Cultures and Racial Stratification within the Mackey Family

During the early twentieth century there was prominent tension between black and white people. Due to this the only way that African Americans were able to experience mobility was through education or owning a business. The Mackey family overcame this issue by attending Berea College. Charles Taylor Mackey in particular moved up within society by forming his tailoring own business in Chicago rather than Kentucky; however, his identification as an African American male restricted his access to the upper class.

Charles’s education was not enough to overcome his status as a black male in Kentucky; he was forced to move to urban Chicago. Charles Mackey attended Berea College (*The Richmond climax*, 1887) like his relatives. However, the only job that he could get in Kentucky was delivering mail (*The Richmond climax*, 1896). He was 19 years old and must have realized that he could not access *intergenerational social mobility* (Parillo) by remaining in Kentucky with his remedial job. Mackey was able to increase his status within society during his lifetime. This is an example of *symbolic interaction* (Parillo): he was able to use his sociological imagination to view his place in society and what role he played in Kentucky versus the role he could play in northern Chicago.

Black males were treated differently than white males in the early 1900’s, making it hard to prosper, especially in the south. They were not given equal employment opportunities. One can see this in Greene’s diary: “The employer did not feel that Negroes could perform such labor” (325). Even in urban areas where Greene was attempting to sell Carter G. Woodson’s book, he saw the gap between blacks and whites in all ranges of employment. This shows that the *conflict theory* (Parillo) is able to be applied to the relationship between black and white males. The two groups are battling over resources such as the power that comes with being employed and making money. However, Woodson’s book, written a few years prior to Greene’s
diary, reflects the fact that there are more opportunities in the north: “The leaders in the North are still trying to decide how large a share of social justice” (332) black men should receive. The difference between black and white males is not yet as prominent in the northern states as it is in the southern states. There is some type of movement within social status in the north. It was difficult for black men to experience intergenerational social mobility anywhere during the early 1900’s. Mackey was able to increase his chances of this occurring by moving to Chicago.

In Chicago, Charles Taylor Mackey experienced relative success by owning his own tailor shop with his brother. After Mackey “proved [himself] to be honest upright, steady worker” (The Appeal, Jan. 1903) he was able to draw in many customers. He kept his business open for at least 20 years- from at least 1900 to 1920 according to the United States Census Bureau. They were able to work around the upper middle class by being employed to tailor their clothing (Batchelor). Only the most prosperous and respectable people had their suits tailored. Mackey came in contact with these people on a daily basis. His family was able to do things that these prosperous people did, such as entertain at card games (The Appeal, Feb. 1903). Mackey was successful in owning his own business by being in close proximity to the upper class.

The tailoring business prospered until the Great Depression when many black-owned business went bankrupt. There is a possibility that the businesses owned by black men closed before the ones owned by white men. This represents action-orientation levels of prejudice (Parillo): a person’s beliefs about a group as negative can lead them to behaving negatively toward them. In this case the white customers would only go to white businesses when there was an economic strain. “Economic competition and conflict breed prejudice” (Parillo, 89). This is the economic-competition theory. However, the impact of the repression was so widespread and the commodity that is supplies was so unnecessary that the business would have most likely closed no matter the race of the owner. At that point he found a job as a night school teacher when his life came to a close in Chicago.

The conflicts between black and white people were more prominent in the South. Charles Taylor Mackey recognized that he would be more successful in Chicago, even with education from Berea College. So, he moved to Chicago where he was able to form his own business. Mackey had success in the North, but he still experienced limits based on his racial identification.
Works Cited


