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MOVING UP WITH KIN AND COMMUNITY: Upward Social Mobility for Black and White Women

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The major aim of this research is to reopen the study of the subjective experience of upward mobility and to incorporate race and gender into our vision of the process. It examines evidence from a social science study of upward mobility among 200 Black and white professional-managerial women in the Memphis, Tennessee metropolitan area. The experiences of the women paint a different picture from the image of the mobility process that remains from scholarship conducted 20 to 30 years ago on white males. Relationships with family of origin, partners, children, friends, and the wider community shaped the way these women envision and accomplish mobility and the way they sustain themselves as professionals and managers.

My parents always expected me to go to college. In my elementary school in Mississippi, we had split-terms. Schools were closed in the fall so that students could go in the fields and pick cotton. I remember thinking, "If there is any way to get out of this field, I'm gonna take it." At the end of October, I would go back to school, but other children would still be working in the fields. And I thought, "There's got to be a way to help people do better." That's when I started thinking about going to college.

—*Earnstein Washington, Social Worker*¹
(Interviewed, Summer 1986)

When women and people of color experience upward mobility in America, they scale steep structural as well as psychological barriers. The long process of moving from a working-class family of origin to the professional-managerial class is full of twists and turns: choices made with varying degrees of information and varying options; critical junctures faced with support and encouragement or disinterest, rejection, or active discouragement; and interpersonal relationships in which basic understandings are con-

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tinuously negotiated and renegotiated. It is a fascinating process that profoundly shapes the lives of those who experience it, as well as the lives of those around them. Social mobility is also a process engulfed in myth. One need only pick up any newspaper or turn on the television to see that the myth of upward mobility remains firmly entrenched in American culture: With hard work, talent, determination, and some luck, just about anyone can "make it."

By the late 1960s the study of the subjective experience of social mobility started to be overshadowed by quantitative research identifying the variables that predict status attainment among white men (e.g., father's occupation, father's education, son's education, son's first job). With the publication of *The American Occupational Structure* by Blau and Duncan (1967), research efforts shifted from the qualitative interpretation of face-to-face interviews and first-hand observations of social class to the quantitative analysis of national surveys. This shifted attention in the stratification literature from social psychological to structural analyses of mobility. Further, it changed the focus from understanding mobile individuals' lives in the context of changing relationships with family and community (cf. Blau 1956; E. Ellis 1958; R. Ellis and Lane 1963; LeMasters 1954; Stuckert 1963) to the detached analysis of the movement of individual cases through a mobility table (Breiger 1981; Cohen and Tyree 1986; Kerckhoff 1984; Knottnerus 1987; Sewell, Haller, and Ohlendorf 1970).

Both the early qualitative studies of the white male experience and the later shift to quantitative analyses of individuals' educational and career paths (even those works incorporating white women and people of color; cf. Alexander and Ekland 1974; Fossett, Galle, and Kelley 1986; Hout 1984; Oliver and Glick 1982; Pomer 1986; Rosenfeld 1978; Sewell, Hauser, and Wolf 1980; Treiman and Terrell 1975; Wright 1979) leave social science with little understanding of the current contexts or subjective experiences of social mobility. Further, they leave a 20-year-old legacy of the image of mobility as a process that is experienced by white males as a competitive game in which individual players are isolated and detached from others. As Strauss (1971) then described it, those who are upwardly mobile must raise work to primacy in their self-definition, take on a new reference group, embrace

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middle-class values and aspirations, and spend time with “the right people.” To accomplish this, working-class men are expected to distance themselves from their families and friends — a process facilitated by male socialization, which emphasizes independence, detachment, and rational (economically motivated) decision making.

The study of the subjective experience of mobility ceased in the early 1970s, just as the largest ever influx of upwardly mobile individuals began to enter the professional managerial middle class. In just one generation, professional, managerial, and administrative positions increased from 15 percent to 30 percent of the labor force (Ehrenreich and Ehrenreich 1979; Vanneman and Cannon 1987). This expansion of middle-class positions also accompanied the civil rights and women’s movements, which brought down many race and gender barriers to occupational attainment and upward class mobility. Because of these shifts in the occupational structure and breakdowns in some race and gender barriers, more white women and people of color (especially of the baby boom generation) have experienced upward social mobility in the post-World War II period than at any time in this century (Fossett, Galle, and Kelley 1986).

The broad goal of this article is to reopen the study of the contexts of mobility by examining the subjective experience of upward class mobility among Black and white women of the baby boom generation. Two recent studies have begun to explore these mobility issues with regard to White men and teenagers (Ryan and Sackrey 1984; Steinitz and Solomon 1986). In this article, we seek to begin to lay a foundation for future explorations into the ways that race and gender shape the class experience of upward mobility.

