CRITICAL SOCIAL RESEARCH
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PART 4 RACE

4.3 Joyce Ladner—Tomorrow's Tomorrow

4.3.1 Introduction
In *Tomorrow's Tomorrow* Joyce Ladner (1971) analyses the growing into womanhood of
low-income adolescent black[8] girls from the large metropolitan centres of the United
States. Ladner collected most of her empirical data between 1964 and 1968 while
working as a research assistant on a study, supported by the national Institute of Mental
Health, of an all-black low-income housing project of over ten thousand residents in a
slum area of St. Louis.

The majority of females in the study were drawn from the Pruitt-Igoe housing, the
remainder were in 'substandard private housing'. The sample consisted of 'several peer
groups which over the years changed in numbers and composition' (Ladner, 1971, p.
xxv). Most of the data reported are based on systematic open-ended interviews that
related to life histories and 'attitudes and behaviour that reflected approaching
womanhood' (Ladner, 1971, p. xxv). This material is supported by direct observation as
Ladner spent a considerable amount of time with the girls and their families in their
homes, homes of friends and her own apartment, at church, parties, dances, out shopping,
and so on. In this way she established a strong rapport with both the girls and their
parents.[9]

Ladner regards the majority of her research as 'exploratory' and from it she drew
some preliminary conclusions, which she tested via the agency of taped (and transcribed)
interviews with a randomly selected sample of thirty girls aged between 13 and 18.
Ladner thus sees her results as generalisable to all low-income urban Black American
girls.

This method, reflecting Ladner's concern to develop a multivariate analysis of black
culture, might at first sight not appear to be particularly critical. However, it must be set
in relation to a number of other considerations: first, the contextualisation of the data
historically and structurally; second, the inadequacies of dominant sociological
approaches. Third, the requirements on her to conform to specific academic standards of
objectivity and her own concerns about the possibility of value-freedom.

Ladner's book was a radical statement in the United States at the time, not least
because of its positive assertion of a black culture, its denial of the relevance of white
middle-class norms for assessing black culture and its claim that (working-class) black
womanhood provided the model for the new liberated white middle-class women.

4.3.2 Structure—institutionalised racism

Ladner sees Black women as located historically and structurally in an oppressive, racist system. They are acting subjects who engage dialectically with the system that engulfs them. They are neither wholly determined by, nor do they act freely to structure, their environment. Poor black women, informed by a particularly oppressive heritage, adapt their social circumstances in order to survive in, transform, and confront the oppressive system. Through depicting the lives of black pre-adolescent and adolescent girls in a big-city slum, she shows how distinct socio-historical forces have shaped a very positive and practical way of dealing and coping with the oppressive system.

> It is difficult to capture the *essence* of this complex period of psychosocial development because of the peculiar historical backdrop against which this process occurs. Therefore I have endeavoured to analyze their present lives as they emerge out of these historical forces, for they have been involved in a strong reciprocal relationship in that they have been shaped by the forces of oppression but have also exerted their influence so as to alter certain of these patterns. (Ladner, 1971, p. 270)

The structural focus of her analysis is institutionalised racism, which 'has exerted the strongest impact upon all facets of the Black woman's life'. Ladner defines institutionalised racism in general terms as the policies, priorities and functions of a system 'of normative patterns' that subjugate, oppress and force dependence through the sanctioning of unequal goals, inequality in status and access to goods and services (Stafford & Ladner, 1969, p. 70).[10]

4.3.3 White social science—pathology and black culture

Sociology, reflecting the myths of institutionalised racism, has tended to see blacks in general as pathological terms. In particular, the black family continues to be seen as 'disorganised' (Frazier, 1931, 1939; Moynihan, 1965) and black women as an aberration of the white middle-class model.[11] Ladner is critical of this prevailing sociological tradition and turns the taken-for-granted on its head by arguing that it is 'malignant' institutionalised racism in both its overt and covert forms that has provided the structures and processes within which the apparent features of 'disorganisation' (matriarchy, illegitimacy, juvenile suicide, violence) have occurred. The institutionalised racism of the oppressing classes is legitimated by blaming racial minorities for their situation, labelling them as deviant and, furthermore, 'indoctrinating the oppressed to believe in their alleged inferiority'.

