

ONE

Introduction

Black researchers rarely, if ever, get to study white working-class people up close and personal, revealing their economic hopes, racial fears, and politically incorrect observations about the world. It simply isn't done. While white and black (as well as other) researchers regularly study the inner workings of poor and working-class communities of color, who seem to have become accustomed to being studied, typically only white researchers have been able to gain access to white poor and working-class enclaves. But if you want to understand how similar working-class blacks and whites assess and pursue opportunities, it is important to have face-to-face conversations with both groups. It is also important to create a comfort zone within which people can candidly discuss at least a few intimate details of their work and personal lives. This is easier said than done, particularly in the case of whites. Working-class, as well as more affluent, whites don't usually volunteer to share intimacies with researchers, and most black scholars choose (perhaps wisely) not to even try "going there." But, for reasons I'll explain shortly, I had to go there. I needed to understand first-hand how working-class whites dominate skilled blue-collar opportunities that make possible a modest but sound version of the good life without attending colleges, inheriting substantial family wealth, or hitting the lottery. I had to go there to see for

2 / *Introduction*

myself what prevents many working-class blacks from being able to do the same.

In my case, going there meant venturing into segregated black and white spaces, each of which presented unique potential dangers. In cities of the early 1990s, even stable black neighborhoods were experiencing the horrible randomness of drive-by shootings, and in the white neighborhoods I entered, anti-black sentiments, like those voiced by the skinhead movement, were gaining prominence. Despite these issues — both of which seemed like mortal concerns before the research was underway — I knew I could do this work. Because I lived in one of the working-class black neighborhoods in which my black subjects lived (and was familiar with the others), I knew I wouldn't often get lost and felt that chances were low that I would find myself in serious danger as long as I used caution. I was extremely reluctant to enter neighborhoods in which there was known skinhead activity, but I chose to go there anyway. I could do so because I can pass for white.

Because I can pass for white, I have often overheard conversations among whites to which people of color are not ordinarily privy. At the same time, as a child growing up in an African American family and community, I observed differences — sometimes subtle — in conversation content when whites were present. I have lived as a proverbial “fly on the wall” observing the private talk of both whites and blacks — and my racially ambiguous appearance has made it possible to observe, if not always interpret, private race-talk among other racial and ethnic groups as well. I have observed a fascinating, and I would argue universal, pattern in my inadvertent eavesdropping sessions: Americans of all backgrounds talk about race even when they appear not to be talking about race and change their racially charged conversations when they believe members of other races are present.

This pattern of conversation management, with its intricate codes, euphemisms, and censoring, is connected to the desire of most Americans to appear colorblind, or racially neutral, particularly when they are observed by someone they consider a racial “other.” This pattern makes

it difficult for researchers who conduct cross-racial interviews to be certain that their informants are not adjusting their responses in order to seem as much like completely unprejudiced beings as possible — and it isn't a pattern that is observed only among whites. For respondents of color, the pattern can involve deemphasizing anger about racial conditions or concerns about being the victim of racial discrimination when speaking with white interviewers. For whites it may mean being careful not to espouse stereotypes about people of color when being interviewed by a researcher of color. Sometimes scholars as well as laypersons view with suspicion data collected in cross-racial interviews because we know about this pattern of self-censorship, even though we don't talk much about it. Experienced researchers frequently make arrangements for subjects to be interviewed by same-race interviewers, even when we don't expect the data to yield sensitive racial material, so concerned are we that race might contaminate the interview process. We can never be sure which characteristics in an interviewer might lead subjects to censor themselves, but we routinely place our cautionary bets on race rather than differences in education, social class, or even gender.

