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Class and Sex

The analysis of the interplay of class relations and sexual divisions raises a number of conceptual problems which have been largely ignored throughout this study. Two of these are particularly important: the relationship between individuals and families as incumbents of positions ("empty places") within class relations; and the relationship of the domestic labor of housewives to capitalist relations of production. In order to define adequately the class position of women, both of these problems need resolution.

Many Marxists (as well as non-Marxists) have argued that the family rather than the individual is the appropriate constituent element of class (see Szymanski, 1972, 1973; Stodder, 1973). When this stance is adopted, the class position of the family is usually identified as that of the "head of household," which is generally assumed to be the man in a

married couple. These conventions in effect define the class position of married women by the class position of their husbands.

Whether individuals or families are the appropriate elements of class is in part an historical question, not simply an a priori theoretical one. There are certain circumstances in which families rather than individuals fill the "empty places" within the social relations of production, and in such situations the family becomes the appropriate incumbent of class positions. Such is often the case, for example, for the traditional petty bourgeoisie, especially in agriculture. Within the capitalist mode of production itself, kinship groups (rather than nuclear families per se) may occupy the empty places of finance capital. But in general, especially in advanced capitalism, it is more appropriate to view individuals as occupying class positions.¹

A related conceptual issue concerns the interpretation of domestic labor. Many women do not directly participate in capitalist production, and thus in order to define their class position at all it is necessary to understand the relationship of household production to capitalist production. Some Marxists have argued that household production should be viewed as a subsidiary mode of production within capitalist society. To be sure, like all subsidiary modes of production, domestic production is dominated by capitalism, but nevertheless it maintains a certain autonomy (see Harrison, 1974). Other Marxists have argued that domestic production represents a final, privatized stage within capitalist production itself in which commodities are transformed into consumable use-values (see Secombe, 1974; Benston, 1969). And yet other Marxists have stressed that the interpenetration between the role of women as wage laborers and their role as household producers is critical for understanding the nature of domestic labor itself (see Hartsock, 1975; Coulson et al., 1975). While at times these debates take on a rather scholastic character, the issues they raise are essential for understanding the class position of housewives.

¹This does not imply that family units are irrelevant in a class analysis. While individuals may generally fill the empty places within social relations of production, families fill the empty places within social relations of reproduction.

In these terms, the working-class position within the social relations of reproduction is filled by families engaged in the reproduction of workers' labor power; the capitalist class position is filled by families engaged in the reproduction of capitalists. This suggests that the notion of "contradictory locations within class relations" can be extended to families: a family occupies a contradictory location within the social relations of reproduction when it reproduces the labor power of individuals in different class positions (i.e., when the members of the family occupy different positions within the social relations of production).

I have not reached a satisfactory solution to the problem of understanding household labor.² Given the empirical focus of this study on income inequality, however, it is possible to leave this issue in abeyance, since in any event we will limit the analysis to women in the labor force. Nevertheless, because the direct participation of women within capitalist relations of production is bound up with their role in the household, the absence of a theory of domestic labor unquestionably limits the analysis which follows.

In effect, therefore, I will treat the problem of sex and class in an exactly analogous way to the analysis of race and class in the previous chapter. Women will be treated as individuals inserted into the empty places within capitalist social relations of production rather than as members of family units within social relations of reproduction. We will thus investigate only one dimension of the complex interrelationship of class and sex: the ways in which class and sex interact once women actively enter the labor force.

RETURNS TO EDUCATION FOR SEXES WITHIN CLASS CATEGORIES

Hypothesis 10.1. *The returns to education of men and women will be much closer within class positions than across class categories.*

As in the research on racial differences in returns to education, one of the most consistent findings in studies of sex and income is that women tend to get lower income returns to education than men. Suter and Miller (1973) found that controlling for occupational status, full-time employment, and lifetime work experience, women received less than half the wage and salary returns to education of men (and less than half the income returns to occupational status as well). Even when

²One line of reasoning which I find attractive, but not without problems, is to define household labor primarily in terms of social relations of reproduction. As discussed in note 1 above, families rather than individuals are the appropriate units within social relations of reproduction. A housewife in a family which occupies the working-class position within social relations of reproduction (because it reproduces workers' labor power) would thus be in the working class because of her position within the family and the family's position within the relations of reproduction. The difficulty with this approach is understanding rigorously the distinction between "production" and "reproduction." Much of the actual activity of housewives involves the production of use-values, even if the function of this production is reproduction of labor power. Since most concrete social activity involves simultaneously productive and reproductive dimensions, it seems somewhat arbitrary to understand families narrowly in terms of the latter. This line of thought is explored in an extremely interesting way by Bertaux (1977).

