

Periodicals as Handbooks for Doing Gender and Doing Difference:
Racialized Womanhood in *Cosmopolitan* and *Essence* Magazines from 1978-2000

Sara Elizabeth Jones
Washington and Lee University Class of 2018

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Advised by Dr. Harvey Markowitz and Dr. Lynn Chin

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I. Introduction and Historical Context

In the latter half of the 1900s, black women living in America, particularly those with children, became the subject of national scorn and scrutiny. Commonly chastised by political figures, black women came to serve as symbols for laziness and welfare dependence. Despite similarly changing demographics (increasing rates of divorce and single parenthood) among white families of all socioeconomic statuses, white women never became hot-button political figures in the way that black women did. While black women were being consistently vilified by American culture as welfare queens, white women were urged and pushed forward into independence by the Women's Liberation Movement, beginning in the late 1960s. This means that, simultaneously, black women in America and white women in America were receiving very different messages from popular and political culture, as both the (black) welfare queen and the (white) feminist rose to prominence in America's social consciousness, replacing the Stepford wife as a white female trope. Black women (regardless of class) were universally condemned as lazy while white women were told that they could do anything that they could imagine. The purpose of this thesis is to examine and describe the messages created by and disseminated within these racialized groups (and how these messages interact with the public perception of the groups) from 1978-2000 in the United States and to determine the constructions of the idealized black and white woman (particularly through motherhood) in America in the late twentieth century. In analyzing media created by these groups and for these groups, the intent is to determine to what extent the public's conception of black and white women aligned (or did not align) with the groups' self-concepts.

While there is a clear divide in the public portrayals of black and white women during the 1970s, there is a less cohesive understanding of how the white female and black female

communities either internalized or did not internalize these widely-held beliefs of the black welfare queen and the white liberated woman. Most research on the subject centers on how American society on the whole perceived the two groups. In order to explore this from an inside perspective, I decided to engage in content analysis of *Cosmopolitan* and *Essence* magazines, which seek to reach white and black women, respectively, from 1978-2000. The intention of this research is to form a description of how content created by black women for black women (*Essence*), and content created by white women for white women (*Cosmopolitan*) in the years following the public creation of black women as welfare queens and white women as empowered interacted with these archetypes and ultimately constructed an idealized racialized womanhood.

In 1965, the Lyndon B. Johnson Administration released a report entitled “The Negro Family: The Case for National Action,” which ultimately became known simply as the Moynihan Report, for the sociologist and, ultimately, New York Senator, Daniel P. Moynihan, who drafted it. The report describes the disintegration of traditional family structure among African Americans as “the single most important social fact of the United States today” (United States Department of Labor 1965, 5). The Moynihan Report argues that African American households are increasingly likely to be headed by single women, and that this ultimately increases welfare dependency and decreases the potential for African American children to lead successful and productive lives; therefore, this phenomenon harms American society on a macro-level (United States Department of Labor 1965). The Moynihan Report ends by refusing to propose tangible solutions to this alleged problem, stating that first the country as a whole must agree to recognize the changing structure of black families as a complex problem (United States Department of Labor 1965, 47). The only suggestion made is that “a national effort must be

directed towards the question of family structure. The object should be to strengthen the Negro family so as to enable it to raise and support its members as do other families” (United States Department of Labor 1965, 47). In the next two decades, racial tensions in the United States continued to build as the public perception of black women grew increasingly negative; widespread preconceptions about black women caused Ronald Reagan’s description of the welfare queen to resonate with voters. While the Moynihan report frames the black single mother as a social problem, the Reagan subsequently framed the black single mother as a moral failure.

The Moynihan Report exposed and described black mothers as disproportionately reliant on government assistance; Ronald Reagan transformed this idea into a racialized rallying-cry with the advent of the term ‘welfare queen.’ In a 1976 campaign speech, Reagan placed ‘welfare queen’ into the vernacular of the American public for the first time: “She used eighty names, thirty addresses, fifteen telephone numbers to collect food stamps, Social Security, veterans’ benefits for four nonexistent deceased veteran husbands, as well as welfare. Her tax-free cash income alone has been running \$150,000 a year” (Black and Sprague 2016). While this statement never specifically denotes the welfare queen as black, this racial identity immediately became the public’s perception, through media coverage and political campaigns. This categorization and stereotype clearly portrays black women, especially those with children, as lazy, deceitful, and underserving of help. Hancock writes that the term ‘welfare queen’ “gives a name to long-standing beliefs regarding single poor African-American mothers’ laziness and licentiousness” (Hancock 2003, 36). However, welfare programs in the United States during this time period did not actually serve a disproportionate number of black women, as the media led the public to believe (Black and Sprague 2016).

In the early 1900s, United States welfare programs, specifically the Aid to Dependent

Children program (later known as Aid to Families with Dependent Children or AFDC), required participants to subscribe to middle-class white norms in order to receive assistance (Nadasen 2007, 54-55). This, in turn, allowed the registers of aid-recipients to remain predominantly white as black women were frequently denied assistance under various claims of moral impurity, such as having an illegitimate child (Nadasen 2007, 55). This does not mean that white women were not having illegitimate children during this time, only that government employees were selectively enforcing policies in a way that discriminated against black mothers. The disqualification of women with illegitimate children would seemingly eliminate the possibility of the supposed welfare queen even existing, but this did not stop the public vilification of black single mothers. Between 1950 and 1961, poverty among African Americans increased dramatically and the percentage of black recipients of AFDC increased from thirty-one percent to forty-eight percent, despite continuing racist practices in the determination of eligibility (Nadasen 2007, 56). Following this increase, though, the American press harped upon the image of all welfare recipients as black single mothers. Nadasen writes: “Using hyperbole and inflammatory rhetoric, politicians and the press hammered away at the apparent overrepresentation of black women on the welfare rolls... Increasingly, the politics of welfare converged on the stereotypical image of a black unmarried, unworthy, welfare mother... Promiscuity and laziness became synonymous with black women on welfare” (Nadasen 2007, 58). As previously mentioned, in the 1960s and 1970s, black women, particularly black mothers, became increasingly targeted by the American media as detriments to American society.

In this same time period, white women were typically associated with women’s liberation, a movement predicated on seeing women as capable beings; this movement was largely accompanied by an influx of white women into the workplace. While the 1960s spawned

deep concern over the role of black women as mothers, the 1960s and 1970s contained messages for white women of relentless independence, headed by figures such as Gloria Steinem, who famously stated, “A woman needs a man like a fish needs a bicycle.” A journalistic review of women in the 1960s states: “Americans came to accept some of the basic goals of the Sixties feminists: equal pay for equal work, an end to domestic violence, curtailment of severe limits on women in managerial jobs, an end to sexual harassment, and sharing of responsibility for housework and childrearing” (Walsh 2010). It is extremely important to understand that while these articles and cultural movements are referring to American women, they are actually referring to *white* American women. For example, the National Organization for Women (NOW), founded in 1966 as a leader of women’s liberation, had a membership that was only ten percent women of color in 1974 (Friend 2018). Taylor points out that during the 1970s feminist efforts, race and gender took on different strains of activism: “Black women were forced to choose between pledging membership to a movement against racism or chauvinism” (Taylor 1998, 240-241). Feminist scholarship widely recognizes, in hindsight, that feminism in the 1960s and 1970s referred almost exclusively to the plight of middle to upper class educated, white women (Brah and Phoenix 2004, Garcia 1989).

In this time period, American women became a prominent player in social, political, and economic happenings. In 1975, TIME magazine awarded its coveted “Man of the Year” cover to “American women;” the article that accompanied this award states:

They have arrived like a new immigrant wave in male America. They may be cops, judges, military officers, telephone linemen, cab drivers, pipefitters, editors, business executives -- or mothers and housewives, but not quite the same subordinate creatures they were before. Across the broad range of American life, from suburban tract houses to state legislatures, from church pulpits to Army barracks, women's lives are profoundly changing, and with them, the traditional relationships between the sexes. ...1975 was not so much the Year of the Woman as the Year of the Women -- an immense variety of women altering their lives,

entering new fields, functioning with a new sense of identity, integrity and confidence. (Bergeron 2015)

This statement contains an unquestioned assumption that the American woman can now do whatever she wants to, however she wants to. It unconditionally asserts that women can still be housewives and mothers, but that this is only by choice. The privilege of this perceived right to choose is a key difference between the lives of black and white women in this historical context: black women who chose to be or were somehow forced to be mothers were lazy degenerates, and white women who chose to be mothers were liberated, particularly toward the latter half of the interval examined for this thesis (the 1990s).

Prior to the introduction of the proud feminist as a white female trope, the Stepford wife was prominent in America's social consciousness. The Stepford wives "exist only to nurture, please, and display their husbands' status. They go to the supermarket in full makeup... Their domesticity is cult-like in its utter self-abnegation" (Chocano 2017, 19). Instead of being hyper-focused on children, Stepford wives are fixated on husbands and appearance. The women's liberation movement served as a direct refutation of the Stepford wife lifestyle; instead of living lives defined by men, women were now being told to live lives defined by themselves. This conflict set the stage for an interesting cultural transition, as women were no longer encouraged to behave as their mothers and grandmothers did, and instead ventured into new territory: the workforce.

While the welfare queen became increasingly present in the minds of the American people, single motherhood was actually increasing among white mothers at almost twice the rate it was increasing among black mothers. In 1980, 13.5% of white children in the United States resided in a single parent household; in the same year, 41.3% of black children lived with a single parent (Ruggles 1994, 140). Just eighteen years later, in 1998, 26% of white children and

64% of black children lived with only one parent (Teachman, Tedrow, and Crowder 2000, 1239). Across both racial groups, the percentage of children raised by single fathers remains relatively constant (about 2% of white children and 4% of black children); the dramatic increase had occurred solely in single motherhood (Ruggles 1994, 140). This means that, in this eighteen-year time span, single motherhood for white women increased by almost one hundred percent, while for black women it increased by about fifty percent. This discrepancy in the rates of increase also runs counterintuitive to the attitudes displayed by the general public.

A defining example of the differing media portrayals of black and white women in the 1980s can be found by looking at the winners of a Peabody Award in Journalism during the 1980s. In 1981, a Home Box Office (HBO) series entitled *She's Nobody's Baby: The History of American Women in the 20th Century* won a prize for creating a “truly outstanding tribute to the forward movement of American women” (Peabody Awards 1981). The show features a number of women, the majority of whom are white, for their roles in political activism and in fostering the introduction of American women to the workplace. There are only two black women featured, and they are both entertainers. It is important to reiterate that the series is subtitled “The History of the American Woman in the 20th Century” but excludes the history of most minority women. This exclusion is emblematic of American portrayals of all women as white in this time period. In 1986, a CBS News Special Report, “The Vanishing Family- Crisis in Black America,” won the Peabody for “a sensitive and insightful look into the issue of the black family in America” (Peabody Awards 1986). The documentary opens on a focus group of black mothers, to whom the reporter asks, “Raise your hand if you’re married. Raise your hand if you would like to be married to your baby’s father” (*The Vanishing Family* 1986). The reporter is incredulous when none of the women raise their hand to indicate they are married, and only one

woman raises her hand to indicate that she is married. The piece goes on to portray single black motherhood as a social crisis and blames it for a surge in reliance on welfare programs. This dichotomy is largely indicative of the public's perception of black and white women at this time: white women were strong world changers, and black women were deeply troubled.

In summation, this thesis pays significant attention to three archetypes: the welfare queen, the feminist, and the Stepford wife. The welfare queen is an extremely negative, racist stereotype that is defined as a black woman who has children solely for the purpose of increasing her welfare payout; she is not a good mother, and she cannot and will not take care of anyone but herself. The feminist, for the purposes of this project, is a white woman who shirks traditional expectations of white women in America and insists on defining herself and her life. The Stepford wife is, in many ways, the feminist's predecessor; she does nothing to define herself or her own life, seeking only to be pleasing to a husband. She does not work, nor does she really seem to exist outside of the home.

As previously stated, much more attention has been paid to the public's perceptions of women during this interval, as opposed to women's understandings of themselves. In working to learn more about how middle-class black women and middle-class white women viewed themselves during this time period, I constructed a theoretical lens designed to allow myself to interpret the messages and encourages distributed within these two groups; this lens is detailed in the following section.

II. Theoretical Lens

The theoretical lens for this project plays a critical role in evaluating both the differences and the significance of these differences between the ideal womanhood constructed by *Cosmopolitan* and *Essence*. Within the historical context, it seems plausible that *Essence* would describe readers as single mothers (albeit with different connotations than that of the welfare queen) and that *Cosmopolitan* would describe readers as career-women. To examine this in greater detail, I interpreted how *Cosmopolitan* and *Essence* instructed and encouraged their readers to do racialized womanhood.

This thesis draws largely on the theoretical work of Candace West in her publications “Doing Gender” (1987) and “Doing Difference” (1995). The framework of “Doing Gender” applies to the portrayals of women in both *Cosmopolitan* and *Essence*, as they advise on and provide examples of the performance of womanhood. “Doing Difference” is a theoretical extension that can be utilized to explore the intersectionality classed and racialized womanhood in both publications. While it may appear, at first glance, that only *Essence* readers would be dealing with intersectionality, because white is an “unmarked” category, as I explained in the historical context section, race did strongly impact the public perception of American women. Because there are strong cultural expectations designated specifically for white women, white women were dealing with intersectionality as well.

West and Zimmerman theorize that women must portray themselves in an appropriately feminine way, they are expected to “do” gender: “doing gender involves a complex of socially guided perceptual, interactional, and micropolitical activities that cast particular pursuits as expressions of masculine and feminine ‘natures’” (West and Zimmerman 1987, 126). Further, gender is not an inherent quality of an individual, but is instead a characteristic of social

interactions. Therefore, anytime that *Essence* or *Cosmopolitan* gives advice or descriptions of interactions, they are providing instructions on doing gender. Additionally, gender is not a stagnant 'role' that one assumes and constantly performs but is instead only present through interactions (West and Zimmerman 1987, 129). This also means that *Essence* and *Cosmopolitan* are likely to provide situational advice; for example, *Essence* may encourage readers to do blackness in different ways, depending on the context and who they are interacting with. Similarly, both publications may encourage readers to do womanhood in different ways, in order to generate situationally positive outcomes.

