

The Changing Historiography of the Moynihan Report

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In 1965, Daniel Patrick Moynihan, the assistant secretary of labor to President Lyndon B. Johnson and director of the Office of Policy Planning and Research, produced a document titled *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*, also known as *The Moynihan Report*. The document claimed that the primary cause of black poverty in the United States was the matriarchal family structure of black communities. Moynihan produced the document to inform the President of the central issues surrounding the national effort to bring black Americans into full participation within society.¹ The focal point of the report was that the subjugation of black males by white Americans since the days of slavery deprived them of their ability to support traditional family units, and as such paved the way for women to be the heads of households in black families by a large statistical margin. Moynihan argued that the matriarchal familial structure led to widespread issues such as welfare reliance, lack of education, and an increase in criminal activity. Immediately following the public release of the Moynihan Report there was a widespread backlash against the claims and insinuations made in the document. Historians have chronicled the vehement responses to the report made by civil rights activists, politicians, government officials, and black families, to understand and preserve the legacy that this document has imparted to American society. Throughout the decades, following the release of the Moynihan Report, historians reinterpreted Moynihan's findings and studied the divisive controversy that followed it. With each passing decade, the approach that historians take to analyzing the report differs and is often representative of the dominant culture of the era. The stance of historians about the Moynihan Report is still conflicted, as some disagree and even challenge the conclusions of the paper while others work to validate it.

Throughout the 1960s, in the years following the public release of *The Negro Family*, the academic community was polarized and animated by the report, and the subject remained heavily debated for decades. Academics in the 1960s focused more on the ensuing controversy than the contents of the report demonstrating the polarizing effect the report had on the historical discussion of the topic. Sociologists such as Lee Rainwater and William L. Lancey contributed their perspectives to the discussion of the report with their book *The Moynihan Report and the Politics of Controversy* (1967). While the book is written merely two years after the release of the report, Rainwater and Lancey framed the document in a historical context and interpreted the controversy that followed its release from their unique perspective as social scientists. Half of the book is dedicated to their analysis of the document whereas the latter half is a collection of essays and papers written by a wide range of authors such as civil rights leaders, intellectuals, politicians, and government officials. The reactions to the document from each author in this collection demonstrate just how polarizing and controversial the report was upon its release during the height of the civil rights movement, as some were vehemently against Moynihan while others agreed with his findings. Rainwater and Lancey argue from the point of view of social science and claim that the report was not a “research report” or “technical document”, but instead a “polemic which makes use of social science techniques and findings to convince others.”² In a 1967 review of *The Moynihan Report and the Politics of Controversy*, fellow sociologist Kenneth J. Gergen agrees that the paper was too polemical in tone, calling it “over-dramatic,” but also disagrees with their conclusions, stating that the authors “[allowed] their own biases to dominate their stand or interpretation of events,” while also deeming them “decidedly pro-Moynihan.”³ Rainwater, Lancey, and Gergen’s work demonstrates just how divided academics were over the topic of the Moynihan Report and offers insight into the polarized state of the overall discussion of the topic.

The following decade of the 1970's, however, would have a drastically different view of the Moynihan Report.

During the 1970's historians and sociologists began challenging the validity of Moynihan's findings, mainly by attacking the use of scientific data from which his conclusions were drawn. Moynihan's arguments are directly challenged on the basis that his interpolation of raw data was flawed, and therefore should not be used to influence public policy. Science and the scientific method were brought to the forefront of the discussion regarding the report, revealing the value that intellectuals of the time placed on trustworthy data in making bold claims regarding racial inequalities. The essay "'Black Matriarchy' Reconsidered: Evidence from Secondary Analysis of Sample Surveys" by Herbert H Hyman and John Shelton Reed, which is included in the book *Black Matriarchy: Myth or Reality?* (1971) by John H. Bracey, argues that American black families have been considered "matriarchal" so often that "the assertion is widely accepted as truth rather than a proposition still in need of empirical evidence and critical analysis."⁴ Hyman and Reed present new data, which they claim is more indicative of the true state of black families, and conclude, "little evidence for any social-psychological pattern of matriarchy peculiarly characteristic of the Negro family, on the basis of which social theorizing or social policy could be formulated."⁵ The article "Black Families and the Moynihan Report: A Research Evaluation" (1974) by Alan S. Berger and William Simona argue that Moynihan's use of data was not of high enough standards to be used to decide public policy. The authors attacked Moynihan's idea of the "tangle of pathology" that America's black population supposedly suffered from, as they argue that there is more thorough data that actually disprove his conclusions and demonstrate that black families are not drastically different from white families in the terms set forth by the report.⁶ Another article titled "Marital Instability and Unemployment among Whites and Nonwhites, the

Moynihan Report Revisited-Again” (1976) by sociologist Greta Miao, argues that data regarding the yearly fluctuations in the unemployment rate and the rate of marriage instability for white families were not considered in Moynihan’s conclusions regarding the state of black families. She demonstrates that throughout the 1950’s the unemployment rates and fluctuations in marital instability that Moynihan used to highlight the issues regarding black families were the same for whites as well, and therefore his conclusions were flawed. The entire decade of the 1970s is rife with academic critiques of Moynihan’s’ methods of statistical analysis and dismissal of his conclusions.