career women (defined as women who have worked at least three quarters of the time since leaving school) were analyzed separately, the returns to education were much less than for men. Hudis (1974, p. 104) found that the returns to education for women were lower than for men for both hourly earnings and total annual earnings, controlling for race, weeks worked, hours worked, and occupational status. Iams (1973, p. 142), in an elaborate study of the effect of sex on hourly wages, found that the returns to education were lower for women within specific age cohorts for the simple regression of income on education, as well as for a complex regression equation controlling for tenure, occupational prestige, unionization, public employment, region of the country, and several other variables. He further found that the returns to education for women were significantly smaller than for men in 9 of the 14 industrial sectors, and absolutely smaller in all but one. Finally, Treiman and Terrell (1975) found that controlling for number of children under age 6, number of children 6 to 18, percentage of years worked, hours worked per year, and occupational prestige, the returns to education for wives were less than a quarter of the returns for husbands.

On the basis of these findings it would seem fairly safe to conclude that women get fewer dollars out of their education than men. But as in the studies on racial differences, class position has not been examined in these comparisons of men and women. Hypothesis 10.1 argues that if we look at returns to education for men and women within class positions, the differences will be considerably reduced.

We will examine the returns to education for men and women within class positions using two regression equations:

$$\text{Income} = a + b_1 \text{ Education} \quad (1)$$

$$\text{Income} = a + b_1 \text{ Education} + b_2 \text{ Decile Occupational Status} + b_3 \text{ Age} + b_4 \text{ Job Tenure} \quad (7)$$

Since the Panel Study of Income Dynamics contained questions on class position only for heads of household (see appendix A), we will analyze sex differences in returns to education using only the data from the 1969 Survey of Working Conditions. We will also restrict this analysis of sexual differences in returns to education to full-time participants in the labor force, defining full-time employees as people who work 30 hours a week or more, in order to avoid the special problems involved in part-time labor.

Table 9.1 presents the basic regression coefficients for the SWC data, and Figure 9.1 indicates the mean incomes for each level of education for workers and managers in different race-sex categories. As in the studies cited above, men and women differ significantly in returns

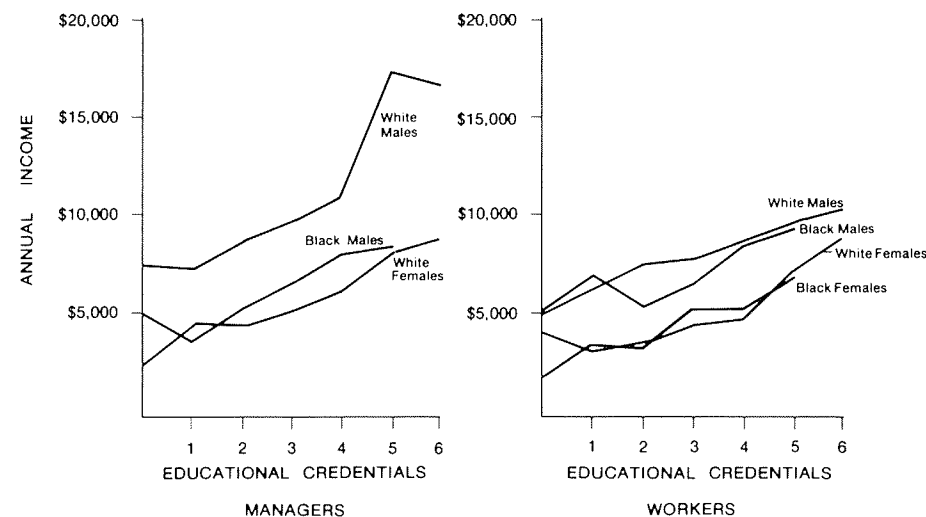


Figure 9.1. Mean income for each education level for white and black male and female workers and managers. Note: Educational credentials are defined as follows: 0 = no education; 1 = some elementary; 2 = elementary; 3 = some high school; 4 = high school; 5 = high school + nonacademic; 6 = some college. (Source: Data from Michigan Survey of Working Conditions. Figure courtesy of the UW Cartographic Laboratory.)

to education in the simple regression of income on education: men receive nearly \$1450 for each increment in education, whereas women receive only \$950. In the expanded regression equation the difference in returns falls just below the 5% level of significance, but the difference is still relatively large in absolute magnitude. Furthermore, the sexes differ substantially in the income returns to occupational status in this equation: men receive over three times as much income from a decile increase in occupational status as do women.

