**Middle Class, Yet Black: A Review Essay**

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## INTRODUCTION

The research on African Americans is dominated by an interest in concentrated urban poverty. While the state of urban ghettos is clearly a pressing policy and moral issue, the majority of African Americans are not poor, and even a smaller minority actually reside in extremely poor neighborhoods (Jargowsky 1997). The contributions of urban poverty research have been significant, but a monolithic conception of the black community is counterproductive. The absence of the black middle class is a curious oversight when many African Americans remain connected to poor blacks in neighborhoods and institutions (Billingsley 1992; Massey, Condran, and Denton 1989), in families (Higginbotham and Weber 1992; McAdoo 1978), and politically and culturally (Dawson 1994; Hochschild 1995; Kronus 1971; Sampson and Milam 1975). The large and growing black middle class is infrequently the sole object of study. Thus, the purpose of this review article is to synthesize the scattered literature on the black middle class, illustrating the benefits of upward mobility for blacks as well as arenas in which upward mobility does not overcome racial disadvantage. I review the literature on 1) the application of class definitions to African Americans, 2) the demographic make-up of the African American community over time (focusing on the recent growth of the black middle class), and 3) the continuing racial disparities within the middle class in neighborhood quality, occupational status, wealth holdings, and interpersonal interactions.

## CLASS DEFINITIONS

Economists often define class in strict income terms (Danziger and Gottschalk 1995; Duncan, Boisjoly and Smeeding 1996; Duncan, Smeeding and Rodgers 1993; Harrison and Gorham 1992a) whereas sociological conceptions of class include occupation and education along with income (Blau and Duncan 1967; Vanneman and Cannon 1987). Studies of the black middle class in particular have used white-collar employment as the marker of middle class position (Blackwell 1985; Higginbotham and Weber 1992; Kronus 1971; Landry 1987; Oliver and Shapiro 1995; W. J. Wilson 1978; F. H. Wilson 1995). Yet even this definition of middle class is contested.

Wilson (1978) employs a broad definition of the black middle class, including skilled craftsmen and foremen along with professionals, managers, business owners, and clerical and sales workers. This schema, Wilson argues, incorporates groups with the economic means to purchase similar goods (e.g., housing, health care, education) (also see Blackwell 1985; Edwards 1980). Landry (1987) also employs the white-collar/blue-collar distinction to define class strata, where the former includes professionals, managers, small business owners, sales workers, and clerical employees. He divides this heterogeneous group into upper-middle class (the first three) and lower-middle class sub-groups. But Landry adds protective service occupations such as police officers and fire fighters in the collection of middle class jobs. Finally, Oliver and Shapiro (1995) adhere most closely to the white-collar criterion, including neither protective service workers nor skilled craftsmen in their definition of middle class .

However, they examine two other definitions of middle class: those making between $25,000 and $50,000 (in 1987 dollars), and those with a college education. Despite the variety of definitions, all of these studies claim to investigate the middle class.

Cannon (1984) and Vanneman and Cannon (1987) go a step further by studying the class *self-placements* of blacks of various occupations. When compared to whites of the same occupation, blacks are overall less likely than whites to identify as middle class, a finding that may be attributable to the recency of the black middle class, as well as the 'segregated functions' of many black middle class occupations (Collins 1983). Both recency and segregation may work to foster a symbolic alliance between the black working class and black poor. Vanneman and Cannon (1987) find no support for what they term the "middle mass" notion of the black middle class, which includes skilled workers (i.e., Wilson's (1978) configuration). Black skilled manual workers do not see themselves as part of the middle class to the same extent that black white-collar employees do.

Kronus (1971) finds similar results from a much smaller sample of African Americans in Chicago. In Kronus's study, only 20 percent of the black blue-collar workers, compared to 55 percent of the white-collar workers identified themselves as middle class. In addition to self-placements, Kronus also finds significant differences in educational attainment, religious affiliation, amount of inter-racial contact, and political participation and attitudes between black blue-collar and white-collar workers. These findings lead Kronus to use collar-color to distinguish the middle from the working-class, despite the fact that some upper-working-class families might have higher *incomes* than some lower-middle class families. Indeed, a white-collar workers could in theory earn a poverty wage when family size is taken into account, somewhat undermining the strength of this definition. Nevertheless, using the definition of middle class as consisting of white-collar workers, a description of demographic trends illustrates the recency and growth of a substantial black middle class population.

## DEMOGRAPHICS OF THE BLACK CLASS STRUCTURE

The percentage of blacks in middle class occupations did not top 10 percent until 1960, whereas the white middle class constituted more than 20 percent of the total white population as early as 1910 (Landry 1987). Prior to World War II, the black middle class was anchored by professionals and business people who catered to the segregated black community (Drake and Cayton [1945] 1993; Kusmer 1976). This was not the case for whites. Along with professionals and entrepreneurs, the white middle class included a sizeable contingent of (especially female) clerical and sales workers.