Because it was possible to signal to black subjects that I was a “sister struggling to get a degree from Hopkins” while presenting myself to whites as an ordinary (read white) graduate student with an atypical interest in and sympathy toward working-class folks, both the blacks and the whites that I interviewed seemed comfortable engaging in significant levels of private racial talk with me. Since I was a stranger, I am certain that members of both groups engaged in some censoring, particularly during the first fifteen to twenty minutes, but I am equally certain, given the candid material I collected, that most of my subjects shortly thereafter became very comfortable revealing private aspects of themselves. For example, a number of the white men I spoke with discussed their concern that affirmative action was helping less qualified blacks and hurting more qualified whites like themselves.

One young white man, Chip, felt confident that reverse discrimination had hurt his chances with the state police. He explained to me:

4 / *Introduction*

I applied for the state police and I passed all the tests and stuff like that. And we were down there for something, I forget what it was. And one of the [white] state troopers (we were on the side — a group of white male individuals), he said to us — [because] we obviously weren't selected to go further in pre-employment — he said, "I'm sorry fellas. Unfortunately, if you were black you would have had the job."

I asked Chip how that made him feel, and he continued:

It didn't make me feel any less of a person because I knew that I had the potential to get the job. I just feel that our system is a little bit screwed up the way sometimes . . . where it feels that it's obligated to certain minorities to give them a certain amount of jobs for each job. I feel — I'm working on the old system — you could get the job according to the qualifications. So I wouldn't expect to go down to a drafting company and have a guy who's got CAD [computer aided design] training and not get the job over me because I was black. As far as that goes, I feel there's a lot of discrimination against that [whites]. I feel you should be hired for your intelligence not your race.

Chip went on to tell me about how his buddies at the state police offices became angry about "reverse racism" after talking to the white state trooper and started complaining about the "fucking niggers" who had been awarded the jobs they wanted. Chip's comments — expressed uncensored — are eerily close to the more censored concerns I have observed among affluent whites during coded conversations about what factors produce persistent racial inequality. I have observed these codes most closely in my classes on race relations.

Year after year, my students at the University of Massachusetts—Amherst asked me — sometimes bluntly, as if to challenge, sometimes more discretely, as if we were discussing some deep personal secret not to be mentioned in public — why blacks have not yet caught up with whites in terms of economic achievements. I sensed that many of the students sincerely hoped that greater equality between blacks and whites

in the United States was not far off. Others seemed to be expressing frustration with blacks for appearing to take longer than other groups to achieve the “American Dream.” Still others seemed ambivalent about black progress — perhaps because they, like Chip, feared that black progress might mean fewer opportunities for whites like themselves.¹ This last group of students seemed the least satisfied with my lectures suggesting that historical forms of discrimination and exclusion do not die out simply because we have legislated against them.² Ironically, these same students were also likely to argue that “who you know” is frequently more important than “what you know” in the search for jobs. But somehow this logic — supported by research³ — is never extended to African Americans, who, as a mere 13 percent of the population, are far less likely than members of the white majority to know the right people to get them the right jobs.

When I’d point out that blacks are still very much underrepresented in the more desirable occupations in the United States, these students countered that they knew whites who had lost a job, not been hired, or been passed over for a promotion that went to a black person for no reason other than race. It seemed that a narrow majority of my students felt that they or someone they knew had paid a price for the economic inclusion of black Americans that seemed both unfair and by and large regrettable.

Nearly all of my white students implied that we have reached a time when race shouldn’t and doesn’t matter, and, in those few places where it still does, it reflects the aberrant behavior of a few backward white people. Like Chip, they frequently suggested that when blacks lose in labor market competition with whites, it is solely because whites have superior qualifications. When blacks win, it is explained as the unfortunate result of a quota system that reserves positions for blacks, irrespective of qualifications.

Clearly, my students are not alone in their beliefs about labor competition between blacks and whites. Many whites outside of colleges and universities share similar views, including the notion that blacks are winning a disproportionate number of competitions because of government-

6 / Introduction

sponsored affirmative action programs rather than merit.⁴ White activists in California, for example, have mobilized around this suspicion in order to overturn affirmative action statutes affecting both educational slots and the process of awarding state contracts. Activists in twenty-five other states, including Texas, Washington, Michigan, Arizona, Colorado, and Florida, appear poised to follow suit.