When we look within the working class alone, the greater returns to education for men than for women disappear entirely. In the simple regression of income on education, white women actually receive nearly \$100 more for each increment in education than do white men, although the difference is far from significant statistically. In the expanded equation, the returns to education for white men and women differ by only \$15, out of total returns of about \$700 for each group. Furthermore, white men and women also do not differ significantly in returns to occupational status within the working class.

Among black workers the results are slightly more complex. In the simple regression, black women receive considerably larger returns to education than black men, although because of the small sample size for blacks in the Survey, the difference is not statistically significant. In

TABLE 9.1
Returns to Education and Other Variables for Men and Women Within Class Positions

Class Comparisons	Income Returns in					
	Eq 7					
	Eq 1	Education	Decile Status	Age	Tenure	N
All						
Males	\$1,442	\$1,147	\$491	\$46	\$89	867
Females	952	810	133	9	26	395
Diff. in coefficients	490	337	358	37	63	
t-value ^a	2.8**	1.5	2.9**	1.6	1.5	
All whites						
Males	1,403	1,134	488	44	91	783
Females	955	776	155	4	37	342
Diff. in coefficients	448	358	333	40	54	
t-value	2.3**	1.5	2.5**	1.6	1.2	
White managers/supervisors						
Males	1,934	1,546	670	73	4	324
Females	1,042	822	358	28	2	94
Diff. in coefficients	892	724	313 ^b	45	2	
t-value	1.5	1.2	ns	ns	ns	
White workers						
Males	764	705	212	35	12	322
Females	862	690	110	-2	72	230
Diff. in coefficients	-98	15	102	102	-60	
t-value	ns	ns	1.1	1.1	1.5	
Black workers						
Males	737	458	336	37	-8	39
Females	1,084	1,440	-108	65	-42	37
Diff. in coefficients	-348	-982	444	-28	33	
t-value	ns	2.1*	1.8*	ns	ns	

Source: Data from 1969 Survey of Working Conditions, for full-time participants in the labor force only.
 Independent variables: Eq 1 = education only

Eq 7 = education, decile occupational status, age, and tenure

Significance levels on a one-tailed test:

*** .001

** .01

* .05

ns $t < 1$

^aMost of the analysis of the 1969 SWC data was completed for an earlier study (Wright and Perrone, 1975, 1977) in which the standard dummy variable interaction method of testing slope differences between groups was used. This method yields a larger t-value than the one adopted throughout most of this book. The first two panels of Table 9.1, however, were generated at a later date, and the more conservative, direct t-test was therefore used. This means that in the first two panels, pairwise deletion of missing data was adopted, whereas in panels 3-5, listwise deletion was used.

^bThe difference in coefficients may differ from the subtracted difference due to rounding.

the expanded regression, black female workers receive significantly greater returns to education, but black male workers receive significantly greater returns to status.³ In any event, in neither equation do black male workers receive greater returns to education than black female workers.

As in the analysis of race differences in chapter 8, white male managers/supervisors have considerably higher returns to education than white female managers/supervisors (although because of the relatively large standard errors for white women, the difference is not statistically significant). In both the simple regression of income on education and the expanded regression, white female managers/supervisors receive only about 50% of the returns to education of white male managers/supervisors. This is an even greater difference than among all white men and women, where women receive about two thirds of the returns of men. Again, as in our discussion of the differences between black and white male managers, it would be expected that this large difference between male and female managers/supervisors reflects the concentration of female managers at the bottom levels of the managerial hierarchy. Unfortunately, there is no way of distinguishing mere supervisors in the SWC data, as we did in the PSID analysis of race differences among managers.⁴

Overall, these results support hypothesis 10.1. When class position is held constant, the large differences in returns to education between men and women in the labor force that have so often been noted in the literature disappear. Although it remains to be shown whether this will hold for actual positions within the managerial structure, it is certainly true for the working class as a whole; and this covers over two thirds of all women and over 40% of all men.

³I do not have a specific interpretation for these results. The much higher returns to education for black female workers than for black male workers may well be due to sampling fluctuation. In the 1973 QES replication of the 1969 Survey, black female and black male workers had virtually identical returns to education in the simple regression of income on education, while black male workers had returns for the expanded regression equation that were larger, although not statistically significant.

