Fairness and Opportunity in the Twenty-First Century Corporate Workplace: The Perspectives of Young Black Professionals

Kevin Woodson

A DISSERTATION
PRESENTED TO THE FACULTY OF PRINCETON UNIVERSITY IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

RECOMMENDED FOR ACCEPTANCE BY THE DEPARTMENT OF SOCIOLOGY

Adviser: Katherine S. Newman

November 2011
© Copyright by Kevin Woodson, 2011. All rights are reserved.
ABSTRACT

Over the past few decades, unprecedented numbers of highly-educated black Americans have attained high-paying professional positions in the nation’s most prestigious private-sector firms. As this group has grown in size and become increasingly diverse, elite black corporate professionals now have widely varied experiences and perspectives concerning the significance of race in their professional careers.

In this dissertation, I draw from a number of core sociological research traditions, including the studies of racial discrimination, careers, organizations, and culture, to investigate the persisting significance of race for members of this group and the potential sources of variation in their experiences and perspectives. Through interviews with 122 black junior and mid-level professionals, and a comparison sample of 23 similarly-situated white professionals, I find that many black professionals continue to experience race as a significant source of career disadvantage. However, black professionals have widely differing experiences and diverse views about the continued significance of race. This dissertation examines the manner in which black professionals’ careers are shaped by the intersection of their personal characteristics and the social, cultural, and organizational dynamics of their workplaces. In doing so, I find that important intra-group heterogeneities, including gender, ethnicity, socio-economic origins, educational backgrounds, life experiences, and organizational contexts, may significantly influence the way individual black professionals experience race in contemporary corporate America.

The significance of race and the precise nature of racial disadvantage for black professionals appear to have changed considerably over the past few decades. Discrimination based on racial stigma and biases appears to be a less salient source of racial disadvantage for this cohort of black professionals than it had been for previous generations. Instead, informal sorting processes based on social and cultural differences that are often intertwined with racial differences may now present an equally significant source of disadvantage, even in the absence of racial prejudice.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my advisor, Kathy Newman, who has been an incredible mentor throughout my time at Princeton and has provided vital support at each stage of the dissertation process. Kathy has consistently encouraged my interest in studying the topic of this dissertation for quite some time now, first during a reading group on the black middle class that she was gracious enough to supervise, and later during my time working with her to complete an empirical research paper for the Joint Degree Program. Kathy helped convince me that I might have enough interesting things to write about this topic to justify a dissertation-length project. She has provided great advice on both methodological and substantive matters, and much-needed guidance on framing and writing up my analyses. Her wise suggestions were critical in enabling me to complete this ambitious project, my first serious qualitative research experience.

I also thank Devah Pager and Martin Ruef for their support throughout the course of this dissertation process. Devah and Martin each pointed me to important research literatures spanning a variety of disciplines, and in doing so helped me better assess the strengths and limitations of my data and contextualize my findings in relation to previous research. They also alerted me to areas of my dissertation that might benefit from further clarity and elaboration. Devah and Martin have both also encouraged me to move forward in publishing some of my findings and have shared very useful suggestions about how I might go about doing so.

I thank Kathy, Devah, and Sara McLanahan for inviting me to present versions of this research through Princeton’s Joint Degree Program in Social Policy, and I thank all of the participants for their helpful suggestions and feedback. During the course of these presentations, I received extensive feedback from Sandra Susan Smith, Hilary Bergsieker, and Ann Marie Russell LaRiccia, and helpful suggestions from other participants as well.
I have also had the benefit of discussing elements of this dissertation in several conferences and workshops. I would like to thank the organizers and participants of the 80th Annual Eastern Sociological Society Meeting, the 2010 John Mercer Langston Black Men Law Faculty Writing Workshop, and the 2011 Law and Society Association Annual Meeting.

I would like to thank the countless friends and acquaintances who have supported this project over the years. Some participated in highly-informative pilot interviews that helped me plan and prepare this study. Others helped me understand the workings of certain industries and helped me make sense of some of my tentative findings. I am particularly grateful to Bret Asbury and Ejike Uzoigwe for reading and offering constructive feedback on earlier drafts of various chapters and related papers.

I am of course deeply indebted to the many generous interviewees who took the time out of their often busy and stressful days to candidly discuss these sensitive topics with me at length. Their willingness to do so helped make this study possible. I would also like to thank those friends, acquaintances, and interviewees who were willing to impose upon their personal contacts to help my study succeed. Although I cannot name these individuals, for confidentiality reasons, they know who they are and how deeply I appreciate their help. Their interest in my study and curiosity about my findings has helped validate my own intuitions about the relevance of this research. I hope that many of these interviewees are eventually able to read this research.

Thank you to the wonderful classmates, faculty, and staff members who made Princeton’s sociology department such a welcoming and intellectually stimulating place for me over the past five years. Princeton was truly a great place to be a sociology graduate student and I am grateful to have had the opportunity to study under the professors of my committee and other luminaries who have also helped me become a better sociologist.
I also greatly appreciate Deans Roger Dennis and Dan Filler of the Earle Mack School of Law for supporting my research and the completion of this dissertation through a generous research fellowship in Fall 2010 and a very manageable teaching load over the past two semesters. I also thank the rest of my fellow faculty members for being such great colleagues and for expressing such enthusiasm about my work.

I would like to thank my mother, Irene Woodson, and brother, Keith Woodson, for thirty-three years of love and support. I am thankful to my mother and my father, Kenneth Woodson, for encouraging my interest in learning over the years. I appreciate all of my mother’s hard work and sacrifice over the years, including her taking us into her home when my wife and I first moved from Washington, D.C. to New Jersey.

Finally, I would like to thank my wife, Tiffanie, for her support and patience throughout my second career as a student. When we met, she certainly could not have anticipated that I would leave my career as an attorney shortly after our wedding, but she realized how much this meant to me and has been unwavering in her support. I almost certainly would have never followed through on my interest in returning to graduate school without her encouragement. For that, I am eternally grateful. This dissertation is dedicated to her.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

**PREFACE: BLACK PROFESSIONALS IN THE CORPORATE WORLD** .......................... 1

**CHAPTER 1: THE HISTORY OF BLACK PROFESSIONALS IN THE CORPORATE WORKPLACE** .......................................................... 7

**CHAPTER 2: ORGANIZATIONAL OPPORTUNITY STRUCTURES OF ELITE CORPORATE FIRMS** ........................................................................................................................................ 30

**CHAPTER 3: SOCIAL CAPITAL AND PROFESSIONAL SUCCESS** .................... 59

**CHAPTER 4: THE RACIAL IMPACT OF SOCIAL CAPITAL AND CULTURAL HOMOPHILY** .......................................................................................................................................................... 90

**CHAPTER 5: PERSPECTIVES ON THE SIGNIFICANCE OF RACIAL DISCRIMINATION** ................................................................................................................................................. 120

**CHAPTER 6: INDIVIDUAL ORIGINS: FAMILY SOCIAL CLASS AND ETHNIC BACKGROUNDS** ...................................................................................................................................................... 156

**CHAPTER 7: EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCES AND CREDENTIALS** .................... 182

**CHAPTER 8: BLACK FEMALE PROFESSIONALS AND THE DISADVANTAGES OF GENDER** ...................................................................................................................................................... 212

**CONCLUSION** ............................................................................................................................... 237

**APPENDIX: DATA COLLECTION AND INTERVIEW METHODS** ......................... 245

**BIBLIOGRAPHY** .......................................................................................................................... 260
PREFACE:

BLACK PROFESSIONALS IN THE CORPORATE WORLD

More than 100 years ago, W.E.B. DuBois (1903), writing about racial segregation and inequality, declared that “the problem of the 20th century is the problem of the color-line.” This pithy expression, and the rest of DuBois’ seminal volume, captured the starkness of racial disadvantage and the severity of its impact on the life chances and outlooks of black Americans. At the time, most black Americans were only a generation or two removed from slavery. Racial discrimination and apartheid were still the law of the land. For more than fifty years after DuBois’ writing, black Americans were still subjected to pervasive discrimination and excluded from most prestigious, well-paying jobs.

As we will see in Chapter 1, race relations have evolved considerably since then. By the mid-late 20th century, the color line was no longer such a rigid, absolute barrier. Thanks to dramatic changes in our nation’s laws and norms, beginning in the 1960s, a substantial number of black professionals were able to secure employment in some of America’s most elite corporate firms. The going was not always easy for these racial pioneers, especially in the early years when many encountered career-limiting discrimination and exclusion. Their struggles were captured vividly in earlier research on black corporate professionals (see Davis and Watson, 1982; Cose, 1993; Collins, 1997; Feagin and Sikes, 1994).

However, as the supply of (and demand for) black professionals increased over time, the experience of being a black professional in a predominantly white corporate firm has changed significantly. As this dissertation will reveal, the experiences and perspectives of the most recent wave of young black professionals to enter the corporate world appear to be substantially different than those of their predecessors. As a result of the profound social, political, and
economic changes of the past quarter century, today’s black professionals likely enter the
corporate world with a different set of racial outlooks. The youngest black professionals were
not alive to experience the brutal, pervasive oppression of Jim Crow segregation. They missed
out on the Civil Rights and Black Power movements that so powerfully shaped the racial
consciousnesses of previous generations. They grew up in a society where black citizens already
held prominent positions in government, business, and the military. Many have attended the
prestigious universities where elite firms regularly recruit their new professional talent. They
have had access to a far greater number of more senior black role models, mentors and contacts
who can advise them on the ins and outs of the corporate workplace. They have seen by example
that at least some talented black professionals can advance and succeed within the elite firms of
their industries. In some respects, they are also more diverse as a group than previous
generations of black professionals. They come from a broader range of social class backgrounds.
More grew up in predominantly white, middle-class suburbs where they had greater exposure to
white friends and classmates. Increasing numbers are first-generation Americans from families
of recent African or Caribbean descent.

These profound changes raise questions about the significance of race for young black
professionals. Do young professionals see their workplaces as post-racial institutions, where
race no longer functions as an important source of professional disadvantage? If not, are there
organizational and personal determinants that might explain why some black professionals have
vastly different viewpoints and experiences than others? Are they insulated from the long legacy
of American racial stratification and the racial discrimination that still persists in other areas of
American society? In this dissertation, I take on these questions using evidence from semi-
directed, life-history interviews of 122 relatively-junior black professionals who began working at corporate firms during the first decade of the twenty-first century.¹

Through these interviews, I seek to understand black professionals’ perspectives about racial disadvantage and professional opportunity. These interviews dwell at length on participants’ feelings about their professional careers and their beliefs about the impact of race in shaping their experiences. By using a sample of the youngest cohort of elite black professionals, this study focuses on one of the groups that should have most fully reaped the benefits of the racial change of the past half century. Understanding the nature of the difficulties still faced by the black elite – as well as the ones that no longer hinder them – may have importance for understanding the evolving realities of race and inequality in twenty-first century America more generally.

These interviews were augmented by interviews of a “comparison” group of 23 similarly-situated white professionals. This comparison group was designed to supplement black professionals’ descriptions of their professional experiences and the workings of their firms, in order to identify commonalities and contrasts across racial lines.

This study also explores the importance of differences in interviewees’ socioeconomic origins, ethnicity, educational backgrounds, and gender—attributes that sociological research tells us should nearly always impact adult attitudes, experiences, and outcomes. This dissertation also considers the possible effects of varied organizational conditions and office social dynamics in producing racial disparities and non-meritocratic outcomes. In doing so, this dissertation builds upon a number of core sociological research traditions including the studies of racial discrimination, careers, organizations, and culture. For over a century, sociologists have studied

¹ The methodology used for these interviews is discussed at greater length in the dissertation’s methodological appendix.
the ways that class position influences how black Americans think about and experience racial stratification and inequality (see DuBois, 1899; Drake and Cayton, 1945; Frazier, 1957; Wilson, 1978; Jackson, 2003; Lacey, 2007). More recent works have studied middle-class blacks’ deployment of class-based cultural and financial resources against the potential disadvantages of and stigmas of race (see Lacey, 2007). Sociologists have also long studied professional organizations as important social structures that both reflect and reproduce stratification and inequalities (see Mills, 1951; Kanter, 1977; Jacobs, 1981). Cultural sociologists have investigated the varied processes and situations through which institutions reward the cultural capital and repertoires of individuals from privileged backgrounds in ways that may subtly, but systemically, lead to unequal opportunities and outcomes (see Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977; DiMaggio, 1982; Lareau, 2003). This dissertation draws from, and contributes to, each of these research traditions while studying the experiences and perspectives of young black professionals in corporate America.

Chapter 1 provides a brief historic overview of the substantial progress that black professionals have made in gaining inroads into the nation’s elite corporate firms over the past several decades and notes the significant disparities that remain. Because more detailed historical data exists regarding corporate diversity in corporate law firms than in other industries, this chapter will discuss the history of black attorneys in the nation’s top law firms as a brief case study. Chapter 2 calls attention to some of the commonplace organizational structures and policies that shape the day-to-day experiences and career trajectories of young professionals working in corporate firms. This chapter discusses several organizational characteristics that often provide senior professionals considerable discretion in making important personnel decisions on the basis of subjective assessments, affinities and biases in ways that may produce
non-meritocratic outcomes. This chapter explains why black professionals who work in certain organizational contexts may tend to report far more negative assessments of their work experiences. In light of these organizational factors, Chapter 3 discusses the paramount importance of organizational social capital for the careers of young professionals. Specifically, this chapter documents the extraordinary advantages of junior professionals with the right mentors, sponsors and peer networks over their less connected colleagues.

Chapter 4 explains that this social aspect of professional work appears to seriously disadvantage many black professionals relative to their white counterparts because of racial differences in cultural repertoires and the effects of homophily practices on social capital formation. This chapter demonstrates that this dynamic may seriously perpetuate racial inequality regardless of whether anti-black racism is still a serious problem. Chapter 5 demonstrates that black professionals have sharply differing perceptions about the prevalence and severity of racial discrimination in their workplaces. This chapter probes this oft-neglected diversity of opinion and offers insight into how black professionals reach their conclusions about the significance of race in their firms.

Chapters 6 through 8 consider the importance of individuals’ personal characteristics and background experiences in possibly influencing their experiences in the professional world. Chapter 6 focuses specifically on interviewees’ family origins, particularly their socioeconomic status and nationality. This chapter considers the interviewees’ subjective beliefs about the importance of their social class origins and parental immigrant status in affecting their career experiences and also looks for patterns amongst interviewees’ perspectives, according to their class and ethnic backgrounds. Chapter 7 considers the significance of interviewees’ experiences in college, professional school, and various pre-professional preparatory programs. This chapter
reveals that the experiences of individual black professionals seem to be shaped by the educational credentials and experiences they have amassed prior to entering the corporate world. Chapter 8 considers the significance of gender as a source of disadvantage for black female professionals. Interviewees agree that sexism seems to be a far lesser obstacle than it had been for previous generations, but many also believe that gender still presents considerable disadvantages for professional women. Black female interviewees primarily discussed the manner in which the intersection of race and gender impeded their abilities to generate sufficient social capital within their firms.
For much of America’s history, black Americans were almost completely excluded from the nation’s mainstream educational and professional institutions. Hundreds of years of slavery produced severe racial inequalities that were further cemented in the 20th century by Jim Crow apartheid in the South and de facto segregation and racial discrimination in the North. Many universities completely barred black enrollment and many others used de facto quota systems that excluded all but a token number of black students. Most black college students attended historically black colleges and universities (“HBCUs”), schools that provided valuable educational experiences but credentials that were not fully respected by many elite employers (Williams, 1993). Very few black students attended the nation’s top law schools or business schools (Gellhorn, 1968).

For the first half of the twentieth century, while white corporations, law firms, and other professional service firms sprouted and expanded, even the most highly-educated blacks were largely excluded from all but the most menial white-collar jobs (Drake and Cayton, 1945). This discrimination was so extreme that, on average, black college graduates earned even less than white high school graduates (Freeman, 1973). Only 13 percent of black Americans held middle-class jobs in 1960, compared to 44 percent of their white counterparts (Landry, 1987). Stories abound of black applicants with college degrees, and even professional degrees, being steered toward jobs well beneath their educational credentials (see Daniels, 2002). Black college graduates were routinely denied professional jobs in national corporations, consulting firms, Wall Street financial firms and elite professional services industries and in fact rarely even
applied for such jobs (Collins, 1989; Zweigenhaft and Domhoff, 2003). Even low-status white-collar jobs were difficult to attain. Some major corporations operating in major northern cities only hired significant numbers of blacks to such positions as a result of serious boycotts and protests (Delton, 2009; Sugrue, 2008).

Because of these conditions, only a small number of black professionals were able to secure sales and management positions in white corporations during the 1940s and 1950s (Capparell, 2007; Norment, 1995). Most of these pioneers began their careers in low-status jobs or minority-specific sales and marketing positions and rose through the ranks of their companies over time (Capparell, 2007; Freeman and Fields, 1973).² Others, including Jackie Robinson and E. Frederick Morrow, were celebrities who had already gained national prominence in sports or government (Noment, 1995). A handful of distinguished blacks were also appointed to corporate boards during this period (Noment, 1995; Zweigenhaft and Domhoff, 2003). These landmark achievements were rare exceptions to the general racial exclusion of the time and elicited both great fanfare and heated opposition. The hiring of blacks in middle-management and sales positions received extensive coverage in black periodicals across the country and, in at least one instance, even prompted the Ku Klux Klan to organize a national boycott.

**Early Research on the Black Middle Class.**

In this segregated economy, most of the black elite of the time worked outside of the mainstream economy, in jobs servicing black customers, clients and consumers. This black middle class, though small, was an important feature of the segregated black society (see

² For example, Clarence C. Finley worked his way up from a low-status clerk position to become a comptroller, in 1959, and finally the first black president of a major white corporation became at the Charm-Tred-Monticello Company in 1970 (Norment, 1995; “Clarence Finley’s Magic Carpet Ride,” 1971). Companies began to develop minority specific positions as early as the 1930s (Avery, 2006). Harvey C. Russell, rose from a position in “Negro sales” to became the first black vice president of a national corporation at Pepsi-Cola Co., in 1962 (“Retailing: The Negro Market,” 1962). James Avery eventually rose to senior vice president at Exxon after starting in its Negro Markets department in 1956 (Daniels, 2002).
DuBois, 1899; Drake and Cayton, 1945; Record, 1957; Frazier, 1957). Separated from the white middle class, the elites of black society were bound to the black working and lower classes. Hence, early research discussing the black middle-class tended to focus primarily on intra-racial class dynamics and group life within the black community (see DuBois, 1899; Drake and Cayton, 1945). They were largely depicted as proud of their elevated status position within the black community, but constrained by racial discrimination, which restricted their residential, social and occupational options.

The Civil Rights Era and the Onset of Racial Progress

Government Intervention.

This social order began to change when the black protest movement of the mid-twentieth century eventually succeeded in convincing key actors in the federal government to embrace its calls for racial justice. Demands for greater equality were bolstered by the pressing Cold War macro-politics of the period, where America’s racial apartheid was increasingly perceived as a national embarrassment and a symbolic disadvantage in the competition with the Soviet Union over the loyalty of the developing world (Dudziak, 2000; Bell, 1980). A series of legal victories in the Supreme Court and the passage of landmark federal civil rights legislation eventually eradicated many of the discriminatory laws and practices that had historically structured and perpetuated America’s racist social order. The NAACP’s long campaign against separate and unequal schooling in higher education had begun bearing fruit in past decades, when the Supreme Court forced several states to admit black students to their then-whites-only law schools (Kluger, 1977). These rulings and the Supreme Court’s legendary rulings against racial segregation in all of public education, in Brown v. Board of Education, greatly expanded the pipeline of black professionals.
In the face of mounting demands from civil rights groups and other activists, northern state governments began passing fair employment practices laws and regulations designed to prevent private companies from discriminating against black jobseekers as early as the 1940s (Sugrue, 2008). Several presidents, including Franklin Roosevelt, Harry Truman and Dwight Eisenhower, used executive orders to establish federal agencies or committees to target employment discrimination, particularly focusing on government agencies and contractors, and several state governments followed suit (Skrentny, 1996). However, these federal and state agencies were limited in size, resources, and enforcement power, and therefore not adequately designed to effect any real systemic change (Skrentny, 1996; Blumrosen, 1972).

Advocates finally nudged the federal government into assuming a more active role in pressuring corporations to reduce racial discrimination in the 1960s (MacLean, 2006). President Kennedy created the first anti-discrimination agency with serious enforcement power with the President’s Committee on Equal Employment Opportunity (“PCEEO”) in 1961 (Skrentny, 1996). Unlike previous efforts, the Kennedy administration insisted that it would terminate contracts with companies that practiced racially discriminatory employment practices (Dobbin, 2009). The PCEEO initiated its “Plans for Progress” program, under which companies worked with the PCEEO to voluntarily establish anti-discrimination practices and agreed to submit regular progress reports on trends in black employment (Jones, 1987). PCEEO significantly increased the number of blacks employed by white corporations. Because compliance was largely voluntary, and enforcement lax, many companies continued to discriminate. Civil rights leaders were therefore initially highly critical of the program (Dobbin, 2009). However, by 1963, Plans for Progress participants were hiring nearly ten times as many black workers as they had in 1960 (Dobbin, 2009). Contractor corporations therefore unsurprisingly had greater
increases in black employment representation than other companies (Jaynes and Williams, 1989). Many corporations began to implement affirmative action programs in the form of targeted recruitment and training efforts in order to comply with civil rights laws and antidiscrimination regulations (Delton, 2009).

Anti-discrimination employment litigation also played an important role in increasing workplace diversity (Skaggs, 2009). The federal government created a civil rights agency, the Equal Employment Opportunity Council (“EEOC”) to enforce the 1964 Civil Rights Act. Despite being severely understaffed, underfunded, and suffering from intermittent leadership problems and Congressional resistance (Graham, 1990), the EEOC successfully pressured employers through threat of enforcement actions. It sued several major corporations for discriminating against black applicants and won a landmark settlement against AT&T, requiring the corporation to implement affirmative action hiring and promotion practices (Simmons, 1984). The EEOC also used public hearings as a strategic means of increasing workforce diversity in targeted areas and industries. Although the agency primarily focused on lower-status and blue-collar employment during this period, in 1968 held hearings on white-collar employment in New York City that highlighted the continued exclusion of black workers from high-status positions in some of America’s largest corporations and most prestigious firms (Lieberman, 2007; Chambers, 2008). This negative publicity, along with growing concerns over urban riots, further motivated corporations to develop more integrated workforces (Dobbin, 2009).

By the mid-1960s, many of the nation’s most elite universities—some led by allegiance to moral principles, others by fear of the growing urban riots and campus unrest—began

---

3 Skaggs (2009) found that companies that have been targeted in anti-discrimination litigation hire more black managers and become closer to industry norms in management diversity.
accepting black students in record numbers (Stulberg and Chen 2008; Karabel 2006). Many schools even began accepting black applicants with lower grades and test scores than most white admitted students, in some instances offering special summer programs to help these admitted students get up to speed before classes began (Gellhorn, 1968; Ramsey, 1980). These open admissions and affirmative action policies rapidly expanded the pipeline of highly qualified black professionals, producing many of the pioneers who integrated the partnership ranks at top law firms and Wall Street banks (Loomis, 2008). Companies also began to provide more opportunities to the black students who did not attend the most prestigious universities. Many companies, including numerous Plans for Progress participants, increasingly turned to HBCUs as viable recruiting sites for junior professional positions. The number of major corporations recruiting on HBCU campuses skyrocketed, from “essentially zero” in 1960 to 50 in 1965 and 300 by 1970 (Freeman, 1973: 282; Dobbin, 2009).

Government enforcement activity increased into the 1970s as the federal government required more detailed affirmative action plans from contractors and Congress granted the EEOC power to sue offending corporations (Dobbin, 2009). This pressure, along with the unprecedented economic growth of the era, increased the employment options for the new cohorts of highly-educated blacks, leading to a larger and more prosperous black middle-class (Peake, 1975; Landry, 1987). Black employment gains in professional and skilled blue-collar jobs outpaced white gains in the 1960s (Ross, 1967). Although black workers continued to earn less than their white counterparts, the black-white earnings gap began to close (Freeman, 1973). Freeman (1973) even found that the marginal returns to higher education were in fact larger for blacks than for whites. The black middle-class doubled in size between 1960 and 1970 (Landry, 1987). Between 1957 and 1971, the percentage of all black workers in managerial/executive
positions rose from .5 percent to 2 percent, still substantially lower than the 8 percent of comparable white workers, but a significant increase nonetheless (Black Enterprise, 1973). The trend continued into the 1980s (Patterson, 1985).

Despite these important indicators of progress, the career prospects of even the most successful black professionals were still constrained by racial discrimination. Largely confined to relatively marginalized, “black” jobs including community relations and minority marketing divisions, or human relations positions, black professionals enjoyed relatively little institutional power within their corporations (Freeman and Fields, 1973; Davis and Watson, 1982; Cose, 1993; Collins, 1997). 55 of Collins’ 76 interviewees, who were the highest-ranked black professionals in Chicago’s largest firms, held these types of positions, which Collins (1989:330) characterized as “functionally segregated” “racialized holding cells.” Although these positions carried impressive titles and sometimes substantial supervisory authority, they were isolated from the corporations’ key revenue-generating functions and hence presented very little opportunity for further upward mobility (Davis and Watson, 1982; Taylor III et al., 1982). Thus, the most ambitious black professionals eventually grew dissatisfied with these positions as their careers stalled while their better-placed white colleagues continued to ascend the corporate ladders within their companies. The challenges and frustrations of these black corporate managers soon became the basis for most of the existing qualitative research on the experiences and perspectives of black professionals (discussed below).

*Case Study of Racial Change: Increased Diversity in Corporate Law Firms*

The experience of black attorneys in corporate law firms is in some respects a microcosm of the experiences of black professionals in the broader corporate world. Few black Americans were licensed to practice law in the first half of the twentieth century (Houston, 1935; Smith Jr.,
1993). Those who did were almost completely excluded from largest, most prestigious corporate firms and were confined to working on cases dealing with the legal problems of other black Americans (Hale, 1952; Gellhorn, 1968; Edwards, 1971; Jordan, 1982).\(^4\) Through the mid-1960s, black students accounted for only approximately one percent of law school students (Kidder, 2003). Very few attended the prestigious law schools that were the source of most of the top firms’ associates (Smigel, 1964). Moreover, even those with impeccable credentials were often denied jobs at top firms. Even William Coleman, who graduated first in his class at Harvard Law School and clerked for a Supreme Court justice, was rejected by firms in Philadelphia, Boston and New York before finally being hired by Paul Weiss (Loomis, 2004; Kluger, 1977).

Black representation at the nation’s top law schools rose substantially in the late 1960s and early 1970s (Gellhorn, 1968; Edwards, 1971). Gellhorn (1968) estimated that between 1965 and 1967, the number of black law school graduates roughly doubled, from around 200 to approximately 400; this rate exceeded the rate of increase of the overall population of black attorneys (Kidder, 2003). At Harvard Law School, the number of black law students in the entering classes (which averaged 565 total students) increased from a mere 3 in 1963 to 65 in 1970 (\(ld\).). By 1970, black students also constituted 10 percent or more of the entering classes at several other elite law schools, including Michigan and UCLA (\(ld\).). With some exceptions, these rates have remained relatively stable through to the present day. Since 1990, more than 3,000 black students have entered law school each year, out of an overall new law student population of 42,000-45,000 (\(ld\)).

This racial diversity in elite law schools dramatically expanded the pool of black

\(^4\) Smigel (1964) conducted extensive interviews at various Wall Street law firms and learned of only three black attorneys working at any of them.
attorneys who corporate law firms might deem sufficiently well-credentialed to hire. This
increase in the supply of black attorneys with elite educational pedigrees came about just as law
firms began to rapidly expand their workforces and increase associate hiring (Nelson, 1988). By
the late 1960s, when some top corporate law firms had begun hiring their first black attorneys,
only 20 firms employed more than 100 attorneys (Id.). By the late-1980s, more than 100 firms
employed 200 or more attorneys—several employed more than 500 attorneys (Galanter and
Palay, 1991). In all, these largest firms accounted for approximately 35,000 attorneys, which
represented a significantly higher percentage of all recent law school graduates than firms had
employed in earlier years (Dinovitzer and Garth, 2007; Galanter and Palay, 1991). As firms
dramatically increased their annual new associate hiring, they began to formalize their
recruitment systems and granted more weight to applicants’ academic performance and other
meritocratic considerations.

It was during this period that most firms began to hire their first black attorneys.
Although a small number of early outliers each hired at least a single black male attorney by the
early 1960s (Hoffman, 1973; Zweigenhaft and Domhoff, 2003), prestigious firms in the leading
legal markets of New York, Washington, D.C., Chicago, Boston, and Philadelphia did not begin
to hire black attorneys and name their first black partners until the late 1960s and 1970s. Firms
in the largest southern legal markets, including Atlanta, Houston and Richmond, followed suit,
naming their first black partners in the late 1970s and 1980s. These pioneers tended to be lateral
hires from the public sector who possessed extensive contacts and impressive reputations from
years of government or non-profit service; very few had begun as junior associates with their
firms, the conventional route to partnership (Smith, 1984).

---

5 As of 2000, 14.3 percent of all attorneys in private practice worked at law firms with at least 100 attorneys
(Galanter and Henderson, 2008), including 28 percent of all recent law school graduates (Dinovitzer et al., 2004).
However, some of the largest and most prestigious firms in these cities did not name their first black partners until much later.⁶ Even amongst those firms that did integrate their partnership ranks, these black partners often remained the lone “tokens” for many years.⁷ Thus, despite the progress of a relatively small number of pioneers, the overall representation of black attorneys as partners at the nation’s largest and most prestigious firms increased fairly slowly. As late as 1979, only 12 (<1%) of the 3,700 partners of the 50 largest law firms in the country were black (Burke, 1979). By the end of the decade, fewer than 50 of the nation’s 250 largest law firms had hired more than one black partner (Brenner, 1990) and the 25 largest law firms in New York City only had a total of 21 black partners (Beschloss and McNatt, 1989; King, 1990).

Thus, although the absolute numbers of black attorneys has increased substantially, their percentage of their firms’ overall attorney populations, particularly in the partnership ranks, have remained relatively flat. In 1983, 2.1 percent of the total attorneys at the top 100 law firms in the country were black (Smith Jr., 1984). By the end of the decade, only 157 (2.4 percent) of the 6,673 associates working at the top twenty-five New York firms were black (Beschloss and McNatt, 1989; King, 1990). In 2011, only 205 (3.1%) of the 6,550 total attorneys working at the nation’s four largest law firms are black (American Lawyer Diversity Scorecard, 2011).

This progress likely would have been even slower had it not been for considerable pressure from various external sources, including corporate and public-sector clients, the American Bar Association (“ABA”), and students at elite law schools. The growth of black political power in some of the nation’s largest cities created greater opportunities for black

---

⁶ For example, Paul Weiss hired William Coleman as an associate in 1949, but did not name a black partner until Jeh Johnson, 45 years later, in 1994 (Loomis, 2004). The revered New York firm of Wachtell, Lipton, Rosen & Katz did not name its first black partner until 2003.

⁷ For example, Arnold and Porter named its first black partner, Clifford Alexander, in 1969 but did not name another until 1984. Although Simpson Thatcher promoted Conrad Harper, its first black partner, in 1974, it did not name its next black partner, John W. Carr, until 1991.
professionals working in elite professional service firms (Smith Jr., 1984; Smith, 1990; Hornsby, 2009). Black elected officials helped black attorneys (and investment bankers) gain greater access to potentially lucrative work, increasing their value to the predominantly white firms interested in landing city business. Black political leaders were particularly aggressive in steering more work toward black professionals in Atlanta and Washington, D.C. (Smith, 1984; Hornsby, 2009) and might partly explain why there are higher percentages of black partners in these cities than in New York City (Smith Jr., 1984).

The ABA, which had once firmly resisted the entrance of racial minorities into the upper realms of the profession—it formally excluded black attorneys until 1943—eventually came to embrace the push for greater racial diversity as a top organizational goal. In 1984, the ABA formed a Task Force on Minorities in the Profession that released a report detailing the persisting segregation in the industry and finding that minorities were still deprived of equal opportunity (ABA, 1986). This report led to the creation of Commission on Opportunities for Minorities in the Profession in 1986, and the Commission on Racial and Ethnic Diversity in the Profession a year later. Led by future ABA president Dennis Archer, this commission sought to steer more legal work to minority attorneys through its Minority Counsel Program, which facilitated greater contact between minority lawyers and corporations’ in-house legal staffs and helped link minority and majority law firms (ABA, 2000). Later, as ABA president, Archer renewed the organization’s focus on diversity, and convened conferences and panels across the nation (Carter, 2004). After the ABA Colloquium on Diversity in the Legal Profession in October 1999, the

8 However, some of these gains ultimately proved to be somewhat illusory and short-lived. The black bankers who made inroads because of these black political gains were heavily concentrated in municipal finance, one of the less profitable, traditionally lower-status realms of investment banking (Monroe and Friday, 1988). This area was hit especially hard during the economic downturn of the late 1980s and much of the progress came undone. In the process of drastically downsizing their municipal finance departments, some banks reportedly released up to two-thirds of their total black bankers (Monroe and Friday, 1988).
association adapted a number of goals designed to increase the number of black law students and to improve the recruitment, training, retention and promotion of black attorneys at law firms (ABA, 2000). The ABA again renewed these efforts in June 2009, when president H. Thomas Wells, Jr. convened a National Summit on Diversity, “Diversity in the Legal Profession: The Next Steps?”

The legal offices of hundreds of corporations joined these efforts to increase diversity (Donovan, 2006, Schmitt, 2006; Roberts, 2008). This came as part of a much larger renegotiation of corporations’ traditional relationships with the elite law firms that serviced them. In the 1970s, as corporations became more conscious of rising legal costs, they attempted to improve oversight over their legal services and began to abandon their longstanding loyalties to their law firms. They increasingly asked law firms to bid against each other for work, practices which had until then been frowned-upon (Nelson, 1988). As corporate legal departments became more involved in monitoring and regulating their outside law firms, they also began to make demands concerning their outside counsels’ racial and gender diversity. In 1988, Harry Pearce, then Vice President and General Counsel of General Motors, became the first attorney of a major corporation to formally request that his law firms develop more diverse workforces (Metropolitan Corporate Counsel, 2004). A few years later, DuPont began considering diversity as a criterion for selecting law firms (Donovan, 2006). Corporate client pressure escalated in 1999, when Charles Morgan, general counsel of Bell-South, working with the Association of Corporate Counsel, got nearly 500 corporations to sign his proposal, “Diversity in the Workplace, A Statement of Principle.” The statement, which was also adopted by local bar associations, explained that the companies would “give significant weight” to law

---

9 This change also occurred in investment banking as well (Knee, 2006), but did not result in similarly aggressive efforts to improve racial diversity.
firms’ efforts in promoting diversity within their workplaces when hiring law firms (“If The Client Insists,” 2007). Even so, this effort produced only modest results. Hence, in 2004, Roderick A. Palmore, then General Counsel at Sara Lee, who had himself previously been the first black partner at two different law firms, authored a more strongly-worded follow-up statement, “The Call to Action” which insisted that law firms take more pro-active measures in improving diversity (Donovan, 2006).

Many of the nation’s largest corporations now regularly survey and request information about diversity statistics and procedures from the law firms interested in competing for their business (Maleske, 2009). Some corporations including Microsoft pay special bonuses for law firm diversity (Ibid.). NALP, the Association for Legal Career Professionals, a non-profit legal industry organization that, among other things, gathers extensive data about individual law firms, and industry periodicals, including the Minority Law Journal began to query law firms for similar data, and developed rankings and reports that were publicly disseminated and viewed by thousands of law students and attorneys. Stanford University’s Building a Better Legal Profession also actively tracks and rates law firms’ diversity (Liptak, 2007). Because of these efforts, clients and law students can now more easily sanction law firms that do not comply with industry diversity norms.

Wal-Mart has demanded that its law firms supply it with the names of women or minority attorneys who may potentially serve as their primary contacts on their cases (Schmitt, 2006) and developed special software to monitor the diversity of its outside counsel (Roberts, 2008). Wal-Mart even recently terminated two of its law firms solely because of their lack of progress in meeting diversity objectives (Donovan, 2006). The company has moved more than $60 million worth of its legal business to firms with minority or female relationship partners (Roberts, 2008).
The general counsels’ offices at many other important corporations (including Wal-Mart, Shell Oil, Dupont, MetLife, Merrill Lynch, Prudential, Citigroup Target, General Mills, The Gap, Pitney Bowes and American Airlines) have been praised by minority attorney groups for taking active steps to increase the diversity of the law firms serving them (“If The Client Insists”, 2007).

The efforts of these corporate clients have born significant fruit. Several corporations have insisted that law firms not list minority attorneys’ names in their pitches for business unless those minorities will receive substantive responsibilities. Some of these companies regularly follow up with clients and demand detailed information about the amount and quality of work performed by minority attorneys (Donovan, 2006). Thus, although considerable racial disparities still linger in the legal industry, black big firm attorneys now work in institutional dynamics far more favorable than those faced by their predecessors.

The Research Literature on Black Corporate Professionals

Researchers, journalists and other observers began studying and commenting upon the experiences of black professionals in corporate America in the early 1970s. Most of the earliest wave of this research was based on the experiences of black professionals working in corporate management. There are several reasons for this focus. Corporate management was the realm where significant numbers of black professionals first made inroads and it remains the sector where the greatest number is employed. By virtue of the sheer size and number of corporations, they account for a far greatest number of professionals than the elite professional services organizations. Thus, the size of the population of black professionals working in various levels of corporate management enabled researchers to employ quantitative research methods that would have been impossible in other industries.

The early research consistently found that black professionals were significantly worse-
off than white professionals in measures pertaining to objective professional outcomes and personal career satisfaction. In perhaps the earliest comprehensive study of black professionals working in white firms, Freeman and Fields (1973) found that they were promoted at substantially lower rates than their white counterparts and perceived that they had unequal opportunities to advance within their firms. Many black interviewees also complained of feeling isolated at their firms and reported that their managers did not seem interested in their professional development. Notwithstanding these issues though, Freeman and Fields found that a slight majority of these interviewees were satisfied with their overall career progress and experiences.

The black managers studied by Fernandez (1974) received lower salaries than their white counterparts, even after taking educational credentials and years of work experience into account, and reported less job satisfaction. White and black managers both most commonly identified racial discrimination as the most important source of racial disparities in their industries, although white managers did not believe that racial discrimination was a problem in their own firms (Id.). In an influential early essay based on his own experiences, Jones (1973) also documented the continued existence of racial disadvantage affecting blacks in corporate management.

**The Declining Significance of Race and the Fear of Racial Retrenchment.**

In the late 1970s, researchers including Richard Freeman (1976), America and Anderson (1978), and William Julius Wilson (1978) suggested that the situation of black professionals and the black middle-class was improving and that outright racial discrimination was becoming a less serious problem for this group. These works, particularly Wilson’s, generated a controversy that helped bring the issue of the black middle-class’s relative well-being to the attention of
mainstream academia and public discourse. Wilson’s (1978) text itself only contained a few fleeting references to the black middle class and was not even intended as a study of the group. However, the work sparked a large uproar on account of its provocative title and Wilson’s suggestion that racial disadvantage was becoming less important for the black middle-class.10

These works were published in a political context of conservative backlash against increasingly aggressive civil rights policies, including busing and affirmative action, which prompted skepticism even from stalwart Democrats and liberals (Douglas, 1974; Keynes and Miller, 1989). Many white Americans had increasingly come to believe that the government had done enough to address racial inequality and that racism was no longer a significant barrier for qualified, hard-working blacks. Wilson’s work was regarded by some observers on the Left as providing research support for this conservative backlash and a threat to policies critical to the black middle-class. Concerns about the predicament of the black middle class became more acute after the election of President Reagan in 1980, and with good cause. Reversing course from a decade of anti-discrimination enforcement efforts, the Reagan administration decreased the EEOC’s funding and actively opposed affirmative action (Smith, 1993). The speed of increased racial diversity in corporations slowed during the 1980s, leading some black professionals to question whether their companies were truly interested in racial diversity beyond token representation (Jones, 1985). Some observers suggested that decision-makers in corporate America preferred elevating white women instead of racial minorities as a more comfortable way of improving their overall diversity statistics (see Simmons, 1980; Jones, 1985). The gains that black Americans had made in closing the racial wage gap in the decades following World War II slowed during the 1980s (Smith, 1993). The concerns over Freeman and Wilson’s arguments,

---

10 Extrapolating from empirical research by Freeman (1976) and others, Wilson claimed that “there is every reason to believe that talented and educated blacks, like talented and educated whites, will continue to enjoy the advantages and privileges of their class position” (1978:153).
exacerbated by this broader social and political context, soon prompted a flood of research and commentary on the work lives of the black middle-class.

These works were almost uniformly negative about the current conditions of black professionals and pessimistic about the group’s future prospects—several warned of a reversal of hard-won gains (Landry, 1987; Collins, 1997). These works revealed that even highly-educated black professionals earning huge salaries still regularly experienced racial discrimination and unequal treatment (Collins, 1983; Feagin, 1991; Feagin and Sikes, 1994; Benjamin, 1991). They spoke of being passed over for promotions, held to unfair double standards, and subjected to offensively low expectations and excessive scrutiny (Feagin and Sikes, 1994; Collins, 1983; Benjamin, 1991). The racial slights and injustices experienced by this group was the almost exclusive focus of much of this research (see Feagin and Sikes, 1994; Thomas and Hughes, 1985). This social science research was joined by numerous journalistic accounts and memoirs that also addressed the disparities, dissatisfaction and racial disadvantages that encumbered black professionals’ career opportunities and outcomes (see Davis and Watson, 1982; Hicks, 1985; Williams, 1987; Monroe and Friday, 1988; Cose, 1993; Fulwood, 1996; Barrett, 1999; Jett and Chartrand, 1999). The firsthand accounts in these works were supported by quantitative studies of white and black professionals. Kraiger and Ford (1985) found that black professionals received lower job performance ratings than their white counterparts; Greenhaus et al. (1990) found that black managers were less satisfied with their careers, felt less accepted in their companies, and reported slower rates of promotion.

Not all studies of black professionals and middle-class workers found evidence of disparities or discrimination. In a study of one corporation, Sheridan et al. (1997) found no evidence that race influenced individual opportunities and outcomes. Similarly, in a study of a
federal agency, Powell and Butterfield (1997) found that race did not affect promotions to top management positions. Pulakos et al. (1989) found minimal evidence of racial effects on military promotions. There were also more upbeat firsthand accounts from senior black professionals, although these works represented a very small minority of the total writing on the topic (see Lewis, 2001).

Limitations of the Existing Research.

This important body of research and reporting put to rest any triumphant misperceptions about the black middle-class experience. Yet, it was also insufficiently nuanced and rather one-sided. Although survey data has clearly demonstrated that not all black professionals report being disadvantaged by race, the research literature has done surprisingly little to investigate the differences between those who encounter race-related difficulties and those who do not. In fact, many of the leading studies completely ignore or trivialize those black professionals who believe that their careers have not been shaped by racial unfairness. In doing so, they mischaracterize black professionals as a monolithically aggrieved group, at times through rather sensationalized rhetoric. Benjamin (2005: 183), for example, described black professionals as universally beset by institutional racism and an “ongoing onslaught of oppression.” Feagin and Sikes (1994:vii) begin their study with a quote from a respondent proclaiming that being black in white America is “One step from suicide!” and they later discuss the 1984 suicide of black journalist Leanita McClain as a cautionary tale of black middle-class despair. The full range of black professionals’ opinions about the importance (or lack of importance) of race in shaping their everyday experiences and career opportunities is not reflected in this literature.

Much of this research is also now dated. These studies were based on the experiences of the first cohorts of blacks in corporate America, those who entered the corporate world shortly
after the advances of the civil rights era and during the onset of affirmative action. Some aspects of these studies are even more outdated than their publication dates indicate, as they include anecdotes from some interviewees involving incidents that had occurred decades earlier. Some of Davis and Watson (1982) and Cose’s (1993) interviewees began their careers as far back as the 1940s. They were often among the very first black professionals to work at their firms (and in some instances, their entire industries). For example, half of the 73 executives interviewed by Collins (1997:47) were the first black professionals ever hired by their companies. As tokens in their workplaces, many of the first black professionals experienced the additional pressure of serving as “symbols” or “ambassadors” of their groups (Kanter, 1977; Benjamin, 2005). They lacked the networks and contacts that help many black professionals navigate corporate hierarchies today. They were also forced to deal with many counterparts, bosses and clients who had never personally interacted with highly-educated black people, including some who outspokenly opposed to working with them (Smith Jr., 1984). Many of their colleagues had grown up before the civil rights movement and had not been socialized to value racial equality. These early pioneers encountered racism and racial isolation far more extreme than anything that exists today, as traditional anti-black prejudice substantially declined during the late 20th century (Firebaugh and Davis, 1988).

More recent cohorts of black professionals thus arrived in a corporate world with a very different, and far more favorable, racial climate. Some of the black corporate pioneers helped pave the way for greater numbers of future black professionals by effecting institutional change in their firms’ recruiting and hiring practices and by personally advocating for black candidates during their firms’ hiring seasons (Dent, 1997). For example, whereas elite investment banks once only recruited formally at top schools and informally at the lesser-ranked schools alma
matters of some of their white professionals, black bankers began to push for their banks to also recruit at HBCUs (Dent, 1997). Established black professionals now regularly participate in panels and speaker programs, and publish writings advising younger black professionals on how to succeed in corporate America and elite professional services firms (see Harris, 2009). Internship and professional preparation programs further increased the pipeline of highly-qualified young black professionals and have been particularly influential in increasing the black presence in corporate America.

As a result of these efforts and the societal changes discussed above, there are now far more black professionals working in America’s corporations and professional service firms. According to the most recent edition of the American Lawyer’s (2010) annual diversity scorecard, for example, there are now more than 300 black partners working at the nation’s 250 largest firms and more than 2000 other black attorneys, with well over 100 black partners working at New York City law firms alone (Goldstein, 2008, Luo, 2008).11

Working as a junior associate in a major city with hundreds of black firm attorneys and alumni in 2010 is obviously very different than the experiences of earlier generations in the existing literature, who began working at firms in the 1970s and 80s, when there were still very few black attorneys working at large law firms anywhere in the country. Although the number of black professionals working in any specific firm is still often relatively small—particularly at the very top—black corporate professionals now have networks at their disposal that can provide mentorship, camaraderie and social-capital-building opportunities unavailable to earlier cohorts.

11 However, these statistics include both full and “non-equity” partners—salaried attorneys who many argue are not truly partners at all (Henderson, 2006). Because a disproportionate percentage of these firms’ black partner populations are believed to be non-equity partners, firms’ reported statistics have been roundly criticized as self-serving and grossly misleading with respect to the true racial disparities at the top of these firms (Henson, 2010; Jones, 2010; Law Office Management & Administrative Report, 2010). The statistics concerning minority non-partner attorneys are similarly misleading, as they include lower-salary, non-partner-track staff attorney positions.
Formal company-sponsored “affinity groups” for black workers, which were once frowned upon in many corporate workplaces (Davis and Watson, 1982), are now widely embraced. Their proliferation has further strengthened black professional networks within firms, just as internet technology has helped black professionals build networks outside of their firms.

**Persisting Disparities.**

Although there has been considerable progress, inequalities in the corporate world have persisted over time. Black professionals are still statistically underrepresented in several industries, including law and financial services. Those who join large law firms are more likely to leave earlier than their white counterparts (Sander, 2004). Minority attorneys are still significantly underrepresented in the nation’s largest law firms (Chambliss, 2005). Black partners are more highly represented at large offices in other primary legal markets, including Washington, D.C., Chicago, and Atlanta but are still only exist in token numbers at most of the top firms in New York City.\(^{12}\) Their representation may have declined recently, as law firm downsizing during the recession has left the industry less diverse for the first time in over a decade (Barker, 2010).

Progress for black professionals in other elite professional services industries, including Wall Street banks and consulting firms, developed even more slowly, despite many discrimination lawsuits and multiple federal government investigations (see GAO, 2006; GAO, 2008; U.S. House, 2010). In the early 1970s, Goldman was sued by a black Stanford business school student who had been told by an interviewer that he would not be hired because of his race (Ellis, 2008). A top Wall Street firm, Merrill Lynch settled a class action discrimination law suit by entering into a consent decree to improve minority and female hiring in 1976 (Williams,

\(^{12}\) Only 5 of the 69 largest offices in New York City had 3 or more black partners (“Diversity Rankings”, 2011). By contrast, more than a third of the largest offices in DC and nearly half of the largest offices in Atlanta had at least 3 black partners (Id.).
There were no black partners at any of the leading Wall Street banks until the mid-1980s and no black managing directors until the 1990s (Bell, 2002; Endlich, 1999). By the late 1990s, a small but growing number of successful black professionals held high-status positions on Wall Street and throughout the financial industry, including a number who were managing directors at major banks (Clarke et al., 1996). Diversity also increased in the lower ranks of elite Wall Street banks (Norment, 1999).

The consulting industry giants were slower to even begin diversifying and they appear to have made less progress. McKinsey, the most prestigious consulting firm, hired its first black consultant, James Lowry, for a position in urban affairs development in 1968 (McCoy, 2002). As of 1993, only 2 of McKinsey’s 465 partners were black (Huey, 1993). One top consulting firm, Bain & Company, did not promote its first black partner until 1998. One consultant estimated that there were a total of 11 black managers and 20 senior managers at all the top firms in the industry in 1998 (Karp, 1998). Statistics on minority representation in consulting are notoriously scarce, as top consulting firms have refused to provide comprehensive diversity statistics (Daniels, 2004), but interviewees estimated that the top four consulting firms are on average only 1-2 percent black. McKinsey reportedly employed only 120 black consultants out of approximately 7000 consultants firm-wide in 2007-08 and only 7 black partners.

Black corporate managers also continue to struggle. Studies have found that they were more likely than their white counterparts to experience downward occupational mobility during the 1990s (McBrier and Wilson, 2004). Black men and (especially) women are still severely underrepresented in executive and management positions, holding 2.7 and 1.8 percent of such positions respectively (Benjamin, 2005). Elite firms in other fields not represented in this study, particularly advertising, appear to be even less diverse (Elliot, 2009).
CONCLUSION

There has been real, substantial racial progress in corporate America in the decades since the first cohorts of black professionals entered the corporate world. This progress is most evident in the dramatically increased representation of black professionals in many of the most elite firms in the country. Because of this and other fundamental changes, there are important gaps in the research literature that this study will attempt to address. However, racial disparities in these firms still persist and show no signs of going away any time soon. The disproportionate attrition rates of black professionals, their greater dissatisfaction with various aspects of their jobs, and their relative underrepresentation in the upper ranks of their firms have all been widely recognized as serious issues in all of the industries being studied here.

