Hiring Strategies, Racial Bias, and Inner-City Workers*

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This article explores the ways employers' hiring strategies affect the employment chances of inner-city blacks, using a recent survey of 185 Chicago-area firms. The authors find that employers commonly direct recruitment efforts to white neighborhoods and avoid recruitment sources that bring them a disproportionately inner-city black labor force; when they do draw applicants from poor black neighborhoods, they tend to use labor market intermediaries to recruit workers. There is also evidence that inner-city blacks often do poorly in job interviews in part because they lack the work experience that is so often a focal point of the interview, and in part because of race and class related differences in culture. Finally, there is preliminary evidence that skills testing is associated with higher proportions of black workers in entry-level jobs, suggesting that more objective means of screening prospective employees provide less latitude for racial bias. Racial bias appears to occur as employers search for productive workers and could be reduced by developing more effective ways for job applicants to demonstrate their skills.

Employers and black job applicants encounter one another in a specific context of race and class relations. Widespread publicity, emphasizing poor schools, drug use, crime, and welfare dependency, shapes the way city residents view the inner city and whom they associate with it. These perceptions shade the relations between black and white, middle class and poor, sometimes engendering suspicion, resentment, and misunderstanding (Anderson 1990).

Given the uncertainty that characterizes most hiring decisions, it is likely that these perceptions and strained relations influence employers' hiring practices. For instance, employers might recruit selectively in order to avoid inner-city residents because of expectations that they would be poor employees. Race and class misunderstanding or tension might be manifest in the job interview itself. If hiring practices are largely subjective, the influence of these perceptions about the inner city may be even more influential than would otherwise be the case.

Using data from interviews with Chicago employers, we examine employers' hiring strategies and consider their potential for racial bias. We focus on three hiring practices: selective recruitment, job interviews, and employment tests. We examine employers' views of different categories of workers and the way these preconceptions guide their recruitment strategies, and then discuss employers' accounts of job interviews with inner-city blacks. Finally, we examine the relationship between employment testing and black representation in entry-

level jobs. The research is exploratory. We cannot provide rigorous evidence about the extent of racial bias. However, our interview data lend themselves to a fine-grained description of patterns of racial bias in hiring strategies. The description can serve as the basis for future empirical work on the employment problems of disadvantaged minorities.

Literature Review: Hiring Strategies and Racial Bias

While there has been sustained interest in the high joblessness of blacks in the United States, most research considers skill deficiencies or spatial mismatches in labor supply and demand rather than barriers to employment that exist in the hiring process. To the extent that research examines access to jobs, most studies focus on the use of networks in filling lower-skilled positions and on inner-city blacks' lack of access to job networks (Braddock and McPartland 1987, Wilson 1987). The following survey of the literature examines the hiring process in more detail and .explores how racial bias might occur at different points, from recruitment of the applicant pool to screening and interviewing.

Selective Recruitment and Racial Bias

Employers' recruitment practices are influenced by many considerations, including cost and time. For instance, employers use personal networks to recruit because they are inexpensive and fast. Small firms, lacking elaborate personnel offices, are especially likely to use informal networks, while larger firms are more likely to supplement networks with recruitment through classified ads and other formal sources.

Because screening applicants is costly, employers have an incentive to recruit selectively, excluding potential applicants they view as unpromising. Selective recruitment might be based on "statistical discrimination" or the use of nonproductive characteristics such as race to predict productive characteristics that are more difficult to observe (Aigner and Cain 1977, Bielby and Baron 1986, Phelps 1972, Thurow 1975). Employers' expectations about the productivity of different groups may be influenced by past experience, prejudice, or the mass media. Selective recruitment might also, of course, be motivated by a "taste" for discrimination or a reluctance to hire, work with, or be served by members of a particular group (Becker 1957).

Previous research suggests that employers recruit selectively based on race, ethnicity, class, and neighborhood. Of these categories, race and ethnicity have received the most attention, and empirical research has documented less favorable treatment of black and Hispanic job applicants (e.g., Braddock and McPartland 1987, Cross et al. 1990, Culp and Dunson 1986). But employers also share the larger society's perceptions of the "underclass," associating crime, illiteracy, drug use, and poor work ethic with the inner-city black population. Thus, they may look for indicators of class and "space," or neighborhood of reference, among black workers (Kirschenman and Neckerman 1991). Studies find that employers evaluate the educational credentials and references of blacks differently depending on whether applicants are from the central city or the suburbs (Crain n.d.; see also Braddock et al. 1986). Other employers confound race, class, and "space," generalizing their negative perceptives of lower-class or inner-city workers to all black applicants (Kirschenman and Neckerman 1991).

