POPULATION CHANGE AND THE EMPLOYMENT STATUS OF COLLEGE EDUCATED BLACKS

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ABSTRACT

A number of recent studies on the status of black Americans have focused upon the increasing gap between the black middle class and the disadvantaged. Framed in the context of the declining significance of race thesis, many sociologists have reported that middle class blacks have reached parity with their white counterparts in terms of lifestyles and life chances. This study challenges that assumption by taking a population approach to the analysis of change in the employment status of the black middle class. Specifically, three questions are addressed: (1) Have college educated blacks gained parity with comparable whites in levels of employment? (2) How have the levels of employment for college educated blacks changed over time? and (3) Are demographic and socioeconomic variables more important than race in explaining the patterns of black-white employment? The

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results of the logit analysis reveal that net of demographic and socioeconomic variables, blacks have lower levels of employment than whites. Moreover, the race effect increased in magnitude over the 1980-1990 decade. An analysis of interaction effects showed that college educated blacks did improve in the likelihood of being employed over the decade, but so did college educated whites. However, despite this improvement for blacks, parity with whites did not occur. The paper concludes with a discussion of the theoretical implications of the results.

The historical and social significance of the black middle class has been well recognized in research on racial inequality (Morris 1984). DuBois (1899) documented the system of class stratification within the black community in his classic work, *The Philadelphia Negro*. He maintained that the black middle class had the potential, if not moral obligation, to uplift the black population as a whole via its leadership (1903). Others have criticized the black middle class for its failure to provide leadership (Woodson 1933) or its preoccupation with assimilation (Frazier 1957; Cruse 1967). However, in contemporary sociological research the major focus has been placed on the social and economic gains of the black middle class as a consequence of the Civil Rights Movement (Wilson 1980; Hout 1984; Farley 1984). To date, black middle class gains have yet to be placed in the context of the joint effects of changes in population size, population composition and the structure of the American economy (Lieberson 1980). Most analyses which attempt to link the socioeconomic status of blacks to the transformation of the American economy have focused on the black disadvantaged (Wilson 1987, 1991). As a result, most researchers implicitly assume that the future for the black middle class lies in eventual social and economic parity with whites (O'Hare et al. 1991). To the contrary, the black middle class is vulnerable to economic downturns as well as increased discrimination as employment opportunities for middle class whites become more scarce (Lieberson 1980; Gans 1988; Feagin 1991). Accordingly, the purpose of this paper is to assess the extent to which the level of employment has changed for the black middle class over the 1980-1990 decade. The following research questions are addressed: (1) Have college educated blacks gained parity with comparable whites in levels of employment? (2) How have the levels

of employment for college educated blacks changed over time? (3) Are demographic and socioeconomic variables more important than race in explaining the patterns of black-white employment?

The Sociology of the Black Middle Class

The black middle class has its origins in the old mulatto elite that emerged during the antebellum era (Spickard 1989). Membership in this group was based upon subjective status (light skin) rather than objective class indicators (Franklin and Moss 1988; Childs 1989). This group eventually gave way to a bonafide middle class based upon achieved characteristics and consisting of darker-skinned blacks (Landry 1984).

Historically, members of the black middle class have been marginalized and precluded from experiencing the full benefits of their relatively privileged positions (Blau and Duncan 1967; Duncan 1968; Franklin and Moss 1988). As Landry (1984) noted:

> The severe restrictions faced by black professionals—lack of opportunities for acquiring a professional education, an impoverished black community, prejudices among educated blacks, racial and exclusionary norms—resulted in a slow and uneven growth in the number and types of black professionals between 1915 and 1960 (p. 52).

It is this group that Frazier (1957) severely criticized for being preoccupied with creating a black middle class fantasy world based upon mimicking the white aristocracy. Similarly, Cruse (1967, 1987) criticized the black middle class for abdicating its leadership role in the black community and the failure to establish autonomous black institutions. Blackwell (1991) likewise noted the in-fighting among prominent black leaders for legitimation by the white power structure.

Despite its shortcomings, the black middle class has played a pivotal role in advancing the cause of the entire black population and disadvantaged minorities as a whole (Franklin and Moss 1988; Horton 1992). Morris (1984) noted that the black middle class of the South, specifically black ministers, provided the leadership during the Civil Rights Movement. In fact, their leadership was indispensable because the white power structure of the South had virtually eliminated the NAACP as a force in that region (Morris 1984).

