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The Black Woman:
The Pre-Decisional Stage

Phyllis Jackson

Should I press my hair? Should we have whites on the Committee? Should whites teach Black Studies courses? Should I wear my lappa and buba to the Greek Frat dance tonight? These and other molecular questions are disturbing especially when we consider that they have been raised to address the crucial issue of a psychological conversion to blackness. Not only are these molecular questions addressed to this psychological conversion, they become measures! The escalation of this phenomena from question to measure to decision is frightening.

This discussion is leveled at all black people at all stages of awareness and commitment. Essentially it proposes a view of a method of inquiry before making a decision. It asks that people move from molecular level questions to molar level questions. These molar level questions will form a basis of inquiry during the pre-decisional stage which has the triple function of relating ideas with ideas, ideas with experience, and experience with experience. Molecular questions, on the other hand, do not call for investigation but rather “yes” or “no” answers.

The black woman, as a subject of unusual interest, provides a framework of reference for advancing a method of inquiry on the molar level. A glut of questions on the molecular level, like those above, which deal with external badges of blackness will end in premature elliptical decisions.

Womanhood has become a prominent topic of discussion in the past decade. Black womanhood has been a primary concern of many analysts of human behavior since the introduction of the first African female on these shores. Each group of analysts—social analysts, policy makers, and law people—has contributed, in its fashion, to the myth of the Black

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In a recently published book, *Tomorrow's Tomorrow*, the author, Joyce Ladner, explores the myth and its consequences:

“The highly functional role that the Black female has historically played has caused her to be erroneously stereotyped as a matriarchate, and this label has been quite injurious to Black women and men. It has caused a considerable amount of frustration and emasculation within Black men because it implies that they are incapable of fulfilling the responsibilities for the care and protection of their families. It has also caused certain added responsibilities to be placed on the shoulders of the Black woman because the larger societal expectation of her was in conformance with this stereotyped conception.”

Two corollaries follow from this erroneous characterization of the Black woman, first:

In recent years the Black woman has almost become a romantic, legendary figure in this society because the vast conceptions of her as a person are largely dictated by these stereotypes. The idea that she is almost superhuman, capable of assuming all major responsibilities for sustaining herself and her family through harsh economic and social conditions has been projected in much of the popular literature and academic research.

Implicit in the popular conceptualization of Black womanhood on all fronts is that she is felt to be stronger than other women and certainly stronger than Black men.

Given the first, the second is natural and inevitable.

Moreover, it is often assumed that the male's inability to function as the larger society expects him to be more a function of his having been emasculated by the woman than society.

Not all writers on the subject would have us believe that the Black man has been irreparably damaged by the Black female; but, of course, the overwhelming majority would. Miss Ladner is one of the rare social scientists who would shift the responsibility from the so-called domineering wife and/or mother to a racist society. In doing so, she eschews the all-pervasive primary paradigm which incorporated the doctrine of free will. Since the individual is endowed by God with a free will, ergo, he is responsible for any position in which he finds himself. Thus we hear, “If black people didn’t have so many children, they would not be impoverished.”

The stereotypes and misconceptions which victimized Blacks and created a black mystique have been institutionalized—nay, died through irresponsible and biased social science investigations. Quare. To what end?

Frantz Fanon proffers that intentionally created rifts between males and
females of an oppressed or awakening peoples is a tactic employed to act as a safety valve for the retention of power. Hence, we commend to your attention *A Dying Colonialism*, a major treatise on the psychology of the oppressor, in which the author claims that the French, in order to maintain their position in Algeria, deliberately attempted to engender conflict between Algerian men and women. This tactic is readily identifiable in traditional colonial relationships but not entirely limited to or prompted by these classical international relationships. Indeed, this phenomenon is alive, well, and residing in the United States, courted by our social scientists and properly chaperoned by our accommodating primary paradigm. Robert Stapes, eminent black sociologist, and an astute observer of a thriving neo-colonialism in the United States, vehemently denies the “emasculating of the Black male by the Black female.” He contends that this fabrication has been advanced, not in search of truth, but for more selfish motives:

> It has been functional for the white ruling class, through its ideological apparatus, to create internal antagonisms in the Black Community between Black men and women to divide them and to ward off effective attacks on the external system of white racism. It is a mere manifestation of the divide-and-conquer strategy, used by most ruling classes through the annals of man, to continue the exploitation of an oppressed group.