Race Bias in the Job Interview

Almost all employers select new employees by using job interviews, usually in combination with other bases for screening such as test scores, work experience, references, and credentials. Job interviews are widely used despite psychological research showing little

correlation between interviewer ratings of job applicants and measured skills or job performance.

Research on white-black interaction suggests that prejudice or cultural misunderstanding create difficulties for blacks, especially lower-class blacks who interview with white employers. While classic racism—the view of people of color as undifferentiated—has declined, race relations between strangers are often tense and shaded with fear, suspicion, and moral contempt (Blauner 1989; see also Anderson 1990). Those from different racial or ethnic groups lack the common experiences and conversation patterns that ease interaction in impersonal settings (Erickson 1975). Blacks and whites often misread each others' verbal and nonverbal cues (Kochman 1983), These misunderstandings are exacerbated when class as well as race separates people (Berg forthcoming, Glasgow 1981).

In research on employment interviews, race itself typically has little or no effect on interviewers' ratings, but race is significantly associated with interviewer ratings of nonverbal cues such as facial expression, posture, and certain aspects of voice that are known to influence employers (Arvey 1979, Parsons and Liden 1984). In one field study, for instance, black job applicants were rated significantly less favorably than whites on posture, voice articulation, voice intensity, and eye contact (Parsons and Liden 1984). Behavior or language seen as inappropriate also lowered interviewer ratings of objective characteristics such as education and experience (Hollenbeck 1984).

Race Bias in Employment Testing

Employment tests have been used for decades to measure general aptitude and specific job skills. Testing is used in hiring for perhaps one out of four high-school-level positions, with tests more common in the public sector and less common in unionized firms (Braddock and McPartland 1987, Cohen and Pfeffer 1986, Hamilton and Roessner 1972). Estimates of test validity vary. A recent meta-analysis of studies of the General Aptitude Test Battery (GATB), a widely used test of cognitive and psychomotor skills, estimated a .19 correlation between test scores and job performance (Hartigan and Wigdor 1989).

Racial bias in hiring stemming from the use of employment tests has been a longstanding concern. In 1971, the *Griggs v. Duke Power* decision required that if employment tests or other apparently neutral means of screening were shown to have an adverse impact on the hiring of protected groups, the firm must demonstrate that the test is job-related. Employers have found it difficult to validate general aptitude tests to the courts' satisfaction and have lost most testing cases since 1971 (Burstein and Pitchford 1990). However, this litigation stimulated the research on test validation. The meta-analysis cited above found that the correlation between test scores and job performance ratings was lower for minority employees than for nonminority employees but that on average test scores did not underpredict minority job performance (Hartigan and Wigdor 1989). Tests of skills such as typing are more easily validated and have not been open to the same legal challenges.

Most research on employment testing simply compares test scores to job performance rather than comparing testing to other means of employee selection. Yet if employers do not test applicants, they may rely more heavily on selective recruitment or on subjective impressions in the job interview. Thus, even if tests introduced some racial bias, subjective means of screening might disadvantage minority applicants more. For instance, if employers base hiring decisions on their preconceptions about inner-city schools rather than on tests of individual job applicants, then *all* graduates of those schools might be screened out. This hypothesis is consistent with other research suggesting that formal job search methods work better for blacks than informal methods because the formal methods provide more objective criteria by which employers can evaluate job applicants (Holzer 1987).

The Chicago Employer Survey

Our research is based on face-to-face interviews with 185 employers in Chicago and the surrounding Cook County. The sample was stratified by location, industry, and size, and firms were sampled in proportion to the distribution of employment in Cook County.[1] Inner-city firms were oversampled. Unless otherwise specified, all descriptive statistics presented here are weighted to adjust for oversampling in the inner city. As no comprehensive list exists of Chicago-area employers, the sampling frame was assembled from two directories of Illinois businesses, supplemented with the telephone book for categories of firms underrepresented in the business directories. The field period lasted from July 1988 to March 1989, and yielded a completion rate of 46 percent. In terms of industry and size, the completed sample's weighted distribution roughly matches the distribution of employment in Cook County.[2]

Our initial contacts and the majority of interviews themselves were conducted with the highest ranking official at the sampled establishment. The interviewers and respondents were not matched by race with the respondents. All of the interviewers were non-Hispanic white; 8.5 percent of the respondents were black, 1.5 percent were Hispanic, and the remainder were non-Hispanic white.

