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ABSTRACT

This paper has a dual purpose. First, it relates the research and writings of DuBois, a social scientist and humanist in the best intellectual tradition of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, to the sociology of the black family in the United States; and second, it presents selected data having to do with the structure and functioning of contemporary black families. Probably even more than being descriptive, the presentation has to do with issues of knowledge, theory, methodology, and social policy raised by the study of family life among blacks. Since DuBois' time, and before, a popular profile of the black family stresses family composition and makes extensive and important inferences about behavior and achievement. The data, based on census figures, is not satisfactory for explaining how and why a family functions. The discussion of the several intellectual hats and dimensions DuBois brings to the study of the family and experiences of blacks suggests that research and writing on the black family, aside from considerable datedness, much unevenness, and many gaps reflects as many approaches as there are traditions or modes of intellectual activity. It also serves to underscore several issues, among them the fact that more studies in the field and in some depth are needed of various types or expressions of family activity and among blacks in many settings. Any sociological profile of the black family demands a balance between objectivity and caring about human values. (Author/AM)

BLACK FAMILIES: SOCIOLOGICAL PROFILES

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October 5, 1974
Sheraton Biltmore Hotel, Atlanta, GA.

This presentation on the occasion of the first W. E. B. DuBois Institute for the Study of the American Black comes some 66 years after the publication in 1908 of DuBois' The American Negro Family.* The paper has two purposes: First, to relate the research and writings of DuBois, a social scientist and a humanist in the best intellectual tradition of the 19th and early 20th centuries, to the sociology of the Black family in the United States; and second, to present selected data having to do with the structure and functioning of contemporary Black families. Probably even more than being descriptive, the presentation has to do with issues of knowledge, theory, methodology, and social policy raised by the study of family life among Blacks.

DuBois, in his early writings, both scholarly and popular, prefigured much of that which has been written and speculated about by serious students of family life among Blacks. To say that he anticipated a great deal of subsequent thinking and writing about the Black family is not only to make a commentary on DuBois' prescience and remarkable insight, but also to make an oblique and perhaps somewhat damning criticism of much of subsequent research and serious writing on family life among Blacks. Despite impressive changes in research technology and numerous new theoretical claims, there really has been

*One of the interesting facts about this book is that it was based on the research efforts of DuBois' Atlanta University students, the classes of 1909 and 1910--sophomores and juniors.

little significant change in conceptions and mappings of Black family life among Blacks since early DuBois.

When I began to think about the topic as originally assigned, "A Profile of the Black Family," I had two initial thoughts: one was that the term profile, insofar as it means an outline view, is a metaphor of limited usefulness, and probably not the best cue for the kind of discussion that would be appropriate for this occasion. The second thought was that if there is any merit in the term profile, it is more useful to think in terms of different profiles of the Black family--demographic, economic, social psychological, political, etc. The concern I felt was that like all composites, a profile obscures a more complex reality.

DuBois was more acutely aware than most of complex reality of family and child rearing experiences in the Black community, and especially of the need to deal sensitively with them in science as well as in literature and art. DuBois was a social scientist and a humanist--and he combined the two orientations superbly. In both roles he was especially sensitive to change (progress, if you will), and the parts played by both science and art in interpreting life and in furthering change. DuBois' intellectual life and influence spanned the latter part of the nineteenth and two-thirds of the twentieth centuries, and although his political career took many turns and exhibited some inconsistencies and paradoxes, there was a singular consistency and continuity to his moral assumptions and his faith in scientific, literary, and artistic forms of communication. He never really abandoned a dogged and firm nineteenth century faith in history and progress--a quality of

faith that is not too widely shared today. DuBois as social scientist, whether studying the African slave, the Reconstruction Era, the Black community, or the Black family showed this fine sense of history. However he combined it with an awareness that history itself is an activity and potent force of the present. The manner in which he was concerned with continuities and the stages of change in family life among Blacks is suggested in the fact that he concluded at the beginning of this century that as a whole the Afro-American had "merged into twentieth century civilization" according to standards of common school training, economic independence and monogamous sex mores. And in his optimistic view of historical development and of the level Blacks had arrived at, he was at pains to point to the early differentiation of the Black family in terms of urbanization and class and social status. In this he foreshadowed in part some of the questions, hypotheses and findings in the classic researches of Frazier and of Allison Davis more than a generation later.