The image of the isolated and detached experience of mobility that we have inherited from past scholarship is problematic for anyone seeking to understand the process for women or people of color. Twenty years of scholarship in the study of both race and gender has taught us the importance of interpersonal attachments to the lives of women (cf. Miller 1986) and a commitment to racial uplift among people of color (cf. Anthony 1980; Brown 1987; Collins 1990; Gilkes 1983). For example, recent research on white women presents a picture of the female experience that emphasizes commitment, interdependence, and affiliations — especially with family. Far from a willingness to distance self from family for the greater goal of “making it,” social relationships are viewed as the core of women’s lives (Chodorow 1978; Gilligan 1982).

The psychologist Miller (1986, 83) notes:

Women stay with, build on, and develop in the context of attachments and affiliations with others. Indeed, women’s sense of self becomes very much

organized around being able to make and then to maintain affiliations and relationships. Eventually, for many women the threat of disruption of an affiliation is perceived not as a loss of a relationship but as something closer to a total loss of self.

McAdoo (1978) suggests that lacking wealth, the greatest gift a Black family has been able to give to its children has been the motivation and skills to succeed in school. Aspirations for college attendance and professional positions are stressed as *family* goals, and the entire family may make sacrifices and provide support. Likewise, recent scholarship on women of color (Collins 1990) notes that Black women have long seen the activist potential of education and have sought it as a cornerstone of community development—a means of uplifting the race. When women of color or white women are put at the center of the analysis of upward mobility, it is clear that different questions will be raised about social mobility and different descriptions of the process will ensue.

This study seeks to bring race and gender into the study of the subjective experience of upward social class mobility. Specifically, we seek to identify some commonalities and differences in the ways that Black and white women experience certain key relational aspects of the mobility process. First, we examine their relationships with family as reflected in parental expectations and supports for education, occupation/career, and marriage and children. Second, we explore the women's sense of debt and obligation to family and friends. Finally, we explore some ways that mobile women's experiences are situated within the larger communities—both Black and white.

RESEARCH METHODS

Research design. These data are from a study of full-time employed middle-class women in the Memphis metropolitan area. This research is designed to explore the processes of upward social mobility for Black and white women by examining differences between women professionals, managers, and administrators who are from working- and middle-class backgrounds—that is, upwardly mobile and middle-class stable women. In this way, we isolate subjective processes shared among women who have been upwardly mobile from those common to women who have reproduced their family's professional-managerial class standing. Likewise, we identify common experiences in the attainment process that are shared by women of the same race, be they upwardly mobile or stable middle class. Finally, we specify some ways in which the attainment process is unique for each race-class group.

Sample. The population of interest was defined as women of the “baby boom” cohort (i.e., 25 to 40 years of age at the time of the study) who were college graduates who went to college directly from high school or within two years of graduation and who were currently working full-time as professionals, managers, or administrators — that is, in “middle-class” occupations (Vanneman and Cannon 1987). (For a discussion of the rationale for selecting these groups, see Cannon, Higginbotham, and Leung 1988).

As is the case with many studies of special categories of women, there was no way to sample randomly the population who fit the preceding study parameters. We employed a quota sample that was stratified by three dimensions of inequality: race, class background of the respondent, and the gender composition of her occupation. Each dimension was operationalized into two categories: Black and white, raised working class/upwardly mobile and raised middle class/middle-class stable, and female-dominated and male-dominated. Twenty-five cases were selected for each of the eight cells of this $2 \times 2 \times 2$ design. For purposes of this research, data are analyzed by race and class background only.

Within each of these cells, subjects were selected to reflect the proportions of professionals, managers, and administrators in the Memphis Standard Metropolitan Statistical Area (SMSA, 60 percent professionals and 40 percent managers and administrators in the male-dominated occupations; 76 percent professionals and 24 percent managers and administrators in the female-dominated occupations). Within each gender-composition category, particular occupations were selected for inclusion in the sample based on their proportions among professionals, managers, and administrators in the SMSA.

Finally, to avoid confounding race, class background, and occupation, subjects were selected so that the different race and class-background categories contained women from the same or closely related occupations. Subjects were also sorted into three age groupings defined by birth cohort (1956-60, 1951-55, and 1945-50) to prevent overrepresentation of any age group in a race, class-background, or specific occupational category.

Procedures. Every few weeks, volunteers who met all study parameters (25-40 years of age; full-time employed professionals, managers, or administrators; and college graduates who went directly to college) were sorted according to all of the stratifying variables (race, class, sex composition of occupation, professional vs. managers and administrators; specific occupation; and age category). Subjects to be interviewed were then randomly

selected from each pool. (A detailed description of sampling procedures can be found in Cannon, Higginbotham, and Leung 1988.)

Instrument. Data were gathered in face-to-face focused life-history interviews, lasting 2½ to 3 hours each. The research instrument contained many items, including schooling experiences from elementary school through college; early family experiences; perceived barriers to attainment and social support networks at critical mobility junctures (from high school to college, immediately after college, in graduate school); current work situation (including perceived job stress, location in the administrative hierarchy, job rewards, perceptions of discrimination, obstacles to attainment); integration of work and personal life (including social support networks); and general well-being and physical health, life events, and mental health.