Dispensing with the pathological model, Ladner undertakes one of the first positive analyses of the black community and particularly of black women. This analysis is informed by a notion of black culture sustained by the functionally autonomous black (ghetto) community.

Ladner argues the existence of a distinct black culture comprised primarily of two elements: Africanisms that have survived slavery; and the adaptive responses blacks made to slavery and post-slavery racial discrimination. 'The "Black cultural" framework has its own autonomous system of values, attitudes, sentiments and beliefs' which cannot be assessed by the norms of white middle-class culture. What is necessary is 'rigorous multi-variate analysis' of Black culture (Ladner, 1971, p. xxiii), which is something that

white middle-class social science has failed to do, preferring instead simplistic stereotypes.

The inherent bias of social science, which draws on the basic concepts and tools of white Western society, reproduces 'the conceptual framework of the oppressor' with the researcher defining the problem. This prevents most social researchers from being able to accurately observe black life and culture and the impact racism and oppression has on blacks.

Although Ladner argues that black women must be situated within black culture, she insists that their lives must be seen in a wider context of oppression. It is inadequate to view the subjects of her study in the isolated context of the slum area of St. Louis, Missouri, rather they must be located within 'the national and international context of neo-colonialism and its disastrous effects upon oppressed peoples. Their conditions and life chances are necessarily interwoven with the status of the oppressed all over the world. As this broader context changes so will their lives' (Ladner, 1971, p. 287).

Ladner argues that dominant (white) social science has dealt woefully with black culture because it has failed to address the fundamental problem of neo-colonialism. To understand blacks it is necessary to develop a 'new frame of reference which transcends the limits of white concepts' (Bennett, 1970).

4.3.4 Objectivity and value-freedom
Ladner's training had been informed by the deviancy perspective on black women and she began the fieldwork with such preconceptions, initially intent on elaborating what was alleged to exist. However, her life experiences invalidated the deviant perspective and as she came to understand her subjects, Ladner moved her focus from trying to find out how 'harmful consequences' of the ghetto affected women's life chances and how a 'less destructive adaptation could be made to their impoverished environments' to one that saw the subject's lives as a healthy and successful adaptation to their circumstances.

As she became more involved with the subjects of the research she was unable to continue the expected role of dispassionate scientific data extractor. She became unhappy with a process that set out to simply 'describe and theorize' about the 'pathology-ridden' conditions of Black people.

> I began to perceive my role as a Black person, with empathy and attachment, and, to a great extent, their day-to-day lives and future destinies became intricately interwoven with my own. This did not occur without a considerable amount of agonizing self-evaluation and conflict over "whose side I was on." On the one hand, I wanted to conduct a study that would allow me to fulfill certain academic requirements, i.e. a doctoral dissertation. On the other hand, I was highly influenced by my *Blackness*—by the fact that I, on many levels, was one of them and had to deal with their problems on a personal level... I was unable to resolve the dilemmas I faced as a Black social scientist because they only symbolized the larger questions, issues and dilemmas of our times. (Ladner, 1971, p. xiv)

Ladner, drawing on Gouldner's (1962) denial of value-freedom and exhortations to be open and honest about ones values and on Clark's (1965) admissions about his role as 'involved observer' questioned the possibility of value-free research. Although attempting to maintain some degree of objectivity, she 'soon began to minimize and, very

often, negate the importance of being "value-free,"' arguing that the selection of the topic itself reflected a bias. She researched Black women because of her 'strong interest in the subject' (Ladner, 1971, p. xviii).

The 'inability to be *objective* about analysing poverty, racism, disease' raised for her a further problem: a problem of conscience, morality and action. To what extent should involvement in subjects' lives lead the researcher, black or white, to direct action to ameliorate 'many of the destructive conditions he[12] studies?' (Ladner, 1971, pp. xix-xx) How can researchers remain dispassionate observers and not intervene? While giving no direct answer to the question Ladner admits that on many occasions she found herself acting as counsellor or 'big sister'.

Ladner's account retains elements of 'positivism' necessitated by the research context and the PhD, although mediated by her critical perspective. Her reference to testing exploratory conclusions, her agonising over objectivity and value-freedom, her references to multivariate analysis, her latent 'apology' for not providing answers and making causal connections parallels the presentation in Oakley's (1974a) *Sociology of Housework*. She too was trapped by white male, academic constraints and had to balance her critique of dominant sociological methods and perspectives along with her involvement and sympathy for her respondents against her desire for academic credibility. Like Ladner, she was opposed to a dominant-subordinate researcher-subject relationship. They both wanted to make the activities of women visible as meaningful and resourceful activities located within a wider oppressive structure.