Frazier, frequently noted that much of his research involved the testing of hypotheses about the Black family developed by DuBois in his The Negro American Family. Frazier wrote that DuBois, "as early as 1908 had undertaken to relate family disorganization among Negroes to the destruction of the African clan and the demoralization of Negro sex and family during slavery." And Frazier's recurrent references to the role of tradition and ceremony in stabilizing the Negro family are consistent with DuBois' observations about family rituals at the end of his chapter on the family in The Philadelphia Negro,

published in 1899. DuBois devoted much of this chapter to the variety of family forms and practices and ended it by concluding that "On the whole, the Negro has few family festivals; birthdays are not often noticed." And further in anticipation of the theme of the well-known chapter, "In the city of Destruction" in Frazier's The Negro Family, DuBois added: "The home was destroyed by slavery, struggled up after emancipation, and is again not exactly threatened, but neglected in the life of city Negroes. Herein lies food for thought."

Aside from E. Franklin Frazier, and more recently Andrew Billingsley, in his effort to develop, or better adapt, a theoretical framework for studying and understanding the Black family variations, and Robert Hill who in stressing the strength of Black families, sought to refute allegations that Black families are inherently weak, few students have shown interest in, much less studied, variations in family forms among Blacks. In The Negro American Family, DuBois wrote the following about the differentiation of classes:

> Few modern groups show a greater internal differentiation of social conditions than the Negro American, and the failure to realize this is the cause of much confusion. In looking for differentiation from the past in Africa and slavery, few persons realize that this involves extreme differentiation in the present. The forward movement of a social group is not the compact march of an army, where the distance covered is practically the same for all, but is rather the straggling of a crowd, where some of whom hasten, some linger, some turn back; some reach far-off goals before others even start, and yet the crowd moves on. The measure of the advancement of such a throng is a question at once nice and indefinite. Measured by the rear guard there may be no perceptible advance.

Measured by the advance guard the transformation may be miraculous.

And in a rather curious kind of statement that was not unusual for early social science, he refers to the center of gravity of the mass of Negroes:

> Yet neither of these are reasonable measurements, but rather the point which one might call the center of gravity of the mass is the true measuring point, and the determination of this point in the absence of exact measurements may be for a long time a matter of opinion rather than proof. So with the Negro American. It is easy to prove the degradation of thousands of Negroes on the back plantations of Mississippi and the alleys of Washington; it is just as easy to prove the accomplishments of the graduates of Atlanta University, or the members of St. Thomas Church, Philadelphia.

And in a discussion that would be on target today in view of the recent controversy stirred by Scammon and Wattenberg's Commentary article about Black progress and how many Blacks are moving into the middle-class and how fast--about which, more later.

> The point is where between these manifest extremes, lies today the cultural center of gravity of the race. It is begging and obscuring this question to harp on ignorance and crime among Negroes as though these were unexpected; or to laud exceptional accomplishment as though it was typical. The real crucial question is: What point has the mass of the race reached which can be justly looked upon as the average accomplishment of the group?
>
> The exact location of this point is impossible to locate beyond doubt. Yet certain facts about it are certain: It is moving forward rapidly; this is proven by the decrease of illiteracy and the increase of property holding, both on such a scale, covering so long a period of years as to be incontrovertible evidence.

To illustrate this differentiation the 1908 publication included four sections on the Negro country families, the social life of the country, the Negro northern city home, and a study of thirteen select homes representing mostly the upper class of Negroes.

In the same volume, The Negro American Family, DuBois, in an interesting fashion, provided cues for both sides of the later and recently revised debate between Herskovitz and Frazier concerning the significance of the African background for the American Black family experience. The same issue has recently been phrased by Orlando Patterson as a difference between the catastrophic and survivalist conceptions of Black history (see "Rethinking Black History," Harvard Educational Review, August, 1971).

