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A new scholarship about black women, strengthened by the growing acceptance of black and women's studies as distinct areas of academic inquiry and by the need to refute myths and stereotypes about black women and black family life which helped shape social policies of the mid-1960s, is examining aspects of black family life that have been overlooked or distorted. Several studies have argued that a historical tradition of work forms an essential component in the lives of Afro-American women.[1] Beginning from that premise, this paper seeks to demonstrate that the emphasis on women's work role in Afro-American culture has generated alternative notions of womanhood contradictory to those that have been traditional in modern American society.[2]

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1. See Delores Aldridge, "Black Women in the Economic Marketplace: A Battle Unfinished," *Journal of Social and Behavioral Scientists* 21 (Winter 1975): 48–61; Jacqueline Jackson, "Family Organization and Ideology," in *Comparative Studies of Blacks and Whites in the United States*, ed. Kent Miller and Ralph Dreger (New York: Seminar Press, 1973); and Diane K. Lewis, "A Response to Inequality: Black Women, Racism, and Sexism," *Signs* 3 (Winter 1977): 339–61.

2. Natalie J. Sokoloff, "The Economic Position of Women in the Family," in *The Family*, ed. Peter J. Stein, Judith Richman, and Natalie Hannon (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley Publishing Co., 1977).

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These new models project images of female sexual and intellectual equality, economic autonomy, and legal as well as personal parity with men. While they represent a new direction in the social ideology, they reflect an aspect of life that has been dominant for generations among many Afro-American women. Dialectical analysis enables us to clarify and illuminate this contradiction, and could provide theoretical direction to the new scholarship. But understanding the dialectics of black womanhood first requires rethinking several areas of scholarship about black women and their families.

Black Women in Black Family Literature

Four major problems pervade the literature on Afro-American families. The first of these derives from the use of inadequate historical data and/or the misinterpretation of that data. The second entails erroneous or partially conceived assumptions about the relationship of blacks to white society. The third problem is a direct result of the second and arises because of the differences between the values of the researcher and those of the subject. Fourth is the general confusion of class and culture.

Problem One: Issues in Black Family History

The dominant influence on the study of the black family and the role of black women was Frazier's *The Negro Family in the United States.*[3] While his major contribution was to provide a historical and sociological analysis of black family life in a period when psychological and biological theories of racial inferiority abounded, his historical methodology had serious shortcomings.

According to Gutman, Frazier did not explain the conditions he studied but "read that condition back into the past and linked it directly to the nineteenth-century slave experience."[4] He concluded that female-headed families, which he termed the "matriarchate," had developed during the slave period and gained prominence after emancipation among those blacks who were economically unstable or otherwise removed from the direct influence of Euro-American culture. In his view, poverty and limited assimilation into the dominant culture inhibited their adopting the normative family patterns of the society. Since

3. E. Franklin Frazier, *The Negro Family in the United States* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966).

4. Herbert Gutman, "Persistent Myths about the Afro-American Family," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, vol. 6, no. 2 (Autumn 1975).

these conditions were characteristic of most black families, he concluded that female-headed households were prototypical of black family life. Using a linear model of historical change, Frazier argued that the subsequent crises of reconstruction and urbanization served only to intensify this type of family disorganization.

The overriding image of black women that emerged from his work is that of a strong and independent person who placed little value on marriage, engaged without conscience in free sexual activity, and had no notion of male supremacy. As a grandmother, she is depicted as the "oldest head" in a maternal family organization, ideotypically defined as a three-generation household. Thus, while Frazier identified some of the historical conditions which encouraged the development of self-reliance and autonomy in black women, the limitations of his historical interpretation resulted in his evaluating these qualities negatively, suggesting that they were contributory factors in the disorganization of Afro-American family life.

Probably the most debated of recent studies which drew heavily on Frazier's history is "The Moynihan Report."[5] Moynihan accepted, without examination, Frazier's linear model of the historical development of the black family and used it as an explanation for contemporary data. The effect of his work, focusing on marital dissolution, illegitimacy rates, female-headed families, and welfare dependency, was to "prove" that Frazier's interpretation was still relevant. However, Frazier's analysis of black family history is being refuted, not only because of its methodological weakness but also because of its findings.