While my students grant that historical patterns demonstrate that whites have been favored over blacks for four centuries, regardless of qualifications, they will not grant that such patterns have produced an unfair advantage held by whites as a group or a pattern of exclusion that the government has not adequately dismantled. Even when I ask students about jobs that don't require a college degree or highly specialized skills, like blue-collar trades, students authoritatively claim that blacks don't get these jobs because they do not work as hard as whites, they are less reliable than whites, and they have attitude problems that make them less desirable as workers, even on the rare occasions when they have the requisite skills.

From an economic point of view, my students' comments demonstrate a great faith in the "invisible hand." They assume that everyone who seeks work has an equal chance of being considered for jobs and that the best candidate is nearly always chosen irrespective of race or other irrelevant characteristics — *except when affirmative action interferes with this self-regulating system*. The "invisible hand" analogy suggests a sorting process that is free of particularistic bias and therefore inherently meritocratic. According to this worldview, anyone who studies and works hard ought to be able to make it in their chosen field. Faith in the "invisible hand" is associated with an endorsement of Market explanations of social inequality.⁵ On the other hand, some of my students seem to endorse an alternative view, namely that many people get their jobs as a result of knowing the right people. Sociologists call this perspective the Embeddedness approach because it suggests that each person is embedded in a network of social relationships that help an individual accomplish a variety of goals, including getting a job. This approach

brings to my mind the workings of a “visible hand” that interferes with the workings of the “invisible hand” and disrupts meritocratic sorting procedures. Not surprisingly, these two perspectives differ a great deal in how they explain the workings of complex labor markets that include young and minority job seekers, who are the main subject of this book.

A CRISIS IN THE YOUTH LABOR MARKET

Just as I started graduate school in Baltimore during the late 1980s, a number of journalists and researchers noticed a disturbing pattern of unemployment among young male workers, especially black men.⁶ Young black men between the ages of 16 and 24 were over twice as likely to be unemployed as their white counterparts, and white men were having unprecedented employment problems.⁷ In addition, growing numbers of black men were not even showing up in unemployment statistics because they had given up looking.⁸ They were not in the labor force and they were not looking; scholars referred to them as discouraged workers. But this pattern was familiar to me long before I started graduate school.

Each year I was in college, I remember returning home for holidays and summer vacations only to find a number of my black male high school classmates and neighbors having puzzling difficulties finding and keeping jobs. I could not forget the sadness that seemed to envelop my friends, especially around the holidays, when everyone expects to shower family members with specially chosen gifts. Their inability to provide even small treasures for nieces and nephews caused many to withdraw from family life altogether — a self-imposed exile that no doubt made resisting alcohol, drugs, and other escape routes more difficult. By the time I started my second year of graduate school, three of my friends were dead, several others had spent time in jail, and numerous others — even those who “kept to the straight and narrow” — continued to have employment difficulties.

My observations led me to wonder if there was something about my friends, or something about the Washington, D.C., metropolitan area

8 / *Introduction*

(where we grew up), or something about the late 1980s that caused these men to slip through the cracks. As a graduate student studying sociology, I was in a good position to begin a serious investigation. I found that sociologists, particularly those interested in understanding complex employment trends, frequently turn to large-scale studies that draw samples of individuals from all across the United States. National studies of non-college-bound males indicated that black men tended to take longer than white men to make the transition from high school to work; that they were paid less, on average, than comparable white men; and that they experienced greater pre- and post-high school unemployment than white men *and* black women.⁹ Neither differences in men's work orientations—their attitudes about jobs and working—nor in their educational credentials accounted for these findings. My friends were not unique; their experiences were shared by many young black men across the United States.

