

# RACE AND CULTURE CONTACTS

E. B. REUTER, *Editor*

## *Contributors*

ROMANZO ADAMS	ANDREW W. LIND
W. O. BROWN	R. D. MCKENZIE
E. FRANKLIN FRAZIER	ROBERT E. PARK
MAX HANDMAN	JOHN A. RADEMAKER
ASAEL T. HANSEN	EDWARD B. REUTER
J. O. HERTZLER	JESSE FREDERICK STEINER
CHARLES S. JOHNSON	CLARK WISSLER

FIRST EDITION

McGRAW-HILL BOOK COMPANY, Inc.

NEW YORK AND LONDON

1934

## Chapter XIII

NEGRO PERSONALITY CHANGES IN A  
SOUTHERN COMMUNITY

BY CHARLES S. JOHNSON

Personality is regarded in this paper as the organization of an individual's habits and behavior patterns in the process of adjustment to the culture in which he is set, to the institutions and customs which constitute this culture, and to other individuals who share this culture. Immediately the question arises as to the influence, in this adjustment, of the biological factor of race itself, and what discernible part, if any, it plays in determining the configuration of personality of an individual or the culture of the group. The basic assumption of much of the literature regarding the Negroes in America, scientific and otherwise, is that they represent a culture which is in itself widely different from that of the Euro-American culture in which they live. This is implicit in the frequent and serious references to the success or failure or ineptness of the members of this group in taking on the white man's civilization. The unique situation of the Negroes and their relationship to the American culture, however, raises questions of considerably wider range than this local relationship. For it is possible to observe, in the adjustment experience of this group under well-defined conditions, something of the process by which individual and group behavior patterns are conditioned.

There is, in the first place, an important body of historical material pointing to the fact that in the transplantation of Negroes from Africa they were

stripped of the greater part, if not all, of their original culture heritage. Similarly, the extensive race crossing in this country from the beginning would most certainly have modified to a considerable extent such unique biological traits as belonged to a single race. To sociologists who are or should be realists, however, it is evident that, in dealing with race, it is necessary to keep in mind always the distinction between biological and social phenomena, and that what is usually meant by race has more to do with cultural and social questions than with biological differentiation.

No discriminating treatment of the Negro in America could fail to take into account the wide cultural differences existing among them in America today. But is this cultural base African or Euro-American? Or do these cultural differences among Negroes represent merely stages of adjustment to the accepted American standard? And if so, in what sense is this adjustment different from that manifested by other groups within the American culture affected by the same external factors of isolation, local and regional institutions, and codes? It is not possible to speak of any of the backward groups in American society as being without a culture; and, since Negroes do not appear to manifest in their present behavior traces of African culture quite so consistently as they manifest traces of the culture of the early American frontier, any measure of changes in personality and group behavior patterns becomes a measure of the extent to which the social and cultural isolation of these groups is being broken down. It seems wholly consistent to refer, in a broad sense, to *planes* of culture as marking the wide range of differences observed between individuals and groups which function together in a complex but common society.

## A PEASANT GROUP

The observations of this paper are based upon a study of 612 Negro families located in the rural section of an Alabama county. The area in which they live is devoted extensively and almost exclusively to cotton cultivation, and in this activity and concern, which dominates the life of the group, there have been retained, only slightly modified, most of the features of the plantation under the institution of slavery. The county itself has a long history of cotton cultivation under the plantation system. The population is over 80 per cent Negro, the few white inhabitants who are still living in the area studied being for the most part proprietors or their representatives.

The shift from slavery to the tenant system was more a political than either social or cultural change. The Negro group is characterized not only by geographical isolation but by a social and cultural isolation so marked that many of the values of the past, established in the economy of slavery, have been retained. They represent a type which can most readily be described as "folk," and, since their lives are deeply rooted in the soil and their range of movement extremely limited, they are, perhaps, the closest approach to an American peasantry. There is a fixed accommodation to an economic system and technique which belongs to the past. There are characteristic folkways and actual folk thought and expression. The high Negro population proportion, 90 per cent of which is composed of tenants, both explains and fosters homogeneity. Social isolation is maintained by the surviving etiquette of race relations of an earlier period and by a large amount of illiteracy, which shields them effectively from the influences of those copies by which social changes

are introduced. This isolation further restricts the development of the technique of thinking beyond the requirements of their simple routine of life. There is, most significantly, a survival of the tradition of the plantation. Patterns of life, social codes, as well as social attitudes, set in the economy of slavery, are still effective controls. Moreover, there is in the social consciousness of the group and in its social life a degree of organization which does not seem to be based upon African or upon European culture as much as it is based upon the imperatives of their peculiar status and rôle in the early American social system.

