number of others. But at least these two cannot be omitted.

There seems no doubt that the lower one goes on the social-economic ladder, the more overt and bitter becomes the war between the sexes. It seems clear also that this generalization cuts across the color line. The following observation was made about low-income whites:

For most of these women, men are seen as dominant and controlling. They are, like the rest of the external world, unpredictable, difficult to understand, and more powerful than the women.*

These observations were made about low-income Negroes:

The middle-class emphasis on achievement and striving in relation to color is definitely replaced here by an axis of security and exploitation. These women do exploit men for security when they can, yet they see themselves rather as the victims of exploitation—an exploitation more sexual than racial or economic.

While the matriarchy and the gang agree that sex is the most important of all social categories, it is clear that sex is seen in quite different terms by the two groups. What is for the women a matter of preserving

---

family solidarity becomes for the man a question of individual assertive virility. . . . They (the women) see the difference between the sexes as the most basic of social categories, and they align themselves psychologically with their mothers in a solidary phalanx against men.*

These attitudes obviously affect attitudes toward marriage. One formerly married woman said:

*Men folks are rotten these days. You got to lick 'em to get along with them. You got to take so much off 'em. People down the line all say the same thing. (The interviewer asked if she was saying that she didn't want another husband.) She threw up her hands and said: "I don't never want another!"

If most men are beasts and most women are exploited by them, then a smart woman does not want marriage unless she can find that rare paragon, a really good husband. If she can find him, then she is successful. If she bears a child out of wedlock, that is a social misfortune. But illegitimate children do not necessarily preclude a good marriage, and lack of marriage does not necessarily preclude sex.

There may be differences in the degree and expression of the sex war and the cult of masculine superiority among Negroes and whites on the lowest socioeconomic level. Nevertheless, the similarities are striking.

With regard to the whole complex of family and sex patterns, one may say the same thing. Whether there are differences, and, if so, what they are, remains a question. On the basis of this somewhat telescoped discussion it seems reasonable to conclude two things: that the differences related to color, if they exist at all, are probably far slighter than has often been assumed; and that we do not yet have the kind of evidence that would give adequate basis for a firm conclusion on the matter.

It may be added, as a speculation, that there probably are some differences related to ethnic background, but that probably they are dwarfed by the similarities related to socioeconomic status. One cluster of reasons for thinking that some differences exist has to do with the special status of Negro Americans today, including their history, their current situation, and the continuing struggle against discrimination.

*Rohrer and Edmonson, 1960.
being waged for them and by them. Another reason is based on the many discriminations that—to our shame and our regret—still exist. Analysis of Aid to Dependent Children caseloads in one State showed more abuse and neglect of children among white than among Negroes and “a higher proportion of white cases in which parents are deteriorated, with severe personality disturbances making it impossible for them to be adequate parents.” Such a report suggests that the white people found on the lowest socioeconomic levels may be, on the average, less capable and more disturbed than the Negroes on this level. If so, it is probably because social and economic conditions make it easier for white people to rise from poverty, so that for them the screening process is more directly related to basic competence. In order to remain one of the poor, a Negro does not have to have something wrong with him. The speculation about prevailing likenesses and differences, however, remains speculative. It is offered in the hope that others will continue with studies that may help us all to inch toward conclusions without leaping to them.

At this point, I remember a certain man who, although friendly and tolerant in general, once exploded about an opinionated female relative: “No matter what she says, I always feel like disagreeing, because after she says it she always shuts her mouth like a trap.” Perhaps the moral of our tale is that no matter what we say about the poor we are in no position to shut our mouths like a trap—or to shut our minds, either.
UNMARRIED MOTHERS:
some questions
to be answered
and some answers
to be questioned
This page is blank in the original document.
WHEN PEOPLE talk about "the" problem of unmarried mothers or "the" problem of births out of wedlock, it is often like the old story of the blind men and the elephant—each has hold of a different part and seems to be describing a different animal. The reference may be to the unmarried mothers themselves, or a particular group of them—teenagers, say, or perhaps women with four or five out-of-wedlock children. Or the reference may be to the problems faced, the services needed, the tax burden caused by all these unworthy dependents, or to moral values or social conditions, or a number of other aspects.

I found myself trying to picture the problem as an elephant, with each part of him labeled for a different aspect. But I gave it up, because no elephant has enough parts. Any adequate portrait would have to include a herd of elephants, with their tusks and trunks all intertwined and tangled.

I have had occasion in recent years to interview a number of research people who are especially interested in problems relating to births out of wedlock. My remarks here are in part a report on these discussions, plus a good deal of delving among national statistics, local studies, and published discussions. This is the kind of exercise sometimes referred to as a "survey of experts."

Some of these experts I have interviewed at considerable length, with discussion back and forth about what we know, what we need to know, and what we thought we knew that turned out not to be so. Some I have merely read, gleaning their opinions on these same points from the printed page. Obviously, I have made my own selection of respondents, of publications, of points, and of opinions.