The researchers who had been analyzing national data argued that the patterns most likely reflected contemporary racial discrimination and economic shifts that made fewer low-skilled jobs available to urban workers.¹⁰ Others, consistent with the thinking of some of my students, suggested an alternative explanation: black men had poor attitudes and unrefined skills, not examined in the studies, that simply made them less desirable as workers than other available low-skilled groups.¹¹

While national-level data provided important information about general trends, it could not address the concerns of those who felt that high school diplomas earned by blacks simply did not convey the competencies or the work-related attitudes that might be more readily assumed for whites.¹² Moreover, it wasn't clear whether black males were suffering in black/white labor market competitions because of discrimination or because of structural shifts in the economy that diminished the prospects of inner city residents (who were more likely to be black), while enhancing the prospects of suburban residents (who were more likely to be white).¹³ National-level studies tended to concentrate mainly on outcomes rather than on the processes that led to diverse outcomes

among young male job seekers. These types of concerns led some scholars to conduct new research that more closely examined how labor markets respond to black and white job seekers, paying critical attention to the educational experiences, attitudes, and other resources, including network assistance, that blacks and whites bring to the market.¹⁴

Researchers responded to the call for new studies with carefully designed experiments that trained black and white investigators to present themselves as job candidates in an identical fashion.¹⁵ Researchers were trained to speak, dress, and respond to interviewers identically, while providing prospective employers with equivalent job applications, resumes that indicated identical educational accomplishments, and similar references and writing samples. In their study, Turner, Fix, and Struyk (1991) found that blacks were unable to advance in the hiring process as far as equivalent whites 20 percent of the time. They were denied a job offered to their white counterpart 15 percent of the time. This sort of study lent support to the idea that discrimination was a major factor hurting blacks in the labor market, even when black and white competitors held equally impressive records. But critics could easily point out that while such studies are disturbing, blacks and whites are not routinely trained to behave in exactly the same ways, nor are they likely to carry identical credentials and references in real job markets. Moreover, public concerns have been raised not about blacks who have impressive credentials, but rather about those who are, at best, high school graduates. In order to address these concerns, some researchers have suggested that, under ideal circumstances, researchers should compare individuals who had modest credentials and training from the same institutions and who competed in the same labor markets.¹⁶ This is what I set out to do in my study. I quickly found out that, for blacks and whites, this is not as easy as it sounds.

Only in recent history have working-class blacks been able to compete relatively unimpeded in the same labor markets as whites, and despite the thirty years that have passed since the heyday of the Civil Rights era, it is still quite rare for blacks and whites to be trained side-

by-side in the United States. Until the 1960s and 1970s, blacks and whites had little experience sharing access to the equalizing institutions in our society, most notably schools. While residential segregation, particularly in cities, has reverted to pre-Civil Rights era levels, mandatory school desegregation efforts have created only scattered pockets of multiracial school constituencies.¹⁷ But these pockets are important social spaces, since they disrupt historical patterns of racial segregation and can encourage transracial networks of cooperation and collaboration. Researchers suggest that such spaces frequently become resegregated within the institution — as with ability grouping and tracking practices that place white and middle-income students in classrooms, floors, or buildings separate from their darker and poorer peers. In those cases, access to the same institution seems a nominal rather than instrumental similarity, and thus conceals important experiential differences.¹⁸

But surely there is some reason to hope that attending desegregated schools, particularly those in which blacks and whites share a track placement, could have the potential of disrupting all-too-familiar patterns of unequal achievement. I hoped to explore this potential by studying blacks and whites who attended the same vocational school and studied many of the same trades. For me, this was an important starting point, since I'd most likely be able to look at school records that would include information about attendance, behavioral problems, and grades, while examining relationships between schools and local employers, school personnel and students, and the young men and their friends and family members. I constructed my study to answer a set of basic questions:

What happens when whites and blacks share a track placement, the same teachers, and the same classrooms?

Can desegregated institutions, in this post-civil rights era, provide equal foundations and assistance for blacks and whites?

Does the problem of embeddedness — in this case, historically segregated job networks — stifle the emergence of cross-racial linkage mechanisms and networks beyond schools?