## CHANGING FOLKWAYS

Without some organization of their social life, there could have been no stability in the relationship of the Negro group to the dominant society. It would have been as expensive as it would have been tedious to keep the entire slave population under the regimentation of physical force. In such a setting the African culture had neither utility nor place, and there would be ample justification for both master and slave in discarding it. Park has pointed to the systematic manner in which these African culture patterns were discarded, and Puckett has supported this with further observations of the manner in which the southern rural Negro population, generally, tends to represent the surviving traditions of an earlier period of American life. They have been the repositories of certain folkways which have been outgrown by other groups under the stimulation of more frequent contact and interchange of ways of life. Their dialect is, in part at least, a survival of the English of the colonists. Many of the present superstitions and folk beliefs were borrowed from whites, and even patterns

of religious emotionalism surviving among the more naïve types suggest the influence of patterns set in an earlier time by the white camp meetings and revivals.

It would be expected that many of the patterns to which they were exposed would be imperfectly copied; that in them would be many crudities of manners, social practices, and behavior below the level of accepted ideals of the American society then or now; and that for unique situations there would be developed unique behavior responses, which eventually would come to be their characteristic folkways. The social behavior of the dominant society which supported the plantation, especially in its relation to the Negro slaves, was not always conducive to the cultivation of standards of morality or ethics or beauty by the slaves. The organization of life and of values for the Negroes under the régime of slavery was and had to be—as is true of all cultures—an organization which permitted the most satisfying functioning of individuals in their setting. Viewed in this light, such meaning and value in the situation as have been given to marriage, the relation of parents to children, divorce, extramarital relations, illegitimacy, behavior in emotional crises involving love, death, religion, take on a new significance. They should help to explain the type of personality organization developed under the conditions controlling the individuals included in this study.

#### THE SUPERIOR STATUS OF WOMAN

In the American culture the structure of the family is the father, mother, and their children, with the father as head of the group. The family organization is supported by the institution of marriage, and social codes govern questions of legitimacy, respectability, and morals. The Negro families in the situation described

do not follow this pattern with consistency or conviction, but this does not mean that they are without organization or controlling social codes which determine for them what is respectable and what is normal. The rôle of the mother is of greater importance than in the more familiar American pattern. This traces back definitely to the values established around this rôle under slavery, when the father was incidental, had no authority and exercised no control, since the woman belonged to the master and not to the husband. Not only in the Negro group but in the white group the rôle of the Negro mother had a certain prestige and authority well-known, as the "mammy" tradition attests.

In the economic organization of the families of the group studied, the earning power of the woman is only slightly less than that of the man. This has given to the woman an important measure of independence. Moreover, the importance of the mother is enhanced as a result of her advantage, based no doubt upon sex, in dealing with the master class. Traditionally, the woman could ask greater favors, draw into the family small but constant sustenance; in crisis situations involving race and status she has always been able to gain advantage where the appearance of a male member of the group, except under circumstances of complete self-defeating humility, would most often prompt punishment for impudence. These among other factors have combined to give to the woman in these families a unique status, and one with authority. This dominance is reflected in many characteristic patterns of behavior.