4.3.5 Myths

Given these concerns, Ladner deals with the broad question of the socialisation of Black women through the specification of a number of more specific questions.

> What is life like in the urban Black community for the 'average' girl? How does she define her roles, behaviors, and from whom does she acquire her models for fulfilling what is expected of her? Is there any significant disparity in the resources she has with which to accomplish her goals in life and the stated aspirations? Is the typical world of the teen-ager in American society shared by the Black girl or does she stand somewhat alone in much of her day-to-day existence? (Ladner, 1971, pp. xxiii–xxiv)

> What do the sociohistorical traditions of the Black community do to mold girls into women? How do contemporary circumstances and events play important roles in preparing them to fulfill the expectations of their community and the larger society? (Ladner, 1971, p. 43)

> What does 'becoming a woman' mean symbolically to the adolescent girl? (Ladner, 1971, p. 104)

In dealing with her material, Ladner first provides an introductory historical context that documents the changing circumstances of black women from Africa through slavery to contemporary ghetto life. She then explores how her fieldwork material engages

numerous myths about the black community, which she draws out of her review of the relevant literature.

For example, the literature led Ladner to expect black girls to express feelings of inadequacy, worthlessness and self-disparagement because of their colour. She presents a large number of verbatim statements from respondents, ranging in age and political awareness, which clearly show this presupposition to be false, for example:

> I'm proud of being a Negro. I mean it's not bad to be a Negro and that's why I'm proud.... (13 year old)

> I've always been proud of being Black because I think it is a superior colour.... (15 year old)

> We are not Negroes. We are "so-called" Negroes. That's the name they gave us. Our original name is Black.... (17 year old)

She concludes that the statements 'speak for themselves' and, while a 'very small number' of girls did 'not speak favourably of being black' none of them wanted to be white. She concludes by turning the analysis round and asking why the 'self-hatred' thesis has been consistently advanced when there has been so little empirical evidence to validate the thesis. (Ladner, 1971, p. 99)

Similarly, the myth of black promiscuity is also confronted by the testimony of the girls. An alternative moral code and less formalised family structure operate within the ghetto, which provides statistical indicators interpreted by middle class whites as indicative of promiscuity. However, the ethnographic data on the reality of ghetto women's lives reveals this to be a misleading view.

In this way Ladner addresses the girls views and life experiences involving numerous facets including poverty, the ghetto environment, exploitative agencies, policing, theft, femininity, sexuality, marriage, and so on. The young women were generally very positive about themselves and contrary to the myths of black helplessness clearly revealed their creativity and resourcefulness. Further, the views expressed showed that the girls had a 'phenomenal' awareness of what the sources of oppression of blacks are.

The exploration of the myths, Ladner maintains, shows that they are propagated as part of the 'institutional subjugation that is designed to perpetuate an oppressive class'. The perceived 'institutionalized pathological character' of the ghetto provides the legitimation for its continued subordination and exploitation (Ladner, 1971, p. 100). Revealing the myths is the first step in developing a more fundamental critique of the oppressive forces that produce various forms of anti-social behaviour. When this has been done then the conceptualization of pathology can be reversed. '*The society, instead of its members, becomes pathological*' (Ladner, 1971, p. 101).

4.3.6 Praxis
Ladner, as an anti-racist, is committed to social change. The historical situation of black women in America convinces Ladner (1971, p. 282) that the 'most viable model of womanhood in the United States is the one which Black women symbolize'. This is reinforced by her ethnographic material, which shows that black women are characterised

by realism, resourcefulness, creativity, strength and determination to struggle against racism. However, she suggests, aspects of this model need re-evaluation and alteration.

Black women should be at the forefront of the Women's Liberation Movement (WLM). However, the issues addressed by the WLM are mainly irrelevant to black[13] women. For example, the 'protection' afforded white women by white men from which the white WLM wants to extricate itself. Black men have never been allowed to protect their women and so 'Black women have always been "liberated"' (Ladner, 1971, p. 283). Further 'battles between the sexes' are a 'luxury which Black people as a race can ill afford'. 'Black women do not perceive their enemy to be Black men, but rather the enemy is considered to be the oppressive forces in the larger society which subjugate Black *men, women and children*.'

