

## NOTHING IS MORE PRACTICAL THAN A GOOD THEORY

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The book review editor of our local newspaper rejected my colleague's new book on violence for review because it was "too full of jargon" and "too theoretical." Many people use such excuses to turn sociology off. Such an attitude is regrettable. Most sociological theories are not stated in jargon, excessively abstract, unrelated to social reality, nor are they impractical. As a matter of fact, nothing is more practical than a good theory.

Every social phenomenon that attracts public attention is sure to stimulate theories to explain it. Violence is a common and arresting event in American society. Blacks rioted in Miami in the summer of 1979. On November 3 of the same year, the Ku Klux Klan and "American" Nazis killed 5 people in Greensboro (N.C.). Nearly 30 young black children have been mysteriously killed in Atlanta in the last two years. In each case, WHY? Well, sociology accommodates with a variety of theories to explain violence. Kornhauser (1959) and others cited alienation as the central feature of mass society and the leading contributor to collective violence. Nieberg (1969:20) said the so-called "riffraff theory" of collective violence results from the activities of Communists, psychopaths, the downtrodden, and other alienated persons. Elliott (1952:273) and Graham (1970:74-82) cite the "frontier theory" of modern violence. This explanation suggests that as the frontier closed, people migrated to cities, bringing with them the culture of Dodge City shootouts, gun slinging, gangsterism, and vigilantism. McLuhan (1968) advanced the notion that electronic mass communication is transforming and retribalizing society, creating the intense immediacy of experience that produces situations of collective violence.

In sociology as in all the sciences theories contain and state what we know about the phenomena we study. There are few "laws." What we know is theoretical in the sense that it is presumed to be true and open to challenge. Theories that explain phenomena enable us to predict their recurrence and to plan for them to facilitate their recurrence or to prevent their recurrence. Theories also permit us to use *facts* to understand, explain, and interpret

phenomena. In this use a theory is a frame of reference within which the facts can be ordered to explain them. In this respect a theory is analogous to the triangular form in which billiard balls are "racked up." Racked in a square or a round form, they would mean something else, not billiards or pool. Social Facts, like billiard balls, can be arranged in different forms. In each form they are likely to have a unique meaning.

### WHAT THEORIES DO WITH FACTS

Fact one. First, regularly the news media report that increasing proportions of the black population live in "extended" families. These are multi-generational or collateral aggregations of related persons who live together in a single household. Often these clusters of "relatives" are not arranged around a married couple. The reports point out that as the number of these extended family units increases, the number of nuclear husband-wife-children families in the black community declines.

Fact two. Although nine-tenths of the black adults have been married, the marriage rate in the black community is declining. More individuals live alone, failing to marry. As in the general community, an increasing number of adult men and women live together without getting married. In the literature these are called "alternate family forms." One that has attracted much attention recently is the case of older men and women living together to combine their inadequate pensions to support two people.

Fact three. The media report that the number of female-headed families in the black community continues to increase. A growing proportion of these are composed of young unmarried women with children born out of wedlock. These female-headed black families also include widowed, deserted and divorced women with children; women who have adopted children, either officially or informally; and women who have undertaken to support dependent relatives. Some of these female family heads are called "welfare mothers" by the media.

Fact four. At present more than half of all black children are born out of wedlock, and the percentage continues to increase. This information is widely reported in the news media. These reports also contain pejorative evaluations. However, the evaluation is not the central fact. The basic fact is that at present most black children are recorded as having no official father as a matter of marriage record.

### THEORY AND MEANING

What do these facts mean? The facts intrinsically have no social meaning. The social meaning is attributed to them by a theory. To make that statement brings us back to the discussion of the uses of sociological theory. Sociological theory constitutes a frame of reference within which to arrange a set of facts and by means of which to interpret their meaning. Let us see how sociological theories of black families would give social meaning to these facts.

There are two major theories of black families, called by Allen (1978:167-189), for want of better terms, the "cultural deviant," and the "cultural variant." The cultural deviant theory argues that black families have been victimized and isolated by the American socioeconomic system. As a consequence, their grasp of American culture is inadequate, defective, or distorted. Black families are therefore regarded as pathological.

This theory has been variously formulated by social scientists. Frazier (1939) called the salient condition of black families as "inadequate socialization," i.e., incomplete learning of the American culture. In a widely discussed report on *The Negro Family*, Moynihan (1965) identified the problem as "weakness," resulting from the impact of the socioeconomic system. Oscar Lewis (1961) argued that blacks were not only inadequately socialized; but they had acquired the "culture of poverty."

See how the facts cited above tend to fit this theory. Low and declining marriage rates, extended, non-nuclear units, female headedness, and illegitimacy are clear deviations. The theories say that deviance results from abnormality, inadequate socialization, and the acquisition of a deviant subculture. In other words, these four facts about black families seem to fit as a cluster into the interpretative form of cultural deviance.

Staples (1980:889) states that "The cultural variant orientation depicted black families as different but functional family forms." That is, it is freely admitted that black families are different in substantial ways from nuclear middle-class white families. But rural and poor urban, orthodox Jewish, native American, and Spanish speaking families also are different from the white American family type. The cultural variant theory interprets difference not in a negative, pejorative way, but rather as evidence of functional adaptation.

The cultural variant theory as developed by such scholars as Billingsly (1964), Ladner (1971), Myers (1980), Blackwell (1975), Hill (1972), Staples (1971), and others argues that the "deviances" constitute functional adjustments of black families to the socioeconomic exigencies of their lives. For example, many blacks are poor. They endure low pay rates, high unemployment rates, and severe economic exploitation. Extended family living constitutes one functional adjustment to this economic situation. Poor blacks can pool their low incomes and cut family expenses, and so make do. Births out of wedlock and female family heading are other coping devices. A young unmarried black mother can get on public welfare. In this way she can avoid unemployment, sexual exploitation by men and the degradation of menial jobs while enjoying the self fulfillment of motherhood and the opportunity to manage her life. Premarital sexual activity, motherhood without wedlock, welfare status, and the rest are infringements of middle-class mores. But these behaviors may have a different meaning and function in the poor black neighborhood. In the black community failure to marry, extended family organization, and female heading of families created by birth out of wedlock are seen as acceptable, pragmatic social behavior in the face of the socioeconomic conditions of life. These facts *mean* that many black people are realistic, creatively adaptable members of their real worlds.

We can put the matter of the functions of these two theories another way. The cultural deviant theory describes and evaluates black families without explaining why they behave as they do. It says that because black family behavior is different from that of middle-class whites it is deviant; and it asserts that because

these families are deviant they behave in the ways that are popularly reported. The cultural variant theory admits that behavior in black families is deviant, but argues that it results from efforts to cope with the unique problems of life in the black community. This theory does not bother to describe or evaluate this family behavior.

### CONCLUSION

Sociological theories are not always couched in jargon, stated abstractly, and devoid of practical use. Good theories are likely to be simple, clear and very useful. Such theories can help lay persons as well as social scientists to understand, interpret and explain a body of facts.

I have also shown how a set of facts about black families can be interpreted in opposite ways by different theories. Each theory is useful but for a different purpose. The cultural deviant theory reveals how the family behavior of poor black families is perceived and interpreted by the middle classes. The cultural variant theory seeks to explain why black people in poor, disadvantaged families act as they do without evaluating that behavior. Sociological theories are practical useful tools of observing and thinking and nothing is better for these purposes than a *good* theory.

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