In the subsequent chapters I present the full diversity of black professionals’ views about race and opportunity within their prestigious workplaces while considering how their diverse life trajectories, including family and educational backgrounds may have shaped their perspectives and experiences. In the following chapter, I discuss how the organizational structures of these workplaces, including their assignment processes, the limited access to premium opportunities, and subjective evaluation and promotion processes, systemically produce outcomes that are not necessarily meritocratic or conducive to fairness.
CHAPTER 2: ORGANIZATIONAL OPPORTUNITY STRUCTURES OF ELITE CORPORATE FIRMS

Previous research has devoted only scant attention to the specific organizational contexts and conditions in which black professionals work. These studies reveal very little about how the experiences of black professionals may tend to differ by occupation or place of employment. Evidence from this dissertation’s interviews suggests that this is an important oversight. Organizational structures and practices that are prevalent in many firms are particularly conducive to unequal treatment and outcomes. Junior professionals’ views about the fairness of their workplaces and the quality of their experiences are shaped by the organizational processes and structures that determine their access to opportunities and rewards within their firms. Interviewees identified important organizational dynamics that compromise meritocracy and produce unfair outcomes in almost all of the jobs included in this study. In all but a few of these jobs, the fairness of firms’ opportunity and reward structures are seriously compromised by informal practices and organizational conditions that left the fates of junior professionals to senior professionals’ biases, affinities, and subjective assessments. Practices prevalent in these firms, including the use of subjective performance evaluations and highly-discretionary, under-scrutinized assignment processes, substantially increase the risk of non-meritocratic outcomes and perceptions of unfairness.


Meritocracy, wherein outcomes are wholly determined by task-relevant factors including ability and performance, is widely regarded as an ideal justice principle and standard of fairness (Son Hing et. al, 2011). In employment contexts, true meritocracy requires that evaluators and
decision-makers are able to accurately identify and measure individual workers’ work performances and contributions. As we will see below, this was not so in most of the jobs represented in this study. In a very small subset of these jobs, however, performance could be evaluated according to quantitative, objective measures of individual productivity. For example, because Wall Street traders are given direct responsibility over discrete allotments of capital and are responsible for buying and selling debt and other securities with these funds, their performances, measured in the amount of money that they earn (or lose) for their firms can be calculated into “profit and loss” figures, which are continuously updated. Similarly, the performance of Wall Street salespeople, who sell debt, equity and other assets to institutional investors, can be measured according to the volume of their accrued “sales credits” (Banks, 2004).

In these positions, junior professionals’ evaluations and access to rewards are thus far less dependent upon the imperfect, potentially-biased impressions of their senior colleagues. As a result, interviewees tended to regard these positions as the most fair and meritocratic in the corporate world. Quincy,13 a bond trader, credited the ready availability of quantitative performance measures with producing greater fairness in his job. His firm’s computer network kept real-time records of his profits and losses, color-coded in green and red, respectively.

In trading, at the end of the day you knew whether you were good or bad. And it’s not your bosses that tell you, it’s the markets that tell you. You’ve got a little corner, usually on the bottom right-hand side of your screen [that] says up or down. If you’re green, you did good. If you’re green and you got a couple zeros with a plus sign, then f-ck everybody else, it was you. You made it happen. If it’s red, get your sh-t together. If it’s red, negative, with zeros after it, then maybe [trading is] not for you...It’s not like going to a gym and it takes 6 months to see results; you know every day in and out whether you were good or bad. When you’ve got this number in front of your boss and you’re a little anti-social and he thinks you’re an –sshole, but you’ve got zeros and it’s green, there’s not much he can say to that...It’s pretty easy to see who’s doing good and who’s not.

13 In order to preserve the confidentiality of interviewees’ identities, the names of all interviewees quoted or cited in this dissertation have been replaced by pseudonyms. Other identifying details, including the names of schools, colleagues and employers, have also been obscured throughout this dissertation.
Another interviewee, Nathan, had a unique vantage point in that he had worked in trading, investment banking, and the legal profession over the course of his professional career. He adamantly insisted that the relationships and personal pedigrees that at times shaped careers in most of those professional settings did not receive much currency among traders. Nathan discussed his different professional experiences in rather colorful language:

At the tippy-top [of all my professional experiences], I put trading…It was the purest form of merit. You stick your fingers into the f—king market and you make money. It’s that simple. There’s no room for bulls—t. There’s no room for, “Well, we don’t know if we’re gonna let you put your fingers in today because little Jimmy here whose dad is—“F—ck Jimmy and his dad! Can Jimmy make money for us? Oh, no? Well Jimmy, go sit on the bench then. We’re gonna put in the guy who can make money for us.” It’s like professional sports.14

Nathan found that the individualistic work structure of trading made it nearly impossible for senior professionals to deny talented traders the rewards they deserved.

When I was a trader I was literally making the trades. Handling millions of dollars, just doing the transactions myself. So there’s nobody to get in the way and say “Oh, well, [Nathan], you’re not a good trader because you’re black.” “Did you look at my f-cking screen today? I just made three hundred grand. What the f-ck did you do?” It was kind of like that and I liked that.

However, although this narrative of bottom-line jobs as purely meritocratic was espoused by numerous interviewees, it is important to note that even these objective performance measures do not completely eradicate the potential for biased employers to reward employees’ performances unfairly. Although quantifiable performance indicators do away with an important source of unfairness—biased and inaccurate perceptions of individual performance—employers do not mechanically allocate salary bonuses and other rewards on the basis of these metrics. Instead, firms generally provide employers some discretion in deciding how to allocate even “merit-based” bonuses. Using experimental data of business students with management experience and survey data from a large corporate firm, researchers have found evidence of a

---

14 Organizational researchers have also used professional sports as an example of an occupational setting where individual performance can be precisely assessed according to established criteria (see Abrahamson, 1979).
performance-reward bias, whereby women and minorities receive smaller bonuses than white men with equal evaluation scores (Castilla, 2008; Castilla and Benard, 2010). Thus, while individual junior professionals might believe that their jobs are purely meritocratic because their employment outcomes are shaped by their individual performance measures, they often do not have access to the comprehensive information about their colleagues’ bonuses that would enable them to truly determine whether performance-reward biases still exist in their groups.

Nonetheless, Nathan distinguished trading from his other professional experiences and opined that “anything that would have been described as a gentlemen’s profession back in the 1800s is bad for black folks. Bad.” He noted that this appears to have been true for stigmatized minority groups throughout history.

I formed a couple of theories back [in college] that minorities are best served in industries where you’re real close to the stream of money and there’s no bullsh-t in between you and the money. I started studying Jewish history too and I was like, “Why did Jews become merchants? Why were they successful in places like Venice and not places like Milan?” And the answers were to me [that] when you’re close to the money and you’re making them money, that’s all people care about. It’s human nature. They’re willing to forego things—that’s human nature.

Nathan likened the fairness of trading with his similar experience in a sales position selling stocks.

All the money you bring in, your name’s on it. You can show it. And people like that. I don’t care if you are racist. If [I’m] black and I’m bringing you money hand over fist, sh-t—on some base level, even if you hate black people, you like seeing my ass coming in your office because you know I’m bringing you money.

Nathan did not believe that employers in trading or sales were any less racist than those in other professions (in fact, he suggested that they might be more likely to use racial slurs and offensive racial humor). He believed, however, that because those employers could observe the financial value of employees’ individual performances, they were more likely to value high-performing black professionals and far less likely to unfairly discriminate against them.

Wall Street interviewees who worked in investment banking, research, or back office
positions regularly contrasted their inevitably subjective performance reviews with the “objective” measures used to evaluate salespeople and traders. Sylvester, an investment banker, explained the simple fairness of compensation in those positions. “In sales and trading, you have a book and you eat what you kill there—there’s really no subjectiveness to that.” Another investment banker, Zeke, believed that this promoted more meritocratic outcomes. “[In trading], you have a book of business. It’s very, very easy to quantify exactly what you’re doing.” “On the sales and trading side,” he explained, “people who are let go are the people who are just not performing.” He contrasted the each-person-for-themselves individualism of his firm’s trading groups with the team-based work arrangements of investment banking, where “it’s really tough to quantify who’s doing what, especially on the junior level.” This difference may partly explain why ethnic and racial minorities have historically advanced further in trading than in other elite professional fields. In trading, questions of “fit” and the ability to interface with wealthy clients take on less importance; this appears to increase racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic diversity.

From what I know of our securities trading divisions and those of other firms as well, they’re much more diverse than investment banking. And that’s why investment banking has always been the last bastion of the blue-blood banker...Because with traders, it doesn’t matter where you went to school, it doesn’t matter where you come from, it’s all about your book of business. That’s why with trading, you’ll read about traders and they’re the hard-scrabble guys from Brooklyn (especially Italians over the past few years) who had sharp elbows and somehow just made it. Whereas in banking you just don’t get that.

As Zeke mentioned, investment banking had long been the almost exclusive province of affluent WASPs. Historically, the ethnic minorities and workers with less prestigious educational pedigrees who were hired by Wall Street banks were concentrated in trading, which was stigmatized as low status work (Lewis, 1989; Chernow, 1990). This lack of prestige may have begun to change in the late 1970s, as trading became far more profitable and banks made efforts to increase diversity in other departments (Chernow, 1990). However, even when investment banking began to diversify,
have enabled minorities to gain opportunities to demonstrate their competence in these jobs earlier than in investment banking.

Compromised Meritocracy in Non-Quantifiable Positions

Although there is still some potential for employer biases and preferences to affect employee outcomes in the “bottom line” jobs discussed above, interviewees were far less upbeat about the fairness of the other jobs represented in this study, including law, corporate management and investment banking. For example, Susan, a former investment banker who survived multiple rounds of layoffs before being let go herself, believed that the fate of junior professionals in her group was largely influenced by the quality of their relationships, not just the merit of their work. Like other interviewees, she contrasted the practices in her department with the greater fairness she perceived in trading.

It’s really easy for it not to be a meritocracy and for you to not get rewarded for being the smartest one on the floor. Especially [in investment banking] where it is really team-oriented and it’s not about you and the book you trade and the exact amount of profit that you made in a year. You don’t own that. You can’t point to a number that says, “I did X.”

Interviews with non-bottom line workers drew attention to a number of structural characteristics that potentially produce greater unfairness in these jobs. Interviewees identified the lack of quantifiable, “objective” performance measures, the prevalence of team-based working conditions, the preponderance of “labor pool” staffing models, and other organizational factors as increasing senior professionals’ abilities to unfairly distribute valuable opportunities and rewards.

The informality of these organizational personnel practices stands in notable contrast to the systematic, highly organized nature of these firms’ efforts to hire the most impressive junior minority investment bankers remained largely stratified into the less prestigious and less lucrative municipal finance groups (Monroe and Friday, 1988).
professionals available. Each year, firms send representatives to campuses around the country to hold information sessions, receptions, and dinners for potential applicants (Ellis, 2008; Rolfe and Troob, 2000; Ho, 2009). Firms review job-seekers’ resumes and then subject the most promising applicants to multiple rounds of interviews before deciding whether to take them on. Those chosen must usually complete probationary summer internships in order to receive “permanent” offers of employment.

However, the hiring process is just the first of many selection points through which junior professionals must pass during their careers at these firms. Most importantly, after junior professionals have been hired, senior professionals pick from amongst them in distributing assignments and opportunities. These decisions are obviously far less formalized than firms’ hiring processes and therefore even more susceptible to non-meritocratic influences, including their social skills and relationships, senior professionals’ biases and homophily preferences, and even random chance (“luck”) (Rolfe and Troob, 2000; Wilkins and Gulati, 1996). Junior professionals working in these roles do not receive equal opportunities to demonstrate or develop their talents; their assignments and opportunities vary considerably, in both quality and quantity.

**The Importance of Premium Opportunities.**

Most of these jobs use “tournament” mobility processes, in which junior professionals must outperform their peers to ascend their firms’ steep personnel pyramids or leave (Rosenbaum, 1979; Galanter and Palay, 1991). The odds of advancing far in these firms are

---

16 Firms’ uses of up or out practices, and the width and slope of their pyramids, vary by industry (Pfeffer, 1995; Roth, 2006). In some industries, including investment banking, the vast majority of newly hired junior professionals will not be able to remain with their companies for more than a few years (Wise, 2006; Rolfe and Troob, 2000). Other industries, including consulting and corporate law firms, use more relaxed “up or out” practices (Edersheim, 2004; Henderson and Galanter, 2008; Rampell, 2011). Others, including corporate management, rarely use up-or-out practices at all (Sonnenfeld and Maury A. Peiperl, 1988; Interview with Terrance, 04/06/2009). These differences did not seem to shape interviewees’ perspectives about the fairness of their firms. Interviewees did not complain about up-or-out employment models and those who worked under such organizational regimes were no less satisfied with their career experiences than other interviewees.
often very slim, and junior professionals therefore often regard these jobs as temporary “stepping stones” that can provide them credentials, skills, networks, or income that might help them eventually pursue their long-term goals (Wilkins and Gulati, 1998). For example, most analysts who enter investment banking hope to eventually move into “buy-side” jobs at hedge funds and private equity or venture capital firms, or to pursue opportunities in other industries (Sylvester interview, 03/28/11; Lucas interview, 05/16/11). Similarly, many law school graduates enter large law firms unsure of their professional goals or intending to leave after a few years to pursue jobs in government, in-house corporate legal departments, smaller firms, or public interest organizations (Dinovitzer and Garth, 2007; Neville, 2007).

The many junior professionals who do not plan to advance far in their firms are often primarily concerned about accessing premium opportunities that will enable them to develop transferrable human capital that improves their professional abilities and external job prospects (Sonnenfeld and Peiperl, 1988; Feldman and Ng, 2007). The exact nature of these premium opportunities vary according to the nature of work in different fields. At law firms, associates often evaluate their experiences according to whether they have received assignments that have allowed them to develop and use their legal judgment and analytical abilities, or otherwise prepare themselves for higher-level responsibilities (Wilkins and Gulati, 1996). In corporations, premium opportunities tend to involve “stretch” assignments, where trusted junior professionals receive responsibilities that are usually entrusted to more senior professionals. In consulting, getting staffed on matters with the firms’ most important clients can be particularly valuable.

Although previous commentary has discussed the importance of these premium opportunities (or “training work” assignments) for junior professionals aspiring to rise in their firms (see Wilkins and Gulati, 1996, 1998), they are often at least as important for those who
hope to work elsewhere. Several attorney interviewees, for example, discussed the importance of handling depositions and participating in trials for eventually finding work at other law firms or in high-status government positions. Receiving key premium opportunities early in their careers can catapult junior professionals onto higher opportunity-paths than their peers (Wilkins and Gulati, 1996; Wilkins, 1999). Ian, a white attorney, received valuable experience taking depositions in a pro bono case very early in his career. This later helped him land other premium assignments on more important cases. In describing the value of his early experience, Ian explained, “It makes a big difference once you have that [experience] and can tell the next partner, ‘Yeah, I’ve taken seven depositions’ and they can say, ‘Well, why don’t we give you these three that just came up?’” Senior professionals have strong incentives to entrust their premium work to experienced junior professionals like Ian, as they require less training and monitoring. These workers thus enjoy smoother upward trajectories and better prospects in securing promotions or landing competitive jobs outside of their firms. Early work assignments can also alter workers’ careers by influencing their professional goals and self-regard (Lewin, 1936; Argyris, 1964; Hall and Foster, 1977). Junior professionals begin their careers highly impressionable and may develop enduring professional attitudes and aspirations based on their initial experiences (Berlew and Hall, 1966). Receiving more challenging early assignments may increase their confidence and commitment and lead them to outperform their counterparts (Idl.).

As we will see in Chapter 3, those junior professionals who have the best personal relationships and rapport with their colleagues often find themselves with far greater access to these all-important premium opportunities.

Most of the work available for junior professionals is far from premium. Their regular assignments usually require them to use fairly little creative thinking or professional judgment
diligence and attention to detail, attributes that do not signal workers’ potential to function in higher roles. Law firm associates, for example, are often required to perform routine, essentially clerical or administrative tasks such as reviewing documents to find key words and filling in pro forma legal documents (Wilkins and Gulati, 1996). Similarly, junior investment bankers work long hours assembling excel spreadsheets and PowerPoint presentations, or performing even more clerical tasks; they are derided as “paper pushers” by some in the industry (see Banks, 2004). Interviewees often referred to such assignments as “grunt work,” “scut work,” or “sh-t work,” and held them in contempt. Mike, a white attorney, bitterly described the “crappy” document review assignments that consumed his time at his first firm.

I didn’t use any of my skill sets that I had from either [student activities] or law school…It’s like you’re just like a monkey: “Do this. Do that. Do this. Do that,” and you just stare at the screen all day. [They] give you simple tasks and I felt that anyone could do it. I felt like a high school kid could do it: “Look for these key words and if you see anything that looks suspicious, let us know.”

These large document-review projects bring in substantial revenues for law firm partners but offer associates very little in the way of career development. Young professionals who receive too much grunt work may be passed over when premium opportunities become available later on. Mike, who found himself on a low-opportunity path, explained how the disadvantages of associates like himself were compounded over time.

If you’re working with one [partner] and you’ve only done discovery for the first two years and then I’m another partner and I say, “Hey, what do you know about Kevin?” and he says, “He’s only done discovery,” then I’m not going to want you on my team to do research and writing…When you first show up, if you’re in a group that gives you good opportunities then I think you have an opportunity to get the same type of good work elsewhere [on other cases]. But at my firm, I was stuck on this sh-tty case—you don’t have any opportunity to develop any skills that will get you to that next level of “lateralling” to another partner or being used by that other partner for something more substantive.

Mike argued that this sequence unfairly “dooms” most associates very early in their careers and prevents them from developing marketable skills. Veronica, a black attorney,
referred to this as “a snowball effect” and explained the consequences. “If you don’t really get the kind of work where you can demonstrate your talent, then either people label you as not doing good work or…behind [your] class.” Tabitha, a black attorney, quickly fell behind her cohort when her firms’ partners failed to assign her enough work. She received a mere ninety hours of billable work during her first two months, while a classmate who began with her received more than three-hundred hours of work during that same period. This early disparity led to severe long-term consequences.

At this point, the discrepancy sets in. [The other attorney is] getting training. She’s learning things so that in July, when they ask who can draft a promissory note, she’ll be able to say “yeah,” and I’ll have say that it would be my first time. So then there’s a perception of one of us being more qualified than the other.

Tabitha never overcame this skills deficit; she eventually abandoned law firm life for a public-sector job.

Because firms often fail to closely monitor and regulate senior professionals’ staffing practices—even when firms do have rules in place they are regularly flouted and under-enforced—junior professionals working in these roles often face a very real risk that they will not receive adequate opportunities. To avoid this fate, most junior professionals must eventually take initiative in pro-actively angling for premium opportunities, in many instances by developing and leveraging social capital. As we will see in Chapter 4, this may lead to greater disadvantages and disparities for black professionals and other outsiders.

**Reward Structures Based on Senior Professionals’ Subjective Assessments.**

Firms primarily determine promotions, retention, and compensation for junior professionals working in these jobs according to the outcomes of their periodic formal

---

17 In this study, I was not able to discern any clear, definitive patterns that might explain why some firms seemed to implement and abide by more formalized assignment processes than other firms. This may be a fruitful subject of future research that more specifically investigates the organizational histories and cultures of a small number of firms with different opportunity structures.
performance evaluations (Ho, 2009; Roth, 2006; Wilkins and Gulati, 1996). Although elite
corporate firms undergo considerable efforts to ensure that personnel decisions are at least
somewhat based on their individual merit, these efforts are undermined, perhaps fatally so, by
other organizational conditions and the nature of the work being evaluated. In the vast majority
of elite corporate jobs, junior professionals’ evaluations are necessarily based upon senior
professionals’ subjective, qualitative appraisals of their work performance (Wilkins and Gulati,
1996). Almost all of the jobs represented in this study, including corporate law, consulting, and
investment banking, lack quantifiable outputs that can be clearly attributed to individual junior
professionals. Junior professionals often work on hierarchical teams where their work product is
filtered through other colleagues before reaching senior professionals; they rarely have
substantive work output for which they alone can take credit. Hence, their individual work
performance and contributions can be difficult to identify, let alone measure.

Further, some of the competencies being assessed during the evaluation process are
intangible attributes that are very difficult to discern and therefore subject to flawed
interpretations. Thus senior professionals must at times make highly-impressionistic judgment
calls, and may do so in ways that consistently privilege certain junior associates over others.

In conducting reviews, senior professionals are influenced by practices and norms in their
industries. There appear to be strong cultural differences governing the ways that firms in
different industries complete their review processes. Many of the interviewees working in law
firms and corporate management suggested that the integrity of their reviews were compromised,
either by senior professionals’ not taking the review process seriously or by relationships and
interpersonal dynamics within their firms (For example, Rafael, a former law firm associate,
described one of his first formal performance reviews as “a one-minute phone call with a woman
in Paris”). In contrast, reviews in the finance and consulting industries are generally fairly comprehensive, and interviewees in these industries generally considered them to be fair. For example, Duane, a consultant, described the efforts that leading management consulting firms take to make their review processes as comprehensive and precise as possible.

[Firms] figure out what kind of skill areas are needed for someone to become a good consultant. This includes analytical skills, communication, leadership, problem-solving—basic categories of skill buckets and then specific line items within these buckets. Your manager will take notes on how you’re doing and then give you an evaluation at end of the project, usually on a 1-5 scale, 5 being the highest. Then you get an overall score. Then, usually on a half-year basis, all the partners will get together and look at each [junior consultant] and go through their evaluations on the projects, and they’ll often go and get explanations from the people who worked with them. They’ll pool the information and come up with the overall ratings.

However, despite these efforts, Duane found that the fairness of reviews in consulting was still ultimately limited by the inherent subjectivity and indeterminacy of many of the individual rating criteria.

It’s supposed to be very, very methodical and structured in the way they do evaluations, but it’s all done behind closed doors, so who knows? What ends up happening—and this is something that lots of black consultants talk about—is that even though they try to make [the reviews] based on a bunch of specific metrics, a lot of it still ends up being subjective. Like, maybe you do great work and you have great skills, but if you have a different personality than them, they may say something on your review like, “He’s smart and he’s great but he might not be a team player” and junk like that. That’s when you get a lot of people like me who get frustrated.

Consistent with Duane’s description of his black colleagues’ frustration with these subjective elements of their performance reviews, experimental research has suggested that decision-makers may selectively define merit in ways that reward the attributes of favored in-group members (Uhlmann and Cohen, 2005). To the extent that black consultants differ from their colleagues in non-job-related characteristics, this may still work its way into their performance reviews. Many interviewees, including Duane, believed that the subjective nature of their performance reviews enabled relationships, affinities and biases to disadvantage black professionals. Several complained that their bosses had unfairly discounted their leadership abilities or professional initiative and commitment in previous performance reviews. Blair, a
corporate manager, complained that, despite going above and beyond the call of duty and achieving very impressive results on important projects, he has been repeatedly and unfairly criticized for his personality traits and interaction skills. He noted that although his job had objective, quantitative performance measures and productivity goals, the highest performing managers (including he) were at times downgraded by their colleagues’ subjective assessments of their personalities. On one review, he was disparaged for being “too laid back” and not appearing sufficiently engaged in his tasks, even though he had forged great relationships with his subordinates and successfully pushed them to cut costs and meet important deadlines. This criticism deeply frustrated him because he considered it irrelevant, non-disprovable, and possibly racially-coded.

Because evaluations are largely subjective, evaluators had considerable discretion in conducting them. Senior professionals can distort their junior colleagues’ performance reviews, intentionally or unwittingly. Interviewees complained about senior professionals harping on rare, unrepresentative errors for some junior professionals while omitting damning information about serious mistakes or incompetence for others. Interviewees from several industries claimed that their supervisors regularly “protected” favored junior professionals on their reviews and unfairly criticized others. Diana, an attorney, described her firms’ review procedure as a politically-driven, subjective process in which partners sought to reward their favorite associates while understating the merits of other attorneys who have worked for them.

It’s because the way the review process works. The partners are in this room arguing about who’s better than who. And they’re going to push for “their” people to be rewarded the most. And so if you work for someone who has their A-Team…if you’re just their worker bee or they don’t particularly like you, they’re probably going to ding you.

Several legal periodicals and blogs have questioned the integrity of law firms’ performance reviews in the context of law firm layoffs. There have been rumors that several
firms facing fiscal difficulties have recently conducted “stealth layoffs,” in which high-performing associates suddenly received unexpectedly abysmal reviews and were asked to leave on “performance grounds,” to avoid revealing the firm’s financial insecurity to clients and competitors (see Roberts, 2008; Law Shucks, 2009). Mabel, an attorney, received heavy praise during an in-person meeting with a top partner but then, to her surprise, received a subpar “below expectations” rating on her formal, written evaluation a few weeks later. Mabel was shocked and confused by the discrepancies between her oral feedback and her written reviews. A source close to the partner suggested to her that he had most likely given her the low review because he was aware that she was not receiving as much work as her otherwise stellar reviews would have suggested, and he wanted to protect himself and the group from outside scrutiny for their staffing practices. Similarly, Shayla, a former Wall Street professional, alleged that her boss had given her a dishonestly poor evaluation in order to promote a recent hire, who happened to be the son of a friend of his family.

We’re going through reviews and I got the worst review that I had ever gotten. I had been at the firm for five years and I had never gotten a review like this. My boss totally ripped me. At the end it said, “[Shayla] will not be promoted until she learns her job.” And I said, “I don’t agree with this review because I have trained three other people on how to do this job, I have a good reputation with everyone I deal with, and why would you say such a thing?” It didn’t click with me until three weeks later…They decided to bring [the new hire] up from a level below me to a level ahead of me so that he would be my boss…The only way they could get away with it was to destroy me on my review—that would be the way they could justify a move like that.

If Shayla had instead worked in a position where her performance evaluation would have largely centered on objective indicators of her abilities and performance, her bosses would have had far greater difficulty in sandbagging her review to advance their favored protégé.

**Firms’ Internal Labor Market Conditions.**

Informal staffing arrangements prevalent within elite firms increase the potential that junior professionals will experience unfair outcomes. Junior professionals’ specific
responsibilities are often not clearly defined and subject to change, depending on the needs of the senior professionals in their firms. These workers are not usually hired to fill unique positions or perform specific, clearly-defined tasks. Instead, they are essentially placed into labor pools within their firms as “deckhands” and deployed to perform specific assignments as chosen by senior professionals.

Senior professionals have considerable discretion in distributing premium opportunities, so long as there are enough available junior professionals in their firms’ labor pools. Many firms formally require senior professionals to delegate the selection of junior professionals to firm administrators, who are then supposed to distribute assignments according to junior professionals’ skills, developmental needs, and availability. In practice though, these rules are often ignored. In tension with widely-embraced values of bureaucratic efficiency and egalitarian fairness, in many industries, including law, consulting, and investment banking, senior professionals often delegate work directly to the junior professionals with whom they would like to work. Given firms’ labor pool personnel structures, this lax enforcement of firms’ formal assignment rules often provide senior professionals substantial autonomy and discretion in allocating opportunities (Bielby, 2000).\(^{18}\) Several interviewees noted that most premium work tends to be assigned outside of their firms’ formal processes.

Leon, an attorney, argued that because of this organizational structure, law firm partners have minimal incentives to develop the skills of many junior associates. Because premium work is scarce and partners have incentives to allocate it to their mentees or junior professionals who already have previously acquired other premium experience, many less fortunate associates end up stuck with low-quality work, which is just as profitable for their firms but does little to

---

\(^{18}\) This autonomy is further increased by the absence of quantifiable performance measures, which further insulates many personnel decisions from subsequent scrutiny or challenge.
advance their careers. Having observed this, Leon complained that law firms “will let you sit there and make money and not teach you anything.” He contrasted the organization of work in law firms with that of investment banks, in which senior professionals have greater incentives to develop more workers.

My friends who work at banks have a completely different experience…The way law firms work would never work at a bank. [In] banks…you’re on a team [and] everyone on your team actually has a vested interest in you getting better because the better you are, the quicker you get things done. Whereas at law firms they don’t have the same vested interest in training you because if [Leon] can’t get it done, then screw it, we’re just going to give it to [another associate] and overwork her. And so there’s more languish in that law firm than there is at banks.

Although Leon’s assessment was surely somewhat of an over-generalization, the investment bankers interviewed for this study generally confirmed his perception that there was greater interdependence between senior and junior bankers.

“Tap on the Shoulder” Promotions and Other Problematic Personnel Practices

On the extreme end of informal personnel practices, some firms extend senior professionals especially broad autonomy in distributing important opportunities, even in staffing available positions, within their subgroups. Several black professionals claimed that candidates favored by decision-makers in their departments were effectively insulated from merit-based competition, and argued that this produced blatantly unfair outcomes. This perspective was most pronounced amongst corporate managers and interviewees who worked in middle-office Wall Street positions—both areas where junior professionals commonly advance through varied career trajectories. In corporations, junior managers often advance by zigzagging from position to position across different divisions of their companies (Kanter, 1977; Jackall, 1988). When vying for new positions, they at times must compete against workers from different parts of the company, whose past responsibilities were very different than theirs and therefore difficult to compare. Joshua, who currently works in corporate management, found that this intensifies the
possible importance of biases and subjective preferences. He noted that appraisals of individual potential in filling particular roles are based more on “perception” than “actual face to face contact,” at his current company. Because the link between actual performance and rewards was attenuated, Joshua believed that personnel decisions were “a little more hairy” and non-meritocratic, potentially driven by social influences, biases, and political considerations. Although Joshua has thrived in his new position thus far, he is now concerned, for the first time in his career, that race may unfairly affect his professional outcomes.

The corporate managers interviewed in this study mentioned that their firms allow senior managers to formally list certain junior managers as “preferred,” “strong,” or “high-potential” candidates. Jobs were essentially set aside—or, in some cases, even created—for these candidates. Those not on the list face very slim odds of securing desired promotions and in some instances are not even informed when higher-level positions become available. As Blair, a corporate manager, explained, “If you’re not on the list, it’s exponentially harder.” Blair and other interviewees complained that these designations were often largely influenced by junior professionals’ self-promotion skills and social connections. Blair also found that even when there were not any preferred candidates competing for the jobs, applicants still needed to be mindful of office politics that required them to notify the appropriate people and seek out informal permission and support from their current supervisors.

If I just saw a job listed in the open posting and applied for it on the spot, then I’m gonna get all the back channel bs. People saying “Oh, you didn’t talk to me about this. What are you trying to do?…” Why do they even call it an open job posting if you can’t really apply for it? Why don’t they call it a restricted job posting? If you click to apply without talking to all the right people you get a stigma attached to you. You need to check in with your direct supervisors and sometimes their supervisors, your mentors, etcetera. All these people.

Blair blamed the promotion system for producing unfair racial disparities, as black junior professionals at his company were rarely as socially entrenched in the circles of power as some
of their white peers and more reluctant to self-promote themselves. He complained that “there are several black people here that are beyond qualified to be managers but because they’re not in those inner-circles, they’re not on the [preferred candidates] list and they have to jump through hoops.” Other corporate manager interviewees echoed Blair’s criticisms of their firms’ personnel practices. This might explain why, as a group, almost all of the corporate managers interviewed reported that black professionals in their firms were disadvantaged by race, a much higher percentage than most other industries.

In practice, financial firms also often allow senior professionals broad discretion in hiring lateral candidates, from within and outside their firms, to fill openings in their groups. Front office trading or sales roles, which become available from time to time, are highly coveted by many middle-office workers looking to advance to more prestigious, higher-paying positions. Interviewees complained that senior professionals misused their discretion in filling these roles by regularly hiring the marginally-qualified children of family friends and colleagues, or junior professionals who had managed to establish social rapport with them. Several black interviewees shared stories of unimpressive non-black candidates receiving jobs and opportunities that were not made available to more qualified black professionals (including themselves). Leroy, who worked in a middle-office role on Wall Street, was still rankled over a time when his boss hired a “horrible” intern (a friend from college) over several higher-performing black interns. In some instances, junior professionals with connections are “tapped” for promotions and position openings that were not even publicly announced. Leroy recalled his deep frustration in being passed over for a higher-status role in his group in favor of a white coworker who possessed less impressive credentials and a weak work ethic (he was known among his peers as “the frat boy who did no work”).

There was a role that popped up—a trading role—and I had already expressed interest in moving
I wasn’t even told about the role. I’m hanging out with [the coworker, Evan] at lunch and he’s like “The boss just told me to take a look at this role here.” I was like, “What’s the role?” It was the trading role…and what do you know? [Evan] is still in that trading role today. I never even got the look. And [Evan] was the worst worker out of all of us.

Shayla, who worked in a middle-office position at a different firm, also witnessed the unfair results of these practices, including one incident that outraged several of the junior professionals in her group.

One of the dumbest white people I knew-- she came in for an interview. She was totally horrible. She didn’t get the position that we were looking to hire for. But she went into the elevator with one of the Managing Directors, who’s like, “Oh I really like her.” The next day, the girl’s a portfolio manager. Dumb as rocks but became a portfolio manager. She was in HR before, went to some little no-name school and boom, a job…You would never see a black person go from HR to one of those groups.

Shayla and Leroy’s anecdotes exemplify the non-meritocratic and racially disparate outcomes that can occur when small numbers of senior professionals are given complete discretion over personnel moves in their departments. This explains why most of the middle-office Wall Street professionals interviewed reported that black junior professionals at their firms were disadvantaged by race, either because of biases or homophily-driven bonds between white senior and junior professionals.

Interviewees also noted that the work responsibilities and skill sets of junior and senior professionals were very different in several industries. Several suggested that this divergence rendered senior professionals’ decisions about which junior professionals to promote particularly imprecise and, at times, problematic. Lewis, a white attorney, argued that the low-level work assigned to associates in his department did not allow them to demonstrate their abilities to partners. Lewis, who worked at the firm for several years before moving on to a job with the federal government, described the large disconnect between the work responsibilities of most associates and the skill-set expected of partners.

Being a good associate doesn’t show at all that you’ll be a good partner. Being able to organize
stuff well and being able to proofread and organize documents-- that’s very different than being able to give strategic advice to a client over time or being able to bring in more business from an existing client or being able to pitch new clients on your services.

This difference left Lewis very cynical about the fairness of his firm’s promotion process.

“To the extent that big law firms present themselves as hierarchies based on merit, that’s just hogwash.” Lewis “reject[ed] out of hand” the idea that law firms were meritocratic, as “absurd.” Interviewees from other industries, including investment banking and consulting, also noted similar gaps between their work responsibilities and the characteristics sought in senior professionals.

**Organizational Unit Size.**

Access to opportunity and the overall quality of individual experiences vary vastly, even for professionals who hold the same positions in the same firms, depending upon the specific contexts of their particular departments and offices. Although black employees may generally benefit from the more formalized hiring and evaluation processes of larger organizations, within these large firms they may be best off working in smaller sub-units. Several of the black interviewees most satisfied with their experiences attributed their good fortunes to working in particularly small offices or departments. Many interviewees who worked in smaller divisions believed that they were treated more meritocratic and fairly than their counterparts in larger departments. These smaller departments often contain less excess labor supply, as there are far fewer junior professionals, and the work itself tends to be staffed far less hierarchically. Whereas larger law firm departments may have dozens of associates from whom partners and associates can pick and choose to work with at any given time, partners in smaller groups may have only

---

19 Many social scientists, most notably Weber (1946), have extolled the virtues of formal, bureaucratic employment structures in limiting subjectivity and promoting meritocracy and efficiency. Formalized personnel practices may help stamp out unfairness and biases in personnel decisions (Szafran, 1982). The increasing formalization of elite, large institutions likely helped produce more diverse cohorts of junior professionals in recent decades (Nelson, 1988; Galanter and Palay, 1991).
one or two junior and mid-level associates available to handle their work.

Duane, a consultant, found that larger offices in his industry had more junior consultants available for assignments, which allowed senior consultants to send opportunities to their favorites.

At bigger firms,…when [partners] find people they like, they often try to get them pulled onto their projects. And sometimes this gets worked out outside of the official staffing process. A person will approach you directly and say “I like you and I want you on my project.” So if he has a project where he needs two associates, he’ll tell the staffing person, “Go get one more associate because I already have one lined up.”

Although he did not find this inherently problematic, Duane felt that senior professionals at his firm tended to use this autonomy to “pull in” associates who were demographically similar to themselves, on the basis of social rapport (see Chapter 4). Senior professionals’ leeway in hand-picking workers their favored protégés is greatest when there is “slackness” in firms’ internal labor markets (e.g., when the firm does not have enough work to keep all of its junior professionals busy). Such slackness can occur as a result of firms’ permanent staffing policies or on account of temporary external economic conditions. Duane explained his belief that smaller, more tightly-staffed firms that lack this type of slackness produce greater parity.

At smaller firms…it doesn’t really work like that. Work comes up and there isn’t a pool of associate resources where you can give partners a choice of who they want. At small firms, it all comes down to who’s available. There might only be one or two people available. There’s less choice in staffing, in terms of partners picking people.

Veronica, an attorney, chose her firm because she was attracted to its relatively small corporate department, which she believed would provide greater opportunities to distinguish herself. Her experience at the firm has met her expectations. Since joining the firm, she has worked very closely with top partners and gained great exposure and an excellent reputation throughout the department. During our interview, she touted the benefits of working in a small department and explained how it helped provide her a much better experience than her
counterparts in the larger departments.

You get more of a connection with the people you work with... It cuts out some of the BS. In litigation, [at this firm] anyway, it's much more political. You have to work for the right people—you have to have the right people at the table. You have to do that in corporate too, but...because we're so tight-knit, everyone knows what everyone does and what kind of work they do and if they're a good or bad associate.

Veronica credited her practice group’s unusually small size with ensuring that she received her fair share of premium opportunities and “good work.”

I felt that there was no gender or racial bias, and I would be the first person to point it out if I thought it was there. I just got the impression that there was work that needed to be done and everyone was looking at the bottom line and they wanted to give it to the person who could do it right, and who could do it fast and who could really take responsibility for it. I think that might have been a function of the kind of practice group I worked in. I worked in a very small practice group with only two or three associates at any given time so it’s not like they were looking at all these choices and fifteen white guys and then me and skipping over me. They really didn’t have the opportunity to pass over me for good work, because they needed the work done. Everything was thinly staffed and if I could do it, they’d give it to me.

Thus, the lack of a sizeable associate labor pool in Veronica’s department reduced the importance of interpersonal affinities and biases by stripping partners of some of their discretion in making assignments. Partners who needed complex or important work done had fewer options available than partners in larger departments. Also, the close professional interaction that comes from working in small, tightly-knit groups likely helps break down racial prejudices and some of the racially-based social distances that otherwise might result in social homophily and exclusion (Ibarra 1995).

Sarah, an attorney, reported that she has had great experiences practicing law in two very small groups (including one with fewer than ten attorneys). She extolled the benefits of working in very small work groups, in that “you work almost exclusively with partners, you have your own clients, [and] people call me directly.” As a result, she has already received exposure and

20 However, black professionals do not always find working in smaller work units advantageous. Such groups may tend to use more informal personnel practices that are driven by social relations and interpersonal rapport. When this is the case, working in smaller units may actually increase perceptions of racial isolation and exclusion or correlate with other factors that lead to negative experiences.
development that many large firm associates never get. Jayson, a corporate attorney, believes that he was able to quickly establish himself as a go-to associate in his small practice group, in part because there were not many white attorneys of his seniority range to compete with over choice assignments. Another attorney, Oscar, chose to work at a small satellite office of a large national firm for personal reasons, and reaped professional benefits from his decision.

I benefited by making that choice…I was actually able to get a little bit less [grunt work] just because I was in the New Jersey office…I was able to cultivate relationships [with] partners, senior associates and get more substantive experience…That’s actually probably where I got most of my courtroom experience and being able to take the depositions.

Joshua, who had worked on Wall Street as an investment banking analyst, credited the small work groups and teams, constant interaction with more senior people, the institutional incentives in developing everyone in promoting fairness. Joshua explained that, at the Bank, analysts “got to work with pretty senior people so people knew really fast—often within weeks—who was really good or who was really bad.” He noted that unlike in other corporate industries, “It wasn’t like there were layers of people to work through to figure out who was adding value.”

Other interviewees concurred. The benefits of working at a smaller firm led Harriet, an attorney, to leave her large New York City firm for a smaller New Jersey firm. “I started working in New York but realized I had a better chance getting the experience and tutelage I needed across the river.”

**External Economic Contexts.**

Professionals’ perspectives on their corporate experiences are also likely influenced by the broader economic contexts in which their firms operate. Changing economic conditions lead to vastly different experiences and outcomes, even for workers who enter the professional world
only a year or two apart from each other. Within the past decade for example, some interviewees began their careers in the shadow of 9/11 and the ensuing recession, while others entered the corporate world during the economic boom of the mid-2000s. Those entering in the last few years have experienced one of the worst economic downturns in American history, where layoffs, reduced bonuses and salary freezes were common.

These differences matter. Junior professionals’ access to opportunities is in part determined by business conditions within their firms. Several interviewees perceived that premium work opportunities were spread around far more equitably in economic boom times, by necessity. Sylvester, a former investment banker, noted that because of booming business in his group, senior professionals were forced to rely on all junior professionals and entrust them with important assignments, almost strictly according to their availability. “I think it was difficult for people to try to play favorites...As far as me getting different experiences, because there was so much work going around, they couldn’t really play that game.” He noted that favoritism became more apparent in less busy groups that were doing fewer deals, as senior professionals “try to push deals down to their folks” in order to keep them gainfully employed.

In economic downturns, when work becomes scarcer, senior professionals’ affinities and biases can become more important, leading to non-meritocratic outcomes. Minorities appear to have been particularly hard hit by the recent recession (Barker, 2010). For example, in 2009, diversity in the largest law firms decreased for the first time on record (2010 Diversity Scorecard). African-American non-partners were the hardest hit, as their number decreased by 13% (Id.). Several interviewees reported that black junior professionals were disproportionately affected by layoffs at their firms. Leewanda, an attorney, captured this perspective in her diagnosis that “What’s bad for the general population kills us.” Sylvester half-joking likened
layoffs at his firm to the many Hollywood movies where black characters are killed off first.

Many interviewees suggested that during the recession, firms’ previous commitments to increasing diversity became lesser priorities. Some believed that the recession increased the importance of relationships and homophily in determining which workers were terminated. Zeke, who was laid off by a Wall Street investment bank during the recession, explained how relationships became more important when his group’s financial outlook became precarious.

In good times, they’ll find a place for you, even if you’re a “grunt”….as long as you’re really good at something. In bad times, when it’s been about cutting back, someone has to vouch for you…. It’s all about the contacts you’ve made and who will vouch for you… If you belong to the same frat, or same golf club, or the MD is a friend of your uncle, it’s a huge advantage.

Zeke explained, “[The Bank] was extremely diverse in investment banking before in good times but then afterwards most of my black colleagues in my associate class were laid off. I think everyone but one was laid off.” Several interviewees shared similar remembrances.


Because their actual abilities and contributions are not objectively measurable, some junior professionals are able to advance their careers through social performance and political behavior. Junior professionals who can project the public face of sociable, confident but careful, committed workers will tend to receive greater opportunities and accolades than their merit warrants (Goffman, 1959; Jackall, 1988). As Jackall (1988:46) notes, professionals’ “appearances, modes of self-representation, interactional behavior, and projections of general attitude” potentially matter a great deal in the corporate world. Junior professionals with the right cultural toolkits are better able to make small talk with colleagues, demonstrate engagement in their work, project demeanors and personality of enthusiasm and sociability, and lobby for valuable professional opportunities and recognition.

Interviewees candidly described the social performances that they put on to establish the
right public faces around their firms. Tony, an attorney, discussed some of his tactics.

There’s some “optical” stuff I did too that’s basically bulls—t, but it’s helpful. I would get in early—really early. Some of the partners that I worked for were early guys—they’d get into the office by 7 in the morning. And then some of the same guys I worked with would stay until 9 pm. Was I in the office from 7 to 9? No. Sometimes I would get in at 7, leave the office at noon and run some errands, come back at 3, leave again, go pick up some dinner, meet some friends out, and then come back. But what they saw me doing was coming at 7 and leaving at 9.

Other interviewees identified self-promotion as a crucial component of performing their work roles. Because senior professionals cannot closely monitor junior professionals’ day to day work, junior professionals who can successfully call attention to their accomplishments or dedication may gain a leg up. Several interviewees discussed self-promotional tactics that they considered useful for “being known” within their firms and securing premium opportunities. Some mentioned unnecessarily speaking up during team meetings, sending unnecessary mass-mails to their practice groups about work-related topics, or networking at firm social functions and practice group meetings as ways of getting known. Interviewees who recognized the importance of playing the game and projecting the right images were able to strategically exert their efforts in ways that yielded tangible benefits.

Succeeding at work requires more than simply executing technical tasks with high proficiency; it is a test of interactive skill as well. Workplace interactions may be important staging grounds for young professionals hoping to cultivate the right image to advance their careers. Those who cannot comfortably interact with their colleagues and project the right public faces will at times face criticisms and suffer professionally for it. Some interviewees spoke of learning this the hard way. Several interviewees complained that this dynamic produced non-meritocratic outcomes and disadvantaged black professionals, who often struggled with the social performance aspects of their jobs. Blair and a few other black interviewees complained about being criticized because they “didn’t smile enough,” or seemed “too serious,” “angry,” or
“unhappy.” Lakesha, a public relations account executive, initially struggled with projecting the right public face at work. As a result, her bosses and colleagues thought that she was an angry person and unhappy with her job.

They said that I do great work but they’re not sure if [my] heart’s in it… They want you to do the work and do it with a smile… Why would I lie and say that I’m happy to do work that I’m not happy about? Yeah, I’m going to do it because it’s my responsibility but what’s the song and dance about?

Being criticized for her workplace demeanor stunned Lakesha, who had wrongly assumed that “doing great work” would itself pave the way to success. She did not realize how much junior professionals stood to gain by “acting fake” and performing the expected “song and dance” of exaggerated cheerfulness and enthusiasm about last-minute assignments. Although many interviewees would have been surprised by her cluelessness about the unwritten behavioral protocols of the professional world, a few others ran into similar difficulties; her problem was by no means unique.

CONCLUSION

Despite their considerable incentives to the contrary, senior professionals in elite corporate firms often distribute opportunities and rewards in ways that undermine the importance of junior professionals’ individual talents and performance. This is due in large part to the lack of objective, quantifiable performance metrics to assess individual performance in many positions. The qualitative review criteria used in most elite professional jobs are easily manipulated, consciously or unintentionally, to conform to assumptions and biases. They also produce more ambiguous results, making the costs of passing over more talented or deserving workers less readily apparent—even to the senior professionals themselves.

Senior professionals’ affinities and biases are magnified in importance by some of the more prevalent organizational structures within the corporate world, including “labor pool”
personnel arrangements that essentially allow them to personally choose junior professionals for particular premium assignments. This is particularly pronounced in firms that have greater “slackness” in their internal labor markets, which occurs most often in large organizational subunits and during times of economic decline. Firms’ staffing practices and other organizational conditions allow individual senior professionals in some corporations and financial firms almost unbridled discretion in filling particular positions with the internal candidates of their choice. Such practices privilege junior professionals with the right intra-organizational social capital. As black professionals often experience greater difficulty in developing bonds and connections in their firms (see Chapter 4), these discretionary personnel practices may produce racial disparities in junior professional outcomes. Although professionals working in “bottom-line” jobs with objective, quantifiable performance metrics may still potentially suffer from employers’ biases (with respect to some personnel decisions), they were far more satisfied with the apparent fairness of their jobs than other interviewees. These findings demonstrate that the experiences and perspectives of individual black professionals are shaped by the particular structures and policies of their firms. Hence, researchers should be very careful in extrapolating from the experiences of any single cohort, as the experiences and professionals are in many ways highly context-specific.

The next chapter will demonstrate that because these various institutional structures and practices undermine the meritocratic functioning of corporate organizations, social capital and relationships become hugely important in shaping individual experiences and career trajectories.
CHAPTER 3:
SOCIAL CAPITAL AND PROFESSIONAL SUCCESS

More than half a century ago, C. Wright Mills (1951) commented that the emergence of bureaucratic private-sector organizations as the primary employers of the American middle-class had fundamentally transformed the means by which white-collar workers succeeded professionally. Unlike earlier generations of entrepreneurs and small businessmen, who succeeded according to their ability to outperform their competitors in the market, the professionals working in the large organizations studied by Mills got ahead by winning approval from more powerful people within their organizations. Success was no longer directly connected to individual merit; it was now mediated by the ability to make good impressions and curry favor with more senior professionals and gatekeepers. Individual merit and abilities only mattered to the extent that those decision-makers considered them important.

More recent research on corporate careers has confirmed and elaborated upon Mills’ prescient observations. In-depth studies revealed corporate workplaces as arenas where successful professionals must leverage social and professional relationships and reputations to gain access to valuable career-enhancing opportunities (Kanter, 1977; Jackall, 1988). The managers in these studies understood upward career mobility as a process of perpetual competition for scarce social and political resources, requiring exceptional social skills and awareness of unwritten norms. Kanter (1977: 61) found that “[f]itting in socially was a requisite” for professional advancement in her corporation. Junior professionals’ fates are in many ways determined by their relationships with colleagues within their organizations. Those with greater rapport with key decision-makers or broader access to advice and information about
their workplaces tend to have far better experiences than those who do not. Opportunities, performance, and rewards are each shaped by junior professionals’ relationships. Premium opportunities are not awarded to junior professionals by pure chance or solely on the basis of merit. The rewards for a job well done do not always flow to workers automatically. These valuable resources instead must be allocated and awarded by higher-ups, and can be influenced by various non-merit-based factors, including social relationships and organizational political dynamics (Jackall, 1988). To accomplish their goals, junior professionals must cultivate relationships and bonds of inter-personal affinity, through their work and social performance, and then leverage them strategically.

Interviewees’ accounts suggest that this still holds true, decades after Kanter and Jackall’s research. As discussed in Chapter 2, firms’ organizational structures and practices create conditions in which junior professionals who develop personal bonds of trust and affinity with colleagues at their firms often have greater opportunities and more satisfying experiences. As we will see, this presents problems for many minority professionals, who for various reasons often struggle to develop these types of organizational relationships.

**Social Capital**

These observations, that workers’ professional success depended upon their relationships with colleagues, are consistent with more recent research on the concept of social capital. Although there have been a proliferation of competing definitions of social capital, the description offered by Adler and Kwon (2002:23) captures the essence of most accepted uses of the term:

Social capital is the goodwill available to individuals or groups. Its source lies in the structure and

---

content of the actor's social relations. Its effects flow from the information, influence, and solidarity it makes available to the actor.