Under the framework of doing gender, gender is an omnipresent feature of every interaction. As West and Zimmerman explain:

Individuals have many social identities that may be donned or shed, muted or made more salient, depending on the situation. One may be a friend, spouse, professional, citizen, and many other things to many different people- or, to the same person at different times. But we are always women or men- unless we shift into another sex category. What this means is that our identificatory displays will provide an ever-available resource for doing gender under an infinitely diverse set of circumstances. (West and Zimmerman 1987, 139)

This is to say that, regardless of whether one is choosing to do gender as male, female, or a non-binary gender, one is inherently aware of the gender that one is choosing to do, and that one cannot possibly opt out of gender. When one does gender in a way that falls outside of socially accepted boundaries, the other individuals within the interaction will be challenged in some way (West and Zimmerman 139). This feeds into the argument that gender is a self-perpetuating concept: we expect a gender from everyone we interact with, and so we also perform gender ourselves in every interaction. Doing difference is essentially an extension of this, in which race is interpreted to be involved in every single social interaction. This means that every piece of advice given by *Essence* and *Cosmopolitan* is both inherently gendered and inherently racialized.

It became useful to understand these works through the lens of gender and race as performance. As Candace West proposes, “gender [is] an emergent feature of social situations” and “a routine, methodical, and recurring accomplishment” (West and Zimmerman 1987, 126). Gender and, ultimately, race can be conceived of not as rigid roles but as omnipresent categorical performances that are demanded in every situation. This is to say that we are all constantly performing our own identities as we conceive them, with gender and race being elements of these identities that may overlap and intersect in innumerable ways. Both gender and race continually reinforce themselves as normatively important labels; we are obligated to perform our gender and our race, but we obligate those around us to perform as well.

The premise of doing difference lies within the assumption that there are special social directives for people who live within one or more marked categories. Unmarked is a term used to denote categorizations of people that are considered default; these categories are typically also the recipients of societal privilege. The properties of a marked group are as follows:

- (1) the marked is heavily articulated while the unmarked remains unarticulated; (2) as a consequence, the marking process exaggerates the importance and distinctiveness of the marked; (3) the marked receives disproportionate attention relative to its size or frequency, while the unmarked is rarely attended to even though it is usually greater; (4) distinctions within the marked tend to be ignored, making it appear more homogenous than the unmarked; and (5) characteristics of a marked member are generalized to all members of the marked category but never beyond the category. (Brekhus 1998, 36)

Brekhus argues that the process of marking, which both women and black Americans have undergone, ultimately reinforces images of marked categories as more interesting than unmarked categories; for instance, women are perceived as more gendered than men, while whiteness is perceived a default and only blackness is something to be performed (Brekhus 1998, 39). As both black and female, then, black women should experience double marking, in which they are expected to perform both their gender and their race; white men, on the other hand, experience

no marking and are often defined by their absence of performance. The denotation of marked and unmarked stems, Brekhus contends, from a focus on the “moral, social, and political concerns of our time” which leads scholarship to study intensively groups that are disadvantaged by social structures, such as racial minorities and women (Brekhus 1998, 39). It is through this process, then, that we as a society have come to understand marked categories of people as more culturally interesting or more differentiated than other groups, thus leading to a higher demand for the performance of these groups’ perceived and expected attributes by the members of the groups. This understanding would thus predict that *Essence* would be much more instructive than *Cosmopolitan*, because its readers have much more to perform. It also implies that *Cosmopolitan* would not provide any sort of advice or instruction on doing whiteness, while *Essence* would provide instruction on doing blackness.

Under the frameworks of “Doing Gender” and “Doing Difference,” I examined *Essence* and *Cosmopolitan* as the pinnacle of identity performance; they are both reinforced and reinforcing. In creating issues of a women’s magazine, the editors are compelled to create content that appeals to women of the desired in-group (black middle-class women for *Essence*, white middle class women for *Cosmopolitan*) while also defining idealized qualities for readers to aspire to. Readers should identify with the women portrayed in the magazine, but they should also feel as though the magazine can help them to somehow better themselves, to come closer to cover-girl standards. In this way, *Cosmopolitan* and *Essence* are viewed as guidebooks to ‘doing’ racialized womanhood, and they will be analyzed throughout this thesis as such.

The use of Zimmerman’s work on doing gender and doing difference allows the creation of a theoretical lens that interprets *Essence* and *Cosmopolitan* as instructional materials. Magazines, particularly women’s magazines, are inherently aspirational. They depict beautiful

and successful women and encourage their readers to be more like the women that grace the covers. I have thus chosen to understand the women presented in *Essence* and *Cosmopolitan* as women who are doing gender and doing difference in the right, or culturally acceptable way.

This approach lends itself well to the following questions: How do the ways in which *Essence* and *Cosmopolitan* instruct readers to do gender and do difference appear to grapple with societal expectations? In particular, how does *Cosmopolitan* handle the influence of the women's liberation movement? How does *Essence* handle the ramifications of the welfare queen stereotype? Where are the discrepancies and what do these discrepancies mean about how these groups perceive and understand the ideal woman? Do any of these aspects change over time and, if so, what do these changes say about the culturally accepted standards of doing gender and doing difference?

III. Methodology

IIIA. Choice of Materials

The audience of middle-class women is a critical element to this project. Because middle-class women typically have the resources to pursue the sort of advice dispersed by women's magazines as well as popular culture, women belonging to the middle-class were most susceptible to the messages of both the American public and *Cosmopolitan* and *Essence* during this time period. While women belonging to the lower-class would also be affected by political discourse and public perception (particularly its negative aspects), they would be less able to change their lifestyles than middle-class women. Therefore, the messages created by *Essence* and *Cosmopolitan* were assumed to be indicative of how readers wanted to create their own personhood, because the readers had the financial and social capital to create their own personhood.

I chose to engage in a comparative analysis of *Cosmopolitan* and *Essence* magazines after coming to understand the publications as containing similar types of content and holding large market reach, and after reading existing research comparing the two magazines. I was largely interested in how the magazines would either encourage or shy away from family life and how the magazines would approach family structure, as these are traditionally critical elements of doing womanhood. Additionally, given the presented historical context, family life was a critical issue in the time period, particularly for *Essence* readers.

Between 1978 and 2000, *Essence* magazine featured a child with a parent on the cover of fourteen issues. *Cosmopolitan* magazine, in the same time period, featured only individual women on its covers, surrounded by taglines about finding the perfect man or fixing a broken relationship. This is not because *Essence* is a family-targeted magazine; it strives for the same

readers as *Cosmopolitan*: heterosexual, college-educated, gainfully employed women. Reviere and Bylerly explain the demographics of readers as such:

The magazines are similar in their orientation toward a heterosexual female audience, possessing a college education, and gainfully employed. They differ in two ways. *Essence* readers have a considerably higher median income than *Cosmo* readers- \$62,000 vs. \$27,000. The lower income level among *Cosmo* readers, however, reflects in part a large number of college-aged readers (with student incomes lower than women fully employed). An additional difference- and a detail central to the present study- is that the two magazines reach out to different racial demographics. *Essence* is oriented toward an African-American (Black) audience, *Cosmo* toward a white audience. (Reviere and Bylerly 2013, 676-677)

Cosmopolitan is written with white women in mind, while *Essence* describes itself as “Where Black Women Come First” (Essence 2018). The content of both magazines is similar; the publications present an array of weight loss strategies, beauty and fashion recommendations, tips for both sexual pleasure and sexual health, relationship advice, and celebrity profiles.

Reviere and Bylerly ultimately determine in their work that *Essence* more closely adheres to second-wave feminist tenets than *Cosmopolitan*, because *Essence* is significantly more likely than *Cosmopolitan* to encourage readers to prioritize their own desires and needs and to dissolve unproductive relationships (Reviere and Bylerly 2013, 687). Because of this previous finding, I was particularly interested in seeing how *Essence* framed singled motherhood; the findings of Reviere and Bylerly would suggest that *Essence* would frame single motherhood as an empowered choice, as opposed to framing it in the negative contexts of the welfare queen. This would also indicate that *Cosmopolitan*, according to the findings of Reviere and Bylerly, may advocate for maintaining a reliance on men, as opposed to advocating for independence.

As mentioned previously, both *Essence* and *Cosmopolitan* are widely circulated in America. As of 2011, *Essence* held a total circulation of 1,050,000 issues and *Cosmopolitan* had a circulation of 3,032,000 issues (Audit Bureau of Circulations, 2011). 2010 Census data

estimates that there were 119,000,000 white women living in the United States and 21,000,000 black women living in the United States. This means that, in 2010-2011, there was one issue of *Cosmopolitan* in circulation for every thirty-nine white women and one issue of *Essence* in circulation for every twenty black women. This actually means that *Essence* possesses almost twice the reach of *Cosmopolitan*, when adjusted for population size. Regardless, both publications hold large market shares and can be assumed to reach a large number of women, particularly when accounting for the fact that magazines are often placed in communal areas, such as waiting rooms.

From 1978 to 2000, the time period covered in this project, *Essence* was led by Marcia Ann Gillespie and, subsequently, Susan L. Taylor, both of whom are African American women. In the same time period, *Cosmopolitan* also had two editors in chief: Helen Gurley Brown and Bonnie Fuller, both of whom are white women. Therefore, the magazines should have undergone approximately the same amount of change over the period studied. It is also worth noting that, because *Cosmopolitan* was led by white women and *Essence* was led by black women, the magazines were created by members of the groups that they seek to address.

IIIB. Sampling

To generate a representative sample, I performed content analysis on the June issue of both *Cosmopolitan* and *Essence* for each year from 1978 to 2000. The month of June was randomly selected. This time period is meant to span Reagan-era politics and welfare reform, as well as be long enough to encapsulate substantial cultural shifts. The entire content of each issue was analyzed, except for the advertisements. Advertisements were excluded because they do not inherently represent the viewpoints of the publications and may not have been created by

members of the white or black female communities, as the magazines themselves are. All articles of each issue were read in full.

III.C. Process

In order to strategically evaluate both the differences and the similarities in the portrayal of womanhood in *Cosmopolitan* and *Essence*, I employed content analysis. Content analysis is a technique designed to garner inferences from text in a way that is both replicable and valid (Krippendorff 2004, 18). Within this process, however, it is widely accepted that a text has no meaning without a reader, and that meaning must be derived through a series of judgments consistent with the subject matter of the texts (Krippendorff 2004, 22-23). That is to say that the researcher is expected to be knowledgeable about the subject matter presented in the text, to develop a framework for categorizing the text, and to utilize this framework consistently throughout the project. In the context of my research, this meant reading a representative sample of both magazines and evaluating the articles and headlines contained in each as they pertain to the construction of female personhood within the theoretical framework of doing gender and doing difference. For each and every article, I examined how articles portrayed the right and wrong ways of doing racialized womanhood. Since I was the only analyst, consistency was achieved by regularly reviewing prior notes and categorizations. Additionally, with only one analyst, a discussion of positionality was critical to the validity of the work.

Decisions as to what was important and what was unimportant to this project were made gradually and with an eye for interpreting *Cosmopolitan and Essence* as references for the performances of gender and race. It was also critical to bear in mind the historical context in which these issues were published. In knowing that black women were becoming a politically-

attacked category, I paid particular attention to overt discussions of the political but also to more subtle references to a broader black female community, which I realized was a common topic in *Essence* when I began my analysis, as *Essence* often referred to the black female community as an inherently politicized topic. Given that *Essence* readers are generally middle-class, I was interested in seeing how *Essence* did or did not address the idea of the welfare queen because, although it was unlikely that *Essence* readers were actually utilizing welfare programs, they could still very much be stereotyped as and affected by the idea of the welfare queen in the public's mind. I also wondered if there would be negative references to black women who were not middle-class, if there would be a sense of giving the black female community a "bad name."

In reading *Cosmopolitan*, I was particularly interested in the way that close relationships (intimate or otherwise) were portrayed. Given the media's fascination at the time with the completely independent woman, I hoped that *Cosmopolitan* would reveal whether or not middle-class white women at the time were actually aspiring to independence from men, and, if this was the case, did *Cosmopolitan* ever even discuss family life and children? If family life and children were ignored, did *Cosmopolitan* focus entirely on readers' personal development and careers? I also wondered, given the cultural beliefs at the time that (white) women had essentially beaten sexism, how the magazine would approach relationships with men, and how *Cosmopolitan* would emphasize or deemphasize its readers' careers.

In all, much of this project and its resulting conclusions were derived from a presence-absence idea. In the beginning issues, I was often struck by something that seemed omnipresent in one publication and entirely absent in the other. Because it was a comparative project, I read the issues in an alternating fashion, and my interest was often piqued by the two vastly different impressions of the same cultural happenings. The analysis of what was present and what was not

ultimately granted me a better understanding of the publications' priorities in relation to each other.

After determining the elements of each issue that struck me as interesting or important to the overall research themes, I then thought through each of the articles or headlines through the lens of instructions for doing gender or difference. It was helpful to me to envision the editors and authors of the publications to be doing gender and difference themselves and envisioning themselves as role models for readers. In this way, I evaluated each piece as a part of a broader instruction manual. For the purpose of organizing my thoughts, I broke my notes and observations into the following categories: readers in the office, sexual activity, relationships with men, political activity, motherhood, and social networks. This furthered the idea of presence-absence, as I realized how the distribution of content between the categories differed significantly between the publications. Essentially, I broke down how *Cosmopolitan* and *Essence* expected their readers to do gender and difference in the workplace, in sexual encounters, in romantic relationships, in politics, in motherhood, and in friendships, and then I analyzed how these differed (both over time and between the publications) and what these differences implied about the priorities for doing gender and difference as *Essence* and *Cosmopolitan* readers.

IIID. Positionality

This endeavor began with an interest in how the two publications approached reproductive health; however, the subject matter quickly ballooned into an overall examination of womanhood. Creating this thesis truly became an exercise in making the strange familiar and the familiar strange. Having grown up in an affluent white household and completed my entire education at schools and universities with disproportionately white student bodies, *Cosmopolitan*

magazine and its various offshoots were well-known to me. More importantly, however, the cultural expectations placed upon middle and upper-class white women were (and still are) lived realities for me. It was a truly anthropological process, then, to come to view issues of *Cosmopolitan* as essentially foreign texts, and to begin to question the unspoken assumptions and taken-for-granted priorities of white female culture, in order to make the familiar strange. I am certain that there are aspects of *Cosmopolitan* that are so familiar to me that I failed to take note of them entirely. In attempting to combat this problem, I often pinpointed small, subtle things in *Essence* that were unfamiliar to me and attempted to find their equivalents in *Cosmopolitan*. For example, both publications featured a wedding-themed issue during the interval studied. *Essence* gave specific suggestions on incorporating children from previous marriages into the ceremony, which grabbed my attention. This thought then led me back through an unquestioned assumption in *Cosmopolitan*'s wedding issue: that there were no previous children, which I had not noticed on my first reading.