In a significant advance of the debate on the role of the black middle class, Butler (1991) introduced the concept of the "truncated middleman." Documenting the diversity within the black middle class in his analysis, Butler (1991) noted:

> The major implication is that, among this group today (those who have attained a degree of economic security), we really have two groups which trace their success to different patterns of adjustment to America by their foreparents. Because of this, the two groups continue to adjust to racism and discrimination in similar but significantly different ways. Thus it is a theoretical and methodological mistake to lump all Afro-Americans into one group called the "middle class" (p. 234).

Butler (1991) identifies the two groups as: (1) *the truncated Afro-American middleman*; and (2) *the Afro-American new middle class*. The former is distinguished by a tradition of self-help and entrepreneurship within the black community. The latter adjusted to racial oppression in the form similar to the assimilation patterns of other racial and ethnic groups. According to Butler (1991) there is a distinct difference betweens the two groups in terms of economic stability, intergenerational mobility, and the support of black community institutions.

However, much of the contemporary debate in the area of racial inequality centers on whether and to what extent that conditions for middle class blacks have changed. Wilson (1980) wrote:

> However, in the economic sphere, class has become more important than race in determining black access to privilege and power. It is clearly evident in this connection that many talented and educated blacks are now entering positions of prestige and influence at a rate comparable to or, in some situations, exceeding that of whites with equivalent qualifications (p. 2).

While there is general agreement that opportunities for blacks have increased (Hout 1984), many sociologists refute the claim that class has superseded race as the determinant of the lifestyles and life chances for black Americans (Killian 1990; Kluegal 1990; Feagin 1991). Horton (1992) found that middle class blacks were less likely than comparable whites to be homeowners. Horton and Burgess (1992) found that race superseded class in determining levels of black male marriageability. Thomas and Horton (1992) reported that middle class blacks had not achieved parity with middle class whites in terms of family income.

Whereas this debate is far from being resolved, one point is irrefutable: the black middle class continues to be a standard by which the level of racial inequality in American society is assessed (Landry 1984; Farley and Allen 1987).

Population Change in the Context of Structural Inequality

One perspective on racial inequality that transcends the race/class debate is the *population and structural change thesis* (Horton and Burgess 1992). According to this perspective, racial inequality is a function of the interaction of changes in the minority population and the economic/occupational structure. This approach provides linkage between the changes in the size and composition of the black population and the structural changes in the economy that impact upon the overall opportunity structure (Horton and Burgess 1992). Population and structural change was alluded to by Wilson (1987) when he placed the social dislocation of black workers in the context of the structural transformation of the American economy. However, Wilson focused on black blue collar workers and the disadvantaged (Wilson 1987, 1991). Similarly, Lichter (1988, 1991) alludes to this approach in his study of black underemployment and black female marriage markets. However, this study represents the first formal articulation of the population and structural change thesis.

Hence, according to this approach, the black middle class should experience increasing disadvantage in the labor market as the size of this population segment increases. Moreover, that disadvantage will be exacerbated in periods of economic restructuring and/or downturns. As opportunities for white middle class workers decline, the competition between blacks and whites at that level should increase proportionately.

History provides considerable support for the population and structural change thesis (Franklin and Moss 1988). Racial discrimination and oppression, the Black Codes, and Jim Crow were all mechanisms to eliminate blacks from competition with whites in the labor force (Wilson 1980; Landry 1984; Franklin and Moss 1988). Lieberson (1980) documented that the increase in the size of the black population and its perceived economic threat to white workers resulted in the institutionalization of racial discrimination in the labor force in the North. Similarly, the resurgence of blatant forms of racism and anti-minority sentiments on the part of middle class whites

provides additional support for this view (Gans 1988; Kluegal 1990; Feagin 1991; Hacker 1992; Terkel 1992).

The 1980s provide an excellent test of the thesis because it was a period of unprecedented economic restructuring and white displacement during the post Civil Rights Era (Bluestone and Harrison 1982; Ackoff et al. 1984). Likewise, the 1980s was a period in which there were significant occupational gains for blacks (O'Hare 1991). Thus, in accordance with the population and structural change thesis, black middle class labor force participants are expected to experience an increase in discrimination. One manifestation of this discrimination would be lower levels of employment than that experienced by middle class whites. Therefore, one major contribution of this study will be to test this thesis in the context of those blacks who have presumably the highest levels of human capital: college educated blacks.