The interview schedule included both closed- and open-ended questions about employers' hiring and recruitment practices and about their perceptions of Chicago's labor force and business climate. Because of the many open-ended questions, we taped the interviews. Item nonresponse varied depending on the sensitivity and factual difficulty of the question, with most nonresponse due to lack of knowledge rather than refusal to answer. In addition, the length and detail of responses to open-ended questions varied widely. Some employers volunteered additional information in response to closed-ended questions, which provided useful context for interpretation of the survey results.

Most closed-ended questions focused on the "sample job," defined as the most typical entry-level position in the firm's modal category—sales, clerical, skilled, semi-skilled, unskilled, or service. Entry-level jobs were selected for study in order to focus on the employment of disadvantaged workers, many of whom are first-time job seekers with limited skills. Because we sampled firms by industry and size, we do not have a random sample of entry-level jobs. However, when we compared the occupational distribution of our sample jobs to that of Cook County (excluding professional, managerial, and technical categories), we found that the two distributions were quite similar. The sample job serves as the unit of analysis for the quantitative part of this research. In the text, employers are categorized based on these sample jobs.

The interview schedule included several questions that bear on issues of hiring strategies and racial bias. We asked closed-ended questions about the race and ethnicity of employees in the sample job, as well as about use of various recruitment sources, the importance of specific hiring criteria, and any credentials or skills required for the sample job. Additionally, in the context of a general discussion of the quality of the workforce and of inner-city problems, we asked employers to comment on the high unemployment rates of inner-city black men and women and on any differences they saw between immigrant and native-born

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1. Given our focus on employment opportunities, the purpose of the design was to yield a sample that approximately matched the distribution of employment in Cook County. For instance, if 5 percent of Cook County jobs were in large, inner-city manufacturing firms, then 5 percent of the interviews should be in large, inner-city manufacturing firms. The sample necessarily underrepresents small *firms*, but does so in order to gain a more representative picture of employment opportunities. For more information, see the Final Report available from the authors.

2. About 22 percent of employers we contacted refused to take part. We did not have the resources to pursue all potential repondents who were willing to be interviewed. Halfway through the field period, we set a minimum 40 percent completion rate in all industry-by-location categories and stopped pursuing unresolved cases in categories with completion rates higher than 40 percent. Response rates by industry, firm size, and location were monitored, and special efforts were made to pursue cases in categories with low completion rates.

workers and among black, white, and Hispanic workers. Although these questions do not permit systematic comparisons of employers' perceptions of white, black, and Hispanic workers, they yielded rich data on employers' views of minority workers, often a sensitive subject. Answers to the open-ended questions were examined in the context of each case, and some items were coded and tabulated.

Although we surveyed both city and suburban employers, for this discussion we examine quantitative data for city employers only. Preliminary analysis suggested that patterns for city and suburban employers differed, and we did not have enough cases for separate analysis of the latter. Excluding suburban cases left 137 cases for analysis, although missing data reduced the number of cases available for multivariate analysis to 118. For Table 2, we divided the occupations into four categories, (1) clerical, (2) sales and customer service, (3) skilled and craft, and (4) "blue-collar" or semiskilled, unskilled, and noncustomer service. Because of the heterogeneity of service occupations, we divided them between the sales and blue-collar categories. "Customer service"—including jobs such as waitress, tour guide, and theater usher—had hiring criteria that were similar to sales jobs; other service jobs such as cook and janitor were more similar to semi-skilled and unskilled blue-collar jobs.

Hiring Strategies and Racial Bias

During the time of the survey, the main problem most employers faced was not quantity of job applicants, but "quality." Employers complained that Chicago's work force lacked both basic skills and job skills. They were also dissatisfied with work attitudes, with many saying that employees were not as loyal and hard-working as they once were. Also, employers' traditional ways of getting information about job applicants had become less useful. For example, respondents told us that a high school diploma was no longer a reliable indicator of good basic skills. In addition, the threat of lawsuits has made it increasingly difficult to get information from an applicant's previous employers.

