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Positive Effects of the Multiple Negative: Explaining the Success of Black Professional Women¹

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Despite American society's myth and credo of equality and open mobility, the decision-making elites and elite professions have long remained clublike sanctuaries for those of like kind (Goode 1957; Merton, Reader, and Kendall 1957; Hughes 1962; Hall 1948; Epstein 1970*b*, p. 968).

To be Jewish, black, foreign born, or a woman have all been bases for exclusion from law, medicine, engineering, science, the supergrades of the civil service, architecture, banking, and even journalism. Only a few in the professions find that good can come from being born of the wrong sex, race, religion, or ethnic group. This is a report on a set of these deviants who possess at least two—and often more—statuses deemed to be “wrong.” It attempts to analyze why they nevertheless were successful in the occupational world.

In the exchange system of American society, women's sex status and blacks' racial status have typically cost them prestigious and remunerative jobs because society did not evaluate them as being high in either capacity or potential. Those who did succeed had to be brighter, more talented, and more specialized than white males in a comparable labor pool, whom the society ranked higher. Thus, they paid more for the same benefits (or “goods”), if they were permitted to acquire them at all.

Where categories of persons have more than one of these negative statuses, there often tends to be a cumulative negative effect. The costs of having several negatively evaluated statuses are very high and lead to social bankruptcy when people simply cannot muster the resources to pay them. This effect has been elsewhere conceptualized as “cumulative disadvantage” and has explained the poor representation of blacks (among others) in skilled occupations. Black women, for example, because of their

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two negatively evaluated statuses, are situated at the very bottom of the occupational pyramid.

Indeed, the status set which includes being black and being a woman has been one of the most cumulatively limiting.

These ascribed sex (female) and race (black) statuses are dominant;² they are visible and immutable and impose severe limits on individuals' capacities to alter the dimensions of their world and the attitudes of others toward them. In the elite professions, blacks and women have been considered inappropriate and undervalued, and as a result they have constituted only a tiny proportion of the prestigious professionals.³ Not only have they been prevented from working in the elite professions, but the few who do manage to become professionals tend to work in the less remunerative and prestigious subfields (Epstein 1970c, p. 163).

Women typically have jobs which rank lower than men at every class level, and, contrary to some current misconceptions about the existence of a black matriarchy, black women are most typically at the very bottom of the occupational pyramid. They earn less than white women who, in turn, make less than men, white or black.⁴ This economic distribution is constant for every category of worker, including professionals, with the sole exception of domestic workers. Although black women earn less, they are also much more apt to work than white women of the same age and education (Bureau of the Census, *Current Population Reports*, P-60, no. 75 [1970], table 50, p. 113).⁵

Yet there are black women who have achieved success in the popular definition of the term, becoming professionals of high prestige and acquiring high incomes as well. For them the effect of status sets with two immutable negatively evaluated statuses—the sex status of female and the race status of black—did not result in negative consequences but formed a positive matrix for a meaningful career.

² According to Robert K. Merton, statuses are dominant when they determine the other statuses one is likely to acquire (see Epstein 1970c, p. 92). Part of this analysis (as that in my earlier work [1970b, 1970c]) draws on Robert K. Merton's conceptualization of the dynamics of status sets, part of which is found in *Social Theory and Social Structure* (1957, pp. 368–84), and much of which has been presented in lectures at Columbia University and is as yet unpublished (see footnotes in Epstein 1970b, p. 966).

³ In 1960, blacks constituted 1.3% of all lawyers, and the proportion of women in law was 3.4%.

⁴ Median earnings of full-time, year-round workers were reported as follows for 1967: Negro women—\$3,194; white women—\$4,279; Negro men—\$4,777; white men—\$7,396 (U.S. Bureau of Census, *Current Population Reports*, ser. P-60, no. 60, table 7, p. 39). Although figures went up in 1970 the relationship remained the same (U.S. Bureau of Census, *Current Population Reports*, ser. P-60, no. 75, table 45, pp. 97–98).

⁵ In 1968, 49% of Negro women were in the work force compared with 40% of white women (Brimmer 1971, p. 550).

This paper is based on interviews with a sample of 31 such women who achieved occupational success in the prestigious male-dominated professions and occupations of law, medicine, dentistry, university teaching, journalism, and public relations.⁶

Studying these successful black professional women we located three major patterns resulting from the interaction between statuses which accounted for their success. They may be outlined as follows:

1. Focusing on one of the negatively valued statuses canceled the negative effect of the other. (That is, raised its "worth." For example, in a white professional milieu, a black woman is viewed as lacking the "womanly" occupational deficiencies of white women—for example, seeking a husband—and the black woman's sex status is given a higher evaluation.)

2. Two statuses in combination create a new status (for example, the hyphenated status of black-woman-lawyer) which may have no established "price" because it is unique. In this situation, the person has a better bargaining position in setting his or her own worth. This pattern may also place the person in the role of a "stranger," outside the normal exchange system and able to exact a higher than usual price.

3. Because the "stranger" is outside the normal opportunity structure, he or she can choose (or may be forced to choose) an alternate life-style. This choice was made by many black women forced to enter the occupational world because of economic need, and, in turn, it created selective barriers which insulated the women from diversions from occupational success and from ghetto culture, thus strengthening ambition and motivation.

In the sections which follow, we will locate black professional women among other professionals to demonstrate their very special position in the social structure and further illustrate the process by which they were able to "make it" in American society.

BLACK WOMEN IN THE PROFESSIONS

Like the pattern for whites over 25, black women currently in the labor force have had more median years of schooling than black men, and more of them have been high school graduates. Furthermore, although black men in college now exceed black women, more black women over 25 are college graduates than are men in this age group (U.S. Department of Commerce,

⁶ Because no lists exist of black women in any of these professions, there was no way to systematically sample the universe of black women professionals. Instead, respondents were obtained by referral from friends and colleagues. Because of the extremely small absolute number of black women in these fields, and because the study was limited to the New York area, a great deal of time was spent simply trying to find subjects.