My original interest in this project stemmed directly from a desire to make the strange familiar, to come to understand the unspoken assumptions and taken-for-granted priorities that undergird *Essence*. In particular, I recently spent eight weeks interning at a homeless shelter at which ninety percent of clients were black women. This means that I am much more well-versed in the day-to-day lives of impoverished black women than I am in the lives of middle-class black women. Therefore, in my research, I often struggled to parse out the differences between social expectations that vary due to class and social expectations that vary due to race, and, of course, the intersection of the two. In reading *Essence*, I was frequently struck by the prevalence of white privilege, by the ability of *Cosmopolitan* readers to not even have to consider half of the things that *Essence* readers do, and I attempted to capture this in my analysis. In my first

readings of *Essence*, I was shocked by the frequent discussions of political matters and the understanding that *Essence* readers were constantly fighting racism in America. In *Cosmopolitan*, there was very little material of this nature. In contrast to attempting to study the cultural demands placed upon black women from scholarly work, delving into *Essence* provided an opportunity to immerse myself in the everyday messages received by middle-class black women. In exploring the two publications, I came to derive meaning and importance from areas of contrast between the two; I feel that the comparative nature of this project greatly enhanced the narrative quality of the research. However, as I have explained, I am the only analyst in this project, and I come with my own background, lived experiences, and preconceived notions, despite my best efforts to avoid these external factors.

IV. Results and Analysis

A common phrase in both *Cosmopolitan* and *Essence* is “having it all,” however, this phrase holds different meanings for the two publications. In critically reading the ways in which *Cosmopolitan* and *Essence* portray romantic relationships, motherhood and family life, it becomes clear that, according to *Cosmopolitan*, to “have it all” is to have a husband; while, according to *Essence*, to “have it all” is to have a child, friends, a career, and possibly a male partner. *Cosmopolitan* expects its readers to do womanhood by maintaining relationships with men at all costs, while *Essence* instructs its readers that to do black womanhood is to be successful in all facets of life. In both magazines, there is a complex interplay between the societal notions surrounding their readers and what the magazines believe their readers are concerned about. In particular, *Essence* battles the notion of the welfare queen, while *Cosmopolitan* slowly grapples with the effects of the women’s liberation movement.

IVA. *Cosmopolitan*: Women Defined by Men

A woman’s relationship with a man is more important than any other relationship she could possibly have is a theme that continually reaffirms itself in *Cosmopolitan*.. In general, marriage (or, at the very least, a boyfriend) is viewed as the ultimate aspiration for *Cosmopolitan* readers. Many of *Cosmopolitan*’s how-to columns focus on managing relationships with men in various capacities. This means that readers of *Cosmopolitan* are taught that to do white womanhood correctly is to focus their ambition and energy on finding and keeping a husband. This stands in direct contradiction to the historical expectations of white women as the feminist, which focused on women as liberated individuals who did not need men in their lives.

In investigating the content of *Cosmopolitan* during this time period, though, I found that there is significant discussion of women in the workplace and women in control of their lives, which does align with the values of the feminist trope. Furthermore, *Cosmopolitan*, particularly in the 1990s, does portray its readers as powerful and capable, despite continued constant discussions of relationships with men. It becomes clear that, throughout the time period, *Cosmopolitan* believes that its readers are both entitled to and able to achieve whatever it is that they personally desire, in all sectors of life.

By performing a content analysis of *Cosmopolitan* from 1978-2000 and examining this content through the described theoretical lens, I developed the hypothesis that, during this time period, *Cosmopolitan* and its readers lived in a constant state of tension between the ideals of the Stepford wife, or the traditional woman, and the feminist, or the modern woman. This tension is consistently shown in the studied issues of *Cosmopolitan*, as readers are encouraged to pursue their own desires and interests but to portray their lives in ways that appeal to men. Readers are expected to have the internal values of the feminist, but the same ultimate goal as the Stepford wife. This tension also explains why, as I describe below, the messages in *Cosmopolitan* underwent a significant change during the period studied, as the importance of male relationships was gradually reduced, and the importance of independence and self-reliance was gradually increased. At the beginning of the period, 1978, the feminist was a fairly radical, new idea, and, as *Cosmopolitan* progressed over the next twenty-two years, the feminist garnered larger and larger acceptance by both the magazine and its readers.

It is my belief that *Cosmopolitan* readers during this time, middle-class white women, struggled to conceptualize themselves as independent, because they had lived their entire lives in relation to women who were impressed with the ideas and values of the Stepford wife. While

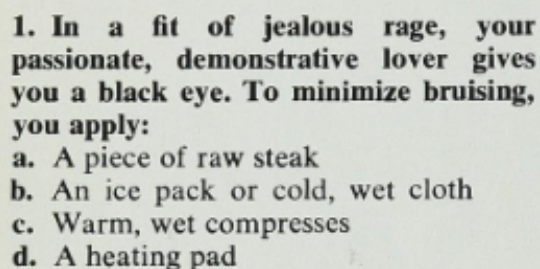
readers during the time do come to see themselves as capable and worthy of pursuing their own desires, much of the content is still framed in terms of romantic relationships with men. I interpret this to be evidence of a clear tension in how readers saw themselves; partially the Stepford wife, and partially the feminist.

Romantic Relationships: The Ultimate Skill

From 1978-2000, *Cosmopolitan* regularly encourages and even pressures readers to both acquire and maintain romantic relationships with men. Therefore, the magazine constructs the ideal woman as a woman that is in a relationship. This indicates to readers that, in order to do white womanhood correctly, they must pursue marriage at all costs. This implication is difficult to reconcile with the ideas of the women's liberation movement, and I believe it to be a remnant of the values of the Stepford wife stereotype .

In June of 1978, the very first issue analyzed for this project, *Cosmopolitan* published a quiz entitled "Can You Come to the Rescue?" which contained various questions about handling medical or first aid situations that may arise. The very first question reads: "In a fit of jealous rage, your passionate, demonstrative lover gives you a black eye," and then the quiz asks the reader about the best method to prevent bruising (see Figure A1). This language, by normalizing relationship violence, suggests that, for *Cosmopolitan* readers, preserving a relationship with a man is more important than personal safety. Furthermore, the terms "jealous" and "passionate" imply that this sort of violence is an expression of love and commitment. This belief that the relationship with a man is to be preserved at all costs is very much remnant of the notion of the Stepford wife, who did the female gender entirely by existing within the context of a man. By 1983, however, in "Irma Kurtz's Agony Column," readers are encouraged to leave men who are

violent, if the men refuse to seek professional help. Readers are still encouraged to try and work through emotional abuse, though. This marks the beginning of the transition from Stepford wife ideals to feminist ideals, albeit gradual. Again in 1989, “Irma Kurtz’s Agony Column” urges a reader in a physically abusive relationship to leave without hesitation. In 1993, “Irma Kurtz’s Agony Column” tells readers to leave men that put them down, displaying a clear philosophical shift from prior issues. The trend of advising readers to unconditionally leave an abusive relationship continues throughout the 1990s. This shift in perspectives on abusive relationships (of all forms) is a great example of the larger shift that I see occurring in *Cosmopolitan* during the interval studied. I interpret this shift to mean that, over the twenty-three-year period, *Cosmopolitan* readers, middle-class white women, internalized some of the messages of the women’s liberation movement, and began to believe that they could establish a sufficient quality of life without a man, meaning that it was worth it to leave an abusive relationship. In the earlier years though, the ideals of the Stepford wife were still winning out in the tension between the two, leading readers to believe that a relationship with a man was so important to their quality of life that it was worth it to risk their personal safety in order to reach the idealized standards of doing white womanhood, which absolutely required a husband.



1. In a fit of jealous rage, your passionate, demonstrative lover gives you a black eye. To minimize bruising, you apply:

- a.** A piece of raw steak
- b.** An ice pack or cold, wet cloth
- c.** Warm, wet compresses
- d.** A heating pad

Figure A1. *Cosmopolitan* June 1978.

Additionally, throughout *Cosmopolitan* but particularly in the first half of the time period studied, the acquisition and maintenance of a romantic relationship is portrayed as a skill that is

necessary to do womanhood; the responsibility of maintaining a relationship lies solely with the woman, which is a stance reminiscent of the Stepford wife trope. In June 1979, a column entitled “How Not to Louse Up A Budding Romance” gives a list of forty-four “don’ts” for women who want to make a relationship last. The tips mostly center on creating a pleasing image for the man and portraying oneself as available to but not reliant on or obsessed with him. In continuing the trend of helping readers hone their abilities to please men, the 1985 article “You Can Talk Sports to Men” provides a primer on a variety of sports in order to help readers converse with their boyfriends and bosses (see Figure A2). These articles are particularly interesting because they encourage women to exhibit somewhat-masculine behaviors (independence and sports watching) in order to please men. This is a great example of *Cosmopolitan* encouraging readers to pursue feminist-type behaviors in a way that still somewhat meets the needs of the Stepford wife. Most importantly, I interpret this category of articles (articles on how to portray oneself to men) to be symbolic of the assumption that readers can and will do whatever it is that they want to do, but that readers do ultimately desire a meaningful relationship with a man. *Cosmopolitan* typically shies away from actually telling readers how to act in their private lives, but instead focuses on telling readers how to manage the appearance of their personalities and interests. This provides a complex glimpse into how women of this time period were expected to successfully do womanhood- they were assumed to want a man, and so they were assumed to want advice on portraying themselves to men, even though these portrayals often stood in contrast to the women’s actual lives. There are numerous more examples of this appearance management in *Cosmopolitan*, many of which will be examined below.



Figure A2. *Cosmopolitan* June 1985.

Tips on accommodating one's male partner continue throughout the interval studied; a 1990 article "Yikes! You're Living Together!" gives the following tips for women who have just moved in with their boyfriends: "Give him plenty of space," "Stock the kitchen with his favorite foods," "Leave him a gift," "Respect his privacy," and to avoid bringing up the topics of marriage and children too soon after the move. These suggestions center largely on changing one's own lifestyle to accommodate that of the boyfriend, and these ideas are furthered by a June 2000 article "4 Things in Your Pad that Make Him Panic," which tells readers how to make their homes more inviting to men. While there are tangible changes mentioned in these two pieces, the tone is largely centered on portraying oneself to men. This again reflects the understanding that *Cosmopolitan* readers can and do act as they please, but that they may have to hide this behavior in order to attain a man. This is another example of the tension between the Stepford wife and the feminist. Readers appear to be acting as feminists but still wanting to appear as the Stepford wife. Similarly, "Picky Picky Picky: Stop Accentuating the Negative in Him" warns readers in 1991 that they will end up alone if they don't settle for a man soon (see Figure A3). This type of article reinforces the belief that, above all, readers still harbor the Stepford wife notion that they need a man in order to be happy and in order to perform womanhood correctly. Therefore, the

magazine recommends lowering one's standards, if that's what it takes. I would hypothesize that, particularly because this article appears in the 1990s, readers were probably fairly comfortable with their own independence and capabilities; however, it is likely that societal expectations (particularly those of the readers' families) still favored women being in relationships.

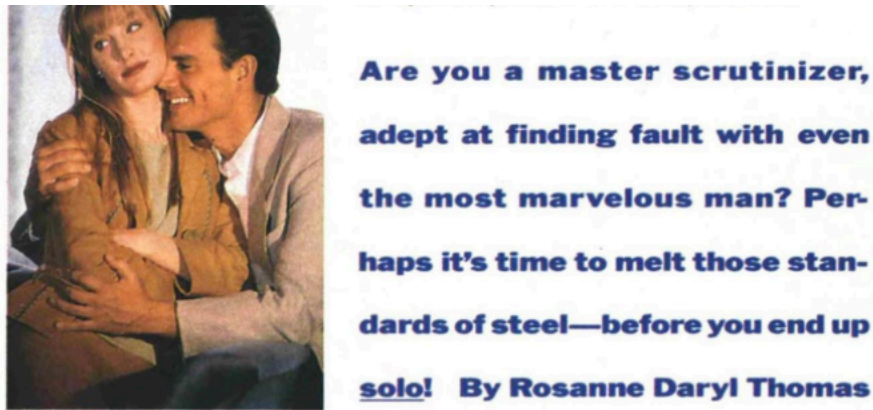


Figure A3. *Cosmopolitan* June 1991.

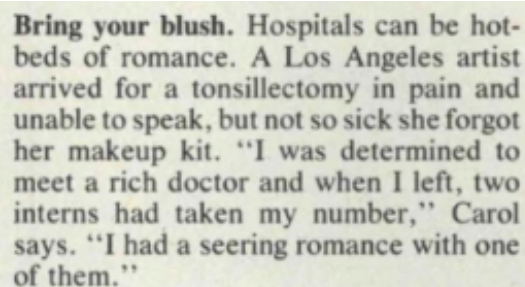
A 1992 piece “Getting Him to Do His Share” takes a different tact on relationships and urges readers to get their partners involved in housework; this article falls more in line with the expectations of how a liberated woman would do her gender. However, it is immediately followed by a section of recipes entitled “Bake Him a Cake.” These two articles, in the same issue, present a fantastic example of the tension between the Stepford wife and the feminist. In this issue, *Cosmopolitan* is demonstrating a clear understanding that its readers may want to do gender in a way that aligns with both tropes at different instances. Therefore, readers at this time period were likely negotiating the two tropes and embracing the behaviors of both in various situations. This aligns with the understanding that doing gender is entirely situational and that gender may be performed differently depending on the circumstances. In 1993, “The Nineties Man: Why is He So Scared?” calls men weak for fearing strong women, which is a decisive change from previous insinuations that women should do their best to avoid intimidating men.

The assumption that it is a woman's responsibility to make a romantic relationship work underrides content in *Cosmopolitan* throughout the interval studied, which reflects the idea that, as Stepford wife would, *Cosmopolitan* readers intensely desire a relationship with a man and need this in order to feel that they are doing womanhood correctly. For example, "Commitment-Phobics: Men Who Can't Love," from June 1987, explains how to demand a committed relationship from men, never exploring the possibility that the woman should perhaps move on, instead. Similarly, in 1996, "Irma Kurtz's Agony Column" suggests that a reader who has discovered that her fiancé is a peeping tom go with him to therapy and help him to overcome his sexual deviance, as opposed to leaving him. This is a particularly interesting example because it refutes any notion of female sisterhood or of women looking out for each other; the reader knows that her fiancé is violating the privacy of other women, but she is advised to help him. This indicates that, as late as 1996, readers are still told that to do womanhood correctly is to place relationships with men above relationships with women or a collective sense of duty to women in general.

Because *Cosmopolitan's* readers who want to do their gender in the right way should always aspire to be desired by men, two of "Life's Little Pleasures," from June 1989, are "Your date gets to your meeting place just in time to see a handsome stranger trying to pick you up" and "Three construction workers whistle appreciatively as you pass by." Under a continual theme of defining women in terms of men, the same issue features a five-page story entitled, "An Affair to Remember: What It Was Like to Live With and Be Loved by Cary Grant," which is entirely about the experience of dating a male celebrity.

