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## In Job Hunt, College Degree Can't Close Racial Gap

**By MICHAEL LUO**

Johnny R. Williams, 30, would appear to be an unlikely person to have to fret about the impact of race on his job search, with companies like JPMorgan Chase and an M.B.A. from the University of Chicago on his résumé.

But after graduating from business school last year and not having much success garnering interviews, he decided to retool his résumé, scrubbing it of any details that might tip off his skin color. His membership, for instance, in the African-American business students association? Deleted.

"If they're going to X me," Mr. Williams said, "I'd like to at least get in the door first."

Similarly, Barry Jabbar Sykes, 37, who has a degree in mathematics from Morehouse College, a historically black college in Atlanta, now uses Barry J. Sykes in his continuing search for an information technology position, even though he has gone by Jabbar his whole life.

"Barry sounds like I could be from Ireland," he said.

That race remains a serious obstacle in the job market for African-Americans, even those with degrees from respected colleges, may seem to some people a jarring contrast to decades of progress by blacks, culminating in President Obama's election.

But there is ample evidence that racial inequities remain when it comes to employment. Black joblessness has long far outstripped that of whites. And strikingly, the disparity for the first 10 months of this year, as the recession has dragged on, has been even more pronounced for those with college degrees, compared with those without. Education, it seems, does not level the playing field — in fact, it appears to have made it more uneven.

College-educated black men, especially, have struggled relative to their white counterparts in this downturn, according to figures from the Bureau of Labor Statistics. The unemployment rate for black male college graduates 25 and older in 2009 has been nearly twice that of white male college graduates — 8.4 percent compared with 4.4 percent.

Various academic studies have confirmed that black job seekers have a harder time than whites. A study published several years ago in The American Economic Review titled "Are Emily and Greg More Employable than Lakisha and Jamal?" found that applicants with black-sounding names received 50 percent fewer callbacks than those with white-sounding names.

A more recent study, published this year in The Journal of Labor Economics found white, Asian and Hispanic managers tended to hire more whites and fewer blacks than black managers did.

The discrimination is rarely overt, according to interviews with more than two dozen college-educated black job seekers around the country, many of them out of work for months. Instead, those interviewed told subtler stories, referring to surprised looks and offhand comments, interviews that fell apart almost as soon as they began, and the sudden loss of interest from companies after meetings.

Whether or not each case actually involved bias, the possibility has furnished an additional agonizing layer of second-guessing for many as their job searches have dragged on.

"It does weigh on you in the search because you're wondering, how much is race playing a factor in whether I'm even getting a first call, or whether I'm even getting an in-person interview once they hear my voice and they know I'm probably African-American?" said Terelle Hairston, 25, a graduate of Yale University who has been looking for work since the summer while also trying to get a marketing consulting start-up off the ground. "You even worry that the hiring manager may not be as interested in diversity as the H.R. manager or upper management."

Mr. Williams recently applied to a Dallas money management firm that had posted a position with top business schools. The hiring manager had seemed ecstatic to hear from him, telling him they had trouble getting people from prestigious business schools to move to the area. Mr. Williams had left New York and moved back in with his parents in Dallas to save money.

But when Mr. Williams later met two men from the firm for lunch, he said they appeared stunned when he strolled up to introduce himself.

"Their eyes kind of hit the ceiling a bit," he said. "It was kind of quiet for about 45 seconds."

The company's interest in him quickly cooled, setting off the inevitable questions in his mind.

Discrimination in many cases may not even be intentional, some job seekers pointed out, but simply a matter of people gravitating toward similar people, casting about for the right "cultural fit," a buzzword often heard in corporate circles.

There is also the matter of how many jobs, especially higher-level ones, are never even posted and depend on word-of-mouth and informal networks, in many cases leaving blacks at a disadvantage. A recent study published in the academic journal Social Problems found that white males receive substantially more job leads for high-level supervisory positions than women and members of minorities.

Many interviewed, however, wrestled with "pulling the race card," groping between their cynicism and desire to avoid the stigma that blacks are too quick to claim victimhood. After all, many had gone to good schools and had accomplished résumés. Some had grown up in well-to-do settings, with parents who had raised them never to doubt how high they could climb. Moreover, there is President Obama, perhaps the ultimate embodiment of that belief.

Certainly, they conceded, there are times when their race can be beneficial, particularly with companies that have diversity programs. But many said they sensed that such opportunities had been cut back over the years

and even more during the downturn. Others speculated there was now more of a tendency to deem diversity unnecessary after Mr. Obama's triumph.

In fact, whether Mr. Obama's election has been good or bad for their job prospects is hotly debated. Several interviewed went so far as to say that they believed there was only so much progress that many in the country could take, and that there was now a backlash against blacks.

"There is resentment toward his presidency among some because of his race," said Edward Verner, a Morehouse alumnus from New Jersey who was laid off as a regional sales manager and has been able to find only part-time work. "This has affected well-educated, African-American job seekers."

It is difficult to overstate the degree that they say race permeates nearly every aspect of their job searches, from how early they show up to interviews to the kinds of anecdotes they try to come up with.

"You want to be a nonthreatening, professional black guy," said Winston Bell, 40, of Cleveland, who has been looking for a job in business development.

He drew an analogy to several prominent black sports broadcasters. "You don't want to be Stephen A. Smith. You want to be Bryant Gumbel. You don't even want to be Stuart Scott. You don't want to be, 'Booyah.'"

Nearly all said they agonized over job applications that asked them whether they would like to identify their race. Most said they usually did not.

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