Historians during the 80s and 90s approached the Moynihan Report from far different perspectives than those of the prior decades. They often veered away from the reactionary interpretations that many prior academics held against the Moynihan Report, and instead brought new, contrasting ideas to the historiography of the subject. During the nineties, historians tended to focus their analysis on how the Moynihan Report impacted the overall political climate of the nation instead of the actual content of the report itself. Earl Smith, in his article “The Black Family: Daniel Patrick Moynihan and the Tangle of Pathology Revisited” (1987), claims that in the twenty years following the release of The Moynihan Report, “black and white scholars have, for various reasons, ignored the findings of the Moynihan Report and other studies and it is only recently that good empirical research on poverty and families have again begun to address the problems of black American families.”⁷ He goes on to demonstrate how careful analysis of old and new data regarding structural and demographic change reveals that the problems highlighted in the 1965 Report are even more prevalent in 1987 and that even though it is a series of factors influencing the problem, the main issue is the “economic alienation of black men.”⁸ James Berger, a professor of American studies at Yale University, stated in his article “Ghosts of Liberalism: Morrison’s

Beloved and the Moynihan Report” that the report had a negative effect on the politics, activism, and culture surrounding the issue of black poverty in the U.S. His biggest claim was that despite Moynihan’s endorsement of major investments in employment, housing, and healthcare programs, his report was viewed as an attack on black manhood and womanhood, which “furthered the severing of ties between liberal policy makers and African American activists and thinkers, who increasingly turned toward black nationalism and separatism in the late 1960s.”⁹ Another article from 1996 is titled “The Culture of Poverty: An Ideological Analysis” by sociologists David L. Harvey and Michael H. Reed, which discusses how the tumultuous political environment of their decade was shaped by the controversy of the Moynihan Report, explaining how “by the time the report became public record, ideology was scripting both sides of the dialogue,” and that “the alignments shaped by this controversy formed the template for future blood-letting.”¹⁰ Academics of the 80s and 90s tended to view the Moynihan Report’s controversy as a means to understand the state of their own contemporary politics, often reducing their analysis through a political lens that worked within a paradigm of liberalism, conservatism, and radicalism that was understood in the 1990s.

By the 2000s the civil rights movement had grown further into the past and the controversial effects that the Moynihan Report’s release had on the American people had largely disappeared from the public consciousness. Historians felt free to revisit the report as a document from another era rather than treating it as a contemporary government report, and as such, they were able to provide interpretations that drastically differed from the works of prior academics. Rhonda Y. Williams, a professor of History at Vanderbilt University, is the author of *The Politics of Public Housing* (2004), which questions the existence of Moynihan’s proposed “black matriarchy,” and denounces multiple aspects of the report’s proposals. In her book, Williams

proposes that public housing solved a majority of the issues regarding black, single-mother households by providing the basic necessities that would otherwise be attained by a father in a traditional family structure.¹¹ William Julius Wilson of Harvard University authored the article “The Moynihan Report and Research on the Black Community,” (2009) which defends the findings of the report and provides reasonable evidence that the early opposition to it was misguided and misinformed. He explains that much of the poor reception that the report received was due to attention-grabbing headlines that caused many Americans to form opinions on the matter without actually reading the entirety of the report.¹² Academics of the 2000s approached the subject of the Moynihan Report with a more open mind and provided interpretations that gave a larger context to the report rather than being overly critical of the content of its pages.

The trend of reanalyzing the Moynihan Report from previously unconsidered perspectives continued into the 2010s, as academics began taking into consideration the historiography of the subject when approaching the subject. They applied their modern paradigmatic perspective to the historically accepted interpretation of the Moynihan Report, revealing interpretations that view the subject through the lens of gender studies, political polarization, and the role of academics in policymaking. Daniel Geary, a professor of American studies at Trinity College of Dublin, authored the article “Racial Liberalism, the Moynihan Report & the ‘Dædalus’ Project on ‘The Negro American’,” (2011) which discusses the Daedalus project, an academic journal that focused on long-standing racial inequality in the U.S., demonstrating how racial liberal intellectuals and politicians who contributed to the journal had already been discussing the same things that made Moynihan’s report so controversial. He reveals how Moynihan’s contribution to the Daedalus and its subsequent conferences highlight just how connected the journal was to the larger conversation regarding government policymaking and the socioeconomic inequalities for African Americans.