DuBois began The Negro American Family by characterizing the issue of African influence in a fashion that would be appropriate even today:

> This essay is an attempt to study the family among Negro-Americans--its formation, its home, its economic organization and its daily life. Such a study is at once faced by a lamentable dearth of material. There is comparatively little exact information on many important points. Nevertheless, there is perhaps enough to give a tentative outline which more exact research may later fill in. In each case an attempt has been made to connect present conditions with the African past. This is not because Negro-Americans are Africans, or can trace an unbroken social history from Africa, but because there is a distinct nexus between Africa and America which, though broken and perverted, is nevertheless not to be neglected by the careful student. It is, however, exceedingly difficult and puzzling to know just where to find the broken thread of African and American social history.

In many ways, the recent revival of the issue of whether the Black family is essentially African or American was not initially the result of new research and data but rather of ideological and political imperatives that gained force anew in the new Black nationalism and the racial and ethnic conflict and competition of the 1960s. This does not mean that the uncovering of new data and the development of new and revised interpretations of the history of Blacks and of the significance of the African background will not be forthcoming. A great deal of new research has been stimulated. At the start of the recent revival essentially all that was done, partly under the pressure of time, was to dust off and reassert old ideas, and to dig up books, many of which were out of print and, in some instances, forgotten, and reissuing them. DuBois' view of the effects of slavery was essentially a catastrophic one; and he was essentially optimistic and melioristic about the future of Blacks; and on the question as to whether the future of the Black in the United States and Black institutions are oriented toward, influenced by, Africa or America, he was vigorous and unambiguous. In The Crisis in 1919, writing with reference to reconstruction in Africa, he notes:

> With the establishment of a form of government which shall be based on the concept that Africa is for Africans, there would be a chance for the colored American to emigrate and to go as a pioneer to a country which must, sentimentally at least, possess for him the same fascination as England does for Indian-born Englishmen.

However, he adds:

> Once for all, let us realize that we are Americans, that we were brought here with

> the earliest settlers, and that the very sort of civilization from which we came made the complete adoption of western modes and customs imperative if we were to survive at all. In brief, there is nothing so indigenous, so completely 'made in America' as we.

Any review, however brief, of DuBois' contributions toward a sociology of family life, must emphasize again and again, that DuBois was the quintessential intellectual in many respects. That he was a member of a minority group helped reinforce and underscore some salient features of the intellectual's roles and functions in society--ranging as he did from scientific research to expressive intellectual action, including intellectual and political contention--and all to the end of bringing about change and challenging injustice.

DuBois ran the gamut of intellectual roles and this is illustrated in the many ways he examined and communicated about Black family life. He was variously the elitist man of ideas, social scientist, humanist, poet, journalist, propagandist, polemicist; and always the advocate of truth, justice, equality who was aware of the politicality of knowledge and symbols.

Each person probably has several favorite quotes from DuBois. In the context of this discussion, my favorite is from his address to the annual meeting of the NAACP in 1926 "On Criteria for Art," already described and commented on by Anne Cook Reid in her discussion of DuBois the artist. Although it has reference to art, it is relevant to the understanding of his total outlook on intellectual action in relation to the status of Black institutions.

> The apostle of beauty thus becomes the apostle of truth and right not by choice but by inner and outer complusion. Free he is but his freedom is ever bounded by truth and justice; and slavery only dogs him when he is denied the right to tell the truth or recognize an ideal of justice.
>
> Thus all art is propaganda and ever must be, despite the wailing of the purists. I stand in utter shamelessness and say that whatever art I have for writing has been used always for propaganda for gaining the right of Black folk to love and enjoy. I do not care a damn for any art that is not used for propaganda. But I do care when propaganda is confined to one side while the other is stripped and silent.

DuBois was especially important as a critic of prevailing scholarship and its consequences. He was concerned with redressing imbalances and in filling in gaps, especially when they were fostered by historians and social scientists. Witness The Suppression of the African Slave Trade, The Philadelphia Negro, and numerous journal articles and book reviews on a wide range of scientific and popular issues, including slavery and its consequences, race, intermarriage, literature and art, economics and education. It is interesting to note that one of his papers was devoted to "Black Folk and Birth Control," in The Birth Control Review, June 1932.

Since DuBois' time, and before, a popular profile of the Black family stresses family composition and makes extensive and important inferences about behavior and achievement.[3] It is based on census data primarily; and these data include income and employment figures. Two points should be emphasized about the statistical data on the family from the United States census: They have a static quality and they are presented and organized in topical fashion; for example,

marriage, households, fertility, dependency, divorce, occupation and income, etc. This organizing principle has a certain convenience and it contributes to statistical summaries and to rate making, but it is not satisfactory for explaining how and why a family functions.