In 1982, a columnist writes about her experiences having a dilation and curettage procedure following a miscarriage in a piece titled "Coping With Surgery." In the piece, the

author never addresses the loss of a pregnancy, instead providing tips for women who must undergo surgery, including “bring your blush” in order to pick up men during the hospital stay (see Figure A4). This advice enforces the idea that, in any situation, a woman must pay attention to attractive men and must always be working toward the ultimate goal of a serious relationship with a man. This example in particular displays a complete disregard for motherhood by *Cosmopolitan*, and communicates to readers that doing womanhood is not about being a mother but instead about meeting attractive men. I also find it particularly interesting that, in this piece, women are viewed as being more than capable of handling their own health and dealing with pain- this portrayal of women as strong and resilient does encapsulate some of the values of the women’s liberation movement. Again, though, it is in clear tension with the Stepford wife, because the *Cosmopolitan* reader should be strong enough to get over her discomfort in order to acquire a man.



Bring your blush. Hospitals can be hotbeds of romance. A Los Angeles artist arrived for a tonsillectomy in pain and unable to speak, but not so sick she forgot her makeup kit. “I was determined to meet a rich doctor and when I left, two interns had taken my number,” Carol says. “I had a seering romance with one of them.”

Figure A4. *Cosmopolitan* June 1982.

In the 1990s, *Cosmopolitan* slightly alters its portrayal of male-female relationships by presenting the idea that it is acceptable to be without a relationship for a short period of time. In yet another example of navigating the feminist and the Stepford wife, the 1995 article “How To Live Without a Man (For Now)” argues that women are no longer scorned by society for being single, and that women can, actually, enjoy taking a break between relationships. This statement that it is okay to do womanhood without a man does somewhat coincide with the conception of a

liberated woman, but, there is still the presumption, as indicated in the article's title, that the reader will ultimately begin dating again and that being single cannot be a permanent choice for a reader who wants to do womanhood in the right way.

Furthermore, *Cosmopolitan* portrays men as the keepers of women, which directly counteracts the values of the feminist, who believes that women do not need men. In another feature from 1982, "25 Ways to Know He's Not for Keeps," one of the 'ways' listed is "he has not asked you to stop smoking." This implies that women should seek to be in relationships with men who will take control of their health and wellbeing. As has been shown, it is a recurring theme in *Cosmopolitan* that doing womanhood involves relinquishing control of oneself; in this example, the reader is expected to do womanhood by expecting her boyfriend to monitor her health behaviors- earlier, the reader is expected to be fine with giving up control of her physical health by staying with a man who hits her. This is in absolute disagreement with the values of the women's liberation movement, which advocated for women do womanhood by taking control of their own lives.

Cosmopolitan offers a variety of suggestions on making the transition from a dating relationship to marriage, which presents a route for achieving the ultimate goal of the Stepford wife. In June 1990, "The Great Postponers: Unmarried Men in Their Thirties" blames female liberation for men's hesitance to marry, alleging that female independence has robbed the world of romance and that men are no longer incentivized to marry, because pre-marital sex is not stigmatized. It seems that *Cosmopolitan* believes that the women's liberation movement has actually made doing womanhood, in the traditional sense that it advocates for, less satisfying and less worthwhile. This presents an interesting discourse between *Cosmopolitan* and the social climate at the time, which interpreted feminism as the new face of doing womanhood. The

magazine seems to assume that its readers still very much want to marry and consider this a critical element of doing gender. This does not inherently contradict the notion that women at this time are entitled to greater sexual freedom than they have been in the past; however, this article does present a downside to this trend. It does not appear that *Cosmopolitan* is against its readers facing less stigmatization for embracing sexuality, however *Cosmopolitan* reaffirms in this article that it expects its readers to do womanhood by getting married.

In a similar vein to the way in which *Cosmopolitan* encourages readers to avoid sexually intimidating men by portraying themselves carefully, “Dinner at His Place,” published in 1984, emphasizes proper etiquette when invited to have dinner at a boyfriend’s house. In particular, readers are advised to praise the man copiously even if the meal is not good and to not try and help in the kitchen for fear of “upstaging” the man. This falls into the category of doing womanhood by making oneself appealing to men. Later in the same issue, “My Money, Your Money, Our Money” instructs readers to avoid taking too much control during arguments with a partner about finance, even if the reader is the primary breadwinner. This implies that, even if readers are now able to make their own money (or even more money than their partners) that they should not express this. This is another example of *Cosmopolitan* accepting ideas of women’s liberation but discouraging readers from presenting themselves as entirely independent. This means that readers at the time likely believed that men desired a Stepford wife, as opposed to a feminist. This reaffirms that readers should be focused on relationships with men, even if they themselves want to partake in the benefits of the social climate, specifically greater involvement in the workplace. Several years later, in June 1987, “Money Talk: The Seven Myths of Money” states that many men are no longer intimidated by women that are knowledgeable

about finance. This communicates to readers that, because men are now okay with it, readers are able to represent themselves as capable and competent.

The Absence of Mothers in *Cosmopolitan*

For *Cosmopolitan*, motherhood is typically presented as a down-the-line aspiration. There is very little discussion of children (although there is the occasional mention of babies), and health columns often harp on preventing infertility. This can be read as somewhat aligned with the values of the women's liberation movement, because it does not base women's worth on their maternal status. However, across the board, it appears that *Cosmopolitan* fully expects its readers to ultimately desire children, and children are almost always coupled with marriage. This conveys that, in addition to always prioritizing marriage and romantic relationships, readers are advised that to do womanhood they should plan to have children. This whole discourse is another fantastic example of the tension and interaction between the Stepford wife and the feminist; readers can act as a feminist and live out their lives in a way that delays or even deprioritizes childrearing, but they should ultimately expect to take on a domestic role.

In an example of the coupling of marriage and pregnancy, a reader writes in to the "Your Body" column in *Cosmopolitan* in 1982 because she has had two past abortions and is now engaged; she wants to be sure that she will still be able to conceive, since she is due to be married very soon. A headline of the cover of the June 1983 *Cosmopolitan* reads, "Having Your First Baby When You're Older: Thinking about postponing pregnancy, but not sure you should?" This headline reaffirms the idea that *Cosmopolitan* believes that most of its readers have not yet had children, but that they ultimately hope to. The article accompanying this headline states that women have begun delaying pregnancy as a result of successful careers, and that this choice

comes with significant health risks. This is, again, a mention of how women's liberation has prevented women from successfully doing womanhood, in *Cosmopolitan's* view. *Cosmopolitan* believes that its readers have embraced liberation in the context of professional success, which is why they are more likely to delay pregnancy. Again, though, there appears to be a tension between readers being able to work more (acting as a feminist) and this costing them the traditional accomplishments of womanhood, such as marriage and family (acting as a Stepford wife).

There are numerous other mentions of future pregnancy, a 1986 article "Genetic Counseling" gives information for readers who want to have children but have histories of hereditary diseases in their families, a 1987 scare-piece "Pelvic Inflammatory Disease" emphasizes the risks of infertility as a side-effect, "Letters" from 1989 quotes a reader struggling with the emotional difficulties of infertility, and two separate pieces from 1990 ("Health Memo: News from the Medical World" and "Your Body") discuss the possibility of male infertility. This is furthered by a male-authored piece from 1990 entitled "The Egg & I: Adventures of a Test-Tube Daddy," in which the author recounts the experience of himself and his wife using In Vitro Fertilization.

In a 1981 op-ed, a reader writes "I'm Not Going to Do what I'm Supposed to Do Any More!" saying that she will no longer conform to the expectations of married mothers, which include losing ten pounds, getting monthly spa treatments, and exercising regularly. At the end of her piece, though, she states, "*Some* of the things I'm supposed to do I'll keep on with, of course. I will not let my children subsist solely on frozen enchiladas or *always* tell the truth when my husband acts if I'm in an amorous mood or gain weight and waddle about like a great mama duck." Most striking about this piece is what this woman considers to be the non-negotiable

terms of doing married motherhood: home cooked meals, sexual availability, and image maintenance. This notion of requirements is furthered by a letter from a reader, published in “Letters” in June 1989, which reads “[a man with a mistress] gets it all: the excitement, great sex with *her*; the pot roast and domestic security with his *wife*.” This strongly implies that married women are not sexually exciting but are instead useful only to men in the context of homemaking. *Cosmopolitan* does somewhat divide the instructions for doing motherhood and doing womanhood; if the reader does womanhood correctly (sexually available but not too available, successful relationship maintenance), then she will earn the opportunity to do motherhood, which involves copious domesticity. This again represents the idea that middle-class white women at this time period may transition or even oscillate between the Stepford wife and the feminist. *Cosmopolitan* clearly finds itself unable to fully reconcile the two archetypes, which is likely a difficulty that its readers also experienced at the time.

Cosmopolitan consistently references the notion that there is a prescribed role for a mother to play, with clearly-defined attributes that typically reflect the values of the Stepford wife trope. This is perhaps best summed up by a headline on the June 1987 cover that reads “How Bette Midler Will Carry On (Now That She’s a Wife and Mother, and Still Wild)” (see Figure A5). This theme is exacerbated by a 1995 piece “Moms Who Date, Daughters Who Don’t,” which states: “The lady who kissed your cuts and bruises is now baring her cleavage, behaving like a wild child- even having sex- while you’re home baking cookies. Is this any way for a mother to act?” The article provides suggestions on accepting one’s mother as a sexual being with her own desires and a right to live her own life; these suggestions are in line with women’s liberation, because they advocate for allowing all women (including one’s own mother) to do womanhood in the way in which they want to. As discussed above, *Cosmopolitan* struggles

to reconcile the idea a mother and the idea of a sexual woman. This does feel reflective of the broader historical context, in which women were transitioning out of a solely domestic role.

Cosmopolitan is sending mixed messages about whether or not women can be both maternal and sexual.

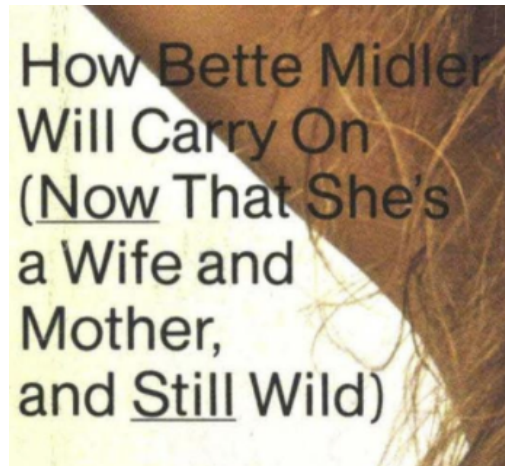


Figure A5. *Cosmopolitan* June 1987.

The Sexual Behavior of *Cosmopolitan* Readers

Early on, *Cosmopolitan* consistently advises its readers to maintain an image of sexual selectivity, mostly in order to not intimidate male partners. The piece “How Not to Louse Up a Budding Romance” from the June 1979 issue includes the following suggestions for readers: “Don’t regale him with witty tales of the promiscuous period you went through after Sam left you,” “You don’t have to pretend to be a virgin, but don’t act as though you’ve had a career as a sexual surrogate, either,” “Keep your more boisterous bedtime fantasies to *yourself*,” and “Never criticize his sexual technique. Despite everything you’ve heard, if you’re too candid, you will lose him. Only *praise* is allowable, and you should *lie* if you must!” The suggestions presented in this article implies that *Cosmopolitan* understands its readers to be sexually active women, but that the magazine believes that for its reader to be successful (in finding a long-term relationship with a man), she must not come across as too sexually experienced. This is echoed in an article

published in 1982 called “How to Use (Not Abuse) Your Sexual Experience” which encourages women to enjoy sex but to avoid intimidating male partners. These two articles illustrate, again, the tension present in *Cosmopolitan* during the interval studied. The magazine advocates for its readers acting as feminists and doing what they want to do, sexually, but also seems to understand that American men may not be ready for or attracted to those qualities and may instead be seeking the qualities of a Stepford wife. *Cosmopolitan*’s advice to its readers to act as they wish but portray themselves differently to the men they are seeing reaffirms the notion that a male partner is the ultimate goal, which is, again, a likely remnant of the expectations of the Stepford wife.

In the late 1980s, *Cosmopolitan* begins to waffle on the appropriate amount of sexuality for its reader to show and experience, which represents a cultural shift to broader acceptance of feminist values. In the same issue (June 1986), the magazine published articles entitled “Don’t Worry, You Can’t Be Too Sexy” and “The Sexually Assertive Woman: Balancing Act for the ‘80s.” These two titles are obviously in conflict: the reader can’t possibly be too sexy, but she also must balance her sexual assertiveness; this is yet another clear example of tension between the Stepford wife and the feminist. The first piece argues that women should embrace their sexuality to its fullest and celebrate the relatively liberal social climate of the 1980s, while the second argues that being too “liberated” is a turn-off for potential mates. Perhaps most interesting about this disagreement within the magazine is that, if its readers are to be truly liberated, then they should be free to have as many or as few sexual partners as they want. However, *Cosmopolitan* associates doing liberated womanhood directly with promiscuity, and thus advises its readers to avoid doing liberated womanhood. While it appears as though *Cosmopolitan* might be trending toward sexual-openness, a 1995 advice column “Cosmo

Etiquette '95" states that readers should always tell men that they have had sex with three other men (see Figure A6). The number three implies that readers should do womanhood in a nonintimidating way by portraying themselves as sexually experienced but not *too* sexually experienced. Yet again, *Cosmopolitan* advises readers that it is fine to act as feminists but that they should portray themselves as Stepford wives. This again confirms the assumption that *Cosmopolitan* readers, middle-class white women, are still under the influence of the values of the Stepford wife and still ultimately desire a husband, even if this means portraying themselves in a different manner than how they actually behave.

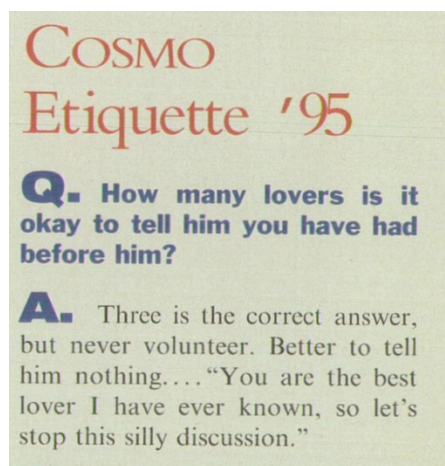


Figure A6. *Cosmopolitan* June 1995.