Statistical Abstract 1968 [1968], table 156, p. 110; *Statistical Abstract 1970* [1970], table 157, p. 109; data derived from the *U.S. Census of the Population: 1960*, vol. 1, and *Current Population Reports*, ser. P-20, nos. 169, 194). Their educational advantage accounts partly for their greater access to professional jobs, and a significantly higher proportion of black women than men hold professional jobs—60% of the total numbers of blacks holding such jobs—as reported by the 1960 census (Bureau of the Census, *1960 Subject Reports. Occupational Characteristics*, PC(2) and 7A, table 3, p. 21). Of all employed black women, 7% were professionals, in contrast to 3% of all employed black men (Ginzberg and Hiestand 1966, p. 210).

Like all American college women, black women are often steered into teaching and nursing careers. Black college women generally have taken B.A. degrees in education⁷ and found employment in the segregated school systems of the South (Ginzberg and Hiestand 1966, p. 216). Although the census has always counted teachers as professionals, teaching has always ranked low in occupational prestige,⁸ and black men, like white men, did not enter teaching in any numbers.⁹

There are no census figures on the total number of graduate and professional degrees earned by black men and women,¹⁰ and seemingly contra-

⁷ In predominantly Negro colleges and universities, for the years 1963–64, the proportion of women students majoring in elementary education was 24.4% as compared with 6.4% of the men (McGrath 1965, p. 80). The field of education alone accounted for 38% of all bachelor's degrees earned by women in 1967. Education also accounted for 51% of the master's and 29% of the doctor's degrees earned by women in 1967 (*Handbook of Women Workers 1969*, pp. 192–93); 53.5% of black women in the "Professional, Technical & Kindred Workers" category in the U.S. census were elementary (43.1%) and secondary (10.4%) school teachers (Ginsberg and Hiestand 1966, p. 215).

⁸ Teaching ranked thirty-sixth in the NORC study of occupational prestige in 1947 and rose to twenty-sixth place in 1963, still placing it far below medicine, law, banking, college teaching, etc.

⁹ Black men have gone into teaching to a somewhat greater degree than white men but not nearly to the extent of the women. Of professional men, 11.9% were elementary school teachers and 13.1% were secondary school teachers; the absolute numbers being considerably smaller as well, as the table below indicates:

PERCENTAGE OF NEGRO PROFESSIONAL, TECHNICAL AND KINDRED CENSUS CATEGORY WHO WERE TEACHERS, BY SEX, 1960

TEACHERS	MEN		WOMEN	
	Number	%	Number	%
Elementary	13,451	11.9	75,695	43.1
Secondary	14,823	13.1	18,194	10.4

SOURCE.—Ginsberg and Hiestand 1966, pp. 210, 215.

¹⁰ Statistics on doctorate production of blacks can only be based on the number of graduate degrees produced by the predominantly black colleges and by estimates of

dictory figures appear in the sources available. A study of Negro colleges—where the majority of blacks have earned their graduate degrees (Blake 1971, p. 746)—shows that black women earned 60% of the graduate and professional degrees awarded in 1964–65 (United Negro College Fund 1964–65, appendix I). However, a Ford Foundation study (1970) of all black Ph.D. holders in 1967–68 (p. 3) indicated that of a 50% sample of the total, only 21% were women. Another source covering black colleges for the same period as the UNCF report (1964) lists more women than men earning M.A.'s (799 as compared with 651; probably a majority were education degrees) but more men than women earning Ph.D.'s (five men and two women) (Ploski 1967, p. 527).¹¹

If one compares the proportion of black women with black men in those professions higher in prestige than teaching, we find a more traditional picture. More black men than women are editors, doctors, lawyers, scientists, and college teachers (Bureau of the Census, 1960 *Subject Reports. Occupational Characteristics*, PC (2)-7A, table 3, p. 21). Furthermore, they consistently have higher median incomes than do the women in these professions (Bureau of the Census, 1960 *Subject Reports. Occupational Characteristics*, PC (2)-7A, table 25, p. 296; table 26, p. 316).¹²

But relative to their male colleagues, black career women have done better than their white sisters; they constitute a larger proportion of the black professional community than women in the white professional world. Only 7% of white physicians are women, but 9.6% of black doctors are women; black women make up 8% of black lawyers but white women constitute only 3% of all white lawyers. Black women approach real equality with black men in the social sciences—they are 34% of all blacks in the profession—although the absolute numbers are small (data derived from same Bureau of the Census 1960 as indicated above).

In most professional groups, black women constitute a larger proportion of women than black men do among males in these groups (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1960 *Subject Reports. Occupational Characteristics*, PC (2)-

the number of blacks in the integrated colleges. Statistics are unavailable because of fair educational practices laws. The absolute number of black doctorates ever held is small, estimated by Horace Mann Bond (1966) at 2,485 (comprising those awarded 1866–1962) (Ginsberg and Hiestand 1966, p. 564). The Ford Foundation study cited herein found 2,280 current holders of Ph.D. degrees in 1967–68.

¹¹ Although the Ford study included education doctorates, we suppose that the high figure for women graduates in black institutions is probably due to the high proportion of education doctorates awarded by Negro institutions when compared with the range of doctorates awarded by white institutions. This is probably due to perennial fiscal problems and inability to fund programs in the hard sciences until quite recently.

¹² If one uses nonwhite categories (which, for the general population, is 92% black) to get figures for blacks in the professions, a misleading impression will result. Certain professions (see n. 15) have almost equal numbers of blacks and other nonwhites, such as Chinese, Japanese, etc.