My sources did not, nor shall I, make moral or ethical pronouncements. As research investigators, our responsibility is to analyze and to report, providing background for decisions and actions guided by values. Nevertheless, the attention given to the subject—by researchers as well as by others—reflects the assumption that our illegitimacy rates pose serious problems, that reducing them would be good, and that failure to reduce them is bad.

**Defining the problem**

Those interviewed were almost unanimously concerned about defining the problem. Are we concerned about illegitimate births? Are we concerned about extramarital conception? Or are we concerned about extramarital coitus? Let us be clear about it, they insist, because the ways of coping with these three different levels would be different and might, to some extent, be incompatible.

For purposes of this paper, we are talking about unmarried mothers and illegitimate births. I shall refer to them as unmarried mothers, even though a considerable number of illegitimate pregnancies occur during marriage, between marriages, and after marriage. And I shall, for convenience, use the word "illegitimacy" and its derivatives even though no baby can rightly be called illegitimate.

The survey of experts pointed up four main questions that those who have seriously studied this complex of problems would most like to have answered—four questions, each of which trails a host of others. These are:

1. How big is the problem?
2. Who are the unmarried mothers?
3. What factors contribute to, or are associated with, births out of wedlock?
4. Are unmarried mothers and their children receiving the services they should have?

I will try to indicate under each question some of the reasons these experts think we should learn more about it.
Question One: How Big is the Problem?

The first question can be studied from two viewpoints: How big is the problem in absolute numbers and how big is it in the context of other relevant numbers? Our galloping publicity makes us more familiar with the absolute than with the relative picture. We are constantly being reminded of the fact, which no one can dispute, that the number of births out of wedlock has risen radically.

How we perceive a problem and its causes strongly conditions what we are able and willing to do about it. The nature of our perception of this one is suggested by the frequency with which we hear reference to the “alarming” rise of births out of wedlock. A number of my respondents asked, “How alarming is the rise?” They did not doubt that the number had increased but they did suggest that if it could be seen in context, perhaps it could be viewed without alarm. This would be so salutary, both for our peace of mind and for our unmarried mothers, that it seems worth considering.

The difference between seeing statistics in or out of context can be illustrated most easily by a few simple charts. First, the trend line for births out of wedlock leaves no doubt that the number of nonwedlock births has soared, rising from about 89,000 in 1940 to about 291,000 in 1965 (Fig. 1). This is a tremendous number. And this is the figure most often impressed on the public.

When we see this same trend line as part of all live births it looks somewhat different. The rise is still clear (Fig. 2). There is a gradual, steady increase—actually somewhat less steady than it looks here, because the scale of the figure does not permit showing a slight jog downward from 1947 to 1948. The long-run rise can be seen as part of a twenty-year rise in the number of total births. And, despite a decline in total births since 1961, the general long-term picture looks very different when viewed in or out of context.

Two points are salient here: first, the increase in numbers was part of an overall increase in live births. Second, the births out of wedlock increased faster than all live births.

There is some question and some debate about the extent to which the greater increase before 1961 was “real” and the extent to which it was an artifact, resulting from changes in reporting, in health practices, and in a number of other factors. However, for present purposes it is enough to recognize: (a) that some of the apparent gain over all live births is deceptive and that some is probably “real”; (b) that the bulk of the problem lies, not in the extent of that gain—real or apparent—but in the long-term picture—the number of nonwedlock

*Campbell, 1967.
births we would have even if there had been no gain over all live births. We must cope, not with a sudden crisis but rather with a gradual long-term trend.

If births out of wedlock had not continued to rise while total live births declined, the 1965 edge of the black sliver at the bottom of Figure 2 would be somewhat thinner, but the main part would still be there. This picture has been with us for many years—and for many, many years, people have been viewing it with alarm and discussing it as a crisis born of a sudden upsurge in nonwedlock births. What this chart says is that most of the upsurge exists because there are more people.

If the nonwedlock births had not gained at all on the inwedlock...
births, there would still be reason for grave concern about the number of nonwedlock births. As a matter of fact, back in 1880 people were saying much the same things we are saying now about illegitimacy, including questions about how much of the rise was “real” and how much it resulted from improved reporting.

*Calhoun, 1917.
Another point usually viewed out of context concerns the number of unmarried mothers who are under twenty. The figures most often quoted tell us that the number of nonwedlock births to teenagers is larger than the number in any other five-year age group. And sure enough, Figure 3 bears out the statement. This often leads to the remark that “most unmarried mothers are under 20,” which is untrue, as a glance at Figure 4 reveals. The majority of unmarried mothers are not teenagers.