Gutman's recent study of black families suggests the breadth and detail required for a more accurate understanding of the history of black families, particularly with regard to its structure and normative patterns.[6] He contends that the female-headed household, while a recurrent pattern, was atypical in the period before 1925 and generally exaggerated in studies of black family life. His findings indicate that: (1) there is little evidence of a matriarchal form of household; (2) the typical household everywhere was a simple nuclear household headed by a male; (3) there is no significant difference in the household structure of field hands as opposed to artisans and house servants (this finding addresses itself directly to the issue of assimilation); (4) some of the physical movement associated with emancipation involved the reconstruction of broken slave households; and (5) sustained marriage among slaves, common everywhere, meant that the role models of marriage and family

5. U.S. Department of Labor, Office of Policy Planning and Research, *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, March 1965).

6. Herbert Gutman, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1976).

existed *within* the slave world and were constantly available to younger slaves.[7]

Gutman's work is important in developing a dialectical analysis of black women and their families because he has begun the process of examining the detailed components of family structure at specific historical moments. This permits us to begin an analysis of why and how the family and women's roles therein have changed over time. Of particular interest is the fact that he explains this trend in terms of distinct Afro-American cultural norms which emphasized marriage while refraining from stigmatizing women who gave birth out of wedlock. Since the establishment of paternity has had so profound an influence on the social position of Euro-American women, Gutman's documentation of the existence of norms which differed radically from those of the dominant culture supports the potential of Afro-American culture to generate alternative notions of womanhood and poses this contradiction as an important problem for further study.

Problem Two: Black Families in a White World

Fundamental to the proposal of a dialectical framework to analyze the condition of black women in the family is a conviction that the relationship of blacks to white society is dialectical in nature. This contention, while not new, has yet to be systematically applied to the study of black families. Frazier, influenced by the theories of Robert Park, determined that incomplete assimilation and isolation of blacks from white society explained their divergent family forms. The matriarchate was the result of the failure to assimilate, while patriarchal forms developed among those who had not been isolated from Euro-American norms and values.

A different theoretical position about the relationship of blacks to white society has been proposed by Billingsley.[8] He adopted Parson's social systems model and argued that the black family must be viewed as a separate but interrelated social system within the nexus of the larger society. The functionality of black families depends on the smooth interrelationship of these systems. Applying Billingsley's model, one could analyze black women in their complex of social roles: first in terms of

7. These finding were quoted in Clarence Turner, "Some Theoretical and Conceptual Considerations for Black Family Studies," *Blacklines* 2 (Winter 1972): 16. The assumption that slavery was a closed system (item no. 5) without any influences from outside the plantation or from traditional African life has been hotly debated. Two people who have presented findings to the contrary are Melville Herskovitz (*The Myth of the Negro Past* [Boston: Beacon Press, 1941]) and John Blassingame (*The Slave Community* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1972]). In general, revisionist history seeks to examine the existence and influence of African survivals in Afro-American culture.

8. Andrew Billingsley, *Black Families in White America* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1968).

their roles within the family—mother, daughter, or sister; second, within the community—church member, PTA president, etc.; and third, within the wider society—secretary, housekeeper, teacher, or welfare recipient.

While this model recognizes the existence of a distinct Afro-American culture, its focus on the lives of black women as a set of interacting roles provides only a limited understanding of the dynamic and contradictory nature of their experience. Emphasis on functionality and dysfunctionality of their roles predisposes us to view black women more in relationship to the dominant culture than within Afro-American culture itself.

Valentine has suggested the concept of "biculturation" to describe the relationship of blacks to white society.[9] This concept assumes that blacks have been simultaneously socialized into two different cultural systems: white Euro-American and black Afro-American. However, much of the learning about Euro-American culture remains latent because discrimination prohibits blacks from achieving many mainstream values. While this concept may be particularly useful in explaining role conflict where role expectations derived from Afro-American culture contradict those derived from Euro-American culture, its major weakness is failure to account for the interrelatedness of these two cultural streams or to explain the basis of their unequal interaction.