Measurement. In this research, we rely on a model of social class basically derived from the work of Poulantzas (1974), Braverman (1974), Ehrenreich and Ehrenreich (1979), and elaborated in Vanneman and Cannon (1987). These works explicate a basic distinction between social class and social status. Classes represent bounded categories of the population, groups set in a relation of opposition to one another by their roles in the capitalist system. The middle class, or professional-managerial class, is set off from the working class by the power and control it exerts over workers in three realms: economic (power through ownership), political (power through direct supervisory authority), and ideological (power to plan and organize work; Poulantzas 1974; Vanneman and Cannon 1987).

In contrast, education, prestige, and income represent social statuses—hierarchically structured relative rankings along a ladder of economic success and social prestige. Positions along these dimensions are not established by social relations of dominance and subordination but, rather, as rankings on scales representing resources and desirability. In some respects, they represent both the justification for power differentials vested in classes and the rewards for the role that the middle class plays in controlling labor.

Our interest is in the process of upward social class mobility, moving from a working-class family of origin to a middle-class destination—from a position of working-class subordination to a position of control over the working class. Lacking inherited wealth or other resources, those working-class people who attain middle-class standing do so primarily by obtaining a college education and entering a professional, managerial, or administrative occupation. Thus we examine carefully the process of educational

attainment not as evidence of middle-class standing but as a necessary part of the mobility process for most working-class people.

Likewise, occupation alone does not define the middle class, but professional, managerial, and administrative occupations capture many of the supervisory and ideologically based positions whose function is to control workers' lives. Consequently, we defined subjects as *middle class* by virtue of their employment in either a professional, managerial, or administrative occupation as specified in Braverman (1974), Ehrenreich and Ehrenreich (1979), and Vanneman and Cannon (1987; see Cannon, Higginbotham, and Leung 1988 for exceptions). Classification of subjects as either professional or managerial-administrative was made on the basis of the designation of occupations in the U.S. Bureau of the Census's (1983) "Detailed Population Characteristics: Tennessee." Managerial occupations were defined as those in the census categories of managers and administrators; professionals were defined as those occupations in the professional category, excluding technicians, whom Braverman (1974) contends are working class.

Upwardly mobile women were defined as those women raised in families where neither parent was employed as a professional, manager, or administrator. Typical occupations for working-class fathers were postal clerk, craftsman, semi-skilled manufacturing worker, janitor, and laborer. Some working-class mothers had clerical and sales positions, but many of the Black mothers also worked as private household workers. *Middle-class stable* women were defined as those women raised in families where *either* parent was employed as a professional, manager, or administrator. Typical occupations of middle-class parents were social worker, teacher, and school administrator as well as high-status professionals such as attorneys, physicians, and dentists.

Data analysis. In the following section we present a set of responses to questions regarding the family, friend, and community relationships of upwardly mobile and middle-class stable Black and white women. Each of the questions provided a dichotomous response, yes or no, and then asked subjects to elaborate on their answers. Table 1 contains frequencies and percentages of yes or affirmative responses for each question by each of the four race-class background groups: Black and white, upwardly mobile and middle-class stable. Since percentages add to 100, data on no or negative responses are not included. For each question, chi-square statistics are presented for three analyses: (1) a four-category independent variable including all race and class categories, labeled *Total*; (2) a race effect obtained by collapsing class categories; (3) a class effect obtained by collapsing race

categories. In addition to these data, quotes from respondents that explicate the response are also presented, along with some responses to open-ended questions.

RESULTS

Relationships with Family

Family expectations for educational attainment. Four questions assess the expectations and support among family members for the educational attainment of the subjects. First, "Do you recall your father or mother stressing that you attain an education?" Yes was the response of 190 of the 200 women. Each of the women in this study had obtained a college degree, and many have graduate degrees. It is clear that for Black and white women, education was an important concern in their families (see Table 1, row 1).

The comments of Laura Lee, a 39 year-old Black woman who was raised middle class, were typical:

Going to school, that was never a discussable issue. Just like you were born to live and die, you were going to go to school. You were going to prepare yourself to do something.

It should be noted, however, that only 86 percent of the white working-class women answered yes, compared to 98 percent of all other groups. Although this difference is small, it foreshadows a pattern where white women raised in working-class families received the least support and encouragement for educational and career attainment.

"When you were growing up, how far did your father expect you to go in school?" While most fathers expected college attendance from their daughters, differences also exist by class of origin. Only 70 percent of the working-class fathers, both Black and white, expected their daughters to attend college. In contrast, 94 percent of the Black middle-class and 88 percent of the white middle-class women's fathers had college expectations for their daughters.