The population and structural change thesis also has some bearing on the employment status of black females. Black females are expected to have experienced significant labor force displacement as white females increased their numbers in the labor force and experienced substantial occupational mobility in the face of the economic restructuring of the 1980s.

Similarly, blacks of every age cohort are expected to have lower levels of employment status—irrespective of social class. Moreover, the employment gap is expected to be greatest at the young adult cohort level. These are persons who have relatively little human capital (i.e., work experience). Therefore ascriptive characteristics (race, family background, and network of friends and acquaintances) are more likely to have an effect on the likelihood of being employed. Placed in the context of the declining employment opportunities for all age cohorts, black young adults are expected to be the most disadvantaged of all labor force participants.

Statement of Hypotheses

Hypothesis 1. There will be an increase in the magnitude of the effect of race on employment status from 1980 to 1990.

Hypothesis 2. The employment status of college educated blacks will be lower than that for college educated whites in both 1980 and 1990.

Hypothesis 3. The employment status of black females will decline relative to white females between 1980 and 1990.

Hypothesis 4. Young adult blacks will have significantly lower levels of employment than their white counterparts in both 1980 and 1990.

DATA AND METHODS

There are two sources of data for this study. The first is the 1 in 1000 Public Use Microdata Sample (PUMS) of the U.S. Bureau of the Census. The second source is the 1990 Current Population Survey. The study includes only black and nonHispanic white labor force participants between the ages of 25-54. The 1980 sample size is 99,324 (10,567 blacks, 88,757 whites) and the 1990 N is 75,405 (6,771 blacks and 68,634 whites).

Multiplicative logit models are employed as the multivariate method of analysis. This method is appropriate because the variables of the analysis are categorical in nature.

Operationalization of the Variables

Employment Status. This is the dependent variable of the analysis, coded as 1 for employed and 2, if unemployed.

Race. A dichotomy with black and white coded 1 and 2 respectively.

Age. This variable is coded as a trichotomy with the categories 25-34, 35-44 and 45-54 in that order.

Sex. Male is coded as 0 and female is coded as 1.

Education. Persons with 4 or more years of college were placed in category 1. All others received a code of 2.

Occupation. There are two categories for this variable, white collar and blue collar. The first was created by combining managerial and professional specialty with technical, sales and administrative support occupations. The second was the result of combining: (1) service occupations; (2) precision production, craft and repair areas;

and (3) operators, fabricators and laborers. Farming, forestry and fishing occupations were excluded from this analysis.

Sector. Two codes were used for this variable representing public and nonpublic categories.

Region. This variable has two codes, 1 being South and 2 non-South.

RESULTS

Table 1 presents the descriptive analysis of employment status by race for 1980 and 1990. These data show that blacks do not equal whites in levels of employment. This relationship holds across demographic and social categories as well as time. However, the one area where blacks are near parity is within the college-educated category. In 1990, there is only a -.6 percent difference between blacks and whites. This represents an improvement over the 1980 gap which was -2.0 percent.

Age and sex differences provide some mixed results. The black-white gap in employment status widened at the 25-34 category and declined for the 45-54 age group. The 35-44 area was virtually unchanged over the two points in time. Similarly, there was a 1.2 percent decline in the gap for black and white males but the gap for females remained essentially unchanged.

Table two presents the logit analysis of employment status for 1980 and 1990. These results show that even in the face of an array of social and demographic controls, race is a major determinant of employment status. Also, the effect of race increased in magnitude from 1980 to 1990. The odds for blacks in 1980 was .87 to 1 while the value for blacks was 1.15 to 1. The 1990 odds for blacks and whites were .67 to 1 and 1.49 to 1, respectively. Thus for blacks, the likelihood of being employed was less than that for whites and the discrepancy increased over the decade. This finding supports hypothesis number one which argued that race would increase in its effect on employment status over the decade. It is likewise important to note that this finding is at odds with the declining significance of race argument. However, it is supportive of the population and structural change thesis.

