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The New Emerging Black Middle Class: The Love Jones Cohort.¹

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Short Abstract

Studies of the black middle class typically focus on married households with children. Currently, however, although the black middle class is growing, marriage among blacks is declining. This discrepancy points to the emergence of a new black middle class, composed of never-married, childless professionals living alone. Borrowing the title of a popular film, we dub this group the Love Jones Cohort. To measure this cohort's middle class status, we created an index using income, education, occupation, and homeownership. We then used cross-sectional, cohort, and regression analyses to determine that while the Love Jones Cohort is not yet comparable in size to black-middle-class-married households, the cohort is comprising a growing proportion of black middle class households. Furthermore, in most cases, over time, the rate of growth of the black middle class is comparable for middle class couples and those in the Love Jones Cohort. Young never-married black women are an especially fast-growing segment of the black middle class. Recognizing the Love Jones Cohort requires rethinking the way that the black middle class is conceptualized and studied.

Extended Abstract

Introduction

Literature on the black middle class focuses predominantly on married couples with children. However, over the last three decades, for the entire United States population, the family literature shows that the age of marriage has risen, divorce rates increased slightly, cohabitation has soared, nonmarital childbearing has become more normative, and forfeiting marriage and children has become more common (Casper and Bianchi, 2002). Researchers (Casper and Bianchi, 2002; Cohen, 1999; Tucker and Mitchell-Kernan, 1995) have found that most of these same trends are dramatically evident among blacks (the exception is forfeiting children). In fact, the retreat from marriage is even more pronounced for blacks (Casper and Bianchi 2002; Raley, 2000). This change in family patterns raises questions about the demographics of the black middle class. However, very few researchers connect the two bodies of work to examine the socioeconomic status of blacks based on household type. Popular media such as film represent a new kind of middle-class black: young, never-married, childless, urban professionals living alone. Do these popular representations reflect an actual demographic change? Our research shows that, indeed, one-person, never-married, childless households constitute a rapidly growing segment of the black middle class, a fact which requires rethinking how the black middle class is conceptualized and studied. Borrowing the title of a popular film depicting members of this new black middle class, we dub this new group the Love Jones Cohort.

To measure the demographic shift in the black middle class, we have created a black middle class index based on four measures: education, occupational prestige,

income, and homeownership at the household level. We then juxtapose this index against black household types. We have two overarching research questions. First, within the black middle class, is there a decline in the representation of married-couple family households and a rise in households comprised of young people who live alone, are not married, and have no children? Second, how have the effects of household structure on middle-class status changed over time? Taken together, these research questions point to the query: Does this new living-alone household type buy black aspirants access into the black middle class?

Data and Methods

Using the 1% sample of the 1980, 1990, and 2000 Integrated Public Use Microdata Series (IPUMS), we select both person and household variables for non-Hispanic blacks and aggregate to the household level. Our sample is limited to householders between 25 and 54; however, for most of our analysis, we highlight those households between 25 and 44. To understand the growth of household type by class status (Tables 1A & 1B; 3A & 3B) and change in class status by household type (Tables 2A & 2B; 4A & 4B; 5A & 5B) over time, we use two approaches: cross-sectional and synthetic-cohort analyses. Cross-sectional analyses allow us to examine class status for each household by household type and class status at one point in time: 1980, 1990, and 2000. First, we examine the difference among three household types for households with householders aged 25-54 (Table 1A & 1B; 2A & 2B); then we examine households with householders between ages 25 and 44 to narrow the lens to younger households (Table 3A & 3B; Table 4A & 4B); from there we examine class status by household type and how it varies for men and women who live alone (Table 5A & 5B), paying particular

attention to comparisons of married-couple families and never-married living-alone households. Second, we examine household types and black middle class status changes as a cohort moves through time at ten-year age intervals (Table 6A, 7A, and 8A). Given that census data are not longitudinal, we employ a synthetic-cohort analysis to track the 1980 households aged 25-34, to the 1990 households aged 35-44, to the 2000 households aged 45-54.

Our analytic strategy is to compare what most scholars defined as the former black middle class—married couples with children with what we believe to be an increasingly important component of the new black middle class—black never-married singles living alone, in essence, the Love Jones Cohort. We focus on three main household types: married, never-married, and single. The married category is a household with a spouse present (with or without children). The never married category is a one-person household without children. The single category is a household without a spouse present but is not a one-person household, for example, a single-parent.

Scholars disagree over how to define middle class, and there are disparities between what it means to belong to the white middle class as compared to the black middle class. Consequently, we created our own black middle class index building on the work of other scholars in this area (Landry, 1987; Oliver and Shapiro, 1997; Pattillo-McCoy, 1999; St. John and Clymer, 2000). The index variables are binary. Households are considered to be middle class if any one of the following criteria are met: anyone in the household had 4 or more years of college; per capita household income was above the average per capita household income for the specified year (we measured per capita with the equivalence scale from Citro and Michael (1995) adjustment, .7 for each kid, .65

economies of scale); the combined score of the household on the occupational prestige scale was above the mean for all black household types for the specified year; or the household either owned or was buying their home. Given the degree of fluctuation in these variables from one decade to the next, indices for 1980, 1990, and 2000 were computed using data corresponding to black households in the same time period.