When asked the same question about mother's expectations, 88 percent to 92 percent of each group's mothers expected their daughters to get a college education, except the white working-class women, for whom only 66 percent of mothers held such expectations. In short, only among the white working-class women did a fairly substantial proportion (about one-third) of both mothers and fathers expect less than a college education from their

TABLE 1: Family Supports for Educational and Occupational Achievement by Race and Class Background

	Black			White			Total (χ^2)	Race (χ^2)	Class (χ^2)
	Upwardly Mobile	Middle-Class Stable		Upwardly Mobile	Middle-Class Stable				
	N			N					
Parents stressed need for an education	98% (49)	98% (49)	86% (43)	98% (49)	98% (49)	86% (43)	11 37**	3 79*	3 79*
Father expected college education	69% (33)	94% (46)	70% (32)	88% (44)	88% (44)	70% (32)	15 00**	0 15	14 44**
Mother expected college education	88% (44)	88% (44)	66% (33)	92% (45)	92% (45)	66% (33)	15 15**	3 05	5 98**
Family provided emotional support for college	64% (32)	86% (43)	56% (28)	70% (35)	70% (35)	56% (28)	11 31**	3 37	7 57**
Financial aid from family for college	56% (28)	90% (45)	62% (31)	88% (44)	88% (44)	62% (31)	23 91**	0 10	23 39**
Parents stressed need for an occupation	94% (47)	94% (47)	56% (28)	70% (35)	70% (35)	56% (28)	31 74**	19 02**	1 45
Family encouraged respondent to think about career	56% (28)	60% (30)	40% (20)	52% (26)	52% (26)	40% (20)	4 49	2 88	1 28
Parents stressed marriage as primary life goal	6% (3)	4% (2)	22% (11)	18% (9)	18% (9)	22% (11)	10 74*	12 00**	0 48
Never married	34% (17)	24% (12)	20% (10)	34% (17)	34% (17)	20% (10)	3 77	0 16	0 16
Feeling of owing kin	86% (43)	74% (37)	46% (23)	68% (34)	68% (34)	46% (23)	19 53**	12 26**	1 71

daughters. About 30 percent of Black working-class fathers held lower expectations for their daughters, but not the mothers; virtually all middle-class parents expected a college education for their daughters.

Sara Marx is a white, 33-year-old director of counseling raised in a rural working-class family. She is among those whose parents did not expect a college education for her. She was vague about the roots of attending college:

It seems like we had a guest speaker who talked to us. Maybe before our exams somebody talked to us. I really can't put my finger on anything. I don't know where the information came from exactly.

"Who provided emotional support for you to make the transition from high school to college?" While 86 percent of the Black middle-class women indicated that family provided that support, 70 percent of the white middle class, 64 percent of the Black working class, and only 56 percent of the white working class received emotional support from family.

"Who paid your college tuition and fees?" Beyond emotional support, financial support is critical to college attendance. There are clear class differences in financial support for college. Roughly 90 percent of the middle-class respondents and only 56 percent and 62 percent of the Black and white working-class women, respectively, were financially supported by their families. These data also suggest that working-class parents were less able to give emotional or financial support for college than they were to hold out the expectation that their daughters should attend.

Family expectations for occupation or career. When asked, "Do you recall your father or mother stressing that you should have an occupation to succeed in life?", racial differences appear. Ninety-four percent of all Black respondents said yes. In the words of Julie Bird, a Black woman raised-middle-class junior high school teacher:

My father would always say, "You see how good I'm doing? Each generation should do more than the generation before." He expects me to accomplish more than he has.

Ann Right, a 36-year-old Black attorney whose father was a janitor, said:

They wanted me to have a better life than they had. For all of us. And that's why they emphasized education and emphasized working relationships and how you get along with people and that kind of thing.

Ruby James, a Black teacher from a working-class family, said:

They expected me to have a good-paying job and to have a family and be married. Go to work every day. Buy a home. That's about it. Be happy.

In contrast, only 70 percent of the white middle-class and 56 percent of the white working-class women indicated that their parents stressed that an occupation was needed for success. Nina Pentel, a 26-year-old white medical social worker, expressed a common response: "They said 'You're going to get married but get a degree, you never know what's going to happen to you.' They were pretty laid back about goals."

When the question focuses on a career rather than an occupation, the family encouragement is lower and differences were not significant, but similar patterns emerged. We asked respondents, "Who, if anyone, encouraged you to think about a career?" Among Black respondents, 60 percent of the middle-class and 56 percent of the working-class women answered that family encouraged them. Only 40 percent of the white working-class women indicated that their family encouraged them in their thinking about a career, while 52 percent of the white middle-class women did so.

Mary Ann Tidwell, a white woman raised working class in the rural South, is now an environmental manager. She has a B.A. and an M.A. in physics. Despite the scarcity of women in her occupation, Mary Ann's experiences getting there were not unusual for working-class women of this era. In high school, Mary Ann excelled in science and math, yet her parents held very traditional expectations for her:

They wanted me to be a teacher, be married, have grandkids for them, and live near home. They wanted me to attend school so that I could support myself in case I ended up with a husband leaving me. My brothers were encouraged to have a *big* career, be something *big*! Mine was to have financial independence. They expected the same grades from us, but they didn't expect a career-daughter.

Dawn Jones, a 33-year-old white attorney from a working-class family, described her parents' feelings:

They felt that ideal life is something that does not encourage the woman to have a demanding professional career. It is asking for trouble. During that time everything was presumed, "you'll do well in school, you go to college, you'll have a family." I was totally unprepared for what my life has been, really.