In this context, careful screening has become both more important to employers and more difficult to do. To identify good workers, some employers screened applicants using skills tests, "integrity interviews," psychological profiles, and drug tests. Others tried to recruit selectively or used informal networks. Almost half of our respondents said that employee referrals were their best source of qualified applicants, and it has become more common for employers to pay recruitment bonuses to employees whose referrals are hired. One respondent estimated that he hired 80 percent of all employee referrals, compared to only 5 percent of all applicants attracted by a newspaper ad.

In the following sections, we examine the implications of these hiring strategies for black employment. We consider three ways of screening potential workers: selective recruitment, job interviews, and employment testing.

Selective Recruitment

More often than not, employers recruited selectively, limiting their search for job candidates rather than casting a wide net. Employers sometimes explained their recruitment strategies in terms of practicality, for instance the ease or low cost of using personal networks or the difficulty of screening the large numbers of applications yielded by newspaper ads. But far more often they said their recruitment strategies were intended to bring them better applicants. The criteria of applicant quality they expressed were formally race- and class-neutral, but the recruitment strategies designed to attract high-quality applicants were not. When employers targeted their recruitment efforts at neighborhoods or institutions, they avoided

inner-city populations. In addition, selective recruiting was more widespread among employ-ers in poor, black neighborhoods than among those located elsewhere. The perceptions that employers expressed of inner-city black workers are consistent with the interpretation that they avoid these applicants because on average they expect them to be lower-quality workers.

One way of screening the applicant pool is by not advertising job openings in the newspa-pers. More than 40 percent of our respondents did not use newspaper advertising for their entry-level jobs, and those who did place ads often did so as a last resort after employee net-works had been unsuccessful. Moreover, about two-thirds of all city employers who adver-tised used neighborhood, suburban, or ethnic papers in addition to or instead of the metropolitan papers. Using neighborhood or ethnic papers (here, "local" papers) allowed em-ployers to target particular populations, usually white, ethnic, or Hispanic. For instance, one downtown law firm advertised in white ethnic neighborhoods because its residents were be-lieved to have a better work ethic. On the other hand, a few white-collar employers told us they advertised jobs in the *Defender*, a black newspaper, because of a commitment to minority hiring or simply to "keep the numbers in balance." In most cases we cannot identify the specific neighborhoods which employers targeted because respondents were not asked for this detailed information. But the effect of recruiting from local papers is evident from the survey. City employers who advertised only in local papers averaged 16 percent black in the sample job, compared to 32 percent black for those who advertised in the metropolitan papers.

Recruiting based on the quality or location of schools also provided employers with a way of screening. A downtown employer, for instance, believed that youth from suburban schools had better writing skills. Although the firm advertised over the entire metropolitan area, suburban resumes received more attention. When employers volunteered which schools they recruited from, it was usually Catholic schools and those from the city's white northwest side neighborhoods. One manufacturer posted ads at a Catholic school as well as at two of the city's magnet technical schools. A downtown bank recruited from three northwest side Cath-olic schools. Recruitment from Catholic schools selects white students disproportionately, but this form of recruitment was not necessarily seen in racial terms. Black Catholic school stu-dents were also viewed as more desirable employees than black public school students.

On the other hand, the state employment service and welfare programs which dispropor-tionately refer inner-city blacks were associated with low-quality applicants, or in one respon-dent's words, "the dregs of the year." Neither agency screened adequately, most employers felt, and as a result tended to send inappropriate or unqualified applicants. A manufacturer who had hired white workers through Job Corps criticized the program, saying that none of them had worked out: "As a group I would be prejudiced against them." Another said:

> Any time I've taken any recommendations from state agencies, city agencies, or welfare agencies I
> get really people who are not prepared to come to work on time, not prepared to see that a new job is
> carried through, that it's completed. I mean there just doesn't seem to be a work ethic involved in
> these people.

Most employers did not recruit through these agencies; only a third of all employers used the state employment agency, and 16 percent used welfare programs.