⁴One suggestive piece of evidence for this expectation comes from the QES study. Respondents with supervisors were asked whether their supervisor was a man or a woman; 40% of the women, and only 2% of the men, in the sample who had supervisors said that they were supervised by women. Although it is not possible from these data to determine the proportion of subordinates of female managers/supervisors who are women, these figures do suggest that female managers/supervisors generally supervise mainly women, whereas male supervisors supervise both men and women. This would tend to support the hypothesis that female managers/supervisors are highly concentrated at the bottom of authority hierarchies relative to male managers.

TABLE 9.2
Income Gaps and Returns to Education and Other Variables for Class Positions Within Sex Categories

Class Comparisons	Difference in Mean Incomes	Income Gap ^a in		Regression Coefficients							
		Eq 1	Eq 7	Eq 1		Eq 7					
				Education	Education	Education	Decile Status	Age	Tenure		
White males											
Managers/supervisors vs. workers	\$3,190	\$2,298	\$1,371	\$1,170	\$841	\$459	\$38	\$-9			
Workers as % of managers	71%	78%	85%	40%	46%						
% of difference elim. by controls	28%	28%	57%	28%	28%						
t-value	6.0***	6.0***	3.5***	4.7***	2.7**	2.5**	ns	ns			
White females											
Managers/supervisors vs. workers	\$880	\$527	\$57	\$180	\$131	\$247	\$30	\$-71			
Workers as % of managers	84%	90%	99%	83%	84%						
% of difference elim. by controls	40%	40%	94%	ns	27%						
t-value	2.1*	2.1*	ns	ns	ns	3.2**	1.5	1.4			

Source: Data from 1969 Survey of Working Conditions, for full-time participants in the labor force only.

Independent variables: Eq 1 = education only

Eq 7 = education, decile occupational status, age, and tenure

Significance levels on a one-tailed test:

*** .001

** .01

* .05

ns t < 1

^aEvaluated at the grand means of the independent variables for the entire sample. Education = 3.0; age = 39.6; tenure = 6.4; decile occupational status = 5.8.

CLASS DIVISIONS WITHIN SEX CATEGORIES

Hypothesis 10.2. *The differences between female managers and workers will be less marked than between male managers and workers.*

If in fact women are concentrated at the very bottom of managerial hierarchies, then female workers and managers/supervisors should look much more similar than male workers and managers/supervisors. Table 9.2 presents the income gaps, and the returns to education and other variables, for workers and managers/supervisors within sex categories.⁵ White male workers and managers/supervisors differ by \$1170 in returns to education in equation (1) and \$840 in equation (7); the corresponding figures for white women are \$180 and \$130. Similarly for income gaps: the mean white male workers' income is only 71% of the mean white male managers/supervisors' income, whereas the mean white female workers' income is 84% of the white female managers/supervisors'. When the various controls in equation (7) are added, the gap in income between white female workers and managers/supervisors is a mere \$57, or less than 1% of the expected income for white female managers. The gap between white male workers and white male managers/supervisors in equation (7), on the other hand, is \$1371, or 15% of the expected income for white male managers/supervisors in this equation. These results suggest that the class divisions among women are considerably less marked in economic terms than among men.

CONCLUSION

It is important to emphasize that the results discussed above do not show that discrimination on the basis of sex is merely a form of class oppression, any more than the results in the previous chapter showed that racism was inconsequential for the structure of income inequality. All that we have shown is that some of the differences between men and women are clearly mediated by their positions within class relations, not that sexual inequality is a mere epiphenomenon.

As in the analysis of racism, sexual discrimination can be seen as having two basic effects in the context of our empirical investigation. First, it clearly influences the distribution of men and women into class positions. Table 9.3 indicates the class-sex-race distributions for the

⁵Income gaps are assessed at the overall sample means for the independent variables. Since for most of these the values for men and women are not so drastically different, the two points at which to assess the income gap are relatively close. The gap in all the comparisons is thus assessed at the same point and it is possible in Table 9.3 to compare the income gaps across comparisons.

TABLE 9.3
Distribution of Classes Within Race-Sex Categories

Class Category	Males		Females	
	White	Black	White	Black
Employers	11.5%	4.9%	2.3%	1.6%
Managers/supervisors	40.2	32.5	26.8	23.3
Workers	43.5	61.4	67.3	72.7
Petty bourgeoisie	4.9	1.2	2.0	2.4
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
N (both samples)	2,100	168	1,135	159

Source: Percentages are averages of frequencies from the 1969 Survey of Working Conditions and the 1973 Quality of Employment data for all participants in the labor force. For distributions within each sample, see Wright, 1976a, pp. 353, 365.