#### SEX AND MARRIAGE CUSTOMS

There is not only a notable dominance of women in the families studied, but a marked sexual as well as

economic independence of the woman. Early marriage is the rule in rural families generally, but in this group the situation seems to be strikingly reversed. The importance of the family as an economic unit, and the consequent economic value of older children in families, tends to discourage early marriages on the part both of women and of men. The economic returns from the long period of nurturing unproductive children comes only when children are old enough to contribute to the support and earnings of the family group. Custom and practice recognize this necessity. Young couples, without capital to employ help and without children, are seriously handicapped in getting a start. Only family groups, natural or assembled, can succeed in such a situation. Since to get established the young people have to be attached to some older family, parents are reluctant to give to another family either a daughter or a son. A notable exception to this general rule is the marriage of a younger girl to a middle-aged man, and most often one with children by a previous union, who are old enough to work.

The postponement of marriage, which is largely an economic necessity, gives a different value to the courtship in this group adjustment. One result of this is a group rationalization as a substitute for the control of marriage at this active sex period. Sex experimentation, as a normal incident of this prolonged courtship period, appears to be taken for granted by the group. It is certain that little surprise is evidenced when it is known that sexual intimacies have occurred. There is little deliberate birth control, and where pregnancy follows this relationship social pressure is not often directed toward compelling the father to marry or to support the child. The mother's chances

of marrying someone other than the father are not seriously injured.

An incidental value of this lack of a censoring public opinion is the freedom for children thus born from warping social condemnation. The group adjustment to this situation entails a widespread and commonly accepted practice of child adoption, which gives family status to all children. There are, thus, virtually no orphans. Normally, the child of an unmarried daughter in a family is treated as if it belongs to the mother's parents, and the status of the mother is similar to that of an older sister.

#### TYPES OF FAMILY

The environment has produced not one but many family types which, however, have numbers of traits in common. It is not immediately apparent just what have been the predominant influences in shaping their differences. There are families which are fairly stable and adjusted to the environment and its social codes. They have a distinct background, family traditions, a consciousness of integration, and they are sensitive to certain patterns of respectability which represent the more reflective moral sentiments of the group. These families appear among both the educated and uneducated classes of the population and in varying proportion among owners, tenants, and croppers.

The frequency in this community of the artificial or quasi-family seems to warrant their classification as a type. There are, again, those families which, though not bound by formal sanctions, continue to hold together over many years under their own internal compulsion. Multiple marriages are fairly common.

Intransient family groups seem to be a product of the environment and are held together over periods by economic and other considerations of convenience. And just as these types are reflections of the environment there have been developed physical and psychic adjustments with regard both to remarriage and to the disposition of children.

Equally important are the families whose organization and sentiments, though in accord with more advanced ideals of other communities, are in constant conflict with the dominant patterns of both the white and Negro local community. Finally, there are those family groups which reflect definite disorganization as a result of the collapse of the traditional controls and are yet unable or unwilling to adjust themselves to newer patterns of relations. All of these are affected in some degree by the social and cultural transition which they are experiencing.

The numerical distribution of these types of families can be suggested in these figures: In the 612 households there were 404 married couples or couples living together in common-law association. There was no male head in 152, or 25 per cent, of these families; that is, the male parent was either away or dead. The wife or female head of the household was absent in 33 of the families. About two-thirds of the families were normal family groupings. In 231 of the 404 couples married or living together, the man or woman was for the first time married or in marital association. In 24 families the husband had been married more than once and the wife once. In 74 families both man and woman had been married more than once. There were only two divorced persons who had not remarried. The community afforded no spinsters and extremely few older bachelors.

#### ILLEGITIMACY

The sexual unions resulting in the birth of children without the legal sanctions are of several types, and these offspring cannot wisely be grouped together under the single classification of "illegitimate." Children of common-law relationships are not illegitimate from the point of view of the community or, most often, of any objective standard of stability, for many of these unions are as stable as the legally sanctioned ones; they sometimes hold together for twenty or thirty years, or until old age or death of one of these parties, and lack only the sense of guilt. Again, there are competent, self-sufficient women who not only desire children but need them as later aids in the struggle for survival when their strength begins to wane. They want neither the restriction of a formal marriage contract nor the constant association with a husband. They get their children not so much through weakness as through their own deliberate selection of a father.