7A, table 3, p. 21). In terms of earnings they are also far more equal to white women than black men are to white men. In fact, black women accountants, musicians, professional nurses, and social workers exceeded their white female colleagues in earnings, according to the 1960 census (U.S. Bureau of the Census, *1960 Subject Reports. Occupational Characteristics*, PC (2)-7A, table 25, p. 296; table 26, p. 316).

However, one cannot ignore the fact that for all professions the absolute numbers of blacks are small, and the numbers of black women are so tiny that they may go unreported and unanalyzed. In the 1960 census, only 220 black women lawyers and about 370 black women social scientists were counted. No doubt there have been increases in all fields, but this remains conjectural in view of the fact that the proportion of all women in the professions has remained fairly static over the past 40 years (Epstein 1970*b*).

BLACK WOMEN HAVE GREATER ACCESS

It is believed that in some sectors, probably as professionals in white firms, hospitals, and communities, black women have done better than black men. Historically, black women have had more access to white society than black men and have had opportunities to learn the "ropes" of the white world. Because they were desired as house servants, nursemaids, and sexual partners, black women often became intimates of whites, learnings their values and habits. They could be intimates because as women they were not only powerless but were never regarded as potentially powerful, an attribute which has its analogue in their admission to the male-dominated professions.

Although it is difficult, if not impossible, to document the sense of threat with which white male professionals react to the thought of black men as colleagues, it is clear that black men and women perceive this reaction as a barrier to them. It was a common feeling among the black women in this study that this perceived threat was not as great for them. Being a woman reduced the effect of the racial taboo.

On the other hand, black women are found in professions and occupations known to be difficult for white women to penetrate. Because these women are black they are perhaps not perceived as women; they may be regarded as more "serious" professionals than white women; they may not be viewed as sexual objects nor be seen as out to get a husband. The stereotypes attached to the so-called feminine mind, emotions, or physiology may not seem easily transferable to black women, for whom there seem to be fewer stereotypes in the context of the professionally trained.

We have concentrated on several themes: (1) the special conditions which created for these women an image of self and an achievement value

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structure, (2) the problems attached to playing out traditional, idealized female dependency roles; and (3) the reinforcing components of the work situation.

WOMAN AS DOER

Although the situation of the black woman is in many ways unique, many of the problems she faces are also experienced by other groups of women with negatively evaluated statuses. The mechanisms she uses to cope with strain are mirrored in their experiences as well. But perhaps more than the others, the black woman has been the subject of myths and misinterpretations often applied to behavior of minority group members (see Hyman 1969; Mack 1971).

The most pernicious of the popular stereotypes about the black woman holds that a black matriarchy exists and is a key factor in the social disorganization of the Negro family and the "irresponsibility" of the male as provider and authority. It is a perfect example of the "damned if you do, damned if you don't" syndrome (Merton 1957, p. 480).

Although a greater proportion of black women than white women work, and a greater proportion are the heads of families, the assumption that these factors have an independent negative effect has been challenged. The great majority of black families are intact families and, although a higher proportion of black wives work than do white wives, the typical pattern of black family life is an equalitarian one rather than one of wife-mother dominance. The strong mother figure is prevalent in the black family, but as Ladner (1971) has recently pointed out, strength is not the same as dominance. There have been many instances of strong mother figures in American history (immigrant mothers and pioneer mothers) who have been idealized as women who made it possible for their families to endure in punishing situations. Somehow, these other women were subjected to a different set of norms in contexts in which work was considered appropriate, in which running the shop, sitting at the cash register, or administering the farm was not viewed as masculine or, worse "castrating" behavior. Sometimes the work was done side by side with the husband, sometimes alone because of his incapacity or unavailability. Only the rich could afford to keep their women unoccupied and unhelpful.¹³

The analogue of the immigrant woman probably fits the black woman's situation best, for she also was aware that the men in her family might

¹³ The managerial ability of women throughout history has been understated. Although women have always worked in agrarian societies and at the lower strata in all societies, upper-class women have assumed economic roles in a variety of circumstances. Women of rank managed estates in France and England in the absence of male heirs or when men went off to war.

not be able to provide for it entirely. Sharing or assuming work obligations were real expectations, and enough women did so to become models for generations to come. Both this study of black women professionals and my earlier study of women lawyers, many of whom came from immigrant families, showed that these women had in their lives models of mother-provider figures¹⁴—a mother or grandmother who, as a domestic worker or proprietor of a small store, or as a seamstress and, later, teacher and suffragette, generated a positive image of woman as doer, not as a passive and dependent person. The mother-provider figure appeared not in the absence of a father but often as the figure who worked with a father in a family business or who shared the economic burden by working at another enterprise. In fact, the mother-provider as heroine is a common image in many of these case studies because the activity of these women was so positively experienced and cherished.

The following description of a mother, offered by a woman physician in the study, is typical: "My mother was not the stronger of my parents but she was the more aggressive, always planning and suggesting ideas to improve the family's situation. A dressmaker by trade, she would slip out to do domestic work by the day when times got hard, often not telling my father about it. He was a bricklayer and carpenter but had trouble finding work because he was unable to get union membership."

Most of this sample of black women came from intact families. What was important was that their mothers, forced to work, canceled the "female effect" of motivation and offered an alternative model of adult women to that of the larger white culture. The black women interviewed showed a strong maternal influence; of the 30 interviewed, only four said their mothers had never worked (and one of these "nonworking" mothers had 13 children). Even more unusual was the fact that many of the mothers had been professionals or semiprofessionals. Seven had been teachers, one a college professor, two were nurses, and one a physician. This heritage is unique for any population of women, including professional women, whose mothers are more likely to have worked.

MIDDLE-CLASS VALUES

Most women interviewed in this study came from families which stressed middle-class values, whether or not their incomes permitted middle-class amenities. I have already noted the high proportion of mothers who held

¹⁴ In my sample of women lawyers, nearly all of whom were white, 20% had mothers who were or had been engaged in professional occupations, nine of whom were teachers. Thirty percent never worked (Epstein 1968, p. 96). In Rita Stafford's larger study of women in *Who's Who*, 11.5% of the mothers of lawyers were in a profession and close to 70% were housewives (Epstein 1968, p. 236).