Ladner's study of adolescent black girls, rather than emphasizing the shared and interacting norms which link Afro- and Euro-American traditions, illuminated the conflicts and dualities which the young women in her sample coped with as maturing adolescents.[10] She argued that the attitudes, behaviors, and interpersonal relationships of these women were adaptations to a variety of factors, including the harsh realities of their environment, Afro-American cultural images of black womanhood, and the sometimes conflicting values and norms of the wider society. This is exemplified in her discussion of attitudes toward premarital sex:

> Often in the absence of material resources, . . . sex becomes the resource that is exchanged. . . . It is here that sexual involvement transcends any conventional analysis because the standards that the individuals apply to their actions are created out of their own situations. Although many girls found it to be a means of expression in a variety of ways, they were still influenced by the conventional codes of morality. Some of them were more influenced by the conventional codes of morality than others and experienced conflict and sometimes trauma over whether or not they should defy these

9. Charles Valentine, "Deficit, Difference and Bicultural Models of Afro-American Behavior," *Harvard Educational Review*, vol. 41, no. 2 (May 1971).

10. Joyce A. Ladner, *Tomorrow's Tomorrow* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Co., 1971).

> codes. The sharp conflict . . . had a profound effect upon their lives.[11]

At the same time, she describes the reciprocal effects of distinctive aspects of black life upon the wider society.

Ladner's work comes closest to the perspective which we are proposing in this paper. By self-consciously applying the dialectical mode of analysis to the experiences of black women, we may make explicit the complex interaction of political, social, and economic forces in shaping the broad historical trends that characterize black women as a group as well as the particular lives of individual women. In this way, we move beyond the deficit models of Frazier and Moynihan and even beyond the models of Billingsley and Valentine. These models illuminate the complexities of black and white social roles but have limitations in accounting for the impact of racial oppression on the economic, political, or social life of black Americans and in explaining the historical or geographic variations in the black experience. The dialectic permits us to focus on the dynamic and contradictory aspects of black American life and to account for the simultaneity of conflict and interdependence which characterize black-white relations in American society.

Problem Three: Value Discrepancies between Researcher and Subject

The third problem is a direct result of the second and arises because of the differences between the values of the researcher and those of the subject. The values about family life underlying the work of Frazier and Moynihan are those that form the foundation of the bourgeois family: monogamy, nuclearity, and patriarchy. Female independence of male authority and economic control is viewed as destructive of this family form. This analysis denied the existence of a distinct Afro-American culture and ignored the meaning that these behaviors might have for the people being studied. To a large extent, the matriarchy thesis was based on the combination of erroneous historical interpretation with the actualities of black female labor-force participation.

As Aldridge, Jackson, Lewis and others have pointed out, black females have historically had high participation rates in the labor force—higher than their white counterparts, even with children (see tables 1 and 2 and fig. 1). Moynihan combined these high levels of labor-force participation with notions of female dominance in husband-wife families and with the large (relative to white families) percentage of female-headed families in the black community to conclude that matriarchy was characteristic of black family life.

As a result, in much of the social science literature on black families, black women became scapegoats, responsible for the psychological emasculation of black men and for the failure of the black community to gain parity with the white community.

11. Ladner, pp. 212–13.

Table 1

Labor-Force Participation Rates of Women by Race and Year

Selected Years	All Women	Black	White
1900	20.4	41.2	...
1910	25.2	58.2	...
1920	23.3	43.7	...
1930	24.3	...	...
1940	25.4	37.3	...
1950	29.0	46.9	32.6
1960	34.5	48.2	36.5
1970	...	49.5	42.6
1974	...	49.1	45.2

SOURCES.—Joe Feagin, "Black Women in the American Work Force," in *The Family Life of Black People*, ed. Charles Willie (Columbus, Ohio: Charles E. Merrill Publishing Co., 1970), pp. 25–26; Valerie K. Oppenheimer, *The Female Labor Force in the United States*, Population Series Monographs no. 5 (Berkeley: University of California, 1970); U.S. Commerce Department, *Negro Population 1790–1915* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1918).