After World War II the black class structure began to change. The United States experienced unprecedented economic growth and prosperity after 1950 up until the early 1970s. The coincidence of this growth with the Civil Rights Movement created a large swelling of the black middle class. The black class structure began to resemble the white class structure with greater occupational diversity. Between 1960 and 1970, there was a more than 100 percent increase in the percentage of black women in clerical jobs--from 10 percent to 22 percent of black women (Landry 1987). Black women left private household service in large numbers. In 1940, 58.4 percent of black women were domestics; by 1980 only 6.2 percent were so employed (Cunningham and Zalokar 1992). There were similar shifts for black male workers. Between 1940 and 1970, black male professionals and technical workers went from 1.8 percent to 7 percent of all employed black males. In the same time, black proprietors, managers and officials increased from 1.3 percent to 3 percent, and clerical and sales workers from 2.0 to

10.2 percent of the black male population (W. J. Wilson 1978; for other chartings of occupational changes see Blackwell 1985; Farley 1985; Farley and Allen 1987; Jaynes and Williams 1989; Billingsley 1992).

The black middle class has not since experienced the kind of growth characteristic of this immediate post-war period. Since the economic downturn of the 1970s, the black middle class has slowed in growth, especially for black men (Landry 1987). Between 1980 and 1990, the percentage of blacks in middle class occupations grew from 39.6 percent to 44.9 percent (F. H. Wilson 1995). By 1995, the percentage had grown a bit more to 49.8 percent of all black workers (with another 3 percent in protective services), while 59.8 percent of whites were white-collar workers (Smith and Horton 1997, Table 483). The white middle class contains more upper- than lower-middle class workers whereas the opposite is true for the black middle class. And despite these occupational improvements, the gap in black-white income has not shown signs of narrowing since the mid-1970s. For the younger cohorts, the gap may in fact be increasing (Blau and Beller 1992; Bound and Dresser 1998; Bound and Freeman 1992; Cancio, Evans, and Maume 1996; Corcoran and Parrott 1998; Ferguson 1996; Harrison and Gorham 1992b; Smith and Welch 1989). Thus, the growth of the black middle class since World War II has been impressive when discussed in historical terms. Yet, when viewed from a comparative perspective, blacks continue to lag behind whites. The next section reviews the literature that finds racial disparities in other arenas.

## INEQUALITIES IN THE MIDDLE CLASS

While poverty research garners much research funding and public interest, there are often findings about the black middle class buried within such analyses and discussions. The consensus is that middle class blacks continue to face racial obstacles and have yet to attain parity with whites. Being middle class does not overcome the particular disadvantages of being black.

*The Neighborhood Context*

Sampson and Wilson (1995) show that African Americans of every socio-economic status live in qualitatively different kinds of neighborhoods than their white counterparts. Researchers must settle for mismatched spatial comparisons because of the inability to locate comparable white and black neighborhoods. In a revealing exercise, Sampson and Wilson use census data to locate structurally similar black and white ecological contexts as defined by the percent poor and percent in single-parent families. They find the following:

> In not one city over 100,000 in the United States do blacks live in ecological equality with whites when it comes to these basic features of economic and family organization. Accordingly, racial differences in poverty and family disruption are so strong that *the 'worst' urban contexts in which whites reside are considerably better than the average context of black communities* [emphasis added] (p. 42).

The residential returns to being middle class for blacks are far smaller than for middle class whites. Massey, Condran and Denton (1987) compare similar black and white families in Philadelphia and the kinds of neighborhoods in which they lived. The probability for neighborhood contact with a family on welfare for college-educated blacks was 22 percent, whereas college-educated whites had only an 8 percent chance of such contact. This pattern was repeated for contact with blue-collar workers, high school dropouts, unemployed workers and female-headed families. Reviewing the above study, Massey and Denton (1993: 153) conclude that for blacks, "high incomes do not buy entre to residential circumstances that can serve as springboards for future socioeconomic mobility." Other studies have found similar

disparities (Darden 1987; Erbe 1975; Fainstein and Nesbitt 1996; Farley 1991; Fielding and Taeuber 1992; Landry 1987; Logan, Alba, and Leung 1996; Massey and Denton 1985; Massey and Eggers 1990; Villemez 1980; on surburbanization see Galster 1991; Massey and Denton 1988; Schnore, Andre, and Sharp 1976).

In terms of exposure to crime, the black middle class is again at a disadvantage, even in the suburbs. Similar to the findings of ecological disparities, Alba, Logan and Bellair (1994: 427) find that "even the most affluent blacks are not able to escape from crime, for they reside in communities as crime-prone as those housing the poorest whites." This unique position has an impact on the ability of residents of black middle class neighborhoods to realize common goals and values because of the obstacles in the form of poorer schools, higher crime, and more poverty (Gregory 1992; Pattillo 1998). The spatial immediacy of problems of crime, drugs, and urban decay for the residents of black middle class neighborhoods differentiates them from similar whites (Morenoff and Sampson 1997; Owens 1997).