Some other points are more important, however. Figure 5 shows the unmarried women of childbearing age in our population. The teenagers bulk large as a proportion of unmarried mothers but

Provided by the Maternal and Child Health Library, Georgetown University
they bulk much larger as a proportion of all unmarried women of childbearing age—and these women, including those who are separated and divorced, are what the experts call “the population at risk.” That is, they are the ones who account for nonwedlock births.

Twenty years ago, teenagers produced a larger proportion of nonwedlock births than today. Moreover, the illegitimacy rates among teenagers have risen less than in other age groups.

That word “rates” opens the Pandora’s box of illegitimacy figures. But if numbers are to be seen in context and in perspective there is no avoiding that word and the more familiar though far less revealing word “ratio.” We confuse ourselves a good deal by confusing those two words.

The illegitimacy ratio is the number of nonwedlock births per
1,000 live births. The illegitimacy rate is the number of nonwedlock births per 1,000 unmarried women of childbearing age. The ratio talks about babies, the rate talks about mothers.

Many people have difficulty with these nonidentical twins. The press frequently mixes them up, and a recent chart from a solid social work organization showed a heading that was "Rate" over a definition that was "Ratio." The point is not academic quibbling. It is highly relevant to public perception, which is highly relevant to the climate in which services are offered or withheld.

Each measure has its uses. The ratio is important for those who plan and administer services. It is not useful, however, for understanding trends, since (as our Vital Statistics people put it) the ratio is a function of age and marital composition of the population,
illegitimacy rate, and fertility rate of married women.* They say a good deal more in explaining why the ratio is a poor measure to use in analyzing trends, but for present purposes it is enough to establish that this is a point on which demographers agree.

The rate, though far from satisfactory, tells much more about trends than the ratio, since it is less distorted by factors directly influencing legitimate births.**

Those who talk about rate at all often say that since 1940 the reported overall illegitimacy rate has tripled, and this is true. What we hear much less often is that since 1957 the overall rate has leveled off, oscillating within one or two points, but in effect representing a wavy plateau. The current picture is a rise in numbers and a leveling off of rates.

Among teenagers, as noted, the rate has increased less than in other age groups over the past 20 years, and since 1957 it has remained relatively constant.† Among girls under fifteen, the rate has not changed since 1950.

When I ask why an increase in numbers is always heralded so loudly and a leveling-off in rates receives so little fanfare, I am sometimes told that the public will only support services if "someone pushes the panic button." Such an approach is hardly compatible with sensible problem solving. One reads accounts of punitive legislation, proposed or passed, in response to the panic button, and the hostility it engenders. One sees what fear and anger do to public attitudes and actions. Jaffe refers to "... the flurry of punitive proposals throughout the country to 'deal' with illegitimacy and mothers receiving Aid-to-Families-with-Dependent-Children. Various states have considered plans to jail or deny public assistance to mothers bearing children out of wedlock, or to take away their children under the theory that they are ipso facto 'neglected' or living in 'unsuitable homes' (Wickenden, 1963). Bills for compulsory sterilization of unwed mothers have been seriously debated in such states as Mississippi, North Carolina and Iowa, and advocated in many others (including a number of Northern States). Most of these proposals have failed of adoption, but they offer raciest politicians and others opportunities for massive fulmination on illegitimacy, AFDC costs and related subjects, which appear to be aimed at intimidating unwed mothers from applying for public assistance."††

*Schachter and McCarthy, 1960.
**Campbell, 1967.
†Although the overall rate has remained relatively stable since 1957, the rates vary in different groups. Women twenty-five or over are "the only age group to show important increases in illegitimacy." (U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, 1966[D]. (/)
††Jaffe, 1964.
It is hard to believe that we are incapable of using a rational, problem-solving approach without needing to stir up action by distorting and misinterpreting facts. The fact is, to quote our National Center for Health Statistics once more, that “the increase in the number of illegitimate births during the past few years is due far more to increased numbers of women at risk than to increased risks of an unmarried woman having a child.”* That is, the chief reason why more women are bearing children out of wedlock is that there are more women. Clark Vincent put it very simply and clearly when he remarked, back in 1961, that even if there were no increases in rates, the number of unwed teenage mothers in the sixties would be almost twice what it was during the fifties because almost twice as many girls were born between 1945 and 1954 as between 1935 and 1944.**

The complexity of the picture and the destructive effects of distorted reporting place a solemn duty on every administrator, practitioner, writer and seriously interested citizen to do one of two things: either to stop talking about ratios, or else to study enough statistics and talk with enough demographers to be quite clear about what rates and ratios do and do not mean.

Actually, it would be simpler and easier to talk much less about them. We know that we have many more unmarried mothers than we would prefer. We know that in the next ten years the number will probably rise, even if rates stand still or dip, because the number of childbearing women will continue to increase. We could afford to forget all about the statistics and concentrate on trying to reduce the gap between available services and the need for them—a subject to be discussed under question four. To declare a moratorium on intense preoccupation with illegitimacy statistics would leave more time and a far better climate for trying to fill the service gap.