Employers in inner-city areas of the city were more likely than other employers to recruit selectively. For instance, they were less likely to recruit from schools or local newspapers (see Table 1). They tried to recruit the best of the local labor force by using labor market in-termediaries such as informal networks or formal agencies to screen workers. As other re-search has shown, because blacks were seen as higher-risk employees, the recommendations and information provided by these intermediaries could be especially important for them (Coverdill 1990). One respondent attributed her firm's success with black workers to their heavy use of employee referrals. Another said employers were likely to be wary of a black

Table 1 • *Recruitment Practices: Percent of Employers Using Each Recruitment Source or Screening Mechanism, by Type of Neighborhood*

	Downtown	Nonpoor white	Poor black	Other	Total
Recruitment Sources					
Ask employees	93.3	85.6	93.3	83.3	88.8
Use schools	47.9	47.7	36.7	29.2	44.1
Illinois Job Service	30.3	33.3	40.0	31.3	32.5
Private employment agencies	39.5	19.7	23.3	8.3	25.5
Community groups	21.0	34.1	30.0	20.8	27.1
Welfare programs	11.8	19.7	20.0	14.6	16.1
Newspaper, media ads	69.7	59.1	40.0	39.6	58.4
Metropolitan papers	39.0	14.7	16.7	8.3	22.6
Local papers	2.9	18.3	0.0	22.9	11.6
Metropolitan and local	23.8	17.4	23.3	8.3	18.8
Walk-ins	63.0	83.3	73.3	75.0	73.9
Referrals from union	11.8	11.4	30.0	6.3	12.5
Help-wanted signs	10.1	14.4	33.3	20.8	15.5
Best source:					
Ask employees	42.1	46.8	36.7	36.4	42.6
Newspaper, media ads	29.9	24.2	26.7	18.2	25.6
Formal Prerequisites					
No formal prerequisites	26.2	42.3	57.1	54.2	39.9
Education only	24.3	26.0	7.1	4.2	20.3
Formal skills test only	15.0	22.8	29.0	25.0	20.6
Education and skills test	34.6	8.9	10.7	16.7	19.3
Unweighted N	42	52	13	23	130

Source:
> Chicago Employer Survey. Community areas classified as "Nonpoor white" were those with 50 percent or more white residents and 20 percent or less poor households. Areas classified as "Poor black" were those with 50 percent or more black residents and more than 20 percent poor households. Newspaper categories do not sum to total percent using newspapers because of missing responses among those who used newspapers.

man "unless he's got an 'in.'" A large southside employer recruited local high school or college students and added, "It gets them in the door if they're children of university people we know."

Large inner-city employers were especially likely to use formal labor market intermediaries. An inner-city day labor agency was able to place many black workers although many clients preferred "carloads of Mexicans"; its manager attributed this success partly to a computerized record-keeping system:

> Having so much detail on each individual employee allows us to record in their files good performance and bad performance, and we're therefore much more able to discriminate between good workers and bad, much more so than our competitors, who would just take anybody off the street, and because they can't really monitor somebody's performance, why take a risk? Whereas we're in a position to take a risk, because if the person doesn't pan out, either he goes to a different job, or we tell him goodbye. . . . It's after they're on the payroll that you really do your screening.

An inner-city hospital developed a "feeder network" into nearby elementary and high schools, funding tutors, child care for teen mothers, and other educational assistance, and

providing information about health care careers for those who went on to college. The hospital used its feeder system to "draw the best talent on the top to us. . . . They've already got the work ethic down, they've been dealing with both school and work, we also know what's going on with the schooling, the grades and all." The hospital also recruited staff through community jobs programs and employee networks, but not newspapers. "If you are just a cold applicant," the hospital's representative said, "chances of you getting in are almost nil."

Inner-city employers not large enough to develop these extensive screening mechanisms were at a disadvantage. One inner-city retailer said that young workers were disrespectful and prone to steal; she added, "I think I'm getting the best of what I've got to select from, and they're still no good. And other people in the same line of business say the same thing. I know the guy at the gas station, the guy who runs the Burger King, and all of us say the same thing." Even these smaller employers tried less elaborate means of screening. The retailer just cited recruited some employees through a youth mentoring program. A fast food manager sent prospective workers to a distant suburb for training as a way of selecting the most motivated.

The interviews suggest that selective recruitment designed to attract higher-quality applicants disproportionately screens out inner-city blacks. Employers' perceptions of inner-city black workers are consistent with the interpretation that at least some do this deliberately. "The blacks that are employed are just not as good, not that there aren't good blacks, but it's a smaller percent than it would be of whites, for whatever reasons, cultural things, or family background, whatever," said one respondent. Table 2 shows the coded responses to a question inquiring about reasons for the high joblessness of inner-city black workers. Although this question was implicitly comparative, it did not elicit perceptions about workers of other ethnic backgrounds. Employers were especially likely to say that inner-city blacks lacked the work ethic, had a bad attitude toward work, and were unreliable; they also expected them to lack skills, especially basic skills. About half said that these workers had a poor work ethic. In the words of employers: "they don't want to work," "they don't know how to work," "they cannot handle the simplest of tasks," and "they come late and leave early." About 40 percent said inner-city black workers had attitude problems, including a bad attitude toward work as well as apathy and arrogance: "They've got an attitude problem. They want to be catered to. . . . they want it handed to them, they don't want to do anything." Another respondent said that black men have a "chip on their shoulder; [they] resent being told what to do." One third of all employers said black workers tended to be undependable, "here today, gone tomorrow."