Social capital’s effects have been observed across a wide range of social and organizational life, ranging from the outcomes of individuals and families to those of communities and nations (see Coleman, 1998; McLanahan and Sandefur, 1994; Putnam, 1995; Woolcock, 1998; Seibert et al., 2001; Moran, 2005). The effects of social capital (or “relational capital,” as discussed by Wilkins 1999 and Kay et al., 2009) have also been studied in the context of organizational careers, where researchers have consistently found that it influences various individual outcomes (see Kay and Hagan, 1999; Adler and Kwon, 2002; Borgatti, and Foster, 2003). To borrow from Granovetter’s (1985:487) discussion of social embeddedness, junior professionals’ “attempts at purposive action” are made in and shaped by “concrete, ongoing systems of social relations” within their firms.

Multiplex relationships, which are those between people who interact in multiple roles, may be the deepest sources of social capital in the corporate world and thus particularly beneficial. They allow “the resources of one relationship to be appropriated for use in others” (Coleman, 1988:S109). Perhaps the most common example of a multiplex relationship is that between individuals who are coworkers and become friends. Such relationships involve two roles, one professional and the other personal. They produce fuller, more sympathetic understandings between colleagues in ways that may lead them to treat each other with more respect and generosity. Through their interactions in informal social settings, workers may develop greater trust, rapport and camaraderie, from which they may later benefit professionally.

Workers who normally will not go out of their way to help mere colleagues may be more willing

---

22 Nepotistic employment arrangements also represent multiplex relationships as those involved are both family members and colleagues. In recognition of the tendency toward un-meritocratic favoritism in nepotistic relationships, many places of employment have instituted checks to constrain them. Although nepotism represents a somewhat extreme example of the potential significance of multiplex relationships, other multiplex relationships at times tend to produce similar, albeit weaker favoritism.
to do so to help colleagues whom they consider to be their friends. Workers with strong relationships, as opposed to merely weak ties, with members of their professional social networks experience better objective and subjective career outcomes (Seibert, Kraimer, and Liden, 2001). People are less likely to share useful career development information and assistance with people with whom they only share weak ties because of the effort and possible risks involved in doing so.

**Mentors and Sponsors**

Workers’ most important social capital lies in their relationships with mentors and sponsors. Although mentorship has been the subject of varied, conflicting definitions, it can perhaps best be understood as a purposeful dyadic relationship partly devoted to the professional development of the more junior member (the mentee), (Kammeyer-Mueller and Judge, 2007). Mentors and sponsors can shape junior professionals’ careers by, among other things, offering them valuable advice, praising them to colleagues, and providing them opportunities for professional development and exposure. Mentorship can be established by formal designation, but is most productive when it develops organically, through mutual affinity between mentor and mentee. Many companies have implemented formal mentorship programs with only mixed results (Kalev, Dobbin and Kelly, 2006).

Although mentorship encompasses varied functions, Kram (1985) developed a useful, widely-accepted conceptual dichotomy between career support and psychosocial mentorship (Dougherty and Dreher, 2007; Allen et al., 2004). Mentors who provide psychosocial support share friendship and counseling on inter-personal issues with their mentees, which increases their emotional well-being and professional confidence (Blake-Beard, Murrell and Thomas, 2007). Mentors who provide career support help their protégés advance within their organizations by
sharing opportunities with them, protecting them from adverse actions at the hands of other senior professionals, or coaching them on performing their work responsibilities (Allen et al., 2004). Career support mentorship has been associated with higher salaries and better career outcomes (Scandura, 1992).

Career support mentors who vouch or advocate for their mentees from positions of power and influence within their firms are also commonly referred to as “sponsors” (Kanter, 1977; Wayne et al., 1999). Kanter found that sponsors were crucial to the career prospects of junior professionals. Using Turner’s (1960) research on mobility, Kanter (1977: 181) observed that professional advancement seemed to be determined by a process of “sponsored mobility” or “controlled selection by elites.” In systems of sponsored mobility, established elites (senior professionals) personally select elite recruits and provide them special opportunities and preferential treatment to help develop them into full-fledged elites. Senior professionals reduce the chances that their selected recruits will fall through the cracks by actively providing them guidance, premium opportunities and exposure. This is in contrast to contest mobility, where all competitors (here, junior professionals) have equal opportunities to advance according to their merits. The mentee’s relationship with a powerful senior sponsors can secure them favorable treatment from other colleagues, in a process that Kanter (1977: 182) refers to as “reflected power.”

Workers who have mentors report better career outcomes and greater feelings of career satisfaction. Junior professionals may especially benefit from mentorship relationships with their direct supervisors. Wayne et al. (1999) found that receiving mentoring from one’s bosses was associated with both salary increases and job satisfaction. Higgins & Thomas (2001) found that the quality of a professional’s relationship with their primary mentor is associated with
significantly improved subjective outcomes, including greater job satisfaction. They found that longer-term, objective criteria of success, including promotions and organizational retention, were strongly affected by the quality of a professional’s relationships with their entire “constellation” of mentors (Id.).

Many of the past studies addressing the effects of mentorship relationships on career outcomes use samples very different than the young professionals interviewed in this study. With a few exceptions, these studies tend to use samples that disproportionately consist of white males, workers with much longer tenures at their firms, and employees working in a broader variety of jobs with more widely varying levels of education (see Wayne et al., 1999; Scandura, 1992). Notwithstanding these demographic and occupational differences though, the experiences reported by interviewees in this study are consistent with the findings of those past studies. The organizational structures and practices common in contemporary corporations and elite professional service firms significantly advantage those professionals who develop the best interpersonal relationships. The social capital possessed by junior professionals appears to significantly affect their outcomes in these workplaces. Several interviewees discussed the importance of having “relationships” with colleagues, bosses and mentors. Consistent with previous studies, many interviewees credited their mentors with helping them navigate their firms. Several provided detailed anecdotes of specific instances, even pivotal moments, where there mentors had furthered their careers.

**Greater Access to Premium Opportunities.**

Given the paramount importance of premium opportunities to most junior professionals (see Chapter 2), perhaps the largest benefit of organizational social capital is the extent to which it facilitates access to more and better opportunities. Tami, who sells bonds at a major Wall
Street bank, benefited greatly from her relationship with a boss whom she considered “a great mentor.” Her boss consistently helped her gain exposure and access to valuable opportunities. She explained, “If there was some special project that came up that would give me visibility to different groups or get a chance to meet and rub elbows with different people, exposure to great people, he would nominate me for that project.” When Tami decided that she wanted a more analytically-challenging role and informed her boss, her boss proved more than willing to facilitate her lateral move. As she recalled, “He’s the one who said, ‘Hey, maybe you should think about applying to this position [in a different group].’”

Jessica, who works in supply chain management at a major corporation, explained that sponsors are an absolute prerequisite for junior professionals hoping to advance within her company.

When a new position or a new promotion comes up and they start to think about candidates, my name would come to mind because they know me. If you just apply online through the internal job system—unh-unh. That’s not really going to get you too far. You need to know somebody that can vouch for you and say “Yeah, I know her and she’s ready for that position.”

Those without the right champions will not have equal access to promotions and other opportunities, regardless of their merits. Tony, the attorney, also recalled that his primary sponsor directly provided him premium opportunities that brought him greater responsibilities, exposure, and professional development than most of his counterparts.

As a second year, he put me in charge of a team of 20 contractors doing doc review and I was running the internal research bank, which included associates of my level up to fifth years…That’s one of the reasons why I was able to get the job [in the client’s general counsel’s office]: because I had some exposure in that organization and they understood that I could handle myself.

Advocacy.

One way that senior professionals increased opportunities for their mentees was by advocating for and endorsing them to other senior professionals. Interviewee after interviewee
discussed the importance of finding senior professionals willing to “go to bat” for them by advocating for them to other senior professionals. Such advocacy can be vital in positions where the contributions and talents of junior professionals are otherwise hard to observe and difficult to measure. Like several other interviewees, Hannah, a consultant, found that most of the work in her field was not intellectually challenging (she quipped that “none of this stuff is rocket science”) and that most of her colleagues perform “the same level of work.” Because junior consultants cannot meaningfully distinguish themselves through their work product, Hannah sensed that their relationships with key decision-makers often determine consultants’ career outcomes at the firm. In her opinion, professional success is largely a function of “who we know, who knows the work we’re doing, and who feels comfortable with us.” The junior professionals with the right organizational social capital at her firm appeared to receive more premium opportunities, greater exposure, and faster promotions.

Sandra, an attorney, credits her success at her firm in part to her rapport with a few very supportive partners advocated for her and steered opportunities her way. She explained, “When I came in the door, I got with some partners who were just really good about saying, ‘You were great, I’m going to recommend that so and so works with you’ or ‘Here’s another case for you to work on.’” She contrasted her experiences with those of her less fortunate counterparts who worked with partners who did not further their careers.

Some partners are just like, “Write me the brief and I don’t really care about you after you’re done.” And if you’ve worked with people like that, then that really can hinder your development and who you’re exposed to and the type of cases you get.

Similarly, Diana, a senior associate who has enjoyed excellent opportunities and performance reviews at her law firm, believes that her experiences would have likely been very different had she worked for less supportive partners.

If you’re a workhorse and you’re willing to do whatever they throw at you and you work long
hours and you work late and you service that client but you work for someone who isn’t appreciative and won’t go to bat for you and won’t give you a fantastic review and tell everyone about you and tell them that you do great work, no one’s going to know… There are some people that I think I could work for them and I could bust my ass and it just wouldn’t get me anywhere.

Information on Important Unwritten Rules and Expectations.

Social capital also benefits actors by providing them access to information that is otherwise difficult to obtain (Coleman, 1988). This is particularly valuable in the corporate world, where junior professionals must become well-versed in the unwritten norms and expectations of their firms in order to succeed. They must learn how to “play the game”—how to distinguish themselves through self-presentation and social performance—which in some instances may be as important as their actual work product. They must figure out which opportunities are most important and which risks are most potentially ruinous. Very few junior professionals, even after completing their firms’ often-extensive formal training programs, begin their careers fully understanding how to optimally perform. Many start out unaware of important political and cultural dynamics at their firms or uncertain about how to smoothly navigate them. Acquiring these types of insights can be difficult and costly, especially if done the hard way, through trial and error. Early errors or misjudgments can place their careers in peril.

Leon, a black mid-level associate in a prominent firm, described the unpleasant fates of some former colleagues whose careers had rapidly spiraled downward when they made mistakes and did not have people to vouch for them or provide timely feedback. He described how they were sometimes essentially cut off and set adrift.

There’s this culture of exclusion after you screw up on something. No one really says, “Hey, you screwed up this; here’s how you do it right. Let’s get it right next time.” It’s more like, “You screwed up on something and I’m afraid of you screwing up again so I’m just going to blackball you the rest of the time and you’ll just get the feeling and you’ll just go to another team.” Now that doesn’t really work well because when I go to Team number 2, I come with the same inefficiencies or inadequacies that I had on Team 1 and no one corrected. So I go to team 2 and I make the same mistake and get blackballed again. So I go to team 3 and get blackballed again, because I’m making the same mistake that nobody’s taken the time to correct.
Junior professionals who don’t “get it” in time may thus face catastrophic results as senior professionals become completely unwilling to entrust them with the type of sophisticated, substantive work necessary for them to develop professionally.

Ewoma, a former law firm associate, did not understand the difference between her firms’ formal and unwritten rules until it was too late. Although her firm formally encouraged associates to participate on internal committees and claimed that pro bono work was just as valued as billable work, Ewoma found that the considerable time and energy she spent on pro bono cases and firm committee work were not rewarded. She eventually realized that the dominant norms at her firm diverged dramatically from the formal guidelines; the unwritten rules required junior associates to complete as much billable work as possible before spending much time on non-billable work.

Grasping the unwritten rules and expectations can even be difficult for more experienced junior professionals too. Even mid-level and senior law firm associates interviewed in this study discussed being uncertain about how exactly to go about making partner at their firms. Kelly, a white attorney who failed to earn a promotion to partner at her firm, explained that “nobody really tells you” what associates are expected to do to make partner. “All of a sudden that clock changes and you’re senior associate and it’s like, ‘Ok, go run a case now.’” When Kelly was assigned to one particular case as a senior associate, she was oblivious that the partners expected her to “take” the case and coordinate its day to day activities. It was not until after her final review with the firm that she understood the opportunity she had been presented and the extent to which she had fallen short.

I can see where I failed and how I didn’t pick up the ball and I didn’t run that case but it was never clear to me. Because you’re in this hierarchy and you’re the low man on the totem pole… Then you make senior associate and you’re given this case and there are two other partners on it and you think, “Ok, I guess I’m supposed to be doing the same thing.” And [my reviewer] said, “No, that was your case. You were supposed to take it
and run that case.” I guess that was supposed to be obvious to me but it wasn’t obvious to me at the time.

Because she lacked this crucial information, Kelly failed to perform at her full capacity at the firm and her career there was cut short.

Junior professionals whose social capital provides them access to reliable information and guidance from more senior professionals often enjoy substantial competitive advantages over their mentor-less counterparts who must go it alone. Leon and Ewoma both found that associates who had better connections and supportive relationships with colleagues, particularly mentors, received access to the guidance and insight that they and others lacked. Tony credited his mentors with giving him the strategic advice necessary to distinguish himself at his firm and position himself for premium opportunities. At the suggestion of his mentors, Tony worked significantly more hours on non-billable matters (in addition to his billable work) than the other associates at his firm. He volunteered to serve on an important committee at his firm and began writing and ghostwriting articles in legal industry publications on topics relevant to his areas of professional interest. These activities brought him greater exposure throughout the firm, a reputation for exceptional commitment to the organization, and substantive expertise on several key legal issues. All of this increased his reputation among other partners at the firm, making it easier for him to obtain premium work assignments that further contributed to his professional growth.

Protection.

Sponsors can also protect junior professionals from some of the major pitfalls of corporate life, including undesirable assignments, difficult senior professionals, and layoffs. Having sponsors who were seriously interested in his professional development bore both immediate and long-term professional benefits for Tony. When Tony began receiving too much
work on outside of his primary area of interest, his sponsors went to bat for him and intervened through “backroom channels” to protect him. He believes that because his sponsors had the institutional clout and know-how to address his situation tactfully, he attained a far more favorable resolution than if he had been forced to complain to other partners himself.

Susan, an investment banker, discussed how relationships with bosses often lead to preferential treatment come evaluation time, when supervisors can protect their favorite subordinates by omitting or downplaying their mistakes. “You can totally protect people, like one-hundred percent…it’s so easy.” Susan has seen colleagues protect their favorite subordinates by “not making their flaws apparent.” Leroy contended that this is true even in Wall Street jobs where individuals’ performances can be evaluated and ranked according to their contributions to their firms’ bottom lines, because “the difference in revenue is small unless you’re just bringing in tons and tons of money.”

Ewoma, an attorney, did not initially recognize the importance of developing relationships with colleagues at her firm and had instead mistakenly assumed that she could succeed through hard work alone, as she had done in school. She soon found herself “floundering” at the firm and eventually concluded that “it doesn’t help to be quiet and serious and sit in your office and do work and eat your lunch at your desk.” She discovered that her peers who were more socially embedded in intra-firm networks with partners and senior associates had significant advantages over her and other outsiders.

It takes more than just coming to work and doing your work and going home. Your social connections to the people you work with are in some ways more important than the work that you do; they inform the work that you do. So for example, if I’m having trouble on a project, if I already have a comfortable social relationship with the partner that I’m working with, then it’s more likely that the partner is going to understand that the work is challenging and less likely for the partner to think that it’s because I just don’t get it…People who had strong connections to the senior associates…were given the benefit of the doubt because the senior associate knows this person. They know that they are an intelligent person because they have hung out and had conversations about things other than work.
Ewoma found that partners helped and protected the junior attorneys with whom they enjoyed deeper personal bonds. They were more likely to give those associates the benefit of the doubt, and to “take a minute to go through [the assignments]” with them, instead of criticizing or blacklisting them. In the professional world, where most junior professionals are bound to make at least some mistakes or turn in assignments that are less than perfect, getting the benefit of the doubt early on can be all-important. Those who have the right ties may receive more charitable evaluations, better training and guidance, and greater access to premium opportunities down the road. Even if junior professionals who lacked relationships outperformed their more plugged-in counterparts, Leroy believed that senior professionals could undermine their accomplishments by questioning whether they had only posted impressive profits because they had been given “easy” accounts.

White interviewees agreed the importance of having the right social capital and multiplex relationships. Bridget, a consultant, believes that working with bosses with whom she had social relationships saved her career. Bridget was off to a rocky start and received overwhelmingly negative feedback from her first manager over the course of her first six months at the firm. Her fortunes abruptly changed though, when she began working with other bosses.

I was as close to quitting as I’d ever gotten to anything and it was only stubbornness that really kept me there. But then I had a couple projects with people who I knew more socially, who I at least felt a little more confident around and suddenly I realized that I had learned a lot already… Instead of getting feedback that “you need to work on everything,” I was getting feedback on “you’re good at this; you’re not good at that.” That helped a lot. I started getting reviews that “you improved a lot.” Those kinds of reviews were good.

Bridget ultimately earned a promotion after two years as an analyst, in part because her new bosses knew her socially, liked her, and were “willing to go to bat” for her. Without these relationships, her experience at the firm would have been drastically different. Her divergent experiences working for different bosses suggest that senior professionals, like other human
beings, are possibly more supportive, patient, and generous in working with people whom they personally like and know socially.

**The Significance of Economic Conditions.**

Organizational social capital is particularly valuable for junior professionals during economic downturns, when opportunities become scarcer and layoffs become more common. Most interviewees believed that economic conditions, particularly the recent recession and related layoffs, increased the importance of social capital, at least in the short term. Most of those whose firms had undergone layoffs claimed to have personally observed colleagues’ whose fates were determined by the strength of their relationships with influential higher-ups.

During bad economic times, senior professionals may sometimes work harder to protect their mentees and protégés, either through direct advocacy or by steering good work their way. As a result, other professionals, including several interviewees, struggled to find enough work to stay busy during economic downturns. For junior professionals in the corporate world, failing to stay busy may carry very serious consequences, even if it is through no fault of their own. It can be interpreted as a sign of junior professionals’ laziness or of senior professionals’ lack of trust and confidence in their work abilities. During economic downturns, junior professionals who fail to stay busy become the most conspicuous targets for layoffs. Susan, who was let go during the recession, believed that relationships with influential sponsors helped some young professionals avoid, or at least prolong, being laid off. She and some of her colleagues were initially stunned by the bank’s decision to layoff certain “incredible” workers instead of some of their fairly unimpressive peers. She ultimately concluded that layoff decisions “never [come] down to who’s most capable” but instead has just as much to do with having the right relationships.
Omar, an attorney at a satellite office of a national firm also suggested that social capital, in the form of associates’ personal relationships with partners and their families, can extend some associates’ careers at his firm. He has found that some partners are even willing to “keep around dead weight or people who are not profitable” if they have strong social bonds and enjoy spending time with the unproductive associates. Or as Brianne, an attorney, noted, “You’re not going to get rid of the person you like hanging out with.”

Similarly, Nakia, a former investment banker, found that that the people with the least social capital were the most vulnerable during layoffs, in her industry.

Especially with this economy, when it’s time for bonuses to be handed out or promotions to be made or [other] decisions, it doesn’t matter how intelligent you are, someone has to advocate for you. I have a lot of friends who were in the finance industry and were laid off. You can always argue about why you were laid off but when the layoffs came, I’m one-hundred percent confident that the people with the best relationships probably fared a lot better.

However, the relationship between deteriorating economic conditions and the importance of social capital is not necessarily linear. Several interviewees suggested that when economic conditions really bottomed out, social capital actually became less important as decision-makers were even forced to let some of their favorite junior professionals go. Although Leroy believed that relationships generally “keep you around a lot longer” than marginal differences in individual merit and work performance, he also referred to the recession and the resulting layoffs as “the great equalizers.” He found that the marginal talents who were protected through their relationships during ordinary economic times, and even the earliest layoffs, were eventually released when economic necessity forced the firm to make serious, difficult decisions. Fabrice, who believed that it’s ordinarily “super easy to protect the people you want and neglect the ones you are not interested in,” also observed that interpersonal relationships became less important during the recession.
At [the Bank], there was this one analyst in my group and he was one of those kids who went to
[the same college as the MD] and my MD loved him, loved him. But next thing you know, I
think he was laid off in the round after me. So who knows why these things happen? ...At some
point I take it relationships don’t matter. But they can take you pretty far.

Jacquette, a research analyst, believed that layoffs were more or less made according to
fair, bottom-line considerations. She had survived “layoff after layoff after layoff after layoff
after layoff” and seen “bloodshed left and right” at her firm. She did not believe that these
firings were “unfairly skewed toward minorities [or] women” or otherwise “affected by race.”
She had a theory about the relationship between economic conditions and racial fairness that was
very different than that espoused by some other interviewees.

[Race] matters most when things are pretty average...In the great times, when things are
absolutely fabulous, they’re going to just be promoting people left and right because they want to
keep you. There’s so much business that they want to keep you...When things are crap,
everybody’s getting laid off, so it doesn’t matter. When things are average, people are jockeying
for position...That’s when I think it probably matters the most but right now, forget about it.

Thus, Jacquette saw the recession as forcing the firm to table the usual office politics to
make hard-headed, difficult decisions based primarily on financial considerations.

Social Embeddedness in Professional Peer Networks.

Relationships with peers, particularly those who are slightly more senior, can also yield
important advantages in the corporate world (Kram and Isabella, 1985; Ibarra, 1995). These
relationships can serve many of the functions of mentorships, including providing access to
information and psychosocial support (Kram and Isabella, 1985). Junior professional peers may
have more up-to-date information than senior mentors and may be best situated to offer practical,
useful advice on coping with the challenges of their jobs. They can also supply cautionary tales
and scuttlebutt about recent mistakes made by other junior professionals, knowledge that
provides valuable behavioral guidance. Interviewees noted that peer relationships with slightly
more senior professionals were useful sources of work-related trouble-shooting advice and socio-
psychological support. Rebecca, a junior associate at a mid-sized law firm, explained that relationships with slightly more senior associates helped some junior associates better understand how to deal with (or avoid) particular partners and handle difficult situations at the firm.

You have to navigate and stay away from some people…That’s just part of working at a big law firm. You need to identify a couple of mid-level associates who are sympathetic—people you can see yourself being friends with but who also understand who’s who and what’s what because [they] can help trouble-shoot this for you. Or someone who you can go in and shut the door and say, “This just happened to me, how should I react?”

Workers may be reluctant to share candid, unfiltered information and guidance with most of their colleagues, because of the risk of incurring the wrath of their bosses if the information were to somehow become made public. Hence, those who have not formed adequate social capital and bonds of trust are largely deprived of these crucial insights.

Ian, a white senior associate, unwittingly provided a powerful example of the profound ways that peer relationships, in this case with fellow law school alumni, can definitively shape career trajectories.

Ian: Just [by] the luck of the draw, the cases I was assigned to, I was getting better, more substantive experience than a lot of my peers were. I took 4-5 depositions my first year, argued a motion my second year…Not the common fodder of first years at large law firms.

Kevin: Was it just luck of the draw? Why were you getting these great opportunities compared to your friends?

Ian: Well, that’s at least how it seemed to me—it did seem luck of the draw. Well, in part. One thing—the first few depositions I took were on a pro bono case, but it was a case that I hadn’t worked on. Ok, so this isn’t luck of the draw, this is a [Law School] connection actually. A good friend at [Law School], who I graduated with, went to another firm. Someone from there who was also a [Law School] grad a few years ahead of us was leaving my friend’s firm and coming to my firm. That happened maybe six months after we started. I sort of met that guy and had this immediate talking point that we knew this same guy in common and had gone to the same law school. That guy was the one who had this pro bono case… He was going on vacation but because we had that connection, I was the one he called and said, “Hey, I know junior associates are always looking for experience, I’m going on vacation and there are like four depositions next week, do you want them?” So that was that.

Ian’s experience, which he initially attributed to random chance, was actually a textbook demonstration of the power of social embeddedness in providing some people with access to
resources unavailable to others. His multiplex relationship with the senior associate gave him access to premium opportunities that would have gone to back into the firm’s assignment pool or, perhaps more likely, to another associate who already had a relationship with the attorneys on the case. These substantive opportunities, which allowed Ian to develop important skills, greatly enhanced his career at the firm.

**Demographic Matching and Special Support from Black Mentors.**

Previous research has reached inconsistent findings on whether mentors and mentees matched on the basis of race or other demographic characteristics attain better outcomes (Blake-Beard et. al, 2011). Some studies have found that mentees with “unmatched” mentors may be just as well off, or even better off, those with matched mentors (Smith, Smith and Markham, 2000; Ugrin et al., 2008; Atkinson et al, 1991; Turban, Dougherty and Lee, 2002).

Other studies have found that demographic matching provides important benefits for students and workers (Ortiz-Walters and Gilson, 2005; Foley, Linnehan, Greenhaus, and Weer, 2006; Ensher and Murphy, 1997). Researchers have found that black protégés may especially benefit from psychosocial support from more senior black mentors (Blake-Beard, Murrell, and Thomas, 2007).23 These mentors, even if they do not work at the same firms, can relate to their mentees’ situations as black professionals working in elite, predominantly white corporate institutions and can help them deal with the challenges and anxieties that come with that (Ibarra, 1995). For contemporary junior professionals, these experienced black professionals present a substantial resource that was largely unavailable to earlier cohorts of black professionals (see Davis and Watson, 1982).

The conflicting findings of this past research, and the diversity of opinions captured in

---

23 Blake-Beard et al. (2007) suggested that racial challenges may be so consistently critical to the careers of black professionals that advice on how to deal with these issues should be conceptualized as both career support and psychosocial support mentorship.
this study, suggest that having black mentors may be more beneficial for some young black workers than others, depending on their particular needs and concerns. Several interviewees proclaimed that black mentors had been particularly important, even pivotal, in their careers. Lloyd, a former investment banker, was recruited to a top Wall Street bank by a black vice president who promised that he would “look out” for him and “ease the path” for him. The vice president kept his word and became an important sponsor to Lloyd, providing him support and guidance throughout his time at the firm. Lloyd appreciatively recalled, “My mentor introduced me to other people on the team, helped me get situated, fed me good projects, helped me on projects, [and] introduced me to the two other black VPs.” Because of this support, Lloyd believes that he was treated “more than fairly” and may have been even better situated than most of his non-black classmates at the firm.

Similarly, Hubert, who works at a Wall Street bank, received valuable mentorship support from a senior black professional with whom he worked during his first finance job out of college. This mentor assuaged Hubert’s initial concerns about the significance of race on the job, telling him “not to worry about being the only African American because if you do your job well, you can be successful.” This advice influenced Hubert’s views about the significance of race at the firm and gave him confidence that may have helped him overcome the difficult transition into the professional world. Even when this mentor left the firm for another, he still advanced Hubert’s career by alerting him to, and encouraging him to consider, a position that had become available at his new firm. Hubert explained, “He helped me realize that I didn’t have to stay at [the Bank]. I now have a superior role and it’s a better institution with a better reputation too. His encouragement allowed me to take the next step.”

Other interviewees reported that black mentors were especially helpful in either advising
them on how to deal with legitimate racial grievances constructively or in cooling them off in instances where they may have mistakenly perceived racial slights. This was particularly important for young professionals who perceived that their workplaces were racially unfair. For example, Tony noted that his black mentors offered him race-specific advice about how to conduct himself as a black attorney, given their belief that there were racial double-standards at their firm. They informed him that as a black male, he would receive greater scrutiny than their white counterparts and that he should therefore not act as recklessly as some of his them at firm social events. Tony believes that adhering to this advice helped him maintain a pristine reputation at the firm.24

Martha, a consultant, spoke of one black mentor who helped her deal constructively with situations where she believed she was being treated unfairly.

There were times where I wanted to go off on somebody and I would have to call [the mentor] or go to her office and close the door and she would say, “Count to ten…” “Count to a hundred…” So I had that with her—I had someone who I could confide in. To whom I could say, “I feel like I’m getting screwed over in this situation, I feel that this person isn’t listening to me, I feel that they’re discrediting my analysis,” and she would just say, “Ok, then you approach it this way.”

Such guidance is also valuable for young black professionals who have run into difficulties and are uncertain about whether they have been mistreated because of race. During his professional career, Jermaine encountered several situations where he believed that he was disrespected on account of his race. Jermaine acknowledged that in some of these instances, he had erred in attributing ordinary unpleasant occurrences to racism. He praised his black mentors for helping him recognize legitimate beefs and checking his occasionally excessive sensitivity.

One of my mentors can really say to me, “You know it seems to me that this is really just about your personality and not about anybody else.”…I think it’s important to have that because particularly as an African American, we’re constantly taking a look at situations and trying to understand what’s at play… Sometimes you need a reality check. Sometimes you really need someone who can adopt your brain for a second and go, “Hmm. It turns out this is you. They’re

24 Although most of the other successful interviewees rejected the wisdom of this approach to firm social dynamics, it seems to have worked well for Tony at his particular firm.
not really being racist, or they’re not being crazy, you’re just really impatient and they’re doing the best they can.”…Just being told to calm down is very helpful because if you talk to your friends, or your wife, or your girlfriend, maybe their tendency is to go, “Oh, you’re right, baby” as opposed to “You know what? Breathe. You’re not handling this right. Couldn’t you do this, couldn’t you do that?”

Terrance, who was dissatisfied about his career at a pharmaceutical corporation, credits his mentors with making his experience more tolerable. He explained that his mentors were great “sounding boards,” who advised him “how to deal with certain problems, how to voice certain grievances, [and] how to try to get better work opportunities.” Terrance’s considerable network of mentors and other social acquaintances outside of his workplace also helped advance his career more directly. As he became increasingly frustrated with the slow pace of his professional development relative to some of his high-achieving peers, Terrance successfully leveraged his social capital to find another position at a smaller company where he believed he would be treated more fairly.

**The Importance of Mentors with Organizational Power and Influence.**

There are also reasons why demographic matching with same-race mentors may not be particularly beneficial for some young black professionals. Several interviewees insisted that their mentors’ racial identities were far less important than their organizational influence and professional insights. This outlook is supported by research findings that mentors with organizational power are significantly more helpful than others in improving various career outcomes. Podolny and Baron (1997) found that having a mentor only correlated with increased upward mobility if the mentors had “fate control” over their mentees’ career outcomes. Their findings underscore that not all mentors are useful and that the benefits of mentorship may be contingent upon the mentor’s organizational status and power. Because the senior ranks of the elite firms in these industries are disproportionately white, most of the most powerful potential mentors are white. Thus, Dreher and Cox (1996) found that only MBAs with white male
mentors earned significantly higher incomes than their counterparts; MBAs with female or minority male mentors did not out-earn MBAs who had no mentors at all.\textsuperscript{25} Consistent with these findings, several interviewees did not feel that black mentors were particularly important for their career prospects. Some of the interviewees most pleased with their professional experiences credited their relationships with influential senior white mentors. Sinclair, an attorney, noted that the vast majority of the most powerful professionals in the corporate world were white, and that his firm was no exception. For this reason, he strongly believed that black associates who attempt to build mentorship relationships exclusively with black partners risk severely disadvantaging themselves. In describing his decision not to seek a mentorship relationship with a particular young black partner who was seen as a go-to mentor for many black associates, Sinclair asked rhetorically, “How much clout does he have relative to the person that’s been partner for 20 years and who’s been making it rain?”

Lendell, a law firm associate, also discussed the pitfalls of relying too heavily on black junior partners and explained that he had “nightmarish issues” in his dealings with one such partner. Lendell discovered that this partner had excessively cut Lendell’s hours in his billings to the client, which improved the partner’s standing with the client and other by making it seem as if he were running a very efficient case.\textsuperscript{26} This partner’s efforts to bolster his own standing came at Lendell’s expense; during his reviews, he was criticized for being inefficient and unproductive as a result of having had so many of his hours on the case cut.

\textsuperscript{25} Dreher and Chargois (1998) also found that mentorship relationships were only associated with increased compensation for mentees with white male mentors.

\textsuperscript{26} The billable hours of law firm associates are generally counted according to the numbers of hours that they report working on various cases to the relevant partners and firm administrators. These hours of the associates’ time are then billed to the pertinent clients who must pay the firm for their services. Law firm partners at times adjust associates’ billings downward, thus not fully charging clients less for all of their associates’ time spent on a case, either because they believe that the associate has been inefficient or because the partner to curry generate good will with the client. For bonus and evaluation purposes, some firms, including Lendell’s, only give associates credit for working for the reduced amount of hours billed.
Shayla, an attorney at a large firm, emphasized the importance of having committed, well-placed sponsors:

From the moment you walk in the door you need to connect with people... If you don’t connect with someone who has some power and authority and somebody who is going to take an interest in you, you can easily get lost in the black hole of the law firm. If you cozy up to someone like that, they’re going to make sure you get good work, exposure to clients, and keep you away from -sholes...From the jump, if you don’t get under someone’s wing you can really suffer.

Other interviewees concurred with this assessment. Sinclair, for example, explained that at his firm, “The biggest thing is that ultimately what you want is for one person with clout here to like you.”

Tami, the Wall Street salesperson, spoke of other possible benefits from working with non-black mentors. During her time at the bank, she had developed a few white mentors, who she credited for explaining “how can you improve yourself in general, not just how you can deal with situations.” The second half of her statement was a dig at some of her more senior black colleagues, who she perceived as being too narrowly focused on coaching their protégés through particular racial issues. Tami found that the advice from her white mentors, compared to that of her black mentors, was “more useful for succeeding at the highest level in my profession.” She suggested that black mentors at times had a tendency to give advice that was too narrow and racially-oriented. Because of their generational differences (Cose, 2011)—the senior black professionals had begun their careers at a time when racism and racial inequalities were far more blatant—Tami had a difficult time relating to their perspectives. She felt that her white mentors, by contrast, gave her insights that allowed her to outshine her white counterparts.

Based on their experiences, a lot of times the advice they give you is going to be on how to be the absolute, absolute best at the bank. It’s not going to just be networking advice; it’s going to be about actual performance. Because I have had lunch a few times with a few [black] people and it was always about what you should do as a black person to succeed. With the white male mentor it’s about what you should do to succeed, period. It’s always [about] what you can do to get further ahead, not just what you can do to prepare for the worst.
The more senior black professionals at her firm seemed to assume that her professional trajectory would be marred by various race-related obstacles, and formulated their advice accordingly. This frustrated Tami, who, being both very ambitious and quite optimistic about her prospects at the firm, instead sought advice about how to shine as brightly as possible. She believed that some of the advice she received from her black mentors was at best beside the point and possibly even counterproductive. Other interviewees, including Sinclair, complained that some senior black professionals had adopted self-limiting ideological assumptions about racism that prevented them from taking advantage of all available opportunities. It is possible that those senior professionals’ guidance may have been more beneficial to black junior professionals who were already struggling with racial issues. Tami and Sinclair, however, who both hit the ground running at their firms, did not find their mentorship at all valuable.

Agnes, an attorney, began her career acutely aware of the importance of mentors and professional networks, having studied these topics in college. She established an extensive professional network of black professionals in the industry, including in other departments within her firm, but she initially failed to develop adequate social capital with the powerful (white) colleagues in her group. Agnes struggled when the economy slowed down and work became scarcer.

Where I might have gone wrong is that I focused too much on the black community and didn’t step outside of that and cast a wider net… I went through a period where I wasn’t getting a lot of work and it was a product of not having strong enough relationships with partners in my group.

Fortunately, Agnes’ black mentors identified the problem and helped her with “the intricacies of establishing real concrete relationships” with the influential white partners. After actively working on this, Agnes was eventually staffed on more deals and became busy again.

Young professionals who “hitch their wagons” to non-powerful mentors, or those who lose organizational standing or leave their firms, may struggle (Wilkins, 1999; Caplan, 1994).
Omar, an attorney, developed good relationships with some partners at his firm but believes that he was not able to rise to his full potential because he did not ingratiate himself with the partners who mattered the most. Omar regrets not fully understanding the corporate politics of law firms early on during his career and wishes that he had been more strategic in developing relationships with “the people with real power.”

I would have been more strategic about who I worked with. Because I spent a lot of time with partners who I truly love and connect with, who I go to dinner with, who I can travel to Europe with, but these partners have no juice. So working with them and building these amazing relationships means nothing for my career.

Although Omar has fared much better than most of his counterparts at his firm, he believes that having the wrong mentors prevented him from becoming a true star.

**Investing in Social Capital through Social Labor.**

Developing quality mentors and sponsors can require considerable effort. Social capital is an asset into which social actors must invest time and energy in order to later extract benefits (Portes, 1998; Adler and Kwan, 2002). Many interviewees understood the necessity of investing in social capital through social labor. They did not leave relationship-building up to chance but instead pro-actively worked to expand their professional networks and to strengthen their ties to key individuals within those networks.

Martha flourished as one of the few black consultants in her office, earning early promotions and a solid reputation as a high-performer. She characterized her ascent at her firm as being “definitely political” and believes that it was only possible because of the relationships that she purposefully cultivated with key sponsors and decision-makers. During our interview, she revealed that she had invested as much planning and effort into developing these relationships as she had devoted to performing her formal job requirements.
I would often go and talk to the [senior] person and say, “Oh, I heard that you have this article coming up; I would be happy to give you research.” I would always send holiday cards; I knew their wives and their children’s birthdays so I would say, “Tell your wife I said happy birthday.” But that’s on a personal level. On the work level, it was always around just trying to help them out, trying to help them make money and sell work. So if it meant that I had to work a couple extra hours to help somebody with whom I wasn’t working, I would do that. I would always help them and see how they were doing and find some way to communicate with them before I needed something from them. Before appraisal time when I wanted them to put in a good word for me.

Stacey, a black attorney, found that discussing her passion for the fine arts with partners at the firm enabled her to develop mentorship relationships that helped her “professionally and personally.” She bonded with one female partner over their shared love for theater and the two even attended plays together with their husbands. This partner ended up becoming instrumental in getting her premium work assignments. Her interests in fine arts also helped her establish rapport with one of the most powerful partners at the firm.

I knew that he liked art [so] I sat down with him at a big dinner, sort of a black tie event, and I said, “I really want to tell you about this exhibit that I saw recently when I was in New York.” All the other partners were looking around and finally someone said, “I thought you were talking about a trial exhibit” and he said, “No. She knows where my heart is really at; she’s talking about an exhibit at the Metropolitan Museum of Art.”

Partly because of this conversation, Stacey ultimately developed considerable rapport with the partner. She believes that because the partner respected her interests outside of the firm, he was more understanding and lenient about her not working around the clock to finish up particular assignments for him later.

Other junior professionals discussed developing rapport with senior professionals, thereby gaining access to opportunities, by simply being assertive and pro-active in making small talk with them. Gary, an attorney, revealed that as a junior associate at his firm, he made a list of people he “needed to talk to” and used aggressive networking and social maneuvering to meet them. “I just really worked on going up and talking to people when I didn’t want to, going to some of the events when I didn’t want to.” Gary believes that black associates at times must put forth extra effort to develop relationships, because some partners initially might be
uncomfortable interacting with them. He thus forced himself to attend firm and industry events so that he could introduce himself to important partners, even when doing so was very uncomfortable.

Even if I knew that I was going to be the only black attorney there, I would go anyway… The structure [of the firm] doesn’t hardly favor anybody but it definitely doesn’t favor minorities because [white partners] don’t see you like they see themselves. So I felt like the onus was on me to break the ice and the first couple times I talk to [them], they’re not thinking about what to say or “am I saying the wrong thing?” because I’m talking to them first and they can respond…I would just go talk to them—make small talk. If I knew somebody had kids, [I would] ask, “How are your kids doing in college?” or whatever.

Gary believes that he got “decent returns” in the form of better assignments from this approach, which won over partners and convinced them that he was “a decent guy.” Sandra, a successful attorney, discussed how she strategically established relationships with partners who might be able to provide her valuable opportunities. “I really did seek people out to go to lunch. I really did stop by partners’ offices and say, ‘Hey, I heard you’re working on this case. I think that’s really interesting; do you need help?’” Although these efforts did not always yield immediate results, they eventually paid dividends, giving her a competitive advantage over her less pro-active colleagues.

Several interviewees discussed socializing and networking as important parts of their jobs, requiring as much drive and effort as their formal work responsibilities. Earl, an attorney, discussed the at-times unpleasant appearances that he regularly made at firm and industry events to broaden his network and develop relationships with influential senior attorneys.

We have all these dinners and cocktail parties and you can join a billion bar associations. A lot of people don’t get involved because they think it’s boring or it’s awkward, but I go because people at the firm notice that you do it. They become familiar with you—you end up having conversations with people that you wouldn’t ordinarily have conversations with because you’re stuck at a dinner table with them. It is awkward at times. Sometimes they talk about things that I don’t necessarily want to talk about and there are people that I don’t necessarily want to talk to, but I think you have to do it.

Although Earl was no more comfortable in this type of networking than many of his less
active peers, he committed himself to attend these functions because he saw them as integral to succeeding at his firm. Similarly, Sinclair spoke of the seriousness with which he approached developing social capital with the partners in his department.

You kind of have to “hustle,” for lack of a better term. You have to be in partners’ faces—not in a bad way, but just be around. You have to be willing to schmooze your butt off, to go to these firm events. Lots of times they’ll send out emails saying, “Partner X wants to invite you to the firm suite for a hockey game. Who’s interested?” A lot of people are like, “Hockey? I hate hockey. Why would I go do that?” Whereas the person who’s the biggest go-getter would say “I do hate hockey, I would rather do anything other than watch hockey, but Partner X is going to be there so I need to go. I need to go smile and shake hands and talk about hockey like I know what I’m talking about or let him talk about hockey and just listen, smile and nod.”

Sinclair insisted that this type of instrumental networking was particularly important because of the hierarchical organizational structures of law firms. He found that it is virtually impossible for most junior associates to develop adequate exposure and appreciation by merely performing well on assignments.

The senior partners are not going to know who you are because there are so many people in between you. There’s a junior partner, there’s a counsel, there’s a senior associate, there’s a mid-level [associate]. So it would be hard for you to get to the point where you have a strong bond with a senior partner or a powerful partner just by working hard as a junior associate.

Instead, Sinclair explained that junior professionals need to socially “campaign” amongst their colleagues to establish helpful relationships.

The way to do it is to be social and to be out there and to eat lunch in the cafeteria every day. Also, you bond with your classmates because you never know which classmate has the hook-up with a partner. The next time the partner asks him to “come to this whatever with me and if there’s anyone else you want to bring, bring them too,” you want to be that person that gets brought… It’s kind of like you’re running a mini-political campaign and you’re the politician… A lot of shaking hands and a lot of kissing babies. It’s a lot more than just being a great worker.

Other interviewees were able to build valuable organizational social capital more naturally, just by hanging out and having fun with their colleagues. Jack, a black attorney, believes that the goodwill he accrued at firm social outings were crucial to his professional success at the firm, and helped him compete against counterparts who he believed were more intelligent or did better work than him.
Jack: Being social was really helpful, a big asset for me. I consider myself kind of a social person...so going there, blending in was easy to do because I could go out at night to Happy Hours. That was just part of the culture.

Kevin: I was going to ask you about that: What difference do you think that makes, going to happy hours?

Jack: Oh, it's huge. Huge. If the partners are doing it, you've got to do it. And we had senior associates and some of the younger partners going out and doing this, so it was just absolutely instrumental. Not more so than doing good work but on equal footing... I saw people who did good work, but never went out, and they were not as connected, visibly not as connected, for sure, and did not have as good of a time... I did good work [not great work] but because I went out, I had a great time there. A great time. Was accepted almost immediately. I felt comfortable.

Although Jack admitted that his work product as an associate was not at all exceptional, he credits the social rapport he established with senior professionals for giving him the confidence to make an unprecedented move that helped launch his career forward. As a junior associate, Jack approached one of the attorneys whom he knew socially, a young partner, and proposed an ambitious (and expensive) business development trip. This venture turned out to be a smashing success; it netted an important client, thereby increasing Jack’s standing at the firm to “superstar status.” This led to other premium opportunities that were not available to his peers.

In contrast, other interviewees suffered for their lack of social effort. Brianne, an attorney, initially put forth minimal effort into socially bonding with her colleagues, whom she did not particularly enjoy being around. Brianne, who like many other interviewees perceived that she did not have much in common with her colleagues on account of race-related cultural and social differences, refused to engage them in “phony” small-talk and friendly banter (she explained, “I’m not a bullsh---er, I don’t like to chit-chat.”). Unlike her white peers, who seemed to enjoy the collegiality of their firm, Brianne regarded it as an annoying distraction that

---

27 Several interviewees observed that their firms have somewhat of a “superstar exception,” whereby those professionals who are able to achieve despite not having the social and cultural qualities normally required for success. A small number of professionals who are known for being extraordinarily intelligent and talented are immediately valued by their superiors and seem to succeed despite their social shortcomings.
prevented her from leaving work and hanging out with her real friends. She explained that her asocial approach to firm life was a serious handicap to her career there.

If you’re a loner and would prefer to send an email instead of stopping by someone’s office, it’s a big [disadvantage]. It’s about…liking to be “up underneath” people. Spending three hours on a project because you’re conversing instead of going back to your own office and doing it in forty-five minutes. Putting your best foot forward and doing it quickly is never better than going to offices and staying late because you were chatting.

Although her assessment of the relative value of spending time socializing may be an overgeneralization, very few interviewees would have disagreed with her general take on the futility of working hard without putting forth the effort to develop useful relationships with colleagues.

This lesson was brought home to Brianne in a recent incident, when she belatedly discovered that certain damaging misperceptions about her professionalism and work performance had spread among other attorneys and damaged her reputation in her group.

There was a perception floating around about me in certain circles that I was unresponsive, not reliable, not a team-player, argumentative…I felt I was boxed in because of miscommunications. I didn’t know there was a problem because the other [attorneys were not] comfortable saying anything [to me]. That’s when differences become a problem—the whole “community of trust” thing. There’s no back story. If there’s a misunderstanding, because of the lack of comfort they don’t feel any type of obligation or affinity to say anything. Not to be vindictive, but [because] it never crosses their minds.

Because Brianne’s colleagues had no “back story” in which to contextualize their interactions with her, they were less likely to give her the benefit of the doubt in evaluating her personality and her attitude toward her work. She has since come to realize that this can be a significant disadvantage in the law firm setting and that making small talk and putting in face time with other attorneys can be worth her while, even if it results in being less productive or billing fewer hours.
CONCLUSION

Organizational careers, even at elite corporate firms that aspire to use meritocratic employment practices, are shaped by the social embeddedness of employees in relationships with mentors and other colleagues. Interviewees’ accounts demonstrate the importance of social capital—goodwill-infused relationships with both mentors and colleagues. Organizational social capital can provide junior professionals information about their organizations’ unwritten rules and expectations, greater access to premium opportunities, more favorable performance evaluations, behind-the-scenes advocacy, and protection from layoffs. Social capital mediates the effects of firms’ organizational structures on individual outcomes, and shapes professional careers in ways that often have little to do with merit. Differences in social capital can produce wildly unequal outcomes for individuals with comparable qualifications and abilities.

The social embeddedness of professional work and the importance of social capital in getting ahead may affect some junior professionals more than others. Despite the positive experiences of black professionals like Jack, many black interviewees reported greater difficulties developing social capital at their firms. Evidence from these interviews suggests that black professionals may be consistently disadvantaged by the social dynamics of their firms. The following chapter will discuss the ways that the life course, socialization and cultural differences between black and white workers may render it more difficult for many black professionals to develop organizational social capital. These difficulties, caused by the social tendency of homophily, may play an important role in exacerbating and perpetuating racial disparities across corporate America.
CHAPTER 4:
THE RACIAL IMPACT OF SOCIAL CAPITAL AND
CULTURAL HOMOPHILY

As we saw in Chapter 3, social capital matters a great deal for junior professionals in the corporate world. Those who find supportive mentors and influential sponsors or develop multiplex relationships with their peers have greater access to information, opportunities, and protection. Those who fail to develop these relationships find themselves at a considerable disadvantage. Although this social component of professional work is vital for professionals of all races, it appears to be particularly problematic for many black professionals.

Previous research has documented that black professionals often have a hard time developing useful relationships with their non-black colleagues.28 Black professionals interviewed in several studies complained about not receiving support from colleagues or inclusion into social networks (see Davis and Watson, 1982; Cose, 1993; Feagin and Sikes, 1994). Quantitative studies comparing black and white corporate professionals have also found that black workers tend to develop less social capital within their firms. Compared to white professionals, black professionals report receiving less support from colleagues (James, 2000; Sander, 2004), and are significantly less likely to develop mentorship relationships with white men (Dreher and Cox, 1996). A study of black corporate managers found that problems relating

---

28 Studies of blue-collar and service workers have also found that black workers are racially disadvantaged by their lack of social capital and relationships within their workplaces and industries (see Waldinger, 1995; Royster, 2003). More broadly, these studies are consistent with Loury’s (2002: 95-96) discussion of “discrimination in contact”; his term for “the unequal treatment of persons on the basis of race in the associations and relationships that are formed among individuals in social life, including the choice of social intimates, neighbors, friends.”
to social capital—including feelings of isolation, alienation, and lack of access—were more prevalent than concerns about racial biases and discrimination (Irons and Moore, 1985).

Previous studies have often discussed this problem as a product of discriminatory racial exclusion (see Feagin and Sikes, 1994; Cose, 1993). However, while racial biases no doubt may play an important role in these difficulties, there are also other explanations. In light of homophily, the tendency for people to befriend those similar to themselves (Lazarsfeld and Merton, 1954), differences in the black and white adults’ cultural repertoires and toolkits might render many black professionals less able to develop social bonds with their colleagues, even in the absence of racial hostility or prejudices.

*Homophily in the Corporate World*

Research across a wide variety of social and organizational settings has established that people tend to form quicker and more durable relationships with others who share salient personal characteristics (McPherson et al., 2001; McPherson and Smith-Lovin, 1987; Rivera et al., 2010). Although these homophily preferences can operate purely on the basis of ascriptive characteristics, they have been more closely linked to similarities in personal experiences and cultural interests in previous research on elite corporate professionals (see Rivera, 2009). Senior professionals’ preferences for being around similar others influence their personnel decisions. Some may privilege employees who possess similar cultural interests, tastes and experiences by providing them better opportunities and mentorship.

Homophily preferences may become especially important in occupational settings lacking objective, clearly defined performance measures, like many of the jobs represented in

---

29 These findings about homophily are consistent with social psychology research on implicit bias and in-group preferences. This research has consistently found that, for members of high-status groups, in-group affinities may be stronger and more important than aversion toward out-group members (see Brewer 1999).
this study.\textsuperscript{30} Dalton (1951) found that in the absence of well-established criteria, supervisors tended to promote workers with whom they shared ethnic, religious, political, and social ties. Corwin et al. (1960) and Pfeffer et al. (1976) also found that conditions of uncertainty or ambiguity increase the importance of social influence or commonality in organizational decision-making. Kanter (1977) found that homophily preferences appeared especially pronounced in jobs where workers must handle non-routine challenges and tasks with high degrees of uncertainty that require them to use discretion and professional judgment. Kanter theorized that managers will tend to distribute such positions to socially-similar junior workers because they presume them to be more predictable and dependable. Kanter suggested that supervisors would be more willing to delegate the more routine work to out-group members, including women and racial minorities.