Cosmopolitan disseminates mixed messages on whether or not to accommodate the sexual wants of a male partner, with the focus shifting over time to an emphasis on the woman's pleasure and satisfaction, which is another example of a progressive acceptance of feminist ideas over the period studied. In 1981, the magazine published a guide called "Fetishes for Aficionados" that encourages women to be open to any sexually deviant ideas that their boyfriend or husband may present; the author also presents fetishes as a natural result of human evolution. The very next year, though, a reader writes in to a recurring advice column entitled "Analyst's Couch" and states that her new lover insists that she "talk dirty" in bed, but she does

not want to. The columnist advises her to adhere to her own preferences and not indulge her lover in activities that she does not enjoy herself. This echoes the liberated sentiment of doing womanhood in a way that is satisfying to the reader, as opposed to her male partner. By 1983, “Irma Kurtz’s Agony Column” is encouraging readers to embrace all of their own sexual fantasies, stating that it is fine for a woman to watch pornography that depicts rape, if that is what she enjoys. Two years later, “When He Doesn’t Want Sex” tells readers to go to great lengths to improve their sex lives to meet their own desires and expectations; similarly, in 1989, “When the Sex Urge Dwindles in Marriage” urges readers to find compromise with their husbands in order to achieve sexual satisfaction. This category of articles strongly embraces the open female sexuality that was emphasized in the women’s liberation movement.

In accordance with urging readers to avoid intimidating men, *Cosmopolitan* often tells readers to stroke their partners’ egos, in order to achieve a better sex life. “When He’s Having Trouble in Bed,” published in 1995, advises that, if a man is experiencing sexual dysfunction, the reader should do everything she can to make him feel secure about himself (see figure A7). This reaffirms the idea that women who are doing womanhood correctly are making men feel better about themselves and going to great lengths to maintain romantic relationships.

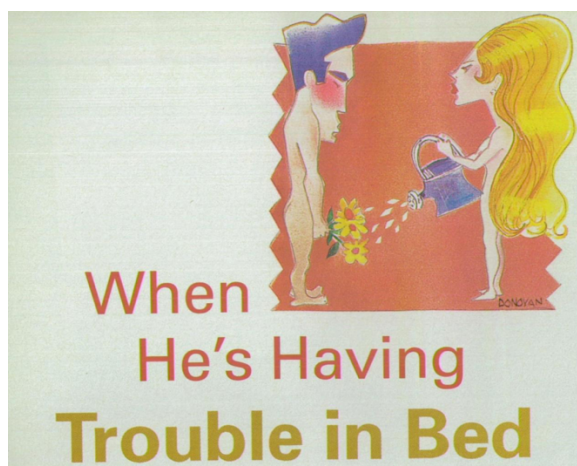


Figure A7. *Cosmopolitan* June 1995.

White Women at Work

Cosmopolitan, in the late 1970s and early 1980s, often alludes to office jobs only in the ways in which these jobs involve male-female interaction. In this way, love and sexuality are typically intertwined with business in *Cosmopolitan* for the earlier portion of the period studied. This comes back to the central theme that doing womanhood for a *Cosmopolitan* reader, no matter what else is involved, must always involve the maintenance of relationships with men, which I interpret to mean that *Cosmopolitan* readers still subscribed to the importance of marriage that is portrayed by the Stepford wife trope. As time progresses, however, the magazine becomes less and less likely to encourage or even discuss sex or romance in the workplace. This reflects the theme that has already been discussed that, during the period studied, *Cosmopolitan* gradually alters its advice on doing womanhood to more closely follow the ideas of liberated womanhood, which is consistent with my prior analysis.

In June 1978, an article in *Cosmopolitan* entitled “Going Up the Ladder on Your Back” details the pros and cons of earning promotions through sexual transactions (see Figure A8). The column begins by acknowledging that speculation about the sex lives of successful business women is omnipresent and goes on to discuss the plight of women who turn down sexual advances from colleagues and the triumphs of women who have used office romances to their advantage. The article even posits that women who are able to use sex to their advantage are the same women who find success, regardless: “Maybe they did get their first breaks in bed, but they were smart enough to make all the right moves when they got up.” This statement actually promotes the mindset that women who are doing anything successfully (including career advancements) are, first and foremost, doing relationships with men correctly. This actually seems to presume that, in order to be a successful feminist, one must be able to manage men. In

summation, this piece presents sexual relations, or at least advances, in the office to be inevitable, and promotes, above all, the importance of not offending male colleagues and of maintaining a desirable image in the work place- again coming back to the theme of the incredible importance of portraying oneself correctly to men. In 1998, though, *Cosmopolitan* publishes an article called “Sleeping Your Way to the Top,” which is about getting a good night’s sleep to improve job performance. This is again consistent with the general trend established in this project.

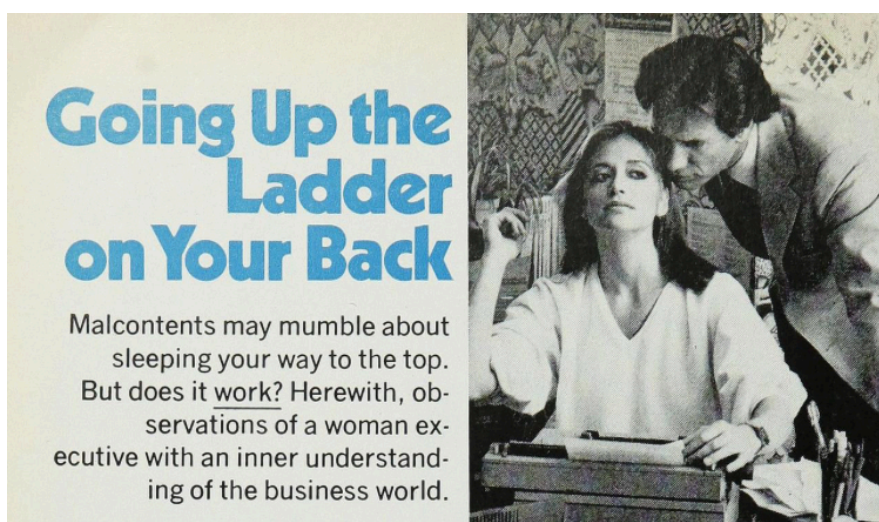


Figure A8. *Cosmopolitan* June 1978.

In contrast, in 1985, *Cosmopolitan* begins to warn its reader against engaging in sex or romance in the workplace and provides tips on preventing sexual advances from coworkers or business clients. This advice implies that women should now, in stark contrast to the Stepford wife, focus on defining themselves independently of men. “The Cosmo Woman’s Guide to the Business Trip” advises never meeting male clients in a hotel room, always paying for one’s own meals, and dressing conservatively for all interactions with clients. This signals another transition for *Cosmopolitan*’s definition of doing womanhood; the definition now prioritizes professional

success (and being taken seriously in the workplace) over relationships with men, which is a major change for the magazine.

Cosmopolitan also presents the belief that the increase of women in the workplace in the 1970s and 1980s has led to a decline in marriage and motherhood, which provides another example of *Cosmopolitan* and its readers hesitating to fully accept the feminist archetype. An article from June 1981 entitled, “All the Good Ones Are Married” argues that women with successful careers often enter relationships with married men because they do not have time to fulfill the expectations of a traditional marriage. Therefore, readers of *Cosmopolitan* are receiving the message that they may not be able to have both a full professional life and a full home life. This confirms the already-mentioned theme that *Cosmopolitan* believes that women’s liberation has limited the benefits of doing womanhood correctly (as a Stepford wife). However, on the flipside, this article is also referencing women who are successful in both the office and in their sex lives. This again illustrates the idea that *Cosmopolitan* readers may be able to have the various life components that they want, but that this may come at the cost of tradition.

In 1981, *Cosmopolitan* published a six-page feature entitled “The Men Behind Those Beautiful Women,” which highlights the efforts of the romantic partners of women who have found professional success in the entertainment industry. Largely, the piece credits the boyfriends or husbands for the woman’s success; one of the men explains how he keeps his wife in the physical shape that her career demands by monitoring what she eats and barring her from consuming chocolate. This piece strongly implicates that women cannot achieve professional success alone, which is similar to the notion that women may have to use sexual relations to create success in the business world and refutes the idea of the feminist that women are capable of independent success. Similarly, a 1982 article “Rachel Ward... Off on a Movie Spree”

profiles the career of Ms. Ward through the various male producers and casting directors that have supposedly created her success.

By 1982, *Cosmopolitan* is encouraging its readers to separate business and pleasure and to seek equal treatment in the workplace. In “Managing Your Boss” from June 1982, the magazine states that women should not perform personal favors for their boss (particularly if he would not ask these favors of a male colleague, nor should they engage in sexual relationships with their boss, because this will shrink the woman’s chances of advancing her career. This indicates a shift in the expectations of *Cosmopolitan* readers in the workplace, which is consistent with a greater acceptance of the feminist. Although the title, ‘Managing Your Boss’ does keep with the theme that women who do womanhood successfully are capable of carefully managing relationships with men.

Interestingly, *Cosmopolitan* often equivocates the work of a housewife and the work of a businesswoman. In a 1984 piece entitled “Beating Deadline Tension,” the columnist writes about how to avoid stress “whether the goal is netting a plum account or serving up a delectable pasta primavera.” This is echoed in the 1994 article “10 Tips for Getting a Great Job,” which states “Getting a job is like finding the right man- you only need one.” A 1986 article “Even Though You’re Smart, It Wouldn’t Hurt to be Charming Too” argues the theory that women have become “too busy, skill-oriented, or liberated,” to reach their full potential both in and out of the workplace (see Figure A9). According to this piece, women have made great strides toward acceptance and success in previously male-dominated spaces; however, they have taken this success too far and have lost the charisma that previously gave them an edge. In the author’s opinion, women cannot truly compete with men on merit alone (this does not at all align with the beliefs of the feminist), and they must use the social skills associated with conventional

femininity to their advantage if they want to be successful. This again invokes the notion that women's liberation has inadvertently harmed women by changing the rules of doing womanhood. More importantly, the piece argues, women who have forsaken charm and personality for intelligence and accomplishment will never find a satisfying romantic relationship, repeating the notion that women who are doing womanhood correctly should always be working toward a lasting romantic relationship, which is an antiquated belief created by the Stepford wife. The piece seems to argue that *Cosmopolitan* readers should be working toward striking a balance between traditional femininity and new-wave femininity; as in, the magazine feels that its readers could benefit from using some aspects of traditional femininity to their advantage, instead of shirking it all in the name of progress. This is one of the clearest examples of *Cosmopolitan* and its readers attempting to strike a balance between the Stepford wife and the feminist. Again, this viewpoint changes over time; in 1991, a feature story entitled "Taking Risks in Business: Are Women Getting the Hang of It?" encourages readers to go against the expectation of demureness in the workplace.



Figure A9. *Cosmopolitan* June 1986.

There is a constant tension in *Cosmopolitan* between the focus on its readers as businesswomen (feminists) and its readers as wives and mothers (Stepford wives); the issue

grows in magnitude during the time period examined. As previously discussed, articles and headlines often reference so-called “liberated” women within the context of the downsides of being “liberated.” In turn, the magazine debates whether or not it is truly worth it to embrace the increased role of women in previously male-controlled areas. This is exemplified by a headline on the cover of the June 1988 issue that reads: “Attention Feminists! Why Some Smart Women Are Getting Off the Fast Track and Going Home” (see Figure A10). This highlights an assumption often made by *Cosmopolitan*: its readers can have professional success if they want it. This means that *Cosmopolitan* takes the benefits of the women’s liberation movement for granted; readers can be feminists- but do they want to be? The column that this headline refers to, though, is actually about mothers who have forsaken professional successes to spend more time at home with their children. This is widely portrayed as a virtuous and positive decision made by the women featured. Therefore, *Cosmopolitan* is arguing that its readers could do womanhood by chasing professional success (as feminists), but that they will be happier if they choose to do womanhood in a more traditional and domestic sense (as a Stepford wife). Similarly, a 1992 op-ed “On My Mind: Who Killed Feminism?” argues that feminism has become too exclusive and disrespectful of women who want to be stay-at-home mothers.



Figure A10. *Cosmopolitan* June 1988.

The notion the *Cosmopolitan* readers are completely capable of having professional success is consistently reiterated, primarily through the suggestion that readers should consider giving up their careers to pursue a more domestic role. Like the previously discussed articles that question feminism, a 2000 feature “Meet the New Housewife Wanna-Bes” profiles successful women who, after shaping their careers, realized that they wanted to get married and quit their jobs. The article explores the viability of this strategy by interviewing men about whether or not they would be willing to financially support a woman that they were dating or married to, which actually opens up the idea for the first time that men may now be desiring feminists more so than Stepford wives.

The expectation in *Cosmopolitan* is typically that “bosses” are male. In 1986, however, the magazine published a feature (“Career Advice from The Top”) containing advice from predominantly female business executives, seemingly breaking this trend. When the article is highlighted on the cover of the issue, though the headline specifically denotes that there is also advice provided from men (see Figure A11). The specific mention of the men involved (along with no clarification of the qualifications held by these men, while the women are clearly defined as “executives”) seems intended to grant the article legitimacy, as if an article just featuring women would not be credible. Interestingly, a 1990 piece “Handling the Problem Boss” unconditionally assumes that ‘problem bosses’ are female. The connotation ‘problem boss’ implies that these female bosses are doing womanhood in the wrong way, according to *Cosmopolitan*.

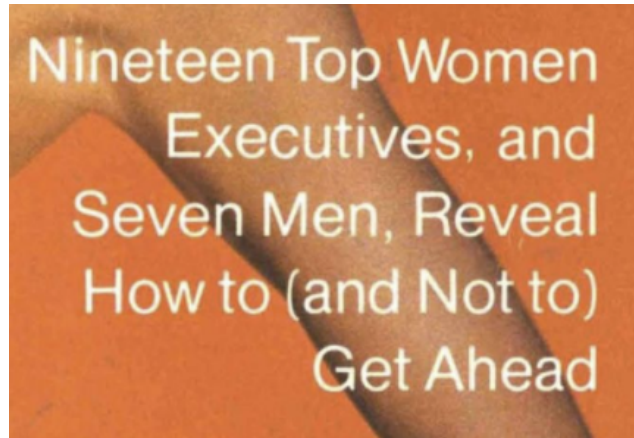


Figure A11. *Cosmopolitan* June 1986.