The relative odds for the interaction effects are presented in table three. The interaction of race, education and employment status

Table 1. Employment Levels in the United States by Race, 1980 and 1990

	1980			*1990*		
	Black	*White*	*% Pt. diff*	*Black*	*White*	*% Pt. diff.*
Total	87.6	94.1	-6.5	90.3	95.9	-5.6
Age:						
25-34	88.9	94.6	-5.7	89.4	96.0	-6.6
35-44	92.8	96.0	-3.2	93.7	97.0	-3.3
45-54	92.1	96.2	-4.1	95.3	97.7	-2.4
Sex:						
Male	86.7	94.1	-7.4	89.6	95.8	-6.2
Female	88.5	94.2	-5.7	90.9	95.9	-5.0
Education:						
College	95.6	97.6	-2.0	98.0	98.6	-.6
No College	86.6	93.3	-6.7	90.0	95.6	-5.6
Occupation:						
White Collar	93.9	97.0	-3.1	94.3	97.5	-3.2
Blue Collar	83.8	90.7	-6.9	87.5	93.6	-6.1
Sector:						
Public	92.9	97.1	-4.2	96.9	98.4	-1.5
Nonpublic	88.3	94.2	-5.9	89.9	95.6	-5.7
Region:						
South	93.2	96.7	-3.5	91.0	96.1	-5.1
Nonsouth	85.6	93.6	-8.0	89.5	95.8	-6.3
N	10,567	88,757		6,771	68,634	

Table 2. Logit Analysis of Employment Status, 1980 and 1990

Independent Variables	*1980*	*1990*
Race:		
Black	.87***	.67***
White	1.15***	1.49***
Age:		
25-34	.76***	.79***
35-44	1.12***	.99
45-54	1.17***	1.28***
Sex:		
Male	1.03	1.11***
Female	.97	.90***
Education:		
College	1.26***	1.21**
No College	.80***	.82**
Occupation:		
White Collar	1.60***	1.41***
Blue Collar	.63***	.71***
Sector:		
Public	1.35***	1.56***
Not Public	.74***	.64***
Region:		
South	1.33***	1.08**
Not South	.75***	.92**
Constant	31.73***	35.45***
G^2/df	1.32	.95

Notes: * $p < .05$
** $p < .01$
*** $p < .001$

reveals that college educated blacks improved in the likelihood of being employed over the two time periods. In 1980 the odds for blacks were 1.00 to 1. In other words, college educated blacks had an even chance of being employed. But, by 1990, the odds had improved to 1.26 to 1. College educated blacks were more likely than not to be employed in the later year. On the surface, this appears to provide support for the declining significance of race thesis. However, a different picture emerges when one compares the black relative odds to those for college educated whites. In neither 1980 nor 1990 do blacks achieve parity with whites in employment status (1.64 in 1980 and 1.96 in 1990 for whites). In fact, the differences in the magnitudes of the relative odds for the two groups remained unchanged. This is because college educated whites experienced a gain in employment status that was comparable to that for blacks. The net result is that

Table 3. Relative Odds for the Logit Interactions of Race with Age, Sex and Education: 1980 and 1990

	Black		*White*	
	1980	*1990*	*1980*	*1990*
Age:				
25-24	.54	.50	.89	.78
35-44	.94	.87	1.55	1.36
45-54	.93	1.17	1.52	1.82
Sex:				
Male	.73	.83	1.20	1.30
Female	.83	.78	1.36	1.22
Education:				
College	1.00	1.26	1.64	1.96
No College	.61	.51	1.00	.79

college educated blacks are no better off in 1990 than in 1980 when compared to their white counterparts. These findings support the second hypothesis and clearly demonstrate that race is not declining in significance.

The race-sex interaction with employment status is a direct test of the third hypothesis. Black females were expected to have lower levels of employment status than their white counterparts in 1980 and 1990. These results support that hypothesis. In fact, black women lost ground over the period. The 1980 and 1990 odds for black females were .83 to 1 and .78 to 1 respectively. In both years, black women are less likely than not to be employed. The opposite is true for white females. Their 1980 and 1990 odds are 1.36 and 1.22 in that order. In fact, it is clear that black women are more similar to black men in employment status than to white women.