We have briefly touched upon the victimization of Blacks, (males no less than females), the role of the social scientist, and the question, “To what end?” The next questions on the molar level are: how to explode the myth? on what basis? and who shall rectify the problem?

This writer defers to Sister Angela Davis. Miss Davis argues that the so-called matriarchy is a myth because the Black family, and the Black woman have never functioned in the manner in which we understand the universal definition of the matriarchy:

> ...a society in which some, if not all, of the legal powers relating to the ordering and governing of the family—power and property, over inheritance, over marriage, over the house are lodged in women rather than men.

William Goode suggests that no matriarchy, as it is defined above, is known to exist in any part of the world. As Miss Davis develops her analysis, she reiterates the positive qualities of the Black female, and explodes the myth of the matriarchate on the basis of power:

> Inherent in the very concept of matriarchy is “Power.” It would have been exceedingly risky for the slave holding class to openly acknowledge symbols of authority—female symbols, no less than male.

As one of those who understands power, Hans Morganthou has stated that a definition of power includes the power to define, for to define is
"the psychological control over the minds of men."10

Explosion! The basic problem of the matriarchate theory is power. Black females have no power. They have as much power presently as did their great, great grandmothers when released from slavery. We must avoid the tendency to confuse power and/or growth with a few tokenistic opportunities. Statistics have borne out that the black woman's present economic and political opportunities are extremely limited: they have changed little with emancipation.

Miss Ladner and others state that a perspective of Black people as deviants has been possible because Blacks have not had the power to resist the labels. This power could come only from the ability to provide the definitions of one's past, present and future.11 The Black woman's power has been non-existent to the extent that she has not been able to define herself or anyone else. She has been defined by the majority group, labeled by the majority group and expected to fulfill the prophesies of the dominant group.

Miss Davis sees the attribution of power to Black women as a deliberate and dastardly distortion of history. Since the distortion is of Blacks by whites and for the whites, it becomes incumbent upon Blacks to assume the primary responsibility for the fashioning of a remedy:

The paucity of literature on the Black woman is outrageous on its face. But we must also contend with the fact that too many of these rare studies must claim as their signal achievement the reinforcement of the fictitious cliches. . . Many have recently sought to remedy this situation. But for the time being at least, we are still confronted with these reified images of ourselves. And for now, we must still assume the responsibility of shattering them.12

Common sense dictates that those who created, institutionalized, and defied a certain public posture will in no way discredit themselves, desecrate their discipline, or jeopardize the ideological fantacies of the status quo, especially while it is still of value to the vast majority of a society. No, we as Blacks must insist upon the perogative to rectify the situation. Such an insistance properly carried through includes the right to define ourselves and create new paradigms. Who will act? You will act!

Listen to the marshalling call from Dr. Jacqueling Jackson, Associate Professor of Medical Sociology at Duke University Medical Center. It provides an undergrid for the main foci of this section of our discussion as well as a tentative summary. That marshalling call you hear is a call for paradigms of change:

It is especially important to examine these myths, for they have been the basis for two cruel and erroneous theories with reference to the Black woman, her mate, and her man. The Black woman has become "the black widow of modern sociology" and this notion must be dissipated.13
Why is it difficult to dispel injudicious, misguided research? Perhaps it is time to turn from who should do what to the exploration of the potential dangers to the larger society if such myths are exposed. Why are they adverse to a redefinition of the problems in terms of a structured society and its effects on the lives of individuals? Why do social scientists behave as they do? Why do they perceive these challenges as threatening?