When working-class white women seek to be mobile through their own attainments, they face conflicts. Their parents encourage educational attainment, but when young women develop professional career goals, these same parents sometimes become ambivalent. This was the case with Elizabeth Marlow, who is currently a public interest attorney—a position her parents never intended her to hold. She described her parents' traditional expectations and their reluctance to support her career goals fully.

My parents assumed that I would go college and meet some nice man and finish, but not necessarily work after. I would be a good mother for my children. I don't think that they ever thought I would go to law school. Their attitude about my interest in law school was, "You can do it if you want to, but we don't think it is a particularly practical thing for a woman to do."

Elizabeth is married and has three children, but she is not the traditional housewife of her parents' dreams. She received more support outside the family for her chosen life-style.

Although Black families are indeed more likely than white families to encourage their daughters to prepare for careers, like white families, they frequently steer them toward highly visible traditionally female occupations, such as teacher, nurse, and social worker. Thus many mobile Black women are directed toward the same gender-segregated occupations as white women.

For example, Lynn Johnson was encouraged by her working-class mother to get a degree in education, but instead, she majored in economics and never told her mother until graduation day. She described her encounter.

Momma said, "Be a teacher." That's all she wanted me to do. She came to my graduation from Regional College and she got my degree, and it said *Bachelor of Science in Economics*. Momma said, "Girl, what are you gonna teach? They don't teach Economics, and you can't type either!" I said, "That's right Momma, I sure can't." "Well, I want to see you get a job with this!" She threw that degree back at me. Oh, she was *so mad!* She has since learned better, but initially she was really hurt, because she thought my only option was to teach.

Marriage. Although working-class families may encourage daughters to marry, they recognize the need for working-class women to contribute to family income or to support themselves economically. To achieve these aims, many working-class girls are encouraged to pursue an education as preparation for work in gender-segregated occupations. Work in these fields presumably allows women to keep marriage, family, and child rearing as life goals while contributing to the family income and to have "something to fall back on" if the marriage does not work out. This interplay among marriage, education, financial need, and class mobility is complex (Joslin 1979).

We asked, "Do you recall your mother or father emphasizing that marriage should be your primary life goal?" While the majority of all respondents did not get the message that marriage was the *primary life goal*, Black and white women's parents clearly saw this differently. Virtually no Black parents stressed marriage as the primary life goal (6 percent of the working class and 4 percent of the middle class), but significantly more white parents did (22 percent of the working class and 18 percent of the middle class).

Some white women said their families expressed active opposition to marriage, such as Clare Baron, a raised-working-class nursing supervisor, who said, "My mother always said, 'Don't get married and don't have children!'"

More common responses recognized the fragility of marriage and the need to support oneself. For example, Alice Page, a 31-year-old white raised-middle-class librarian, put it this way:

I feel like I am really part of a generation that for the first time is thinking, "I don't want to have to depend on somebody to take care of me because what if they say they are going to take care of me and then they are not there? They die, or they leave me or whatever." I feel very much that I've got to be able to support myself and I don't know that single women in other eras have had to deal with that to the same degree.

While white working-class women are often raised to prepare for work roles so that they can contribute to family income and, if necessary, support themselves, Black women face a different reality. Unlike white women, Black women are typically socialized to view marriage separately from economic security, because it is not expected that marriage will ever remove them from the labor market. As a result, Black families socialize all their children—girls and boys—for self-sufficiency (Clark 1986; Higginbotham and Cannon 1988).

Lou Nelson's response was typical of the Black working-class women. She said:

I can truly remember my parents saying "I want you to go to school and get your degree, get you a job, then get married if you choose to." It was always a case of you being in a position to get married if you choose to marry and not having to rely on a man to provide you with food and clothing and things of that sort. They said, "Always be able to take care of yourself."

Janice Freeman, a Black woman raised working class who is now a college professor, responded similarly, "The main thing that they wanted me to do was to become financially independent. I mean be stable and be able to take care of myself and not be a burden to anybody."

In fact, fairly substantial numbers of each group had never married by the time of the interview, ranging from 20 percent of the white working-class to 34 percent of the Black working-class and white middle-class respondents. Some of the women were pleased with their singlehood, like Alice Page, who said:

I am single by choice. That is how I see myself. I have purposely avoided getting into any kind of romantic situation with men. I have enjoyed going out

but never wanted to get serious. If anyone wants to get serious, I quit going out with him.

Other women expressed disappointment and some shock that they were not yet married. When asked about her feeling about being single, Sally Ford, a 32-year-old white manager, said:

That's what I always wanted to do: to be married and have children. To me, that is the ideal. I want a happy, good marriage with children. I do not like being single at all. It is very, very lonesome. I don't see any advantages to being single. None!