*Segregated Labor Markets*

The black middle class is disproportionately dependant on public sector employment (Boyd 1994; Burbridge 1994; Collins 1983; Eisinger 1986; Freeman 1976; Grant, Oliver, and James 1996; Steinberg 1995; Waldinger 1996; Zipp 1994). Public sector jobs in the postal services, in education, in social work, in public administration, and in protective services provide a solid income with growth potential that support the black middle class. Government jobs and positions with federal contractors have been the most positively affected by affirmative action policies (Leonard 1984, 1991; Freeman 1976; Smith and Welch 1989). Also the system of government-provided professional and social services that grew after the 1960s has been heavily staffed by black employees. Blacks are clustered in local, state and federal jobs that interface with the black community.

In the private sector as well, black workers and black businesses perform functions that cater to a black clientele (Collins 1983, 1989, 1997). In her study of black executives who advanced in their companies in the aftermath of the civil rights movement, Collins describes even those jobs that are well-paying and fairly high in occupational status as "dead-end jobs" (1989:317). Black workers in management positions are marginalized into racialized positions--interfacing with a predominantly black consumer territory, or monitoring a firm's equal employment hiring compliance. While these advances have fueled the growth of the black middle class, this stratified labor market arrangement also makes middle class black occupations in the private sector particularly sensitive to public opinion regarding affirmative action in the private sector. And in the public sector, job security hinges on support for welfare programs and well-funded social and public services.

*Wealth Disparities*

Another example of the intersection of race and class is in the acquisition of wealth. Presenting evidence on wealth disparities between the white and black middle class, Oliver and Shapiro (1995: 7) narrate "a tale of two middle classes, one white and one black." Overall, blacks have far less wealth than whites. The most startling finding of *Black Wealth/White Wealth* is that for many of the calculations of black wealth the authors come up with zeros. While the black-white income gap for white-collar workers is 0.7--that is, blacks make 70% of what whites earn--the wealth ratio is 0.15. For every $1.00 that white middle class individuals have in wealth, blacks possess only 15 cents. The wealth that blacks do amass is in the form of home or car equity, which is not as easily transferred to the next generation as wealth in the form of financial assets. The absence of a wealth cushion means that in times of crisis the well-being of black

middle class families is more seriously imperiled. Oliver and Shapiro (1995) conclude that wealth is as important an indicator of social outcomes as the traditional measures of income, occupation and education (also see Hurst, Luoh, and Stafford 1998; Jaynes and Williams 1989; Menchik and Jianakoplos 1997).

Inter-generational mobility is also stifled by wealth deficiencies. While early studies found that class background had increased in importance in determining the life changes of African Americans (Featherman and Hauser 1976; Hout 1984), recent investigations of mobility indicate that low-status blacks still have difficulty improving the position of their children, and middle class blacks are less able than similar whites to pass on their somewhat privileged class position. Sixty percent of whites, but only 36 percent of African Americans from upper-white-collar backgrounds are able to maintain their parents' occupational status. Whites are also more likely to improve on their parents' occupational status; 53 percent of whites from lower-white-collar backgrounds move into upper-white-collar jobs, compared to only 29 percent of blacks. Downward mobility is also more prevalent among African Americans (Oliver and Shapiro 1995; also see Davis 1995; Duncan, Smeeding, and Rogers 1993).

*Enduring Racism*

A final indication of the continuing importance of race for middle class African Americans is the discrimination and racism to which they are subjected. Harvard University professor Cornel West was reminded that neither money, nor education, nor prestige negated the fact that he was black. One empty cab after the next passed him as he attempted to get to a photo-session to take pictures for the cover of his book (West 1994; also see Cose 1993; Feagin and Sikes 1994). Measures of income, education and occupation do not capture the irrational instances in which blacks (both poor and middle class) are stifled by their skin color. Furthermore, racism is likely to have an effect on both mental and physical health (Thomas and Hughes 1986; Williams and Collins 1995).

## CONCLUSION

The plight of the black middle class does not compare with the struggles for daily survival of poor black families. This review does not intend to diminish research and policy efforts to improve the economic, social, and political well-being of low income African Americans. To the contrary, a more holistic analytic focus on the black community, including the black middle class, underscores the importance of race for blacks of all classes. The fact that the black middle class has not reached parity with whites and continues to face obstacles to upward mobility in the forms of residential differentials, occupational discrimination, wealth inequalities, and interpersonal racism is proof that race still matters and illustrates the continuing need for race-based policies such as affirmative action.

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