The inherent danger a new perspectus presents to the field of social science and the larger society can be explained as threatening if viewed in terms of an historical development of an ideologically generated explanatory paradigm. Thomas Kuhn, in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, discusses the development and function of a paradigm’ when anomalies occur in a given setting, a theoretical explanation is generated which defines the problem in a way which guarantees the existence of a stable set of solutions. The anomalies referred to in Kuhn’s scientific examples can be extended to the realm of social science investigations so as to correspond to the documentation of racism in a nation premised on equality, poverty in a nation of affluence, hunger in the land of milk and honey, urban decay, crime, mental illness, etc.

Once faced with the Civil Rights agitation emanating from the underdeveloped “ghetto” the manifestation of these paradoxical social problems had to be recognized. To recognize the problem is to define it—a definition of reality had to be constructed which would both account for the problems expressed by the people and maintain the existing economic and political structure. Voila! The Moynihan Report. According to Moynihan, the reasons for and the answers to the problems were to be found in the Black Community. To echo Malcolm: The victim was again to suffer for the crime. The Moynihan Report, according to Angela Davis, consecrated the myth that Black women were matriarchs. It also received Washington’s stamp of approval while acknowledging the tangle of pathology engendered within the myth.

At this point, we are borrowing very heavily from Rose’s analysis of the extension of Kuhn’s theory to the social scientists and policy makers. Roe, in *The Betrayal of the Poor*, supplies a strong indictment of the methodological heuristics employed by social scientists of an affluent society as they relate to the poor. His logical analysis of the victimization of the poor is appropriate in this discussion because its value is integrally related to a refutation of what those few concerned social scientists have pointed out as a primary and predominant concern when “outsiders” are defined by the “insiders.” Rose’s analysis of the poor is of importance since the Black women who are heads of households are traditionally poor; caught in a triple bind of sexism, racism and poverty. At any rate, it is felt that the analysis of information about the poor by the non-poor is perceived through the utilization of a primary construction of reality, which has had a binding perceptive force on a population over time and serves only to destroy the value of the data. Rose further states that “reality is defined and reinforced in a manner which maintains the existing distribution of power and
resources through the provision of language and meanings associated with language, the latter derived from sources outside the individual.”

I apprehend the reality of everyday life as an ordered reality. Its phenomena are prearranged in patterns that seem to be independent of my apprehension of them and that impose themselves on the latter. The reality of everyday life appears objectified, that is constituted by an order of objects that have been designated as objects before my appearance on the scene. The language used in everyday life continuously provides me with the necessary objectifications and posits the order within which these make sense and within which everyday life has meaning for me.

If we continue with Rose’s analysis vis-a-vis Kuhn, Berger and Lucknow as it applies to the existence of poverty in America, and apply it to the existence of the myth of the Black woman in America, we will see that the paradigm for the perception of the Black woman is based upon a history of pejorative concepts beginning with moral or spiritual deprivation and extending to present-day subcultural, psychopathological views and their derivatives.

Rose explicates the problem of methodological heuristics:

To return to the main discussion, the impact of the paradigm on the perception is one of reality definition. Having established the theoretical explanation of a phenomenon, the professionals operating within the confines of the paradigm generally attempt to expand its utility in three ways: increasing the accuracy and scope of the knowledge of the facts legitimated by the paradigm, comparing the facts with predictions from the paradigm, or articulating the paradigm theory by resolving some of the ambiguities. Inevitably, in the course of these functions, there appear inventions generated to measure paradigm-related facts. These inventions are in the form of instrumentation designed to verify the theory and often contain within them aspects of the theory itself. Thus, in the social sciences, research on the recipe-based premise is conducted and popularized, (see Oscar Lewis’ work on the culture of poverty), quantitative attitudinal research is done comparing imputed values of the lower class vis-a-vis middle class, and instrumentation is developed to carry the paradigm into operational programs. Legitimate knowledge is reduced to what can be explained by the paradigm and ordered for the transmission to future professional practitioners.