These perceptions of inner-city black workers are likely to underlie much of the selective

Table 2 • *Percent of Employers Making the Following Observations about Inner-City Black Workers, by Occupation*

	Customer service	Clerical	Craft	Blue-collar	Total
Lack of job skills	14.3	12.5	35.5	7.7	13.2
Lack of basic skills	65.3	50.7	64.5	40.2	50.4
Lack of work ethic	49.0	50.0	45.2	43.6	47.2
Lack of dependability	28.6	26.4	32.3	42.7	32.8
Bad attitudes	28.6	43.7	41.9	33.3	37.8
Lack of interpersonal skills	14.3	9.7	9.7	4.3	8.5
Unweighted N	21	53	13	50	137

Source:
    Chicago Employer Survey. These figures were coded and tabulated from the open-ended questions about inner-city black men and women.

recruitment discussed earlier. It is impossible for us to say whether employers avoid these applicants because of their race or their class, or for some other reason; race and class are so confounded in a setting like Chicago. But the effect of selective recruitment is to screen out disadvantaged black workers.

Social Interaction in the Job Interview

Virtually all employers interviewed job applicants, using these interviews to assess a wide range of qualities including literacy, values, common sense, integrity, dependability, intelligence, and character. Although they acknowledged the subjectivity of selection through interviews, they were confident their real world experience gave them the ability to spot good workers. The interview may take on particular importance for inner-city black applicants. Potentially, it is an arena in which they might overcome the negative images associated with their race or other markers such as neighborhood or school. One respondent described his bad experiences with black employees, but added that not all blacks were bad workers: "Well, you know when you talk to somebody you can tell a certain amount of something." Another noted that if she interviewed someone from the projects, "I would really spend a lot of time on prior work history and the types of things, the tasks that their job [requires]." These employers, and perhaps others, gave greater weight to the interview when applicants were poor or black.

Discussion of past work experience is generally an important aspect of the job interview. Searching for indications of dependability and willingness to work, employers said they probed reasons for gaps in applicants' work records. Unemployment itself did not disqualify an applicant with an acceptable excuse, such as illness or family responsibilities, and the interview provided a chance for an applicant to justify his or her work history.

In addition to relatively straightforward questions about work experience, employers often developed their own subjective "tests" of productivity and character. For instance, a manufacturer of transportation equipment asked if applicants had a "personal philosophy about work, a personal work ethic." Another manufacturer used the interview to judge "how the person looks at life, you know, is it what's in it for me or . . . is it a positive attitude." Much depended on the "gut reaction" of the employer. When one respondent was hired, she described how she and the recruiter "just clicked. I had the stuff, but also we just, just clicked. It's real important." Many paid attention to how expressive or open an applicant was. A law firm supervisor scorned the textbook job interview methods, saying what mattered to her was how "casual, frank, and honest" people were. A real estate developer looked for "someone that appears to sit up straight, talk expressively . . . [who] appears to be intelligent, articulate, forthcoming with their answers—you don't have to drag every word out of them." A hotelier, looking for desk clerks who could handle stress, said "I think you can determine that from how forthright they are in the interview."

Complicating interaction during the job interview is many employers' distrust of job applicants in general, and perhaps minority applicants in particular. Employers complained that some applicants lied about their work record and skills. Lying on applications was one common reason for rejecting applicants at a security firm: "Well, you know, you lied about your driver's license. They have previously been suspended or a couple of your references said they don't even know you or you said you went to a certain school, you didn't go to this particular school." A clerical employer complained, "They'll come in, say they type 50, 60 words a minute, and you put them on a typewriter and they type 20. Or they'll say they have computer experience, and then it turns out they don't know what a cursor is." Another said, "They've gotten to be so good at conning people that it's just frightening." Such falsification was mentioned more often by employers who saw many minority applicants, and one respondent said that black men were more likely to falsify their applications.