SENSE OF OBLIGATION

Subjective sense of debt to kin and friends. McAadoo (1978) reports that upwardly mobile Black Americans receive more requests to share resources from their working-class kin than do middle-class Black Americans. Many mobile Black Americans feel a "social debt" because their families aided them in the mobility process and provided emotional support. When we asked the white women in the study the following question: "Generally, do you feel you owe a lot for the help given to you by your family and relatives?" many were perplexed and asked what the question meant. In contrast, both the working- and middle-class Black women tended to respond immediately that they felt a sense of obligation to family and friends in return for the support they had received. Black women, from both the working class and the middle class, expressed the strongest sense of debt to family, with 86 percent and 74 percent, respectively, so indicating. White working-class women were least likely to feel that they owed family (46 percent), while 68 percent of white middle-class women so indicated. In short, upwardly mobile Black women were almost twice as likely as upwardly mobile white women to express a sense of debt to family.

Linda Brown, an upwardly mobile Black woman, gave a typical response, "Yes, they are there when you need them." Similar were the words of Jean Marsh, "Yes, because they have been supportive. They're dependable. If I need them I can depend upon them."

One of the most significant ways in which Black working-class families aided their daughters and left them with a sense of debt related to care for their children. Dawn March expressed it thus:

They have been there more so during my adult years than a lot of other families that I know about. My mother kept all of my children until they were old enough to go to day care. And she not only kept them, she'd give them a bath for me

during the daytime and feed them before I got home from work. Very, very supportive people. So, I really would say I owe them for that.

Carole Washington, an upwardly mobile Black woman occupational therapist, also felt she owed her family. She reported:

I know the struggle that my parents have had to get me where I am. I know the energy they no longer have to put into the rest of the family even though they want to put it there and they're willing. I feel it is my responsibility to give back some of that energy they have given to me. It's self-directed, not required.

White working-class women, in contrast, were unlikely to feel a sense of debt and expressed their feelings in similar ways. Irma Cox, part owner of a computer business, said, "I am appreciative of the values my parents instilled in me. But I for the most part feel like I have done it on my own." Carey Mink, a 35-year-old psychiatric social worker, said, "No, they pointed me in a direction and they were supportive, but I've done a lot of the work myself." Debra Beck, a judge, responded, "No, I feel that I've gotten most places on my own." And finally, Phyllis Coe, a library administrator, stated:

No. Growing up in a family, I don't think it's that kind of a relationship — that's their job. I feel that way with my son. I certainly love him but I don't want him ever to be in a position to think he owes me.

The sense of balance or imbalance in one's interpersonal relationships with family and friends can be a source of comfort or stress. Carrington (1980, 266) found that the sense of debt can contribute to depression among Black professional women:

Depressed black women express strong needs to nurture and "take care of" significant others in their lives — spouses and children. They also feel guilty when engaging in self-enhancing activities, either professionally or personally, that do not directly or indirectly include their families. This sense of guilt is particularly observed in depressed black women who are upwardly mobile.

To examine this issue we asked, "In terms of your obligations to your family and relatives, do you feel you've: given more help than you received, received more help than you've given, or given about the the same as you've received?" Responses varied by race and class. For all groups except the Black working-class women, about one-half felt that they had given equal to what they had received; there was some sort of balance in family relationships. When perceived imbalance existed, it was mostly that the women felt they received more than they gave. Again the rather striking exception is Black raised-working-class women, 31 percent of whom feel they have given more than they have received from family. Some comments from this group illustrate the point.

Rose Hill, a 40-year-old professor who was raised working class, said: "I feel that in many respects I'm stronger in terms of emotional and financial well-being than most of my family and I feel an obligation to give it back."

Jenny Well, a college administrator, recalled an incident that was typical of how she frequently gave more to her family than she received.

For example, our aunt died. All the nieces and nephews were going to buy flowers — a spray from us. I ended up paying for it, okay? And all of them made a lot more money than I do. And I felt used. That happens a lot of times. We all come up with an idea, but to make sure the idea goes through, Jenny's always stuck with it.

Mary Chapel, a married 35-year-old corporate director with three children, said:

I've given more than I received. Because it is almost as if I'm the backbone of the family in my father's absence. I'm the person that all of them come to. My sister in New York comes to me, my sister in Memphis comes to me, my mother comes to me, everybody, even my friends come to me. It's as if I've moved in to take the place that my father vacated when he passed.

We also asked, "In terms of your obligations to your friends, do you feel you've given more help than you received, received more help that you've given, or given about the same as you've received?" Since friends are chosen, it is not surprising that the balance of obligations with friends is more likely to be equal for all groups. Interestingly, however, Black women are most likely to feel that they give more than they receive, even to friends.

In addition to being the backbone of her family, Mary Chapel is also a key person in her friendship network. She reported:

Well, not so much in terms of giving money, but certainly giving them my time. I don't care what it is, day or night, if they want to see me or talk to me, I think it is really important. And I don't turn around and ask them to do the same for me because I don't need that kind of external support. I don't need to go outside of my family to ask for help.