Question Two: Who Are the Unmarried Mothers?

The second and third questions highlighted in this review are: Who are the unmarried mothers; and what factors can be identified that contribute to, or are significantly associated with, births out of wedlock? Taken together, these two questions represent the researcher's cagey way of approaching the question, why—which he knows by ex-

---

**Vincent, 1961.
perience almost never allows itself to be answered in broad daylight.

Although questions two and three are in essence inseparable, I shall separate them. Separating the inseparable is, of course, one of the research habits found so irritating by nonresearchers. But discussion, like research, often requires pulling things apart in order to see how they fit together. Accordingly, under each question I will mention a few points on which some familiar answers are being qualified or challenged.

**Group differences**

Who are the unmarried mothers? Four familiar answers have influenced assumptions about who they are.

The first of these concerns mentality. Time was when it was commonly said that low intelligence was significantly related to unmarried motherhood. Perhaps there has been a real change in this correlation. Or perhaps we have become more alert to the limitations of certain intelligence tests for people not proficient in the language or the *mores*. Or perhaps we are more alert to sampling problems. A study of the twenties, for instance, described the unmarried mothers who had been sent to a psychiatric clinic for testing as representative of those known to social agencies—apparently without considering that the very reasons for wanting them tested might constitute a difference between them and the others. In any case, recent studies do not encourage an assumption that inferior intelligence is especially associated with unmarried motherhood.

The second stock answer concerns broken homes. Here again, sophisticated sampling raises doubts. It is probably true that a large proportion of unmarried mothers do come from broken homes. However, the incidence of broken homes is very high among the groups with high out-of-wedlock birth rates—that is, the low-income groups, both white and nonwhite. Because of questions about sampling, it has yet to be established that the broken home is more characteristic of unmarried mothers than of other women in these groups. This is a point on which more evidence is needed.

The third answer concerns geographic mobility. It is often said that unwed motherhood is most frequent among the newest migrants from the South to the North or from rural to urban environment. The explanations offered are persuasive. A few studies, however, show less illegitimacy among very recent arrivals than among those who have been longer exposed to urban influences. Until this point is resolved,

*Kronick, 1962.*
one can no longer with any comfort put the onus on the newcomer.

The fourth familiar answer is often the only one given to the question: Who are the unmarried mothers? The terms used vary among emotional disturbance, psychological disturbance, disturbed parent-daughter relations—usually mother-daughter. Most frequently this answer involves the assumption that out-of-wedlock pregnancy is the unmarried mother's solution to her intra- and interpersonal problems, that her pregnancy is not accidental but quasi-deliberate, and that her personality and problems conform to a regularly recurring—in fact almost invariable—pattern. Often there is a lip-service recognition that unmarried mothers are not all psychological identical twins. Yet a doctoral dissertation published as late as 1958 can declare roundly that all unmarried mothers show the same traits and have become pregnant through the same psychological mechanism; and a serious article dated 1956 can declare that pregnancy out of wedlock is never really accidental and that these girls can become pregnant almost at will—even though failure to use contraception may help a little.

A root of conflict in testimony about who the unmarried mothers are seems to be that, through the years, the most available subjects for study have been the clients of social agencies, and generalizations about "the" unmarried mother have typically reflected the characteristics of agency or clinic clientele.

The evidence supports at least one unqualified statement. So far no single trait or condition—physical, intellectual, or emotional—stands up as the overwhelming constant characterizing "the" unmarried mother—except, of course, bearing a child out of wedlock.* Nor is there convincing evidence that, among those who do suffer from emotional and interpersonal disturbances, one pattern is overwhelmingly preponderant. To those whose business is the assessment of evidence, it is surprising that statements as sweeping as the ones cited can still be made.

Clark Vincent is the investigator who has most emphatically and convincingly pointed out the distortions in our notions about who the unmarried mothers are, and some of the consequences of these distortions. When he presented evidence that some unmarried mothers are relatively mature, upstanding, and economically self-sufficient, he added an essential and long-lost piece to our picture—a piece consistent with the neglected message of our national statistics. The results of his studies, and of his thinking about them, are brought together in his book, Unmarried Mothers.** He asked a simple question: Who are the

---

*Bernstein, 1960.
**Vincent, 1961.

66
other unmarried mothers—the ones who do not form our captive populations for study in agencies and on relief rolls; the ones who are over twenty and supplied with cash and able to leave home to bear their out-of-wedlock children, whom they then place—all secretly and without benefit of agency? This question he proceeded to begin answering, and in doing so he began sketching in the lines of a more balanced and realistic picture than had been accepted before.

The neglected group he added to our ken represents a minority of unmarried mothers, but an important one. They are white girls and women, chiefly of the middle- and upper-income levels. It is generally conceded that the great majority of unmarried mothers come from low-income brackets. We do not know exactly how large a proportion, but serious students of the subject agree that we would do well to find out.