Table 2

Percentage of Mothers in Labor Force by Age of Children, Color, and Marital Status (March 1967)

Age of Children (years)	Race of Mother		Differential
	Nonwhite	White	
Under 6*	44	27	+17
6–17	58	48	+10
Under 18	50	37	+13

SOURCE.—Adapted from Joe Feagin, "Black Women in the American Work Force" in *The Family Life of Black People*, ed. Charles Willie (Columbus, Ohio: Charles E. Merrill Publishing Co. 1970).

*Percentage participation of black and white mothers for 1975 are 54 and 51, respectively, a differential of +25.



FIG. 1.—Trends in labor-force participation for all women and black women, 1900–1973. *The sharp increase in 1910 has been accounted for by differing instructions to the census takers for that year.

Ryan has labeled this type of reasoning "blaming the victim." It is an ideology which, he says, ". . . attributes defect and inadequacy to the malignant nature of poverty, injustice, slum life, and racial difficulties. The stigma that marks the victim . . . is an acquired stigma, a stigma of social, rather than genetic, origin. But the stigma . . . is still located *within* the victim, inside his skin. . . . It is a brilliant ideology for justifying a perverse form of social action designed to change, not society, as one might expect, but rather society's victims."[12] In general, the justification of the matriarchy thesis has been based on the combination of erroneous historical interpretation with the actualities of black female participation in the labor force. Ten Houten states: "In modern urban society the subdominance of the black husband to the wife is attributed to employment behaviors."[13]

It is a cruel irony that the black woman's role as a worker has been used to represent dominance over and emasculation of black men. This predisposition ignores both historical and socioeconomic realities. Black women were brought to this country for two economic reasons: to work and to produce workers. Although they were valued for their reproductive function, as were white women settlers, it was only of equal importance with their labor.

There was no concern about the legitimacy of their children because there was nothing for them to inherit. The protective barriers which gradually forced white women out of production and changed their relationship to labor and society did not exist for most black women. Davis, in an analysis of the historical significance of black women's relationship to labor, emphasizes this point.

> It is true that she was a victim of the myth that only the woman, with the diminished capacity for mental and physical labor, should do degrading household work. Yet, the alleged benefits of the ideology of femininity did not accrue to her. She was not sheltered or protected; she would not remain oblivious to the desperate struggle for existence unfolding outside the "home." She was also there in the fields, alongside the man, toiling under the lash. . . . This was one of the supreme ironies of slavery: In order to approach its strategic goal—to extract the greatest possible surplus from the labor of slaves—the black woman had to be released from the chains of the myth of femininity. . . . The black woman shared the deformed equality of equal oppression with the black man.[14]

12. William Ryan, *Blaming the Victim* (New York: Vintage, 1971), pp. 7–8.

13. Warren Ten Houten, "The Black Family: Myth and Reality," in *The Family in Transition*, ed. Arlene Skolnick and Jerome Skolnick (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1971) p. 420.

14. Angela Davis, "Reflections on the Black Woman's Role in the Community of Slaves," *Black Scholar* 3 (December 1971): 7.

Problem Four: Class and Culture

Too often, social science researchers have sought to describe black women and their families as if they were a monolithic whole, without regard for differences in social class. At the other extreme is the contention that social class differenoes obliterate distinctions of race. In other words, social science has generally supported the idea that Afro-American culture is synonymous with lower class culture and that it disappears as black Americans gain middle class status.

To illuminate the complexities of the interaction of class and culture, Billingsley adopts Milton Gordon's concept of "ethnic subsociety." According to Gordon, "the ethnic group is the locus of a sense of *historical identification,* while the eth-class (the intersection of ethnicity and social class) is the locus of a sense of *participational identification.* With a person of the same social class but of a different ethnic group, one shares behavioral similarities but not a sense of peoplehood. With those of the same ethnic group but of a different social class, one shares the sense of peoplehood but not behavioral similarities. The only group which meets both these criteria are people of the same ethnic group *and* social class."[15]

The concept of "eth-class" is useful in that it communicates a sense of the ways in which ethnic differences interact with social class. However, it has serious limitations because it ignores the elements of domination and oppression which are at the root of black-white relations in the United States and which account for the high concentration of blacks in the lower class.