The advent of the civil rights movement led to an assertion of black masculinity. Black males demanded the right to provide for and protect their family, to compete equally in the job market, and so on: that is, to have equal rights to patriarchy. Ladner argues that this has required black women to redefine their roles in relation to black men. Traditionally strong, black women are facing a dilemma of continuing to assert individuality or becoming a passive supporter of black men. This dilemma is reflected in the tensions within interpersonal relations experienced by the girls and women in the study.

Many blacks assert the passive role on the assumption that 'Black men cannot find their places at the top of the family hierarchy if women continue to maintain the[ir] aggressive roles'. The alternative denies patriarchal usurpation of power and argues that men must discover 'their assertiveness through their own inner resourcefulness, with the compassionate *support* of Black women' (Ladner, 1971, pp. 284–5). Ladner argues that black women, while not necessarily embracing patriarchal dominance, must adjust to allow for the 'full development of *male and female*', utilising their 'survival techniques in the larger struggle for the liberation of Black people'. In short, black women, both working- and middle-class, should take their struggle out of the confines of the family into a wider political struggle.

Ladner is not, however, claiming to chart a course of action for black women. Indeed, in her book she is simply saying 'This is what the Black woman was, this is how she has been solving her problems, and these are the ways in which she is seeking to alter her roles.' The actions of black women, though, cannot be seen in isolation as they are 'dictated by, and interwoven with, the trends set in the vast Black American community' (Ladner, 1971, p. xxi). It is necessary, she argues for blacks to unite in an aggressive opposition to the growing racist repression, evidenced in the United States at the start of the 1970s, in the growing number of killings, attacks on black intellectuals, failure to enforce desegregation and general confiscation of fundamental rights.

The unified struggle, she argues, must be grounded in black culture. Ladner sees black culture 'as a non-material culture' and as 'emotive', 'spiritual' and 'aesthetic'. It is in this respect that it is humanistic and may counteract prevailing destructive forces in society. White culture is decadent and unworthy of emulation. Instead she argues that black people should work towards strengthening the values that have emerged out of the black experience. Furthermore, reflecting Black nationalist movements, she is sceptical of integration into a society whose terms are dictated by the oppressing group. However, she warns against romanticising Black culture and seeing it as an opiate and an end in

itself. 'No matter how much we celebrate our culture and its heroes, we must still do the necessary *activist* work to eliminate oppression. Cultural nationalism can never be a total substitute for direct political involvement' (Ladner, 1971, pp. 278–9).

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[8] Ladner refers throughout to Black persons with an upper case B.

[9] Ladner also refers to the use of Thematic Apperception Tests.

[10] This definition fails to ground institutional racism in explicit material practices, reflecting the prevailing approach to American sociology of the late 1960s. Nonetheless it does provide a structural context within which to locate the day-to-day struggles of black women.

[11] The disorganisation thesis derives from so-called 'Chicago School' studies of 'social disorganization' the 1920s and early 1930s. Along with its associated concepts of 'definition of the situation' and 'social becoming' it had a long lasting impact on American sociology. Social disorganisation was initially used to refer to the disorganisation that occurs within societies as a result of social change (see Carey, 1975; Bulmer, 1984; Harvey, 1987). A parallel notion of individual disorganisation emerged in a number of guises, initially integrally linked to social disorganisation but later becoming a more autonomous notion linked to personal or group pathology. Disorganisation was first used in relation to the family by Mowrer (1924, 1927), and Frazier (1931, 1939) draws on this.

[12] Ladner uses the male pronoun throughout to refer to social researchers.

[13] 'Black women in this society are the only ethnic or racial group which has had the opportunity *to be women*. By this I simply mean that much of the current focus on being liberated from the constraints and protectiveness of the society which is proposed by Women's Liberation groups has never applied to Black women, and in that sense, we have always been "free", and able to develop as individuals even under the most harsh circumstances. This freedom, as well as the tremendous hardships from which Black women suffered, allowed for the development of a female personality that is rarely described in the scholarly journals for its obstinate strength and ability to survive. Neither is its peculiar humanistic character and quiet courage viewed as the epitome of what the American model of femininity should be.' (Ladner, 1971, p. 280)