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professional jobs, and although far fewer of the fathers' jobs ranked high (five of the 30), the fathers all had occupational talents and skills. Generally the fathers held a variety of jobs which defy ordinary classification because, though not middle-class jobs by white standards (e.g., as truckers and post office employees), they were at the time good opportunities for blacks.

THE SPECIAL CASE OF THE WEST INDIANS

Considering the size of its population in the United States, an unusually large proportion of my sample (one-third) is West Indian, and this helps account for the high level of aspiration found in the sample. It is generally believed that black professionals are of West Indian extraction in far greater proportion than could be expected by chance.¹⁵ The situation of the black women of this group is illustrative of the "positive" effect of holding two or more negative statuses.

The experience of West Indians in the United States is different from that of other blacks because they face double discrimination—from the larger society for being black and from the black community for being

¹⁵ West Indians have contributed disproportionately to the current Negro leadership, including Stokely Carmichael, Lincoln Linch, Roy Inniss, and other accomplished people. Glazer and Moynihan (1963) assert that in the 1930s foreign-born persons were to make up as much as one-third of the Negro professional population, especially physicians, dentists, and lawyers. We can assume these foreign born were predominantly West Indian. This seems to hold true today if one examines the proportion of foreign-born nonwhites in the professions. Almost one-half of the nonwhite male college instructors, presidents, etc., were listed as foreign born in the 1960 census, about 20% of the natural scientists, about 40% of the doctors, but only a tiny percentage, 0.8, of the lawyers. This also holds true for black women with almost 11% of the nonwhite female college faculty being foreign born, 26% of the natural scientists, 60% of the doctors, and no lawyers listed (U.S. Bureau of Census 1963, vol. 2, PC [2]-7A, table 8, pp. 114-15). And the census figures do not include the large numbers of professionals who were born here of West Indian parentage. Although the nonwhite population is 92% black, and the category in the census data is often taken to mean "mostly black," one must be wary of the percentages for certain professions because tiny numbers of blacks are often matched in number by other nonwhites, such as Chinese. This can be seen in the following table:

NUMBER OF NEGRO AND OTHER NONWHITES IN SELECTED OCCUPATIONS,
UNITED STATES, 1960

	Negroes	Other Nonwhites
College pres., prof., instruct.	5,910	2,794
Chemists	1,799	1,115
Physicians, surgeons	5,038	5,007
Lawyers, judges	2,440	530

SOURCE.—*U.S. Census of the Population*, vol. 2, 1960 *Subject Reports, Occupational Characteristics*, PC (2)-7A, table 3, pp. 21-22.

foreign.¹⁶ West Indian children are often persecuted and taunted as “monkey chasers.” Their way of speech identifies them to other blacks as foreigners, and they experience the same kind of ostracism as white immigrants who bear visible negatively valued statuses. But, as a group, West Indians are known to have a sense of pride, to value education, and be characterized by Protestant Ethic strivings. Although the assimilation of second-generation immigrants into the main culture is common, and they may have difficulty maintaining their values in the context of competing views of work and study in the ghetto, being a West Indian black does create a circumscribed set of possibilities and insulation from the larger society, black and white. Marginality to black society (as immigrants) and to white society (as blacks) means an absence of diversion from the group’s goals and competing values. Because they are isolated and the young women are segregated by their parents even more than the men,¹⁷ the threat of the street and the illegitimate opportunity structure is cut off. At the same time, West Indian youth receive a heavy dose of achievement input from parents and their extended-kinlike community.¹⁸ Many prominent West Indians referred repeatedly to their British training in thrift and self-esteem, to the importance given by their elders to education, to respect for adults, and at the same time, to the importance of being “spunky.”

SELF-CONFIDENCE

Black women seem to have acquired a sense of confidence in their competence and ability. Interviews with these black professional women revealed a strong feeling of self-assurance. Further support comes from Fichter’s study of graduates from predominantly black colleges, which indicates that college-educated black women have more confidence in their abilities than

¹⁶ Cruse (1967, p. 121) suggests that native (New York) Negroes frowned on West Indians mainly because the islanders presented a threat of competition for jobs available to blacks. The West Indian influx into New York in the 1920s coincided with the great migration of Negroes from the South. However, he does note the severe antipathy of native blacks to West Indians because of their alleged “uppity” manner.

¹⁷ One woman commented: “I was not only protected; I was overprotected. West Indians are real Victorians regarding the behavior of their girls.”

¹⁸ The isolation and special character of the black West Indian have probably emphasized a sense of community bolstered by mutual benevolent associations (also known as “meetings” and “hands”) which are often church associated. Members have pooled resources to meet mortgage payments on homes, appraised property, and in other ways have acted as pseudokin groups in assisting talented youngsters with college scholarships. Often these groups had a geographic base and were Jamaican, or Trinidadian, etc. Paule Marshall’s *Brown Girl, Brownstones* (1959) is a vivid portrait of a Barbadian community in Brooklyn, focusing on a young girl growing up, her hard-working mother, and the influence of a Barbadian community organization in reinforcing work, ownership, and scholarship norms.

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a comparable group of white women graduates (1964, p. 12; table 5.17, p. 92).

Asked by Fichter if they thought they had personalities suitable to a career as business executives, 49% of the white women interviewed but 74% of the black women thought they did (1964, table 5.18, p. 93).

This high degree of self-confidence may result from their special condition of having gone to college, a very special event in the black community. Their self-confidence is probably reinforced as they overcome each obstacle on the way to the top.