Sexual unions for pleasure frequently result in children. There is a term for children born under such circumstances. They are called "stolen children." "Stolen children," observed one mother, "is the best." A woman with children, who has been married though later separated from her husband, may add other children to her family without the benefit of the formal sanctions. These are referred to as "children by the way." There are also the children who result from the deliberate philandering of young men who "make foolments" on young girls. These are generally condemned by the community. These children, as circumstance directs, may be placed with the parents of the mother or father of the child or with an uncle,

sister, or grandmother. They are accepted easily into the families and eventually are scarcely distinguishable from any of the other children. Even if there were severe condemnation for true "illegitimates," the confusion introduced by the group in its adjustment would tend both to mitigate some of the offenses and to obscure most of them from specific denotation.

The sense of guilt may be noted in some of greater exposure to the outside culture, but within the community as a whole social censure is not conspicuous, nor is there any notable loss of status because of illegitimacy. It does not appear to be regarded as seriously as, for example, certain artificial forms of birth control or "being closed out," which means having all of one's crop, stock, and tools taken over for debt.

The church recognizes illegitimacy as "a sin of the mother," and if the mother is brought into church meeting with other evidences of "sin," like card playing or "frolicking," she may be "put out of the church," but readmission is possible with a solemn promise not to do it again. Actually, there is less stress placed by the churches upon illegitimacy as a "social sin" than upon card playing and ball playing.

The sense of shame and injured status follows illegitimacy when the family has, for one reason or another, become compact and self-conscious; when there has been exposure to assured standards of a different and, presumably, higher level, as a result of children returning from boarding school, or when the family has acquired some means of education. Such families are most careful about the opinions of outsiders and resort to the measure of forcing the father of the child to marry the daughter. Ownership of property tends to restrict illegitimate relations because of the

economic complexities introduced and the serious effects upon credit and leadership in the larger community of looseness in domestic relations.

#### SEPARATION AND DIVORCE

The practice of separation and divorce offers another example of group adaptation. In about a third of the families the man and woman were in their first association. Although the amount of remarriage was great, the number of divorces was extremely small. Voluntary and mutual separation amounts to divorce. Divorce is one of the legal formalities introduced from the outside. It is not essential to the functioning of this group life, since it involves no serious problem of the care of children or the abandonment of helpless females. The courts, when such would normally be appealed to, are expensive and extrinsic to the social life; and since the only contact with them is through officers of the law, who are more often to be feared than trusted, such alien agencies are to be avoided. The meaning of divorce, in the sense in which it is employed in the larger society outside, thus is considerably confused. Some of the families believe that going from one county to another gives them the legal right to remarry. Crossing the "line" (Mason and Dixon) was in some families accepted as effective divorce. A remarried woman said: "My husband done cross de line, don't hear nothing. He may be living or dead. Ain't dat divorce?"

The simplest interpretation is that the act of separation constitutes divorce. "They say when you separate from your husband," said another woman, "you already 'vorded." The term "giving a strip," in common use, refers to the act of a man or woman writing, or having written for them, on a piece of paper

the statement that he or she is divorced, and this stands as final.

I been married three times. My other husband's bout Wetumpka somewhere. We jest couldn't git along, so he revorced me, and me and the second one fought like cats and dogs. One night he fought me so that I had to call for help. He left that night and the next day he got the wagon and moved, and *he asked me for a revorce; so I give him a strip. Marion Wood write it. If I had time I'd ramble round here and find that strip they sent me from Wetumpka.*

There were other individuals who believed that the act of remarriage of their spouse, even though no divorce was secured, conferred upon them the freedom to marry again: "You see, my other husband, when we separated, got married again first, so that divorced us."

A man and woman, aged forty-eight and forty-six, respectively, had been married eighteen years. It was the second marriage for both although neither had secured a divorce. Of her first husband, the wife said: "My husband didn't leave me, but he got into a little trouble about some cotton situation and went away. He wanted me to go too, but I didn't want to leave my mother. He was gone a long time before I married again."

The husband explained: "My wife just went away, and she's over in Cecil. I didn't have to get a divorce, because she had been gone a long time."

A man who had been drafted during the World War was positive that he had been exempted by the government from any further marital responsibility: "I'se an ex-soldier. They told me when I went to the army and come back that the government had done 'vorced me, and I didn't have to git naire 'vorce."