Several subsequent studies of promotions and attrition in corporate law firms have reached findings broadly consistent with some of Kanter’s conclusions (see Wilkins and Gulati, 1996; Sander, 2005; Gorman, 2007). Rivera (2009) documented that the hiring process in elite professional service firms was significantly influenced by cultural matching, the tendency of interviewers to give more favorable ratings to applicants with whom they shared common cultural traits. As we will see, these tendencies remain relevant well after junior professionals have begun working at these firms.

Many of the black professionals interviewed in this study believed that they were disadvantaged by homophily within their firms. Several reported that their white counterparts developed solid multiplex relationships with their (predominantly white) colleagues with greater ease, and received preferential treatment on the basis of these bonds. Leroy, who was unable to

\textsuperscript{30} See Chapter 2. Conversely, homophily-driven favoritism might be less pronounced where individuals’ contributions to their companies’ bottom lines are clearer, as in Wall Street sales and trading positions.
move from his middle-office role to a trading position in his group, attributed his difficulties to senior professionals being influenced by homophily more than past performance.

It was very much a “friend recommendation” thing—that’s how you got on there. Either you were someone’s son or—I don’t think all of that was race, I think it was much more “What do you have in common? Are we all from the same country club? Do we all celebrate the same Jewish holidays?” It was much more a function of that than race.

Although Leroy suffered as an ethnic and cultural outsider, he was careful to distinguish this from racial discrimination.

It’s race but it’s also culture…It’s something I actually look for when I interview, to a certain extent, for interns. It’s, “Who do I feel comfortable working with late at night?” You’re going to sit next to somebody for 10 to 15 hours of your day for every day of the week for a couple years (if it works out that way) and you want to make sure the person you’re sitting next to is, for the most part, someone you can connect with and feel comfortable next to. And I think that translates into, “What are your shared experiences?” But I think race plays a factor in the fact that you may have little shared experiences depending on race.

Leroy considered this to be a non-malicious result of professionals’ natural interest in making their work lives as comfortable and enjoyable as possible, given the brutal conditions of their jobs. He even sympathized with their actions, to some extent, and suggested that he acts similarly when he is involved in hiring decisions.

Although Kanter (1977) discussed homophily tendencies as a mechanism that senior professionals used to deal with uncertainty, the perspectives of Leroy and other interviewees suggest a more straight-forward explanation for the prevalence of homo-social reproduction in the corporate world: Because of their jobs’ long hours and often difficult, stressful working conditions, professionals—black and white alike—value working with colleagues with whom they can comfortably socialize and engage in easy conversation. Instead of being specific to particular types of jobs or contexts, homophily is better understood as a fairly universal human tendency that occurs whenever it is not adequately monitored or regulated. Interviewees who complained about their bosses’ homophily actions did not seem to interpret their bosses’ actions
as being motivated by doubts of their abilities to perform challenging tasks; nor were these complaints concentrated in particular types of jobs.

Shayla, the attorney, observed that black associates are less likely to develop solid relationships with their colleagues. She attributed this to cultural and experiential differences, stemming from differences in their social networks and social class backgrounds.

We don’t usually get [the relationships with partners] because it’s usually made on the basis of knowing somebody’s parents, or belonging to the same country club, or being related to the client, or we both ski in Vail, or you remind me of me when I was young. It’s based on connections or common grounds. A lot of people in power at law firms are old white dudes—if they’re only looking for people who remind them of themselves, they will only look at younger white guys.

Although she has found mentors, she attributed this to her exceptional social skills. She resented this additional burden. She noticed that black professionals who were not socially outgoing seemed to suffer more than white associates with similar personalities.

It shouldn’t be like that. Other [white] people aren’t [socially outgoing] and they get mentors. Why does everybody [black] have to put special stuff out there to get mentors? Some people just don’t feel like doing all that—they don’t want to have to do it.

Her observations seem consistent with previous research finding that sociability may be particularly important for young black professionals. Cox Jr. and Nkomo (1986), in a study of public-sector employees, found that social behavior factors, including sociability and “fit,” had a greater influence on black professionals’ overall performance ratings than on those of their white counterparts. Although some elite professional service firms screen for cultural similarity during hiring interviews (Rivera, 2009), these firms may be less likely to reject well-qualified black candidates on the basis of cultural non-conformity or lack of social rapport. Because of the relatively small supply of young black professionals with prestigious credentials, firms interested in preserving diversity may be more reluctant to reject them on the basis of cultural dissimilarity.
To the extent that this occurs, this further exacerbates the cultural and social distance between black and white colleagues.

Several interviewees discussed some of the disadvantages they perceived in their firms as cultural outsiders. Ewoma encountered “uncomfortable social barriers” as one of the few black attorneys at a historically Jewish New York law firm. She sensed that her outsider status made partners less interested in supporting her.

I don’t know that the partner that I’m working with saw me as his daughter and saw a need to nurture me in the way of mentoring that he would have done with my Jewish colleague who lived in a neighborhood like his and probably went to the same schools that his kids go and went to the same synagogues and share the same holidays.

Ewoma emphasized that she believed that this differential treatment was driven by homophily, not racism.

It isn’t about a negative rejection of some people, [it’s] about a positive embrace of certain other people…You embrace the people who are like you and you’re agnostic about the people who are not like you…I think that what actually happens is that people like to live their lives comfortably, they’re comfortable around certain people and they gravitate toward [those] people. They are going to be warm and welcoming with people who are like them and don’t see that not sharing that warmth and welcoming with people who are not like them is an act. They think that they are not doing anything. They think, “I’m not discriminating against that person.”…But their lack of action is an act in and of itself.

Ewoma’s interpretation of her colleagues’ motivations, while admittedly speculative, illustrates how racial disadvantage might occur even in the absence of malice or intentional exclusion. Even if the favorable treatment that partners gave to some Jewish associates was motivated by a purely benign impulse, it can disadvantage black professionals just as much as malicious racial discrimination. These social dynamics can have unmeritocratic consequences.

Like Ewoma, most interviewees were fairly nonjudgmental about their colleagues’ homophily tendencies, which they often described as “natural” or “human nature.” They
differentiated homophily from racial discrimination, in which white professionals mistreat blacks on the basis of racial biases. Several interviewees who reported suffering from homophily dynamics at their firms reported that they did not believe that their bosses considered them to be any less competent or intelligent than their favored white coworkers. Scott, an attorney who observed that white associates at his firm had stronger relationships with their colleagues, noted that there were “a variety of reasons for that, the least of which could be overt racism on the part of white partners.” Like Ewoma, he too concluded that partners’ decisions to privilege certain workers over others “probably more so comes down to basic human nature, affinity, who gravitates to who.” These interviewees believed that non-conforming white junior professionals also suffered and received fewer opportunities and rewards than some of their less talented white colleagues who possessed the right cultural and social capital.

Although these homophily tendencies were not as morally offensive or insurmountable as traditional racial discrimination, to some interviewees, their effects were just as frustrating. Interviewees were quite vivid in describing their discomfort in their interactions with their bosses and colleagues, even when discussing challenging moments that had occurred years ago. Dennis, an attorney, described his interactional struggles.

You have these start-of-the-deal meetings…and the connections have started to form between the senior associates and the juniors. They’ve already formed between the senior [associate] and the partner. What happens is you walk in the room and the partner talks to the senior, the senior talks to the white [junior] associate. Nobody talks to you. It reinforces this outsider mentality that there’s something different or awkward about me because I’m not fitting [in]. “I can’t think of the right things to say, I don’t have the background, they’re all very comfortable and, oh my god, what am I doing?” I don’t know about you, but once that starts for me, there’s a downhill slope. Even if you do it to yourself, if you’re made to feel different, you’re going to reinforce that over and over and over again. That happened to me for years at the Firm; drove me insane.

Dennis’ reflection hinted at the considerable psychological costs of such social

---

31 Interviewees described these difficulties in different terms. Some initially referred to these difficulties as “racial” in that they disadvantaged many black professionals. Some only distinguished these problems from racial bias upon further probing. Others immediately described these challenges as “cultural” or “not really racial.”
discomfort. The “outsider mentality” can become self-fulfilling, as it may lead black professionals to invest less time and energy in developing important relationships out of a sense of hopelessness. Other interviewees also struggled with this at certain points in their careers.

Fabian, a research analyst who works at a firm where he is one of only five black researchers and traders (out of more than 200), struggled with the social dimension of his job. Fabian did not feel comfortable around his colleagues and had a hard time relating to them. Their personal backgrounds, world views, and cultural reference points seemed very different than his own—these were not the type of people with whom he ordinarily socialized. Instead of trying to bridge the gap, Fabian withdrew into his work. This was a serious mistake. Fabian believes that he suffered from the resulting social disconnect; when certain misperceptions about his work product emerged, he did not learn about them until it was too late.

Having attended predominantly black schools his entire life, Quincy, a trader at a prestigious Wall Street firm, was not accustomed to maneuvering in white social spaces. Although it did not seem to affect his career, as social capital and interaction skills are less important for traders than other elite professionals (see Chapter 2), his description of the anxiety at firm functions reveals the depth of the social disadvantage that many black professionals must work hard to overcome.

I’ve gotten there many times where you walk into a party and nobody looks like you and your mind is already set on, “What time am I getting out of here? What excuse am I going to give if anyone asks where I’m going? How am I going to get through this night? What can I make up to talk about?” So from the first twenty seconds of some of the events I went to, I was already in defense mode. And that’s just debilitating and painful and it just takes you away from the situation…I would say that’s probably the toughest side of Wall Street.

Quincy blamed himself for his initial difficulties, explaining “it was totally on me and I knew it. It was my own personal insecurities.”
Regardless of whether senior professionals are racially biased against black workers, their homophily tendencies can still reproduce racial disparities. Duane, a consultant, explained how the senior consultants at his firm took to junior professionals with similar personal backgrounds.

My incoming class was maybe 34 associates and, from the start, there was a group of about maybe five or six guys that the partners immediately embraced. The rest of us called them “the golden boys”…The common thread is that [they were] usually white guys who had gone to Harvard Business or Harvard Law or the military, which is the background of the partners.

This seriously disadvantaged junior consultants who did not share these traits in common with the office’s partners.

The partners made sure that they [the golden boys] were pulled onto all the plum projects. They worked with all the partners who had pull--who had power. They were asked to take leadership roles in the office in different random things; they were always pushed to the forefront… It was blatant. Because these guys would be getting on great projects with the great people. The rest of us would be thrown on random stuff.

The favoritism that Duane observed was not purely racial— the golden boys’ personal backgrounds and experiences, including their educational pedigrees, military experience, and personal recreational interests, also mattered. Duane noted that many of his white peers were also ignored by the office’s senior consultants.

The Racial Consequences of Cultural Differences.

Cultural Capital.

The varied processes through which institutions reward the cultural repertoires of higher-status groups and reproduce social inequalities has been of great interest to sociologists (see Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977; DiMaggio, 1982; Lareau, 2003). Cultural capital theory, developed by Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) and others, conceptualized culture as a set of knowledges, tastes and practices, disproportionately possessed by particular elite classes. Bourdieu found that people from high-status families develop high-brow tastes and styles, in
contrast to the low-brow tastes of people from less affluent backgrounds (Bourdieu, 1984, 1986). Bourdieu and later researchers found that this cultural capital is systemically privileged by schools and other institutions, as it is conflated with intelligence and other merit-related characteristics. Bourdieu (1984, 1986) regarded cultural capital as an asset that was inherited from parents through childhood socialization, but other sociologists have demonstrated that cultural capital can also be developed outside of the home, and later in life (see Lamont and Lareau, 1988; Attewell and Lavin, 2007).

Subsequent studies, including DiMaggio and Mohr (1985), applied Bourdieu’s findings about the importance of high-brow cultural tastes and knowledge to American society (Lareau and Weininger, 2003). DiMaggio (1982) and DiMaggio and Mohr (1985) found that high-brow forms of cultural participation, including attending operas or museums, correlated with social status and positive educational outcomes. However, other studies have demonstrated that American elites tend to enjoy non highbrow—even lowbrow--forms of cultural capital as well (Peterson, 1997; Peterson and Simkus, 1992; Peterson and Kern, 1996). Some of these studies have been criticized for focusing almost exclusively on the arts, thereby operationalizing cultural capital too narrowly (see Holt, 1997; Lareau and Weininger, 2003). As Holt (1997:101), persuasively argues, art, is only “a small fraction” of consumption. Americans “expend the vast majority of their leisure energies” on other activities, including “food, interior décor, vacations, fashion, sports, reading, hobbies, and socializing” (Id.). As we will see below, Holt’s observation applies to the experiences of professionals working in elite corporate firms. Interviewees’ discussions of the cultural repertoires useful in their offices often pertained to middle- and low-brow pop culture and leisure activities, or non-elite interactional styles. Similarly, other studies have found that various American institutions privilege cultural capital
relating to parenting practices and interactional styles prevalent within upper-middle-class American homes (see Lareau and Horvat, 1999; Lamont and Lareau, 1988).

**Racial Differences in Cultural Capital.**

Although cultural capital has been commonly discussed as a class-based phenomenon, it is also influenced by racial identity (Hall, 1992). Because of the substantial social (and geographic) distance that exists between most Black and white Americas, black and white professionals tend to arrive in the corporate world with dissimilar social and cultural backgrounds. Many black Americans grow up in racially segregated neighborhoods and attend segregated schools (Massey and Denton, 1993; Massey et al., 2003). This racial separation affects poor and relatively affluent black families. Some middle-class black families purposefully move to suburban black middle-class enclaves to seek out black social and cultural spaces (Cashin, 2004; Fulwood, 1996). Those living in predominantly white neighborhoods still predominantly socialize with extended families and friends who live elsewhere, through their involvement in black fraternities and sororities, social organizations, or the Jack and Jill children’s’ program (Graham, 1999; Neckerman et al., 2003). Even affluent black families participate in social organizations and leisure activities that are very different than those of well-heeled whites (Graham, 1999). These separate black social spaces are conducive to the development of cultural repertories distinct from those of whites (Neckerman et al., 1999). Hence, researchers have found that the cultural toolkits of middle-class blacks may be very different than those of their white counterparts (Ogbu, 2003; Pattillo-McCoy, 1999).

---

32 Cultural capital also tends to vary by gender. In the corporate world, for example, men may be more likely to possess tastes and knowledge about sports that help them gain access to social esteem amongst their disproportionately male colleagues (Erickson, 1996). I will discuss this and other examples in Chapter 8, which specifically focuses on the significance of gender.
Thus, the cultural milieus of black households often differ in a number of areas ranging from language use to tastes in music, movies and television programs (Brown and Pardun, 2004; Levitt and Dubner, 2005:182). These cultural differences are reinforced at school. As identity-based homophily appear to become particularly important among adolescents (Clark and Ayers, 1992; Joyner and Kao, 2000), students tend to join predominantly same-race peer groups (Tatum, 1997; Hallinan and Williams, 1989; Moody, 2001). By adulthood, they have developed very different leisure preferences than their colleagues and dissimilar tastes in music, cinema, television, and humor. For example, Brianne, an attorney, discussed missing out on “Friends” and “Seinfeld,” two shows informed her white coworkers’ cultural frames of reference, because they aired during the same time slots as two of her favorite black shows, “Martin” and “Living Single.”

Cultural capital has no absolute or intrinsic value—its usefulness is determined by the “structure of the field”: the rules and values of particular organizational settings and contexts (Bourdieu, 1986; McDonough, 1997; Carter, 2003). Hence, its value varies in different contexts. Cultural capital that enables individuals to flourish within certain social settings or arenas may be useless in others. The cultural differences that develop over the course of childhood and young adulthood may later disadvantage black professionals in the corporate workplace.

The cultural repertoires of black students can help them gain acceptance amongst their black peers—in some schools, black children who fail to demonstrate these styles and understandings are even ostracized for “acting white” (Carter, 2005; Datnow and Cooper, 1996). However, their cultural capital may later impede their efforts to develop relationships with colleagues and mentors across racial lines. In predominantly white corporate workplaces, black professionals’ cultural tastes and experiences thus constitute “non-dominant cultural capital,”
which Carter (2003:138) uses to describe “a set of tastes, or schemes of appreciation and understandings, accorded to a lower status group, that include preferences for particular linguistic, musical, or interactional styles.” Carter (2003) does not address whether racial differences might foster non-dominant cultural capital in professional and upper-middle-class minorities (her work focused on a group of lower-income minority children), but her insights seem logically applicable.

These ideas are consistent with past research demonstrating that people who possess different types of cultural capital tend to develop different types of friends and social networks (Lizardo, 2006). When white professionals bond through culturally-informed activities and conversations outside the repertoires of many black professionals—for example, through allusions to old Seinfeld episodes, pub gatherings, or particular outdoor sports—black professionals often struggle to relate. Their social discomfort and lack of cultural familiarity can reinforce their status as outsiders, and thus presents an important independent source of continuing racial disadvantage in the corporate world.

Interviewees noticed that professionals at their firms seemed to primarily associate with colleagues with whom they shared particular cultural experiences, tastes, and repertoires. Because black professionals’ cultural preferences were often different than those most valued within their firms, many believed that they were disadvantaged in their efforts to establish relationships with their colleagues during workplace interactions and out-of-the-office social outings including happy hours and social events.

Many interviewees encountered considerable difficulties arising from their struggles with the cultural norms and social conventions of their work groups. Lewis, a former corporate manager, complained that his having had very different social experiences than his white
professional peers in college became evident again and again in his interactions around the workplace, and even led to him being the subject of jokes around the office.

That’s one of my pet peeves; it happens quite often. I talk to white people and they’ll mention something and I’ll be like, “I don’t know what that is” and they’ll go through this whole “You don’t know what it is? Did you ever go to college?” And I’m like “Come on. Realize that I come from a different environment than you do.”

Nakia, a former investment banker, discussed her difficulty adapting to her colleagues’ social norms and activities of choice.

There were also a lot of cultural differences. Like I didn’t come from the background where drinking was the thing to do…but I always felt like the white kids, since they were 15 and 16, had been drinking and that’s like the thing to do. When we were at work and people were working long hours, [white colleagues would say] “Oh if it’s cool, let’s go out and get something to drink” or “Did you hear that so and so got so drunk?” There were [also] so many cultural differences [relating to] what they did on the weekend…To me it always just made me feel like I didn’t belong.

Greta, who works in a Wall Street middle-office position, noticed similar cultural differences between white and black professionals. She believes that she and many of her black counterparts suffered from their lack of common ground with their firms’ white professionals. She and many others disengaged instead of putting for the social labor necessary to thrive.

We [black professionals] know there’s a game and we just don’t want to play it. And the game is harder for us. I don’t feel like playing the game of going to yoga with “such and such” and “such and such.” One of the challenges that I had is that everybody goes for drinks on Thursday. Our white counterparts go to the bar—Thursdays and Fridays, it’s just a given. That’s where a lot of socializing happens, that’s where a lot of conversations happen.

These activities seemed to be fun for her white colleagues and consistent with how they naturally spent their free time. Their participation in these social rituals provides them intangible but important benefits, in the form of increased face time and opportunities to develop rapport with colleagues. Her black colleagues, on the other hand, regarded these gatherings and activities as laborious ordeals. They were more accustomed to socializing in predominantly black social spaces that featured very different styles of music, drinking, and conversational styles and topics. Greta traced their lack of comfort to their experiences in college, years ago.
We don’t play beer pong, and beer games and “flippy-cup” and all these other things in college...There’s a socialization that happens in college that is different from one culture to another. And if you don’t know and have never been socialized in that way, you go into the corporate setting where there’s people who already have something familiar happening and the cliques start happening, just naturally, and you get excluded from things and you have to encourage yourself to go. And that’s one thing we fail to do out of college when we’re younger.

Another Wall Street professional, Susan, also reflected on the centrality of “the bar scene” and alcohol at her firm. This presented somewhat of a social handicap for Susan who explained that she would “leave early or not go at all sometimes” because she did not enjoy social drinking. As Greta, Susan, and other interviewees explained, the social culture of some firms are in many ways an extension of the norms and activities that a lot of her white counterparts become socialized into as teenagers.

Wayne, an attorney, did not have trouble dealing with the cultural tastes and social activities that were dominant at his firm, but he sensed that it was far more challenging for many other black associates.

There’s another layer of complication, stress, almost like another layer of the job that you have to go through if you’re not comfortable—for example, if you don’t like to go out and drink beer. There’s small annoyances. If you go to a firm event you know there’s going to be sh-tty music. That’s just the way it is. You ignore it but why should you? Why is it that there are only certain genres? …What it meant to go out and have a good time was very monolithic. I’m sure there are certain people who have a very difficult time adapting to that or have no desire to adapt and don’t think it’s worth the price.

As Wayne’s comments, like those of many other interviewees, suggest, black professionals often perceive a significant gap between their cultural preferences and repertoires and those valued or accepted as legitimate by the professionals within their organizations. Wayne and these other interviewees also spoke of their own homophily preferences; these interviews revealed that tendencies toward racial homophily were by no means unique to white professionals. Even Wayne, who was more at ease in social interactions with non-black colleagues than many interviewees, spoke of feeling more at ease in (predominantly black) social settings outside of work, interacting with people who shared his tastes and experiences.
However, Wayne recognized the value of bonding with colleagues and gaining social acceptance at his firm, and he believed that this required associates to develop the requisite cultural knowledge and sensibilities concerning bars, upscale eateries, and cuisine in addition to culturally-informed intuitions about appropriate topics and modes of conversation. He discussed some of the many ways that everyday interactions required associates to draw from their cultural toolkits.

For example, attending happy hours, how you conduct yourself at those happy hours—what are the topics of conversation? What are the things you should be up to speed on in the news? What type of places do you like to go to outside of the firm? Also, what types of bars, what type of restaurants—how do you conduct yourself at those restaurants? Are you cultured enough to understand the different things that are on the menu at an exotic restaurant? Can you pronounce the sushi? People hold you to a certain cultural standard that assumes a certain level of sophistication.

Wayne saw some associates who did not have the right cultural capital become essentially discredited for making comments or voicing opinions that were deemed illegitimate.

[Other attorneys are] judgmental if your preferences are different… If people sort of said anything that was in the realm of the unexpected, it’s almost like they were written out of the conversation… For example, I wouldn’t have felt really comfortable talking with people at the firm about the kind of rap music I like or the kind of clubs I like.

Thus, even professionals like Wayne, who had the necessary cultural capital to impress their colleagues and build relationships, at times resented the double-standards that they believed marginalized some of their own cultural preferences.

The perspectives shared by white interviewees were generally very different than those of black interviewees. Their accounts generally seemed to confirm black interviewees’ perceptions that they were less disadvantaged by cultural differences and social difficulties. A few white interviewees actually discussed socializing with colleagues and the resulting camaraderie as one of the aspects they enjoyed most about their jobs. Very few white interviewees, including
women, mentioned having any difficulties developing relationships with colleagues. By and large, they did not report having difficulties fitting in with superiors, colleagues or clients, or demonstrating their commitment to their firms. Most discussed forming good friendships with classmates or colleagues in their departments. The majority seemed to regard these aspects of their jobs as somewhat burdensome and tedious, but not as particularly problematic or challenging.

Only one white interviewee described feeling socially isolated or excluded from her colleagues. Margaret, a white attorney, joined a large law firm where she had not worked as either a summer- or first-year associate, a year after graduating from law school. She found that her fellow attorneys had formed exclusive cliques and relationships by the time she arrived.

**Racial Consequences of Black Professionals’ Greater Social Distance.**

Although these cultural differences may seem trivial, in these social capital-driven workplaces, they can become quite important. A few interviewees recalled instances when non-black workers received preferential treatment because of their cultural capital, including opportunities that they certainly would not have received otherwise. This process, through which cultural capital enables in-group members to gain stronger social capital, is ultimately zero-sum. Minorities and other outsiders bear most of the costs.

For many interviewees, this seemed to present a more formidable and salient challenge than outright racial discrimination. Clara, a black attorney, had great difficulties fitting in socially with her (almost exclusively white) colleagues at her firm. She described the firm as an “old boys club” and noted that groups of white partners and associates regularly went out for drinks or dinner after work. She observed that the partners and associates seemed to bond and

---

33 However, the white sample was far smaller than the black sample. It remains possible that a larger sample may have uncovered more examples of white professionals with these types of social difficulties.
develop great rapport at these gatherings, as evidenced by their inside jokes and chummy behavior around the office. This was especially important in gaining access to work and other opportunities at her firm, which was informally run with minimal centralized assignment procedures. She noted that even very junior white attorneys and those who did not have stellar professional reputations regularly received far more work and opportunities than she, because they closer to the senior associates and partners at the firm.

Clara also recounted a shocking incident where she, the sole black attorney in her small practice group, was the only attorney left behind when the others all attended a work-related conference in a sunny locale. Although this event had originally been planned only for the group’s partners, the white associates in the department ultimately were also able to come along. Clara explained her exclusion as resulting from her weaker relationships with the partners and associates in her group. Clara later learned that one of the associates who had become close friends with one of the partners had asked if she could attend, and had received permission. Once she was invited, she spread the word to other associates in the group and eventually all of them except for Clara had requested to attend. During our interview, Clara seemed to accept the social dynamics that led to this outrageous result, explaining that she considers it to be “human nature” to “gravitate” toward “people who look like you or look like your nieces and nephews or children or whatever, or have some of those shared experiences.” “I’m not justifying it and I’m not denouncing it but I think that’s just how it is.”

It is important to note that Clara’s exclusion from the conference was not inevitable. A black attorney with greater social comfort and social capital amongst her colleagues would have found out that her white associate colleagues were planning to attend and quite possibly would have requested to attend the conference (or she may have been invited directly). Nonetheless, to
the extent race hindered Clara from developing social capital at the firm, it is implicated in her unfortunate outcome.

Brandon, a Caribbean-American attorney who previously worked at a large firm, did not perceive any racism or discrimination during his time at the firm, but he observed that black associates had greater difficulties than white associates in developing mentors because they had less in common with their senior white colleagues. This produced a mentorship disparity, which rendered black associates more susceptible to negative career outcomes, and at greater risk of falling into what Brandon referred to as a “death spiral,” where junior professionals were ousted from the firm for underperformance. Although Brandon believed that the black associates that were asked to leave generally deserved to be fired, he noticed that comparably underperforming white associates were given opportunities to “rehabilitate” their reputations, because of their mentors.

These difficulties were not purely race-specific. White professionals who failed to develop relationships also struggled at their firms. One white interviewee, Richard, an attorney, believed that his lack of rapport with partners in his department led to his being laid off during the recession. Unlike the struggling black interviewees discussed above though, Richard did not seem particularly frustrated by his experience and instead explained that he refused to make the necessary effort to ingratiate himself with the partners because he found some of them personally unbearable and he was not invested in his career at the firm.

**Client-Facing Roles.**

There are some positions where junior professionals’ interactional skills and cultural repertoires become critical to their firms’ economic performance. Specifically, in client-facing roles, junior professionals must be able to socialize with or entertain current and potential clients.
in order to generate future business for their firms. Many junior professionals who rise part way up their firms’ career ladders through hard work and attention to detail may find that their performances are now measured by completely different criteria. This is especially evident in investment banking and other industries where junior professionals must transition from “worker bee” roles to client-facing position in order to advance. While investment banking analysts and associates were largely evaluated on their work ethic and attention to detail (Banks, 2004), vice-presidents were often responsible for helping their directors generate new business and maintain their relationships with existing clients. In these positions, social skills are no longer sources of unfair favoritism; they are actually become a core criterion of merit.

These client relationships revolve around the rapport and camaraderie that arises out of personal interactions—during meetings, over dinners, and at social outings. Thus, junior professionals’ career prospects and access to opportunity became far more dependent upon social interactional skills. Junior professionals who cannot project the right public faces or develop relationships with senior professionals in their firms are presumed to be unfit for these client-facing roles. Thus, subjective assessments about interpersonal skills became very important and those who did not conform to social expectations are at times deemed potential liabilities. They eventually find that, despite their promising past work performances, their future prospects at their banks have become quite limited.

Nakia, a former investment banker, explained how the criteria for success changed significantly as junior professionals became client-facing mid-level professionals:

On the upper level, it’s more about networking, the client relationships that you build…It’s no longer just how smart you are or how hard you work. You have to be able to build those networks and you have to be able to have someone who is an advocate for you. That’s the

34 There are wide variations within investment banking, according to industry group. In some groups, technical acumen and quantitative skills are apparently far more important than social skills, self-presentation, and the ability to develop relationships (Ho, 2009:110-11).
biggest thing…Promotions and maintaining your ability to succeed in that industry is really about relationships.

Other interviewees agreed with Nakia’s description of the shifting expectations. Zeke, an investment banker who was not promoted to vice president, found investment banking to be “one-hundred percent meritocratic” in its entry-level positions. He explained that as an analyst or associate, “if you do the work, you’ll be fine, no matter what color you are, no matter what school you come from.” This changed as junior professionals became more senior though. Zeke explained that at the vice president level “it’s more about being a “client guy,” more client-facing… better able to present to clients.” These social skills did not come naturally for Zeke and contributed to his being laid off. Although he noticed that some white professionals also failed to make the transition—he considered these difficulties to be class-based, not racial—he and other interviewees believed that black associates were particularly disadvantaged.

In contrast to the difficulties encountered by these black professionals, Tyler, a white investment banker from a professional family, enjoyed, and was adept at, socializing with clients at formal receptions and over expensive dinners. Like many other interviewees, Tyler considered these events to be tedious at times, but he did not regard them as sources of awkwardness or anxiety.

**Strategically Adapting and Selectively Assimilating.**

Most of the research on black corporate professionals’ difficulties has not seriously examined the strategic actions that these individuals take to improve their situations. However, there is ample reason to believe that many black professionals may be able to draw upon resources or otherwise maneuver within their workplaces to avoid or overcome these potential disadvantages. Even though cultural differences do prove disadvantageous to many black professionals, they are not necessarily insurmountable.
These disadvantages do not affect all black professionals equally. Interviewees believed that some professionals were less affected or otherwise better able than others to deal with them than others. Those with more in-depth past social interactions with white peers, arrive in the corporate world with the requisite cultural capital. Others are able to adapt upon entering the workforce. Most interviewees did not believe that these difficulties were universal or impossible to overcome. Even these interviewees acknowledged that black professionals had to expend much more effort in bridging cultural gaps to develop the image and relationships necessary for success.

Oscar, an attorney, emphasized the importance of developing personal rapport with more senior attorneys. He found that black attorneys who were able “play the role” of social butterfly got along just as well as their white counterparts.

Some black people are the life of the party and everybody—black, white, [and] Latino—want to be around them. I’ve seen other people who are black and introspective and go about their business and aren’t as social and I think they may be hurt even more, by their race, than a white person who is quiet and shy. Not necessarily because a white person is scared of them or offended but because they [already] have a little less in common.

Black professionals can manage impressions relating to their social identities, either by signaling their more desirable personal characteristics or by negating stereotypes that others potentially assume about them as minority group members (Roberts, 2005; Bell, 1990). Many engage in what Lacey (2007:88) has labeled, “script-switching,” a relatively extreme form of impression management that occurs when individuals strategically invoke particular traits and behaviors to gain acceptance while performing particular social roles. Professionals of all races may be required to switch scripts to conform to the norms of their offices, for example, by adopting interactional styles that are more formal or aggressive. Previous researchers have at

---

35 “Script-switching” is conceptually broader than the more commonly used term, “code-switching” (see Pattillo-McCoy, 1999), which specifically refers to substituting linguistic favored linguistic styles for less acceptable vernaculars (Lacey, 2007).
times glossed over this point by implying that the norms of corporate America “reflects the cultural styles and preferences of the American mainstream” (Lacey, 2007:97) or “the values and ways of white America.” (Feagin and Sikes, 1994:135). However, the gap between black professionals’ corporate scripts and their out-of-the-office cultural styles and interests appears to be more substantial (Davis and Watson, 1982). Davis and Watson (1982) found that seemingly non-racial norms, including those governing social interactions and personal appearance, presented more of an imposition from black professionals, whose personal styles were further removed from the corporate norms. Anderson (1999) found that black employees who did not assimilate into cultural and social practices of the white corporate elite were less likely to have advanced within the corporate hierarchy. Their switching efforts are therefore at times more problematic, require more effort, and are less seamlessly-executed.

There are a continuum of views about whether black professionals need to assimilate or alter their personalities, social behavior, and cultural tastes to fit in at their firms. Interviewees have very different impressions about script-switching and the extent to which it is necessary or useful. Some find it counterproductive and unseemly, others believe it to be of paramount importance in minimizing racial stigma. Some seemed to believe that succeeding professionally required them to go to greater lengths to conceal and abandon many of their identifiably black cultural characteristics while adopting traits more consistent with those exhibited by the white majorities at their offices. They believed that these efforts might enable them to distance themselves from racial stigma help foster impressions of greater commonality with their white colleagues.

Several of the interviewees who were most satisfied with the directions of their careers and successful at their firms argued that black professionals could do well without assimilating.
Shayla insisted that the firm accept her on her own stylistic and cultural terms and even boasted of sporting “a small nose ring, tattoos, and long locks” while refusing to assimilate herself into “a black version of a Barbie doll.” She complained that black female professionals often exhaust themselves by “wearing the mask” and attempting to hide or assimilate away from their cultural differences. Others, such as Leondra, who works in a middle-office position at a major Wall Street firm, believed that many of the most successful black finance professionals were those who assimilated to their firms’ predominant cultures as much as possible.

You definitely have to play a game. Now looking back on it, knowing what I know now, the first thing is that you don’t want to make yourself different [from the white majority]. You want to assimilate as much as possible. And you see a lot of the black people really become, I don’t want to say “Uncle Toms,” but that’s really what they become. They put on this fake demeanor and this fake laugh. They listen to the same music as the white people, they talk like the white people, they try to vacation like the white people, and they wear the same outfits as the white people…You want to show that you’re as much like them as possible.

Other interviewees discussed script-switching and dramatically modifying their personalities to project the right public faces in their interactions with colleagues. Some complained about feeling compelled to put on false fronts, for example, by pretending to be more outgoing and upbeat than they really were. Several interviewees complained about this social performance aspect of their jobs and considered it exhausting or even somewhat degrading.

Wynona, a corporate manager, was highly ambivalent about the steps she and her black professional friends felt required to take to project the correct presentation of self at their jobs.

I joke around with [my black professional friend] about “Are you going to juke and jive for the man today?” Because it’s tiring to be in that world at times, because I feel like you have to act differently. We always call it “the tap,” where you’re tap dancing for the man… We joke around and say, “Are you Becky36 today? Are you chipper?”…I feel like you have to exert a lot of energy outside of just doing the job so that you can be viewed as one of them.

Wynona and other interviewees sometimes script-switched by emphasizing particular aspects of their cultural repertoires that they knew could be used to forge common group and

---

36 “Becky” is a racially coded term that they use to describe their more cheerful white female colleagues.
establish social connections with their white colleagues. Wynona purposefully used her musical
tastes, which she describes as “not what would be considered black,” to connect with her white
colleagues, instead of attempting to assimilate by pursuing other predominant cultural capital.

I try to find things to bond with them so that I don’t feel like I have to be fake. I’m not really an
outdoorsy person, so when they talk about climbing mountains or surfing or stuff like that, I can’t
really get into that. But I try to at least steer the conversation to something musical because if
you looked at my iPod you would not know that I was black.

Trevor, who has had favorable experiences at his elite New York law firm, agreed that
assimilation was key to success.

There’s a lot of emphasis on diversity and highlighting differences but I think the minorities that
are probably the most successful are the ones that are able to assimilate into the dominant culture.
That’s probably been the most effective strategy. I don’t think you can come in and wave the
“I’m different flag” every day; I don’t think that’s going to get you very far.

Trevor noted that this observation was also true of white professionals as well. He
explained, “If you’re gay/lesbian, I think it’s the same issue. If you’re a woman, it’s the same
issue.”

Some interviewees were constantly on the lookout for sources of potential common
ground with their white colleagues that might help them minimize the cultural differences.
Kayla, an attorney, found that to get beyond racial differences, “All you have to do is give them
a reason to see you for who you are, so they’ll relate to you and treat you the same way.” Kayla
explained that to do so, she purposefully initiates small talk about sports, neighborhoods, and
other common interests, an approach that she believes has paid dividends.

Several interviewees believed that black professionals who do possess the valued cultural
capital have an easier time developing bonds that can help accelerate their careers as well. Leroy
recalled that one fairly unimpressive black applicant with an extensive golf background (and
who was savvy enough to convey his love for the sport during his interviews) bonded with one
of the hiring managers over their shared enthusiasm and parlayed this rapport into a job offer. In
this instance, the cultural capital of golf actually functioned as a racial equalizer. Black professionals who have the time and resources necessary to learn how to play golf may find that this investment opens doors that they may have assumed were closed by race.

**Social Withdrawal and Inadequate Social Labor.**

Some black professionals actually reinforced their disadvantages by socially withdrawing from their colleagues. Several interviewees called out their black coworkers for not putting forth the effort to move outside of their comfort zones to put in quality social time with their white colleagues. Tammy, a supply-chain manager at a large corporation, believes that minorities struggle to advance in her corporation in part because they fail to fulfill the important, but unwritten, extra-professional social expectations of their jobs. “We don’t tend to branch out and do things, to go out to bars and that sort of thing and we have to do that.” Unlike those peers, Tammy regularly invests time and energy into integrating herself into the social fabric of the company. She explained, “If they have happy hours, I show my face…I make my rounds and let it be known that I was there.” She considers this component of her job as crucial to advancing within the company. “If you don’t have the social piece and they don’t feel comfortable with you—they don’t feel that they know you and can trust you—then you could be here 24 hours a day and I [still] don’t think you’re going to rise to the upper ranks.” This is also important for Tammy’s white counterparts, but she believes that it’s “more natural to them” because the other professionals at these gatherings are “more like them” and, in some instances, “already know them.”

Leroy also found that many black junior professionals fail to put in sufficient extra-professional face time, which prevents them from developing relationships and receiving the candid feedback they need to get ahead.
The [formal] feedback loop is always generally bad. But here’s the thing—do you have that informal feedback? If you can get informal feedback, you’re doing ok. That’s something you don’t really get as a minority. Why? Because you’re not at golf. You’re not at the bar…with your boss and coworkers. A lot of us, black kids especially, come in and they say “Hey, I don’t want to go drink with my coworkers I’ve been hanging out with my people all day. I want to hang out with my friends after work.” But when you do that, you lose that informal feedback loop.

Leroy changed his social life to conform to the norms of his group, and his efforts brought him tangible rewards. “I didn’t drink until I started interning there and that was why. I needed to be in the loop…The bar is where I got my best feedback. I negotiated my bonus in a bar.”

As Leroy suggests, black professionals’ social preferences also often reflect homophily tendencies. This has also been found in previous research (see Mehra et al., 1998; Mollica et al., 2003). Several other interviewees, including Wynona, alluded to their own homophily preferences.

It’s like an unwritten rule when you get there and you see other black people at any position, because even [here]…there’s only about three or four or five of us in all the programs combined. So when you come in the room and see them, your first mental note is, “Ok, I’ve got to meet that person,” because you just want some camaraderie.

These homophily preferences may reduce black professionals’ initiative to forge relationships with their white colleagues. Black professionals at times miss out on informal opportunities to develop valuable social capital because of their own discomfort or disinterest, not because they have been excluded by others. Christopher, who worked in engineering and business positions in large corporations, regretted that he did pro-actively develop useful relationships at his first job. Instead of performing the social labor necessary to embed himself into the predominantly white professional and executive networks, Christopher ate lunch and socialized with the lower-status black office and clerical staff. While his white colleagues bonded over travel and snowboarding outings, Christopher partied with black acquaintances he
knew from outside the company. In doing so, Christopher in effect distanced himself from the sources of influence and power at his corporation. His situation reflects a dilemma that many black professionals experience: the decision between spending social time with people who can help their careers or socializing with people with whom they are more comfortable.

Some interviewees noted that black junior professionals lacked the social comfort to adequately promote themselves to their superiors. This leads to serious disadvantages: those who are passive or quiet about their work often find that their senior colleagues underestimate their accomplishments and misinterpret their personality traits. As Sheldon, a former investment banker succinctly explained, “Some people work very hard but they don’t get credit for the work because they don’t make it known that they actually did the work.” Blair noted that his white counterparts appeared to be far more comfortable and effective at self-promotion than him and most of his black colleagues. Blair derisively recalled that even some who “suck at their work” were “absolute masters of self-promotion” who induced senior colleagues to overestimate their abilities and productivity by “chatting them up” and sending unnecessary “reply all” emails to their divisions. He believed that this type of social performance largely determined which junior professionals were placed on his company’s “preferred candidate” list, which served as a de facto fast track to higher positions within the company. Stellar professional performance was not necessary or sufficient to advance in the firm; self-promotion and social maneuvering even enabled some “mediocre” employees to make the list over more competent, experienced counterparts. “And this isn’t hypothetical,” Blair added. “This has played out several times.”

Blair believed that the racial and social homogeneity of his department gave white junior professionals a sense of “privilege” and confidence that they could befriend and win over even the most important senior professionals. He also observed among his black colleagues, a couple
who he described as “Carlton types,”37 who demonstrated exaggerated enthusiasm and good humor that Blair referred to as “tap-dancing for the white man.” Although Blair was not a natural self-promoter and could not stomach the code-switching necessary to pull off the “Carlton” act, he ultimately discovered other effective forms of self-promotion that he found more palatable. He began to regularly email his supervisor about tasks he had recently accomplished, future issues that he wanted to flag, and reminders of his career development objectives. He found that this helped his boss better appreciate his productivity and dedication; he believes that this may pay dividends as he attempts to move up in the company. Consistent with Blair’s observations about racial differences in junior professionals’ social comfort at work, no white interviewees mentioned having difficulties projecting the right public faces or being criticized for failing to do so. These differences possibly reflect broader race-related cultural and social dissimilarities that many black interviewees identified as a source of racial disadvantage.

Sandra believed that other black associates at her law firm exacerbated their relationship problems and lack of access to premium opportunities by acting more passive and reticent than their white counterparts, in their interactions with partners. Sandra, who took a very active approach to meeting important partners and lining up interesting, useful assignments from them, recalled some of her more passive peers being stunned by her directness.

When I shared with [black] junior associates that I really did go by so-and-so’s office and say “Hey, I saw this on the new business matter list, do you need help?” they looked at me like I was crazy. The associates were like “Oh my God, you did that?” But I honestly feel like that’s what a lot of the white people do.

This approach paid dividends for Sandra and she believes that many of her black counterparts may have been at least somewhat better off had they followed her lead.

Similarly, Rachel, a very confident, outgoing attorney believed that her interactional

37 “Carlton” is a reference to the affluent, comically racially-assimilated, highly-energy character played by black actor Alfonso Ribeiro on the sitcom “The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air.
skills helped her thrive where many other black associates had failed.

[Partners would] rather just be around someone who’s not concerned about anything and not afraid to say what they think and doesn’t alienate the partner. I think that’s what made my ascendency so easy… I’m the same person in my office, at the firm, at home—I don’t have different personas. Where my husband will say that I’m so wacky and I’m so silly, that’s the same person that I am at the office.

Other interviewees offered similar perspectives and agreed that racial differences were far less of an issue for extroverted, socially-outgoing black professionals.

**CONCLUSION**

Many black professionals have difficulties developing valuable organizational social capital because of differences between their social and cultural backgrounds and those of their white counterparts. Consistent with the extensive research literature on homophily and cultural capital, interviewees often alluded to the importance of cultural common ground and social relationships in shaping the career experiences of junior professionals within their organizations. Many believed that black professionals were significantly disadvantaged on account of their having fewer background experiences and cultural tastes, styles, and interests in common with their white counterparts and superiors. These cultural differences created a social disconnect that impeded black professionals from developing the crucial networks and mentorship relationships that appeared to come far more easily to their counterparts. Black interviewees’ accounts of these difficulties seemed to be generally consistent with the perspectives of the white professionals interviewed in this study, who rarely discussed this social aspect of their job as challenging or problematic.
CHAPTER 5:

PERSPECTIVES ON THE SIGNIFICANCE OF RACIAL DISCRIMINATION

Documenting the existence of racial discrimination has been a core concern of much of the previous writings on black professionals and the black middle-class, and with good reason. Reports have demonstrated that even many highly-educated black professionals with handsome salaries and high-status jobs still believe that they are discrimination against at work and given fewer opportunities and less respect than their white counterparts (see Davis and Watson, 1982; Collins, 1983; Jones, 1985; Williams, 1987; Feagin, 1991; Cose, 1993; Luo, 2009). The black professionals discussed in these works shared a litany of complaints involving egregious racial mistreatment. They spoke of being passed over for promotions and other opportunities, held to unfair double standards, and subjected to offensively low expectations and excessive scrutiny (Cose, 1993; Feagin and Sikes, 1994; Davis and Watson, 1982). Memoirs and biographies have provided more detailed accounts of individual black professionals who believe that racial discrimination contributed to their downfalls from their high-status jobs and once-promising careers (Barrett, 1999; Jett and Chartrand, 1999).

However, in highlighting these important racial wrongs, these works have at times given short shrift to the experiences of black professionals who do not believe they have been seriously disadvantaged by racial discrimination. Feagin and Sykes (1994) and Cose (1993), for example, only use anecdotes from interviewees who believe that their professional careers have been severely undermined by race. To the extent that these works exclude other viewpoints and perspectives, they present skewed portrayals of the black professional experience. Black Americans’ opinions about race are not nearly as monolithic as these studies have suggested.
Survey data has consistently demonstrated that many black Americans, including middle-class professionals, do not feel that they are regularly subjected to racially discriminatory treatment (Hochschild, 1995). For example, the various public opinion surveys analyzed by Hochschild (1995) demonstrate that significant percentages of middle-class blacks report not being personally subjected to or hindered by racial discrimination. Data from nationally representative samples including the National Study of Black Americans (1979-1980), the National Survey of American Life (2001-2003), and other studies also demonstrate that many black managers and professionals do not believe that they have been regularly subjected to racial discrimination on the job or in other areas of their lives. Previous reports have revealed sharply differing views about the significance of race, even amongst black professionals working in the same industries and firms (see Hopkins, 1987; Dent, 1997; Loomis, 2004). In recent research on the leveraged buyout industry, Turco (2010) found that very few of the black professionals in her (admittedly very small) sample considered race to be a disadvantage at their firms.

Since many middle-class blacks do not believe they have been seriously affected by racial discrimination, works that present the group as uniformly victimized are misleading and inaccurate. Furthermore, some people who believe that they have experienced discrimination do not feel that it has seriously impeded their professional outcomes. To them, discrimination is more of an annoyance or a minor obstacle than a serious roadblock (Thompson, 1986; Smith, 2000; Clarke, 2001). By suggesting universal suffering or disenchantment, these works ignore a broad range of views and experiences that do not support their theoretical claims and ideological presuppositions.

Even if those previous reports had been accurate when they were originally written, the experiences of today’s professionals are undoubtedly more varied and less blatantly shaped by
discrimination. Traditional racism has sharply declined over time (Kinder and Sears, 1981). Social and political change has increased the supply of highly-educated black workers and made racial diversity a sought-after commodity in many companies, thereby transforming the demographic composition of corporate America. In light of these developments, it is perhaps unsurprising that the beliefs about the significance of racial discrimination conveyed by this study’s interviewees were far more diverse and, in some respects, far more upbeat than those depicted in past research.

**Corporate Firms as Color-Blind Institutions**

In stark contrast to the image portrayed by most previous accounts of black professionals, only a minority of interviewees believed that black professionals at their firm were adversely affected by racial biases or unfair treatment. Only a fraction of this group believed that they themselves had personally suffered from racial discrimination. Although most interviewees believed that race-related cultural and social differences made professional success at least somewhat more difficult for many black professionals (see Chapters 3 and 4), more than two-thirds of all interviewees reported that their own careers had not been seriously hindered by race. Most interviewees who believed that race mattered did not feel that these issues were determinative or insurmountable. This distribution of views about race diverges sharply from previous research, which has at times suggested that racial grievances are universally shared by virtually all black professionals.\(^{38}\)

Unlike the studies that have carefully documented racial discrimination in the service and blue-collar labor markets (see Pager, 2007; Kirschenman and Neckerman, 1991; Royster, 2003), the black professionals in this sample did not report experiencing any access discrimination in

\(^{38}\) This study’s findings concerning individual views about racial discrimination, like those of previous qualitative studies, are subject to various potential biases and validity threats. These issues are discussed at length below, in methodological appendix.
their efforts to land jobs at top firms. The elite black professionals who participated in this study undergo hiring processes that are dramatically different than those experienced by lower-skilled black jobseekers. These differences appear to reduce the incidence of discrimination in the former relative to the latter. Most of this study’s interviewees found their jobs through formal on-campus recruitment processes where employers came to their schools to actively seek out prospective talent. Corporate firms generally recruit, interview and hire new workers, en masse, as new cohorts or “classes” each year, in a public, highly-formalized process. Students are not as dependant on word of mouth or referrals from well-placed connections; they hear about prospective employers well in advance, through campus advertisements and their schools’ career services centers. The top professional schools have systematized on-campus interview procedures where most students are all but assured of the opportunity for an initial interview with most of the firms and employers of their choice. Firms receive transcripts and resumes and therefore have extensive information about jobseekers before meeting them. Further, corporations and elite firms now actively try to assemble racially-diverse cohorts of junior professionals. Several Wall Street interviewees even alluded to their firms having unwritten minimum “quotas” and targets for the number of new black hires.

Perhaps not surprisingly, many of the interviewees who had been successful at their firms felt that discriminatory treatment had not been an important source of disadvantage for them or their colleagues. Several maintained that their firms had institutional interests in avoiding racial discrimination. They spoke of their firms having strong economic inducements and competitive pressures to use and reward their young professionals on the basis of merit. Beth, a partner at a

---

39 However, there is a potential sampling bias here with respect to this particular point as this study’s interviewees had each successfully found employment at these elite firms. There may be some black professionals who failed in their attempts to land such jobs and who therefore may have different perspectives on the prevalence of access discrimination in these industries.
prestigious law firm, explained that her firm was not desperate for work and was “too busy” and had too much invested in its reputation for excellence to not give the best performing attorneys the most responsibilities. “The culture is that when it comes down to the business and making money, they want the best person for the job.” During our interview, Beth insisted that she was not naively post-racial. “I’m no idiot—I know that racism exists,” she explained. “I’m on the watch for it.” However, despite this vigilance, Beth reported that she had not seen evidence of racism at her firm. Instead, she has found that there are plentiful opportunities for talented black attorneys willing to work hard enough.

Beth conjectured that black attorneys might be better off working for the largest, most prestigious law firms (including hers), because those firms are more likely to have more open-minded clients and, if necessary, the financial security and credibility to stand up to racially biased clients. “If my clients were uncomfortable with me because I’m black they wouldn’t be our clients and we don’t need them,” she explained. She contrasted her experience with those of black attorneys working at smaller, less prestigious firms. “All law firms don’t work like that,” she noted. “I don’t know what it’s like if you go to a third-tier law firm because you don’t have good grades in law school and have to go to a small shop and it is largely personality driven and people feel how they feel and do stuff that wouldn’t go down at larger firms.”