Other research suggests that inner-city black applicants experience difficulty in job interview interactions, and indeed, we heard some explicit criticisms of how inner-city blacks interview. Most common were complaints about applicants dressed in shabby or inappropriate clothing or coming late to interviews. But some respondents said more generally that inner-city blacks, especially men, did not know how to interview: they "aren't prepared; they don't have the enthusiasm"; they were belligerent or had "a chip on their shoulder"; they didn't know dates of employment or provided inconsistent information. One respondent commented that black men were not willing to "play the game" and to "follow the rules."

Our question about whether employers might be wary of poor people or those from the projects drew similar responses: applicants from a poor neighborhood did not know how to present themselves. A manufacturer said that project residents would be favorably evaluated if they had a positive attitude, but that they were not well equipped to "come in and really sell themselves." A clerical employer commented, "You don't need to look at the address to know where they're from; it's how people come across; they don't know how to behave in an office." A number of respondents remarked on cultural differences between inner-city blacks and the middle-class whites who dominate in business settings. Inner-city residents come from "a different world," said one manufacturer; "we don't realize that their rules are very different than ours."

It is obvious that job interviews are biased in favor of people who are friendly and articulate. But we find evidence that interviewing well goes beyond interpersonal skills to common understandings of appropriate interaction and conversational style—in short, shared culture. Job applicants must be sensitive to verbal and nonverbal cues and to the hidden agenda underlying interviewers' questions. They may be called upon to talk about abstract matters such as philosophy of work. And in discussing their past work experience, potentially an awkward subject for inner-city applicants with few previous jobs, they must be forthcoming and honest. Because inner-city blacks have trouble with this interaction, heavy reliance on the interview to assess qualities such as honesty, intelligence, reliability, and so on is likely to disadvantage them.

Skills Tests and Black Representation

About 40 percent of the Chicago employers used formal skills tests to screen for the sample job. It is likely that this high incidence of testing is associated with city employers' distrust of the Chicago public school system and the quality of the city labor force. Only 30 percent of suburban firms in our survey used skills tests. Use of formal skills tests was much more common among clerical employers than among anyone else. More than half of all white-collar employers used conventional tests, measuring skills such as language, spelling, composition, math, typing, and filing speed. The clerical tests ranged from standard typing tests to "matching words in columns and seeing whether they know their ABCs" for filing.

Blue-collar employers also gave tests, most often informally. Skilled and craft employers often asked prospective employees to name tools or perform a given task. A precision tool manufacturer thought certification was helpful, "But most everything's going to come out on the test anyway; no matter what kind of paper people bring in, when he sets them up out there and they make the piece, it'll show." Employers of semi-skilled or unskilled blue-collar workers often screened for basic skills informally, observing how well employees filled out job applications; a few required a high school diploma as a proxy for literacy. Some had simple tests embedded in job application forms. A transportation employer described his firm's hiring process: "They fill out an application, which includes a little test—see whether they can read, write, and add." Another employer "sit[s] them down at a machine, [to] see how well they can do."

When employers have relatively objective means of getting information about job candidates, we would expect them to place less weight on more subjective and presumably more racially-biased hiring strategies. The previous two sections provide evidence that screening through selective recruitment or job interviews, both relatively subjective, disadvantage inner-city black applicants. In this section we ask whether employers who use skills tests have higher proportions of blacks in the sample job. Although our previous discussion emphasized both race and class, limitations of our data prevent us from analyzing the percent of inner-city or poor black workers in the sample job.

Considering only the bivariate relationship, we find that employers who tested job applicants for skills, either formally or informally, averaged 37.9 percent black in the sample job compared with 25.0 percent black among employers who did not test. But these figures are confounded by firm size. Larger firms were more likely to use skills tests and had higher proportions of black workers. It is also likely that other characteristics such as occupation or neighborhood composition confound the association between skills tests and black representation. To control for the influence of these variables, we performed an ordinary least squares (OLS) regression using percent black in the sample job as the dependent variable.

Table 3 • *Variables Included in Analysis of Percent Black in Sample Job*

Firm size	Establishment size at survey date, divided by 100.
% Black in area	Percent of Community Area residents who are black, using 1980 Census figures for the area in which the firm is located. Chicago Community Areas are aggregations of roughly 10-20 census tracts.
Skilled Occupation	Coded "1" when the sample job is a skilled or craft occupation.
Clerical Job	Coded "1" when the sample job is secretary or typist.
Test	Coded "1" for employers who give formal or informal skills test.