RELATIONS TO THE COMMUNITY

Commitment to community. The mainstream "model of community stresses the rights of individuals to make decisions in their own self interest, regardless of the impact on the larger society" (Collins 1990, 52). This model may explain relations to community of origin for mobile white males but cannot be generalized to other racial and gender groups. In the context of

well-recognized structures of racial oppression, America's racial-ethnic communities develop collective survival strategies that contrast with the individualism of the dominant culture but ensure the community's survival (Collins 1990; McAdoo 1978; Stack 1974; Valentine 1978). McAdoo (1978) argues that Black people have *only* been able to advance in education and attain higher status and higher paying jobs with the support of the wider Black community, teachers in segregated schools, extended family networks, and Black mentors already in those positions. This widespread community involvement enables mobile people of color to confront and challenge racist obstacles in credentialing institutions, and it distinguishes the mobility process in racial-ethnic communities from mobility in the dominant culture. For example, Lou Nelson, now a librarian, described the support she felt in her southern segregated inner-city school. She said:

There was a closeness between people and that had a lot to do with neighborhood schools. I went to Tubman High School with people that lived in the Tubman area. I think that there was a bond, a bond between parents, the PTA I think that it was just that everybody felt that everybody knew everybody. And that was special.

Family and community involvement and support in the mobility process means that many Black professionals and managers continue to feel linked to their communities of origin. Lillian King, a high-ranking city official who was raised working class, discussed her current commitment to the Black community. She said:

Because I have more opportunities, I've got an obligation to give more back and to set a positive example for Black people and especially for Black women. I think we've got to do a tremendous job in building self-esteem and giving people the desire to achieve.

Judith Moore is a 34-year-old single parent employed as a health investigator. She has been able to maintain her connection with her community, and that is a source of pride.

I'm proud that I still have a sense of who I am in terms of Black people. That's very important to me. No matter how much education or professional status I get, I do not want to lose touch with where I've come from. I think that you need to look back and that kind of pushes you forward. I think the degree and other things can make you lose sight of that, especially us Black folks, but I'm glad that I haven't and I try to teach that [commitment] to my son.

For some Black women, their mobility has enabled them to give to an even broader community. This is the case with Sammi Lewis, a raised-working-class woman who is a director of a social service agency. She said,

"I owe a responsibility to the entire community, and not to any particular group."

There are also questions about the depth of mainstream individualism within the white community. Recent scholarship on mobility experiences of white youth in the Northeast demonstrates that some share a commitment to educational attainment but do not necessarily want to take on all the trappings of the middle class. Steinitz and Solomon (1986) discuss how many of their white respondents want to become somebody, but "they do not want to become different kinds of people, nor do they want to separate themselves from those they now know and love" (p. 30). They value their connections with others and are people who believe "that development through relationships is the critical role to maturity, [and] who hold that responsibility to others is necessary to the realization of self" (p. 13).

In our study as well, the white raised-working-class women represented a spectrum. Some discussed primary responsibility to the nuclear family, like Sara Marx, a 33-year-old director of counseling. When asked about the similarities between her life and her parents' lives, Sara remarked:

There is a definite loyalty to partners. We have a good communication within the family. I think my parents have more of a non-verbal communication and my husband and I have a more verbal communication. Honesty, work ethic—we both think we should work hard to get things to make us comfortable.

Sally Ford, a 33-year-old single woman raised working class and now employed as a manager for a manufacturing company, was taught to look beyond the family. When reporting similarities with her parents, Sally noted: "They taught me a tremendous sense of responsibility in terms of what you owe to the world and your fellow man and community. We have that in common." Sally's parents were active in social organizations and community issues, and she has followed that path.

Crossing the color line. Mobility for people of color is complex because in addition to crossing class lines, mobility often means crossing racial and cultural ones as well. Since the 1960s, people of color have increasingly attended either integrated or predominantly white schools. Only mobile white ethnics have a comparable experience of simultaneously crossing class and cultural barriers, yet even this experience is qualitatively different from that of Black and other people of color. White ethnicity can be practically invisible to white middle-class school peers and co-workers, but people of color are more visible and are subjected to harsher treatment. Our research indicates that no matter when people of color first encounter integrated or predominantly white settings, it is always a shock. The experience of racial

exclusion cannot prepare people of color to deal with the racism in daily face-to-face encounters with white people.

For example, Lynn Johnson was in the first cohort of Black students at Regional College, a small private college in Memphis. The self-confidence and stamina Lynn developed in her supportive segregated high school helped her withstand the racism she faced as the first female and the first Black to graduate in economics at Regional College. Lynn described her treatment:

I would come into class and Dr. Simpson (the Economics professor) would alphabetically call the roll. When he came to my name, he would just jump over it. He would not ask me any questions, he would not do anything. I stayed in that class. I struggled through. When it was my turn, I'd start talking. He would say, "Johnson, I wasn't talking to you" [because he never said *Miss Johnson*]. I'd say, "That's all right, Dr. Simpson, it was my turn. I figured you just overlooked me. I'm just the littlest person in here. Wasn't that the right answer?" He would say, "Yes, that was the right answer." I drove him mad, I really did. He finally got used to me and started to help me.