Alicia sensed very early in her Wall Street career that her firm was “merit-driven.” She received considerable substantive responsibilities very early on and, based on her boss’s appraisal of her performance, was able to change groups when another position became available elsewhere in the firm. In light of her positive experiences, she described Wall Street as highly meritocracy and downplayed the importance of race.
Here, at the end of the day, people just care about making money so they just want to keep whoever’s going to make them the most money… People on Wall Street are definitely a lot more results-driven [than other industries]. For the most part, they try not to let things get in the way of getting results. So I think that plays out to how it’s merit-based and if you show you can do it, they’re going to let you do it. Because at the end of the day, they just want the most capable people underneath them to kind of do their job so that they don’t have to do it.

Ashanti, a senior associate who has worked at two law firms, denied that racial discrimination limited opportunities at either of them. She explained that her first firm, where she worked for several years, was meritocratic because “it’s such a business organization and the bottom line is profit.” Oscar, an attorney at the small satellite office of a large national firm offered a similar take on his bosses’ pursuits of profit as fostering fair treatment.

It’s purely about money and “what have you done for me lately.” I do think that [complaints about] race might be a little overplayed. I really do believe, and I have encountered, that if you do good work, that that can be valued and you can definitely succeed.

During our interviews, Oscar and Ashanti each referred to close black senior associate mentors who were promoted to partner in their firms. Their interactions with these mentors likely shaped their perceptions of racial fairness by making them more comfortable at their firms and demonstrating that it was possible for at least some black attorneys to excel there.

A few interviewees even claimed that their race had been net benefits for them at their firms. Some suggested that race often made it easier to “stand out” and earn positive attention for good work. Others explained that because their firms were interested in increasing the diversity of their professional workforces, there were special premium for black associates who demonstrated talent and potential. Veronica, an Ivy League graduate who is on the partner-track at a large firm, asserted that she has “never felt marginalized” there. Instead, she perceived that her race had actually benefited her at her firm, once she established her abilities, because her firm desperately sought to retain talented, hard-working black associates. She believes that top law firms are highly motivated to increase diversity, and that once a black attorney becomes a
proven commodity, the sky is the limit for them. However, she also recognizes that she may have been better-situated to succeed than many other black professionals, even within her firm. The small size and “thin” staffing of cases in her department may have made it easier for attorneys to develop strong reputations and progress through individual merit than it is for their counterparts in the larger, more “political” departments of the firm.

Like Beth above, many of the interviewees who did not believe that they had been held back by race made efforts during our interview to emphasize that they were not naïve or unaware of the existence of racial disadvantage in American society. Some seemed surprised, almost slightly embarrassed, that race had not been an issue for them. For example, Alicia, who has worked on Wall Street in investment banking and sales, somewhat sheepishly shared, “I guess I’m just an anomaly but… I can’t really think of anything race-related.” She explained that she had been treated well by her white colleagues, including several “old white men” who had already taken interests in her career and served as mentors and sponsors for her. Vanessa, an attorney, considered herself to be well informed about race and highly racially-aware, having majored in African-American Studies in college and studied racial inequality in law school. She arrived at the firm on the lookout for indications of racial foul play but found none.

The belief that race did not play much of a role in affecting individual careers was not limited to those interviewees who had positive experiences while employed at these firms. Many who were less than satisfied with their careers still believed that race had not been a significant factor. Instead, they offered a variety of non-racial explanations for their negative experiences. Several suggested that the demanding lifestyles required by their jobs were simply not for them. Joshua, a former investment banker at one of Wall Street’s most prestigious firms, fits within this group. During our interview, Joshua consistently downplayed the significance of his having
been one of relatively few black workers at his firm by pointing out that, as a multinational firm, plenty of workers actually came from underrepresented groups. Noting the diversity of his bank’s workforce, Joshua explained, “Many times people will say, ‘Oh, I’m the only African American.’ And I’ll go, ‘This other guy’s the only Pakistani, this other guy’s the only guy from Ireland, this other guy’s the only guy from India,’ so you really can’t use excuses or crutches to kind of push along.” Joshua explained that he received premium opportunities by “being in the right place at the right time, having a good attitude and having a good reputation.” Reflecting on his banking career, Joshua discussed how his bosses and colleagues mentored him and took an interest in his career development without regard to race.

I was there basically one hundred hours a week for three years. It’s really hard not to look at people as individuals when you spend that much time together. Because you’re working under such tight deadlines, it’s imperative that people spend time developing the analysts who work on their teams…. So over time, I felt just as much a part of the group as anyone else.

As an analyst, Joshua was so highly regarded by his bosses that he was even given a premium opportunity to work in a role usually reserved for associates. This further convinced him “to not think that opportunities are strictly doled out along racial lines.” Although Joshua was not promoted to associate and went on to pursue a career in corporate management instead of finance, he insists that this was due to his lack of interest and the miserable quality-of-life of investment banking. Sylvester, another former investment banker, claimed that junior professionals are “golden” once they have proven that they can handle challenging responsibilities, regardless of race.

Lakesha, an executive in a large public relations firm, has not had a completely smooth path in her career thus far, but she also does not attribute her difficulties to racially discriminatory treatment. Lakesha grew up in a working class home in an inner-ring suburb, and attended a state school before getting a job at a public relations firm. Although she has done
well at her corporation and loves her job, she has not been promoted as quickly as some of her white counterparts and has had to demand promotions in more than once instance. However, she insists that her treatment was not racist.

Honestly, I think that’s the nature of the beast. I don’t think that’s a white or black thing, or any race thing. If you want something you have to ask for it and you have to make a case that you’re good enough for it because they’re busy trying not to go into the red—they don’t have time to worry about your career.

Lakesha accepted that senior professionals do not always closely monitor individual employees’ professional development or accurately discern who is most deserving of promotions. Instead, she considers workers themselves to be responsible for advancing their own interests and making sure that they get all the opportunities they can handle and receive all the rewards they deserve. Many interviewees who saw their white counterparts get promotions before them would have likely attributed this treatment to racial discrimination and would have been far less forgiving of their bosses. Lakesha instead attributes some of these hiccups in her path up the corporate ladder to class-related differences in some of the “soft skills” and self-presentation that affect outcomes in corporate organizations.40

Other interviewees believed that race might matter at their firms but could be overcome by excellent credentials or performance on the job. Hubert, a VP at a Wall Street bank, believed that his stellar educational credentials and impressive technical skills enabled him to overcome any racial disadvantages in his group.

I understand that as long as I perform and do my job that won’t matter because at the end of the day it’s about money and being able to add value…One of the things is acquiring as much knowledge as you can, which is why I went to business school…. Because at the end of the day it really comes down to who can perform.

40 The possible role of family class background in affecting interviewees’ professional experiences will be discussed at length in Chapter 6.
Hubert believes that his firm ultimately evaluates and rewards workers according to their abilities to contribute to his group’s profitability. He is therefore confident that his skills, which include the ability to perform highly-technical, quantitative financial analyses, and his Ivy League college and business school degrees help counteract any racial advantages of his white counterparts.

Alternative Explanations of Racial Disparities?

Outside observers at times treat the continuing racial disparities in attrition and promotion rates at corporate firms as direct evidence of racial discrimination and unfairness. Many of this study’s interviewees, however, rejected this interpretation and instead offered alternate explanations of why so few black professionals advance in their firms. As we saw in Chapters 3 and 4, many black interviewees believed that black professionals were primarily disadvantaged by race-related cultural differences that made it more difficult for black professionals to develop valuable organizational social capital. Other interviewees suggested that black professionals were disadvantaged by having disproportionately humble socioeconomic origins. They observed that black professionals, compared to their white counterparts, seemed to have had far less contact with corporate professionals while growing up and, as adults, had less access to wealthy family connections that might help them bring in business to their firms.

Several black attorney interviewees suggested that black attorneys were less likely than white attorneys to aspire toward partnership at their firms. These claims are of course highly speculative and quite possibly incorrect. Interviewees from this study’s white professional comparison sample did not express any greater interest in climbing the ranks at their law firms either. Past quantitative studies using industry surveys have also failed to establish racial differences in law firm career ambitions (see Sander, 2006). Nonetheless, several black
interviewees offered generalizations that suggested that black professionals tended to have other
goals, often relating to public interest, and were less willing to make some of the lifestyle
sacrifices necessary to compete for partnership. Several attorneys claimed that African
Americans rarely rose to the partnership ranks at their firms because they often had other
priorities and interests, and skill-sets better suited to other occupations. Veronica, for example,
did not believe that statistical disparities in firm attrition rates were proof of racial
discrimination, and instead offered another explanation for why black attorneys do not thrive at
firms like hers despite the opportunities that she believes are available.

To be honest, this is my personal view but I don’t think a lot of black people come to law firms
wanting to be successful. They want to make good money and leave after a few years…I think
that anybody who comes to a law firm and has the ability to do good work and makes a cognizant
effort to do all the things that you need to succeed at a law firm, will.

Veronica, who has witnessed black associates struggle at her firm, suggested that their
difficulties were actually not related to race but instead resulted from conditions that commonly
disadvantaged white attorneys too.

I have white first year associates who might not have gotten hooked up with the right people
when they got here and didn’t do good work for the right people and now it’s very likely that they
may get fired. So it has nothing to do with [black attorneys’ racial identities]; to me it’s a
universal problem. But I think because there are so few of us, it seems like it’s more of a pointed
issue than it really is.

Her observation that some white attorneys go through the same negative experiences as
their black counterparts underscores the importance of looking beyond racism in explaining
individual black attorneys’ professional misfortunes.

Ashanti, worked at a large law firm for a few years before moving to a smaller firm for
quality-of-life considerations. Although she had been satisfied with experience and highly-
regarded at her firm, she became convinced of the need to pursue her career elsewhere when a
more senior associate friend of hers made partner by working what she believed to be an
“insane” number of hours for multiple years. Ashanti realized that she was not willing to put herself through such an ordeal in order to earn the promotion and that the money and prestige of the position were not sufficient to make up for the stress and social and personal sacrifices.

However, other interviewees expressed doubts or completely rejected these aspiration-based explanations and instead regarded the statistical racial disparities as prima facie evidence of racially discriminatory practices. They instead suggested that racial unfairness convinced even those black associates who were interested in partnership that their ambitions were doomed.

Scott, a mid-level associate at a large firm, explained that through conversations and observations, he noticed that surprisingly few of his black colleagues and acquaintances were interested in competing for partner. Although he believed that associates of all races realized that “ninety percent or more” of the people in each entering class would not rise to partner at their firms and adjusted their expectations accordingly, he thought that black attorneys in particular often planned to only stay at their firms for a few years.

I think black people, people of color, have even more of an attitude that “I’m only here for a few years and then I’m out.” I don’t know a lot of black people or people of color who are like “I’m here for the long haul. I’m going for the brass ring. I’m going for the partnership.”... It’s just going to be difficult to keep black people in a place where the long-term rewards other than the paycheck are extremely intangible...when you can put in a few years at an elite firm, hopefully go someplace else and have a much better lifestyle and a relatively respectable salary.

Scott did not consider the statistical disparities in attrition rates as evidence of ongoing racial discrimination per se, but he did believe that these diminished aspirations of black attorneys were influenced by the fact that very, very few black associates have ever been promoted to partner at the nation’s top law firms. The lack of success of previous black attorneys created, he believed, a “rebuttable presumption” that black associates would not be treated fairly in their firms.
Dennis, who worked at a large firm for several years before leaving to work in-house for a client, opined that he and other mid-level and senior law firm associates who indicated that they were not interested in making partner only deluded themselves into thinking that they did not desire partnership because they perceived it as being unattainable.

If you asked me two years ago why I left [the Firm], I would have said because I wanted a lifestyle change and didn’t want to be partner. The lifestyle change was real…I generally felt that I was hitting a ceiling there. That me making partner was a long-shot. Everybody else was leaving and I saw lawyers who I thought were far better than me making partner.

Although his views were in tension with the many interviewees who persuasively indicated that they had lifestyle preferences or long-standing career goals not involving law firm partnership, Dennis raises an important point. People modify their aspirations in light of their perceptions about opportunities and possibilities, so their lack of interest in partnership are often likely informed by their perception of it being an unrealistic goal. Because this ultimately leads to higher attrition rates among disenchanted workers, Kay and Hagan (1999) have labeled this process, “self-elimination.”

Possibly Self-Limiting Fears about Stereotypes.

Several interviewees noted that black professionals were often concerned about not embarrassing themselves in front of their white colleagues, who they regarded as potentially racially biased. Interviewees suggested that these fears often led those apprehensive professionals to engage in self-consciously defensive impression management tactics that at times backfired and adversely affected their performance or led to them falling into worse standing in their groups. Many of the most successful black professionals interviewed in this study described themselves as being confident, comfortable and assertive in their communications with colleagues. These interviewees spoke of acting naturally and “being themselves” in the workplace, explaining that they were the “same person” at work as they were
outside of the office. They believed that those black workers who were afraid to be themselves were handicapping themselves and doing more harm than good to their own causes. These interactional styles appear to help enable many junior professionals to impress their colleagues with their talents and insights and to project images of professionalism and develop high-status reputations within their organizations.

However, many interviewees were unable to perform with sufficient confidence and outspokenness or chose other impression management strategies intended to call less attention to themselves. Some who believed that black professionals were held to double standards in their work organizations, feared that making inaccurate or off-the-cuff comments might serve to confirm the racial stereotypes or assumptions about their incompetence. Some black attorney interviewees, for example, also discussed not feeling as comfortable as their white counterparts in speaking up in meetings without carefully thinking about and rehearsing their comments in advance or in asking for clarification or help on challenging assignments. Others believed that their black counterparts employed such strategies. Ewoma suggested that many black professionals are concerned about “looking stupid” and that this can negatively affect their work.

Rather than asking questions or being able to say, “I don’t know,” we hide and struggle on our own. We work doubly hard on challenging assignments trying to figure out on our own because we aren’t comfortable saying “I don’t understand,” because we think the consequences might be different for black people.

Other interviewees discussed script-changing efforts, where black professionals not only adapted the vernacular and small talk routines of their office cultures, but actually went above and beyond office norms and purposefully remained more formal and professional in their speech and self-presentation than their white officemates. Blair observed that black junior managers at his firm, including himself, felt compelled to dramatically change their diction and language in the office, while his white colleagues, including his boss, felt no such pressure.
The way they [white professionals] are at work is the way that they were in college. My boss curses up a storm… Do you think he changes who he is when he comes through that door? What if I do that? What if I say “this is bulls--t”? What if I curse? What if I say “f--k that” in a meeting? I always feel that I’m being judged so I always have to be on. That’s how I feel about corporate America. White people don’t have to change who they are.

Although Blair has not actually seen black professionals penalized for acting too casually, he is firmly convinced that his white boss has a special racial prerogative to present himself casually and speak with vulgar profanity, even during presentations and meetings. Blair complained that he and other black professionals feel unspoken pressure to “change who they are” by presenting themselves with exaggerated formality and professionalism in their workplace communications and interactions. He believes that because his colleagues have low expectations of black workers, there is essentially a double standard, where any improprieties or mistakes will be held against him far more than they would against one of his white counterparts. This belief, to the extent that it leads individuals to become more socially distant from their colleagues and superiors, may actually further hinder their efforts to develop the relationships and social capital necessary to succeed in their professions. The overall experiences of these interviewees suggest that this approach to modifying behavior in response to the perceived racial double-standards does not appear to be a winning strategy for black junior professionals. Most of the interviewees who discussed making such behavioral adjustments still reported having negative experiences, in some cases until they abandoned these approaches and adapted other strategies.

Only one interviewee with this perspective, Tony, the southern attorney, had a positive overall experience at his firm. Tony’s black mentors informed him very in his career that he would be monitored with more scrutiny than his white counterparts and therefore should hold himself to a higher level of professionalism and propriety. He took this advice to heart and put up a wall of formal but affable professionalism in many of his interactions with his white colleagues, even away from the office. He as a rule tried to avoid reciprocating the level of
intimate details his counterparts shared about their personal lives and avoided becoming intoxicated in their presence. Tony credits this restraint with allowing him to maintain an impeccable reputation for professionalism, which helped him thrive at his firm.

Although this approach was apparently useful for Tony, evidence from other interviews suggests that this approach may more often lead to the feelings of alienation and under-appreciation that derail organizational careers. These self-presentation and communication strategies of staying low-key and to one’s self, whether at social events or in the course of one’s work day, may run afoul of their firms’ cultural norms of professional self-presentation and may lead decision-makers and senior colleagues to further question their competence and commitment. This self-defeating strategy in the presence of concerns about racial stereotypes and assumptions may lead to outcomes consistent with the findings of social psychologists that awareness of negative stereotypes and investment in difficult tasks can increase anxiety that can undermine performance leading to results that seem to affirm the negative stereotypes41. This dilemma presents a seemingly no-win situation for some black professionals. Many, in attempting to avoid stereotypes end up doing irreparable damage to their careers at their firms, by either taking on too much responsibility or the wrong kind of responsibilities, or not showcasing their analytic talents and critical thinking abilities and professional judgment in team meetings. Nakia, who has worked as an investment banking analyst noticed that black professionals at times seemed to disadvantage themselves by trying to go at complex problems and challenges alone, through hard work, instead of effectively tapping into their relational resources for help.

41 This process is distinct from that discussed in social psychological research on stereotype threat theory, wherein anxieties about negative group-based stereotypes lead members of stigmatized groups to confirm those stereotypes (see Steele and Aronson, 1995; Roberson and Kulik, 2007). However, it is analogous to stereotype threat theory to the extent that the awareness of possible race-based stigma and stereotypes in both instances lead minorities to change their behavior in ways that further exacerbate disparities.
Views on the Persistence of Racial Discrimination

Notwithstanding this majority view that racism has not been a barrier, approximately a quarter of all interviewees asserted that their professional careers had been impeded by outright racial discrimination, racial stereotypes and double standards.

The Persistence of Implicit Racism

Despite the considerable progress of recent decades, research on black professionals has consistently shown that many believe racial discrimination to have been a serious problem well after the end of the civil rights era and the decline of old-fashioned racism. Even with the extraordinary decline in measures of traditional racism and racial animus, a large body of social science research has convincingly demonstrated that racial bias and discrimination still at times severely impede black workers in lower status job markets (see Pager and Shephard, 2008). There is reason to believe that employment decisions may be significantly affected by racial prejudice, including subconscious or implicit racism and cognitive racial biases. In light of the decline of expressions of traditional racism, social psychologists have turned their attention to other possible manifestations of racial prejudice and animosity (Sears and Henry, 2003). Many researchers have found that white attitudes toward blacks and policies intended to benefit blacks are often shaped by negative racial affectations in conjunction with conservative political values, a combination that has been referred to as “symbolic racism” (see Sears and McConahay, 1973; Kinder and Sears, 1981; McConahay, 1982). Other researchers have argued that many whites tend to view certain types of minority progress as undermining their own individual or racial group interests and positions, and therefore react in opposition (Bobo, 1988; Sidanius et al., 1992; Bonilla-Silva, 1997; Bobo, 1999; Sidanius et al., 1999).
There is also a well-developed body of research by social psychologists on implicit, or automatic, bias. In a set of path-breaking studies, Devine (1989) demonstrated that even many low-prejudiced individuals have automatic responses to blacks that are consistent with bias, and racial stereotypes and prejudice. McConnell and Leibold (2001) and other psychologists have demonstrated that experiment participants’ assertions of non-prejudiced opinions are belied by their performance on Implicit Association Test (“IAT”). Numerous studies using this test have found that many people who express non-biased beliefs in fact demonstrate negative implicit reactions to racial minorities and other stigmatized groups. This research has also become increasingly influential in legal academia as law professors, often writing with psychologists, have increasingly published articles incorporating the empirical work on implicit bias to bolster their arguments about the prevalence of racial discrimination and bias in the contemporary workplace (see Kang, 2005; Krieger and Fiske, 2006; Jolls and Sunstein, 2006; Greenwald and Krieger, 2006; Banks and Ford, 2008; Lawrence, 2008; Bartlett, 2009; Green and Kalev, 2008).

Other psychologists have found that whites may discriminate against black job applicants in favor of whites in instances where the black and white applicants both have ambiguous qualifications (Dovidio and Gaertner, 2000). This finding, if extrapolated to the corporate world, suggests that all but the most extraordinarily impressive and qualified black professionals may receive unfair treatment in hiring, evaluation and other processes that require white colleagues to assess their relative merits.

If these implicit and automatic forms of racial bias are as prevalent and potent as the social psychological experiments suggest, then black professionals may experience many of the same types of mistreatments and disadvantages as those of previous generations, despite the

---

42 The IAT, a computer-based test, seeks to measure test-takers’ implicit biases by having them match racial groups and various positive and negative attributes. Test-takers who take longer to pair black with positive than negative attributes, are deemed to have displayed implicit bias.
decline of traditional racism. However, it is unclear how the laboratory findings of social psychologists correspond to the actual goings on in real world employment contexts. Even if we assume that a significant number of white professionals have non-trivial amounts of implicit racism, it is still unclear whether these biases lead them to act in ways that disadvantage black professionals. People can control the effects of their automatic biases through conscious thought and effort, especially when given time to reflect and deliberate (Devine, 1989). Increased awareness and concern about racial imbalances in the corporate workplace, and external client-driven pressures to produce more racially egalitarian outcomes (see Chapter 1) may mitigate some of the effects of whatever biases still persist. It may be that some young black professionals are adversely affected by race, in some cases, quite seriously, while other black professionals are not.

Some interviewees believed that the numbers spoke for themselves. Dennis argued that the racial disparities are so huge, and the lack of black progress at his firm so absolute, that there can be no other explanation other than blatant racial discrimination. His firm, with well over 500 lawyers worldwide, has only had one black partner in its history and has not made a new black partner in over a decade.

I’m a conspiracy theorist so I think that every year, a black lawyer rising through the ranks is going to be stymied by outright, overt attempts [of exclusion]…There has to be something nefarious happening in firms that explains how you can start off in successive years with classes of 10 to 15 black lawyers and yet still only end up with 1 black partner for an extended period of time. It cannot be that we are tricking ourselves out of that promotion every single time it becomes a possibility. It can’t be.

Several interviewees feel that they were presumed by some to be less competent than their white counterparts and were therefore denied important opportunities to demonstrate and develop their professional abilities. Langston, a graduate Howard Law School believes that black attorneys at his large city law firm are systematically treated unfairly. He does not believe
that the white partners at his firm are “necessarily racist” but he nonetheless believes that they
act upon “implicit biases and implicit associations” that lead them to unfairly privilege certain
white associates. Wendell believes that those white associates enjoy “a much wider margin of
error” than their black counterparts because partners are more likely to assume that they are
talented and competent. During our interview, he suggested that his white counterparts were
able to get away with substandard performance with minimal damage to their reputations or
organizational standing. “I have heard some stories of my coworkers’ work not being done on a
filing date two hours before we intend to file, with brackets inside the sh-t. That would never
happen with me. Would never happen with me. A forgivable crime if it happens with other
people.”

Langston also believes that the black attorneys at his firm are not rewarded for their
performance and do not have the same opportunities as their white counterparts. His beliefs
about the role of race at his firm were gradually shaped and informed by his observations of the
struggles of their black colleagues.

As you become more senior, you start seeing who’s getting what and you look at how [other
black] people who are senior to you are also getting distributed work. Then you start realizing
that it’s not about me or my capabilities because this person is as good as their [white]
counterparts and yet they’re not getting what they deserved and you also aren’t getting what you
deserve.

Kevon, a consultant at a southern office of a major consulting firm, believes that many
non-black consultants were given far more blatantly preferential treatment and granted far
greater margin for error than other consultants. This was at times determinative, as black
consultants without key supporters were essentially fired for making mistakes that were routinely
forgiven when committed by others.

I started realizing that the playing field wasn’t level, that there were certain people who were
running downhill and me and other people who were running uphill…For the black people, it was
disproportionately bad. There were stories of people being asked to leave after a year. Being
surprised, told they were doing well, and then having one bad project and being asked to leave. But a lot of the white kids and Indian kids who had people who had their back, would have 2-4 bad projects and people would made excuses for them. And they would still be treated like the best thing since sliced bread.

Kevon describes his experience at his firm as “brutal” and perceived that race “played a huge role there.” He felt that the black consultants working in his office were categorically unable to advance in the firm and were often asked to leave on bad terms. He suspects that the partners at his office were not truly interested in increasing the diversity of their senior ranks but instead only hired black people ”to get their diversity numbers up.”

Unlike Veronica, who believed that black attorneys arrive at law firms less interested in succeeding than their white counterparts, Leon was convinced that black attorneys only lowered their hopes after realizing that they would not be treated fairly at their firms. He believed that “looking up and seeing that people who look like you don’t get to the top of the mountain” deters black associates from putting forth the extreme effort necessary to seriously attempt to make partner. Leon claimed that to believe he could ever aspire to make partner at his law firm would require him to implausibly assume that he was somehow more impressive than all of the black associates who have come before him and failed to do so over the years. He claimed that in his years at his firm and his conversations with numerous “very intelligent, highly-motivated” black attorneys at other firms, he has yet to meet one who believed that they had a realistic chance of making partner. He finds it implausible that these black attorneys, who have worked hard and thrived in intense, competitive school environments suddenly became categorically less ambitious upon joining law firms.

I just feel that there is something organizationally, structurally that prevents talented minorities from getting there. It’s not overt racism… I think it’s more subtle than that… It happens, I believe, on a very subconscious level. They now have enough experience with black associates leaving that they probably think black associates aren’t serious going forward. So they’re even less inclined to invest their time mentoring you because what maybe five classes before you have shown them. So you start off with a subconscious bias that you have to overcome.
Presumptions of Incompetence.

Blair, who works in supply chain management in a major consumer products corporation, also felt that black people at his corporation needed to work extra hard to prove their basic competence. Using a football analogy, he explained that black professionals are ‘penalized’ by presumptions of incompetence before they even start their jobs.

[I]t’s almost like you have to prove yourself. So you start in the hole. It’s like football if you start with a false start-- now you’ve got first and fifteen [yards to go] instead of first and ten like everyone else. [If] you talk to any black person in corporate America, you’ll hear that you have to be twice as good as the white guy next to you.

Blair acknowledges that he “might be paranoid or self-conscious” but he strongly believes that his mistakes will receive more attention than those of his white counterparts.

Terrance, who had negative experiences at his first professional job, and Kareem, a corporate manager who describes his professional experiences in very positive terms, both used similar language in insisting that black professionals need to be “twice as good” or work “twice as hard” as their non-black counterparts.

Withheld Opportunities.

Young professionals can only succeed when they are provided sufficient opportunities to develop and demonstrate their abilities (see Chapter 2). Those who receive access to greater opportunities will have far more impressive records when it is time for performance reviews and promotion decisions. Several interviewees believed that while comparable white professionals are often sought out and given access to such opportunities, they are kept on slower career trajectories and excluded. Terrance who attended a predominantly black urban school in the south before enrolling in an east coast HBCU, and worked for several years in a business position at a pharmaceutical company, adds:
Corporate America can slow black people down by giving them menial tasks. Then when evaluation time comes, [the black workers] might feel that they went above and beyond in handling this work, but the review will state that those tasks had “insufficient complexity” to merit a raise. The problem with corporations with black talent is that there are often only a few [premium work opportunities] and it’s hard to ration them out evenly, so black employees end up getting the short end of the stick often.

Because of the pyramid hierarchy of corporations, only relatively small percentages of professionals can receive certain promotions and advance beyond certain levels in their companies. Corporations, which do not traditionally use the up or out policies common in professional service firms, need to find workers who will be content in long-term, lower-status professional positions while more ambitious and impressive colleagues ascend to greater heights and more prestigious positions. Terrance believes that many corporations, including his own, expect their black professionals to fill those positions. They are less likely to provide them with the scarce premium work opportunities that would allow them to develop and demonstrate the skills necessary to position themselves for raises and promotions. Terrance complained that some of his white peers advanced “leaps and bounds” above him. Within a few years at the company, two of his white colleagues who had begun with him had risen two levels above him (which made them equivalent to his boss’s boss). Although Terrance was assured that his own progress was impressive (he believed, for a black person), he did not believe that he received equal opportunities as those more successful white counterparts. He believes this experience is par for the course in the professional world and that a lot of black professionals he knows are similarly disgruntled (“at least 50% of my peers are frustrated with their jobs, usually because they feel undervalued.”) Terrance repeatedly requested greater responsibilities and more work, but to no avail. He ultimately left the company because he felt that he “wasn’t getting opportunities to get to the top, because of race.”
Clara believes that black attorneys at her law firm were consistently denied opportunities that white associates received as a matter of course. She explained that they received “preferential treatment” and were consistently placed in better positions to excel.

We literally had meetings, associate meetings, [with] the managing partner there and he would go around and ask people sometimes, “What are you working on?” And you could hear the lists; you could hear the difference in the type of work…with some of the white associates around the same year versus what the black associates were working on and it was just totally different… I would ask people [for better assignments], I’d say “I haven’t done this, this and this,” and sometimes they would say stuff like “You have to have more gray hair to do that,” but it’s not because white male associates and the white female associates who were around my year—they’d already done it…I got the impression—my friends at the firm got the impression that some of those things weren’t exactly equal.

Clara observed that some white attorneys—those who shared greater social bonds with white partners—were more privileged than others, all seemed to receive more work and more substantively important assignments than black associates. She also observed that unfair racial disparities emerged very early on, in some instances within black and white associates’ first weeks on the job. They perceived that some—almost always, white—junior professionals received the “superstar treatment” while others quickly lost ground and “fell between the cracks.” Clara, an attorney, noticed that white attorneys at her firm appeared to get more assignments and personal attention from more senior colleagues during their first days on the job (see Chapter 5). Black attorneys who receive lower-quality assignments and opportunities than their white counterparts will quickly fall behind them and will inevitably fail to make partner when they become eligible for promotions.

Abu, who has worked at several financial institutions, also believes that some banks hire black employees without intending to give them the same opportunities to rise through the corporate hierarchy as their white counterparts. He was never “anointed” as a trader (the big money position) and was instead relegated to behind the scenes, support roles. He believes that
only the most overachieving black workers were given access to the types of opportunities enjoyed by ordinary whites.

**Racial Exclusion.**

As discussed in the previous chapter, many interviewees struggled to achieve full inclusion into their firms because of social distances and created by cultural differences. Other interviewees who experienced or observed similar problems had very different explanations. They believe exclusion is motivated by racial prejudice and discrimination. Some discussed seeing new white professionals at their firms being greeted and grabbed in the hall by white partners while black attorneys were ignored. Two interviewees who had grown up in affluent areas and attended elite schools believed that partners ignored them and gravitated to their white counterparts instead because they assumed that, on the basis of race, they’d have more in common with them. Leon believed that partners at his firm are less interested in getting to know black associates because, on the basis of past experience with minority attorney attrition, they probably assume that black associates aren’t serious about trying to make partner and won’t be at the firm for long.

**Double Standards: Greater Penalties for Comparable Mistakes.**

Several interviewees believed that racially discriminatory double standards were most visibly on display in the disparate manner in which white senior professionals in their firms reacted to mistakes made by black and white junior professionals. They believed that blacks were treated far more harshly and punitively while whites were treated more forgivingly. They complained that while black professionals were often “written off” for fairly minor errors, their white counterparts received special leniency from their superiors, even when they made fairly serious mistakes. For example, Abu described the excessive leniency employers extended to
white workers who made very bad mistakes. He explained, “You’d be surprised at the kind of mistakes [white professionals] can make-- [multi-million] dollar mistakes.” Abu believes that black professionals would be dealt with more severely for making mistakes of such magnitudes, (or, more commonly, not even given the responsibilities that would allow them to possibly make such mistakes). Humphrey, an attorney, was once candidly told by a white partner that he would have to be more careful than some of his white counterparts, who “had more margin for error because the comfort level was there for inappropriate reasons.”

Humphrey and Abu both suggested that they were denied promotions they had earned and failed to advance at their previous companies in part because they had been held to double standards. They both believed that they had been unfairly compared to exceptionally high-performing black counterparts who outshined them (and most of their white counterparts too). They each felt that they were penalized for not being the “best black,” even though their qualifications and abilities were as strong as many of their white counterparts who were promoted.

Megan, an attorney who previously worked at a New England law firm, felt that the integrity of her firm’s evaluation process was marred by racial unfairness. Like a few other interviewees, she complained that her supervisors gave too little positive feedback or constructive criticism and disproportionately focused on routine mistakes during her review process.

I would do an amazing job on some things and never hear positive feedback or anything good back but if there was ever a problem, I had to do a policy denial letter and had never even seen one, went back and forth with the senior associate, my feedback focused on that one out of a hundred.

43 This is not to be confused with law professor Stephen Carter’s (1991) discussion of “the best black syndrome,” which refers to the tendency of non-blacks to assume that black professionals received their jobs through affirmative action (and had been hired only because they were the “best blacks” available, not because they were particularly competent or qualified).
Because of this and other inequities, Megan ultimately felt compelled to leave her firm, and quickly landed a comparably high-status job in the federal government.

Even some of the interviewees who were most satisfied with their experiences at their firms believed that blacks were at times held to higher, unfair standards. The perspective of Sandra, a successful senior associate at a large mid-Atlantic law firm illustrates the complex nuances of young black professionals’ experiences navigating the racial landscapes of their firms. During the course of our interview, Sandra raved about her positive experiences at her firm, stating, for example: “It does not get better than this. For me it’s just been a very, very positive experience” and “I feel that I have actually gotten very good opportunities.” When asked about whether race had affected her career experiences, she initially insisted that it had not. “I definitely don’t feel that me being black is a hindrance to me doing well at the firm. At all.” However, Sandra later revealed that, despite her positive experience, she did not believe that black attorneys were treated equally at her firm. She firmly believes that black attorneys face higher standards and must work harder than their white counterparts in order to succeed. Sandra believes that she was only treated fairly because she established herself as an extremely hard-worker (“I definitely billed higher than the average associate. I definitely took on one more case when I could have just chilled.”) In her opinion, all but the most impressive black attorneys were treated unfairly.

I think that black attorneys at any law firm have an uphill battle because I do think that we have to stand out, I don’t think we can be just mediocre. I don’t think we can be average and sail through and still get good opportunities like a lot of the white kids can. I really do think that we have to work harder.

Sandra believed that racial inequality at her firm was most obvious with respect to non-superstar, average performers. Black attorneys who performed average work or failed to demonstrate extraordinary work ethic and enthusiasm were passed over far more consistently.
than comparable white attorneys. She explained that, “If you don’t go the extra mile and you’re a black associate, it can be to your detriment and you can definitely feel that you get less opportunities and that you’re less visible.” In contrast, she has observed that several unimpressive white associates have done fairly well at her firm.

I definitely know that there are some really average white associates who are set up pretty well. They get on good cases, they ham it up with the partners-- they’re super-friendly with the partners…I remember one time getting on a case with one of the alleged superstars and I was very underwhelmed.

Although she did not refer to this during the interview, Sandra’s background and personal disposition may have provided her advantages over many of her black counterparts. Sandra is exceptionally charismatic and outgoing and socially comfortable in a variety of environments, having attended a range of educational institutions including affluent, predominantly white institutions and an HBCU. She was more proactive and uninhibited than many interviewees in approaching partners and asking them for work. It is quite possible that some partners took an interest in her not only because of her superior work product but also because they found it easy and comfortable to get along with her.

Trevor, a New York attorney, believes that law firm partners are more likely to interpret mistakes by black associates as confirmation of their presumed incompetence.

I think that people come to the table with certain assumptions, either consciously or subconsciously. And those assumptions affect the way that they perceive certain things. So two people could make the same mistake but because the person reviewing the work is viewing it through a different lens they might think that something else is going on… So, for example, if we made the same mistake that some [white associate] made, it takes on a whole different connotation.

One interviewee, Dennis, claimed that the white partners at his firm were visibly less comfortable dealing with black professionals.

There is a change in the pulse rate, the literal timing of the beating of one’s heart, if you are in a cocktail reception or a mentor/mentee lunch the first week when you meet your mentor…when the person sitting across the table from you is black and you are white. And I would say that’s probably true 95% of the time…It’s easier for them to engage with someone who is similar than it
is someone who is different. You need some other reason to want to push yourself to have a good conversation with the person who’s different.

Dennis’s description of the social awkwardness he’s encountered in various inter-racial interactions are consistent with a large body of psychology research on intergroup anxiety (see Plant and Devine, 2003). Plant and Devine (2003) and other researchers have found that white people in experimental conditions are more likely to exhibit physical signs of anxiety during and in anticipation of interactions with black people than with other whites (id.). This anxiety leads to less enjoyable interactions that are less likely to facilitate the rapport and bonding that leads to organizational social capital and multiplex relationships.

A few interviewees shared incidents at their firms involving “micro-assaults,” explicit offensive comments or derogation apparently intended to harm or distress them (Sue et al., 2007). One female attorney, Antoinette, was doing very well during her first couple years at her firm, receiving premium work opportunities and accolades from the partners in her department. Her fortunes dramatically changed one day when an outspoken white partner picked an argument with her by criticizing affirmative action at length and alleged that Antoinette had probably been hired over numerous more impressive white applicants. Although the partner ultimately gave her a favorable review, this incident caused other complications that she believes derailed her promising start at the firm. Her real difficulties began once the incident was reported to her firm’s HR department (by someone else who was present). She quickly became somewhat of a pariah in her practice group and began receiving noticeably fewer high-quality assignments, as white partners apparently became less comfortable about working with her. Within a few months after our interview, she had left the firm for employment elsewhere.

44 This may also hold true of black people during their interactions with whites, but this scenario has not yet been thoroughly researched (Plant and Devine, 2003).
One Wall Street interviewee, Leondra, had the most shocking experience of all the professionals interviewed, when she once overheard her boss angrily refer to her as a “f-cking n-gger.” Leondra reported this incident to her firm’s administration, who promptly swept it under the rug while barely punishing her boss. Compounding her problems, Leondra also suffered retaliatory actions from her boss and his allies, who glared at her, refused to speak to her, and in some instances refused to move out of her way in the office hallways. Leondra’s experience suggests that beneath the veneer of racial civility in some workplaces, there may still be underlying hostility. Had she not personally overheard her colleague’s outrageous comment, she likely would have remained oblivious to the level of his animus toward her.

Another attorney, Nadia, believes that she was subjected to racial harassment and innuendo at her New England law firm. One partner seemed to go out of his way to be “hostile” to her and tried to “antagonize” her. She recalled one incident when he used the word “tar baby” in a conversation with her shortly after presidential candidate Mitt Romney had provoked a public outcry for his use of the word. Although it was “obvious” to Nadia that this partner was trying to racially provoke or offend her, she believed that his comment was likely ambiguous enough to provide him that he Nadia did not report the partner or directly confront him about his pointed use of the word, so it is unclear how her firm would have chosen to address the incident. Although such incidents were extremely rare among interviewees, they are alarming nonetheless and reveal that there are at least some bad apples in elite law firms who go out of their way to racially bully subordinates.

White Interviewees’ Perceptions of Racial Discrimination

The smaller comparison group of white professionals interviewed for this study had a lot less to say about racial discrimination in their firms but nonetheless provided an interesting
contrast to the views of the black professionals. White interviewees generally did not have strong opinions about the significance of race in affecting opportunities and outcomes at their firms. Several noted that they were not particularly close to any of their black colleagues and therefore were not at all sure about their perspectives on race. This pattern perhaps confirms the existence of the racial social disconnects discussed in Chapter 4. Most recognized that minorities were underrepresented at their firms but either attributed this to supply-side issues (especially for those working in non-diverse regions of the country).

White professionals almost unanimously believed that racial discrimination was not a problem at their firms. A consistent theme across many of the interviewees with white professionals was that high-status firms appeared to be making good faith efforts to increase racial diversity but that these efforts generally seemed to bear little fruit. Several indicted that their firms were seriously committed to improving diversity and had taken steps to do so. Ogilvie explained that his firm was “bending over backward to hire women, minorities and homosexuals” but “for whatever reason, it was still a lot of white faces.”

Mike, through the course of his experience interviewing and reviewing the resumes of law students who were applying for summer and full-time positions at his firm, noticed that his firm was “so gung-ho about diversity” that it appeared to grant preferential treatment to some minority candidates. Specifically, he believes that on multiple occasions, he noticed that the firm had extended interviews to black associates whose credentials were, on paper, noticeably less impressive than those of the white students from the same schools who had also been granted interviews.

There was a disparity in the grades and the credentials of minority versus non-minority. Just talking generalities, there would be a minority candidate with straight Bs and a [white] guy with half A’s and half B’s from the same school. It happened with two or three candidates that I interviewed.
Seth, another white attorney, also believed that his firm was racially fair but noted that in some instances, black associates appeared to receive preferential treatment from partners. Seth explained that some of his firm’s most important clients pressured partners to staff their teams with diverse attorneys and to make extra efforts to ensure that minority attorneys on those teams were provided premium opportunities to perform substantive work. In their attempts to accommodate their clients’ demands, Seth believed that partners repeatedly extended preferential treatment to one particularly unimpressive African-American attorney even though her work was not up to par.

We had a female African-American associate who was generally viewed by other associates as not being of the same level of intelligence or commitment as others, including by other African-Americans and female associates. Most people didn’t think she was up to the task or thought that she didn’t work really hard, but she still got certain cases and worked with certain big partners because of her diversity status. There was a perception that she got away with a lot more… And other [white] associates would get upset about this; it was definitely something that was discussed. It was never a big deal for me because I always had plenty of good work, but I’m sure that if I was in their shoes looking for work and couldn’t get it, it [this preferential treatment] would have annoyed me too.

Some believed that their firms attempted to increase diversity but were handicapped by their lack of present diversity. They portrayed this as a self-perpetuating difficulty, where talented minority professionals were likely to seek employment elsewhere instead of working for firms that had no black partners and little diversity. For example, Margaret, an attorney, explained her firm’s lack of racial diversity. “Race is a minor factor. [The Firm] just doesn’t seem to attract that many minorities. I think they would love to hire more African-Americans or Hispanics but I think that they don’t really want to go to The Firm and I don’t blame them because there are no minority partners.”

One interviewee recalled an instance where one of her young colleagues had made a racially impolitic joke, which was reported to the firm by several white colleagues and led to him being immediately sanctioned. Although white interviewees were not as dissatisfied or
frustrated with their career experiences as many of the black interviewees, they did share some of their complaints about the nature of professional work. Several noticed that senior professionals at their firms tended to select certain “golden boys” for high-opportunity paths or favored junior professionals with whom they had built friendship and social connections. However, interviewees did not attribute these outcomes to racial homophily or discrimination. Instead, they discussed those people as receiving better treatment than all of their professional counterparts of all racial backgrounds. White interviewees seemed to be more aware than black interviewees of the many white professionals who also did not receive preferential treatment. They seemed more likely to attribute differences in outcomes to the capricious nature of professional life, where some professionals manage to build the right relationships and connect with the right people and others do not. White professionals, men and women, seemed far more conscious of the difficulties and disadvantages of gender (discussed in Chapter 7).

Ogilvie believed that racial differences affected the provision of opportunity indirectly, in that black professionals were less likely to be plugged in to white social networks.

As far as race goes… at the highest levels of most places, there aren’t women and minorities. And for lawyers they’re going to hire their friends who they have trusted a long time. And friendships are mediated by race. [The person who referred me to this study] is my only good black friend. Friendship is still mediated by race.

White interviewees seemed more likely to perceive that junior professional work at elite firms was challenging and/or unfulfilling for most of their counterparts, not just the disfavored few. Very few of the white interviewees were gung ho about the nature of their work at their firms or the quality of their career experiences there. They tended toward “nature of the beast” and “luck of the draw” arguments. Many decided that work at corporate law firms was inherently unrewarding and only fulfilling for a small minority of professionals. They saw the corporate world as a realm where high percentages of professionals got stuck, through no fault of
anyone’s, doing low-quality work with very little potential for personal fulfillment or professional growth. People who were able to “hit it off” with their managers, bosses or other useful people received advantages over others in that they were better able to obtain premium assignments and entry into their firms’ higher opportunity paths, and greater exposure.

One Midwest attorney, Halle, suggested that talented black attorneys may actually benefit from being minorities.

If you’re not white, you’re going to stand out. At a law firm, I think that can be good--you might get more attention because of [minority mentoring programs] and diversity at my firm is at least truly valued. You might even get more attention because they want to make sure you feel valued here.

Kelly, a white attorney who was formerly a senior associate at large Chicago firm, learned first-hand that some partners at her firm were committed to helping black associates were placed in positions to succeed:

I think The Firm certainly tried to have a diverse firm in terms of race and ethnicity…The attitude was always like “Our clients are diverse and our clients are going to look to make sure that we are,” and so The Firm tried to do that. I remember we had an African-American associate on my pro bono case, and The Partner called me and said he’s working on our case now and I want you to look out for him and make sure that he has a good experience and make sure he gets this kind of experience and that kind of experience so I think it’s-- I don’t want to say it’s a plus because obviously white associates are ever overlooked at The Firm but I don’t think race or ethnicity is ever a negative at The Firm, and sometimes they go the extra mile to make sure it’s a place that an African-American or Latino or whatever might want to stay. Because it’s good for the Firm too—their clients are a diverse set of clients and they want to see that in their lawyers.

This comment was consistent with observations by a few black interviewees, including Veronica, that firms that were interested in increasing diversity may go above and beyond to retain black professionals who had proven their abilities and impressed their senior colleagues.

More generally, white attorneys also seemed less likely to characterize the personnel decisions in their firms as arbitrary or unfair. Although several noted the importance of social capital in gaining access to key partners and key assignments, they still described their firms as essentially meritocratic organizations where people who were smart and worked hard generally
prospered. In contrast, black professionals seemed to find success less remarkable than their white counterparts. A number of black interviewees believed that some unimpressive white professionals in their firms succeeded on the basis of social and political factors, and having developed the right multiplex relationships, while only a couple white professionals shared anecdotes involving such people. Most white professionals discussed organizational success as requiring a relatively rare extreme of commitment, focus, drive and dedication. Most perceived that many attorneys were not willing to devote themselves to their firm careers enough to succeed in the competition for partnership. Several acknowledged that they themselves were psychologically unable to muster and sustain the type of intensity necessary to ultimately advance within their organizations.

CONCLUSION

The diverse, complex perspectives presented in this chapter suggest that in assessing the opportunities and experiences of middle-class black workers, a more nuanced middle-ground, balancing the bleakness of previous studies and the overly sanguine “post-racial” euphoria evident in the public discussion of Obama’s election, may be in order. Many black professionals in the earliest stages of their careers appear content with the fairness and equality of their treatment and access to opportunities in their workplaces. A slight majority of all black professionals interviewed in this study did not believe that race had necessarily disadvantaged their careers or the careers of their black counterparts at their firms. Many were painfully aware of their firms’ lack of racial diversity but attributed this to non-racist causes. When discussing their experiences during these interviews, they did not come across as frustrated, angry or upset, in sharp contrast to the perspectives presented as representative in previous research. White
interviewees almost universally fell in line with this perspective although most conceded that this was not a topic they had carefully investigated or contemplated. Several suggested that their firms made substantial efforts to improve racial diversity but were thwarted by supply problems.

Only a distinct, but significant, minority of interviewees believed that black professionals at their firms suffered from racial unfairness including racist double standards and discriminatory treatment. Their descriptions of their experiences and those of their black colleagues echoed many of the problems that have been extensively discussed in previous research, including limited access to premium opportunities, perceived presumptions of incompetence, and reduced margins for error on job assignments.

The following chapters will consider a series of factors that might explain why some black professionals may tend to have better experiences and more positive outlooks about the importance of race on their firm than others. Chapter 6 will consider the ways in which interviewees’ experiences may be significantly influenced by their personal origins and family backgrounds. Chapter 7 will assess the consequences of the different organizational and institutional contexts in which black professionals’ careers have unfolded, including variations in firm and office size, industry norms, the nature of the work performed in different occupations, and economic conditions.
The black professionals interviewed in this study come from a wide variety of family backgrounds. They arrived in the corporate world having travelled very different socioeconomic trajectories, with different challenges, resources, and opportunities along the way. Some grew up in impoverished urban ghettos while others lived in some of America’s most affluent suburbs. Many are first-generation professionals; some were even the first of their families to attend college. Others are the offspring of well-heeled law firm partners and prominent civic leaders. Interviewees also came from different ethnic backgrounds as well. Most were multi-generation Americans--the descendents of American slaves. Nearly a quarter, however, were first-generation Americans of African or Caribbean descent.

This diversity and its implications have yet to be examined. The many studies that have investigated the careers of black professionals have generally given short shrift to these differences. For example, Anderson (1999) alludes to the possible significance of professionals’ class origins, but in a highly-stylized, simplified manner. Some previous reports have generalized that that, compared to their white counterparts, the earliest black professionals, as a group, were disadvantaged by their family backgrounds, but these studies have not considered the significance of heterogeneity within the group. Because people are shaped by their accumulated life experiences (not just by their present circumstances), these background

---

45 Anderson (1999) dichotomizes the company’s black professional workforce into two ("core" and "peripheral") groups, who he portrays as differing by class origins, educational careers, cultural capital, and racial attitudes. His approach does not independently consider the effects of class origins.
characteristics may have profound consequences for professionals’ work experiences and their perspectives about the significance of race in the corporate world.

The Significance of Family Social Class Background for Corporate Professionals

The previous research’s neglect of the family origins of black professionals reflects broader limitations in past sociological research on class, race, and social stratification. There has been surprisingly little commentary on the perspectives of adults who have achieved significant inter-generational social mobility. Sociologists have devoted considerable attention to the dynamics of class reproduction and the factors that limit social mobility, but have had far less to say about how childhood class disadvantages might persist into adulthood and affect upwardly-mobile workers’ professional experiences and outcomes. Thus, we know very little about how the effects of disparate socioeconomic origins may persist into adulthood and influence the work experiences of otherwise similarly situated workers.

Sociologists have identified numerous class-based parenting styles, behavior, and social and cultural resources and practices that middle- and upper-class parents may draw from to help propel their children to high-paying jobs as adults (Bernstein, 1975; Kohn, 1977, Bourdieu, 1986; Lareau, 2002, Devine, 2004; Levey, 2009). Bourdieu (1986) found that some upper-class French families instilled elite cultural capital in their children that may them attain elite status as adults. Hays (1996) found that middle-class American mothers tend to use more labor- and time-intensive child-rearing practices than poor parents, which may increase their children’s’ individuality in ways that may reproduce social class. Lareau (2003) identified a “concerted cultivation” model of parenting that was disproportionately used in upper-middle-class households, which (among other things) encourages children to constructively engage
professionals and authority figures. The interactional styles and cultural repertoires instilled through concerted cultivation may match those valued in many important institutions (Lareau, 2003). Other practices used by upper-middle-class parents, including their immersing their children in organized and competitive activities (see Lareau, 2003; Levey, 2009), may further develop the types of skills necessary for professional success in large organizations, including improved social dexterity, and comfort in competing with counterparts, handling stress, managing full schedules, and juggling multiple projects.