Or does the post–Civil Rights era provide a new, color-blind labor market in which blacks who show signs of work-readiness and achievement succeed on a par with white peers in terms of initial employment outcomes?

Finally, are black students, as the racial deficits theory suggests, lacking something that *should* make them less desirable as workers than their white peers?

These are the questions that guided me as I set about developing a quasi-experimental research design that would replicate some of the useful characteristics of experiments while examining real people who were searching for real jobs.

Between 1991 and 1994, I interviewed fifty men, equal numbers of blacks and whites, who graduated in 1989 or 1990 from the Glendale Vocational High School and who searched for entry-level jobs in Baltimore's blue-collar labor market. By constructing a job history for each, beginning with their first job and ending with their current or last job, I was able to determine when and how the occupational trajectories of the men began to diverge.

Although the majority of the whites and blacks performed well (all were B or C students) and studied the same subjects—auto mechanics, electrical construction, industrial electronics, brick masonry, carpentry, printing, and drafting—whites experienced far greater success than blacks. Specifically, whites held more jobs within their fields, earned higher wages, experienced less unemployment, and had smoother transitions between jobs. They also got more effective assistance from family and friends and from white male teachers. Blacks, by contrast, often relied on poorly situated black family members and friends, and received only verbal encouragement, rather than material assistance, from white male teachers.

Despite the advantages whites held over blacks—advantages not linked to educational, motivational, or character differences—many whites were convinced that blacks were unfairly advantaged because of

reverse discrimination. This ideology—fostered by whites who lived and socialized within racially segregated networks—served to create disincentives for including blacks and replaced the old black-inferiority rationale for exclusion with a new black-ascendancy rationale. According to this view, since the government was helping blacks but not whites, whites must help one another in the marketplace. None of the white males I spoke with had faced direct discrimination in the workplace, but a number held vague suspicions that they had lost out to blacks at some point or another. Only black males were able to provide specific examples of subtle and not-so-subtle forms of racism that they confronted in their dealings with white peers, teachers, employers, and customers. In numerous interviews, blacks described being forced to either adjust to poor treatment by whites or else face severely diminished job prospects.

This book provides an account of the school-to-work experiences of a set of young black and white men in the 1990s. Like many books that convey the results of a case study, the book is divided into sections that describe the thinking undergirding the study and its methodology as well as a number of its findings.

Chapter 2, “‘Invisible’ and Visible Hands: Racial Disparity in the Labor Market,” provides a detailed examination of Market and Embeddedness explanations of racial inequality and labor-market sorting processes. Following the integrative framework introduced and advocated by Charles Tilly, in *Durable Inequality* (1998), the chapter draws on the work of numerous sociologists, economists, and historians. This chapter integrates the analytical frameworks of scholars who examine race, class, labor markets, and institutions (like schools), as well as processes, like going from school to work.

Chapter 3, “From School to Work . . . in Black and White: A Case Study,” describes the school-to-work transition process in the United States and how my case study was designed to capture racial differences that I expected might emerge in the transition process. This chapter describes some of the difficulties of trying to conduct research on work-

ing-class, urban males, as well as the sometimes jarring experience of conducting “undercover” cross-racial research. I call my experience “undercover” because, as I mentioned earlier, I am routinely assumed to be white, but I am actually a very light-skinned African American. I confirmed that I had been taken for white through the explicit, rather than coded, racial talk in my interviews with white men and their families.

Chapter 4, “Getting a Job, Not Getting a Job: Employment Divergence Begins,” describes the contemporary blue-collar labor market in cities like Baltimore and lays out a series of comparative findings on employment outcomes: wages, number and types of jobs held, on-the-job training acquired, months spent unemployed since graduating, and overall success patterns. Even though the case study sample consists of young men who are far better matched on relevant criteria than is possible in aggregate-level comparisons, the findings essentially replicate national statistics indicating that, on average, white men make faster transitions from school to work with more remunerative outcomes.