Divorce appears to be necessary only in those cases in which there is objection of one party to the separation: "Me and him jest come here to live and she [his wife] ain't claim him, so I don't speck he need a 'vorce."

It has been pointed out that the families do not act upon a single standard. Notions of responsibility rest largely upon the social customs which have grown up with the group as a result of adaptation to the early social patterns to which they were exposed, and as a result of exposure to the newer patterns which are being slowly introduced. It is possible to trace, roughly, some of these standards in terms of isolation. This is, however, not always a matter of geographical isolation. In some families old traditions persist virtually unchanged and permit a stable family situation. In others the conditioning patterns are of mixed origin; and in still others there is stability on the basis of newer standards which are more in accord with the culture of the outside. The present picture in the group studied, however, is one of confusion, arising from the actual conflict of different ideals and ways of life. A family may reflect one set of moral ideas regarding marriage and another regarding divorce, or one regarding legitimacy and still another regarding extra-marital sex relations. Generally speaking, home ownership and education tend to mark these differences in standards.

#### SPECIAL GROUP CONVENTIONS

Passing reference should be made to what seems to be conformity to conventions of the group itself, without reference to outside standards and ideals. It is not regarded as respectable to demand or even to ask the father of an unmarried woman's child to support the



child. On the other hand, there is indication of approval if the responsibility of the father is assumed by him without prompting. Community gossip exercises a measure of control, but in certain instances in which the question of a child was at issue the direction of this control was away from marriage, as indicated in the case of the mother of a young girl who had a child by the son of a neighbor and who refused to let her daughter marry the boy, in spite of mutual desires, because the mother of the boy had made uncomplimentary remarks about the girl. It is less respectable to force a marriage than to be deserted after a forced marriage.

It would be a great mistake to assume from practices which, on the surface, seem uncontrolled that there are no standards and no controls. There is a strong conformity to those group standards which are distilled from hard experience rather than from the abstractions of moral philosophy. There are limits to the sex freedom tolerated, and when these limits are reached the violators feel unmistakably the disapproval of the group. Social disapproval is certain and severe upon the men who abuse the social arrangement by refusing to assume any responsibility whatever. The community places its disapproval upon "fast women." A fast woman is not a prostitute but a woman who maliciously and to no useful end steals other women's men and, through the men, the earnings to which another woman has made an important contribution. There is, on the other hand, approval of alliances, whether legal or not, which offer the highest chances of survival in the environment. A mother who had never married said: "I ain't want no husband myself, and I don't care if Alder [her daughter] marries er no. Willie [father of Alder's child] is a social man. Alder's

father asked me to marry him, but I tole him I don't want no husband." Married life imposes certain obligations which are, in the feeling of this element of the community, more binding than necessary or practicable. It gives license to mistreatment; it imposes upon women the risk of unprofitable husbands.

Gambling is condemned as a vice. This is no doubt a result of the influence of the church with its prohibition of indulgence in certain forms of worldliness. Baseball is likewise under the ban and secular "frolics." It is a mark of greatest respectability when it can be said that no member of a family has been in jail. Still another practice which has the disapproval of the group is begging. This is different from mutual assistance between neighbors or from the aspect of supplication necessary at times to secure what is due them from the white folks. To be able to say, "I don't 'cep charity from Nobody," is an indication of highest self-commendation. At first the rural Negroes who went North in the migration of 1918 refused to seek charity, and the Red Cross in this area had first to convince them that the aid offered to them in real distress was not the unrespectable kind of charity. It is only when these Negroes become sophisticated that they lose their "morality" and become content to live on the agencies. Work is a virtue and is respectable, although there are lazy members of the group. A woman is justified in leaving a husband who is lazy and need not give any other explanation.

The suggestion here is that, despite the unevenness of life, the amount of sexual freedom, the frequency of separation and realignment of families, the number of children born out of formal wedlock, there are certain conventional codes and continuities consistent with the essential routine of their lives, and that these

conventions and codes represent a form of organization adapted to their total environment. Where the social processes in these respects are so largely unconscious or are accepted as a survival measure, the relations may reasonably be presumed to have a structure, whatever its foundation and whatever its explanation. The marriage relation under slavery, despite its lack of the sanctions of the dominant society, had some seriousness of purpose for the slaves and was forced to accommodate itself to the convenience of the institution of slavery with respect to continuity, fertility, selection of mates, changes of mates, the quasi-eugenic demands of the institution with respect to breeding, and similar circumstances.