This research has focused on the deployment of cultural capital as a social reproduction mechanism that might explain, for example, why privileged children disproportionately end up in high-status, high-paying jobs. However, the putative class advantages discussed in these works may continue to have important implications for their experiences and successes on the job and may help the off-spring of well-resourced families perform better as professionals. According to the logic of these theories, professionals from such backgrounds should tend to possess cultural repertoires more conducive to maneuvering within the social and political dimensions of the corporate world. Because of their class positions, they should arrive with more experiences and interests in common with their senior colleagues and therefore, because of homophily dynamics, more easily develop valuable organizational social capital. Conversely, professionals raised by less affluent, less-educated parents should have greater difficulties adapting to and succeeding in the corporate world.

Despite the plausible theoretical basis for expecting that why family class should confer substantial advantages upon young professionals within elite corporate organizations, this study

---

46 This concerted cultivation approach stands in sharp contrast to the “natural growth” parenting style favored by poor and working class families. Natural growth parenting emphasizes deference and obedience to adults and more often results in children’s social interactions being primarily limited to family members and neighborhood friends.
found little evidence consistent with this hypothesis. Almost all of the black interviewees came from working and middle-class families, and very few attributed any such difficulties to their family backgrounds or described difficulties that appeared to be class-related. Most of the interviewees from the most disadvantaged backgrounds did not report such difficulties.

Although the cultural repertoires and social comfort that interviewees developed over their lives prior to entering the professional world appeared to matter immensely (see Chapter 4), it appears that these cultural and social factors are more closely related to race than class. As we will see in Chapter 7, the significance of junior professionals’ class backgrounds may be further attenuated by other factors, including their cross-racial exposure in college and professional school and their participation in pre-professional internship programs. Interviews with white professionals also uncovered relatively little evidence that family class position significantly affected many professionals’ experiences at their firms.47

The Difficulties of Upward Mobility.

Although the relationship between interviewees’ socioeconomic backgrounds and their perspectives on their professional experiences was fairly weak, this study found some indications that class origins do matter. A few interviewees from disadvantaged backgrounds believed that their lack of ties to the corporate world were particularly problematic at the beginnings of their careers. Lakesha, a public relations executive, claimed that her lack of exposure to the work routines and expectations of corporate professionals as a child, has been a source of continued disadvantage during her adult professional career. Lakesha, who grew up in a struggling inner-

---

47 It should be noted though, that the white interviewee sample was far more truncated and less socioeconomically diverse than the black sample. White interviewees, on average, came from solidly middle-class, professional or even affluent family backgrounds. None were raised in poverty and only a couple even came from households that could be considered working- or lower-middle-class.
ring suburb, explained that she had discussed these types of subtle class with her black professional friends.

A lot of our parents worked at factories for the serious 9-5 jobs. You go to work and come home, and that’s it... So a lot of us have problems when we have mandatory overtime or we’re working 12- and 13-hour days because it’s just not what we’re used to. We feel like, “Hey, I came to work, I worked my 8 hours…I did my thing, I don’t understand why you want more from me.” When a lot of people whose parents worked in corporate America could see that their dad wasn’t always home on time or that their mom didn’t come home early from work because they had a big project (and there’s always a big project).… That’s a tough lesson to learn when you’re used to [your parents] leaving on time or getting paid hourly.

Lakesha’s observation suggests that the family class backgrounds of some black professionals may make it harder for them to anticipate the demands of the corporate world. Although some of her difficulties were somewhat extreme (other interviewees seemed to understand that their jobs would require long, unpredictable work hours), there is little doubt that she would have better understood this had her parents been corporate professionals.48

Leondra, a middle-office Wall Street professional who grew up in a poor inner-city neighborhood, also struggled with conforming to some of the norms of her prestigious bank.

There were a couple of things that I still didn’t know about how to actually act in the corporate environment...Because there are certain rules that you have to follow, such as how you dress, how loud you speak, what you eat, the things you watch on TV, the music you listen to-- maybe it was a [firm] thing, but it seemed like everyone wore a blue shirt there, and I might have been the one wearing a red shirt...I would do things and shoot myself in the foot because I didn’t know.

Leondra attributed her difficulties to her never having had role models with “white collar job” before she entered the corporate world.

Similarly, Duane, an Ivy League educated consultant from a working class background, primarily associated with other financially struggling, work-study students while attending his elite college, and subsequently experienced significant difficulties adapting to the unwritten rules and expectations of self-presentation and communication in his first corporate job after college.

48 Most professionals from poor and working-class backgrounds understood that their jobs would require long, unpredictable hours before they began working, even if they had not known any professionals while growing up.
Duane ruefully recalled showing up to work on his office’s “casual Fridays” wearing Timberland-brand boots and hooded sweatshirts: clothing that was popular amongst many young black people but also stigmatized as associated with rap music and urban poverty to many others.

As “pioneers” in the corporate world, they must learn important lessons on the job that their more advantaged counterparts who grew up in professional households already absorbed by observing their parents. Because of their family class backgrounds, Lakesha and Leondra believe that they arrived in corporate America without fully understanding the importance of the correct “presentation of self.”

Leondra, who had lived in an inner-city public housing project until she moved into her dorm-room on at an Ivy League college, did not befriend many students from professional families. Her Ivy League experience therefore provide her only limited insight into the norms, strategies and rules governing professional careers in corporate America. The impact of this gap was revealed upon graduation, when she rejected a trading position at one bank and accepted a lower status, middle-office job at a more prestigious bank. Leondra had not realized that although the job she accepted began with a base salary comparable to that of traders, it would pay far less money after bonuses and set her on a far more limited professional trajectory.

Leroy, who also grew up in a poor household, also accepted a job offer for a middle-office position while his better-informed classmates with comparable qualifications sought higher-status, better-paying jobs. Many years later, Leondra and Leroy both spoke with evident frustration about watching their counterparts ascend to much higher-paying positions while they struggled to escape their low-trajectory jobs in those early years.

Sheldon, a former investment banker, believed that his lack of success in “playing…the political game and building my social networks within the firm” contributed to his being laid off
from his firm during the current recession. He noted that many black professionals seemed to
struggle in this area; he attributed their difficulties to their family backgrounds.

It might be particularly difficult for minorities coming in because the non-minority people
coming into banking know more about it just because they have more friends in it or their parents
were in it...[Usually], African-Americans are the first people [in their families] breaking into it
and so we're going in somewhat blind. And I think that's where we have a disadvantage as far as
the connections. Because we don't have fathers that were in the business that can say "Oh, my
son's joining [the bank] this year, watch out for him." We don't have that advantage.

He observed that several of his white classmates appeared to have such class-based
advantages.

I had a lot of the people in my class [who would say] “Oh my dad works at Deutsche Bank” or
“My dad works at JP [Morgan]” and he knows the MD here at [the bank] and they've talked,”
etcetera. I didn't have that. I know that a lot my [black] peers that went into banking didn't have
that. But I know that some [of his white peers] had that, and that's very helpful.

Dexter, an attorney who has worked at two large law firms, reported that he was never
mistreated on the basis of “the color of my skin” and that there “really was no issue of race that
came into play” at either of his firms. Nonetheless, he believed that black professionals, as a
group, were disadvantaged by their parents’ lack of corporate experience, to the extent that they
were not as “politically savvy” and less prepared to “play the game” as their more privileged
counterparts. Dexter recalled one upwardly-mobile associate who had some monumental lapses
in judgment because she “really didn’t know how to play the game.” Although she had received
many opportunities at her firm, her career fizzled because she failed to grasp important unwritten
rules and expectations. Dexter recalled one instance when a partner had invited her to attend a
baseball game on behalf of the firm and informed her that partners and clients would be there as
well. She did not seem to realize that this seemingly casual invitation was really a serious
request, and a potentially valuable opportunity to advance her career.

Basically the underpinnings of that [invitation] is that if you don’t really have anything pressing
like...an emergency at home, you need to go. [But she] says, “No, I have choir
rehearsal.”...We’re talking about the longevity of your career and forming those crucial
relationships that helps [partners] get comfortable with who you are as an individual. She
rejected that for choir rehearsal. A couple of us were sitting around like “Girl, what are you doing?”…That really wasn’t a request, it was sort of a[n] “I need you to be available for this.” And there were a couple other instances where she was like that…It never fully resonated with her.

Dexter attributed that her difficulties to the intersection of her class background and racial socialization. Having grown up in a predominantly black city and attended HBCUs for college and law school, she was apparently “not accustomed to dealing with and engaging people of other races” and therefore “uncomfortable” and “totally not engaging” in those settings.49 In contrast, those in the know, like Dexter, realized that projecting public faces as enthusiastic, outgoing and sociable in their work-related and social interactions could be as important as performing well on their work assignments.

As we saw in Chapter 4, junior professionals with cultural repertoires that are valued at their firms have an easier time developing career-enhancing social capital in the form of relationships with colleagues and sponsors. Some interviewees believed that their working-class family backgrounds impeded them from developing this social capital with senior professionals at their firms. These interviewees observed that their peers from wealthier families seemed better able to develop social relationships and bonds of trusts with their firms’ most powerful senior professionals, who disproportionately came from similarly affluent backgrounds. Interviewees explained that their lack of exposure to travelling internationally, “summering” in exclusive locales, or golfing at country clubs in their pre-professional years prevented them from participating in certain conversations. This hindered their efforts to develop mentorship relationships and reinforced their status as outsiders.

49 Although Dexter believed that his colleague did not “know how to play the game,” it is also possible that she did in fact understand the unspoken rules but intentionally defied them because she did not believe the benefits of being in better standing with partners and clients were worth the necessary social effort.
Class and Family Connections.

As professional service firms earn profits according to their ability to secure work from clients, firms often reward professionals for “bringing in business,” or persuading their contacts and acquaintances to retain their firms. Being able to attract new clients to the firm was very useful for mid-level professionals interested in being promoted and could more than compensate for otherwise unremarkable performances. Several interviewees, particularly those who worked in firms with less prestigious reputations or in offices in smaller professional markets, considered business development as key to successfully ascending the ranks within their firms.⁵⁰

Several interviewees believed that, even in the absence of racial discrimination, black professionals might have a harder time advancing because they lacked the family connections that might help them bring in potential clients to the firm. Kevon, a consultant, explained that as consultants became more senior, their ability to bring in new business and generate revenue for their firms became increasingly important. Although this emphasis on business development had a racially disparate impact, Kevon thought that it was completely rational: “It makes sense to look at how much business this person is bringing in if I want to vote him to the highest level of the company.” He believed that differences in the quality of black and white constituents’ family connections contributed greatly to the racial disparities amongst the senior professional ranks in his industry—even more so than racism or discrimination. As he explained, “We all know that racism and those kind of things exist but they don’t exist everywhere, even where you might see some

---

⁵⁰ Several interviewees who worked in mid-tier professional markets (including, for example, St. Louis, Indianapolis, and Dallas) explained that they were expected to personally generate business for their firms. There seemed to be somewhat less of an emphasis on business development for junior professionals working in the largest and most prestigious firms. These firms certainly rewarded junior professionals for bringing in new business but generally did not require it of them. Because of their greater national prominence and the reputations of their top senior professionals, larger firms seemed less dependent upon the business development efforts of junior professionals.
differences in the numbers of minorities … That doesn’t mean that someone behind the scenes is plotting against you.”

Kevon and other interviewees believed that these business development requirements advantaged professionals from affluent, well-connected families and disadvantaged most black professionals, who rarely come from such backgrounds. George, an attorney who grew up in a poor neighborhood, believes that his background may make it harder for him to advance to partner in his firm. George observed that most black attorneys he knew were first-generation professionals who lacked the contacts and business connections of their white counterparts.

Their [white attorneys’] father and their grandfather were attorneys or their father and their grandfather were business people or executives. And those sorts of connections are key. Because what it means is that if you’re a majority-race associate, now the chance that you could have some business given to you, handed to you, from your father’s company or your father’s friend’s company, it increases the likelihood of your success. Because you’ll be able to get people in the door more so than someone who’s literally almost starting from scratch and almost starting at the end of the race versus [you] starting in the pole position… It’s different if I can pick up the phone and say, “Hey dad, can you call Mr. Johnson? I know that he’s the vice president of XYZ Company and I’d like to at least be able to have a lunch set up with him.”

Thus, independent of any racial discrimination, the legacy of American racial inequality may perpetuate racial stratification in firms that require junior professionals to bring in new business.

A few of the black professionals interviewed in this study did have the family connections and personal wherewithal to generate new business for their firms. Two interviewees from middle-class but socially well-connected families discussed bringing new business to their firms through their family connections. For example, Enoch, an attorney, credited his family background with enabling him to “move around positions of privilege and [bring his firm] black business.”
Advantages of Higher Family Class Position.

Some interviewees from more affluent backgrounds were perhaps better able to succeed in the corporate world because cultural capital and social experiences attributable to their family circumstances. Frank, a white investment banker, found that his social class background as the son of a corporate executive provided him with substantial advantages over some of his counterparts. He explained that at the mid-level positions, investment banking was often very client-focused and thus privileged those professionals who were more adept at socializing with clients. He thrived at this and usually enjoyed these outings, in part because of his earlier exposure to the corporate world and interaction with businessmen as a child. He recognized that the client ingratiation process was “one of the hardest parts of the job” for many people who did not have his family class background.

It’s a flaw in the way the model here is set up. The analyst and associate positions are really quantitatively focused positions and the Vice-president (and above) position is very much a qualitatively focused position, in terms of selling and meeting people and soft skills… They give you a lot on the quantitative training when you start; you basically get none on the qualitative training going forward. So if you haven’t gotten exposure to that somehow you’re probably f-ked, I don’t know you learn it [on the job]… We had two really good associates that had gotten promoted to VP and weren’t really that good socially with clients and they got caught in the downturn and got blown out.

During our interviews, Brandon and a few interviewees from similar class backgrounds often initially conflated class-based difficulties as racial disadvantages, but often ultimately acknowledged that these problems were not as applicable to their black counterparts from more privileged backgrounds. Several interviewees suggested that intra-racial class differences mattered a great deal and that many of their black colleagues from higher socio-economic backgrounds more easily adapted to life at their firms. After discussing his social difficulties at his firm, Brandon noted that I “would probably get a different answer from the ‘Lawrence Otis Graham’ kids…the kids who went to Groton and come from wealthy backgrounds.”
In contrast, white interviewees from similar socioeconomic backgrounds seemed possibly less affected by their family class background or educational careers in shaping professional experience. The white interviewees from working- or lower-middle-class backgrounds did not report having been disadvantaged by their family backgrounds. Mike, a white attorney, grew up in a home that lower-middle to middle-class home in the Midwest. Mike grew up in a lower-middle-class home in a working class community but gained exposure to peers from far more affluent homes and competitive schools through his involvement in extra-curricular activities. This brought him into contact with new reference groups and expanded his horizons beyond that of his household or community’s class make-up. Although Mike did not grow up playing golf or dining in expensive restaurants, he was still able to develop relationships with several partners and many associates at his firm and did not report any difficulties fitting in.

**Class, Cross-Racial Exposure and Social Comfort.**

Interviewees from more privileged backgrounds seemed to have greater and higher-quality cross-racial exposure while growing up. Those who had regular, positive interactions with white peers, neighbors, and family friends while growing up may be more comfortable socially maneuvering in predominantly white organizational and social spaces as adults. Because of the importance of social capital and personal rapport at these elite firms, those black professionals who are more comfortable in their interactions with senior professionals are better off than those who cannot. Sinclair, a junior associate at a prominent law firm, identified this social ease as an important mechanism of class advantage for black professionals from affluent families. “If you can’t deal with older white authority figures in corporate America, you’re going to have a tough row to hoe,” Sinclair explained. “Because that’s who’s at the top. It’s a

---

51 Interviewees’ accounts show that earlier interracial contact can cut both ways. Those who directly experience racial hostility earlier in life are often less comfortable around whites as adults.
skill that needs to be cultivated.” Sinclair credited his growing up in a predominantly white, affluent suburb with giving him helpful exposure and familiarity that some of his black counterparts lacked.

Enoch noted that most of the black attorneys he knew who had succeeded at top law firms had parents who were also professionals. Enoch contrasted his success at his firm with the struggles of a black female associate from a more working-class background. Enoch was astonished at the woman’s lack of familiarity with some of the basic norms of corporate professional life and noted that other black attorneys even took it upon themselves to provide her an etiquette book when she was a summer associate. Enoch believed that black attorneys from poor and working class backgrounds were generally less prepared to maneuver in firms and less attuned to the unwritten rules, and offered Michelle Obama’s well-known difficulties as a law firm associate as an example.

Michelle Obama, the daughter of a city worker and a secretary, began her professional career at Sidley Austin, a large corporate firm based in Chicago. At Sidley, Obama (then Robinson) complained to the firm’s Human Resources department that she found her assignments to be too mundane (Mundy, 2008). HR determined that her complaints were groundless, and notified the partners. Enoch was incredulous about Obama’s decision to go to HR and considered it a grave error that could have derailed her career at the firm.

Now, Michelle Obama is an example of who you don’t hire at a firm. How do you go to HR to complain about not getting good work at a law firm?! See, she was coming from a working class background and didn’t know what was happening. She didn’t know how things work at a firm. She was clueless.

Although it is not clear that Obama’s decision negatively impacted her career at the firm, Enoch considered it an egregious misstep. He believed that if she had been exposed to the norms and rules of the corporate world at a younger age, she would have known to request greater
responsibilities on her case or to approach other partners for better work instead of seeking relief from the firm’s human resources administrators.

The perspectives of the few interviewees who did follow the same careers as one of their parents suggest that the benefits of parental class may be very subtle. Some interviewees from affluent, professional families found that their class backgrounds did not protect them from being treated unequally on the basis of race. Two attorneys from high-income professional households, one of whom had a white father, complained that white partners at their firms were still more likely to go out of their way to seek out and establish connections with their white counterparts, even though they were from similar families and had attended similar schools. Even though they believed that they much in common with the partners, they believed that because of the partners’ race-based assumptions to the contrary, they were never even afforded opportunities to demonstrate their commonalities or develop deeper relationships.

Gary, an attorney, grew up in a working class, non-professional family, but gained an important source of guidance when his sister married an attorney. Because of conversations he had with his attorney brother-in-law during law school, Gary was fully aware of the importance of actively making efforts to develop social capital with partners and senior associates by the time he reached the firm. Although he still found this process difficult at times, he had a considerable advantage over other professionals from working class backgrounds (like Lakesha and Leondra) who were not even aware of the importance of “playing the game.”

Possible Reasons Why Class Does not Matter More.

Notwithstanding the examples discussed above, family class differences actually do not appear to explain much of the overall variation found in black professionals’ experiences and perspectives. The parental occupations of the black professionals interviewed in this study
appear to have little predictive or descriptive power in explaining their professional experiences. Interviewees from all different types of families reported having a wide range of experiences. Some who grew up in very poor households have had very positive experiences at their firms; some from professional or affluent households have struggled through frustrating racial difficulties and professional disappointments.

The effects of professionals’ class origins on their career experiences are mitigated by several factors and are likely less pronounced than in previous generations. Elite institutions throughout the United States, including corporations and professional services firms, now place far less emphasis on factors directly related to individuals’ family backgrounds (see Karabel, 2006). “White-shoe” law firms, for example, no longer explicitly privilege prospective associates who are from the “right” kind of families (see Smigel, 1964). The massive expansion of top professional service firms during the 20th century created the need to hire greater numbers of junior professionals. This increased demand, in conjunction with evolving societal norms about merit (see Brooks, 2000) and the changing racial norms brought about by the civil rights movement, helped open the doors of these once exclusionary firms. Firms thus began to recruit and hire junior professionals from a far more diverse pool of applicants. Indeed, the change in norms and practices has been so profound that many firms today now pride themselves on embracing talented applicants of all backgrounds and marketing the diversity of their professional workforces to potential clients and jobseekers.

Few interviewees from any class backgrounds described their parents as steering them to the corporate world or providing them useful substantive advice and guidance once they had begun their professional careers. Most interviewees were already in college or even professional school (particularly for attorneys) before they ever seriously considered pursuing careers in the
corporate world. Even some from solidly middle-class families felt disadvantaged compared to peers from whose parents were more affluent or worked in the corporate world. Also, because of racial differences in socialization experiences and cultural backgrounds (see Chapter 4), even black professionals from fairly affluent families at times experienced problems fitting in socially.

**Wealth as a Motivating (or Demotivating) Factor.**

Interviewees from working-class and poor backgrounds appeared to be somewhat more appreciative of their high salaries. Professionals’ family social class backgrounds may also influence their attitudes and motivations in ways that actually run counter to social reproduction. Professionals’ family class backgrounds may shape their dispositions toward their jobs in lead to professionals from poorer family backgrounds being less dissatisfied with their professional careers and work experiences. The high salaries of these corporate jobs may be especially attractive to professionals from less privileged backgrounds. Such professionals may more often have been socialized to view work as a place where people go to sell their labor power and put up with aggravating circumstances to earn a living, not as an outlet for personal fulfillment or individuality but. They are more often dependent upon these salaries to pay back student loans and to support other family members.

Several law firm interviewees, for example, spoke of joining or remaining at their firms for the primary purpose of paying down their six-figure law school debt. Black professionals from working-class backgrounds often shoulder significant responsibilities in financially supporting family members, which may make the high salaries of their corporate positions all the more important and meaningful (see Higginbotham and Weber, 1992). Some interviewees spoke of spending tens of thousands of dollars to help, siblings, parents and members of their extended families. Gary, an attorney from a poor southern household, noted that his lack of family
financial resources was a powerful incentive for him to do everything he could to perform well at the firm.

I don’t have anything to fall back on. If I lose my job, I don’t have a mom to float me for two years, nobody’s couch to sleep on. A lot of my classmates felt that too. Yeah, sure, a lot of us might like to do public interest but we’re hungry-- we’re going to go out and make our mark.

He explained, “I think a lot of my decisions have been colored by growing up with less—I had to get to the point where I’m going to be ok [financially secure].” For these reasons, Gary and other first generation professionals may be more willing to tolerate the unpleasant aspects of their jobs and put in the extra labor necessary to advance.

Conversely, a few interviewees from wealthy families realized that they were less willing than their counterparts to slave away at unsatisfying work just to collect law firm paychecks. They each reported being less motivated by the financial rewards of their jobs. To interviewees who had already inherited considerable sums of money from affluent grandparents or planned to receive family money in the future, the lure of the low-six-figure salaries of junior professionals, or even the higher salaries of senior professionals did not seem to be “all that much” or worth the extraordinary personal sacrifice required.

Caleb, a white attorney from a very affluent family believed that his family wealth lowered his tolerance the long-hours, highly stressful work conditions of the corporate world. Because of his family’s wealth, he does not need to earn hundreds of thousands of dollars a year to enjoy a very comfortable lifestyle.

I just was never going to let the job be my life…I guess this is relevant but I’m from a background where money doesn’t need to matter that much. Because my family is relatively well off, I don’t need to be a partner to live well and put my kids through school and what not and I’m very, very fortunate in that respect. Maybe that influenced my decision to leave the firm.

Because the money that corporate associates earned was not a powerful motivating force for Caleb, he was highly-critical of non-financial aspects of his job, including attorneys’ lack of
control over their personal time and their need to please their clients at nearly any cost. Caleb referred to some corporate lawyers as “basically a servant of the bankers” and clearly did not hold the profession in as high regard as some of the more upwardly mobile attorneys.

**Lack of Family Corporate Ties.**

Interviewees’ accounts suggest that being raised by affluent or professional parents is not particularly helpful for junior professionals, unless those parents had experience in corporate firms. Less than ten percent of the black interviewees had even one parent with a professional degree and only a couple had family members with substantial corporate experience. Thus, the parents of even the most relatively privileged members of this sample generally knew little about the particular challenges of forging successful careers on Wall Street or at consulting and corporate law firms. These interviewees generally did not believe that their parents were able to significantly help their careers at elite firms, and the interviews did not uncover evidence of any patterns suggesting otherwise. Cynthia, a white attorney, noted that although her father also practiced law, he worked at a very small law office that could not be more different than her thousand-lawyer firm. Because of the vast difference in their organizations and the nature of their work, Cynthia found that her father’s decades of experience were of very limited usefulness for her career at the firm. Although he shared general tips about professionalism and office etiquette with her very early in her career, it was unclear whether this advice had much impact on her experiences. Elizabeth, a second-generation attorney whose father worked at a small firm, encountered difficulties adapting to the social and political dynamics of her elite, thousand-plus lawyer firm. Elizabeth explained that she struggled to develop the right relationships just as much as other attorneys from more disadvantaged backgrounds and did not consider her father’s occupational experience to be particularly useful.
Immigrant Family Origins

Individuals’ ethnic origins are analogous to their family social class background in some important respects. Both may profoundly shape the cultural toolkits and repertoires that young adults bring to the corporate workplace. Their ethnic origins may shape their expectations and beliefs concerning the significance of race and racial discrimination in America.

Previous studies of black professionals in the corporate world did not discuss the experiences and perspectives of first-generation Americans, or the possible significance of their family origins. The lack of ethnic diversity in the older samples of black professionals also presumably reflects, to a large extent, the absence of foreign-born and first-generation black professionals in the corporate workforce. Although sociologists have been studying black immigration and the cultural conflicts between black immigrants and natives for many years (see Reid, 1939), immigrants did not constitute a sizeable percentage of the black population in America until well into the latter half of the twentieth century (Shaw-Taylor, 2007). In the 1960s and 70s, when many of the interviewees from previous studies began their careers, the population of black Americans entering the workforce who were born or had parents who were born in African or Caribbean countries was far smaller than it is today. The number of black Americans of Caribbean descent increased by sixty percent during the 1990s, and the number from sub-Sahara Africa nearly tripled (Logan, 2007). These groups now represent more than six percent of America’s black population (*Id.*). They possess greater education and human capital than native black Americans, earn higher wages, suffer less poverty and unemployment, and constitute a disproportionate share of America’s black middle class (Logan, 2007; Attewell et al., 2004; Dodoo, 1997). There is not much reliable data on the backgrounds of black professionals, but studies on the high-tier schools that serve as pipelines for many of these positions have found
that first-generation and non-American blacks are disproportionately represented (see Rimer and Arenson, 2004; Massey et al., 2007).

For many immigrant families, ethnicity is an important source of personal and group identity that shapes how individuals draw moral and social boundaries and develop particular feelings of kinship and community (Shaw-Taylor, 2007). There have been reports of considerable intra-racial tensions, as many foreign-born blacks purposefully make efforts to distinguish themselves to distinguish themselves from native-born blacks. Families who have recently immigrated to the United States do not share the inter-generational linkages to our nation’s historic racial injustices and have therefore not developed the same received wisdoms and beliefs about the pervasiveness of racism. Previous researchers have drawn a distinction between involuntary (black Americans whose ancestors arrived as slaves), and voluntary (those who came to America by choice more recently) and suggested that because the latter are further removed from the historic memory of American racial injustice, and instead more likely to perceive American society as racially fair (Gibson and Ogbu, 1991). This leads to very serious differences between the racial perspectives of first-generation and multi-generational black Americans (Sutton and Makiesky-Barrow 1987; Woldemikael 1989; Waters 1996). For example, Caribbean-Americans are notably less concerned about or outraged by anti-black racism and believe that black Americans handicap themselves by obsessively dwelling on it (Waters, 1996; Kasinitz, 1992; Rogers 2001). Black professionals from immigrant families may therefore have very different attitudes and assumptions about race than native black Americans (Waters, 1999). These differences may lead to very different perceptions about the significance of race in their professional careers. Black immigrants and their families may also be less frequently subjected to anti-black stereotypes (Waters, 1999). Researchers have found that many
employers treat first-generation blacks very differently than other black Americans, because they are presumed to have different attributes that make them more desirable employees (Kirschenman and Neckerman, 1991; Waldinger and Lichter, 2003). Several social scientists have also suggested that black immigrants have superior work ethic and other attitudes and cultural values (see Reid, 1939; Glazer and Moynihan, 1964; Sowell, 1978). Their conclusions have been challenged by many other researchers (see Steinberg, 1989; Dodoo, 1999; James (2002; Shaw-Taylor, 2007).

Amongst this study’s interviewees, black professionals from non-native households seemed to hold different views about the relevance of race to their career experiences. They more often downplayed the significance of racism as a barrier to success at their firms and were generally more upbeat about the quality of their experiences. Although a few expressed very strong views and detailed anecdotes about the continued importance of racism as a barrier to in their careers, the vast majority seemed far more upbeat about their experiences. Interviewees who had at least one parent from Africa or the Caribbean less often reported that they had been subjected to racial discrimination. At least two explanations for this pattern seem plausible. Several of the first-generation interviewees who reported positive experiences and outcomes shared anecdotes about their parents instructing them that race was never a legitimate excuse for their failure to succeed.

These interviewees suggested that their parents emphasized that racial discrimination was not so severe as to prevent them from succeeding and was no legitimate excuse for lack of effort. As Uchenna, an attorney, explained, “The motto in our household was ‘Don’t bitch. Don’t whine. Don’t complain. Just do it.’” Uchenna remembers once complaining to her parents about other children persistently mistreating her because of her African ancestry only to have her father
scold her, “‘We gave up everything [to come to America]! You need to get yourself together!’ This parenting may have led professionals from immigrant families to become less conscious of racial mistreatment than people from native black families (Waters 1999). Trevor, an attorney whose parents emigrated from Jamaica, explained that he paid less attention to race than most people, in part because of the views that his parents instilled in him when he was younger.

Race for me…has never been a primary identifier… If there were [racial] issues I probably just didn’t notice it because my attitude has always been, you just focus on the things that you can improve and then everything else will fall into its place…My parents always told me that prejudice is out there, and you deal with it, but you can do anything you want if you work hard.

Several other interviewees from immigrant households reported that they had long identified with their ethnic heritage or their status as first-generation Americans more than their racial identity. Priscilla, a Caribbean-American attorney noted that has always she identified more closely with her ethnic identity than “the whole black-white thing.” From a young age, Priscilla chose not to concern herself with rooting out or worrying about possible racism, which was beyond her control. Describing her childhood growing up in an almost exclusively white community, she explained, “I tend not to focus on things that I can’t change. There were definitely people that worried about race and that kind of thing but I just had too much going on to worry about who was doing what or who was discriminating against me.”

Some first-generation American interviewees recalled having difficulties getting along with their black American peers in high school or college (in one case, even in professional school). Uchenna recalled being relentlessly antagonized by some of the black American children in her school, who called her an “African booty scratcher” and other ethnic slurs. This likely further pushed Uchenna and other immigrant interviewees away from identifying with black Americans.
A few interviewees from immigrant backgrounds suggested that black American professionals might be responsible for many of their own problems. Kara, a former big firm attorney, questioned whether many black Americans had “the same work ethic and drive” as the children of black immigrant parents.

I have been in situations where I was ready to roll up my sleeves and work hard and late to get things done, while some of my [black American] colleagues decided not to because they don’t “feel like it.” I was stunned by that attitude! I cannot imagine not doing work that needs to be done…I think that it might tie back to the different expectations people had growing up. A lot of African-American students who grew up here have such low expectations and grew up in homes where a “B” is a great thing. My father raised me very differently and I think it has a lot to do with the high expectations he placed on me and taught me to place on myself.

During our interview, Kara shared numerous colorful examples of her African father’s drive to instill a perfectionist work ethic and high ambitions in her as a child. She recalled instances where he criticized her for receiving “A” grades on exams whenever he believed that she was capable of earning perfect scores. He constantly placed high demands on her as she entered adulthood as well. Kara attributes his parenting to his determination as an immigrant who uprooted his family to pursue greater opportunities and the American dream. She believes that this upbringing made her more intensely self-motivated and dedicated to her work than her black American colleague, whom she assumes lacked such firm guidance and structure while growing up. Kara’s account was consistent with Asian-American Yale Law School professor Amy Chua’s (2011) recent description of the perfectionist parenting practices of some highly educated immigrant households.

A few interviewees suggested that their ethnic background may have disadvantaged them culturally, in ways that made it harder for them to transition into the professional world. Deborah, a black attorney, traced her difficulties with the corporate culture back to her upbringing in a stern Jamaican household, where children were expected to not interact with their superiors unless spoken to first.
I am not the kid who grew up with parents asking them what they thought all of the time. That’s not how I was raised. It’s not that I don’t think that I have interesting thoughts. If you ask me, I will tell you, but I generally wait to be asked. I don’t really assert myself in that way. I think that it is important in this environment to do that and so I am trying to learn how to do that.

Deborah attributes her difficulties to her family’s ethnic and socioeconomic background (as manifested in her parents’ parenting style), she suggested that the appropriate level of comfort and assertiveness comes more naturally to her more socio-economically advantaged counterparts, who grew up in families that expected them to schmooze and interact with adults and strangers. Therefore, although they can work to develop the necessary corporate social skills, but at times still struggle with this since it does not always come natural for them.

One of my colleagues, her dad ran this billion-dollar hedge fund. She is used to having strange people in her home (or wherever) coming up to her and starting a conversation. She is used to pulling stuff out of her butt to talk about with absolute strangers. She is used to schmoozing, that is something that she grew up with. From my experience going to dinner parties, these people have their kids out. There are a bunch of adults, but the kids are running around in the dinner party at 6 years old. That has happened on more than one occasion from what I have seen. I think that other people grow up with this ability to talk about nothing… I just didn’t.

Deborah’s comment underscores the difficulties discerning and adapting to the unwritten social and cultural codes experienced by some black professionals who are pioneers in corporate America. Deborah explained that her difficulties were not directly racial but instead, “more cultural than anything.” She found that the culture at her firm seemed to revolve around the experiences, values, and ways of life of affluent white Americans. “The corporate culture itself is based on ‘white sh-t,’ just being honest. It is more class too, but it just happens to fall in line with whiteness.” With evident frustration, Deborah complained that the criteria used by “the powers that be” in evaluating associates and determining their futures was implicitly “cultural.” This was a source of considerable difficulty for Deborah, who surmised that “there’s some part of the culture that I am not grasping…there are tons of things that come easy to some people and don’t come easy to me.”
Deborah attributed these difficulties to ethnicity-related cultural differences that advantaged attorneys from upper-class households and affluent white neighborhoods and enabled them to better relate to the partners (she also mentioned a black associate from a fairly affluent family and who thrived at the firm, socially). She spoke about being unable relate to one white partner who would strike up conversations about the elite private schools that he was considering for his son and similar topics. Deborah contrasted her experience with that of one of her counterparts, a white associate whose father had worked in the finance industry. The white associate herself had attended the types of schools that the partner was discussing and she therefore had a much easier time making small talk with the partner. This advantage was reflected in superior reviews from the partner, who complimented her on being “pleasant” and “easy to work with.”

Deborah’s explanation of the effects of her parents’ parenting practices on her subsequent interactional difficulties at her corporate firm involves some of the same cultural characteristics that Lareau (2003) has found to be correlated with social class (in people of all races). It is also worth noting that interviewees from immigrant families with higher social class backgrounds did not mention receiving this type of upbringing or struggling in this manner. Therefore, it seems plausible that Deborah’s account of her difficulties to some extent actually conflates the effects of her family social class background with their ethnic identity and immigrant status.

CONCLUSION

This chapter finds that the personal backgrounds of black professionals appear to influence their perceptions of racial fairness and their ability to effectively navigate the professional and social terrain of the corporate workplace, albeit not as strongly as one might
expect. Some of the most significant effects of interviewees’ class backgrounds appear to be cultural. Many professionals from more privileged family circumstances arrive in the professional world with more valuable cultural capital and greater social comfort due to past interracial exposure. Many professionals from more disadvantaged families have a harder time bonding with their colleagues and developing relationships with influential decision-makers because of they lack the right cultural capital and social comfort.

However, these class effects were highly ambiguous. Interviewees’ perceptions about class disadvantage were not strongly correlated with their own class positions. There are important interceding factors that attenuate the relationship between social class and professional outcomes. As discussed in the following chapter, people from all family class backgrounds have an opportunity to gain exposure and acculturation into some of the social practices and cultural norms predominant in corporate firms during their college and professional school years.

This study also finds that first-generation black professionals from immigrant family backgrounds may be far less likely to perceive racial unfairness within their corporate workplaces. Their anecdotes strongly suggest that perceptions about the seriousness of racism and racial discrimination may be filtered by culturally-informed dispositions that take shape according to their family backgrounds. These findings further underscore the complexity and difficulty of studying the predicament of black professionals, or any group of black Americans, and potentially aids our appreciation of the inherent subjectivity of perceptions and discussions of race. Although the findings presented in this chapter are all highly tentative, they still add to the existing literature on race and class, particularly the previous research on the work experiences of black professionals.
CHAPTER 7:

EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCES AND CREDENTIALS

Just as past studies of black professionals have largely overlooked the diversity of the group’s social class and ethnic origins, these works have also failed to fully consider the implications of their varied educational backgrounds. Professionals enter elite firms having traveled along very different educational trajectories and experiences. Some are graduates of the most prestigious colleges and professional schools in America; others attended lower-ranked institutions. Some immersed themselves in exclusively black social circles during their school years; others had predominantly white friendship networks. This educational heterogeneity appeared to lead to different experiences and perspectives about racial fairness.

Benefits of Attending “Top Schools”

Screening and Credentialism

There are several reasons to expect that black professionals who have attended more elite schools have smoother transitions into the corporate world. Past research on “credentialism,” has established that university degrees are often used as signals of individual workers’ personal qualities. The “screening” or “filtering” perspective on social stratification holds that the prestige of workers’ educational credentials serve as convenient, relatively reliable signals of their individual quality and potential, particularly for job applicants and new hires (see Arrow, 1973; Spence, 1973). Absent evidence to the contrary, senior professionals will tend to assume that workers with elite educational credentials are more talented than others.

However, screening theory may hold true even if employers do not actually believe that the most elite schools provide superior educations. Because the admission processes of these top schools are extremely competitive and comprehensive, employers may use the fact that an
applicant was admitted into such a school as a stamp of approval, confirming the applicant’s intelligence and abilities.\(^{52}\) This may be particularly pronounced at the beginning of workers’ professional careers, when there is little other information to base their personnel decisions (Ishida, Spilerman and Su, 1997).

Bourdieu (1986) and other theorists have argued that prestigious educational credentials are essentially a means for high-status families to launder economic capital into “embodied cultural capital” for their children (Bourdieu, 1984; Bourdieu, 1986). Similarly, conflict theorists have argued that the prestige granted to degrees from elite, expensive universities is part of a systematic class reproduction strategy by which elite groups justify privileging people similar to themselves (see Collins 1979). Degrees function as important signals of high social class background that help elite members identify other, younger elites who they can select to groom to join and succeed them.

Firms may also face strong external pressures to employ professionals who have attended prestigious universities. Clients may view firms’ aggregate educational credentials as proxies for the quality of their workforces, and use that information in choosing between firms. Several interviewees noted that graduates of elite schools were so highly sought-after and aggressively recruited in some fields, particularly law, that it was actually easier for them to find jobs in prestigious corporate firms than elsewhere. For these reasons, young black professionals with the most prestigious degrees may receive better treatment than their counterparts from other schools.

However, important developments of the past several decades call into question the relevance of these theories to the contemporary corporate workplace.

\(^{52}\) Some researchers and human resources staffers have suggested that the primary value of an MBA in consulting is that business schools are trusted to have screened for intelligent candidates who are interested in pursuing careers in business (Leonhardt, 2000).
Importance of Elite Credentials for Young Black Professionals.

Interviewees entered the professional world with diverse educational backgrounds, having attended schools that are imbued with different amounts of status, prestige, and credibility. They attended a wide variety of universities, including Ivy League schools, lower-ranked public and private schools, and historically black colleges and universities (“HBCUs”). Many had graduated from schools that commonly serve as feeders for the most elite professional institutions in the country, others from schools where students rarely landed top corporate job. Slightly more than half (63) of this study’s black interviewees attended the most elite professional schools in their fields. 53 This group appeared to be the most satisfied with their professional experiences and seemed far more likely than other interviewees to consider their work environments racially fair. More than three-quarters (49) reported that race had not been an insurmountable disadvantage at their firms. This is markedly higher than the statistics for interviewees who attended lower-ranked professional schools. Notably, half of the students who attended HBCU professional schools expressed that they had been seriously disadvantaged by race in ways that slowed their career development or ascent in their firms. Forty percent of interviewees who attended other non-HBCU, non-elite schools reported being similarly disadvantaged.

Many interviewees who graduated from elite professional schools insisted that race did not seem to matter at their firms. Others reported that although it might be harder for black

53 This study categorizes “elite” schools as those ranked most highly by US News and World Report. The fifteen highest-ranked law schools and business schools are each considered elite. Law schools include Yale University, Harvard University, Stanford University, New York University, Columbia University, University of Chicago, University of Michigan—Ann Arbor, University of Pennsylvania, University of California--Berkeley, University of Virginia, Duke University, Northwestern University, Cornell University, Georgetown University and the University of Texas—Austin. Business schools include: Stanford University, Harvard University, Massachusetts Institute of Technology (Sloan), University of Pennsylvania (Wharton), Northwestern University (Kellogg), University of Chicago (Booth), Dartmouth College (Tuck), University of California--Berkeley (Haas), Columbia University, New York University (Stern), Yale University, Duke University (Fuqua), University of Virginia (Darden), University of California-- Los Angeles (Anderson), and University of Michigan-- Ann Arbor (Ross).
professionals to succeed at their firms, they could do so through hard work, including strategic social labor. Several believed that their educational credentials had protected them from being subjected to racial unfairness and helped them achieve equal, possibly even preferential, treatment over many of their white counterparts. Harvey, a Yale Law educated attorney working in a big firm in a city that does not usually attract many students from his school, believed that his educational pedigree protected him from any racial mistreatment. “I was one of the few black people but also one of the few attorneys who went to YLS and I think the Yale Law School trumped any racial misgivings for the most part, and if I was treated differently, if anything, I probably received unfair advantages.”

Enoch, who also attended another top law school, felt that his impressive credentials granted him at his firm. “I’m the only associate in this office who went to Harvard Law School, out of maybe eighty associates. The only other people who went to Harvard are partners. So I have this whole status thing going.” Like Harvey, he firmly believed that the benefits of his educational pedigree outweighed any disadvantages of race. He was very blunt about this during our interview and noted that he proudly displayed his degree in his office, “framed with the special preservation matting and glass.” Other graduates of top law schools, including Sherrie, a Chicago attorney, reported that their degrees provided them “automatic credibility” and fair treatment at their firms.

Researchers have found that elite credentials may be particularly important for blacks and other stigmatized groups, who may otherwise face latent doubts about their abilities to perform (Wilkins and Gulati, 1996). Wilkins (1996) tabulated the educational backgrounds of black and white partners at some of the most prestigious law firms in the country and found that black attorneys were more likely than their white counterparts to have graduated from one of the top
law schools in the country.\textsuperscript{54} Consistent with Wilkins and Gulati’s (1996) observations, many of these interviewees suggested that black junior professionals needed superior credentials to advance in the elite firms in their industries. Several observed that black junior professionals working at their firms tended to have graduated from more prestigious colleges and professional schools than their white counterparts. Rachel, an attorney, did not consider race to be a significant disadvantage for associates working at her firm, but did notice that blacks appeared to have a harder time getting their foot in the door in the first place, without truly elite credentials. She noted that black hires had almost exclusively attended high-ranked law schools, unlike their white counterparts, who often graduated from lower-ranked local schools. Rachel observed first-hand that black job candidates from lower ranked schools did not receive job offers that went to similar white attorneys from comparable schools. Other attorney interviewees concurred.

Martha, a consultant, shared a similar perspective. Her mentor advised her that black consultants needed to attend the most prestigious business schools to be seriously considered for upper-level positions at her firm. Martha eventually took notice of the senior consultants’ educational credentials and noticed that most of the black consultants had attended one of the three most elite business schools. This was not so for white consultants.

The black people at [The Firm] are \textit{hands down} more credentialed. I mean, some of these [white] partners that work at [The Firm], I hadn’t even \textit{heard of} the universities they’ve gone to. I have \textit{no earthly idea} where they are (because you can see their resumes). I’m like, “What?!?” It was as if they’d just made up a university name.

Martha did not believe that this disparity was accidental. She found that white colleagues seemed to second-guess the “analytical abilities” of all but the most highly credentialed black...
professionals. These observations prompted Martha to apply to a top business school herself. She explained, “When I looked around me and all the partners and principles who were black [had] went to [the very top business schools], I had no choice but to go.”

Possible Selection Issues.

Although this study suggests that attending different types of educational institutions might affect black professionals’ later outcomes, this study also acknowledges that there are a host of possible selection issues. The colleges and professionals schools attended by individual interviewees may reflect important preexisting differences in their abilities or racial predispositions. Professionals who were admitted into the most selective, elite universities, on average, tend to be more academically distinguished than other students, with higher grades and standardized test scores. If these measures tend to reflect real differences in analytical abilities or work ethic, those professionals may have already been more likely to have better careers, even if they had attended less-ranked schools. To the extent that this is true, differences in outcomes cannot be attributed to their having attended prestigious schools, but to them possessing underlying personal characteristics that distinguish them from the professionals who would not have been admitted into those schools.

Discounted Credentials.

The benefits of attending elite schools are by no means universal or automatic. A junior professionals’ educational credentials may be underestimated by colleagues, who are not always aware each other’s credentials (professionals do not walk the halls of their offices carrying copies of their resumes). The professionals who will be providing work opportunities and sponsorship to young professionals are usually not the ones who hired them and therefore often know very little about their educational backgrounds.
Employers may also discount particular employees’ elite educational credentials on the basis of race. In order to improve student body diversity, many top schools admit black students with grades and standardized test scores significantly lower than most of their white counterparts (Orfield and Miller, 1998; Ayres and Brooks, 2005). Senior professionals who treat educational degrees as signaling that employees have previously demonstrated accomplishments and abilities impressive enough to win approval from university gatekeepers may feel the need to recalibrate their assumptions in light of those racial preferences. This “discounting” may continue to affect black professionals after they have been hired. In order to better diversify their workforces, many firms are thought to hire some black applicants whose transcripts are not as impressive as their colleagues’. Senior professionals may suspect that some of these “affirmative action hires” are not competent enough to perform high-quality legal work. Because firms’ hiring committees do not reveal which new hires benefited from such preferences, senior professionals may assume that black hires are incompetent, in the absence of additional information. Observers have argued that this lack of transparency potentially stigmatizes all black professionals, even those with impeccable academic records (Steele, 1990; Sander, 2006).

Earl, an attorney, complained that some of the partners at his firm seemed to discredit his credentials by assuming that he and other black associates were the undeserving beneficiaries of racial preferences and therefore less talented than their white peers. Earl argued that his firm’s hiring and diversity committees had strong incentives to hire as many black attorneys as possible for their entering classes, but far less interest in whether those hires performed well at the firm. Earl found that because of this incentive structure, his firm had hired several unimpressive black junior associates who were not prepared or motivated to excel. He sensed that this irresponsible use of racial preferences stigmatized the firm’s black junior associates in the eyes of many
partners, and created negative presumptions that Earl and others had to work extremely hard to overcome. Although Earl believes that some partners probably would have discriminated against him even without affirmative action, he blamed his firm’s recruiting practices for substantially increasing his difficulties. Earl received far fewer premium opportunities that his white counterparts early in his career at the firm and was only able to catch up to the other attorneys by working extremely long hours (even by his firm’s standards) and aggressively requesting specific types of opportunities from partners. Earl was frustrated with this experience but suggested that the partners’ discriminatory reactions were logical and rational, given the uncertainty caused by his firm’s diversity hiring.

Although no other interviewees criticized their firms’ affirmative action practices as severely as Earl, some agreed that their firms’ uses of racial preferences in hiring appeared to create doubts among certain white partners. For example, Brian, an attorney, complained that certain partners “think we got here because of affirmative action” and initially subjected him to “a rebuttable presumption that I’m incompetent.”

**White Interviewees’ Perspectives on Educational Credentials.**

This study did not unearth evidence suggesting that school credentials were nearly as important for white students. However, this finding comes with some important caveats. The sample of white interviewees was much smaller than the black professional sample, and there was less variation in prestige. The vast majority had either attended elite schools or worked in cities where their degrees were well regarded. None of the white interviewees had attended schools that were ranked as low as the HBCUs, for example—or even some of the lower ranked state schools, for that matter. Therefore, this dissertation cannot really comment on the effects of
having attended particular types of schools for white professionals or compare them to black interviewees.

Given these limitations of this small sample though, white interviewees did not seem to attribute nearly as much important to their educational credentials in affecting their professional careers at their firms. Most found that elite degrees were very helpful in the initial hiring process but considered them far less important, even irrelevant, after they had begun working.

White interviewees tended to report that once individuals have begun working, the credentials may recede into the background. Even senior professionals who put stock in educational credentials realize that they are crude proxy for future professional performance, and may be on the lookout for information that contradicts the qualities signaled by the degree.

White interviewees who had not attended the most elite schools did not appear any less satisfied with their career progress or opportunities than others. None complained about feeling disrespected, deprived of opportunities, or subjected to excessive scrutiny. A few white interviewees suggested that professionals hired from non-elite schools seemed to far better than others at their firms, and appeared to be more satisfied with their experiences.

**HBCU Credentials.**

A small number of interviewees (14) attended HBCUs for professional school. Their overall perspectives were not as rosy as those of the graduates of more elite schools discussed above. HBCU undergraduate institutions generally fare relatively poorly in the “objective” criteria that ratings guides use to rank professional schools, including school funding, and the student bodies’ GPA and standardized test scores. HBCU law schools receive low scores in both objective criteria (including incoming students’ GPAs and average LSAT scores) and subjective assessments (including judges’ and attorneys’ appraisals of those schools’ reputations). As a
result, these schools are generally ranked amongst US News’ lower tiers, significantly lower than Ivy League schools and the other universities where corporate firms recruit most of their junior professionals. Although these schools attract some extremely talented students, their overall student bodies are less academically distinguished than those of the most selective schools. Thus, these credentials may hold less weight, or even carry stigma, in the eyes of some senior corporate professionals. To some senior professionals, HBCU degrees may signal that an employee is not as competent as their colleagues from higher-ranked schools.

For these reasons, some interviewees from HBCUs complained that their degrees were not duly respected by their colleagues. They worried that attending HBCUs stigmatized them as less talented than their coworkers who attended higher-ranked, predominantly white institutions. Compared to interviewees who graduated from the top-ranked schools, HBCU graduates more frequently perceive that their workplaces were racially unfair, and were more frequently dissatisfied with their career experiences. Rexford, an attorney, discussed the pros and cons of attending law school at an HBCU He noted that attending his HBCU law school proved to have its advantages as well. His school received recruiting visits from partners from top national law firms that never recruited students from nearby or comparably ranked predominantly white schools. However, Rexford also saw that his school’s lack of prestige also presented a formidable career handicap.