Finally, an examination of the race-age interaction shows that the effects of race supersedes that of cohort. As predicted by hypothesis four, blacks in the youngest age cohort had lower levels of employment status than their white counterparts. However, following the 1980 cohorts for both races demonstrate the extent of the race effect. This cohort has an odds of .54 to 1 in 1980. Ten years later, the odds is .87 to 1. Hence, in both years blacks in this cohort are less likely than not to be employed. This is not the case with whites. In 1980 this cohort has an odds of .89 to 1. In short, whites at this age are less likely to be employed. But by 1990, the odds have reversed (1.55 to 1). In fact, these whites have the highest odds for any cohort. This dramatic difference in the likelihood of being employed demonstrates the impact of race for blacks and whites who are comparable on every other socioeconomic dimension. According to the declining significance of race thesis, the experiences of this group should have been similar. Once again, this argument fails to be consistent with the social reality that blacks face in America. Conversely, these findings are quite consistent with the population and structural change thesis.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study was to examine the relationship between changes in the employment status of middle class blacks between 1980 and 1990. Specifically, three questions were addressed: (1) Have

college educated blacks gained parity with comparable whites in levels of employment? (2) How have the levels of employment changed over time? and (3) Are demographic and socioeconomic variables more important than race in explaining patterns of black-white employment?

The results of the logit analysis revealed that, contrary to the prevailing wisdom, race *increased* rather than *decreased* in its effect on employment status. The magnitude in the difference between blacks and whites was greater in 1990 than it was in 1980. College educated blacks experienced some *absolute* gains in employment status over the decade. However, in *relative* terms, they were no better off in 1990 than in 1980 because of the substantial gains for white middle class labor force participants.

In addition, black women lost ground when compared to white females. In both years they were less likely than white females to be employed. Similarly, the race effect was manifest when comparing black and white age cohorts. This is particularly the case for the cohort in the young adult category where by 1990 the black and white employment statuses had dramatically diverged.

Theoretically, these findings bring into question the validity of the declining significance of race thesis. This argument is based upon an absolute change in the lifestyles and life chances of blacks. However, if race is in fact declining, then there should be some evidence of relative change. The improvement in employment status that has been experienced by middle class blacks has been matched by middle class whites. Hence, black middle class labor force participants have merely held their own over the decade. This is particularly important given the white backlash that was witnessed during the decade of the 1980s (Franklin 1991).

These findings do support the population and structural change thesis. To reiterate, the perspective holds that there is an interaction between changes in the minority population and the overall opportunity structure. An increase in the size of the black middle class resulted an increase in the competition between blacks and whites for white collar jobs in a period of economic decline. The net result is an increase in the effects of race in determining employment. This effect is so strong that the employment status of black females are dramatically different from white females and brings into question attempts to link the socioeconomic conditions of the two groups (Collins 1991). Blacks in the youngest cohorts experience

significant disadvantage relative to similar whites in terms of employment opportunities. Duncan (1968) argued that in the face of multivariate controls, the residual race effect was a direct measure of racial discrimination. It is ironic that after more than two decades, these findings lead to a similar conclusion.

In summary, these results suggest that without fundamental change in the economy, the gap between black and white middle class labor force participants is likely to increase. The black population is growing at twice the rate of the white population (O'Hare et al. 1991). Other minority populations are growing at faster rates (O'Hare et al. 1991). As whites increasingly, and perhaps correctly, perceive that their economic opportunities are dwindling, racial tensions are likely to be exacerbated. Thus, whether the black middle class substantially grows in absolute terms is immaterial. They will more likely be victims of anti-black sentiments that even white middle class liberals openly espouse (Hacker 1992; Terkel 1992). These trends appear to foretell a dramatic decline in the state of race relations and an increase in the level of racial inequality in American society.

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FACTORS INFLUENCING THE RETENTION OF BLACK FACULTY ON PREDOMINANTLY WHITE CAMPUSES

Joan Krenzin

ABSTRACT

Problems of retention of black faculty on predominantly white campuses of comparitively small universities were examined by interviewing all of the 15 black professors in one border-state institution. Social distance (explained by conformity, a means of resolving cognitive dissonance, and insecurity) and sponsored mobility were examined as theoretical foundations. Agreement was found with past research on failure of tenure and rank to match years of service, the loneliness of minority status, expenditure of an inordinate amount of time on campus racial issues, and exploitation as token black on committees and task forces. The lack of administrative support and poor rapport with colleagues, found in previous studies, were not found here. Additional concerns on this campus, possibly relating to the size of the city, centered on the lack of social life and the lack of black experiences for children.

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