Rose uses the following quote from Kuhn to explain this socialization process of the professionals:

The study of paradigms...is what mainly prepared the student for memberships in the particular scientific community with which he
will later practice. Because he there joins men who learned the bases of their field from the same concrete models, his subsequent practice will seldom evoke overt disagreement over fundamentals.\(^{24}\)

By this time, it should be clear that what is central to Rose’s thesis is that the commonly accepted premises on which the paradigm is based is the maintenance of the existing construction of reality and continual reinforcement of the theoretical stance, for it is a closed system which excludes alternative explanation of the phenomena.\(^{25}\)

There are other scathing indictments:

The myth of the Negro past is one of the principle supports of race prejudice in this country. Unrecognized in its efficacy, it rationalizes discrimination in everyday contact between Negroes and whites, influences the shaping of policy where Negroes are concerned, and affects the trends of research by scholars whose theoretical approach, methods, and systems of thought presented to students are in harmony with it.\(^{26}\) (emphasis added)

Rose, Herskovits, and Elizabeth Herzog,\(^{27}\) Becker,\(^{28}\) Lemert,\(^{29}\) Tannenbaum,\(^{30}\) Sawyer\(^{31}\) are among those concerned with the methodological heuristics of defining the problem. As the problem of methodological heuristics related directly to the recipe-based paradigm generated in an ideologically oriented conceptualization relating to Black people and the Black community, it is not surprising to read the following:

There must be a strong concern with redefining the problem. Instead of future studies being conducted on the problems of the Black community as represented by the deviant perspective, there must be a redefinition of the problem as one of institutional racism . . . The challenge to social scientists for a redefinition of the basic problem has been raised in terms of the “colonial analogy.” It has been argued that the relationship between the researcher and his subjects, by definition, resembles that of the oppressor and the oppressed, because it is the oppressor who defines the problem, the nature of the research and, to some extent, the quality of interaction between him and his subjects. This viability to understand and research the fundamental problem—neo-colonialism—prevents most social researchers from being able accurately to observe and analyze Black life and culture and the impact racism and oppression has had upon Blacks.\(^{32}\)

The next quote taken from Miss Ladner is quite interesting in that it further undergirds the insights of Mr. Rose, and, at the same time, bears a phenomenally close resemblance. She continues:

Their inability to understand the nature and effects of neo-colonialism in the same manner as Black people is rooted in the inherent bias of the social sciences. The basic concepts and tools of white
Western society are permeated by this partiality to the conceptual framework of the oppressor. It is simple enough to say that the difference between the two groups—the oppressor and the oppressed—prevents the former from adequately comprehending the essence of Black life and culture because of a fundamental difference in perceptions, based upon separate histories, life-styles and purposes for being. Simply put, the slave and his master do not view and respond to the world in the same way.

The challenge from some social scientists is to redefine the problem in such a way that the interests of all members of society are recognized and served. There is understandable resistance to such investigation which would catigate society rather than the individuals. It would be as if an octopus turned his tentacles upon himself. In the interest of the larger society, the wretched of the earth must be treated as if their lot is their lot because it is their lot. It is the social scientist view that the aberrant behavior of the wretched should be socialized by the expectations and standards of the dominant group. If this does not happen, the individual is at fault! After all, he has the opportunity to behave like everyone else! From the aforegoing, it should be clear that there are biases in the social sciences, and because of these biases, social scientists operate with emphasis on cliches and superficialities. Social scientists operate without regard for the structural efforts of oppression in order to maintain the status quo. They are not equipped to conceive of and produce new paradigms.

In reading the literature on the Black woman, writers seem to suggest that the Black woman has had more to do with her present status in the American society than can be substantiated. Some analysts would have us believe that she has more free choice in shaping her destiny than she actually does. This phenomena pervades, in the form of common epithets, the world outside social science. Ask any man about his view of "free choice" and his answer, invariably, will be that "the only free people in America are the white man and the Black woman." Of course, this is absurd. Professor Jacqueline Jackson has this to say about the "free Black female":

In comparison with black males and white females and males, black women yet constitute the most disadvantaged group in the United States, as evidenced especially by their largely unenviable educational, occupational, employment, and income levels and availability of marital partners.