If you attend an HBCU law school, perhaps it’s not quite as good as Harvard, or Yale or some of these other schools, perception-wise. And then of course if you look at the US News & World Report and the rankings that they do of law schools, and they have tier 1, 2, 3 and 4, and typically you’re going to find your HBCU law schools in tiers 3 and 4. And so that’s a challenge.

This presented some very real obstacles early in his career. Rexford recalled an incident when a law firm headhunter recruiting for a more prestigious firm had called him out of the blue, suggesting that he would be a very impressive lateral candidate for a position there. It soon
became clear that the woman had incorrectly read that he had attended a different, somewhat higher-ranked law school; she instantly became far less enthusiastic when she realized that her mistake. Although Rexford was one of the ten top students in his law school class, the headhunter informed him that the firm only considered top five graduates from his school.

Some interviewees felt that HBCU graduates were generally regarded as “worker bees” who were hired to take on menial tasks and fill lower-level positions. They felt that senior professionals in their firms at times presumed HBCU graduates to be less competent and therefore less often groomed or considered them for premium opportunities and promotions. Alicia, an HBCU alumna who works in sales at a top Wall Street firm, claimed that although graduates from her school have had great success acquiring prestigious jobs out of college, they often struggled to land lateral employment opportunities. Alicia had been informed by headhunters that some companies won’t even consider lateral candidates who lack Ivy League-caliber credentials. Leroy, who attended an Ivy League business school, offered a similar assessment and suggested that Wall Street investment banks hire relatively large numbers of black HBCU students to take on the grunt work of the entry-level analyst positions, in order to improve their “diversity numbers.” However, on the basis of his personal observations, he believes that those with Ivy League degrees are considered more seriously when higher-level jobs or premium opportunities become available.

Jessica, who attended an HBCU for business school, also considered her experience a mixed blessing. Jessica had planned to attend a majority-white business school because she was concerned that attending an HBCU might stigmatize her to some prospective white employers. Jessica enrolled at her HBCU business school when she was rejected by her top choice school. She soon found that, contrary to her initial concerns, attending this school actually helped her get
her “foot in the door” of a top national corporation, one of many companies that interviewed at her school to diversify their workforces. However, she eventually found out that the firm, as a matter of informal policy, offered students from her school (and other lower-ranked, non-HBCUs) starting salaries significantly lower than that offered to her counterparts from certain higher-ranked schools. Students from schools that were on the firm’s informal “top schools” list received higher offers and had more latitude to negotiate. Jessica declined her offer at the firm, as a matter of principle, and landed another job at a firm that she believed treated graduates of her school more equitably. Jessica’s experience suggests that for aspiring corporate managers, attending professional school at an HBCU can be somewhat of a double-edged sword. The perspectives of Jessica and other interviewees suggest that attending HBCU professional schools may in some instances materially advantage young professionals by facilitating their entrance into elite firms but may subsequently disadvantage them and become a source of treatment discrimination on the job.

Terrance felt that colleagues at his pharmaceutical company pre-judged him and subjected him to greater scrutiny because he had attended an HBCU and not a top national program like many of his coworkers. Blair, a graduate of an HBCU business school, explained that his interactions with colleagues led him to feel more closely scrutinized, as if they expected him to perform poorly because of his resume. Langston, who graduated from an HBCU law school, perceived that white attorneys at his firm did not fully respect his educational pedigree and treated alumni from his school unfairly. He believed that although black associates were generally not treated completely fairly at his firm, those who graduated from HBCUs seemed to have it the worst. He recalled that one seemingly-impressive graduate from his law school was unable to find enough work to keep himself busy when the economy slowed down, and was
eventually laid off. In the aftermath of that attorney’s demise at the firm, another more senior HBCU graduate, who was also having difficulties, advised Langston that Langston himself would likely eventually encounter such problems too, because his HBCU degree was not sufficiently respected within the firm. Langston’s perceptions were indirectly supported by the accounts of two other black interviewees who had worked at the same firm as Langston, but had attended more prestigious law schools. Consistent with Langston and his colleague’s impressions, those interviewees reported much better experiences there. One reported that race was a real disadvantage at the firm but one that could be overcome through hard work and social labor. The other, who attended one of the very top law schools, did not report any racial difficulties at all.

Non-Credential Benefits of HBCUs

Although several interviewees expressed concerns about whether their HBCU credentials were respected at their firms, they generally believed that these problems were offset by other benefits of attending HBCUs. Almost all who attended HBCUs, either for college or professional school, spoke enthusiastically about the benefits of entering adulthood amongst so many motivated, intelligent black peers, with supportive professors who “understood” and were accustomed to working with black students. Most of these interviewees credited the supportive environments of their schools and the freedom from racial anxieties with providing them self-confidence and other traits that have helped their professional careers.

Others pointed to more instrumental benefits, including particular professional development and soft-skill training that they received through their schools’ business programs. At least three HBCUs—Howard University, Florida A&M University (“FAM U”), and Hampton University—each offer special, selective programs for undergraduate students interested in
studying business. Students in these programs take courses in their universities’ business schools, gain experience in completing case studies and making presentations, and learn soft skills helpful to managing the challenges of succeeding in the corporate world (Brown, 2008). Several students from Howard and FAM U’s programs noted that each had strong pipelines to top Wall Street banks. These connections were both formal, through firms’ institutionalized on-campus recruiting efforts, and informal, through the network of young alumni who worked at those firms and could provide insight into the hiring processes and life at the banks. Interviewees who participated in these programs thus tended to have very positive opinions about their experiences in the professional world.

**Schools as Sites of Social and Cultural Acclimation.**

The higher education experience can also influence the careers and of black professionals in other, more subtle ways. As we saw in Chapters 3, elite corporate firms are in many respects relationship-driven organizations. A junior professional’s ability to build social capital and interpersonal bonds with colleagues can possibly alter their professional trajectories. Junior professionals whose cultural repertoires match those of their colleagues may find it much easier to develop such relationships (see Chapter 4). Attending college and professional school can provide valuable opportunities for some future black professionals to gain valuable exposure and acculturation to the norms, tastes, and social practices valued in elite, predominantly white organizations. These university settings are when many black professionals first gain meaningful exposure to the social and cultural styles prevalent in corporate firms. Those who have these types of inter-racial experiences in school may feel less intense social isolation, discomfort, and perceptions of racial unfairness as professionals.
This is particularly important for students who have not had much previous exposure to middle-class white peers and their cultural sensibilities and social practices. Notwithstanding Bourdieu’s treatment of cultural capital as an asset inherited from parents via childhood socialization, much of the cultural capital most useful in the corporate world can be acquired by some individuals after they have entered young adulthood and left their homes for college. To the extent that cultural repertoires associated with particular racial or class backgrounds may be privileged in elite firms, professionals from disadvantaged backgrounds may overcome this through acculturation in college or professional school (Erickson, 1996). Granfield and Koenig’s (1992) study of an elite law school found that students from non-affluent class backgrounds acquired valuable cultural capital at elite law schools, including tastes and dispositions toward expensive clothing, dining and other luxuries. These emergent cultural tastes and repertories may make such students more attractive to elite law firms.\(^5^5\)

Some interviewees benefited from their exposure to the social practices and cultural norms of middle-class and affluent whites, which may be more highly valued at their firms. Wayne, an attorney, attended prestigious, predominantly white schools throughout his life and has always had close non-black friends. Because of his background, he was more accustomed to the cultural styles and interests prevalent amongst colleagues at his firm, and not as disadvantaged by them as some of his black counterparts (see Chapter 4). Although he was at times perturbed about being forced to culturally code-switch and conceal his true musical preferences and leisure-time activities, he was able to do so quite effectively. He explained, “For me…this wasn’t really a problem because I’ve pretty much been operating in these environments

\(^{55}\) Granfield and Koenig (1992) suggest that this acculturation also makes elite law firms more desirable to the students of elite law schools. Their claim is in tension with the findings of Dinovitzer and Garth (2007), that law firm associates from lower-tier schools tend to be more satisfied with their professional experiences than those from elite schools, where law firm jobs are not held in quite as high status, and the six-figure starting salaries are more often taken for granted.
for most of my life. It didn’t feel any different than anywhere else I’ve ever been—it wasn’t, ‘Holy sh-t this is a culture shock, I need to adapt.’”

Similarly, Harvey also spent the vast majority of his educational career in elite, predominantly white schools, where he met friends from very affluent families. The cultural capital that he acquired then may have also reaped rewards for him as a corporate attorney, as he reported no difficulties relating to his law firm colleagues.

The accounts of other interviewees suggest that social experiences in college and professional school can mitigate the cultural impact of growing up in socioeconomically-disadvantaged or racially segregated circumstances. Brett believes that he would not have been able to develop the necessary rapport with white colleagues and clients had it not been for his interactions with white peers and exposure to diverse interests in law school. Brett had minimal inter-racial social interaction prior to law school, having attended socially-segregated, southern schools his entire life. While attending an elite northern law school, Brett developed interracial friendships and learned how to avoid being socially constrained by racial differences. He was introduced to an array of social experiences and cultural references—including sushi and other ethnic food, skiing, and golf—that later helped him find common ground with professional peers. Many black interviewees suggested that these types of experiences and sensibilities are often taken for granted within corporate America in ways that disadvantage people who lack these cultural repertoires (see Chapter 4). Becoming familiar with them has enabled Brett to become more fully integrated into the social life of his firm. He is regularly invited to weddings, parties and other social gatherings, and has developed rapport with top partners and influential members of the local bar association. He credits his cross-racial interactions in law school with providing him the social comfort level necessary to thrive.
Brett saw other black attorneys flounder because of their social discomfort in these settings. He eventually came to realize that his black counterparts who had attended law schools that were socially segregated by racial lines, were often very uncomfortable in the type of social and professional interactions with white colleagues that he enjoyed. He has noticed substantial differences between his approach to work-related interactions and theirs.

These [other black attorneys] have a different view on race relations because they went to these professional schools where whites hung out with whites and blacks hung out with blacks and one or two students would cross over but the worlds did not meet… I felt like I fit in a whole lot better… than my friends who felt like ‘we can’t drink around the [white] lawyers because black people are held to a higher standard or something.’

Brett believed that these attorneys’ social awkwardness and racial anxieties have become self-perpetuating handicaps that will prevent them from ever gaining full acceptance into their firms’ important informal networks. Unable to develop the relationships and image necessary to succeed in their firms, they experience greater alienation and career dissatisfaction and will have a much harder time ever making partner.

Peter, a corporate manager, explained that prior to attending his elite business school he had maintained almost exclusively black social networks and had only limited exposure to the activities and interests popular among his white corporate professional counterparts, including international travel and various outdoor recreational activities.

In my world, I had only known majority black environments so traveling to Thailand for a week or so is not even talked about where I come from. That’s just so far out there and so far away that no one even talks about it. There’s a feeling that it’s too expensive and black people just don’t do that. It’s like snowboarding… black people just don’t do it, so nobody goes out and does it. None of my friends do it, except me (now)…

He found that attending an elite business school where he developed inter-racial friendships helped him develop cultural capital that enabled him to better bond with white colleagues.
“[Business school] was one of the best experiences I could have ever had. The reason being because it was exposure… [Business school] opened me up to a whole other world…I did the whole boat races, the pong-- beer pong or whatever it’s called—all that stuff I had never even heard of it in my life until I went to [Business School].

Other interviewees also emphasized this social and cultural component of their business school experiences as better preparing them to thrive in the corporate world. After failing to develop instrumental relationships at his first go-round in corporate America, Christopher went to business school and spent a lot of time socializing with white students and partaking in their preferred recreational activities, including golf and snowboarding. Because of these experiences, Christopher was able to fit in better at his next job.

The acculturative benefits of attending schools vary significantly from person to person. Merely attending one of these schools is not enough to develop comfort, familiarity and acculturation. These benefits are mediated by black students’ social experiences on campus, particularly the quality and extent of their cross-racial interactions. The potential advantage of attending elite schools can be compromised by various factors that reduce black students’ cross-racial interactions, including black students’ perceptions that their white classmates are racially hostile or their homophily-driven predilections toward socializing with other black students.

Even black students who attend the same schools often have very different racial attitudes and vastly different interracial experiences (Smith and Moore, 2000). Some are far more comfortable than others in interacting with non-blacks (Cole and Arriola, 2007) and therefore better able to develop inter-racial friendships in college. Others never socialize with their white classmates. College and professional school can be highly-racializing experiences for some black students (Cole and Arriola, 2007). As (Smith and Moore, 2000:3-4) explain, the demographic realities of college life can make black students from different backgrounds increasingly conscious of race, albeit for different reasons.
For those accustomed to predominantly black surroundings and sensitive to issues of race, attending a predominantly white college may further signify their difference from the white majority and may help them define who they are as black individuals. For those raised in predominantly white environments, accustomed to being one of only a few blacks and generally unaccustomed to defining their existence primarily in terms of race, expectations from other blacks in terms of values, attitudes, style of dress, speech, and so on, may make race a more salient feature of their existence whether they like it or not.

Thus, many black students gravitate toward same-race social circles in college or professional school. Black college students’ orientation toward black culture and black identity grow stronger over the course of their college careers (Cole and Arriola, 2007). Class-based differences may also have racial consequences in reinforcing the apparent salience of black students’ racial identity by making black students even more anxious about not being socially accepted by their white peers, which might reinforce their inclinations to befriend other black students instead (Cookson and Persell, 1991).

Although previous studies suggest that elite schools are sites of acculturation, this is not always so for blacks, who because of homophily and racial discomfort, tend to associate with people just like themselves, particularly other black students. As discussed in Chapters 4 and 6, cultural capital important in many firms not particularly elite or class-specific, correlates more with race. Students who attend these schools therefore primarily benefit only to the extent that they have greater exposure to non-black students.

Interviewees had a diverse array of social experiences in college and professional school. Some (a minority) of interviewees had positive experiences and developed racially diverse, or even primarily-white, social networks and held student leadership positions in predominantly white organizations.56 These interviewees tended to consider their professional school experiences to be useful in preparing them for the corporate world. Peter, who utilized his time

56 Even these interviewees emphasized that their experiences were atypical on their campuses, where most black students remained far more socially segregated.
at an elite business school to broaden his cultural repertoire, recognized the potential value of
gaining cross-racial social experience and therefore strategically put forth considerable effort
into moving beyond his comfort zone.

I came with an open mind and said, “You know what, I’m just going to try this stuff that these
kids do and just deal with it, and just mimic what they’re doing because they’re not going to
come into to my environment at all, so I have to go into their environment. So I’m just going to
have to suck it up and do it. Quit the complaining, Get over it, the world is white. Yada yada
yada. It’s unfair, stop crying, just do it.” So I did it.

Many, despite attending predominantly white schools, did not develop the type of cross-
racial social ties that could have provided them access to the type of cultural capital most useful
in the corporate world. Many of the black professionals interviewed in this study reported
having almost exclusively black friendship circles in college and/or professional school. Several
described their lack of interactions with their white classmates as arising out of their homophily
preferences to associate with peers who they believed were similar to themselves culturally.
Others had difficulties relating to their white classmates and finding cultural common ground.

Several interviewees experienced or witnessed racial hostility and conflict at their
schools. A couple interviewees shared anecdotes about black female students at their colleges
being accosted by white male students, either verbally or physically. Both incidents resulted in
subsequent, racially-charged physical confrontations and campus protests and marches. Another
interviewee attended a southern university where black students were frequently harassed by
campus security. Several interviewees experienced acts of racial ambivalence or insensitivity
that left them feeling marginalized and unwelcome. For example, several still bristled over their
white classmates’ constant complaints, in class and in college newspaper op-ed pieces, about the
unjustness of affirmative action and questioning the deservingness of its beneficiaries. One
interviewee noted that her school had a tradition where, to honor the “old South,” white
fraternities and sororities dressed up in confederate uniforms and ball gowns and paraded around
campus. She was particularly offended by an incident when one of the fraternities hired some local black children to come to their party and pretend to be picking cotton on their lawn.

Sandra attended a predominantly white southern school but did not develop any cross-racial friendships. She explained that this was not “a conscious choice” but instead the result of patterns of segregation and indicia of racial hostility at the school.

It was an extremely segregated campus. The black people gravitated toward each other (or the white people gravitated toward each other, depending on which way you wanted to look at it)… There was just no mixing. Not in the cafeterias, not in the recreation center, not in the gym, not in the extra-curricular activities. At all. And so when I think back to that, I actually found that experience extremely tough… It wasn’t a lonely feeling because the friends that I had were great—college was four years of fun—but it was racially isolating.

Interviewees who attended predominantly white schools but involved themselves in almost exclusively black social circles and organizations, and those who have negative interactions with white students tended to have social difficulties at their firms or to perceive that blacks were treated unfairly. For example, Greta, whose difficulties adapting to the social and cultural dimensions of her Wall Street firm were discussed in previous chapters, had attended prestigious, predominantly white schools with affluent student bodies for much of her life. At these schools, however, Greta had socialized almost exclusively with other black students and had experienced negative cross-racial interactions when other students from her dormitory criticized her musical tastes. As a result of her limited interactions, Greta did not gain much useful cultural exposure in school.

Black professionals from working class or poor family backgrounds may find it especially difficult to fit in with their more privileged, non-black classmates. Interviewees from lower-income or working class families who attended elite colleges often gravitated toward students from similar backgrounds. Although having friends who could empathize with their family difficulties and financial struggles provided helpful psychological support, it also limited
their access to information about professional careers and the corporate world. Without this information, professionals from disadvantaged backgrounds often struggled early in their careers, in some instances digging themselves into difficult holes. Several of the interviewees—including Chaundra, Leroy and Duane—who stumbled in their early careers due in part to their family social class backgrounds (see Chapter 6) had attended very prestigious colleges before entering the corporate world. As their difficulties reveal, the acculturation attained by students during school varies considerably, depending upon students’ social interactions across racial and socioeconomic lines. Those who primarily associate with others from disadvantaged backgrounds may gain far less exposure to the social and cultural practices that they will later be forced to confront in their corporate firms.

**HBCU Graduates**

Some HBCU graduates suggested that the transition from HBCU campus to corporate firm could be particularly jarring, socially. Sylvester believed that his black peers who had attended predominantly white schools were better acculturated to the social norms and cultural tastes of their white colleagues and superiors.

My Ivy League counterparts had four years of indoctrination to the socializing and hanging out [with white peers]. I went to [an HBCU]—we weren’t going to bars and hanging out and drinking beer. We went to clubs—black clubs that played our music... So there was a little bit of a learning curve on getting up to speed and comfortable with that.

However, this finding to some extent also reflects preexisting differences between HBCU and non-HBCU students. Students who choose to attend HBCUs may, as a group, tend to hold different racial attitudes than others, based on pre-existing differences in their racial dispositions. Students who choose to attend an HBCU may possess stronger feelings about their racial identities and different beliefs about the importance of race in American life. Several of the interviewees who opted to attend HBCU colleges or professional schools experienced negative
racial experiences or interracial interactions with white peers in college. These racially-charged incidents and comments had profound, enduring effects on the racial dispositions of some black interviewees. Nearly a decade after graduating from college, Deborah, an attorney, still spoke with evident frustration about the cumulative effect of relatively minor race-related occurrences at her school.

Affirmative action was a hot topic when I was in undergrad. Everyday there were articles in the newspaper about how I had stolen someone’s place and that someone else was more qualified to be here than I was. I would be lying if I said that that stuff did not get to me after awhile...In a lot of ways, I feel like [college] really broke me down...There were lots of things going on at that school. I think the affirmative action discussion was something that was a non-stop assault on my self-esteem, in terms of my intelligence, my qualifications and what not.

Brianne, like Deborah, decided to apply to an HBCU for law school only after encountering racial hostility and insensitivity at her predominantly white southern college.

[The college] kicked my ass racially, ethnically, and spiritually...It was an old southern university. You could see where the slaves used to live--all the physical vestiges of slavery. It was a rough place in general for a black student.... There were confederate flags up on some of the frat houses...The only pictures on the wall were all white men.

Sandra, another attorney whose exposure to racial hostility at a southern university led her to attend an HBCU for law school, shared a similar description of her undergraduate experiences.

I still can’t believe the type of racial isolation that was there [in college] and the type of anger that I felt from white people... It made me gravitate toward definitely being with black people all the time and for me then it was pretty easy to choose [an HBCU] to go to law school. That was sort of the progression for me. By the time it was time for me to go to grad school I was like, Ok, I have seriously had enough. I can’t sit through one more class where somebody is talking about affirmative action or somebody is making a comment about welfare recipients. I was just like I can’t do it anymore. I’ve been doing it since I was five and I am done.

Thus, their trajectories prior to professional school—not their time in professional school—that most likely made many of them less trusting of and comfortable around white colleagues in ways that led to less positive perspectives about their professional experiences.
Students who attended HBCUs having had more positive previous inter-racial interactions tended to report that their firms were more racially fair and had more positive assessments of their career experiences. Some interviewees who had grown up in predominantly white neighborhoods and schools discussed going to HBCUs essentially to “find themselves” racially. These interviewees had generally enjoyed positive cross-racial interactions growing up but hoped to develop a better understanding of “the black experience” and “what it means to be black” in America. The interviewees with this perspective reported having more positive professional experiences in the corporate world, suggesting that the ways that the experiences within HBCUs color later racial perspectives depends on the perspectives that students bring with them upon matriculating at these schools.

However, evidence from these interviews suggests that some of these selection concerns may be overstated. Some interviewees discussed attending HBCUs for reasons other than their racial outlooks. Some had initially hoped to attend particular predominantly-white schools. A few interviewees discussed wanting to attend HBCUs throughout their childhood but being pressured (essentially forced) by their parents to attend majority-white institutions because of their parents’ concerns about the HBCU experience being “unrealistic” and inadequate preparation for the racial dynamics of the professional world, where their degrees might be less valued. There may be a particularly strong selection effect for interviewees who attended HBCUs for graduate school, as several indicated that they purposefully chose to attend an HBCU because they had encountered serious racial difficulties or hostilities at their predominantly white undergraduate institutions. Their perspectives therefore, may reflect underlying differences between them and other interviewees that exist independently of their HBCU experiences.
Social Embeddedness in School Alumni Networks

Graduates of the same schools working at the same firms share bonds that may allow them to develop valuable social capital. These potential alumni benefits are not limited to graduates of the most elite schools—in fact, several interviewees suggested that alumni bonds may be stronger among colleagues from slightly less-prestigious schools. This social capital can serve as an important collective resource and can help workers compensate for other disadvantages, including having attended less prestigious school. Some interviewees, for example, noted the presence of predominantly white alumni groups from smaller liberal arts colleges or state schools. Others suggested that alumni groups were a particularly important resource for HBCU graduates in some firms. Sylvester suggested that more senior investment bankers, who had themselves overwhelmingly attended Ivy League and other elite business schools, may be inclined to work with their fellow alumni over other junior professionals.

If you’re an alumnus of the same school…it’s very helpful. So on Day 1, that comes up, and when they’re looking for somebody you might get recruited because you went to Penn like everyone else, or Stanford, or “name-your-ivy-league school.” That of course translates to having people who are already looking out for you because you’re an alumnus and you have that in common.

However, Sylvester later acknowledged that he gained substantial alumni benefits from having attended his HBCU. Sylvester, like other interviewees, noted that graduates from certain HBCU business programs had very strong networks in some banks and groups. Sylvester noted that although his school was not ranked nearly as high as most of his counterparts’ schools, he reaped substantial benefits from its impressive alumni network. He explained that there were at one point more than twenty graduates from his school working in his investment bank who mostly shared an understanding about the importance of helping each other succeed.

57 However, this perception may just reflect that these schools’ alumni networks are more noticeable to observers because, being non-traditional feeder schools, their representation at their firms seemed more unusual.
There were four people ahead of me and four people ahead of them. It was good to have them whenever we came to review process time to call and say, “So, what should I be doing now?” to get the real low down on what’s going on, who I should be avoiding. When I was choosing what group to be a part of… I could get a really, really frank conversation with people like, “You don’t want to work there because this guy’s an -sshole or this group has a tendency to churn through analysts, etcetera.” It was good to be able to reach out and have those types of frank conversations with people who I had been in class with few years ago or people that I knew.

The size and strength of this network helped the new bankers from his school hit the ground running and achieve unusual success, even compared to graduates of more prestigious schools.

I had come in with six folks [from my school]. All of the people that came into [the bank] with me—we all got promoted. After three years, we were all still there. We all got promoted. If you know anything about investment banking, the turnover ratio is super high. The fact that all six of us were able to stay on that long and get promoted, it was a weird anomaly.

Sylvester’s bonds with fellow alumni provided him much-needed advice that proved instrumental to his success at the firm. Sylvester recalled one difficult stretch, during his second year at the firm, when, as a result of his reputation as a talented analyst, his colleagues began bombarding him with excessive work requests. Because as a junior person it was “difficult to say no,” he became overwhelmed and worried that he start making mistakes or not finish all of his assignments on time. He finally sought counsel with slightly older alumnus from his school.

Luckily, I was able to have a conversation with this guy who was a year or two ahead of me, “Dude, I am totally overwhelmed, there’s no way that I can finish all of this work.” He said, “Are you telling them that you can’t finish it?” I said, “Well, no, I can’t do that can I?” He said, “Dude, you totally have to do that or people will run you into the ground.” That is just one of those frank conversations that I could have with an alumnus that I needed to have or I would have totally killed myself. After that, I started telling me people no,…which ended up helping me in the long run.

Sylvester, who had naively assumed that he was more or less required to accept all work that was sent his way, would have either burned out or self-destructed if he had not received guidance from his fellow alumnus.

Greta, who attended very prestigious schools for high school and college, emphasized the benefits of her schools’ well-placed alumni networks.
A lot of the senior people at [her bank] went to [her prep school] or [her college]. The resume got me conversations with people. I can always tap into the alumni networks. I get all the newsletters, all the magazines, and all the happenings that are going on in New York City. I paid for the “optionality,” so that future payments will come out of this.

Having attended prestigious, expensive schools throughout her life paid dividends, as it enabled her to gain personal access to influential people and high-potential networking events. Her educational credentials also give her an identity and basis of connection that makes some of those influential professionals more inclined to help her, or at least take valuable time out of their busy schedules to meet with her. Wayne, an attorney, benefited from meeting a partner who had attended his prep school and who worked in an area in which Wayne wanted to gain experience. Other interviewees, however, alluded to these types of private school alumni bonds as a source of disadvantage to most black professionals, whom they believed were less likely than their white counterparts to have attended such schools.

**Minority Internships and Professional Preparation Programs.**

Many of the black professionals interviewed for this study had participated in pre-professional minority internship programs. Despite obvious differences, these programs were analogous to, and in some ways extensions of, their university experiences. These programs were educational in that they provided training and instruction designed to help minorities perform in later professional settings. “The Consortium” has been working to increase the number of African-Americans in business school since the 1960s (America and Anderson, 1978). The Sponsors Educational Opportunity (“SEO”) internship program has been particularly important in increasing the number of black professionals on Wall Street. SEO, which also provides educational programming and professional grooming, has placed thousands of black students in investment banking internships at Wall Street banks since 1980, including many of the black professionals who currently work at elite banks (Williams, 1980). The Robert Toigo
Foundation has promoted diversity in the finance industry since 1989 and the Management Leaders for Tomorrow program has helped increase the supply of black students at the nations’ top business schools in recent years (Ho, 2006). They also provided credentials that carried varying levels of prestige and signaled particular qualities to prospective employers.

Interviewees who participated in these programs rarely reported perceiving that their firms were unfair to black people. They were also less likely to describe themselves as having struggled or felt particularly uncomfortable, socially. Interviewees credited special internship and preparatory programs aimed at minorities with giving them the experience, understanding of corporate dynamics to succeed early on in their corporate careers and make the transition from school to the workplace. Sylvester credits his SEO experience with allowing him and his fellow alumni to “hit the ground running” when they began working at their Wall Street investment banks after college. Harold, a corporate manager, described the benefits of another professional preparation program, INROADS, in similar terms. He explained that the program “grooms [participants] through various courses on what it’s like to work in corporate America whether its first impression, presentation, corporate politics—all the things you need to know to hit the ground running.”

SEO, a prestigious summer internship and professional development program that connects minority college students with Wall Street internships and immerses them in additional training classes and networking events, was repeatedly singled out as being particularly important. These programs provide impression management skills, advise on the importance of

---

58 However, there may be a substantial “creaming effect” with many of these pre-professional minority internship and training programs that overstates some of the value-added of the programs and their effects on participants’ career perspectives. The students who apply to programs for SEO may tend to be those who are most motivated to pursue careers on Wall Street, and those who already have the most valuable social capital and access to information about the existence and usefulness of such programs. These programs, including SEO and MLT, rigorously screen applicants and select the most impressive, distinguished ones—those who are already most likely to succeed in the corporate world.
social capital and strategies to develop, provide social capital through program networks and
mentors, and, in some instances, also instill cultural capital. Sylvester, an HBCU graduate who
participated in one program, SEO, as an investment banking summer intern during college,
described the manner in which the program helped participants adapt to otherwise-foreign
cultural norms and expectations. He noted that the program covered “dress and presentation of
yourself” in exhaustive detail.

It went from everything from…what to wear, what not to wear, shaving, hygiene, everything.
Back in the day, a lot of the students had never had any corporate experience…What you think is
proper attire outside of Wall Street is totally different. It is really blue suit [or] gray suit [and]
light blue shirt...Literally, we stayed right within those guidelines. There were dress codes; we
were taught how to ask questions, networking.

Given the importance of having the right cultural repertoires and social skill sets in
succeeding in the corporate world, it is not surprising that the black professionals who
participated in these programs reported, on average, better experiences than others. Students
from schools further socially and culturally removed from Wall Street may especially stand to
gain from their exposure through these summer immersion programs. Both Sylvester and
Harold praised these programs for improving the soft skills and cultural repertoires of young
black professionals before their entrance into the corporate world. Interviewees also praised
other benefits of the program. Alicia, an HBCU graduate, claimed that SEO is an important
equalizer for minority students from non-elite schools, including her own, that she believes have
less rigorous curricula and instruction than some of the top schools. She explained that “a lot of
the stuff I learned that I was able to apply up here [at my Wall Street job], even the quantitative
stuff and book stuff, I didn’t learn it in school, I learned it through SEO.”

CONCLUSION

In contrast to the mixed and ambiguous effects of black professionals’ socioeconomic
origins on their career experiences, the association between interviewees’ school careers and
their perspectives on professional life were more apparent and important. Interviewees’ school credentials and experiences appear to be more important than their actual family social class backgrounds. Educational careers provide opportunities for acculturation, social network development, and access to prestigious, legitimizing credentials and degrees. These findings reveal that attending the right schools may be particularly valuable in helping young black professionals overcome family class disadvantages, cultural differences or even racial stereotypes and presumptions. Attaining highly-valued credentials may help ensure black professionals more equitable treatment by signaling intelligence, ability, and professional potential. This may matter not only in the initial hiring process but also in their experiences and treatment on the job. Further, attending particular schools at times provides opportunities to develop cultural capital, skills and dispositions that may later prove beneficial on the job. Attending the right schools can also provide advantageous access to alumni social networks. These types of educational heterogeneities appear to influence junior professionals’ transitions into the corporate world and may lead to significantly different experiences and perspectives.
CHAPTER 8:
BLACK FEMALE PROFESSIONALS AND THE DISADVANTAGES OF GENDER

Many of the leading qualitative studies of black corporate professionals have used almost exclusively male samples and have thus had little to say about the experiences of black women. For example, only 8 of the 76 executives in Collins’ (1983, 1989, 1993) series of articles on black corporate professionals were women (see also Fernandez, 1975; Davis and Watson, 1982). As a result, these works have largely neglected issues of gender and failed to present the perspectives of black women (Bell, 1990; Holvino, 2003).59 It is unclear whether the views and concerns voiced by black men in those works resonate with black female professionals, or whether black women instead have distinct perspectives.

This gap in the research largely stems from the demographics of the corporate world in the mid-to-late twentieth century. The vast majority of the first black corporate attorneys, Wall Street professionals, corporate managers, and management consultants to enter elite firms were men. Much has changed since then though. For several years now, black women have educationally outpaced black men (Trescott and Gilliam, 1986; Cook and Cordova, 2007). This is particularly evident at many of the selective universities that serve as pipelines into the corporate world, where black women in some instances outnumber men by ratios of more than 2:1. As a result, black women have made significant inroads into the corporate world and now constitute a large and growing percentage of the black junior professionals working in many elite firms.

---

59 Similarly, research on the experience of female professionals has generally included very few, if any, black women (see Hennig and Jardim, 1978; Morrison et al., 1987).
However, despite their increased presence in elite firms, black women still seem to struggle in the corporate world. Black women have had slower promotion rates and greater attrition than many other groups. More than eighty percent of minority women leave their law firms within five years (American Bar Association Commission on Women in the Profession, 2006). Women are still underrepresented in certain industries, black women especially so (one interviewee described black women as “a complete minority” on Wall Street). Because black women are “double minorities,” due to their racial and gender identities, Crenshaw (1989) and other researchers have argued that women of color face a triple disadvantage in workforces dominated by white males: They are disadvantaged by race, gender, and the intersection of race and gender. Hence, black women may have distinct perspectives and concerns that have not been adequately captured in previous research on black professionals.

*Gender Inequality and Discrimination in Corporate Firms*

The earliest cohorts of professional women encountered rampant discrimination, including open hostility, suspicions about their competence, double-standards in assignment and promotion decisions, sexual harassment, and ostracism (Kanter, 1977). Male colleagues were completely unaccustomed to working alongside women in non-support roles. Tokenism was prevalent—many firms only hired the minimum number of women they believed were needed to avoid legal or public relations problems (Kanter, 1977; Cohan, 2007). Many women were sidetracked into relatively lower-status administrative and human relations positions while comparably-qualified male professionals were fast-tracked to more lucrative and powerful positions.

These inequalities have been so stark that observers have discussed them as revealing “glass ceilings”: discriminatory, artificial barriers that covertly but systematically stymie the
career progress of female professionals regardless of their accomplishments or merit (Cotter et al., 2001; Federal Glass Ceiling Commission, 1995). The phrase has been most often used with respect to professional jobs, where, as discussed in Chapter 2, performance evaluations and promotions are often based on largely subjective criteria (Morrison and Von Glickow, 1990; Bridge, 1997).60

Gender disparities, discrimination, and harassment are still present in corporate workplaces. Men and women now start out their corporate careers in roughly comparable numbers, but women do not advance within their firms commensurately. Instead, they receive fewer promotions and experience far greater attrition (Wald, 2010). These disparities persist across many industries (Mason and Ekman, 2007; Ragins, 1998; Hull and Nelson, 2000) and begin to emerge very early in professionals’ careers. A third of all female associates completely abandon law firm practice within their first three years, compared to twenty percent of male associates (Sloan, 2009). At law firms, for example, women make up almost fifty percent of entering associates, but less than twenty percent of the partnership ranks (Beckman and Phillips, 2005; Payne-Pikus et al., 2010). Widespread concern over these issues even led the federal government to commission an important study on female careers in the 1990s (see Federal Glass Ceiling Commission, 1995). Roth (2003, 2006) found that Wall Street women earned substantially less money than similarly-situated male professionals. These persisting gender disparities have often been attributed to sexist discrimination (see Bridge, 1997; Bielby, 2000; ABA Commission on Women in the Profession, 2001).61 Even fairly recently, several top firms

60 The glass ceiling problem in law firms has been discussed extensively in law review articles and industry periodicals (see Epstein, 1995; Foster, 1995; Farrer, 1997; Epstein, 2001; Reichman and Sterling, 2004; Wald 2010).
61 Other studies have identified gender-based occupational segregation as a more important cause of wage inequality between comparable male and female workers than job discrimination (Petersen and Morgan, 1995; Morgan, 1998; Giele and Stebbins, 2003). These studies and their findings are less applicable to the population represented in this sample, which only includes women who have worked in elite, high-paying, predominantly-male positions.
have found themselves embroiled in embarrassing civil litigation over the alleged mistreatment of female professionals (Ballard, 1998; Blair-Loy, 1999; Ackman, 2001, 2004; Cohan, 2007).

However, gender discrimination has certainly become less blatant in the corporate world over time. Firms that once rampantly discriminated against women eventually began hiring and promoting non-trivial numbers of female professionals (Epstein, 1993). The younger male professionals who replaced older generations of corporate decision-makers were far less committed to outdated gender norms and far more tolerant of diversity. As the earliest cohorts of female professionals gained seniority, their firms began to hire even more women (Chambliss and Uggen, 2000). Today’s professional women are no longer pioneers or tokens and are far less likely to encounter the blatant animosity and resistance experienced by their predecessors. Thus, there are reasons to believe that the most recent cohorts of female professionals, including black women interviewed in this study, will not universally consider gender to be a serious source of disadvantage and unfairness.

It is perhaps unsurprising then that only a few interviewees reported believing that female professionals suffered outright gender-based discrimination at their firms. A few interviewees did report feeling that they had been subjected to egregious gender-based mistreatment though. Wynona, a corporate manager, had a miserable time earlier in her career, during a stint at a large financial firm. Wynona had been hired by the firm’s national hiring committee but she was placed into a southern office where she was the only woman in her group and one of few minorities. She sensed that the other professionals in her office resented her presence and believes that they discriminated against her.

It was a very sexist [office], it felt like working in a white frat house. That’s what I would call it—I’d be like “I’m going to the frat house today.” It was just blatant disrespect. Yeah, I think a lot of it had to do with being a woman...I don’t know how much more respect they would have had for me if I was a white woman… I think it was a combination of race and being a woman.
Wynona noticed that her senior colleagues refused to provide her opportunities commensurate to her seniority level and instead consistently steered premium opportunities to more junior white male associates and analysts. Those junior colleagues realized that Wynona was not highly valued by her bosses and they eventually began to blatantly disrespect her themselves, by pushing back when she gave them assignments and challenging her authority. Seeing that the writing was on the wall, she left the firm as soon as she could find an opportunity elsewhere.

Notwithstanding Wynona’s experience though, the vast majority of interviewees did not report that women at their firms were purposefully mistreated solely on the basis of gender. Instead, those who believed that gender mattered more often referred to other, often more subtle types of gender-based disadvantages.

*Family Responsibilities, Goals and Expectations, and Work-Life Balance*

Over the past decade, in the commentary on women’s professional careers, concerns about gender discrimination have been largely replaced by a new focus on “work-life balance” issues, the tensions that emerge between women’s devotion to their family lives and professional careers, as an important source of workplace gender disparities in the professional workforce (Blair-Loy, 2003; Belkin, 2003; Harrington et al., 2007).62 The struggles of professional, and other, women in forging successful careers while assuming primary responsibility for child-rearing and other household labor has been well-documented and linked to higher work attrition rates (see Hochschild, 1989; Hochschild, 1997; Stone, 2007).

In a highly influential account, Belkin (2003) even suggested that many young women with elite credentials and impressive career prospects were voluntarily “opting out” of their large

---

62 Descriptively, these researchers are at least somewhat in line with Becker’s (1985) efficiency-based model of gendered employment disparities, in its general emphasis on the effect of female household labor responsibilities in perpetuating these disparities.
corporate firms because they expected to find greater fulfillment by devoting their time to the responsibilities of motherhood. Belkin’s claim has been strongly challenged and criticized (see Percheski, 2008; Kagan, 2005). Researchers have instead emphasized that women’s decisions to compromise their professional careers to care for their children are structured by broader gender inequalities. Blair-Loy (2003:2) noted that many women act in ways that conform to the societally-imposed norms of the “family loyalty schema,” a cultural model dictating that women should regard marriage and motherhood as their primary life commitments. Furthermore, female professionals rarely have spouses who would be willing to compromise their professional careers to stay at home with their children (Harrington et al., 2007). Working mothers therefore spend far more time with their children and function as primary caregivers more often than professional men (Hochschild, 1989; Blair-Loy, 2003). Regardless of whether these family obligations reflect underlying values and voluntarily choices, they clearly contribute to some of the persisting disparities in the corporate world and can profoundly shape the experiences and perspectives of female professionals.

The accounts of several white interviewees actually lent some support to Belkin’s “opt-out” explanation. Chuck, an investment banker who was involved in personnel decision-making within his office, discussed the high attrition rates of female bankers in his firm as a matter of women pursuing their personal goals instead of professional success. Women were severely underrepresented at his office (only a handful had risen to positions higher than associate). Even though his group had begun hiring more women in recent years, it was only able to retain an alarmingly small number of them. Most of the women recently hired into the group quit within less than a year. Chuck found that they left not because of discrimination or unfair treatment, but because they wanted “a better life-work balance” and “a different lifestyle” more compatible
with their family goals. He explained that the lifestyle in investment banking, which includes notoriously long and unpredictable hours and in some instances, extensive travel, “runs people a little ragged,” and seems particularly problematic for women. The demands of the industry are difficult not only for many women who have husbands and children, but also for single, childless women who do not want to wait until their mid-to-late thirties to begin their families. Chuck became aware of these difficulties during a conversation with a friend who had previously worked at his firm.

She said, “Look I want to get married and I want to have a career but I can’t do it in this kind of environment. I can’t meet someone…As a senior associate/ junior VP, I’m still working eighty hours a week. I travel a lot. There’s no time for me to develop relationships and start a family.” And so she now works for a client of ours…and she’s gotten married and done all that stuff.

Several white female interviewees shared perspectives that were consistent with Chuck’s account. Although none indicated that they had left their firms because of work-life issues, many suggested that they would have to in the future, in order to enjoy the family life they desired.

Black interviewees were aware of this issue and believed that it contributed to the disparities in the senior ranks of their firms. When asked about whether gender “matters” at their firms, several black interviewee brought up this issue. Latrice, a Wall Street professional,

I think that [the gender issue is] a lot of women leaving because they want to have families and the work environment and the hours-- it’s just not conducive to being able to raise a family. And I think that’s why a lot of women leave. You can get them in from b-school and then moving up toward the ranks like VP and beyond, you end up having to make some really unfortunate choices as to whether: a) Do I not have kids right now or b) Have them and have a nanny take care of them full-time? Or do you try to do it half way? But you really can’t; there’s no flex-time in banking. As far as being able to recruit and retain more women, I think something needs to change as far as being able to accommodate women who actually want to have a family because that’s what happens.

Latrice believed that gender parity in the top firms in her industry would require structural, organizational changes far more substantial than the ubiquitous women’s “affinity groups” that meet regularly to discuss gender issues.
[The banks] have to be willing to make that change and they have to be willing to not penalize the women for not being around 24/7. They have all these groups, they have all these women’s groups—at every bank you’ll find “women in banking” or there’s always some affinity group—but nobody’s doing anything to actually change the structure of the hours and the way that people are staffed on deals.

Latrice, who was childless and had not yet approached the VP level, had not put much thought into whether these issues might lead her to curtail her own career in the future.

However, although Latrice and other black female interviewees recognized that work-life balance issues contributed to gender inequality in their industries, their accounts also suggest that this issue had less bearing on their own careers. Even those interviewees who reported that work-life balance issues affected women in their firms did not discuss these issues as being particularly relevant to themselves. Few indicated that they themselves had experienced any tensions between professional success and their own family goals and expectations. Although many black women interviewed had either already left corporate world or planned to leave in the foreseeable future, they did not attribute these career moves to work-life balance issues.

This difference in perspective probably stems from profound racial differences in black and white women’s family lives and marriage prospects. There has been considerable research and media coverage of the low marriage rates of black women (Wilson, 1987; Roberts, 2010), particularly the struggles of highly educated black women to find demographically similar marriage partners (Alexander, 2009; Davis and Karar, 2009; Nitsche and Brueckner, 2009). Nitsche and Brueckner (2009) find that those highly-educated black women who are married are significantly more likely than white women to have husbands who are less educated than themselves. This pattern also appeared amongst the female professionals who participated in this study—few of the black female interviewees were married, whereas nearly all of the white women were. The black women who were married almost to a person had husbands who worked in lower-paying, non-corporate jobs.
As white female professionals who had “opted-out” of their professional careers have acknowledged in other studies, having the option of leaving high-paying professional jobs is itself a luxury that is not equally available to all women (see Stone, 2009). Without a husband with a high-paying job, the option of leaving the corporate tournament becomes substantially less desirable, even infeasible, for many professional women. As either single women or primary household wage-earners, junior and mid-level black female professionals appear more likely to face economic realities that constrain the ways they evaluate their future careers. Thus, young black female professionals may be unlikely to seriously consider opting out of their jobs, because they are much more dependent upon their own incomes.

*The Intersection of Gender and Race: Black Female Disadvantage in the Corporate World*

Gender was a salient concern for many black female interviewees, but for reasons that had to do more with cultural and social capital than discrimination or work-life issues. Several even insisted, without solicitation, that in their groups or firms, gender presented more important source of disadvantage than race. They often suggested that gender issues were noticeable because their firms were far less sensitive or “politically correct” about issues of gender, compared to race. They identified several sources of gender-based disadvantages as having either already impeded their professional progress or threatening to do so in the future. Instead of attributing their difficulties to sexism or discrimination, the women in this study more often offered other explanations of the disadvantages of gender.

It became clear during the course of these interviews that several black women who initially identified gender as the primary source of professional disadvantage (instead of race), were actually referring to apparent disadvantages that stemmed from the intersection of gender and race. Some interviewees who spoke about the disadvantages of gender eventually qualified
their observations to explain that these gender issues did not appear to be as problematic for their white female counterparts.

Black female interviewees far more frequently reported being disadvantaged by gender-based social dynamics and differences cultural capital. They more often reported that they were disadvantaged as “double-outsiders” by the intersection of race and class. They perceived that white women and black men were better able to connect with their firms’ predominantly senior white male colleagues and thus were better able to succeed professionally. Perhaps because of these perceptions, black female interviewees attributed their professional frustrations and difficulties to racial discrimination and gender-neutral racial stereotypes less than black male interviewees. Because these female interviewees were aware of black colleagues who had succeeded within their firms, they tended to rule out that their problems were distinctively racial and saw gender as a more logical explanation.

**Gender and Cultural Capital**

Even in work environments that are not blatantly unfair, women may be indirectly disadvantaged by gender if the dominant cultural capital schemas of their workplaces privilege topics and activities that are favored by men. For example, men often engage in “sports talk,” discussing major professional and collegiate sports teams and athletes. This banter enables men to bond and develop ties across racial lines while marginalizing many women (Turco, 2010; Erickson, 1996).

Several female interviewees alluded to the prevalence of strong male bonding over sports or other traditionally masculine leisure activities and suggested that black men were able to use their sports-related cultural capital to gain acceptance among white peers and superiors.
Lacey, a former Wall Street trader, felt marginalized by the male-centered culture of her group. She explained that although it was “not misogyny,” she noticed a “lack of regard” for whether women were fully included and well-integrated into her group. She complained that her male colleagues “don’t realize that the world doesn’t revolve around baseball and football and how that could discourage some women from stepping out and excelling.” This male-oriented culture seemed self-sustaining, as the professional socialization process naturalizes it for male junior traders who observe the behavior of more senior professionals. Similarly, Kameela, an attorney at a southern office of a national law firm, expressed frustration over her firm’s male-oriented cultural schemas. “My firm is definitely a boys’ club. I mean, they go hunting for their client development [outings]. It’s definitely a boys club.” She felt significantly disadvantaged by this and socially- and culturally-disconnected. She explained her difficulties: “I don’t talk sports. If it’s going to be a buddy-buddy thing, it’s who they want to drink with and I can’t share a beer with you and talk about the [local football team] because I don’t watch football. Kameela did not consider her struggles to be “a race thing,” because she observed that several of her black male counterparts succeeded in developing rapport and relationships with their white colleagues. Although the firm’s culture and stereotypically- male social and client-development activities may not be motivated by exclusionary intentions, they may be no less harmful for women like Kameela.

Gloria, an attorney at a mid-sized firm, considered the stark gender disparities in corporate law firms to be more of a disadvantage than the even starker racial disparities.

[Disadvantage] is more gender-driven in my profession, in my experience. [Law is] a profession that’s historically been predominantly male and now the numbers are still not that vastly different. The proportion of men to women is very close now and yet if you look at the makeup of the people in power, you’ll see that that’s not the case there. It looks just the f-cking same. And there’s a reason for that.
Gloria believed that these disparities were self-perpetuating. Because of their homophily preferences, the firm’s overwhelmingly male partners and senior associates were more likely to befriend and sponsor male associates. “When it comes time for them to decide, ‘Who am I going to share my piece of the pie with,’ they want to share it with their friends.”

In some respects, the fact that many female interviewees regarded these sorts of social capital difficulties as the most pressing source of gender disadvantage is evidence of considerable progress, and actually quite promising. This type of disadvantage is arguably far more promising than discrimination, in that it is not purely ascriptive and do not disadvantage all women. It may also be easier for individual women to overcome. Women who are motivated to do so can take steps to minimize its effects. As some female interviewees alluded, women can mitigate these disadvantages by pro-actively making efforts to develop masculine cultural capital, for example, by learning about sports (Davies-Netzley, 1998). However, few interviewees in this study indicated that they had affirmatively taken such steps to advance their careers. Kameela, for example, discussed her own lack of effort to address these difficulties. “I have not made any effort to learn sports and stuff like that,” she explained. “I’m just not interested and that could be a poor career move on my part.”

Kelli, an attorney at a large southern firm, found that, contrary to her expectations, gender seemed to matter more than race in her group. Kelli described herself as having a highly race-conscious worldview in which she was generally strongly predisposed to interpret negative experiences as “about me being black.” Nonetheless, she came to understand the difficulties she encountered at her firm as being attributable to gender instead of race.

It’s rare that I do this, but I think gender plays a larger role on my team…In terms of making those connections, the things that limits the connections is gender. Because I don’t want to talk about baseball…When they’re having “locker-room” talks about women, locker-room talk about sports or whatever, they’re not really talking about white people stuff-- they’re usually talking about men stuff.
Another finance sector professional, Nakia, seconded Kelli’s observation about the prevalence of “guy talk.” She noted that at her investment banking firm, “the default conversation is sports and the girls will look at each other like ‘uh oh’.”

Some male interviewees also realized that these dynamics were particularly difficult for black women at their firms. Gary, an attorney, realized that gender was “important” after speaking with a black colleague who has had a difficult time at the firm.

It’s a lot tougher for her. She feels that she has to work a lot harder to get the same amount of work, to be recognized, that people don’t talk to her the same way or the same amount that they would talk to me. And I think that part of it is that they’re mostly men so it’s probably the same thing in that they may not feel comfortable in initiating a conversation...I guess in choosing a minority, if you have to choose a man or a woman, and you’re a white man, you’re probably going to choose a man first because at least you can talk about beer or sports or whatever--whatever stereotypical male thing. I think that is part of the structure.