EDUCATION AND ITS STRUCTURE

It is commonly believed that a greater premium is placed on the higher education of girls than boys in the black community.¹⁹ Until recently the greater numbers of black women college graduates have supported this assumption. This view and the statistics supporting it have their origins in the structure of discrimination; even with college degrees, black men could not penetrate the high-ranking occupations, while black women graduates could always go into schoolteaching. Thus it has been suggested that contrary to the pattern believed to be true of underprivileged white families, in which male children got preference if not all could be sent to college, in the black family the female child would get preference.

However, the number of black men in college has grown steadily in the past decade and by 1963 surpassed the number of black women students. Further, if one measures the proportion of women among blacks in professions other than teaching, it is not true that more girls get professional training than men. Only 9.6% of black doctors are women (again a higher percentage than in the white community, where only 7% of doctors are women). Certainly black families, like many white immigrant families in the past, could not afford sex discrimination when they needed the contribution of any family member who showed promise. As one dentist of West Indian extraction put it: "Girls or boys—whoever had the brains to get education was the one pushed to do it and encouraged."

Although white families support the notion of college education for girls, they are somewhat ambivalent about encouraging them to go beyond the B.A., viewing professional training as a waste, detrimental to marriage chances, or simply inappropriate for a woman (Epstein 1970c, p. 62). Not a single black woman in the study reported opposition from her family

¹⁹ See, for example, Silberman's assertion about the black woman: "Her hatred of men reflects itself in the way she brings up her own children; the sons can fend for themselves but the daughters must be prepared so that they will not have to go through what she has gone through" (1964, p. 119). And Cogan's statement: "In the Negro family the oldest girl is most protected and most often encouraged to go on with her education" (1968, p. 11).

on the matter of professional training; many referred to their parents' attitudes in the same terms as the dentist quoted above, and with the intensity characterized by a physician: "From the time you could speak you were given to understand that your primary interest in life was to get the best education you could, the best job you could. There was no other way!"

Where the parents could, they paid for the education of their daughters, often at the cost of years of savings and great personal sacrifice. Most of the women interviewed received at least a small amount of financial help from their parents and supplemented the costs of education by working while in school or through scholarship aid.

The black woman's education is considered a real investment in her future. She could not expect, like a white woman, to put her husband through college in order to enjoy a life of leisure on her husband's achievement and income. She knows, too, that a stable marriage is much more problematical as she moves up in educational status.

Of the black women college graduates studied by Noble, 90% said that "preparing for a vocation" was first in a list of reasons for going to college (1956, p. 46, table 16). These responses followed a pattern reported in two earlier studies (Johnson 1938; Cuthbert 1942). And it should be noted that, far more than for the black man, a college education radically improves the income potential of the black woman; her median income is even higher than that of white women with college degrees (*The Social and Economic Status of Negroes in the United States, 1970*, table 102, p. 125, and table 25, p. 34).

In general, black women are more concerned with the economic rewards of work than are white women (Shea, Spitz, and Zeller 1970, p. 215).

Furthermore, the economic necessity expected by black women indicates a canceling of female occupational role stereotypes. The black women interviewed were not bound by conventional stereotypes of the professions deemed suitable "for a woman"; instead, they weighed the real advantages and disadvantages of the occupation. Although my earlier study of white women lawyers found that some of their parents had tried to deter them from that male-dominated occupation, the black women interviewed for this project reported their parents not only encouraged them but a number had suggested they try law or medicine. One woman who wanted to be a nurse was persuaded by her mother to become a physician.

PROFESSIONAL SCHOOLS

Most of the women interviewed were educated at white schools, a number of them having gone to private white elementary schools, to white colleges (79%), and to white professional schools (70%). A little more than half

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of the physicians went to white medical schools (and most of these attended the very top schools—Yale and Columbia, for example), and the rest went to predominantly Negro schools.²⁰ This is extremely unusual because the great majority of black doctors have always been educated in black medical schools.

No figures exist on the proportion of male and female black students admitted to white medical schools, and one can only suppose that black women had as hard a time getting admitted as any women or any blacks. A few of the doctors interviewed, however, felt that they had a slight edge over both groups—again the interaction effect of their two negative statuses; their uniqueness made their admission more likely. None, however, could say exactly why they thought this was true. One commented: “I think that being both black and female may have been an asset, in a peculiar sense, both in getting into medical school and subsequently.”

Being black attenuated the effect of feminine roles in the university setting. Dating was difficult because there were so few black men; furthermore, being a specially selected female meant a high commitment to scholarship. The girls who went to all-white schools were good students, and most reported they had virtually no social life.

MARRIAGE

For most women, getting married and becoming a mother are still the most salient decisions in the setting of a life course. These decisions usually follow a fairly certain pattern and serve as limits on the acquisition of other statuses, especially occupational ones. But marriage is not by any means a certainty for black women, and for those who do marry being a wife may not offer the security to replace a career.

The factors which result in the educated black woman's contingent marital status derive from the marginal position of blacks in American society and from their inability to conform to a number of norms in the family setting which are rooted in patriarchal-focused values. The black male's marginality makes it doubtful he will acquire a professional career; whatever the level of occupation he attains, he will have difficulty in providing a middle-class life-style on his income alone. The educated black woman thus is unlikely to find a mate of similar social rank and education, and it is doubtful she can expect to play the traditional middle-class housewife role played by educated white women.

Lacking the usual guarantee that Prince Charming will come equipped with a good profession and a suburban home, or will come at all, the

²⁰ Seventy percent of Negro medical students in 1955–56 attended black medical schools as opposed to only 30% who attended white medical schools (Reitzes 1958, p. 28).

educated black girl is prepared in both subtle and direct ways to adapt if the dream should fail. The women in our sample reported that their parents did not push them toward marriage, and though they generally married late if they married at all (one-third had not), they did not feel anxious about being unmarried.²¹ Although there is some change today, most white girls have internalized enormous pressures to marry and marry early. Not only do black women probably invest less in the good-life-through-marriage dream, there is evidence that a great proportion feel they can do without it.