***Cosmopolitan* Readers in Relation to Other Women**

For *Cosmopolitan* readers, particularly in the earlier years of the studied period, men and girlfriends are portrayed as in-conflict with each other. Furthermore, while marriage (a forever relationship) with a man is depicted as an ultimate goal, friendships with women are typically depicted as fleeting. A 1984 article titled “Should Friendship Be Forever?” places female friendships into the context of business relationships and suggests terminating any friendships that are unbalanced. The social life of a reader that is correctly doing womanhood is entirely irrelevant, unless it somehow involves her romantic partner. This again counteracts the idea of female sisterhood and support. While *Essence*, which will be analyzed next, frequently discusses places for its readers to meet female friends, *Cosmopolitan* generally frames articles on expanding social networks as ways to meet potential mates, such as in the 1988 article “No More Being Lonely: How Some Lively Cosmo Girls Meet Men.”

Female friendships are often depicted in *Cosmopolitan* as utilitarian. A 1990 piece “Cross Talk” posits that the only advantage female friendships hold over romantic relationships are their capacity for gossip. “Dieter’s Notebook” in 1993 encourages using female friends for diet and exercise accountability.

While female friendships are promoted for specific functions, they are always secondary to romantic relationships for *Cosmopolitan* readers. For example, in 1994, “Falling for Your Best Friend’s Beau” contains advice for women who find themselves lusting for their friends’ boyfriends. The advice is that, if the reader is sure she loves the man is prepared to live without the friend, then she should vocalize her feelings. In 1995’s “How To Live Without a Man (For Now),” the author states that the time immediately following the end of a romantic relationship is a great time to take on a “project” of reconnecting with female friends that the reader has neglected during her relationship. The shirking of friendship by *Cosmopolitan* is similar to the message of the Stepford wife trope, which is the message that a relationship with a man is the only thing that matters.

The *Cosmopolitan* Reader as Apolitical

In the June issues of *Cosmopolitan* from 1978-1993, there is not a single politically themed article. This strongly implies that, for *Cosmopolitan* readers to successfully do womanhood, there is no need to be politically aware or involved; in fact, it may be a detriment to be politically active. The first appearance of politics in *Cosmopolitan* for this project comes in 1994 article entitled, “The Decline and Rise of Bigotry in America.” The piece centers on the changing landscape of race relations in America; it opens with a hypothetical of a woman who is waiting for a date to meet her and is surprised to find that he is a black man, because he did not express any racial signifiers over the phone. The author then delves into the harmful nature of racial perceptions. Another consciousness-raising piece was published in June 1995: “America: Land of the Homeless.” This addition of politically and socially charged pieces in the 1990s does

reflect a slight change in doing womanhood according to *Cosmopolitan* which puts it more in line with the expectations of the 1970s feminist.

***Cosmopolitan* Conclusions**

Cosmopolitan and its readers continually attempt to reconcile the differing messages of the Stepford wife and the feminist. The magazine fully assumes that its readers can reap the benefits of feminism by pursuing their own desires, but also assumes that readers are desperately seeking marriage, or at least a committed relationship. This reflects the mixed messages that its readers were receiving at the time: on one hand white middle-class women were fully capable of achieving all of their goals and being independent; on the other hand, these women grew up in a society consumed by the Stepford wife, a society in which their female role models likely existed almost entirely in the domestic sphere. This explains the consistent theme in *Cosmopolitan* that its readers can act however they want, but that they should present themselves as far more conservative than they actually are. Readers can act as feminists, but they should look like Stepford wives.

IVB. *Essence*: Black Women as Omnipotent

Unlike *Cosmopolitan*, the messages disseminated by *Essence* are entirely consistent throughout the period studied. The messages are clear: readers are capable of doing anything that they want to do, readers are expected to be caretakers (typically as mothers), and readers are responsible for uplifting the African American community as a whole. I interpret the content created by *Essence* from 1978-2000 to be a direct refutation of the welfare queen archetype. As opposed to *Cosmopolitan*, which straddles the line between two archetypes and attempts to pull

the positive elements from both, *Essence* is steadfast in its conviction that the welfare queen is an entirely negative stereotype that its readers want no part of. Additionally, I interpret *Essence*'s constant imposition of responsibility on its readers as an attempt to remove the welfare queen image from society entirely. It's likely that *Essence* readers, middle-class black women, were often racially profiled and viewed negatively as welfare queens- so it makes sense that readers would want to eradicate this image from the American consciousness. *Essence* wants to redefine what it means to do black womanhood in the eyes of America by eliminating the welfare queen and developing the image of the strong black woman.

Motherhood in *Essence*

Essence portrays motherhood as a revered condition, a condition which is seemingly essential to doing black womanhood. In June 1978, the first issue examined for this project, the introduction to the month's horoscopes "Sign Time," reads, "We now know and understand by the principles of 'starlogic' that the saviors of the world will come forth from the loins of our beautiful Black women. Because she has sacrificed for the survival of her people, the fruit of her womb has been endowed with the power to rally all people of the earth to the cause of peace." While this passage is obviously mystical in tone, it does get at a deeper message: *Essence* believes that its readers are powerful women that can express their power through reproduction. Input from readers commonly reflects this sentiment, 1990's "Captain of the Ship" explores the role of women as matriarch's and examines family legacies as the direct result of a woman's leadership. Similarly, the loss of fertility is typically regarded as a tragedy; a feature entitled "Love Song" from June 1980 recounts the story of a woman who undergoes a traumatic hysterectomy, and she is quoted as feeling like a "failure, so less a woman," because she can no

longer bear children. While *Cosmopolitan* consistently advises its readers to maintain and create relationships with men, *Essence* consistently emphasizes the role of reproduction in the lives of its readers. In a rejection of the welfare queen stereotype, which posits that black women do not care about their children and use them as a profit scheme, *Essence* consistently attempts to reclaim the notion of motherhood and present it in a positive light, as opposed to within the connotations of the welfare queen stereotype. As stated above, while *Essence* readers are primarily middle-class and thus not receiving government aid, it is still reasonable to assume that *Essence* readers have suffered negative consequences of the stereotype; thus, it makes sense that *Essence* writers and readers would hope to reframe ideas surrounding black mothers. Throughout the issues of *Essence* examined for this project, I saw the development and encouragement of attributes that eventually became indicative of the strong black woman stereotype. While *Cosmopolitan* was actively negotiating two differing constructions of womanhood at this time (the feminist and the Stepford wife), *Essence* was negotiating the welfare queen and attempting to create a new ideal altogether, which was reflective of what became the strong black woman trope.

Similarly, *Essence* often assumes that its readers are mothers. For example, in June 1979, *Essence* published a number of features catering to parents: “Health Wise: Baby’s Booby Trap,” about the hazards of giving children juice before bed, “Children’s Eye Problems,” about eye care for children, and “Body Alive!” which encourages readers to be more active by playing with their children outside. In the “Body Alive!” column from June 1980, the magazine promotes prenatal yoga. The magazine continues to support and encourage mothers throughout the period examined; in June 1982, a reader writes in to the advice column “Work It Out!” because she is a single mother struggling to make ends meet, and she feels inferior to successful black women. In

addition to offering her advice, the columnist congratulates the reader for “choosing to be responsible for another life,” thus reaffirming the notion that motherhood is a role that *Essence* readers should be proud of. As opposed to *Cosmopolitan*, which seems to view motherhood as something that comes after doing womanhood successfully, *Essence* presents motherhood as a constant and essential element of doing black womanhood. I do, again, interpret this as *Essence* somewhat accepting the prevalence of single motherhood within the black community but also encouraging its readers to do motherhood in a way that contradicts the stereotype of the welfare queen.

An Obligation to the African American Community

In addition to presuming its readers to be mothers, *Essence* frequently publishes pieces urging its readers to become politically involved and to fight to correct social issues. In fact, in its 1989 reader survey, the magazine specifically asked readers: “What have you done to protest the status of Blacks on television?” (see Figure B1). This makes the unquestioned assumption that *Essence* readers are actively pursuing social justice. This exact same concept is revisited in June of 2000, when the article “Keep the Pressure On” tells readers that they must continue to pressure television networks to hire more people of color. In 1992’s “Is There Life After Jesse?” the author insists that readers combat political fatigue and continue to vote, even without Jesse Jackson as a candidate. All of these features about political consciousness instruct readers that in order to perform black womanhood correctly they must be politically active and working to improve the status of the black community as a whole (eliminating the welfare queen is a significant component of this effort).

What have you done to protest the status of Blacks on television?

When television assaults our image as Black people, as it so very frequently does, you most frequently protest by not watching certain programs. Almost half of you said

Figure B1. *Essence* June 1989.

Similarly, changing the lives of black children is a recurring theme; in “Can We Overcome the Traumatic Sixties?” published in 1979, argues that black children are being misled by the mainstream media and that their parents must fight to instill positive values in their children. The issue of raising black children in American society is a prevalent topic throughout *Essence* in the period studied; the June 1981 cover headline reads “Be a Winner” with the subheadings “Inspire Your Children” and “Unite Your Family.” In the article itself, “Be an Inspiration- Teach Your Children to Win,” the author promotes building confidence within black children and provides tips specifically for women raising children as single mothers (see Figure B2). This further reaffirms the message from *Essence* that motherhood is extremely important, and that single motherhood is absolutely permissible. The focus on both single motherhood and professional success dismisses the archetype of the welfare queen; it appears that *Essence* is in full support of its readers being single mothers, but that it also expects them to achieve their own financial successes. Again, because the welfare queen does not care about her and children and cannot provide for them on her own, the insistence of the success of mothers in *Essence* is a clear attempt to dismantle the welfare queen. Unlike *Cosmopolitan*, which implies that children and marriage must accompany one another, *Essence* is completely accepting of single parenthood- as long as the mother can provide for her children and be a positive role model. The consistent

discussion of bettering the lives of black children is another example of *Essence* and its readers working to improve their own statuses by bettering the black community as a whole. Since negative stereotypes of black Americans certainly impact *Essence* readers, even though they are middle-class, it is in the best interest of both *Essence* and its readers to change connotations surrounding African Americans in general. This also goes back to the importance of *Essence* readers belonging to the middle-class. Because the readers have the resources to positively impact the community, they are an incredibly useful audience for this message.

By Violet Leigh Coleman

Be an Inspiration—
Teach Your
Children to Win

When you give your children a positive outlook toward themselves, you help them to become the best they can be: winners for a lifetime



cultural heritage plays a paramount role in developing the self-esteem of Black children. She suggests that we expose our children to as many facets of their culture as possible. Visits to museums, bookstores, concerts and dance recitals that reflect their culture will provide entertainment and an appreciation of our history.

CHUCK STEWART

Figure B2. *Essence* June 1981.

As detailed above, there is a constant insistence in *Essence* that its readers raise their children in a way that reflects positively on African Americans as a whole. For example, in “Contemporary Living: All About Kids,” published in 1984, readers are urged to purchase black dolls for their children to play with. In the same issue, “Watch Your Language, Please,” argues against readers allowing their children to use the term ‘nigger.’ However, “In Defense of the N Word,” published in June 1993, argues for the word ‘nigger’ to remain in the black vernacular. “Mothering” in 1985 provides a tutorial for black mothers to speak to their children about

racism. In 1986, “Speak: In Our Own Image” tells readers that they must take pride in their own image and not try to emulate whiteness, so that their children will be proud to be black. The same column in 1988, “Speak: Video Violence,” the columnist asserts that the prominence of violence in black communities stems from the prevalence of violence in the media, and that, for the sake of the black community, readers should not allow their children to watch violent television shows or movies. The constant referral to the black community as a whole places a responsibility upon *Essence* readers that is just not present for *Cosmopolitan* readers. As opposed to having a singular focus on securing a romantic relationship, *Essence* readers are expected to constantly work toward the betterment of the black community, in addition to maintaining a number of other facets of their lives.

Particularly in the 1990s, *Essence* develops a tendency to refer to black children as ‘our children,’ again reaffirming the idea that African American women, in doing black womanhood, hold a mutual responsibility to the black community as a whole. For example, in 1993, “Protecting Our Children” discusses protecting black children from childhood accidents (see Figure B3). An article from June 1997 entitled, “Helen Leonhart-Jones: Saving Our Children” profiles an executive at Children Services who states that black children are overrepresented in the foster care system and that “our children” are being raised by the state (see Figure B4). This article removes the responsibility for parenting from individual black parents and places instead on the black community as a whole. This discussion of children seems to urge *Essence* readers to take on personal responsibility for overcoming the stereotype of the welfare queen. Given that *Essence* readers during this time were probably negatively profiled on the basis of this stereotype, this makes complete sense. It also makes sense to place this responsibility on middle-class women who are likely in a position to act on these issues. Additionally, in June 2000,

Essence published an article entitled, “Making Sense of Miscarriage: Why We Lose Our Babies and What We Can Do About It” (see Figure B5). The use of the words ‘our’ and ‘we’ again removes parenting from an individual context and places it into a communal context.

PROTECTING OUR CHILDREN

Figure B3. *Essence* June 1993.



Figure B4. *Essence* June 1997.

MAKING SENSE OF MISCARRIAGE

Why we lose our babies and what we can do about it

Figure B5. *Essence* June 2000.

The state of the black community as a whole is frequently addressed in *Essence* during the time period studied. In 1984’s “Minister Louis Farrakhan on the Crisis in Black Leadership,” Farrakhan argues that black leaders must be willing to self-sacrifice for the good of the community. It does not seem, from the constant invocation of political involvement, that *Essence* readers possess the option (if they wish to be doing black womanhood in the correct way) to be apolitical. In 1986, the magazine published a piece entitled “Klan Watch,” intended to update

readers on the status of the Klu Klux Klan (see Figure B6). This political emphasis is continued in 1987's "Speak: Contra-gate: A Black Issue," which argues that the Reagan Administration's efforts in Nicaragua caused the rise in cocaine-related crimes in America which disproportionately affected black communities; the author advocates for the black community to push back against the federal defunding of drug education and treatment programs. This again seems to imply that *Essence* readers are capable of solving problems facing the black community, which would ultimately (hopefully) reduce negative stereotypes that affect them on a daily basis. The allotment of responsibility in *Essence* is particularly interesting because it places huge amounts of responsibility on women, simultaneously casting them as empowered and burdened.