Some black women claimed that certain types of their black male counterparts, particularly those who were outgoing, former collegiate athletes, received noticeable preferential treatment from other white colleagues. Agnes, an attorney at a large New York firm, described this phenomenon at her firm. She referred to some of her especially well-received colleagues as “the black guys at the firm who everyone looks up to” and noted that some white peers even “envy” their status within the firm. She explained how one such associate outshined his white male peers and seemed to effortlessly develop camaraderie with a powerful sponsor. “We have one associate here-- he’s tall, he’s smart, he plays basketball, he’s cool, he’s interesting. And there’s one partner who’s one of the biggest rainmakers at the firm-- a really, really powerful partner-- and he invested in him at a very early stage.” The partner appeared to have been initially drawn to the black male associate because, on a personal level, he wanted to “be around” him and “get to know” him. Ndea, another attorney also noted that there were certain “good-looking” former athletes were well-received because they had what she described as “the ‘cool’
factor; the man’s man, very athletic thing.” This helped them capture the respect and admiration of their white peers and partners in ways that actually turned their black maleness into a gendered advantage for them.

Because these female interviewees had each witnessed some of their black colleagues gain acceptance by white mentors and inclusion into the predominantly white male social circles at their firms, they tended to rule out that their problems were distinctively racial and instead regarded gender as being more determinative. Many seemed to regard their black male professional counterparts as being far less disadvantaged than the black male professionals interviewed believed.

Although many of these difficulties, particularly the disadvantages stemming from the prevalence of sports talk and other forms of male-oriented cultural capital, seem as though they should be equally applicable to both black and white women, the (admittedly small) group of white female interviewees rarely raised similarly concerns. This suggests that other cultural and social common ground may enable white women to develop the types of camaraderie and social ties with white male professionals that prove elusive to many black women.

**Social Exclusion**

Hurtado (1989) has suggested that gender-based mistreatment may vary qualitatively by race, with minority women being more likely than white women to suffer from outright exclusion. Some black female interviewees suggested that they were never given an opportunity to demonstrate whether they possessed the right cultural capital because women were flatly excluded from their male colleagues’ out-of-work activities. Regardless of what cultural capital some possess or their interests in sports and beer, male professionals may feel more comfortable socializing and saying crude and impolitic things solely in the company of other men.
Syrita, an attorney, believed that she and the other few women in her practice group were substantially disadvantaged by the group’s gender dynamics. She explained that many of the partners and senior associates were at times distant and unfriendly to her and her white female counterparts, in strikingly contrast to their chummy relationships with the group’s male associates. Although male partners and associates often socialized outside of work, she and the other women were excluded.

I could see them talking to the next guy, inviting them to play golf, inviting them to come get bourbon and do all these sorts of things that I was excluded from… They would go out and do things together, on private time. They’d invite the guys over to each other’s houses. It was almost like a boys’ club.

Syrita observed that participation in those social activities gave male associates’ colleagues the opportunity to “see other aspects” of their personhood, thereby developing deeper rapport and comfort with each other. This male bonding produced multiplex relationships that advantaged plugged-in male associates over female outsiders. The benefits of these out-of-office gatherings were most evident when junior associates made mistakes at work.

If my friend made a mistake or if something [bad] happened in a case, I think they were more forgiving of that because they knew him on a different level and in a different way. They had seen him in other contexts that they just didn’t see me in. I was very one-sided to them; they only knew me in the context of work. So if they only know you in the context of work, that’s all they’re going to consider when they think about you. Versus they’re like “Oh that’s [a socially-connected male associate]. We’ve hung out with him; he’s cool. Ok, you know that letter had something in it that we probably shouldn’t have said in it [but] that’s cool because I know that in general he’s good, he’s capable, he’s a good dude.” Versus me, they’re like, “Ohh.” The same mistake in the letter, all hell is going to break loose.

She observed that the partners’ inconsiderate treatment extended equally to the white women in her group. These gender issues eventually led Syrita to leave her firm, in search of greener pastures.

Syrita’s experience at her firm reveal the means by which gender-based cultural norms and social networks may further marginalize many black women even relative to their black male counterparts. Because they are unable to or otherwise not allowed to participate in informal
social gatherings, social capital deficits may accumulate such that women will end up with far less access to steady flows of information and work assignments or receive the benefit of the doubt for their performance. The risk of such informal gender disadvantage is likely greatly exacerbated by the social dynamics within many corporate firms. In work groups like Syrita’s, where male members regularly interact with each other outside of work and develop bonds of trust and personal familiarity, the disadvantages of female professionals’ outsider statuses are often intensified.

**Communication and Self-Presentation Issues.**

As we saw in previous chapters, appearing competent and enthusiastic in their interactions with colleagues and clients is an important part of projecting the right public face for young professionals. Successful professionals realized that by assertively participating in team meetings, for example, they could signal their analytical abilities and commitment to their jobs. In doing so, they could distinguish themselves from their peers in the eyes of their superiors. Those who do not feel comfortable speaking up, suffer. More than any other group of interviewees, several black women discussed struggling with this dimension of their jobs. A few attributed their difficulties to their concerns that colleagues might subject them to extra scrutiny because of racist stereotypes about their intelligence or competence. These concerns influenced their conduct in a variety of important workplace contexts. Some spoke of being reluctant to ask their superiors questions about assignments or to share their opinions about big-picture issues. Black female professionals with this perspective also seemed less willing to assert themselves to gain premium opportunities or avoid situations detrimental to their careers.

These issues were perhaps most apparent at team meetings, where some women reported having problems properly asserting themselves in these settings. For example, Sandra, an
attorney, complained that certain white male counterparts who were less reticent seemed to trick partners into thinking they were “superstars” despite their unexceptional work. She recalled one in particular who “acted like he was a partner” and “spoke up in meetings” with “no deference” toward other more senior attorneys. Sandra believes that this confidence and comfort enabled the associate to receive opportunities and recognition above and beyond what his actual skills merited.

Kim, another attorney, recalled being repeatedly criticized for not speaking up or being assertive enough in team meetings. She believed that black women were penalized for not feeling as comfortable and entitled as their white colleagues.

It’s not that we’re not engaged, it’s just that I feel some of our [white] counterparts who are much more comfortable say all kinds of ridiculous things, but they sort of get rewarded for saying something. Whereas I feel [that] I should be much more thoughtful. So if it comes out, I have thought about it, made sure it’s right three times before I make any comment at all, which is sort of-- I’m being penalized for my thoughtfulness.

A few other black female interviewees, like Kim, spoke of being reluctant to fully participate in workplace discussions and team meetings because they feared that any inaccurate comments might serve to confirm their colleagues’ hidden racist doubts about their competence. This led some to adapt defensive, passive self-presentation and communication strategies that were considered illegitimate and criticism-worthy within their firms. In doing so, these women likely further disadvantaged themselves, lowering their standing in the eyes of senior professional decision-makers and reducing their changes of receiving top evaluations and premium opportunities.

Although one interviewee, Tyler, an investment banker, observed that female bankers were criticized for certain aggressive behavior that was tolerated when engaged in by men, more interviewees suggested that women disadvantaged themselves by not acting aggressively enough. Beth, a law firm partner, suggested that many black women naturally have the “Type
A” personalities and confidence necessary to succeed in the corporate world but instead handicap themselves when they arrive at firms and become uncharacteristically reluctant to assert themselves.

A lot of what holds us back is us. Because the bravado that I love about black women, that we have, we don’t bring to [law firms]. I don’t know how we don’t do that but the black women I see who are successful have all done that to a one. And there are no “shrinking violets”; they’ll each easily tell you to “kiss my ass.” What stops us from getting where we want is really our problem.

Beth thus directly blames female professionals at top for professionally handicapping themselves. Perhaps affirming Beth’s observations, a few less senior female interviewees spoke of being afraid to fulfill the perception that black women may have “bad attitudes.” They reported having a very difficult time projecting the right blend of professionalism and extroverted amiability. Female interviewees complained about being criticized because they “didn’t smile enough,” or seemed “too serious,” “angry,” or “unhappy.” Kameela, an attorney, learned from a colleague that there was a misperception among some white partners in the office that she might have a racial chip on her shoulder. Kameela was informed that there was a rumor in the office that she had attributed her difficulties finding work to her being black. Not only was this rumor baseless and inaccurate, but Kameela believed that it might have stigmatized her as an angry black female, and thus made many white attorneys reluctant to work with her.

Although most of the black interviewees who mentioned this problem considered it an issue of race, some interviewees reported that this issue affected women of all races. They attributed these difficulties to gender-based differences in communication, claiming that some women used “traditionally female” (i.e. tentative and non-confrontational) styles of communication that were interpreted as signaling that they were incompetent or unengaged.

Margaret, a white attorney, observed that the many of the most successful associates at her law firm were the ones who appeared to “suck up” to partners most effectively.
I wouldn’t necessarily say they were the best or the smartest. They worked a lot, definitely, but probably not the most. But they sucked up to the partners. We’d have meeting with partners and they’d raise their hands and ask just ridiculous questions and they would be the ones sitting with the partners at lunch and go out with them to bars and that sort of thing…They are the ones who succeed there.

Margaret, like Kim and Sandra, perceived that white male colleagues were able to assertively participate because of their lack of inhibitions about group-based stereotypes. Tami, a black corporate manager—and the only woman in her division—also discussed this as a gender issue in race-neutral language. She found that her talents and contributions were initially overlooked because she was not participating in team meetings as freely as her male counterparts. Her experience improved when she made a concerted effort to speak up more regularly to draw attention to her talents and accomplishments.

A lot of times, the perception is if you’re not saying anything, then you don’t know anything. Or you’re not bringing anything to the table. So I say intelligent things, I don’t just say stuff out the side of my neck that doesn’t make any sense, but I have to say something on the call because I feel the pressure of being the only woman that they may perceive that I’m not intelligent, I’m not aggressive, I’m not assertive, or that I’m disengaged.

She believed that this was particularly important for women.

So I feel that I have to say something on every call whereas some of the other males can pass every week and that’s ok but when I pass, they tend to look over me… Most times I will try to get on the agenda to make sure that I have something specific to my duties that I bring up.

She believes that her strategic efforts have impressed her boss and made him comfortable giving her more substantial responsibilities.

Since I’ve been doing that, as time goes on, my boss has given me more and more and more responsibilities because I think he recognizes that “she might know what she’s taking about here.” Whereas if I had kept passing and passing, I don’t think he wouldn’t have developed the trust… So I think it’s been working.

Chrystia, a senior associate who works in a male-dominated department in her firm, agreed with Tami assertiveness was vital for black professional women. She advised that those who were naturally introverted or passive “have to develop a toughness that you never realized you had.”
Gender and Mentorship

As we saw in Chapter 3, mentorship relationships are of paramount importance for junior professionals interested in advancing in the corporate world. Because these relationships are often influenced by homophily and cultural common ground, women often have a harder time than men in finding mentors amongst the senior professionals at their firms. Dreher and Cox (1996) found that female MBAs were less likely than their male counterparts to form mentorship relationships, particularly with white males. This disparity may be particularly serious for black female professionals whose efforts to develop mentors are also impeded by racial differences (see Chapter 4). In a study of earlier cohorts of black female corporate professionals, Thomas (1989) found that interracial, cross-gender mentorship relationships with white men were not just rare, but even stigmatized and regarded as “taboo.” Notwithstanding this past research, the women interviewed in this study were not noticeably any more likely than male interviewees to report experiencing serious difficulties attaining mentors. Several female interviewees, both black and white, reported having established productive mentorship relationships with influential senior male professionals at their firms.

Some interviewees were able to bond with senior women who protected them and helped advance their careers. A handful of female attorneys mentioned bonding with female partners over traditionally feminine activities, including spa treatments, shopping, tea, and discussions of fashion. Agnes worked in a predominantly male group, but found several supportive women there. She explained, “I’ve been really fortunate. I worked with a lot of amazing female partners here in the group, and because they’re females it’s easier to get lunch, or get manicures and pedicures, and have real conversations about kids and families.” Several interviewees reported that senior black female mentors, though difficult to find, could be particularly beneficial for
junior black female professionals. For example, Laura, a consultant, benefited from the relationships she developed with two influential black women during her summer internship in a leadership development program at the firm she joined after business school.

The woman who was the head of the program was black and my boss was black, so there were two well-accomplished black women already there. I just “clicked” with the woman who headed the program and we developed a great relationship …I think it was definitely facilitated by the fact that the woman saw something in me that resonated with her on a personal level.

This relationship became important at the end of her internship, when Laura realized that she was not interested in the specific position that the program was designed to develop her for, and instead hoped to be considered for a position elsewhere in the company.

At the end of the summer I decided that I wasn’t really interested in marketing so I told the woman who ran the program and she said that she might know some people who could help me. She picked up the phone and called a few people, including a black partner [in the other group in another office]. A little while later, I ended up getting a phone call and having a thirty-minute conversation with two black partners in [that] office and it was a done deal.

The presence of this senior black woman in her group enabled Laura to naturally, with very little forced effort, develop a multiplex relationship with an influential decision-maker who in turn went above and beyond in advancing her career. Laura recognized that she benefited tremendously through her relationships with these women, but she believed that her white male counterparts likely received such assistance from their predominantly white male bosses and mentors as a matter of course.

However, other interviewees suggested that senior female professionals are not always supportive of junior female professionals. A few interviewees reported that the senior white female professionals at their firms generally seemed less supportive and less willing to serve as mentors than senior white men at their firms. A black consultant, Laura, for example, explained “I feel that I have to do what I can to not look overly aggressive, white women can be very
competitive. I’ve had a lot of older white males who have taken me under their wings because they don’t care anymore, nothing to lose.”

**Preferential Treatment for Some White Women**

A few black interviewees reported that some attractive white women received preferential treatment and greater opportunities because white male senior professionals were highly interested in working with them. Mabel, a black attorney, shared several anecdotes about attractive white female associates who appeared to receive better treatment at her firm because particular white male partners were either romantically interested in or already involved with them. She observed that the white females that were deemed attractive within the firm all received placements within the practice groups of their choice, while black women were often staffed to groups in which they were not interested. She also noted that black women whom she knew at other law firms shared her observations (she shared several of their anecdotes during our interview). Mabel was also shocked to discover that one partner in her group had shared far more information about Mabel’s performance and standing with one of her white female peers, than with Mabel herself.

Consistent with black interviewees’ perceptions that some white women received preferential treatment, Rachel, a white attorney, discussed the advantages of being a young, “girly” associate in her group. She discussed the benefits of working with more senior partners in her otherwise unpleasant group. Rachel explained, “To be perfectly honest, there are probably professional opportunities that would not have been available if not for the fact that I was a woman.” She also noted that even after receiving opportunities, she was treated better than some of her male colleagues.

I found that when I’m working with the older men, being a woman is beneficial (and not in the disturbing way). Men have children at this firm; women don’t, men do. Older partners end up being very paternal with me, for better or for worse. You like to be taken seriously but then you
can tell that the partner’s kind of treating you like his daughter. Better to be treated like a daughter and not get yelled at than to be treated very badly...I do think that male partners are less likely to yell at female associates (which is nice) and they’re a little bit gentler. And I think that especially when you’re junior, mid-level associates or other junior associates that I have been working with are more willing to help a woman.

Although Rachel described her preferential treatment strictly as a matter of gender, several black interviewees noted that black female professionals do not receive similar gender-based benefits.

However, Rachel also found that associates who were considered cute and feminine (like herself), were at times seemingly underestimated and taken less seriously than men and other women and therefore possibly disadvantaged in the firm’s professional tournament. She recalled one blonde senior associate in her group who was recently denied a promotion that instead went to another less “cute” attorney, who was not any more talented but seemed to be taken more seriously by some of the partners in the group. Thus, Rachel regarded her gender and appearance as a double-edged sword with ambiguous net consequences that varied for each individual. Because she did not plan to stay at the firm for more than a couple more years, so she believed that the benefits of this gender-based paternalism outweighed the possible long-term risks.

**CONCLUSION**

Although female professionals have made substantial progress in the corporate world over the past few decades, many interviewees believed that women were still significantly disadvantaged by gender. The perspectives presented in this chapter reveal that black female professionals have somewhat different career experiences and perspectives than their black male counterparts. Many black female interviewees believed that black women had greater difficulties succeeding and advancing in the corporate world than black men.
However, these interviewees explained the significance of gender in terms that were somewhat different than those most commonly discussed in studies of the professional world. Unlike past accounts that have tended to focus on sexist discrimination or issues of work-life balance, the black women interviewed for this study primarily discussed gender as exacerbating the social and cultural distance between them and their predominantly white, male colleagues. For them, gender differences compounded the disadvantages of their colleagues’ homophily tendencies (see Chapter 4) and contribute to their social and interactional difficulties. This undermined their ability to develop valuable organizational social capital within their firms and resulted in them receiving less mentorship, access to premium opportunities, and protection from adverse personnel decisions.

Interviewees’ accounts also possibly suggest that some of the particular gender-based disadvantages that are most salient for white female professionals may not be particularly important to black women. For the white women interviewed in this study and in previous reports, a primary disadvantage of gender lay in the apparent incompatibility between the time demands of their jobs and personal and societal expectations about their roles and responsibilities as mothers (and future mothers). By contrast, black female interviewees rarely referred to these issues. This may reflect broader racial inequalities and social conditions that more often deny black women the luxury to even consider abandoning their roles as primary breadwinners in order to start families and raise children.

All of these disadvantages reveal that, as appears to be the case with racial disadvantage and black professionals, even if sexist discrimination has become a less important problem for professional women, other types of gender-related disadvantages may continue to perpetuate disparities and unequal outcomes in the corporate world.
CONCLUSION

In this dissertation, I have examined the views and experiences of a diverse group of relatively young black professionals who have worked in some of the most prestigious corporate firms during the nation in the early years of the twenty-first century. Interviewees’ accounts of their professional experiences bear witness to the extraordinary change in race relations that has occurred over the course of the past half-century and illustrate that race is no longer the insurmountable, all-encompassing barrier that it once was. It once would have been perhaps inconceivable for a study of black corporate professionals to find so many interviewees who did not believe that they had been considerably handicapped by race. Interviewees’ perspectives suggest that the most highly-educated black professionals may experience racial disadvantage in ways that are fundamentally different than the experiences of black Americans from lower-socioeconomic positions. This appears to be consistent with Wilson’s (1978) intuition that racial discrimination would become a less important source of ongoing disadvantage for highly-educated black Americans. While black workers still face well-documented discrimination in blue-collar and service-sector jobs (see Pager, 2007; Royster, 2003), black professionals appear better able to avoid some of the most profound disadvantages of race. Although race is still an important source of career disadvantage for even the most highly-educated black professionals, as a group they are more often equipped with cultural repertoires and financial resources that can enable them to avoid some of the disadvantages of race by more adeptly code-switching and role-switching (Pattillo-McCoy, 1999; Lacey, 2007).

To the extent that race potentially impedes middle-class black Americans, they attempt to overcome and navigate around it, often with considerable success. Regardless of the extent to which racial biases persist in the hearts and minds of their non-black colleagues and bosses,
many young black professionals believe that they can receive fair shake in the corporate workplace. Although many interviewees reported that race can, and sometimes does, shape career experiences and outcomes at their firms and within their industries, they appeared to be far less racially-aggrieved and encumbered by racial bias than their predecessors.

Interviewees’ accounts of their professional experiences confirm that there have been considerable improvements over time. Yet, it is important not to overstate the extent of this progress. The evidence from this dissertation suggests that many young black professionals are still significantly disadvantaged by race-related difficulties. Some interviewees reported that black professionals in the even the most highly-regarded firms and companies were subjected to unfair double standards, presumed to be incompetent, and denied equal access to opportunities. Others pointed to other disadvantages stemming from homophily and race-based gaps in cultural capital. Thus, the emerging narrative that race is no longer a meaningful disadvantage remains unconvincing and premature, at best. Instead, American race relations remain in a “pre-post racial” stage. There has been substantial, undeniable progress, but in some very important respects, the playing field is not yet level. It is not clear whether further progress will continue at the pace as past advances—it is quite possible that corporate firms will never completely eradicate the influence of race in affecting opportunities and outcomes.

The nature of racial disadvantage has shifted over time. Traditional accounts of racial inequality, which focus almost exclusively on white Americans’ racial animus and biases, are now dated and incomplete. Race still matters, even when racial biases do not appear to be in play. Instead, there are also important alternative source of racial disadvantage that, if less morally offensive than outright prejudice, may prove to be even more persistent. Because of the long legacy of social and geographic segregation in America, blacks and whites develop very
different social experiences and cultural repertoires by the time they reach young adulthood. Because these differences render many black Americans less familiar or comfortable with the norms and styles that predominate in their firms, they function as a source of formidable race-related disadvantage.

Several practices prevalent in the corporate world may exacerbate the consequences of these differences, thereby producing greater racial disparities. The opportunity and reward structures of most corporate jobs are not designed to ensure that junior professionals receive equal, or even adequate, opportunities to demonstrate their abilities and advance within their firms. Many elite firms, particularly in the professional services industries, use labor pool personnel structures that often place considerable discretion in the hands of individual senior professionals, who can pick and choose the junior professionals with whom they would like to work.

In firms with these types of organizational structures, personnel decisions are still often influenced by factors that have little to do with professional merit, and that disadvantage black workers. Corporate professionals seem to form relationships with people who resemble themselves, often on the basis of personal affinities and rapport. Hence, those junior professionals with the right social backgrounds and cultural repertoires, ranging from knowledge about sports and pop culture, to comfort at bars or at country clubs, can better fit in socially and develop multiplex relationships that benefit them professionally. Because of these tendencies toward homophily, junior professionals who have the most in common with their colleagues and supervisors often have a leg up on their competition in building relationships with important mentors and sponsors and in landing premium opportunities. To the extent that employers are
able to act upon these homophily-based preferences, this presents a serious burden for many up-and-coming black professionals.

Black interviewees’ perceptions of this problem were supported by the white interviewees in the smaller comparison sample, as white interviewees almost never mentioned workplace interactions or relationship-building as being particularly difficult or requiring inordinate effort. White professionals appear to put far less conscious thought and forced effort into this aspect of their jobs, whereas black professionals often discussed feeling very uncomfortable or uninterested in even the informal social gatherings that were supposed to be most fun and enjoyable.

However, this disadvantage was not a salient problem for all black interviewees and appears to be less insurmountable than traditional stereotype-driven racism. Black professionals with the right cultural repertoires—those tastes, interests and modes of self-presentation and interaction deemed legitimate by white employers and colleagues—can often successfully negotiate racial differences where other black Americans would likely fail. Several interviewees shared anecdotes of themselves or other black professionals with the right social comfort and cultural capital benefiting from their cultural repertoires or interactional skills while other black colleagues languished. Like their white counterparts, those who acclimated themselves to their offices’ post-work bar scenes and who “hit it off” with colleagues were often highly satisfied with their career experiences at their firms and believed that they were treated fairly. This highlights the importance of interracial acculturation and exposure for black Americans hoping to succeed in predominantly white organizations.

Interviewees’ accounts underscore that black workers each experience and make sense of race very differently, according, in part, to their personal characteristics, previous life
experiences, and the organizational conditions that structure their careers. Hence, generalizations about the experiences or perspectives of higher-income black Americans, or even black corporate professionals, are no longer appropriate. All black professionals are not equally disadvantaged by race. Differences in individual backgrounds and family origins appear to produce different experiences and perspectives. Black professionals with elite educational credentials and those who have greater experience and acculturation into white social circles appear to experience better outcomes than others. Degrees from highly-selective universities may serve as powerful credentials with significant signaling effects that might enable black professionals to receive better treatment than their counterparts with less coveted credentials. Black professionals with greater exposure appear less likely to describe their firms as racially unfair or have difficulties forming social capital and gaining access to opportunities. Several interviewees also offered compelling explanations of the often-subtle importance of family social class background in some corporate settings. A number of them suggested that professionals from poor or working class backgrounds often had greater difficulties navigating the social terrain of their offices and projecting the optimal public faces. They often experienced difficulties relating to colleagues or at times failed to even appreciate the importance of trying to relate to one’s colleagues. Some reported that their humble family origins contrasted sharply with those of their colleagues and prevented them from having developed experiences and tastes that may have helped them develop rapport in the workplace.

**Implications and Solutions.**

The findings presented in this dissertation have implications that may help us better understand these complexities of race, in the contemporary corporate world and possibly beyond. The racial disadvantages that persist in the twenty-first century may prove difficult to address.
To the extent that societal stratification, informal workplace social processes, and apparently universal human tendencies toward homophily may perpetuate racial disparities even in the absence of racial discrimination—indeed, even in the presence of considerable efforts to increase racial diversity—they present a vexing, durable source of racial inequality. Even eradicating racial bias, a monumental task, would not necessarily address these problems or end racial inequality in the workplace. Without greater cross-racial acculturation, race-related cultural and social differences will continue to perpetuate inequalities. Individual black professionals may be able to enhance their career opportunities by actively pursuing opportunities for acculturation into the social and cultural dynamics of their white colleagues. Black students may find that putting forth extra effort to socialize with their college and professional school can greatly benefit them in the future, as their greater ease in interacting and developing social capital with white colleagues may pay considerable dividends during their professional careers. Those working in larger firms and practice groups may be able to advance their careers by aggressively networking with senior professionals within the firm and actively leveraging their social capital to solicit premium opportunities. Although undergoing purposive acculturation and assimilation may be quite burdensome and frustrating for some black professionals, it may be necessary to secure equal access to equal professional opportunities.

Black professionals may also help themselves by evaluating the organizational opportunity and reward structures of their prospective employers. In bottom-line jobs, such as Wall Street trading and sales positions, the quantified measures of their performance may help insulate them from potential racial stereotypes and lessen the importance of their social and cultural capital. However, such positions with quantifiable performance measures and bottom-line responsibilities are relatively rare and there may be considerable informal barriers to entry.
into these positions. Within the numerous, non-bottom line occupations, working in small, thinly-staffed practice groups may also tend to help black professionals attain access to the types of opportunities necessary to advance their careers. Perhaps most importantly, black professionals who lack sufficient previous cross-racial acculturation may want to avoid employment in firms with informal personnel practices and “clique-ish” office environments and in which senior professionals more often share premium opportunities and other resources with favored and socially similar junior professionals.

Continued racial progress may also require greater willingness by employers to forego the comforts of homophily. So long as firms allow supervisors to award opportunities outside of their formal processes, disparities will likely continue. Organizations that truly want to increase diversity and promote meritocracy may need to more actively intervene in and monitor the small day-to-day decisions that result in cumulative advantages and disadvantages over time. Everyday decisions that are widely treated as the prerogatives of individual senior professionals have systemic repercussions throughout their organizations. Senior professionals need to be more mindful that favoring certain junior professionals may disadvantage others. Pairing black junior professionals with influential senior professionals who are open to mentoring or sponsoring them may help them overcome some of the principle disadvantages of race.

**Future Research Directions.**

In highlighting the many different perspectives on the importance of race among a diverse sample of young black professionals, this dissertation reveals the need for further research into understanding the full range of differing experiences and perspectives of black Americans. Future researchers could test and expand upon some of the specific findings of this dissertation with even more targeted samples of particular subgroups of the black population.
Studies of black professionals from particular schools or firms, for example, could further flesh out the possible effects of specific background experiences and organizational contexts on individuals’ experiences and views about race. Similarly, ethnographic research might also be particularly useful for further understanding how black professionals develop their ideas and beliefs about racial fairness in the workplace. An ethnographer able to gain first-hand access to team and client meetings, and after-work gatherings, may be able to share even more nuances about the processes by which cultural capital and social capital are converted into professional advantages.

This study’s findings may also have implications for other “outsiders” including members of other racial and ethnic groups. Future research is necessary to determine whether other minority groups are similarly affected by homophily preferences and cultural capital differences. If this study’s findings, that these differences form considerable disadvantages independently of racial biases, are correct, then we should expect to see some of the same problems, albeit possibly to a less intense degree depending on the extent of inter-group social and cultural differences, with other populations of outsiders with less stigmatized social identities. Targeted research on the experiences of white professionals from lower-status family backgrounds or low-ranked schools could also be very helpful. Further in-depth research into the experiences of these groups could go a long way in testing some of the hypotheses generated in this dissertation.
APPENDIX:

DATA COLLECTION AND INTERVIEW METHODS

In this dissertation, I set out to investigate black junior professionals’ experiences and views about race, opportunity, and inequality in the corporate world through a sample of detailed, open-ended interviews. In this appendix, I explain the methodological approach I have taken the overall evolution of this study, to enable the reader to better assess the overall credibility of this study and its findings (Ambert et al., 1995).

My efforts in constructing this sample were guided by preliminary empirical observations and attention to the theoretical implications of previous research. I began this project suspecting that previous studies omitted a significant range of the spectrum of black professionals’ perspectives on race, and were therefore incomplete and misleading. My experience working as a corporate attorney for three years from 2003 until 2006 brought me into contact with black professionals who had many different viewpoints about the significance of race in their day-to-day experiences and career outcomes. These observations did not seem to gel with the extant research literature on black professionals and the black middle-class. Instead of portraying highly-educated black Americans as a diverse group with varied racial outlooks and experiences, much of the existing research seemed to present them as a monolithic, uniformly-aggrieved group whose racial identities inevitably exposed them to relentless, severe mistreatment and discrimination. These studies did not seem to allow that black professionals with certain social backgrounds or life experiences might be particularly susceptible to racial difficulties while others may be better-positioned to avoid the disadvantages of race. This apparent gap, between the past research and the present reality, struck me as an important area in need of further empirical elaboration and theoretical refinement.
The social science research literatures on socioeconomic stratification and mobility, class, race, gender, ethnicity, and cultural capital suggested numerous theoretical reasons why individual black professionals’ experiences and perspectives might vary. For example, family social class background, educational trajectories, past interracial acculturation, and ethnicity each stood out as important individual factors that should influence and mediate how different people experience race. Similarly, organizational contexts, including the distinct opportunity and reward structures of firms in different industries, seemed likely to shape how individual workers experienced and perceived race at work.

I began investigating this issue through a small set of pilot interviews of 10 fairly young black professionals, all of whom were personal contacts or one tie removed. These pilot interviews uncovered a wide variety of perspectives and convinced me that I could uncover a great deal of new insights through a larger interview-based study. Qualitative interview-based studies are arguably far better suited than quantitative survey-based methods for exploratory research questions, like this study’s, that require depth of analysis more than breadth of focus (Ambert et al., 1995).

In order to investigate the potential importance of each of the characteristics of interest discussed above, it was imperative that I develop a broad, diverse sample. Given the theoretical aims of this project, and certain practical considerations (discussed below), snowball sampling appeared to be the most feasible method for gathering such a sample. Snowball sampling, wherein successive contacts and interviewees would be asked to recommend this study to other potential interviewees, seemed to be the method best designed for assembling a large and diverse sample of this target population, given these conditions. Snowball sampling is very helpful for gathering “hidden” members of the populations being studied (Tansey, 2007), in this case those
black professionals who had already left their firms and were no longer employed as corporate professionals. Another important advantage of snowball sampling is that it provides access to individuals who might otherwise be particularly reluctant to participate in social science research. For these reasons, snowball sampling has been widely used in studies of elites who might otherwise be disinclined to share their time and personal information with researchers (Tansey, 2007). Young black professionals are generally quite mindful of the possible career-threatening ramifications of criticizing their colleagues or seeming preoccupied with issues of race. They work for organizations that are very concerned about their reputations and the public images of their employees. Many aspire to hold high-profile positions in business or government. To the extent that their candid accounts of their career experiences might be deemed to reflect poorly on themselves or their employers, they risk incurring serious career-jeopardizing stigma and reprisals. For these and other reasons, the vast majority of large qualitative studies of black corporate professionals have also relied upon snowball or similar non-random sampling (see Benjamin, 2005; Davis and Watson, 1982; Cose, 1993; Feagin and Sikes, 1994; Collins 1983, 1989; Lacey, 2007).

In gathering the sample, I sought out interviewees who currently work, or have recently worked, as professionals in corporate settings. To begin, I developed a recruitment-solicitation message explaining that I was attempting to study race in America from the perspective of young black professionals and interested in interviewing black professionals who were roughly 28-33 years old and had experience working in corporate settings. The message explained that the

---

63 There are also important limitations and potential drawbacks to snowball sampling, the most important one being that this methodology is not conducive to developing probability samples. Therefore, the results of this dissertation, and those of the previous studies of black professionals that have used similar sampling methods, should not be generalized to the population of all black corporate professionals (Biernacki and Waldorf, 1982).
64 My background as a black (bi-racial) former corporate attorney who shared mutual acquaintances with a number of my interviewees may have also made potential interviewees more willing to participate and more comfortable in discussing their experiences fully and candidly.
interviews, which would be recorded, would focus on their childhood backgrounds, educational trajectories, professional experiences, and some of their views about race.

I sent copies of this solicitation message, via email and a social networking website, to 40 direct contacts of mine, including former college and professional school classmates, professional acquaintances, and current graduate students. For this first group of potential interviewees and referral sources, I took efforts to select a demographically diverse group of people who were not in the same social and professional networks. In order to increase the reach of the ultimate sample and the diversity of their referrals, I selected individuals who had attended a variety of different schools and worked in different geographic areas in various industries. Those contacts that fit the study’s criteria were invited to participate. They and the non-eligible contacts were asked to refer me to other eligible young black professionals. The interviewees generated from these referral chains formed the majority of this study’s sample. Of the total sample of 122 young black professionals, 20 of the individuals ultimately interviewed were direct contacts, including former classmates and acquaintances that I contacted through my initial messages and emails. 45 interviewees were one tie removed. 29 contacts were two ties removed and 20 were three or more ties removed.

I sent a similar solicitation message to the administrators of several email list-serves, including young black alumni groups from a few top-tier professional schools and the young alumni network of two HBCU professional schools, but these efforts yielded very few interviewees. Only 8 interviewees contacted me upon receiving a copy of my message through email list-serves for black professional school students and alumni.

In developing this study’s referral chains, I generally refused to request specific types of interviewees—I only asked that referrers share my message with whatever eligible black
professionals they believed might be willing to participate. I emphasized that I was interested in speaking with a wide variety of prospective interviewees no matter what their experiences, perspectives, or current professional circumstances. This helped bolster the overall diversity and potential representativeness of my study and to ensure that I was capturing individual professionals who had positive and negative career outcomes, and those who no longer worked at corporate firms at all. This ensured that this study captured a diverse range of perspectives, not just those of the most successful or satisfied black corporate professionals.

During a few instances in the interview processes, substantive considerations—namely, the need to ensure that the sample sufficiently captured particular subgroups of the overall population of black professionals—required me to take more control over the referral chains (Biernacki and Waldorf, 1982). For example, because black women generally seemed somewhat more willing to participate in this study, there came a time midway through the study when it appeared that my sample might not contain enough male interviewees. In order to address this, I began specifically requesting that interviewees refer more black male professionals. I also had to take similar actions to gain access to black women working in Wall Street financial firms.

Through this sampling method, I was able to assemble a diverse, far-reaching sample. Interviewees ranged in age from 26 to 40, although most were between 28 and 32. 61 interviewees were female and 61 were male. Interviewees represented nearly 50 different undergraduate institutions; Ivy League, state, private and historically black schools were all well-represented. Interviewees represented 35 different professional schools although the majority (63) attended Ivy League or other prestigious professional schools. 90 interviewees were multi-generation black Americans and 32 had at least one parent who had immigrated to America from the Caribbean or Africa. The majority (76) were attorneys, who have worked as associates at a

65 See Table A in the Appendix for descriptive information about the two samples.
combined 70 different law firm offices. Interviewees had also worked in a variety of other industries including the financial sector (25), consulting (12), and corporate management (12).

The Interviews.

To guide the interviews, I prepared a questionnaire outline containing a detailed list of possible questions and themes. I have attached a copy of the outline below. The initial interviews relied on this outline heavily, and as a result, the interviews were conducted in a more rigid question and answer format. Interviewees who knew that I had a sheet of questions to ask would fall into a rhythm of giving short, to-the-point answers and then waiting for my next question. As a result, some of the first interviewees’ answers seemed a bit clipped at times and some of the transitions from topic to topic, a bit forced.

I soon suspected that adapting a more flexible approach to the interviews, with less reliance on the actual questions of the outline would be more conducive to allowing the interviewees to fully and comfortably discuss their perspectives. In light of this, I modified by interview protocol. At the start of each interview, I reiterated the focuses of the study and asked that they each start their interviews by sharing their experiences growing up, including their family backgrounds, community conditions, and the types of schools they had attended). I also asked interviewees to explain how they determined which colleges and professional schools to apply to and attend. I also asked them to discuss how they had ended up working at their particular firms. I asked them to discuss their overall experiences in corporate America, and any positive, negative, or neutral ways that they believed their experiences had been affected by race. I explained that I would ask clarifying and follow-up questions throughout the interview, depending on their comments. Using this approach ensured that these interviews would be sufficiently structured to ensure that all relevant topics were covered, but flexible enough to
allow interviewees to focus at length on particular topics that seemed most pertinent to their perspectives (see Kram and Isabella, 1985). Interviewees who were given more leeway to “ramble,” as some of them self-consciously described it, appeared to develop greater comfort and gave fuller responses including some “tangents” that helped yield important insights. The use of this semi-directed interview method better allowed for hypotheses to emerge from the data, unconstrained by previous hypotheses (Ambert, et al., 1995).

Most of the interviews (112) were conducted by phone, primarily via a conference-call service that allowed me to record and download mp3 files of each interview. The remaining 10 interviews were conducted in person, during trips to New York City, Philadelphia, and Washington, D.C. There was no noticeable difference in the level of detail or perspectives expressed in the in-person or phone interviews. 113 of the interviews were recorded. The other interviews could not be recorded, but I took comprehensive notes to accurately preserve as much detail as possible. These interviews ranged in time from approximately 30 minutes to over 3 hours, with most lasting between approximately 60-90 minutes.

Upon completing these interviews, I reviewed my interview notes, fully transcribed any pertinent quotes, and entered information about the interviewee’s individual characteristics and their views and experiences into a spreadsheet for later analysis.

**White Comparison Sample.**

To more fully assess the significance of race and the relevance of non-racial factors, I also used a small comparison group of young white professionals similarly-situated to the black professionals interviewed in the primary sample. This sample, which included 23 interviewees, was also compiled by snowball sampling. I gathered this sample by seeking referrals from personal contacts, including graduate student acquaintances and some of the black professionals
who had participated in the primary sample. This white sample ultimately contained only two interviewees who were direct contacts. 12 of these interviewees were one tie removed; the other 10 were at least two ties removed. Seven of the white interviewees were referred to me as former classmates or colleagues of black interviewees from the primary sample. Five others were referred by fellow graduate students in Princeton’s sociology department. This sample was somewhat less diverse than the primary sample. Most came from solidly middle-class or affluent families. Virtually all of the interviewees in this sample attended very prestigious colleges and/or professional schools. The others had attended state schools that were well-respected in the cities and firms where they worked. This sample consisted of 15 men and 8 women. Their ages ranged from 28 to 40, but almost all of them were between 29 and 32 years old. Most (17) of these interviewees were attorneys. Two interviewees worked in management consulting and five worked in the financial industry, as investment bankers or traders. All of these interviews were conducted by phone.

The protocol for these interviews resembled those of the primary sample but differed in significant ways. In order to minimize the possible interviewer effects that might come from their being primed to think about racial issues on which they might not otherwise have opinions, the solicitation message for this sample framed the interview in race-neutral language. The message explained that the interview would center on their explanations of their professional experiences and perspectives about how and why some junior professionals succeed in the corporate world. Like the black professionals interviewed in the primary sample, interviewees were asked to discuss their socioeconomic origins, educational trajectories and career experiences. The interviews focused broadly on interviewees’ perspectives about the fairness of their firms and their beliefs about whether junior professionals were ever either helped or
handicapped by non-merit-based considerations. These interviewees were asked questions about whether and how traits like race, gender or family background might matter in their firms, but the discussion of these issues was in some instances quite limited.

**Validity Limitations in Studies of Perceptions of Racial Discrimination.**

In evaluating the data generated from these interviews, I was mindful of several potential limitations that might tend to undermine the credibility of interviewees’ stated views about the significance (or lack of significance) of racial discrimination on the careers of black professionals at their firms.

Although there clearly has been substantial progress and social change, mores of political correctness have emerged that discourages professionals who still have racial biases to keep their beliefs to themselves. This problematizes efforts to discern through direct observation the continued significance of racial prejudice and stereotypes. Studies using data based on reported perceptions of discrimination and fairness are inevitably subject to potential biases and limitations. Studies that ask interviewees to assess whether they have been discriminated against require them to interpret the mindsets and motives of other people, including some with whom they have had minimal contact. This is very difficult and can be an imprecise process. In order to reach conclusions about the overall role of race in their workplaces, individuals must first think about any unpleasant experiences and difficulties they have personally encountered, while considering whether there might be other non-racial explanations, including personal shortcomings, that might explain why they have not succeeded at their firms. They must then compare the experiences of workers of different races to determine whether their black counterparts as a group generally appear worse off than non-blacks. They must also consider various factors that may happen to correlate with race in some instances and, even in the absence
of racial prejudice, may tend to produce racially unequal outcomes, including differences in credentials, social skills, cultural capital, and abilities. Their perceptions may be excessively influenced by unrepresentative outliers. Junior professional work at corporate firms can be frustrating and disappointing for workers of all races. For example, large firm attorneys consistently report significantly less satisfaction with their jobs than other attorneys, regardless of race (Heinz et al. 2005; Lempert et al. 2000; Dau-Schmidt & Mukhopadhaya 1999:362; Dinovitzer and Garth, 2007). Many white professionals are clearly unsatisfied with their careers as well. However, some black professionals’ knowledge of a few white professionals who have been accorded special treatment may obscure that many other white professionals have also been relegated to the drudgery and anonymity of low-quality assignments. Similarly, blacks who have not personally been disadvantaged by race may assume that race has not affected any of their black colleagues either.

Because many elite firms still employ very few black professionals, individuals may find that there are inadequate “sample sizes” to determine the role of race at their firms. Many interviewees recognized the difficulty of disentangling the inherent ambiguities of race in the corporate world. In our interview, Leonard, an attorney, shared some very nuanced reflections about the difficulty of discerning whether an action that adversely affected him was racially-influenced.

A lot of times, you can never say with absolute certainty that it’s because of x, it’s because of y, or it’s because of z….For example, there are situations where there could be three or four plausible reasons why assigning partner A goes to Jane Doe white girl instead of [Leonard] black guy. It could be that the assigning person randomly picked them. It could be that the assigning person thought that Jane Doe had more interest in the area and there was nothing malicious or nefarious about it. It could be that the assigning person had a better personal relationship with Jane and it has nothing to do with race or any nefarious motivation. But it also could very well be that he’s more comfortable with Jane Doe because they share a racial identification. It could very well be that all the objective information notwithstanding, that something deep down inside of him doesn’t believe that you're as bright… You’ll never know absolutely one way or the other
but you also have a gut sense of discernment based on your life experiences to that point. It would be almost impossible to prove [though].

Although Leonard trusts his own ability to recognize racially motivated actions, his description of the inherent difficulties makes it clear that this is, at best, an inexact science. Individuals’ reactions to possible instances of discrimination or mistreatment vary according to their preexisting beliefs about meritocracy and the prevalence of discrimination (Townsend et al., 2010; Foster, Sloto and Ruby, 2006). Different black professionals may reach different assessments of the same situation. Even those working in the same office may have very different perceptions about the prevalence and severity of racial discrimination there. This may reflect actual differences in experiences or differences in predispositions toward attributing negative or ambiguous experiences to racism. Individuals’ perceptions of discrimination may be influenced by differences in their personalities, ideologies and background experiences. For example, Sandra, an attorney who believes that black attorneys are not treated equally at her firm recognized that her views might be influenced by her past racial experiences and socialization. This possibility left her unsure about the accuracy of her beliefs.

I don’t know if that’s in my mind because this is something my grandparents and parents have always told me or if it’s just because of all my experiences with racism in the past…It’s weird because you don’t know if something is—I don’t want to say a figment of my imagination—but a function of [my] past experiences or reality. It’s hard to distinguish sometimes.

Psychologists have also documented a “self-serving bias,” which leads people to “attribute successful outcomes to themselves and unsuccessful outcomes to external factors” (Judge and Bretz, 1994). This bias may lead the least successful interviewees to attribute their unsuccessful careers to racial unfairness and other forces beyond their control, even when the evidence is weak or ambiguous.

Social psychologists have also developed systems justification theory, a hypothesis that posits that believing that superior work will be fairly rewarded may help people feel better about
themselves and their situations (see Lerner; 1975; Blasi and Jost, 2006; O’Brien and Major, 2005). This holds true even if they belong to the marginalized groups that suffer from discrimination (see Olson and Hafer, 2001; McCoy and Major, 2007; Quinn and Crocker, 1999). By discounting evidence that their workplaces are unfair and biased, they avoid dealing with powerful stressors. This can provide “ego defense” and other psychic benefits that protect them from feeling stigmatized, devalued, and powerless (Crosby, 1984; Major and Schmader, 2001; Major et al., 2007). This might partially explain why members of disadvantaged groups, including racial minorities, often report personally experiencing less discrimination than they believe the average members of their groups suffer (Quinn and Olson, 2003). Because of these tendencies, interviewees may be predisposed to describe their workplaces as meritocratic institutions and downplay the importance of racial discrimination in systemically producing unfair outcomes.

However, although this tendency may have influenced interviewees’ perceptions and reports of their professional experiences, as a matter of initial impression, the vast majority of interviewees did not seem particularly reluctant about pointing out sources of unfairness in their firms, either race-related or otherwise. The majority of interviewees reported that race influenced professional experiences in ways that disadvantaged at least some black professionals. As a group, interviewees seemed very thoughtful and candid in sharing their impressions of their experiences.

Conversely, there are also reasons why interviewees may tend to overstate the significance of race. Unsuccessful professionals may protect their psychological and emotional well-being by blaming their career struggles on racism instead of insufficient personal effort or merit (Ford, 2008). The young professionals who enter elite firms are often competitive,
ambitious, high achievers, who are used to out-performing their peers and receiving rewards and accolades. In the working world, many who are used to advancing as far as their talents will carry them suddenly experience the constraints of professional pyramids and limited premium opportunities. For the first times in their lives, many will struggle to succeed. If they internalize their failures as evidence of their own personal limitations, they may lose professional self-confidence and begin to doubt whether they have what it takes to succeed in their professions. To avoid these harms, social psychologists have suggested that members of stigmatized groups may protect their self-esteem by broadly attributing their various difficulties and failures to other peoples’ biases against their group (Crocker and Major, 1989). Blaming their shortcomings and disappointments on others enables them to avoid internalizing self-blame (Stroebe et al., 2010). Thus, social psychologists have found that individuals’ self-esteem is less harmed by insults or unfair treatment on the basis of their membership in stigmatized groups as they are by insults directed at their personal qualities (see Crocker and Major, 1989). Experimental studies have found that criticism from evaluators who are believed to hold biases against one’s social group is less emotionally harmful than criticism from by evaluators who are believed to be non-biased (Id.). Attributing poor outcomes to group-based discrimination can protect, or possibly even increase self-esteem among some individuals (Stroebe et al., 2010).

Professionals who have not had successful careers at their firms may therefore subconsciously act to avoid being consumed by doubt and self-disappointment, by externalizing their failures and attributing them to racial unfairness. Despite these insights, previous sociological research and reporting on racial discrimination has often described interviewees’ allegations of discrimination in language that ignores the possibility that interviewees may be mistaken in their assessments. Many past studies of racial discrimination have failed to
adequately discuss these limits and their possible effects on the validity of their findings. Feagin and Sikes (1994) for example, suggest that the perceptive powers of black Americans are finely honed through personal experience, allowing them to accurately sense instances where they are being disadvantaged by race.

Although these tendencies also likely affected interviewees’ perceptions of their corporate experiences and their explanations of their difficulties, there were many examples of highly successful interviewees who believed that they had been disadvantaged by racial unfairness at their firms, and there were unsuccessful interviewees who did not attribute their difficulties to racial discrimination.

Regardless of the objective accuracy of interviewees’ perspectives about the significance of racial discrimination at their workplaces, their perspectives are still very important to understand, and possibly carry considerable real-world consequences. Perceptions of racial unfairness add stress, frustration and anger, and increase job dissatisfaction. They may alter behavior by making aggrieved professionals either more confrontational and less friendly or passive and defeatist. Alternatively, perceptions of racial unfairness may motivate some individuals to work harder, in order to defy, show up, or enlighten their prejudiced counterparts. Job dissatisfaction is also correlated with organizational exit (Kay and Hagan, 2003; ABA Young Lawyers Committee, 2000). To the extent that black attorneys are aggrieved by their firms’ racial dynamics, they may be more likely to look for employment elsewhere. Thus, beliefs about racial unfairness may perpetuate racial inequality regardless of whether they are accurate, and are therefore important to understand in their own right.
### Table A.
Sample Characteristics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Total Sample ($N =$)</th>
<th>Black ($N = 122$)</th>
<th>White ($N =23$)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Gender</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female:</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male:</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Industry Experience</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Corporate management</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consulting</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Law</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finance</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sales/trading</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Investment banking</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle-office</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>8</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Educational (college):</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HBCU</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ivy</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Education (professional school):</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HBCU</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Top-ranked schools</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NA</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Race and Ethnicity</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multi-generation American</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1st generation/immigrant</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
BIBLIOGRAPHY


in a Racially Unequal Society.” *94 Calif. L. Rev.* 1169.


Cashin, Sheryll. 2004. The Failures of Integration: How Race and Class are Undermining the


“Diversity Scorecard 2010.” The American Lawyer.


———.1903. The Souls of Black Folks. Chicago, IL: A.C. McClurg & Co.,


Harrington, Mona, Ann Bookman, Joan C. Williams, Cynthia Thomas Calvert, and Holly
Harris, Carla. 2009. Expect to Win: Proven Strategies for Success from a Wall Street Vet. New
York: Penguin Group Incorporated.
University Press.
Press.
in the Am Law 200.” 84 N.C.L. Rev. 1691.
Hewlin, Patricia Faison. 2003. “And the Award for Best Actor Goes to...: Facades of Conformity
Higginbotham, Elizabeth and Lynn Weber. 1992. “Moving up with Kin and Community:
Upward Social Mobility for Black and White Women.” Gender and Society. 6: 416–440.
Understanding the Effects of Multiple Developmental Relationships.” Journal of
Organizational Management. 23 (2): 223-247.
Press.
York: Metropolitan Books.
New York: Saturday Review Press.
Its Critics.” Poetics 25: 93-120.
Holvino, Evangelina. 2003. “Complicating Gender: The Simultaneity of Race, Class, and Gender
in Organizational Change.” Pp. 87-98 in R. Ely, E. Foldy, M. Scully, and the Center for
Gender in Organizations (Eds.), Reader in Gender, Work, and Organization. Malden,
MA: Blackwell Publishing.
November 1, 1993.


Association of the Bar of the City of New York, November 17.  


Norment, Lynn. 1995. “50 Years of Progress In Corporate America.” *Ebony*.


Snider, David and Dr. Chris Howard. 2010. Money Makers: Inside the New World of Finance and Business. New York: St Martin’s Press LLC.