Bell (1971, p. 254) suggests that "marriage has limited importance to black women at all educational levels" and that it is also possible that "if education were held constant at all levels, black women would show a greater rejection of marriage than would white women." At lower-class levels it is clear that the rejection of marriage comes because it is perceived as unreliable, and at upper-class levels because of the small pool of eligible men and the competition for husbands.

Although the white college-educated woman is strongly deterred from focus on a career when she marries (though she may work), the black woman who marries a black college-educated man cannot consider withdrawing from the marketplace. She knows that her husband's education is no guarantee of his financial success. It has been clearly established that the discrepancy in income between white and black male college graduates is wider than the gap between incomes of those who are less well educated (Sheppard and Striner 1966, p. 24). Educated black women, like other black women who seem able to trim their expectations to the realities of their lives, know they will have to share the financial responsibilities for a middle-class standard of living. One-half of the college-educated black women studied by Fichter (1964, p. 81) said they preferred to combine their family role with an occupational role. This made them twice as likely as Southern white women or the comparable group of other white women in a national NORC sample to select a combination of marriage, child rearing, and employment.

It seems probable, too, that black women view careers differently than white women who expect to combine marriage and career. White women like to view their work as supplemental to the husband's. They tend not to think of their work as a career growing out of their own life aims. Black women tend less to view their work as a "hanger-on" activity. One gets the feeling in interviews with them that the quality of their lives is determined by their own endeavor and is less a response to their husband's occupation situation. Perhaps this is a function of their relatively high

²¹ But generally women in the male-dominated professions marry late and a substantial proportion are unmarried (see Epstein 1970a, p. 905).

self-confidence. White women lawyers I studied who practiced with their husbands typically referred to their work as “helping their husbands” and not in terms of a real career (Epstein 1971). Of course, black women have less opportunity to reason so circuitously. They are not in any structure where they could work for a husband. None of the lawyers had lawyer husbands, and only one of the doctors had a husband who was a physician. All of the doctors made more money than their husbands. There was almost no occupational homogamy and very little occupational-rank homogamy between husbands and wives, contrary to the marriage pattern for white women professionals, in which occupational homogamy is exceptionally strong.²²

Our respondents, following a pattern common to other educated black women,²³ often married down occupationally. Although some white women in my study of lawyers had husbands who earned less than they did, they appeared more threatened by this situation than the black women studied. Some of the white women, faced with developing careers, checked them to assure they would have lower-ranking, lower-paying jobs than their husbands.²⁴ Black women also consider checking their career progress for this reason, but feel the costs are too great. Although the white woman usually can withdraw from her profession and continue to live at the same economic standard, the black woman who does so pulls the family to a lower standard of living. If the black woman acts like a woman occupationally, she is failing as a mother in helping her family.

The negative rank differential present in most marriages of black professional women has an important effect on their commitment to career. Although black women are probably as hopeful as white women for a long and happy life with their husbands, they face the reality of a higher probability of marital breakup. Divorce and separation rates for blacks

²² Compared by race, marriages tend to be homogamous—husbands and wives coming from similar social, religious, ethnic, and educational background. Within this general similarity, there is some tendency for men to marry a little below their own level, so that they are slightly hypogamous while their wives tend to be slightly hypergamous. The reverse tends to be true for blacks; women tend to marry below their own level (Bernard 1966, p. 90).

²³ Noble reported that more than 50% of the husbands of college-educated black women in her study were employed in occupations of lower socioeconomic level than those of the wives. In more than 60% of this study's cases in which wives reported on their husband's education, the man had a lower level of education than his wife. Noble reports low levels of response for both these items in her questionnaire (1956, p. 51).

²⁴ Perhaps this is a manifestation of the ambivalence women feel toward success. Martina Horner's work suggests that most women will explore their intellectual potential only when they do not need to compete—least of all with men. They feel success is unladylike and that men will be put off by it (1969, p. 62).

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are higher than for whites,²⁵ and their remarriage rates are lower. Although rates of dissolution for black women professionals are the lowest of any category of black women workers, they are still higher than those for white women in similar jobs (Udry 1968, p. 577). Eight of the 24 women we studied who had ever been married had been divorced.

Caroline Bird suggests that black professional women's deviant place in the structure of marriage expectations "frees" them: "Negro career women are 'freer' than white career women not to marry, to marry outside their race or class. . . . They are . . . much less bound than white women by the role duties most frequently cited as universal and inescapable limitations on the career aspirations of all women forever" (1969, p. 38). Whether or not they are free, it is certainly true that their lack of a safe haven in marriage gives them independence, motivation, and perhaps more reinforcement of self-confidence than the white woman who may retreat to full-time marriage at the first feeling of fear or insecurity as a professional.

MOTHERHOOD

Although getting married may determine whether or not a woman takes her career seriously, it is the demands on her as a mother and how she deals with those demands which become most important in her ability to focus on career.

Having children is costly for a family not only because of what it takes to feed, clothe, and educate them, but because typically the wife leaves the labor force—and her income—for long periods to care for them. And for black families it has been imperative that both wife and husband work to maintain their hold on a middle-class life-style.

Although blacks generally exceed the fertility pattern of whites, the fertility rates of upper-class Negro families are the lowest of any group (Moynihan 1965, p. 758).²⁶ Noble's study of Negro women college graduates found that although the majority of her sample married, more than 40% were childless and 38% had only one child (1957, p. 17). Of the 24 ever-married women in my study, 17 had children and seven did not. Of those who had children, more than half had two or more. Strikingly, all of those with two or more children were upper-income professionals—an editor, a lawyer, a dentist, and a half-dozen physicians. The sample's only mother of five is a practicing M.D.

²⁵ Black women appear more likely to encounter marital discord than whites. In 1970, 19% of all black women who at some time had been married were either divorced or separated as contrasted with 6% of white women who had been married (*New York Times*, July 26, 1971, p. 1).