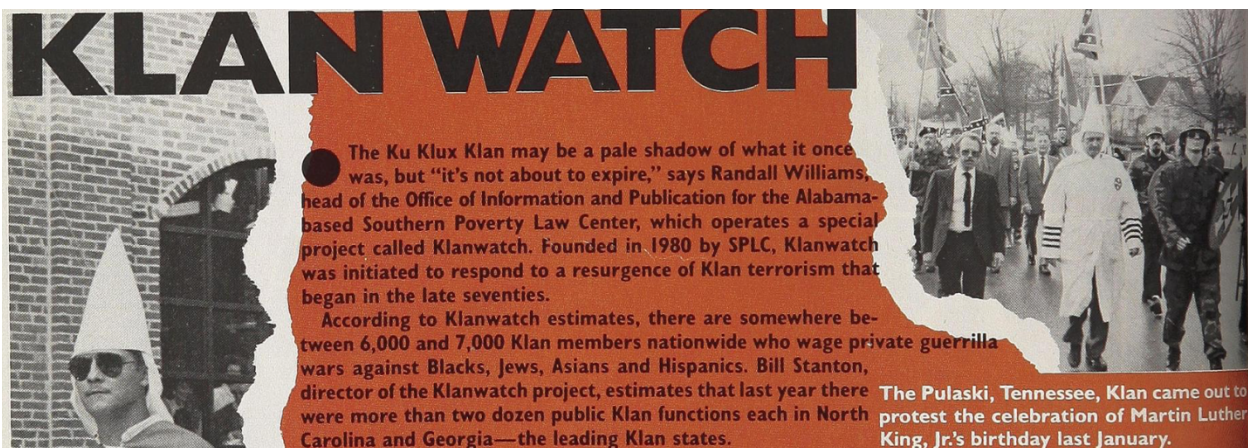


Figure B6. *Essence* June 1986.

As indicated previously, parenthood, and particularly motherhood, is often politicized in *Essence*, as the magazine implores its readers to empower black communities through parenting. An exposé published in June 1982 entitled "Breast or Bottle: The Right to Choose" sharply criticizes the disproportionate marketing of formula to minority and low-income mothers and demands that readers inform themselves and their loved ones about the benefits and drawbacks of formula feeding. This sentiment is echoed in a 1984 piece called "Mothering," which warns

readers that black women receive inadequate prenatal care, leading to high rates of infant mortality. In maintaining its focus on racial health inequities, *Essence* published a piece entitled “A Warning to the Surgeon General” in June 1998 that urges readers to support the new black Surgeon General, who wants to study racial health disparities; the author fears that the rest of the administration will not support these efforts. As shown, the magazine repeatedly acknowledges and fights against racial disparities in America; this further bolsters my argument that *Essence* views both the publication itself and its readers as agents of change in America, thus explaining the constant imposition of responsibility onto its readers.

Clearly, *Essence* expects a lot out of its readers, and it makes some attempts to address this burden. A 1987 piece entitled “Taking Care of You” addressed the fact that black women are almost always caretakers to someone, in some form (see Figure B7). A social worker is quoted as saying, “Most Black women take care of somebody on some level. So enabling other people to survive- that, to me, means being a superwoman, whether you’re unemployed, on welfare, or the chairperson of some major institution.” The direct mention of welfare presents an interesting point within the historical context- *Essence* seems to clearly indicate that it is possible to do black womanhood correctly and to receive welfare. It does however, present being on welfare as acceptable if the reader is still being a ‘superwoman’ and taking on responsibilities. This implies that *Essence* believes all of its readers to be in positions of responsibility and obligation, which does invoke a parallel to *Cosmopolitan’s* discussions that equivocate the roles of housewives and businesswomen. However, the article harps on the constant burdens of institutional racism and sexism that *Essence* readers must fight against; *Cosmopolitan* regularly implies that sexism has ended, and racism is not an issue faced by its readers.. In 1988, *Essence* published a series of articles on mental health, entitled “It’s Okay to Ask for Help: One Woman’s Story,” “Getting

Help,” and “Where to Go for Help.” Just as *Essence* has discussed the racialization of health problems such as HIV/AIDS, in 1993, “Dying to Be Thin” pushes back against the idea that eating disorders are limited to white women and aims to raise reader awareness of the growing prevalence of anorexia and bulimia among black women. I believe that this focus on self-care actually foreshadows the downsides of the strong black woman stereotype that later achieves prevalence in the United States. As *Essence*, and the black community it represents, continually demands more and more from middle-class black women, these women become susceptible to unreasonable levels of stress and possess a greater need for self-care type behaviors and mental health resources.



Figure B7. *Essence* June 1987.

Over the period studied, the magazine featured several opinion pieces (some of which were written by men) about the state of black families, which I believe is a direct response to the

beliefs and theories presented in the Moynihan Report; some of the opinions presented are in agreement with the Moynihan Report and some are in disagreement. In June 1982, an op-ed called, “On Responsible Black Parenting” states that black parents must stop having children that they cannot afford, and that black men can no longer be permitted to walk away from fatherhood. This clearly indicates dissent within the black community, which *Essence* believes its readers can work to resolve. The next year, a male columnist writes a piece for the recurring column “Say, Brother,” in which he recounts his experience as a single father and uses this as a platform to argue against the presumption that black men are uninvolved in the lives of their children. In the June 1984 edition of “Say, Brother,” the male columnist urges black fathers to treat their daughters as equal to their sons. In 1992, “Why We Need Father Figures” blames increases in violent crime on the disintegration of the African American family structure (see Figure B8). These pieces are all reminiscent of the tensions exposed in the Moynihan Report and show that the black community is clearly affected by the governmental and public perception of it. This is again an example of *Essence* readers bearing a responsibility for the black community; these pieces demand that readers take action for the betterment of the community.

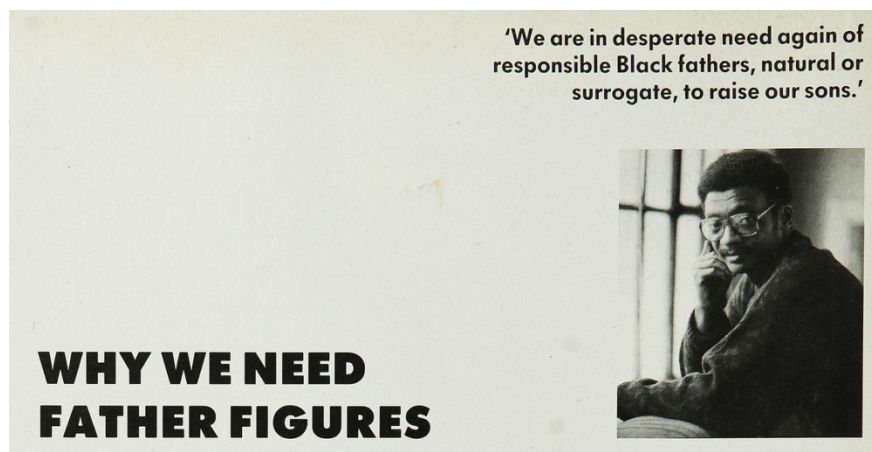


Figure B8. *Essence* June 1992.

In another critique of the state of African Americans at the time period in a more general sense, “The Unseen Workers” from 1991 criticizes upper-class blacks for being disrespectful toward working class blacks and argues that this behavior is a disservice to the black community as a whole. This again reaffirms the idea that in order to do black womanhood correctly, *Essence* readers (middle-class black women) must be willing to accept responsibility for the black community on a broader level.

The Prioritization of the Self in *Essence*

In the same time period that *Cosmopolitan* normalized relationship violence, *Essence* published pieces warning of the dangers of abusive relationships. In 1979’s “Battered Women: When Violence is Linked with Love,” the columnist directly ties patriarchal power dynamics to wife-abuse. The author argues that, while marriage is typically portrayed as a safe-haven, many women become trapped in abusive relationships and cycles of self-blame. Interestingly, the column, while working to expose domestic violence, never explicitly advocates for breaking a marriage. However, another article in the same issue entitled “Women Speak,” contains the testimonies of three women who left abusive relationships. Unlike the messages disseminated in *Cosmopolitan*, *Essence* clearly communicates that women are doing black womanhood correctly will prioritize their own safety and happiness over the success of romantic relationships with men. This again comes back to the notion that *Essence* readers are entirely capable of independence and anything else that they may desire.

Essence makes a point of defining black women in and of themselves, as opposed to defining them in terms of others. This is a notion that is actually in line with the idea of the white feminist, who is allowed to define herself. This is exemplified by the headline on the June 1980

headline, “Love Yourself First!” which seems to encourage readers to pursue self-betterment before focusing on other relationships. Meanwhile, a letter from the editor in the same issue entitled “Common Ground” states that black women have three dimensions: themselves, their men, and their children. This is in complete contrast to *Cosmopolitan*’s belief that its readers have one dimension: men. Similar to the sentiment of “Love Yourself First!” a June 1981 article “Finding the Right Men: Inside Moves” actually urges readers to put energy into themselves instead into pursuing romantic relationships, with the theory that men will be attracted to women who take pride in themselves. The article also advocates for readers to get involved in social activities that interest them, which is a recurring piece of advice in *Essence*. This indicates that readers who are doing black womanhood correctly are socially involved, which goes hand in hand with being politically active in the black community. Throughout the period studied, *Essence* maintains its focus on the self-esteem of the reader; in 1995, “The Winner Within: A Hands-On Guide to Healthy Self-Esteem” includes the phrases “balance the giving and the taking” and “you deserve to be loved.” However, as described above, while *Essence* does encourage women to define themselves, *Essence* also expects its readers to define themselves in terms of the black community, which is counterintuitive. This again displays the longstanding belief that black women are capable (as evidenced by the lack of change over time in *Essence*) but also displays the responsibilities that the stereotype of the welfare queen has created for *Essence* readers to defend the integrity of the community.

In the same vein of defining women in terms of themselves, *Essence* strives, throughout the time period studied, to convey acceptance of a variety of family structure and lifestyle choices. To this point, on the June 1982 cover, the magazine features a family photo, with the headlines “We Are Family!” and “Single and Satisfied!” (see Figure B9). While in

Cosmopolitan, singlehood and family are mutually exclusive, *Essence* remains open to all possibilities. This is echoed in 1982's "Family Business," which encourages readers to create the family that they want for themselves, whether it be traditional or non-traditional in structure. In the article, "First Person Singular," which immediately follows "Family Business," six single women are profiled, some of whom are happy being single and some of whom are not; three of them are mothers (see Figure B10). The author writes, "A woman's story does not end with a man and children... for some of us, children matter too. But now more than ever, we know we can still fulfill our need to nurture, can still experience that sense of continuity that raising a family brings- as single parents." In accordance with this accepting tone, the columnist behind 1985's "Just Between Us" advice column states that it is perfectly acceptable for black women to choose celibacy, if that is their preference. Furthermore, in June 2000, the cover reads, "Sex and the Single Mom," and the issue contains "Mommy Has a Date." This conveys that *Essence* does not assume its readers to live within any prescribed boundary of family structure, but it does always expect its readers to be loving and responsible mothers if they choose to take on parenthood, unlike the welfare queen. In summation, *Essence* does not describe one familial structure as essential to doing black womanhood correctly, although it does often advocate for motherhood.



Figure B9. *Essence* June 1982.

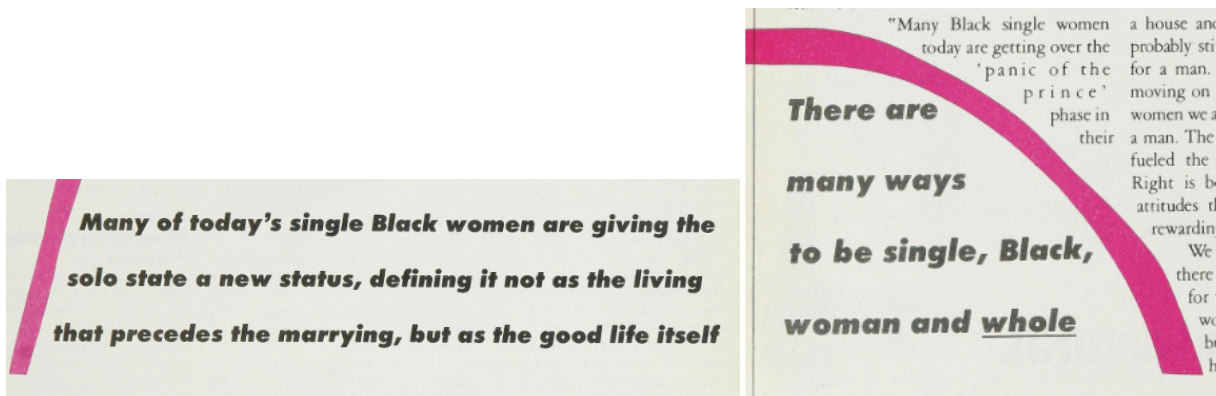


Figure B10. *Essence* June 1982.

In consistently portraying acceptance of all of its readers, *Essence* is illustrating a clear faith and confidence in its readers as capable and whole human beings, and an acceptance of its readers' choices to do black motherhood as they please. The readers seem to believe this as well, as the 1998 "Sister Poll" reports that 68% of readers can raise a child alone as well as she could with a man. This indicates that *Essence's* extolling of the virtues of women as their own entities are not falling on deaf ears. However, as I have stated, while being accepting of its readers, *Essence* still fully expects readers to play an active role in the betterment of the black community.

Essence consistently, from 1978-2000, tells readers to pay more attention to their own self-esteem than to their relationship status and warns against being overly-interested in men. This is obviously in stark contrast to the messages of *Cosmopolitan*. A piece published in *Essence* in 1986, "The Perils of Obsession" advises that women who are constantly seeking male approval should seek professional help instead. The 1991 iteration of "Between Us" tells readers that they must put themselves first in romantic relationships. Interestingly, when a reader writes in to 1995's "Between Us" because her husband (whom she is separated from) wants her to move to be with him, she is strongly encouraged to not vacate her own career and financial stability (she owns her own home) for the sake of her relationship. However, *Essence* does acknowledge that readers may suffer after the loss of a romantic relationship; also in the June 1995 issue, "He's Gone" presents tips on getting over a breakup. Some of these tips include "Don't play strong black woman whose feelings can't get hurt," "pamper yourself," and "get counseling if you need it." However, the next year, "Feeling Good: He Cheated, He Lied" reminds readers that, if a partner is unfaithful, it is not the woman's fault, and to always recognize one's own self-worth. Taking this a step farther, *Essence* published a feature in June of

1997 entitled “Deciding to Marry Myself,” in which the columnist, after experiencing a traumatic breakup, remains single for a year (see Figure B11). After about a year, she begins to want to date again, but she decides not to and to instead focus only on making peace with herself. By publishing this piece, *Essence* is endorsing the choice of this woman to live entirely without romantic relationships and thus completely removing any imposition of male relationships onto its readers.

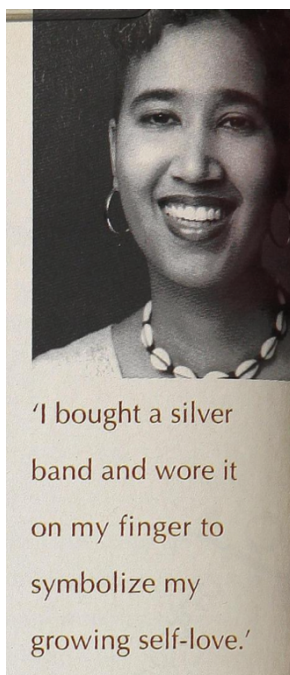


Figure B11. *Essence* June 1997.

