THE GAP AT THE TOP: RELATIVE OCCUPATIONAL EARNINGS DISADVANTAGES OF THE BLACK MIDDLE CLASS

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Data are presented in this article indicating that the disparity in the earnings of blacks and whites in upper level white-collar occupations is greater than that between their counterparts in blue-collar occupations. Moreover it appears that very little of the racial earnings differences in either occupational category can be explained by so-called human capital differences.

Of all the putative changes in the economic conditions of blacks in recent years perhaps none has received more acknowledgement and approbation than the growth in the black middle class.¹ Many analysts have heralded this salutary development as an unambiguous indicator of black economic progress.² The one cautionary note in the chorus of approval is the fear that poor and working class blacks will be bereft of their most viable community members and role models as these more successful and affluent blacks move up and out of the urban ghettos. It is also felt by some that class rather than race is increasingly becoming the most important identifying characteristic of these upwardly mobile blacks and that a shift in their allegiances and interests from race to class is imminent and warranted.

This growth in the black middle class is generally attributed to the government’s antidiscrimination and affirmative action efforts mandated by the corpus of civil rights legislation enacted since the 1960s and the concomitant opening up of opportunities for more and more blacks to obtain higher educations. One reflection of this growth is the change in
The occupational distribution of blacks since 1959. As Table 1 shows, the proportion of black female managers and professionals doubled and the proportion of black males in these occupations nearly doubled between 1959 and 1987, far outstripping the growth in these occupations among white males. Although there has also been a substantial increase of blacks in the lower-paying white collar occupations of technician, sales and clerical workers (particularly among black women), the definition of "black middle class" used here will be confined to those in managerial and professional occupations.

What is left unexamined or unquestioned by those who celebrate the progress of the black middle class is whether those blacks who are escaping the economic despair in the ghettos are also escaping or overcoming the general economic disparity that exists between blacks and whites in the larger society. The evidence adduced in this study appears to give a negative response. Indeed not only does it appear that blacks in the upper white-collar occupations have significantly lower earnings than their white counterparts but the earnings differentials are even relatively greater than those of lower paid black blue-collar workers. An instance of the upper level white-collar disparities is shown in Table 2. Shown there as well are the substantial gaps that exist between the earnings of white females and white males. In a number of cases these gaps appear to be wider than those between black women and white men. However, despite the fact that both the black and white women studied in Table 2 worked full-time, black women worked more hours on average than white women. Full-time is defined by the Census as working 35 hours or more per week. In 1979, a black woman who worked full time worked nearly 3 hours per week more than a similar white woman. Thus the earnings of white women are based on fewer hours than those of black women and their comparative ratios tend to understate their relative situations.

Turning to the table, in 1979, for example, the black-white male earnings ratio for individuals 18 years and over with a 4-year college education was .62 among "executives and administrators." This meant that for every dollar in earnings of a white male executive, a similarly placed black male earned 62 cents. If a black male had 5 or more years of college he would have earned 12 cents more, or 74 cents per white male dollar.

Black males and females fared best in the professions, particularly as "elementary and secondary teachers," the lowest paid of the professions shown. In the 5-plus category black males did worse as "lawyers and judges," the second highest paid of the professions, and black females