#### FACTORS OF CHANGE

It is scarcely conceivable that the isolation of this group at any point could be so complete as to prevent the introduction of different sentiments and interpretations of these relations in the light of more advanced conceptions of life and social relations. The group as a whole thus ranges from the almost total acceptance of the original sanctions of the group under the slave tradition to the fullest acceptance of the newest codes introduced from the outside, whether thoroughly comprehended or not. Disorganization is most acute where these sanctions are in conflict and the individuals are firmly rooted in neither of the patterns of life organizations.

The cultural isolation of this group is being broken down as a result of a number of social factors. One of these is the status of home or farm ownership, another is migration, and still another is education. Ownership, for example, alters the organization of the family and

gives a different stress of values. Marriage and legitimacy more easily go with ownership status because the related and supporting structure of property rights and protection belongs to the outside culture. Ownership imposes a check upon adoption and upon the irregular organization of family groups. It fosters family traditions.

Members of the community who leave it and return may weaken the old controls by their superiority to them, disregard of them, or even abuse of them. They may, as they often do, introduce new ideas which are beneficial. It is because of this weakening of the old controls which have operated traditionally in the interracial alignment that the white proprietors dislike Negroes from the outside, or returned migrants. Such Negroes put "dangerous whims" into the heads of the plantation Negroes who are fixed parts of the community. One unquestionable value of the changing ministry of the Methodist church is to be found in the contact afforded the community through them with the outside world.

Most important of these factors, however, is education. Whether as a result of the elementary schools introduced or of returned children who were educated outside or of new teachers sent in from the outside, the changes become measurable. It is one of the most striking observations of this study that on the basis of parents' education, group differences among the families could be noted with respect to size of family, economic self-sufficiency, the number of still-births and miscarriages, infant mortality, the amount of sickness, the incidence of venereal infection, attitudes toward themselves and toward life. With respect to all of these, save one, there is a distinct correlation, indicating the correspondence of numbers of years

of schooling with degrees of approximation to the approved standards of the accepted American culture.

The exception noted is the factor of earnings. In this case the illiterates earn least, those with most education (that is, more than five years of schooling) rank next, and those with little education rank highest. The irony of the situation lies in the fact that under the archaic economic system, with its distinct racial conflicts and controls, those with little education are most completely accommodated. The illiterates, who number over a third of the adult population, are too dull to take advantage even of their simple surroundings, and those with enough education to develop independence have to overcome the weight of the outmoded plantation system and a strong implication of the unnecessary of effective literacy. This attitude toward education is also a part of the heritage.

The literate Negroes seldom conquer their economic environment. What most frequently happens is that those who are not forced to conform to the common pattern get into personal difficulties with the white proprietorial class or are taken in by the law or migrate. A Negro who can figure well enough to challenge the landowner's account, if he discovers it to be incorrect, or who may resent the high credit rates at the commissary or who has sufficient independence to market his own cotton is a disturbing influence. An economic technique which keeps virtually the whole population as tenants, in debt and perennially dependent, which resists innovations, would scarcely be expected to place a premium upon advanced education.

The process of change in the community may be noted now in the gradual modification of family life and in the transfer of a phase of dependence from white folks to children. The children, rather than the family's

white folks, are now being entrusted with the keeping of the family ages because being young "their minds are strong." These children can read the letters that occasionally come in from relatives or friends in distant parts and bring home gossip from the school. The children thus become a link with the new culture. New notions of sanitation and hygiene percolate into the old homes, giving a new and forewarning meaning to contagion, infection, open wells, and disease symptoms and numerous other hazards which have been locked up in old habits. The slow rate of transition through education, however, seems to be attributed as much to the inadequacy of the present local elementary schools as to the inability or unwillingness of the older members of the group to abandon their traditional ways.