

The Controversy over Race and Class

◆ Since at least the 1960s, the federal government has attempted to improve the economic and social status of blacks with legislation and policies to enhance and protect blacks' employment, voting, and housing rights. One result of government legislation, particularly laws designed to eradicate employment discrimination, was to allow significant numbers of skilled and college-educated blacks to enter the middle class through higher-paying professional and managerial jobs. Thus, blacks whose training and education positioned them to take advantage of federally mandated hiring practices began to compete in mainstream avenues to economic success and well-being (Farley 1984; Freeman 1976a). However, despite government intervention, the social and economic problems of many already disadvantaged blacks multiplied dramatically during the same period (Jaynes and Williams 1989).

Stark contrasts between the socioeconomic progress of contemporary blacks in the middle class and deteriorating conditions in the ghetto raise questions about what influences economic opportunities for black Americans. Researchers ask whether a new system of stratification in the labor market is evolving that responds to attributes associated more with class than with race. Here I take a different path to exploring the relationship between class and race by examining the role of political pressure and the careers of blacks in white corporate management.

I concentrate on relatively privileged blacks because my analysis of labor market trends since the 1960s demonstrates that characteristics associated with black advancement differ from those high-

lighted in existing research using aggregate data. In light of this analysis, I evaluate other research perspectives that perceive class, education, and skills, not race, as the deciding factors in the black experience. I also examine what those research perspectives imply for public policy.

The labor market analysis underpins an alternative paradigm that becomes the basis for interpreting the research presented here. In this paradigm, the middle class that sprang up among blacks benefiting from the civil rights movement is viewed as a politically mediated class, in this case, a class dependent on collective black protest, the growth of federal social programs and expenditures, and governmental antibias policy and intervention. Occupational gains made within the black middle class since the 1960s are fragile. Since the 1980s, these gains have been threatened as much by political changes in the African American community and by changes in federal policy as by macroeconomic trends.

Living the American Dream

Federal legislation to protect black citizenship rights, such as the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Voting Rights Act of 1965, and Title VIII in the Civil Rights Act of 1968 (on housing), raised hopes that exclusionary systems that targeted blacks would erode. During the 1960s these hopes began to be realized in the labor market as employment practices changed and blacks' pattern of little or no occupational progress relative to whites finally altered. Before the 1960s, blacks' rate of entry into higher-paying occupations and white-collar jobs lagged far behind whites' and showed minimal progress. Except for periods of severe labor shortage during the two world wars, blacks' economic standing was severely limited by racial prejudice and may have even deteriorated during the Great Depression (Freeman 1976; Newman et al. 1978). Employment discrimination in the South restricted blacks primarily to field jobs in agriculture and to subservient positions, such as maids and cooks in private

households. Even in the North, blacks were cast as inferior workers, excluded from lucrative industries and establishments and from jobs white workers found attractive. However, the enactment of modern civil rights legislation, in particular the Civil Rights Act of 1964, signaled a dramatic shift in blacks' ability to compete in the marketplace. Data for the 1960s and 1970s show marked increases in black-white male earning ratios (Smith and Welch 1977, 1978a; 1978b) and in the proportions of blacks in the professions (Freeman 1976a, 1976b, 1981). Moreover, occupational distributions for employed black men began to approximate those for employed white men (Farley 1977; Featherman and Hauser 1976; Hauser and Featherman 1974).

Advances in the African American Middle Class

Both E. Franklin Frazier (1957) and William Wilson (1978) define the black middle class in economic terms: blacks employed in white-collar, craftsmen, and foremen positions. By this definition, during the period of federal civil rights activity and the expansion of domestic assistance programs, blacks moved steadily into the U.S. middle class, joining the economic mainstream.