“Untangling Pathology: The Moynihan Report and Homosexual Damage, 1965–1975” (2012) is an article written by Kevin J. Mumford, a professor of history at the University of Illinois, that describes the accepted history of the Moynihan Report as one of two interpretations: The controversy of the report was perceived as “a case of victimization by political correctness, in which a liberal intellectual in search of the truth became a scapegoat for a frank, difficult analysis of African American culture and behavior,” or as a “case of racial bias and misogyny, in which a white male ethnocentric perspective misrecognized an alternative, and viable, family structure.”¹³ Mumford goes on to reanalyze the Moynihan Report through the perspective of homosexuality and argues that the historiography of the matter has been distorted due to the heteronormative interpretations that dominate the accepted history.¹⁴ Gary Peller, a professor of law at Georgetown University, wrote in his article, “The Moynihan Report, Self-Help, and Black Power,” (2016) that “conservatives tend to applaud the Moynihan Report, and liberals and progressives tend to denounce it,” adding that the report has contributed much to the shaping of racial ideologies that the political left and right adhere to in current times.¹⁵ As with other decades, recent academic work on the Moynihan Report applies a degree of logic, perspective, and opinion to their interpretations that are unique to the era they live in, focusing on aspects of the report that are widely discussed today.

Historians tend to focus on either the arguments made in Moynihan’s *The Negro Family*, or the explosive reaction to the report made by academics, government officials, politicians, and the public. For about ten years following the leaking of the report to the public in 1965, the academic response was very reactionary and often sought to challenge one side of the argument or another. Throughout the 1970’s it appeared that many historians actively challenged Moynihan’s findings based on scientific data. During this time, the findings of statisticians and sociologists

were often quoted to rebuke Moynihan's claims and methods. The 80s and 90s saw a transition into a state of peacetime for the country as the Cold War finally ended. Historians of the period began to view the Moynihan Report in a somewhat positive light and reflected on how his predictions for the state of black families largely came true. They also provided an explanation for the fierce opposition to the report by claiming that it was largely drummed up by societal forces such as the media's sensational reporting on the subject and the deep level of pride that black activist groups felt for their communities. In the 21st century, historians began to take a far more liberal approach to their interpretation of the Moynihan Report. They viewed the report's findings and its subsequent controversy through new perspectives such as gender and political structure and have furthered the discussion for those who endorse and oppose the document's conclusions by providing a larger context from which to understand the topic. There appears to be no shortage of interest in the Moynihan Report among historians, as the infamous document has left a powerful and lasting impression on the overall discussion of race relations in the United States; a topic that is unfortunately still very prevalent in our modern day.

¹ Lee Rainwater and William L. Yancey, *The Moynihan Report and the Politics of Controversy* (Cambridge: The M.I.T. Press, 1967), 4.

² Rainwater and Yancey, 297

³ Kenneth J. Gergen, "Lost in the Shuffle: A Political Case History," *Science* 158, no. 3803 (1967): 896-897.

⁴ Herbert H. Hyman and John Shelton Reed, "Black Matriarchy" Reconsidered: Evidence from Secondary Analysis of Sample Surveys." in *Black Matriarchy: Myth or Reality?*, ed. John H. Brace (Belmont: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1970.) 186.

⁵ Hyman and Reed, 188

⁶ Alan S. Berger and William Simon, "Black Families and the Moynihan Report: A Research Evaluation," *Social Problems* 22, no. 2 (1974): 160.

⁷ Earl Smith, "The Black Family: Daniel Patrick Moynihan and the Tangle of Pathology Revisited," *Humboldt Journal of Social Relations* 14, no. 1/2 (1987): 282.

⁸ Earl Smith, 299.

⁹ James Berger, "Ghosts of Liberalism: Morrison's Beloved and the Moynihan Report," *PMLA* 111, no. 3 (1996): 412.

¹⁰ David L. Harvey and Michael H. Reed, "The Culture of Poverty: An Ideological Analysis," *Sociological Perspectives* 39, no. 4 (1996), 470.

¹¹ Rhonda Y. Williams, *The Politics of Public Housing: Black Women's Struggles Against Urban Inequality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 127.

¹² William Julius Wilson, "The Moynihan Report and Research on the Black Community," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 621 (2009): 35-36.

¹³ Kevin J. Mumford, "Untangling Pathology: The Moynihan Report and Homosexual Damage, 1965–1975," *Journal of Policy History* 24, no. 1 (2012): 53-54.

¹⁴ Mumford, 68-69.

¹⁵ Gary Peller, "The Moynihan Report, Self-Help, and Black Power," *Georgetown Journal of Law & Modern Critical Race Perspectives* 8, no. 1 (2016), 41.