In southern cities, where previous interaction between Black and white people followed a rigid code, adjustments were necessary on both sides. It was clear to Lynn Johnson and others that college faculty and students had to adapt to her small Black cohort at Regional College.

Wendy Jones attended a formerly predominantly white state university that had just merged with a formerly predominantly Black college. This new institution meant many adjustments for faculty and students. As a working-class person majoring in engineering, she had a rough transition. She recalled:

I had never gone to school with white kids. I'd always gone to all Black schools all my life and the Black kids there [at the university] were snooty. Only one friend from high school went there and she flunked out. The courses were harder and all my teachers were men and white. Most of the kids were white. I was in classes where I'd be the only Black and woman. There were no similarities to grasp for. I had to adjust to being in that situation. In about a year I was comfortable where I could walk up to people in my class and have conversations.

For some Black people, their first significant interaction with white people did not come until graduate school. Janice Freeman described her experiences:

I went to a Black high school, a Black college and then worked for a Black man who was a former teacher. Everything was comfortable until I had to go to State University for graduate school. I felt very insecure. I was thrown into an environment that was very different—during the 1960s and 1970s there was so much unrest anyway—so it was extremely difficult for me.

It was not in graduate school but on her first job as a social worker that Janice had to learn to work *with* white people. She said, "After I realized that I could hang in school, working at the social work agency allowed me to learn how to work *with* white people. I had never done that before and now I do it better than anybody."

Learning to live in a white world was an additional hurdle for all Black women in this age cohort. Previous generations of Black people were more likely to be educated in segregated colleges and to work within the confines of the established Black community. They taught in segregated schools, provided dental and medical care to the Black communities, and provided social services and other comforts to members of their own communities. They also lived in the Black community and worshiped on Sunday with many of the people they saw in different settings. As the comments of our respondents reveal, both Black and white people had to adjust to integrated settings, but it was more stressful for the newcomers.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Our major aim in this research was to reopen the study of the subjective experience of upward social mobility and to begin to incorporate race and gender into our vision of the process. In this exploratory work, we hope to raise issues and questions that will cast a new light on taken-for-granted assumptions about the process and the people who engage in it. The experiences of these women have certainly painted a different picture from the one we were left some twenty years ago. First and foremost, these women are not detached, isolated, or driven solely by career goals. Relationships with family of origin, partners, children, friends, and the wider community loom large in the way they envision and accomplish mobility and the way they sustain themselves as professional and managerial women.

Several of our findings suggest ways that race and gender shape the mobility process for baby boom Black and white women. Education was stressed as important in virtually all of the families of these women; however, they differed in how it was viewed and how much was desired. The upwardly mobile women, both Black and white, shared some obstacles to attainment. More mobile women had parents who never expected them to achieve a college education. They also received less emotional and financial support for college attendance from their families than the women in middle-class families received. Black women also faced the unique problem of crossing racial barriers simultaneously with class barriers.

There were fairly dramatic race differences in the messages that the Black and white women received from family about what their lives should be like as adults. Black women clearly received the message that they needed an occupation to succeed in life and that marriage was a secondary concern. Many Black women also expressed a sense that their mobility was connected to an entire racial uplift process, not merely an individual journey.

White upwardly mobile women received less clear messages. Only one-half of these women said that their parents stressed the need for an occupation to succeed, and 20 percent said that marriage was stressed as the primary life goal. The most common message seemed to suggest that an occupation was necessary, because marriage could not be counted on to provide economic survival. Having a career, on the other hand, could even be seen as detrimental to adult happiness.

Upward mobility is a process that requires sustained effort and emotional and cognitive, as well as financial, support. The legacy of the image of mobility that was built on the white male experience focuses on credentialing institutions, especially the schools, as the primary place where talent is recognized and support is given to ensure that the talented among the working class are mobile. Family and friends are virtually invisible in this portrayal of the mobility process.

Although there is a good deal of variation in the roles that family and friends play for these women, they are certainly not invisible in the process. Especially among many of the Black women, there is a sense that they owe a great debt to their families for the help they have received. Black upwardly mobile women were also much more likely to feel that they give more than they receive from kin. Once they have achieved professional managerial employment, the sense of debt combines with their greater access to resources to put them in the position of being asked to give and of giving more to both family and friends. Carrington (1980) identifies some potential mental health hazards of such a sense of debt in upwardly mobile Black women's lives.

White upwardly mobile women are less likely to feel indebted to kin and to feel that they have accomplished alone. Yet even among this group, connections to spouses and children played significant roles in defining how women were mobile, their goals, and their sense of satisfaction with their life in the middle class.

These data are suggestive of a mobility process that is motivated by a desire for personal, but also collective, gain and that is shaped by interpersonal commitments to family, partners and children, community, and the race. Social mobility involves competition, but also cooperation, community

support, and personal obligations. Further research is needed to explore fully this new image of mobility and to examine the relevance of these issues for white male mobility as well.

NOTE

1. This and all the names used in this article are pseudonyms.

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