Between 1960 and 1980, blacks entered white-collar jobs at a rate much faster than did whites. The proportion of blacks in white-collar jobs increased 80 percent between 1960 and 1970, and 44 percent more between 1970 and 1979 (Figures 1 and 2). Overall, blacks more than doubled their proportion in white-collar jobs. By 1980, the proportion of blacks in white-collar jobs had increased a total of 124 percent, compared to only 25 percent for whites. At the other end of the occupational pyramid, the proportion of blacks in blue-collar jobs remained relatively constant, while the proportions in service and farm jobs declined sharply.

Blacks' upward mobility looked vastly different for men and women. African American women shifted from domestic and personal-service jobs into clerical and sales positions, but black men

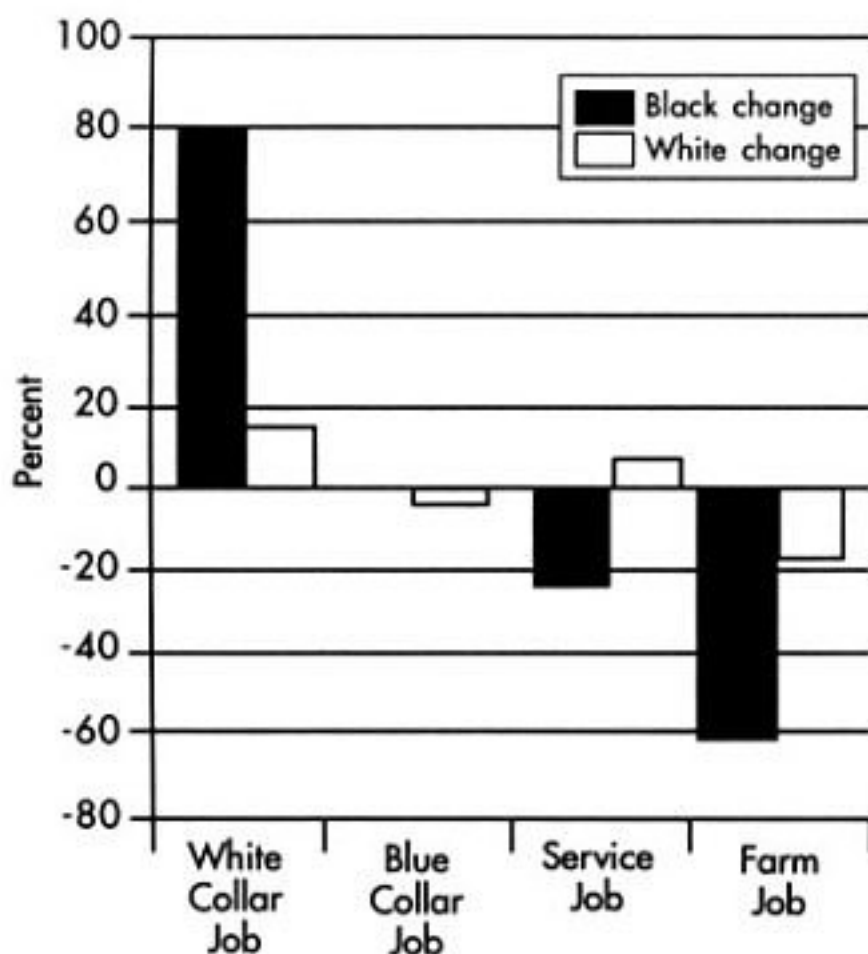


Figure 1. Changes in Employment by Race: 1960–1970

moved into professional jobs, including management and business-oriented professions such as accounting and law, for the first time in U.S. history. Thus, during the decades in which black initiatives set precedent for public policy, the occupational gap between skilled and highly educated black and white men began to shrink, although disparities remained (Featherman and Hauser 1976; Freeman 1976a; Smith and Welch 1977).

In 1960, only 5 percent of employed black men worked in better-paying white-collar occupations; by 1979, 11 percent did. Between 1960 and 1979, the proportion of black men in professional, technical, and managerial fields more than doubled. In contrast, the proportion of white men in the same fields increased only 18 percent (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1979, 1980). Although the economic