We do know how large a proportion are nonwhite, according to the national estimates: 58 percent in 1965. The overrepresentation of nonwhites among births out of wedlock is a familiar theme.

**Reasons for group differences**

Some of the experts have voiced skepticism about the size of the differences between illegitimate birth rates for whites and for nonwhites—differences in present rates and also differences in the rate of increase. Almost none doubts the existence of a difference. Several have suspected, however, that if relevant factors could be controlled, the difference in rate at a given time would be radically reduced and the differences in amount of increase between 1940 and 1960 might be wiped out.

The difference in amount of increase has undoubtedly been affected by improved reporting of all births, an improvement far greater for nonwhites than for whites, as estimated by the National Office of Vital Statistics.** Thus some part of the apparent nonwhite increase does seem attributable to improved reporting.

An uncertain element in reported differences is represented by the fact that some fourteen to sixteen States (the number varies) do not report birth status. And the States which do not report are the very ones to which white unwed mothers are most likely to travel, in order to give birth secretly and place the child in adoption, with the illegitimacy reported neither in the State of birth nor in the mother's

*Nonwhite is the classification used in our national figures. About 92 percent of the nonwhite population is Negro.

State of residence. These States include among others, New York and California.*

Although the estimates for these States are meticulous and sophisticated, this and other problems forbid taking too seriously changes in the national figures of one or two points from year to year—or changes of six-tenths of a point. This is the more true since, despite remarkable improvements in reporting, there is still reason to suspect over-reporting in some groups and under-reporting in others.

One source of real disparity between white and nonwhite rates is that the overall birth rate is higher for nonwhites than for whites.** Another is socioeconomic status. We have no national figures directly relating unmarried motherhood to social-economic level. One of the few unchallenged statements that can be made on this subject, however, is that the overwhelming majority of reported births out of wedlock are to mothers on the low-income levels. A study in New York City, for example, estimated that less than one in twenty of the illegitimate births during the study period occurred to private patients.† A very large number of other studies (including those of Kinsey and of Gebhart) support the proposition that the great majority of nonwedlock births occur among people in low-income levels.

Among reasons given to explain the concentration of nonwedlock births in the lower economic levels is the greater readiness of middle- and upper-class girls to resort to contraception and abortion, as well as the greater availability of family planning information and resources. There is ample evidence that contraception and abortion have been disliked and feared by lower-class whites as well as by lower-class Negroes, and far more by males than by females.‡ With regard to abortion, many find it too expensive or too frightening, and to many it is so unthinkable that they do not reach the stage of fear. There is also evidence, referred to in earlier sections of this publication, that low-income women appear less inclined than others to marry because of pregnancy.§

If the small segment of unmarried mothers above the lower socioeconomic level were deducted, it would be appropriate to base the rates only on the low-income population. But that part of the population represents a much larger fraction of the whole for nonwhites.

---


**Lunde, 1965; Whelpton et al. 1966.

†Parker et al. 1961.

‡Rainwater and Weinstein, 1960.

§Some Assumptions About the Poor, p. 35; Problem Populations, p. 1.
than for whites. According to the Poverty Index of the Social Security Administration, about 48 percent of nonwhite families with children under 18 were below the poverty line in 1964, as compared with 12 percent of white families.*

If our rates of illegitimacy could be figured against the base that produces most births out of wedlock, that base would include a much smaller proportion of all whites than of all nonwhites, and the difference in rates would be reduced by a sharp rise in the white rates.

There is some speculation about the probable effect on illegitimacy numbers and rates of greater access to information about family planning and to means of acting on it. The probabilities are neither clear nor unanimously asserted. To some extent they depend on assumptions about the effectiveness with which information and resources are made available, to whom they are made available, and their interaction with a number of other influences. In any case, it is safe to say that numbers of births out of wedlock are likely to increase for some time, regardless of family planning activities, for reasons already discussed. It is more than likely that ratios will continue to rise, since the number of births in wedlock—subject to a complex of influences other than those affecting births out of wedlock—has been on the decline for several years, and the ratio represents a proportion of all live births.

With regard to rates, it is difficult to see why they would not decline in response to increasing availability of family planning information and resources. The future course of illegitimacy rates, however, is bound to be affected by many additional factors, including employment opportunities and stability for low-income males. Really effective availability might influence rates indirectly as well as directly. It is widely hoped and believed, among its advocates, that the encouragement of family planning is likely to enhance the stability and quality of family life, and that one consequence may be the more frequent presence of those now described as "absent fathers." Such a consequence would, indirectly, reduce illegitimacy rates to some extent.

Question Three: What Factors Are Associated With Births Out of Wedlock?