Blauner argues that black culture is not merely a phenomenon of lower-class life but a product of the experience of discrimination which cuts across all social classes.[16] More important, he links racial oppression to economic exploitation and the structure of classes within a capitalist economy. Thus his analysis goes beyond a merely descriptive portrayal of the interaction of the two variables, class and race, and focuses on the dynamic and contradictory influence that each has on the other. Thus, while he sees race as a form of stratification which has economic, political, and ideological dimensions, he argues that it is a basic rather than epiphenomenal aspect of American industrial capitalism. He concludes: "In American society, races and classes interpenetrate one another. Race affects class formation and class influences racial dynamics in ways that have not yet been adequately investigated."[17]

15. Quoted in Billingsley, p. 10.

16. Robert Blauner, *Racial Oppression in America* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972), chap. 4.

17. Blauner, pp. 28–29.

Implications for the Study of Black Women and Their Jobs

It is the contention of this paper, therefore, that the study of the black women and their families requires serious revision. First, it must be placed within a historical framework which is carefully researched, documented, and reinterpreted. Gutman, Pleck, Lammermeier, and others have only recently begun to provide this data.[18] Serious historical research promises to provide new information regarding the structure and organization of black families at different historical periods and in different regions of the United States. Information about values, attitudes, and the vicissitudes of daily life will remain, however, to be pieced together from oral history and other descriptive reports.

Second, black women must be studied within a dynamic and contradictory framework to understand the complexities of their relations to all aspects of society. Thus, an examination of the impact of work on the family life of women whose occupational categories result in class differences would be expected to yield important distinctions. At the same time, however, the experience of slavery, whether house servant or field hand, and the continued economic precariousness of most black families which has resulted in high rates of female labor-force participation, would be expected to have a particular impact on the growth and development of women in Afro-American culture.

Third, we must continue to research and provide good descriptive studies of the lives of black women and their families across the social class spectrum. Studies such as Stack's offer considerable insight into the ways in which economic oppression impacts on daily life, family patterns, and women's self-concepts.[19] Her work and Ladner's are examples of studies which provide the data necessary for concept development and theory building in this area.[20] They reveal the ways in which black

18. Particular attention is called to the work of Elizabeth Pleck, "The Two Parent Household: Black Family Structure in Late Nineteenth Century Boston," *Journal of Social History*, vol. 6 (Fall 1972); Paul Lammermeier, "The Urban Black Family of the Nineteenth Century: A Study of Black Family Structure in the Ohio Valley, 1850–1880," *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, vol. 35 (August 1973); and the developing activity in oral history of the Kinte Foundation.

19. Carol Stack, *All Our Kin* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974).

20. See forthcoming Ph.D. dissertations by Bonnie Dill (New York University), which explores the meanings of work and its perceived impact on the family lives of black female household workers; and Elizabeth Higginbotham (Brandeis University), which examines the interrelationship of education, career, and family among college-educated black women. Both studies focus on the women's self-presentations, their goals and strategies for survival, upward mobility, and its relationship to their family lives. An article by Robert D. Abrahams ("Negotiating Respect: Patterns of Presentation among Black Women," *Journal of American Folklore* 88 [January–March 1975]: 58–80) utilizes the data in novels and several

women conceptualize work, its meaning in their lives, and its importance in the development of their models of womanhood.

Conclusion: Toward a New Model

We began developing a historical framework for the study of black women by focusing on the contradiction cited at the outset: the historical role as a laborer in a society where ideals of femininity emphasized domesticity. A dominant image of black women as "beasts of burden"[21] stands in direct contrast to American ideals of womanhood: fragile, white, and not too bright. The impact of this contradiction is profound. It has already been alluded to in discussions of the values pervading much of the pejorative literature on black women. It can also be expected to have affected self-images as well as their interpretations and expectations of various role relationships.