²⁶ Although there are no data for fertility of women by their own occupation, the

Though black women who have careers can be assumed to reduce demands made on them by having fewer children than their white counterparts, it is more interesting to see the ways in which they handle their role demands as mothers and the unique aspects of the black social structure which help them do so.

The black mothers interviewed seemed far less anxious about their children than whites. They did not insist that it was their sole responsibility to care for their children, nor did they fear that their absence from home during the children's early years would be harmful to their psychic and physical growth. They seemed freer to accept help from relatives (particularly grandparents, who often volunteered it), to leave the children for long periods, and even to let the children accompany them to work if that became necessary. Hill (1971) suggests that black families are generally more adaptable to absorbing new members—other relatives' children, grandchildren, or grandparents—and that often the "new" older members play important roles in caring for young children while the mother works (p. 5).

Black women, whether of Southern or of West Indian origin, share an extended family tradition in which "others" can routinely perform tasks which middle-class white society would see as exclusively the responsibility of the husband and wife. This aspect of the black social structure meshes neatly with the needs of the black professional woman; it makes it possible for her to continue studies or career after having children, and makes combined motherhood and career a rational decision to be made on its merits.

CAREERS

The occupational spread of the 31 women interviewed ranged from physicians (12, including four psychiatrists), to lawyers (eight), dentists (two), a university professor, three journalists, and several in public relations work, business management, and top administrative posts in social services. (One was in library science, a "woman's field" except in administration; this woman was in charge of a noted collection.) We excluded nursing, social work, and teaching, which are not only women's fields but are low in prestige and considered professions almost solely by the United States census.

An early decision to go into professional work was characteristic of most of the women in the sample. They share this history with male professionals of both sexes (Rogoff 1957, p. 111) and with other black women

percentage of nonwhite wives of professional men who were childless in 1950 was 33% (Whelpton, Campbell, and Patterson 1966, p. 153).

professionals (Ostlund 1957; Brazziel 1960). Considering the years of preparation, both in terms of anticipatory socialization and formal educational requirements, early deciders have an advantage over those who choose late.

Blacks, however, suffer from having fewer real role models in their decision matrix, although doctors (in particular) and lawyers have always been held in high esteem in the black community. Until recently, physician was the highest status occupation a black person could hold, but the absolute number has been, and remains, small. In 1956 New York City had only 305 black physicians, the largest number of any city in the country, and in 1960 the total census figure for the United States was 5,038, of whom 487 were women.²⁷

In contrast to the strong family encouragement of professional careers already noted, most black women recall, as do white women, being urged by primary and high school teachers and guidance counselors to go into schoolteaching or social work. This advice was based on their racial and sex statuses, although black men, too, are sometimes directed into these occupations because of the barriers they face in the more prestigious professions. But the significant messages for them were from their parents, who were encouraging them to be whatever they wanted and who did not raise objections to their trying a white, male profession.

Eight of the physicians went to "white" medical schools (NYU, New York Medical College, Boston University, Philadelphia Women's) or to elite white schools (Columbia's Physicians and Surgeons and Yale).

Despite their educational credentials, most of the doctors work in the black community. Elite medical careers require not only degrees from good schools but a status sequence of internships at elite training hospitals which are hard for any black to get, and which most of the women did not get, or which they did not seek because they felt their chances were non-existent. None of the women who went to a black medical school was able to work within the medical "establishment," although a few had some contact with it under new programs pairing private teaching hospitals with municipal hospitals.

The lawyers interviewed went exclusively to white law schools; four to Columbia, one to the University of Michigan, two to NYU, and one to Brooklyn Law School, a lower-ranking school with an evening program.

²⁷ Michel Richard figured that by interviewing 98 black physicians in New York in 1965 he had a sample of about 28% of all black doctors in New York City, using an estimate of 355 for 1965 (1969, p. 21). By doing a little creative statistical calculation, we figured that using the national percentage of black women doctors (9.6% of black doctors) would mean that there are about 28 black women doctors in New York. We interviewed 12, which would be about 40% if one allowed for a general increase in the total number of black doctors by 1968-69, when most of these interviews were done.

Two of the lawyers who achieved elite establishment careers did so after a top-rank legal education during which they had performed at the top of their class. Following another typical route for the ethnic minorities, the Brooklyn Law School graduate achieved a high-ranking position within the city government. Nearly all of the women interviewed found, regardless of educational attainment, that some professional gates were simply locked. It was one thing to get admitted to school, another to find a job.

Like blacks and women, following the negative effect of holding "inappropriate statuses," they tended to go into protected work settings. Most of the doctors and lawyers started in salaried jobs—government work and clinics—where getting clients was not an immediate problem. Many of the doctors took residencies in municipal hospitals and went directly onto the staffs of these same hospitals or into clinics in the black community. Some of the psychiatrists later mixed private practice with their institutional jobs, but only one could be said to have a truly full-time private practice. It was not only the closed opportunity structure which led these women into clinics and municipal hospitals, but also their sense of service and duty to the black community. Later, some with research interests were able to work in private hospitals within the structure of new programs.

Six of the doctors interviewed were on the staff of Harlem Hospital (the hospital has 15 women physicians, a few of whom are white). This was partially the result of sampling by referral and partially because Harlem Hospital is one of the few U.S. hospitals that has any number of black physicians. It is unique in that women doctors are heads of three departments. All of the women interviewed were specialists. In 1952, out of 33,000 medical specialists, only 190 were Negroes (*Negroes in Medicine* [1952], p. 6, cited in Lopate [1968]). With the exception of three (one of whom had done breakthrough research on the "kidney machine") all were in specialties which historically have been relatively open to women and blacks: four were psychiatrists, two were pediatricians, one was in community medicine, and one in dermatology. A few now in psychiatry had been practicing pediatricians. One can see that their specialization and superior training placed them high on the eligibility list. Most black physicians have not had top-rank educations; more than four-fifths of black physicians were graduated from Meharry Medical College and Howard University (Altman 1969, p. 38). The fact that they claimed to work very hard and the somewhat greater tolerance of black men to women's participation in the professions made it possible for black women to get better posts than most white women can aspire to.