Our first two questions reflected the desire to check assumptions about the dimensions of a problem and the identity of those most involved. Question three reflects the wish to check assumptions about

*Orshansky, 1966.
factors contributing to, or associated with, unmarried motherhood. The main challenges to widely accepted ideas cluster about those two important and elusive factors, cultural background (specifically the Negro-white distinction) and socioeconomic status. These are, quite reasonably, the two factors whose contributions to parenthood out-of-wedlock analysts and practitioners would most like to understand better. They would like to be more clear about the relative and absolute importance of each one, about their manifestations, their interactions, and their shifts through time. These factors have been studied a good deal and are still being studied, in connection with our present subject and with several others. And it seems clear that some often-heard statements and assumptions about them require modification in the light of available evidence.

A frequent feature of such statements is their absolute quality. When historical and cultural factors began to be mentioned as throwing light on current behavior, it was by way of counteracting stereotypes. An effort was made to introduce additional considerations that might help to explain behavior in all its complexity. But these additional considerations have somehow become new means to oversimplification. A pat phrase—"it's the culture"—is used, not to help explain, but to brush aside the need for explanation. And so, in its turn, the culture reference becomes a sort of neostereotype that blurs rather than sharpens our picture.

This rubber-stamp substitute for thought fails to do justice to the complexities of culture itself. Among those who have been most explicit in reminding about and illustrating these complexities are John Rohrer and his co-author.* I recommend their discussion as an antidote to any oversimplifications found in these pages.

I have said that the two factors—or factor complexes—most compelling to serious investigators are the cultural and the socioeconomic. In our society, however, the culture constellation of each individual is vastly affected by his social-economic position. Interest in the relation of this position to unwed motherhood is largely, in fact, an interest in the "culture of poverty."**

The interaction of these two factors is a main theme of earlier sections in this publication. Accordingly at this point I will merely mention two statements that were repeatedly challenged or qualified in the studies and opinions reviewed:

1. Evidence does not support the proposition that the relatively high illegitimacy rate among low-income

---

**Lewis, O., 1961; Gladwin, 1961.
Negroes derives primarily from a "Negro culture" produced by the situation under slavery.

2. Evidence does not support the proposition that no stigma attaches to illegitimacy among low-income Negroes.

The purpose here is merely to note that some familiar answers are challenged by some of our most thoughtful and informed researchers and practitioners. The grounds on which these and a number of other generalizations are challenged have been discussed in previous pages.

Question Four: Are Unmarried Mothers and Their Children Receiving the Services They Should Have?

The number of unmarried mothers is very large—an estimated 291,000 in 1965. If each of those mothers were placed in a bed with her baby, and the beds were laid end to end, the line would stretch from New York City to Richmond, Virginia, and fifty miles beyond.

How many nurses and doctors and social workers and other professionals would it take to give each of those mothers and each of those babies the services they need? Without stopping to figure, one can say confidently that it would call for a great many more than we now have. A rough estimate is that probably less than one-third of our unmarried mothers receive social agency services near the time of the child's birth. Presumably still fewer receive them at other times.

The service gap, which has been with us for many years, is unlikely to be closed soon in spite of current efforts supported by recent legislation. There has been no service manpower explosion to accompany the population explosion; and our ideas of adequate service expand far faster than does our service manpower.

The insufficient services we do have are not distributed evenly or efficiently. I focus mainly on social services here, but the picture with regard to health services is also distressing, as described in another Children's Bureau publication.*

With regard to social agency services, in 1960 an estimated one

*Herzog and Bernstein, 1964.
unmarried mother in six received services from a public or voluntary child welfare agency.* Three-fourths of the mothers served by such agencies in 1960 were white, although the majority of the children born out of wedlock in that year were nonwhite. From this we can estimate that nearly one-third of the white unmarried mothers and less than one-tenth of the nonwhite were served by public or private child welfare agencies.

On the whole, the unmarried mothers served by voluntary child welfare agencies, maternity homes and family service agencies tend to be of higher socioeconomic status (including somewhat higher education) than the average for all unmarried mothers in the United States. Those served by public as well as voluntary child welfare agencies also tend to be younger and more likely to place their children in adoption. About 70 percent of the white babies born out of wedlock and less than 10 percent (5-10 percent) of the nonwhite become adopted legally.

Those who do receive service from agencies with specialized programs for unmarried mothers are likely to be in contact with more than one agency—the average in a New York study was 2.7.** This finding documents a tendency to multiply services for those who do receive them, while many others go unserved in a field plagued by manpower shortages.†

Many unmarried mothers-to-be see no need of social services. Their definitions of needs and their conceptions of the kind of help social agencies give seldom coincide with the agency definitions. Moreover, if all unmarried mothers did seek agency help, the agencies would be unable to cope with the demand.

Another major reason why unmarried mothers do not turn to social agencies is their wish to conceal the pregnancy, and the fear—not always realistic—that the agency will prevent concealment. On the other hand, some turn to the agency for help with concealment, especially if they wish to place the child in adoption.