Results

Cross-sectional results. Tables 1 and 3 show that never-married people who live alone are indeed comprising a growing portion of the middle class, whereas married couples are decreasing their share. This suggests that a redefinition of the black middle class may be in order. Additionally, the rate of growth from 1980 to 2000 of the black middle class as measured by our index is increasing for most household types (the one exception is a decline in growth of middle class status for married couples between 1990 and 2000 (Table 2A & 2B; Table 4A & 4B).

Cohort analysis results. Compared with younger married couples, older married couples have a greater share of the black middle class in each time period, whereas the Love Jones Cohort has a lower representation in the middle-class in the older ages (Table 6A). The table also shows that, over time, married couples lost ground to other household types who comprised larger and larger percentages of the black middle class in all age groups, but especially in the youngest age group (those who were 25-34). Looking down the diagonal, note that as cohorts age they have not really increased their share of the middle class pie, but across successive cohorts, the share of the pie has indeed grown. For example, blacks who were never-married and living alone and were 25-34 in 1980, comprised 9 percent of the middle class. By 2000, when they were 45-54, they still

comprised 9 percent of the middle class. Similarly in 1990 cohort, 13 percent of 25-34 year-olds were in the middle class and this percentage remained relatively constant as they aged into the 35-44 group. But note that between the two cohorts there was a 4 percentage point increase in the share of middle class households that were one-person never-married households.

When we examine the degree to which each household type is black middle class we see that for married couple households and those who are never-married living alone, the middle age group is the most likely to be in the middle class in all time periods. By contrast, for those who are single and not living alone the highest percentage of those in the middle class is among those who are 45-54 in all time periods. Note that across time, for the most part, the groups who made the most consistent progress in entering the middle class were the Love Jones Cohort and those who were single, not living alone. This is true for both never-married women and men but with more pronounced progress for never-married women (Table 8A). Note that most progress was made for all household types at all ages between 1980 and 1990, with more modest increases and even some declines occurring between 1990 and 2000. Note that as the young Love Jones Cohort aged, in general they increased their middle class status, much more so than did the middle class.

Conclusions

The Love Jones Cohort indeed exists and is growing. Although it still represents a relatively small percentage of the black middle class overall, among those 25-34 in 2000, it accounts for 1 in 4 black-middle-class households. In answer to our specific research questions, the data suggest that yes, not marrying and living alone does buy access into

the black middle class (Table 4A & 4B; 5A & 5B). This is true especially for women between the ages of 25-44. A possible implication of this shift is that if black women are achieving middle class status without marrying, marriage may not provide much financial benefit or produce positive returns for professional black women between the ages of 25 and 44.

Next Steps

We plan to reorganize these tables, condense them and run additional descriptive analyses to more prominently display important findings.

We also plan to use logistic regression analyses to determine, the likelihood that certain household types are associated with an increased likelihood of membership in the black middle class, if this relationship has strengthened over time, and among which groups? In these analyses the index will serve as the dependent variable and the key independent variable will be household type with six categories (married with children, married without children, never married men living alone, never married women living alone, single men not living alone, single women not living alone). We will control by age of householder, period, region, and urban residence and perhaps estimate separate models stratified by some of these variables depending on preliminary results.

Cross-sectional Results

Table 1A:

Percent of the Black Middle Class (Score of Four) by Household Type: Households with Householders Aged **25-54** in 1980, 1990, and 2000

Year	Married Couple Family	Never-Married Living Alone	Single Not Living Alone	Total
1980	90.7	5.4	3.9	100
1990	86.8	7.6	5.6	100
2000	79.2	12.1	8.6	100

Table 1B:

Percent Change in the Black Middle Class (Score of Four) by Household Type: Households with Householders Aged **25-54** in 1980, 1990, and 2000

Year	Married Couple Family	Never-Married Living Alone	Single Not Living Alone
1980	---	---	--
1990	(3.9)	2.2	1.7
2000	(7.6)	4.5	3.0

() Percent change is negative

Cross-sectional Results

Table 2A:

Percent of Married, Never-Married, and Single Households with Householders Aged **25-54** that Scored Four on the Black Middle Class Index in 1980, 1990, and 2000

Year	Married Couple Family	Never-Married Living Alone	Single Not Living Alone
1980	8.7	3.0	1.5
1990	12.4	5.7	2.0
2000	13.6	7.2	2.7

Table 2B:

Percent Change in Married, Never-Married, and Single Households with Householders Aged **25-54** that Scored Four on the Black Middle Class Index in 1980, 1990, and 2000

Year	Married Couple Family	Never-Married Living Alone	Single Not Living Alone
1980	---	---	---
1990	3.7	2.7	.5
2000	1.2	1.5	.7

Cross-sectional Results

Table 3A:

Percent of the Black Middle Class (Score of Four) by Household Type: Households with Householders Aged **25-44** in 1980, 1990, and 2000

Year	Married Couple Family	Never-Married Living Alone	Single Not Living Alone	Total
1980	88.4	6.8	4.8	100
1990	82.0	10.6	7.4	100
2000	71.1	17.0	12.0	100

Table 3B:

Percent Change in the Black Middle Class (Score of Four) by Household Type: Households with Householders Aged **25-44** in 1980, 1990, and 2000

Year	Married Couple Family	Never-Married Living Alone	Single Not Living Alone
1980	---	---	---
1990	(2.4)	3.8	2.6
2000	(10.9)	6.4	3.6

() Percent change is negative

Cross-sectional Results

Table 4A:

Percent of Married, Never-Married, and Single Households with Householders Aged **25-44** that Scored Four on the Black Middle Class Index in 1980, 1990, and 2000

Year	Married Couple Family	Never-Married Living Alone	Single Not Living Alone
1980	10.6	4.2	2.0
1990	13.9	7.5	2.3
2000	13.4	8.7	2.8

Table 4B:

Percent Change in Married, Never-Married, and Single Households with Householders Aged **25-44** that Scored Four on the Black Middle Class Index in 1980, 1990, and 2000

Year	Married Couple Family	Never-Married Living Alone	Single Not Living Alone
1980	---	---	---
1990	3.3	3.3	.3
2000	(0.5)	1.2	.5

() Percent change is negative

Cross-sectional Results

Table 5A:

Percent of Households with Householders Aged **25-44** that Scored Four on the Black Middle Class Index by Household Type and Sex, 1980, 1990, and 2000.

Year	Married Couple Family	Female Never-Married Living Alone	Male Never-Married Living Alone	Female Single Not Living Alone	Male Single Not Living Alone
1980	10.6	5.9	3.0	1.5	4.1
1990	13.9	9.5	5.7	1.9	3.7
2000	13.4	11.8	5.9	2.4	4.4

Table 5B:

Percent Change in Households with Householders Aged **25-44** that Scored Four on the Black Middle Class Index by Household Type and Sex, 1980, 1990, and 2000.

Year	Married Couple Family	Female Never Married Living Alone	Male Never Married Living Alone	Female Single Not Living Alone	Male Single Not Living Alone
1980	---	---	---	---	---
1990	3.3	3.6	2.7	0.4	(0.4)
2000	(0.5)	2.3	0.2	0.5	0.7

() Percent change is negative

Cohort Results

Table 6A:

Percent of the Black Middle Class (Scored Four on the Black Middle Class Index) that are Married, Never-Married, and Single Households by Age in 1980, 1990, and 2000.

Age	Household Type		
	1980	1990	2000
	Married Couple Family		
25-34	84.1	75.0	59.4
35-44	92.7	85.5	76.8
45-54	93.6	92.9	84.4
	Never-Married, Living Alone		
25-34	9.1	13.7	24.3
35-44	4.4	9.1	13.3
45-54	4.1	3.9	9.4
	Single, Not Living Alone		
25-34	6.8	11.3	16.3
35-44	2.9	5.4	9.9
45-54	2.3	3.2	6.2

Cohort Results

Table 7A:

The Percent of Married, Never Married and Single that Scored 4 on the Black Middle Class Index by Age in 1980, 1990, and 2000.

Household Type	
Age	
Married Couple Family	
	1980 1990 2000
25-34	9.3 9.8 9.5
35-44	12.2 17.3 15.9
45-54	10.6 16.2 18.5
Never-Married, Living Alone	
	1990 1990 2000
25-34	3.7 5.1 7.7
35-44	5.6 11.6 9.9
45-54	5.5 6.7 9.7
Single, Not Living Alone	
	1990 1990 2000
25-34	1.9 1.7 2.2
35-44	2.5 3.4 3.7
45-54	2.9 3.9 5.5

Cohort Results

Table 8A:

The Percent of Married, Female and Male Never Married, and Female and Male Single that Scored 4 on the Black Middle Class Index by Age in 1980, 1990, and 2000.

Age	Household Type		
	Married Couple Family		
	1980	1990	2000
25-34	9.3	9.8	9.5
35-44	12.2	17.3	15.9
45-54	10.6	16.2	18.5
	Female Never-Married, Living Alone		
	1980	1990	2000
25-34	5.2	6.6	9.9
35-44	7.4	14.6	14.3
45-54	7.4	8.5	12.9
	Female Single, Not Living Alone		
	1980	1990	2000
25-34	1.3	1.3	1.6
35-44	1.9	3.2	3.5
45-54	2.6	3.7	5.5
	Male Never-Married, Living Alone		
	1990	1990	2000
25-34	2.6	3.8	5.5
35-44	4.2	9.0	6.3
45-54	4.1	5.2	6.5
	Male Single, Not Living Alone		
	1990	1990	2000
25-34	3.9	3.5	4.3
35-44	4.8	4.0	4.6
45-54	3.9	4.6	5.5