Professor Jackson examines relevant data, largely culled from census records of the past fifty years in an effort to counter the alleged priviledged status of Black women as compared to that of her male counterpart. Black women purportedly have special privileges with respect to Black men in terms of superior education, occupation, employment and income. The
The question "But where are the males?" refers inevitably to that of the sex ratio i.e., the number of males per every one hundred females. One highly significant gap in almost all contemporary scientific, pseudo-scientific, and ideological concerns about Black women—and especially Black female household heads—is that of the failure to consider the implications of the sex ratio itself. This gap can be attributed directly to the general tendency of social scientists and social policymakers to ignore the realities of the prevailing black sex ratios and concomitant factors, such as the aforementioned tendency of white females to seek black males. 

Since 1940, the black sex ratio has actually worsened, or judged at least from the perspective of Black females. The literature almost always fails to inquire about the male availability levels for Black females. Probably the most glaring example is The Moynihan Report. Moynihan tended to assume that male unemployment was the critical factor affecting the proportion of female-headed households among blacks, but he failed miserably in dealing with the actual supply of black males for black females.

Census data clearly revels that females have been excessive in the black population of the United States since at least 1850, a period of more than 120 years! (emphasis added)

Professor Jackson concludes that the critical issue confronting many Black women is not the black matriarchy or black female emasculation of the male, but merely "But where are the men?"

The question is as interesting and profound as the social scientists’ response is ludicrous. Many of them deal with Professor Jackson’s theory or question by dismissing it and/or by referring to their knowledge-based paradigm. Within this paradigm they find the answer which they expected to find: the reason Dr. Jackson reached the conclusions she reached was that black males do not desire to be counted in censuses or interviewed by social workers. Most social scientists would express this even in the face of census bureau statistics indicating more black female births over a certain period and a higher black male infant mortality rate. Did it ever occur to them that certainly, unborn people and dead babies can’t be hiding just to make life difficult for the census takers? But the paradigm says yes.

Professor Jackson’s article points to what has been an oftimes unstated, but implicit assumption, about Black female household heads: that she is there by some exercise of her own independent will, that she has emasculated the black male of her own volition and in doing so has driven him away. Although this is inconsistent with reality as Black people and poor people experience their lives, it is consistent with the social scientists’ ideologically generated paradigm. To attribute free choice to the individual is consistent with the ideology of a democracy, and, further, it allows
analysts to place blame on the individual rather than on society. It is incredible that in an effort to maintain the paradigm, the social scientists have, through "scientific investigation," created the "tangle of pathology," while they have failed to understand, or, refuse to understand the "pathology of ideology." For purposes of this discussion, the term "ideology" has been continually defined with Manheim:

The concept 'ideology' reflects the one discovery which emerges from political conflict, namely that ruling groups can in their thinking become so intensively interest-bound to a situation that they are simply no longer able to see certain facts which would undermine their sense of domination. There is implicit in the work 'ideology' the insight that in certain situations the collective unconscious of certain groups obscures the real condition of society both of itself and to others and thereby stabilizes it.38

What remains to be understood in the remainder of this discussion is what is referred to by concerned social scientists as patterns of choice in a structured society. It behooves all of us to improve our ability to distinguish between those choices which are real and those which are apparent.

For purposes of this analysis, we offer the following guidelines: When we speak of "free choice" in the adult, mature sense of the word, we speak of something more than decision-making. In order for an individual to exercise free choice, he must have the ability to define a problem or size up the situation in which he finds himself. If there is to be a solution to what the individual perceives as a problem, he/she must have the ability to generate alternate solutions to his problems. Once this has been done, he is in a position to select the best of the alternate routes so as to arrive at what he deems a satisfactory solution. If the individual is able to accomplish the process we have indicated, then we may say that in that particular situation he was able to make a free choice. The choice mechanism operates on those elements which are not handed down or given in advance.39 On the other hand, we may say that elements which are given in advance are not subject to free choice. If the elements are given in advance, they constitute the conditions for a structured decision. These elements are the environmental conditions of choice. In other words, they restrict "free choice," i.e., they remove the word "free" from free choice. "Structure" as used here refers to the persistent qualities of given elements in the environmental conditions of choice or action which make it possible to explain and perhaps predict action. Once we understand the structure of the decisional situation, the action followed by the party or parties involved becomes logically understandable.40