Less frequent deterrents may be equally potent when they do operate. Among these are problems of eligibility for service and lack of referral, or inadequately followed through referral, by members of related professions.**

 Fewer unmarried than married mothers-to-be receive prenatal medical care, and the deterrents are much the same as for social services, although with medical services the problems of eligibility and of

---

*Adams, 1962.
**Bernstein and Sauber, 1960.
†Bernstein, 1963; 1966.
arranging for care bulk far larger.* Problems of arranging for care include difficulties with transportation, inability to get to the clinic during the specified hours, the need to make arrangements for care of other children (if any) during the mother's absence, the long waits at the clinic, and the problems—financial and psychological—of taking time away from work, especially when a woman is trying to conceal her pregnancy as long as possible. Moreover, some women, married or unmarried, dread a medical examination, are afraid of doctors, are uncertain what is expected of them. Fear of doctors and medical procedures is compounded by the overcrowding of clinics, where the staff seem brusque because they are hurried, where one is likely to see a different doctor each time, and where the harried clinic personnel "don't talk nice to you."

Two populations

Whatever the reasons for not receiving services, the fact remains that the great majority of our unmarried mothers do not receive them; and certain selective factors strongly influence service distribution. For all their infinite variety, unmarried mothers can be grouped with regard to specified characteristics in which the members of one group resemble each other more than they resemble other groups, even though they may differ widely with regard to other characteristics. Such groups are commonly referred to as "populations." From the standpoint of services, several distinct populations of unmarried mothers must be recognized. For convenience in describing two of them, I will call them Population A and Population B.**

Population A is middle or upper class in social status and economically self-sufficient (or with a family that is economically self-sufficient). Its members are predominantly, though not invariably, white, and under 25 years old. They are likely to go to a maternity home either in their own or a different community; to have contact with casework agencies; to have private prenatal care although not usually private hospital care at delivery; to show concern about concealing the pregnancy, to be expected to have concern about concealment, and to have help in effecting it; to place the baby in adoption with the help of a social agency; and to leave the unmarried mother status shortly after delivery.

It is widely assumed that unmarried mothers in Population A typically have only one child out of wedlock, although there is no firm

*Herzog and Bernstein, 1964.

**For this formulation I am indebted to Rose Bernstein. Some of it coincides with points made by Helen Harris Perlman, 1964.
evidence on this. It is also widely assumed that unmarried mothers in Population A do, or should, feel guilt about their nonwedlock pregnancies.

Services for Population A are geared to individual diagnosis and treatment, with emphasis on psychological and psychiatric problems and their alleviation. The social agency services are likely to include casework or psychiatric treatment in a setting that includes a high ratio of staff to service recipients.

The community, through its voluntary agencies and organizations, is ready to invest money and effort in bringing more Population A mothers into services and placing their babies in adoption.

Population B is of low social status and has low income, although its members are not necessarily on public assistance. They are predominantly, though not invariably, nonwhite, and their ages vary widely. The proportion of first births is lower than in Population A. Members of Population B are less likely to conceal the pregnancy and the popular stereotype assumes that they do not care about concealment, though in fact they often do. Prenatal care—if any—is likely to be obtained at an out-patient clinic. Medical complications of pregnancy are far more frequent than with Population A.

The unmarried mother in Population B is likely to keep her baby, not necessarily because she wants to do so. She is less likely than members of Population A to leave the unmarried mother status, although she may move in and out of it. She and her family are commonly assumed not to feel great concern about her nonwedlock pregnancy, although this assumption is challenged by increasing evidence.

For Population B, contact with, or knowledge of, social agencies is primarily in connection with public assistance. The goal of treatment is likely to be defined as socioeconomic rather than psychological rehabilitation, including vocational training and assistance in obtaining employment. That is, the emphasis is placed on sociological rather than psychological or psychiatric considerations.

The community objective in supplying social services for Population B has been to get the unmarried mother out of service rather than into it, especially to get (or keep) her off the relief rolls. It should be added that efforts are now under way to change this emphasis. This is an uphill struggle, hampered by shortages of staff and funds, as well as by widespread ambivalence about goals and ways of meeting them.

The community objective in medical services is to bring all mothers, married or unmarried, into prenatal medical care. In the past, the means have usually depended on exhortation rather than on
efforts to make the medical services palatable or accessible. As a result of recent legislation, efforts are now under way to make changes in the way these services are given.*

The majority of this country's unmarried mothers fall into Population B, although this population receives a very small proportion of the services specifically designed for unmarried mothers. If received at all, such services typically end soon after the birth of the child. Little attention has been given, in studies and reports on Population B, to the problems of unwed mothers as mothers, or to the needs of nonwedlock children kept by their mothers; and little information is available about these children after the age of six months.**

Thus, for Population B, as for Population A—though for different reasons—special services are likely to end shortly after the child's birth.

