

Men's race-based mobility into management: Analyses at the blue collar and white collar job levels

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Abstract

There are few theoretical perspectives that address the dynamics of race-based mobility in the American workplace. The “particularistic mobility thesis” fills this gap: it maintains that even when groups work in similar jobs, discriminatorily induced dynamics associated with the relative inability of minorities to demonstrate informal characteristics—such as loyalty and sound judgment—constitute a handicap in mobility into managerial positions. Findings based on the 2004–2010 waves of the Panel Study of Income Dynamics support theory and indicate that from both white collar and blue collar job levels African American and Latino men, relative to White gender counterparts, are disadvantaged: they have lower rates of mobility, are restricted to a formal route to reach managerial positions that is less dependent on a traditional range of stratification-based causal factors including background status, human capital, and job/labor market characteristics, and take longer to reach management. Further, as predicted by theory, along all issues differences, relative to Whites, are greater among African Americans than Latinos and greater among those tracked from blue collar jobs than white collar jobs. Implications of the findings for understanding short-term and long-term minority disadvantage in the American labor market are discussed.

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In the context of race-based mobility analyses, sociologists have advocated conducting more refined analyses than has been typically performed (Roscigno, 2007; Stainback, Tomaskovic-Devey, & Skaggs, 2010; Wilson & Roscigno, 2010). In this regard, the statement by Wilson and Roscigno (2010:75) is typical: “race-based analyses among those working in the same

or substantially similar jobs should be undertaken as a supplement to the more typical practice of focusing on occupations, which are broad aggregations of jobs and display significant variation in workplace roles and accompanying rewards and status”. Along these lines, comparisons of those in substantially similar jobs constitute about as “level a playing field” as can be obtained in stratification research (Smith, 2005; Tomaskovic-Devey & Skaggs, 1999). Indeed, sociologists have underscored the common work roles and “supply side” characteristics of incumbents in similar jobs, they “tend to perform similar work tasks and activities performed in a work role” (Bridges & Villemez, 1994:32) and

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share a similar stratification-relevant profile, consisting of similar skill sets that derive from shared accumulations of pre-work human capital, e.g., education, licensure/certification, and similar levels of on-the-job skill acquisition (Featherman & Hauser, 1977).

Removing the variation in structural location, in fact, represents a critical test of the importance of race in structuring mobility. Indeed, if this kind of mobility analysis is conducted simultaneously at different levels of the hierarchical job structure—for example, from blue collar and white collar jobs—a particularly nuanced account of the importance of race in structuring prospects for mobility into managerial slots is produced: it captures the effects of causal factors such as racism/prejudice and institutional/equal employment protections that may vary across the job structure, thereby, producing varying levels of inequality in mobility prospects vis-à-vis Whites. Overall, a comprehensive assessment of race-based access to managerial positions from similar jobs should focus on several stratification-relevant dimensions of mobility. In addition to, first, documenting group differences in incidence, it is crucial to examine the process by which these positions are attained. Further, examinations of race-based mobility into management among those similarly situated in the job structure should examine its temporal sequencing. Indeed, the stage of the work-career at which individuals move into managerial positions constitutes a “stratification table-setter” (Setterston & Mayer, 1992): the earlier in the work career that mobility takes place, the greater is the amount of time one enjoys the range of socioeconomic rewards as a manager, encompassing, for example, income, wealth accumulation, and enhanced prospects for mobility within managerial hierarchies (Wilson & Roscigno, 2010).

Finally, this examination should take place in the context of a theoretical perspective—such as the “particularistic mobility thesis” (Smith, 2002; Wilson, Sakura-Lemessy, & West, 1999) which has emerged as “the major empirically tested theoretical perspective” (Smith, 2005) that fills the void created by the lack of formal theorizing about race-based mobility (Smith, 2005; Tomaskovic-Devey & Stainback, 2007). Distilling case studies (e.g., Dobbin, 2009; Hite, 2007; Pettigrew, 1985; Tsui & O’Reilly, 1989) and survey-based analyses (e.g., Fairlie & Kletzer, 1998; Tomkiewitz & Brenner, 1996; Wilson, Sakura-Lemessy, & West, 1999) of recruitment and promotion practices within predominantly White managed workplaces, this perspective elucidates race-specific mobility dynamics; it has demonstrated—to date, only at the occupational level—that minorities, relative to Whites, are handicapped in the incidence,

process, and timing to mobility into prestigious and influential managerial positions. Specifically, lacking access to informal job networks which allow them to demonstrate informal relevant personal characteristics, they have to “work twice as hard to get ahead”, resulting in relatively low rates of mobility, a limited number of routes to attaining mobility, and a mobility process that unfolds slowly (Smith, 2005; Wilson et al., 1999).

Within the context of the particularistic mobility thesis, this study constitutes a comprehensive assessment of race-based inequities in the dynamics of mobility among men who work in similar jobs. Along these lines, it uses data from a nationally representative data set, The Panel Study of Income Dynamics (PSID), to assess the extent to which African American and Latino men are disadvantaged, relative to White gender counterparts, when tracked from similar white collar jobs and blue collar jobs in the rate of mobility (incidence), the process by which mobility unfolds (determinants), and the speed at which mobility takes place (timing), into managerial positions. Overall, conducting analyses at the refined job level and across discrete levels of the hierarchical job structure job—should yield new and important insights into the depth and structure of racial stratification in the American workplace.

1. The particularistic mobility thesis

A fundamental premise of the particularistic mobility thesis is that employment practices disadvantaging racial minorities in mobility prospects, relative to, similarly situated Whites, in the job structure cannot be understood apart from the organizational context in which they are embedded. First, employers are “active agents” (Roscigno, 2007), having considerable discretion in determining who will be promoted. In fact, employer discretion has increased over the last several decades as the “new restructured workplace”—with its emphasis on increasing decentralization of employer decision-making and the debureaucratization of formal rules governing employment conditions in the name of efficiency—has taken firm root (Kalleberg, 2009; Moller & Rubin, 2008). Second, employers act in a workplace environment governed by an ideology of meritocracy: their recruitment and promotional practices are consonant with formulations such as “modern prejudice (Pettigrew, 1985) and “laissez-faire racism” (Bobo, Kluegel, & Smith, 1997) which maintain discrimination is institutional, situational, and ostensibly non-racial in nature. Accordingly, employers’ decisions made, for example, in the interest of

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