We can illustrate the point by referring to the situation of Black female household heads. If we understand the structure of the environment i.e., the sex relation of the Black females to Black males, we can explain and predict the presence of Black female household heads and understand it
logically without assignment of the phenomenon to psychopathological behavior. Such an understanding of the structure of that particular environment might lead us away from assignments like “deviants” and usher us away from such non-profitable activity into a molar level examination of why the environment is so structured. For example, Professor Jackson states that even if all the black males throughout the United States were counted, the females would still remain excessive, due to a variety of reasons certainly warranting systematic investigation. This is what we are calling for when we say that molar level activities must be taken rather than the molecular psychopathological analysis. Investigation would have to begin with the unnecessarily high infant and childhood mortality rates of Black males and those victimized by war and wanton killings.\footnote{41} (Not to be forgotten are those men in prison for indeterminate sentences for being poor and black!) Society cannot and will not answer these questions at present. Therefore, social scientists will not ask them.

We must answer sister Davis’ challenge. It is up to Blacks to rectify the situations. In order to do this Blacks must develop analytic skills, synthesize ideas, advance hypothesis and evaluate them. At minimum, we should strive to do the following during the pre-decisional stage:

1) identify the problem in the situation
2) collect and analyze data related to the problem
3) pose possible solutions to the problem
4) indicate the possible consequences of the proposed solutions and the values and assumptions from which they originated.

In other words, this format and/or approach, will further develop one’s ability to heighten their inquiry skills and as well as to enable all of us to identify the “real” or major problem as opposed to subordinate or minor problems, state them clearly, gather data, formulate hypotheses, and reach valid conclusions that can guide action during the pre-decisional stage.

As you follow this format, keep the following summation points in mind:

1) Much of the current literature about the Black woman is myth.
2) These myths have been largely the result of the ideologically generated paradigms promulgated to preserve the status quo.
3) Scholars (black and white) have contributed to these myths.
4) There is currently a challenge to the methodological heuristics of the social science investigator.
5) Reality is constructed by those who have the power to define.
6) There is a difference of degree and kind between free choice decisions and those that are structured by environmental elements.

A final note. Patterns of choice are dependent upon certain human resources, i.e., education, occupation, employment, income level, exposure, accessibility to the system and mobility. When confronted with a structured environment, it may be difficult to generate alternatives. Don’t get frustrated.
People are products of their culture and cultures differ. Here we refer to the anthropological definition of culture: the man-made artifacts, symbols, language, etc. created for survival. Instances of a structured environment, seek to understand the limitations of the structuring and know who structures what for whom and why.

A final note of caution: it is not enough to analyze the phenomenon of free choice versus structured decisions. There are also certain intervening psychological variables which are always present in studies involving individual behavior. Both must be considered. But for now, our major task is to distinguish between those choices which are apparent and those which are real and entertain those questions on the molar level as opposed to the molecular level as they relate to our blackness.
FOOTNOTES


2. Ibid. p. 30.

3. Ibid., p. 31.

4. Frantz Fanon, *A Dying Colonialism*.


6. Ibid. p. 15.


15. For further and more fully developed thesis on the idea of the ghetto as an underdeveloped area see Kenneth Clark’s *The Dark Ghetto* and Carmichael and Hamilton, *Black Power*.


20. Rose, *The Betrayal of the Poor*.


22. Rose, *The Betrayal of the Poor*.

23. Ibid.


25. Rose, *The Betrayal of the Poor*.


32. Ladner, *Tomorrow’s Tomorrow*, p. 25.


35. Ibid., p. 30.


40. Ibid. pp. 7-8.