The lawyers followed the pattern of protected salaried positions to a lesser degree than the doctors. Three had their own practices, and two had become public figures. One was salaried but had attained the super-elite position of partnership in a Wall Street firm. One was the first woman

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assistant district attorney in New York, and another was moving from a poverty program into private practice. All had been affected by the social changes in attitudes toward racial discrimination in New York; all were exceptionally attractive or outstanding in some way, all were highly articulate; all had solid educational credentials. With one exception, all worked in the white world. All felt that being black and women gave them additional possibilities than they might not have had as only women or as only black. The lawyers' extremely unique status combination made them highly visible, and in the law, where performance is quite open to the scrutiny of peers, news of one's excellence spreads quickly.

Women lawyers interviewed in my previous study emphasized their need to be better than others so that no one could use incompetence or lack of devotion to work against them. Black women professionals also stressed this motivating factor and were even more passionate about it. Their need to prove themselves and be the best was often tied in with self-consciousness about their visibility and their sense of responsibility for others of their race and sex. These remarks were typical:

Being a black woman It's made me fight harder. . . . I think probably one of the strengths of being black or being a black woman is that if you have the native material you really do learn to fight and try to accomplish and all the rest. If I had been white, with the same abilities, I'm not sure the drive would have been the same.

Women have some advantages as trial lawyers, for one thing they are well remembered, or remembered, well or not, depends on how they perform. The judge is not as likely to forget them if he has ever seen them before, because we women are in the minority. And, of course, for a Negro woman, she is very likely to be remembered. It is always a help, not to be forgotten.

Some of the younger women were well aware of today's emphasis on having women and blacks in hospitals, firms, corporations, and schools. Most spoke of it with irony, but with an air of confidence and a sense that they deserved whatever benefits came out of the new social awareness. Some recognized they were useful because an employer could kill two birds with one stone by hiring a black woman; one said pithily: "I'm a show woman and a show nigger, all for one salary." Some older women felt they had been accepted in their professional work because being a Negro woman was not as bad as being a Negro man. About a third said they believed Negro men were "a threat" to white men or alluded to that belief as if it were well known to all, and that a black woman constituted less of a threat.

Whether or not this is true (and certainly, no data are available on it), the belief may act to discourage black men from seeking entry into white domains and encourage the black woman because she thinks she has more

of a chance. Black women doctors and dentists who worked with white patients (one had almost a totally white practice) felt that because most of their patients were children, and therefore brought in by mothers, no "male threat" was operative in their relationship.²⁸

Black women probably get "straighter" treatment in white professional setting than do white women. For one thing, white men do not as often see black professional women as romantic partners, or feel the black woman is out "to catch" one of them as a husband, and therefore respect their serious intent. In black settings, the black professional women report suspicious views of their competence and career involvement similar to those encountered by white women in white male settings, but the fact that the working woman is a more familiar image to the black man, and the "woman as doer" is more familiar to him (as it is for the woman), means that attitudes are more tempered.

Black women professionals also seem to have higher regard for each other than white women professionals. I encountered far less self-hatred among them than among the white women lawyers interviewed earlier. The latter shared the (male) negative stereotypes of women lawyers as excessively aggressive and masculine. The black women interviewed seemed to have a more matter-of-fact attitude toward their sister professionals; they never indicated doubts about the competence of other women, and some said they favored women as colleagues because they were more reliable and more willing to work than the men they knew. Few white women professionals favored other women professionals.

These phenomena in the professional world, which grow out of black women's unique position, probably reinforce their self-confidence and act to motivate them toward a career line similar to that of the white male. However, given the limits imposed by the current social structure, only the most extraordinary black women, those who are intellectually gifted and personally attractive, can make it. The fact that some do indicates that an enormous amount of energy in the social system must be directed to keeping others out.

The chance to become professionals developed out of a structure which narrowed their choices, made them visible and unique. For these few, the

²⁸ William J. Goode suggests (personal communication) a general psychodynamic interpretation—that perhaps there is such a cultural emphasis on the fragility of the male ego that the typical traditional male professional may, indeed, play it safe in choosing his colleagues (certainly in choosing someone to act in an authority position over him, as a patient does when he chooses a doctor). The black woman professional may not only face less resistance from a white woman client (she might prefer a male doctor but certainly would choose a black woman over a black male doctor) but she herself might be willing to challenge the professional setting to a greater extent in attempting to enter the white establishment than the black man because, being a woman, she is not so sensitive to the fear of "losing face" (the woman in American society not being socialized to think she has much face to lose, anyway).

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effects of living in a world otherwise beset with limits fed their determination and made them feel the only road to survival lay in occupational success. For those without the special support of family and personal networks of these women, and without their extraordinary ability to drive ahead, the limits of the occupational structure could only be defeating, even to those with ability. The self-maintaining mechanisms of the present stratification system within the professions clearly operate to keep the participation of certain persons low in spite of their possible intellectual contributions. Ironically for this small sample of black women, the effect of mechanisms within the larger stratification system (which operate to keep blacks and women down) served to reinforce their commitment to careers which would be normally closed to them, and by defining them as superunique, made it possible for some to rise within the professional structures. It has become clear that the elaborate filtering system which keeps elite spheres clear of alien groups is costly and self-defeating. It is rare that those who do push through emerge unscathed by the passage. Those who fall on the way are lost to the greater society. But the mechanisms which contribute to the status quo are often not consciously known even by those who participate in their exercise, and only by analyzing the various structural nexus in which they occur can they be isolated and evaluated for what they are.

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