In concluding, however, it is important to explore the implications of this historical tradition for contemporary models of black womanhood. Ladner suggests several in her study of adolescent black girls. These revolve around the girls' images of womanhood, goals for themselves, and their relationships to their families and to boys. In developing their ideals of womanhood, Ladner reports that "the strongest conception of womanhood that exists among all pre-adult females is that of how the woman has to take a strong family role."[22] The pervasiveness of this image of an economically independent, resourceful, and hardworking woman was resented by some, adopted by others, and accepted with resignation by still others. Nevertheless, its overriding importance remained even though Ladner observed other models which existed alongside it. One of these other models, which appears to me as a variation, is that of an upwardly mobile middle-class woman. Ladner points out that education was most frequently seen as the means to this end. The choice of this model had a serious impact on the entire life of girls who chose it, particularly as it affected their relationship with boys. These girls most often avoided serious involvement with boys, particularly premarital sex and the risk of pregnancy which represented a definite end to their aspirations. Success in attaining their middle class goals was not only measured in terms of the training or job acquired but also "by the extent to which one can not only care for himself, but help others in the family."[23]

21. This conceptualization is drawn from the writings of Jeanne L. Noble. It was presented in a draft of an article being prepared for the *World Encyclopedia of Black Peoples* which the author generously shared with me.

22. Ladner, p. 127.

23. Ladner, p. 121.

Girls who rejected the dominant model often adopted a model which Ladner calls a "carefree, laissez-faire, egalitarian model of womanhood." Different though this model was, it too encompasses a sense of self-reliance, strength, and autonomy. This image, as described by Ladner, was primarily directed toward relationships with boys. Inherent in it was an attitude of equality between men and women, a rejection of the sexual double standard, and a general belief that a woman can do whatever a man does. This practical attitude toward male-female relations was not without conflict, particularly as it was confronted by the ideals of the wider society. Neither, however, were the other models. They, too, support an image of womanhood which, until recently, has been out of step with the values of white society.

The image of independent, self-reliant, strong, and autonomous women which pervades the models of the young black women in Ladner's study has been reinforced by the work experience and social conditions of black women throughout history. The image, therefore, represents both the oppressive experiences of work and the liberating attitudes of personal autonomy and sexual equality. It may explain the findings of the *1970 Virginia Slims American Women's Opinion Poll* that "an essentially urban coalition of black women and the young and the educated of both races are ready to follow the examples of blacks and the young and challenge the status quo in American society."[24] This finding is particularly interesting in light of the goals of the women's liberation movement and the relationship of black women to this movement. It has been acknowledged that black women have not identified strongly with what many have seen as a movement of middle-class white women.[25] I would suggest that the image of women—as more than housewives and as sexual equals—toward which white women strive is, in large part, synonymous with the dominant image and much of the experience of black women. Ladner says it well in the closing statement of one of the chapters of *Tomorrow's Tomorrow: "Black womanhood* has always been the very essence of what American womanhood is attempting to become on some levels."[26] And again in her final chapter:

> . . . much of the current focus on being liberated from the constraints and protectiveness of the society which is proposed by

24. Louis Harris and Associates, *The Virginia Slims American Women's Opinion Poll* (1970), p. 78.

25. For discussions of black women's responses to the women's liberation movement see Robert Staples, *The Black Woman in America* (Chicago: Nelson-Hall Co., 1973); Inez Reid, *"Together" Black Women* (New York: Emerson Hall, 1972); selections in Toni Cade, ed., *The Black Woman: An Anthology* (New York: New American Library, 1970); Linda LaRue, "The Black Woman and Women's Liberation," *Black Scholar*, vol. 1 (May 1970); and Lewis (n. 1 above) for a discussion of the structural factors affecting the variety of responses that have been noted among black women.

26. Ladner, p. 239.

> Women's Liberation groups has never been applied to Black women, and in this sense, we have always been "free," and able to develop as individuals even under the most harsh circumstances. This freedom, as well as the tremendous hardships from which Black women suffered, allowed for the development of a female personality that is rarely described in scholarly journals for its obstinate strength and ability to survive. Neither is its peculiar humanistic character and quiet courage viewed as the epitome of what the American model of femininity should be.[27]

Thus the contradiction between the subjection of women from West Africa to the harsh deprivations of slavery, farm, factory, and domestic work and the sense of autonomy and self-reliance which developed, points in the direction of a new avenue for studying black American women. And it is the potential synthesis of these contradictions which embraces the future problems and possibilities of a new definition of femininity for *all* American women.

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27. Ladner, p. 280.