One of the key statistics that has to be dealt with in any discussion of the structure of the Black family, and by implication its functioning or ability to cope, is the change in the proportion of families with female heads. In this instance, as in all selective measures of family stability, it is important to ask what assumptions and what theories with regard to the family institution and social relations in general, and in the Black community in particular, are reflected in this selection of indicators or variables. And how do these assumptions square with the facts of Black family interaction and functioning?

A summary of the current census survey figures with reference to female-headed families shows that one in seven of all children under 18 was being raised by mothers alone, compared with one in twelve in 1960. In 1974 approximately one in eleven of all White families and slightly more than one in three Black families were headed by women. About one in two Black children under six lived with both parents in 1973, compared with seven in ten in 1960.

In looking at the proportion of low income families with female heads, the double significance of income is suggested. Among low income Whites in 1960--one in five families was headed by a female, and by 1973, one in three. Among Black poor families, one in three was headed by a female in 1960, and in 1973, almost two in three.

In 1960, one in four White poor families with children under eighteen had a female head; in 1973 more than two in five. In 1960 one in three Black poor families with children under eighteen had a female head; in 1973 seven in every ten.

The Census Bureau in releasing these kinds of results of its sample surveys always notes the growing concern among social scientists and government planners because of the indicated trend. At the same time it notes that the sample study is subject to some errors.

There are two kinds of questions raised by these statistics. One of the questions is why are Black families more likely to be headed by a woman? And the other is what are consequences of these developments for forms and quality of family living? Just looking at the demographics of it, the proportion of families headed by women is a function of four inflowing factors--divorce, separation, death, out-of-wedlock births; and three outflowing factors--remarriage, death and the aging of children. All of these demographic probabilities contribute to the higher instances of female headed families with children in the Black community.

It should be stressed that marital breakup among Blacks, for whatever reason, is more important than illegitimacy as a factor explaining the high incidence of female headed families among Blacks.

In 1970 the divorce rate for Blacks was higher and the separation rate was almost three times as high as the White. Black women are twice as likely to be widowed and three times as likely to enter into the status of female head by having and keeping an out-of-wedlock child.

Blacks have lower remarriage rates and this is undoubtedly related to the sex ratio in part, as Jacqueline Jackson in her various articles,

has indicated.

It should be pointed out, however, that the figures on separation are affected by the fact that some single women with children report themselves as separated. The census data, for example, showed twice as many separated men in the age group 14-54. This difference cannot be fully accounted for by differences in mortality or by under-reporting by men.

One of the significant findings is that a high proportion of all single, divorced, separated or widowed women, regardless of race, have their own households.

Marital breakup is significantly greater for Blacks born and living in northern areas than for those who migrated from the south, thus suggesting the influence of factors related to urbanization itself rather than to migration.

It is estimated that 90 per cent of children born out of wedlock were not wished for by their mothers, and a national longitudinal study by Ryder and Westoff found that Black women have more unwanted births than White women, although there is little difference between the racial categories with respect to wanted births.

With respect to questions about the effects of single parent families as such on the quality of family life and the socialization and achievements of children--the structural question, these points should be made.

A substantial minority of American children, Black and White, live in a home headed by a woman. It is important therefore, to review current assumptions about the one-parent home and what it means for the developmental prospects of the children who grow up in it.

It has been our habit to view any deviation from our modal family pattern as an aberration. A number of research findings have tended to reinforce this habit. The question may be raised, however, whether a form that includes so many children and has produced so many effective and apparently happy adults, deserves a less negative status. The time has probably come to recognize the one-parent family as a family form in its own right..

Among reasons for re-assessment of the one-parent family as a family in its own right that Elizabeth Herzog and I have commented on are the following:

1. The one-parent family is with us and shows signs of becoming even more frequent.
2. There is reason to believe that children in single parent families are adversely affected by the negative assumptions which cluster around these child rearing units.
3. Through time and space the family has absorbed a vast array of different forms and still has continued to function as the family.
4. The modal American family may not be as functionally two-parent or as "patriarchal" as is sometimes assumed.
5. Analysis of research findings concerning the one-parent family fails to support a sweeping indictment of its potential for producing children capable of fruitful and gratifying lives.