Sexuality in *Essence*

Similarly, *Essence* readers are typically advised to pursue their own sexual pleasure and health, in whatever form that may take. In “Sexual Health” in 1986, readers are told to seek out marriage counseling if they are not satisfied with their sex lives. In 1994, the magazine features a woman who chooses to be celibate in “Am I the Last Virgin?” The column extolls the benefits of a sex-free life and argues that she believes that preserving her virginity is a way of ensuring that

she belongs only to herself. This also shows an assumption that belonging to only oneself is desirable. To broaden the range of sexual acceptance, the June 1994 issue also features an op-ed from a gay black woman entitled “Homophobia: Will It Divide Us?” (see Figure B12). In the course of this study, *Cosmopolitan* never mentioned female homosexuality.

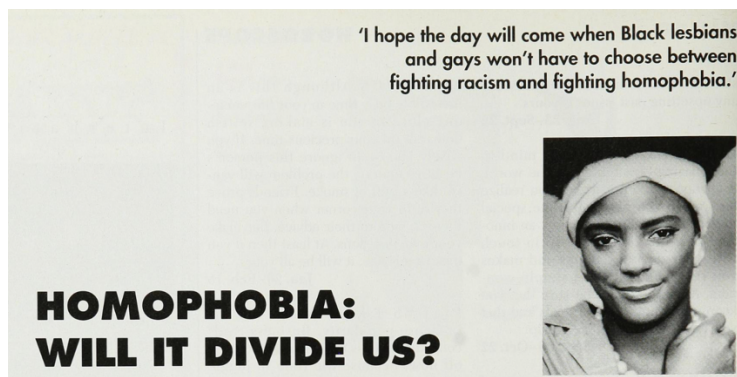


Figure B12. *Essence* June 1994.

In deemphasizing the importance of relationships with men, *Essence* encourages readers to strengthen their social networks, often through joining churches or social organizations. A 1988 advice column “Just Between Us” provides this exact advice to a reader that is struggling with loneliness. Similarly, 1991’s “A Quick Guide to Feeling Good” provides the tip “become part of a community” for increasing personal happiness. Examples of communities include volunteer groups, churches, consciousness-raising groups, weight-loss programs, and book clubs. This is consistent with *Essence*’s constant referral to its readers as members of a broader community; functionally speaking, getting readers involved in these sorts of community organizations may also increase their feelings of obligations to the community.

Black Women in the Office

While *Cosmopolitan* often discusses its readers careers in the context of relationships, *Essence* focuses on the struggles of being both black and female in the workplace. *Essence* does

not discuss in any detail relationships with men in the workplace. While *Cosmopolitan* seems to see women's liberation as a right and believes its readers can easily enter the workplace and succeed, *Essence* views this as a privilege and does not suggest anything to its readers that could jeopardize their career positioning, such as a relationship with a coworker. In the 1983 article "Legal Grounds," the columnist advises a reader on her legal options, after she finds out that her white male colleague is being paid significantly more than her for the exact same work. Similarly, in June 1996, "Racism: And Other Workplace Dramas" encourages readers to exist in the workplace without intimidation and to pursue legal action for discrimination if necessary. This implies that, in addition to being politically active mothers, *Essence* readers are expected to do black womanhood by refusing to submit to discrimination of any kind. Much of *Essence's* coverage of the workplace is inspirational in tone; 1984's "Work Style: 'How I Made a Million'" profiles four black female millionaires who built their own success. Similarly, "Managing Maternity" in 1987 profiles women who have balanced careers and motherhood. Additionally, the professional success of black women is often attributed to the strength of black women's social networks. In 1985's "Essence Woman," an aid official in Washington is profiled; she attributes much of her accomplishments to an informal network of black women in the capital. Social networks are also extolled as great resources for mothers; a 1992 piece "Your First Child," which chronicles the writer's first year as a mother, suggest joining church groups to meet other mothers.

Essence presents strong female role models on a regular basis. For example, the June 1989 issue is dedicated to Oprah Winfrey's professional and personal successes. In 1990, *Essence* had a reporter present for Nelson Mandela's release from prison; the resulting feature ("Walking Into Freedom") heavily discusses the strength of the Winnie Mandela, and the

relationship between the two (see Figure B13). 1992's "Home Work" profiles three women who have founded successful businesses in their own homes, showing readers that they don't need tremendous startup capital to achieve their goals. *Essence* also emphasizes the work of women that gives back to others; "A Program That Works: Hooked on Life," published in 1993, highlights a former welfare recipient and drug addict that has founded a non-profit to help single mothers struggling with substance abuse. This again plays on the theme of *Essence* readers doing black womanhood by being positive community members, whether it be through political action or philanthropic activity. In June of 1996, *Essence* featured Terry McMillan on its cover with the headline "Terry McMillan: Her New Novel and Her New Love." The article within ("On Top of the World") discusses McMillan's new book and her new relationship in equal detail- seemingly implying that her romantic and professional success are of equal value.

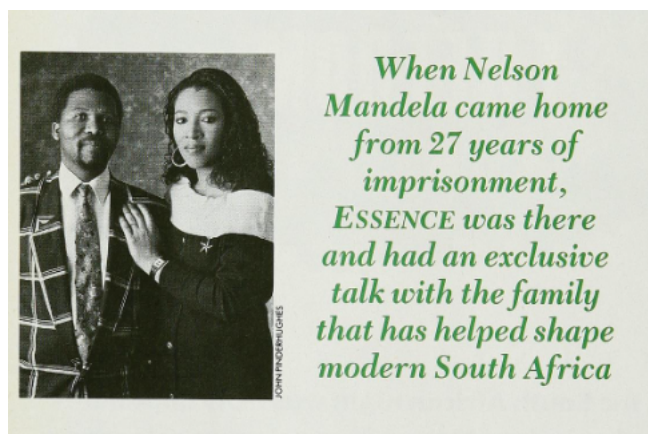


Figure B13. *Essence* June 1990.

As has been previously discussed, *Essence* readers are encouraged to do black womanhood by making life choices that benefit the black community as a whole; career choices are not exempted from this trend. In "Work It Out!" from June 1986, a woman who wants to pursue skincare is urged to go to medical school and become a dermatologist; the columnist specifically notes that there are not enough black doctors in America. This is another strong example of the communal obligation presented by *Essence*.

In summation, *Essence* believes that, in order for its readers to do black womanhood successfully, they must possess multi-faceted lives. The *Essence* reader is expected and encouraged to have children, a successful career, and a strong social network; strikingly, the *Essence* reader is absolutely required to work tirelessly for the betterment of black America. In stark contrast to *Cosmopolitan*, which sees a man as the only non-negotiable of a reader's life, *Essence* presents no strong opinion on whether or not readers should keep romantic relationships with men. In many ways, the viewpoints espoused in *Essence* more closely align with the perceived values of the white liberated woman than the perceived values of the welfare queen. The content of *Essence* changed very little (if at all) across the time interval studied for this project. *Essence* stuck to the main themes of political involvement, motherhood, and independence.

***Essence* Conclusions**

Essence's messages do not change over time. Middle-class black women at the time were expected to truly have it all: children, a job, and friends. The only truly optional life component was a romantic relationship. The most striking element of *Essence* at this time, though, is its constant requirement that its readers serve as stewards of the black community. I interpret this to be a clear and utter refutation of the media's image of the welfare queen. *Essence's* readers were undoubtedly negatively affected by perceptions of them as welfare queens, and so it absolutely makes sense that they would hope to alter the public perception of black women in America at this time. However, in creating this prescription for its readers- that they be all-capable and all-responsible, *Essence* is promoting the image of the strong black woman, which rose to prominence later on and is still a prominent stereotype today. Unlike *Cosmopolitan*, though,

which was teetering between two archetypes, *Essence* takes a clear stance and absolutely rejects the welfare queen while promoting the strong black woman.

V. Conclusion

In summation, if *Cosmopolitan* and *Essence* are to be read as handbooks on doing racialized womanhood, then the two publications are generating different instructions. For the cultural context of the time period studied, in which black women were confined to the racist stereotype of the welfare queen and in which white women were seen as liberated and free to live their lives however they pleased, neither of the publications' advice exactly aligned with the media's portrayal of its readers, but the advice of both certainly interacted with and navigated racialized societal views at the time. The results of my work somewhat agree with the work of Reviere and Bylerly that I have previously cited. I did find, as they did, that *Essence* encouraged more independence from men than *Cosmopolitan* did. However, I feel that my work greatly expands on the context surrounding this finding. As I argue, *Essence* promotes independence but also communal obligation, while *Cosmopolitan* promotes independence while also assuming that readers are desperately seeking a male relationship, which feels counterintuitive.

Essence does, across the board, present motherhood as a venerated position. While *Essence* is not nearly as outright in encouraging its readers to have children as *Cosmopolitan* is in encourage its readers to have husbands, motherhood is consistently praised and portrayed in only positive lights. This is consistent with an idea presented in *The Vanishing Family- Crisis in Black America*, as it supports the notion that 'mother' is a highly desired role within black communities. However, *Essence* encourages its readers to be so much more than mothers, which is, ostensibly, the only role that welfare queens hold, even though they do not adopt favorable qualities of mothers. Additionally, *Essence*, consistently urges its readers to improve themselves (and those around them) in ways that fight against racist stereotypes present at the time; *Essence* directly battles the welfare queen image. In particular, in both its discussions of motherhood and

family life and its discussions of careers, *Essence* demands that its readers work toward financial independence and responsible childrearing. Clearly, *Essence* sees the black community during this interval as embattled, and it believes that its readers can improve the status of the African American community as a whole by refusing to conform to widely held notions, such as the characteristics of the welfare queen. In addition to the context of the welfare queen stereotype, the African American community at this time in America was also faced with the war on drugs and the beginning of the school-to-prison pipeline. This is another example of why the middle-class status of *Essence* readers is relevant; *Essence* readers have the capability to potentially fight the problems facing the black community, which I believe is why advocacy and political involvement is so heavily emphasized.

Essence places tremendous responsibility on its readers in a way that *Cosmopolitan* does not. In addition to being responsible for children, careers, and friends, *Essence* expects its readers to do womanhood by taking an active role in working to improve the lives of all black women in America. Men are treated as optional in *Essence*; they are not an essential component of doing black womanhood. In large part, actually, *Essence* focuses on its readers doing the things and pursuing the relationships that they find fulfilling. There is an underlying assumption that its readers want to be mothers, but *Essence* does not shame readers who choose not to have children. The only true non-negotiable element of doing black womanhood for *Essence* readers is being politically active and supporting the black community. I believe that, in this way, *Essence* is making it mandatory for its readers to act as strong black women, as opposed to welfare queens.

On the other hand, *Cosmopolitan* readers who are doing white womanhood are only expected to be responsible for one other person: a husband. There is no sense of communal

obligation in *Cosmopolitan*; in fact, most potential community members (other white women) are viewed as competition for a husband. *Cosmopolitan* repeatedly espouses the notion that its readers cannot successfully ‘have it all’- professional success and personal success are not both attainable. This seems to reflect the tension present as women and, more specifically, *Cosmopolitan* readers attempt to reconcile the feminist with the Stepford wife. In many cases, *Cosmopolitan* seems to believe that its readers should be able to do whatever they want (sleep with however many men and have successful careers), but that acting in this way (or being honest about acting in this way) may hurt their chances of finding successful romantic relationships. This is particularly interesting because it echoes the sentiments of women’s liberation but also implies that acting as a so-called liberated woman may be a turn-off to men, and that this is a serious problem. It seems to be an unspoken assumption that *Cosmopolitan*’s readers, no matter what, desperately desire a romantic relationship, and this assumption would explain *Cosmopolitan*’s consistent advice to its readers to portray themselves in more traditionally feminine ways. Again, this assumption of desired-marriage is likely undergirded by the long-held beliefs of the virtues of the Stepford wife. As I have explained, the women reading *Cosmopolitan* in this time period would have grown up surrounded by the promotion of domesticity; feminism was a new and radical concept. In this way, even when *Cosmopolitan* is embracing feminist ideas, it is still chasing the Stepford wife goal of a husband.

Essence’s messages are extremely consistent while *Cosmopolitan*’s change over time because *Cosmopolitan* is able to debate the pros and cons of two archetypes while *Essence* directly refutes the connotations of an extremely negative and racist stereotype. The readers of *Cosmopolitan*, middle-class white women, were presented with two archetypes, both of which had merits. Therefore, *Cosmopolitan* gradually transition from the Stepford wife ideals to the

feminist ideals as the tastes and preferences of its readership gradually changed. Meanwhile, the stereotype of the welfare queen presented only negative ramifications for *Essence* readers, thus leading *Essence* to deliver an extremely consistent message on the issue.

There is a clear privilege in the fact that *Cosmopolitan* readers do not need or desire the types of articles that *Essence* readers do. There is a clear privilege that *Cosmopolitan* readers can debate whether or not they want to work, as opposed to having to fight for recognition in a racist workplace. There is privilege in not having to worry about the state of the white community in America. There is no targeting of the white family structure by the government and the media in the way that there is of the black family structure. *Cosmopolitan* have the distinct luxury of having a singular focus: romance.

However, there is a flipside to this. *Essence* readers are consistently told that they can accomplish whatever they put their mind to, that they can truly have it all. The way in which *Cosmopolitan* addresses its readers is degrading. While a singular focus is a luxury, it is also a limit. *Cosmopolitan* regularly warns its readers that they cannot have everything; in fact, they may not even be able to have both a husband and their personal safety, a successful career, or a fulfilling sex-life. *Cosmopolitan* readers are instructed to do white womanhood in a way that is both privileged and degrading; *Essence* readers are instructed to do black womanhood in a way that is both burdened and empowering.

In summation, the self-concept of both black women and white women from 1978-2000, as presented by the content of *Essence* and *Cosmopolitan* magazines, differ significantly from the public presentations of these two groups. While black women were portrayed to the public as lazy and incapable, they urged each other to pursue an unlimited number of opportunities and demanded that their peers play an active part in their community. Conversely, white women were

portrayed to the public as either free and emboldened or domestic and docile, while within their own publications they debated the merits of both of these positions and sought a middle ground. In the context of performing womanhood, these are both logical outcomes. For *Essence*, readers found themselves being negatively impacted by the welfare queen stereotype, and thus fought to change this perception. For *Cosmopolitan*, readers sought to find a balance between the Stepford wife and the feminist tropes in order to negotiate a changing social climate.

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