Chapter 5, “Evaluating Market Explanations: The Declining Significance of Race and Racial Deficits Approaches,” uses unique data from this study and from an unpublished 1960s Baltimore study to evaluate the two most prominent Market explanations. The 1960s study, supervised by the late James Coleman, compared early labor market outcomes for white and black students who attended segregated vocational high schools in Baltimore, one of which later housed both the black and white students who were interviewed for the 1990s study. Comparisons of blacks and whites in both periods suggests the continuing and persistent, rather than declining, significance of racial barriers for blacks. The 1990s data also provide uniquely detailed comparisons of the white and black men on a variety of indicators, including attitude/behavior and skills, as well as willingness to work at dead-end jobs, reservation wage (the lowest wage that a respondent would accept), acceptable reasons to quit a job, school attendance, and troublesome behaviors, such as problems with teachers and illegal activities. The overwhelming similarities of these young men with regard to attitudes, behaviors, values, and

grades — not to mention the uniformly polite and respectful demeanor I observed — strongly suggests that the employment differences that emerged during and after high school did not result from differences in these factors.

Chapter 6, “Embedded Transitions: School Ties and the Unanticipated Significance of Race,” highlights the explanatory power of the Embeddedness framework and links the troubling employment findings to a set of social and institutional factors that made the process of choosing a vocational high school and the process of getting a job quite different for black and white men. Despite attending the same school, the black and white men received differential assistance from school personnel, especially from white male shop teachers, who offered verbal encouragement to black students while offering far more helpful material assistance to whites. Black males overwhelmingly relied on the formal transition mechanisms provided through the school, while white men combined highly effective informal school and personal resources. The school’s part-time job placement counselor, a black woman, candidly discussed the racially charged employment setting that she observed through her role as the school-employer liaison. According to her, many local employers were former students of the school in its all-white days; many were still expecting work-study students to look like themselves. These patterns reinforced rigid racial customs that pervaded the homes and neighborhoods of the white men.

Chapter 7, “Networks of Inclusion, Networks of Exclusion: The Production and Maintenance of Segregated Opportunity Structures,” provides an intimate examination of whites’ taken-for-granted network advantages over similar blacks. Over and over again, white males mentioned this person or that person — friends, neighbors, family members, teachers — who continuously provided support and solid opportunities, even for those with poor work records or a history of incarceration. This chapter also examines black males’ inability to tap into lucrative job networks, which made their searches increasingly difficult. Many were in the process of becoming the discouraged workers that we rarely read

about and so often forget when we develop public policies. Even when black men were able to rely on friends for help, antiblack racism in the labor market had to be factored in strategically. This chapter captures lengthy conversations in the living and dining rooms of the young men and their families. Black men revealed painful experiences of racial discrimination, while white men, ironically, expressed outrage because many strongly believed significant opportunities were reserved for blacks. This chapter challenges the “a-racial” descriptions of job networks that permeate the economic sociology literature and suggests that reverse racism ideology is particularly dangerous, given the segregated social sphere within which it arises and is nurtured.

Chapter 8, “White Privilege and Black Accommodation: Where Past and Contemporary Discrimination Converge,” discusses the explanatory power of Market and Embeddedness perspectives and advances three major conclusions that are in sync with Tilly’s *Durable Inequality* thesis: (1) working class whites’ monopoly over desirable working-class jobs has remained virtually unchanged since the Civil Rights era despite economic restructuring; (2) working-class/lower-middle-class black youth and their families have accommodated this reality by giving up, enduring pervasive racial discrimination, and developing costly alternative strategies without public policy assistance or significant political pressure from social justice organizations; and (3) customs linked to past discrimination have been maintained and refurbished ideologically by reverse racism propaganda, which makes supporting the inclusion of blacks tantamount to social suicide for young white men who are desperately dependent—socially and economically—upon older men in their networks. The price for attempting to break with the white-only tradition—ostracism and exclusion—would be unbearable, thus the torch of racial segregation is passed on from one generation to the next among the working-class white men I studied.