Some implications

If the majority of community services for unmarried mothers are given to those who are white, above the poverty level and likely to place the child in adoption; and if the majority of unmarried mothers are nonwhite, of low income and not likely to place their children in adoption, then adjustments would seem to be needed.

One possible direction of change concerns basic planning of services. For the most part, our services for unmarried mothers function as an array of discrete, separate operations, each of which serves a segment of need and which may involve separate social agencies, schools, vocational training centers, hospitals, clinics, courts, etc. We need a broader base—a coherent, integrated network of care services rather than a multiplicity of more or less related parts.† This kind of planning is now being attempted in many communities, in connection with the poverty program and juvenile delinquency services. A number of current projects are directed toward integrated services for unmarried mothers.

In this connection it is useful to survey the general purposes and the specific services that have been developed abroad and to consider whether some elements might usefully be applied here. In Den-

---

*Haselkorn, 1966.
**Some follow-up studies of unmarried mothers, conducted during the sixties, have furnished needed and welcome information, but have not focused primarily on the areas noted here. (E.g., Hallowell and Knudsen, 1965; Reed and Latimer, 1963; Sauber and Rubenstein, 1965; Wright, 1965.)
†Kahn, 1964; Perlman, 1964; Vincent, 1961.
mark, for example, an unmarried mother is expected to receive help in establishing adequate living quarters, adequate day care for her child and adequate training for herself, sometimes for several years. We are told also that more than 90 percent of the mothers so helped eventually marry and, presumably, establish stable homes.*

Illegitimacy rates in Denmark are reported to have decreased during recent years. Without assuming a cause-and-effect relationship, one can still say that apparently the kind of help that opens up a vista of stable family life and economic independence does not tend to increase illegitimacy.**

Because of the often-expressed fear that effective help for unmarried mothers might encourage illegitimacy, it should be recognized that in this country also the evidence we have is all in the other direction. We have supplied ourselves over the years with plenty of evidence that withholding services and support does not decrease births out of wedlock. And the few relevant studies available indicate that giving services and support does not increase them. Births out of wedlock do appear to be increased, however, by programs of service and support that put a premium on fatherless homes.

The crisis view, with its components of anger and fear, fosters a punitive component in our attitudes—at least in attitudes toward unmarried mothers who are likely to become a drain on the taxpayer’s pocket; and this interferes with efforts to meet practical needs in a way that will diminish the likelihood of future drain. The punitive component is not overt enough to make many propose such measures as sterilization or imprisonment; but it is strong enough to make many oppose measures, especially expensive ones, that could promote self-sufficiency but might seem to reward wrongdoing. There is a question whether it is wise or even expedient to regard community services as a vehicle of moral judgment.

Whatever the patterns that develop, our national goals as well as our national interest suggest that we should find ways to bring needed services to a larger proportion of our unmarried mothers, with less selectivity based on those painfully intertwined factors, class, color and income. These services should be designed, not only to tide them over the period of pregnancy and childbirth, but also—where indicated—to provide support and training aimed at opening the way for them to become adequate mothers and adequate citizens, who will participate in rather than burden the society.

---

*Kahn, 1964.

**The Danish experience also suggests that it is possible to establish paternal responsibility, even among the nonpoor. We do not have official figures, but a psychiatrist working with the Mother’s Aid Program in Denmark reports that the unmarried father contributes financial aid in 90 percent of the births out of wedlock.
The return on the investment can be enhanced by more effective and coherent planning, more diagnostic discrimination and less socio-economic discrimination in determining who gets what kind of services, and more efficiency in utilizing available manpower. Such efficiency involves avoidance of over-service to a few as well as under-service to many, and also involves job analysis to separate out professional components. And such efficiency calls for unemotional concentration on practical problem solving.

Summary

This review of facts, evidence, and assumptions seems to me to add up to several points, the chief of which can be summarized as follows:

1. The increase in births out of wedlock has occurred chiefly because there are more people and not chiefly because the likelihood has increased that a woman will bear a child out of wedlock.

2. It is important to realize that we are confronted with the latest phase in a long-term situation rather than with an erupting crisis, because the crisis view breeds alarm and anger, which are the foes of constructive problem solving.

3. Any effort to understand the significance of changes in the number of nonwedlock births must be based on study of illegitimacy rates.

4. Even if the illegitimacy rate remains constant, or even if it decreases somewhat, the numbers and probably the ratio can be expected to continue rising during the years just ahead.

5. Both in quantity and in content, services for unmarried mothers and their children are inadequate to the need, and the services we offer are not distributed fairly or efficiently.


Bernstein, Rose: "Are We Still Stereotyping the Unmarried Mother?" Social Work, July 1966, pp. 22-28 (Vol. 5, No. 1).


Coles, Robert: "There's Sinew in the Negro Family." Background paper for


Provided by the Maternal and Child Health Library, Georgetown University