Economic insecurity should be looked to as an explanation of how single-parent Black families headed by mothers function rather than to any mystique of the matriarchy.

Income statistics show Black women earn less than Black men; however, the earnings of Black women are more equal to men's than those of White women. And this tells you as much about the relatively depressed income levels of Black men as anything else.

The important point is that Black family income statistics are more properly understood in relation to the state of the economy than in relation to the nature of the Black family institution and the work behavior of people. Census data on income especially should be handled critically; they tell nothing about expected lifetime earnings prospects, or about stability of employment, or about level of assets. In this connection, one of the running debates of the past two years has been with reference to the size and rate of growth of the Black middle-class family. This debate was triggered by Scammon and Wattenberg's article in Commentary in April 1973, mentioned earlier, in which they suggested that most Blacks have moved into the middle-class. Both the facts and the policy consequences of the Scammon and Wattenberg claims about Black economic progress have been weighed and examined tellingly by a number of persons, including Harrington Bryce of the Joint Center for Political Studies, and Harold Connally of the Metropolitan Applied Research Center.

Among the conclusions are that whereas Blacks have made progress during the 1960s, Whites have made even more economic progress, and that there are still significant income gaps between Whites and Blacks. As Bryce points out the income gain is deceptive. Single young Black wives outside the south are more likely to be working year-round; a considerable amount of the ostensible income equality is based on inequality in work effort.

Among the sobering, if not grim, Black family income statistics are these:

The census bureau's figures for 1972 set forth that the median income for Whites was $11,549 while the comparable figure for Blacks was $6,864. While overall poverty in the country dropped, 500,000 Blacks and other minorities moved into poverty. The Black unemployment rate remains twice as high as the White; and unemployment among Black urban teenagers is about thirty-five percent. It is not surprising to find that not all Blacks are poor. But it is more than a little disquieting to find 500,000 moving into poverty in a year in which the rest of the nation is moving the other way. It is also troubling to be reminded that a third of the Black population still lives in official poverty and downright frightening to find that more than 40 per cent of Black children under 18 are poor.

A Washington Post editorial of June 5, 1973 makes the point again about the relationships between Black family structure and functioning and the economy and governmental policy:

> What these figures do tend to reinforce is the impression that our social policies and our economy are creating two quite distinct groups in Black America: the almost equal and the abandoned. America has a great penchant for savoring the good news about race relations while ignoring the hard realities tucked away in ghettoes which are both out of sight and out of mind.
>
> The fact is that the income gap in Black America is as dangerous as it is misleading. The visible progress made by some Black Americans tends to support the positions of those who, consciously or unconsciously, want or need to ignore the plight of the poor. But the progress of some makes the plight of the abandoned no less brutal and no less threatening to the society as a whole.

A major difficulty in the development of knowledge regarding Black families is the inadequacy of samples and of data in sufficient breadth and depth to encompass the wide variability that exists. Thus, it is with great interest that we anticipate the publication of the work of Patricia Gurin and Edgar Epps on the achievement of Black students, particularly as it will illuminate issues regarding the effects of family structure. Their study included 3,600 students in 1964-1965 and 1,100 students in 1970 at ten historically Black colleges; their research used survey procedures as well as in-depth interviews and a battery of psychological tests for longitudinal and cross-sectional analyses. Their findings merit serious attention, since they run against the grain of many assumptions, myths and scattered research findings.

Regarding the issue of father-absence, their data and analysis show that father absence does not depress: (1) academic performance, (2) future aspirations, nor (3) effectiveness in planning or working to achieve personal goals. Family structure was never significant in analyses of student performance, motivation, nor aspirations (we should note here that a fourth of the students studied came from families with fathers not present, which approximated the national estimate for Black urban populations in the north, where absence of male head is highest).

Regarding the issue of Black female dominance and allegations that they have more ambition than males: women students consistently chose lower educational and occupational goals than the men. And this was true for every college studied, for freshmen as well as seniors, and in

1964 as well as 1970. For example, although males and females equally wanted to go to graduate school, only five per cent of the women, in contrast to 35 percent of the males, wanted to pursue a professional degree. And twice the proportion (two-thirds of the women and a third of the men) planned to terminate graduate studies at the master's degree. These findings are consistent with national studies that show that 80 percent of doctorates held by Blacks are earned by men and that three-fourths of the Black Ph.D's in the social sciences are men.