SWC and QES data combined. (The figures are for all participants in the labor force, not merely full-time participants.) Two thirds of all white women and nearly three quarters of all black women in the labor force fall into the working class, compared to 44% of all white men and 61% of all black men. In a complementary manner, only 27% of all white women are managers or supervisors, compared to 40% of all white men. If data on the managerial hierarchy proper were available, this disproportion would certainly be even greater. Sexist ideologies and their material embodiment in hiring and promotion practices undoubtedly account for much of this pattern.

Second, sexual discrimination generates substantial income inequality between men and women within classes. This can easily be seen in the analysis of income gaps between sexes in Table 9.4. The income gap between male and female workers is considerably less than between all men and women, but it is still large and highly significant. When the various controls in equation (7) are added, the gap actually increases, indicating that the different incomes of male and female workers are not a consequence of the age-tenure-status-education composition of the sexes.

Furthermore, the data clearly indicate that the income gap between sexes within the working class is considerably greater than the gap between races. In terms of gross mean incomes, the gap between white male and white female workers is almost two and a half times as large as the gap between black and white male workers (\$3083 vs. \$1236). When the various controls in equation (7) are added, the income gap between black and white male workers (at the grand means of the independent variables) drops to just over \$500, while the gap between white male and female workers remains over \$3000.

TABLE 9.4
Gaps in Income Between Males and Females Within Class Categories

Class Comparisons	Sex Difference in Mean Income	Income Gap ^a in	
		Eq 1	Eq 7
All classes	\$4,914	\$5,034	\$4,912
Female income as % of male	50%	49%	51%
% of gap elim. by controls		-2%	0%
t-value ^b		***	***
All whites	5,189	5,265	4,957
Female income as % of male	49%	48%	50%
% of gap elim. by controls		-1%	4%
t-value ^b		***	***
White managers/supervisors	5,393	5,092	4,677
Female income as % of male	51%	50%	51%
% of gap elim. by controls		6%	13%
t-value		7.4***	6.3***
White workers	3,083	3,320	3,363
Female income as % of male	61%	58%	59%
% of gap elim. by controls		-8%	-9%
t-value		15.7***	15.5***
Black workers	1,641	2,189	2,505
Female income as % of male	75%	67%	67%
% of gap elim. by controls		-33%	-53%
t-value		4.6***	4.3***
White male vs. black male workers	1,236	736	532
Black as % of white	84%	91%	94%
% of gap elim. by controls		40%	57%
t-value		1.4	ns

Source: Data from 1969 Survey of Working Conditions for full-time participants in the labor force only.

Independent variables: Eq 1 = education only

Eq 7 = education, decile occupational status, age, and tenure

Significance levels on a one-tailed test:

*** .001

** .01

* .05

ns $t < 1$

^aThe income gaps in these comparisons are all evaluated at the grand means of the independent variables for the entire sample: education = 3.0, age = 39.6, tenure = 6.4, decile occupational status = 5.8.

^bThe t-values for workers were calculated using the standard analysis of covariance technique involving dummy variable covariates. The t-values in the first and second panels were calculated using the procedure employed throughout the rest of this study.

These results indicate some of the difficulties in analyzing class relations simply in terms of individuals rather than families. At the individual level, the results of the comparison of income gaps between races and sexes within the working class suggest that sexual inequality is greater than racial inequality. However, married, white, working-class women generally share in the consumption generated by the wages of white working-class men. Thus the gap in actual *living standards* between men and women (at least married men and women) will generally be much less than the gap in living standards between black and white working-class families, even though the gap in individual earnings is greater between sexes than between races. It may be convenient to abstract away from the complications introduced when class relations are analyzed in terms of families rather than individuals, but such an abstraction unquestionably limits our understanding of the relationship of sexual divisions to class relations.

To go beyond this rather one-dimensional picture of the interactions of sex and class it would be necessary to have data on class position and income of both men and women within family units, as well as concrete data on the sexual division of labor within the household. If such data were available it might be possible to approach the complex problem of analyzing the relationship between inequalities generated within social relations of production and inequalities generated within social relations of reproduction (as defined in notes 1 and 2 to this chapter). Such an investigation is impossible with available data.

In spite of these limitations in the present data, we have shown that in the analysis of sexual differences in income it is essential to include measures of class position. Capitalism certainly did not create inequalities between the sexes, but capitalist class relations shape the way such inequalities function within capitalist society. Thus, in our analysis of returns to education, much of the differential returns for men and women appear to be mediated by their positions within the social relations of production. Although the data presented here include only full-time participants in the labor force, they do suggest that the analysis of sexual inequalities is incomplete if it is detached from a broader class analysis of capitalist society.