Regarding the issue of the significance of the family's class position on achievement. Gurin and Epps' findings indicate that class is less influential than generally assumed.

Family status measures, including parents' educations, did not correlate significantly with: (1) college grades, (2) performance on standard tests, nor (3) measures of achievement values and motives. A fascinating finding is that although family status appears to influence freshmen students aspirations and expectations of achieving individual goals, the effect has disappeared by their senior year.

The general conclusion is that social background influences realistic expectancies more than motives and values of achievement--i.e., the resources and opportunities associated with social status are more important than family structure or education of parents.

One of the more obvious tendencies in social science interpretations as well as popular views is to develop the image of a lower class Black family as a homogeneous, constant entity with cultural imperatives of its own; and frequently to intimate that it is modal or characteristic. The reasons for this distortion lie in many directions and involve

inadequacies of family theory and failings and shortcomings of methods as well as racism and the effects of racial and ethnic politics. The earlier discussion of the several intellectual hats and dimensions DuBois brought to the study of the family and experiences of Blacks--the reminds one that the research and/writing on the Black family, aside from considerable datedness, much unevenness, and many gaps reflect as many approaches as there are traditions or modes of intellectual activity.

It also serves to underscore (1) the fact that more studies in the field and in some depth are needed of various types or expressions of family activity and among Blacks in many settings--that more description and interpretation is needed of the many subtypes of Black families, of various family syndromes, if you will; (2) the interests of Blacks and of social policy mandate that adequate depiction of the complex reality of family life among Blacks cannot be left to the social sciences alone with their present technological preoccupations and conceptualizations, and (3) among other things, the humanities, especially in the form of novels, poems and plays about the varied expressions of family life among Blacks and the differences that the Black experience makes have continuing and increasing roles to play both in direct depiction and interpretation and in influencing the assumptions, questions and methods of the social sciences. I believe that effective depiction and interpretation of family life among Blacks and therefore family policy depend upon interaction and cooperation between the humanities and social science. Our review of DuBois, the social science scholar and the humanist, underscores this belief the more. It is probably no accident that the most influential serious studies and writings on the Black family

by Blacks have been by scholars who were touched significantly by or in the tradition of the humanities--for example, DuBois, Frazier, Charles S. Johnson, and Allison Davis.

DuBois used a wide range of means and platforms other than scholarly monographs, including lecture platforms, magazine articles, and, of course, the pages of his own Crisis. As has been suggested by many at this conference, The Crisis, in many respects, was a good measure of DuBois, the human being, with all of his concerns, ideals, prejudices, biases--and they were displayed in language that could be both blunt and eloquent. Although apparently aloof, haughty, and sometimes forbidding, he wrote about children, mothers, and his own family with eloquence and tenderness. Each year an issue of The Crisis was devoted to children and a photograph of a child appreared on the cover. In the Children 's Issue of 1912 he wrote:

> This is the children's number, and as it has grown and developed in the editor's hesitating hands, it has in some way come to seem a typical rather than a special number. Indeed, there is a sense in which all numbers and all words of a magazine of ideas must point to the child--to that vast immortality and wide sweep and infinite possibility which the child represents.
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> .....
>
> And yet the mothers and fathers and the men and women of our race must often pause and ask: is it worthwhile?
> Ought children be born to us?
> Have we a right to make human souls face what we face today?
> The answer is clear: If the great battle of human right against poverty, against disease, against color prejudice is to be won, it must be won not in our day, but in the day of our children's children. Ours is the blood and

> dust of battle, theirs the rewards of victory. If, then, they are not there because we have not brought them to the world, then we have been the guiltiest factor in conquering ourselves. It is our duty, then, to accomplish the immortality of Black blood in order that the day may come in this dark world when poverty shall be abolished, privilege based on individual desert, and the color of a man's skin be no bar to the outlook of his soul.

It is this intricate balance between objectivity and caring about the human values illustrated here that is the earmark of DuBois' contributions tc understanding family life among Blacks. And it is this same intricate balance that any sociological profile of the Black family must achieve to be useful.