Variables used in the regression are described in Table 3, and their means, standard deviations, and ranges are shown in Table 4. Dummy variables for craft occupations and secretarial occupations were included in the regression. Other occupational dummy variables were tested as part of a specification search but did not approach significance.[3]

Regression results are shown in Table 4. Skills testing continued to be positively associated with percent black in the sample job when firm size, percent black in the neighborhood, and occupation were controlled. The "test" variable was just short of statistical significance at the .05 level. Examination of regression diagnostics indicated little problem with multicollinearity or outliers, although some heteroskedasticity may be present.[4] The percent black in the community area and the dummy variable indicating craft occupations were statistically significant. The significance of percent black in the community area, which has the largest

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3. Variables tested include dummy variables for bank tellers, semi-skilled and unskilled laborers, and service workers, as well as the two variables in the final specification. The number of occupational dummy variables that could be included at once was limited because multicollinearity resulted when several were included together in the model. The inclusion of these variables did not substantially change the coefficients for firm size, skills testing, or percent black in the neighborhood. Also tested was a dummy variable for race of respondent. In our data, race of employer was highly correlated with percent black in the community area, firm size, and the skills test variable, and inclusion of the variable raised the condition index to 47, indicating serious multicollinearity. In analyses not shown, we also ran the regression without the minority employers and found the results substantially unchanged.

4. A condition index of 26 indicated no serious problems with multicollinearity. Several outliers and influential cases were identified; running the regression without these cases produced coefficient estimates slightly larger than those presented here, and with higher levels of significance. Inspection of residuals indicated that the linear specification was appropriate. The residuals plots also revealed some heteroskedasticity, so the significance tests may not be reliable. Substituting a generalized least squares model for OLS did not seem warranted for this simple descriptive exercise.

Table 4 • *OLS Regression of Percent Black in Sample Job (N=118)*

I. Unweighted descriptive statistics for variables included in analysis

	Mean	Standard deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Proportion Black in job	.318	.312	.00	1.00
Firm size	4.509	13.412	.08	110.00
Proportion Black in area	.246	.294	.00	.98
Craft	.076	.267	.00	1.00
Secretarial	.110	.314	.00	1.00
Test	.551	.500	.00	1.00

Correlation Coefficients

	Proportion Black in job	Firm size	Proportion Black in area	Craft	Secretarial	Test
Proportion Black in job	1.000					
Firm size	.166	1.000				
Proportion Black in area	.504	.020	1.000			
Craft	−.189	−.068	−.001	1.000		
Secretarial	−.037	−.087	.008	−.101	1.000	
Test	.196	.166	.031	−.126	.209	1.000

II. OLS Regression on Percent Black in Sample Job

	Coefficient	T-statistic	Significance
Firm size	.003	1.410	.161
Proportion Black in area	.527	6.452	.000
Craft	−.198	−2.174	.031
Secretarial	−.081	−1.026	.307
Test	.099	1.959	.053
Constant	.146	3.457	.001
Adjusted R squared		.306	

Note:
  The firm size variable is the number of employees divided by 100.

effect of any of the variables, indicates the importance of firm location for work force composition and lends indirect support to the spatial "mismatch" hypothesis. The negative association between craft occupations and percent black is likely to reflect long-standing patterns of discrimination in the skilled trades.

The results presented here show that Chicago employers who test for skills, either formally or informally, tend to have higher proportions of blacks in the sample job than employers who do not test. These findings must be interpreted cautiously because there are alternative explanations for which we could not adequately test. For instance, it is possible that these employers test for skills because they attract more black applicants. It might also be that their hiring criteria differ from those of employers who do not test. However, our results suggest the need for future research to address these issues.

Conclusion

Our evidence suggests that negative preconceptions and strained race relations both hamper inner-city black workers in the labor market. Many respondents perceived inner-city black workers to be deficient in work ethic and work attitudes, as well as in skills. Employers commonly directed their recruitment to white neighborhoods and Catholic or magnet schools and avoided recruiting from city-wide newspapers and public agencies because they believed these recruiting strategies brought them better workers. By design or not, these practices excluded blacks disproportionately from their applicant pool.

The job interview could be an opportunity for inner-city black job applicants to counter these negative stereotypes. But inner-city black job seekers with limited work experience and little familiarity with the white, middle-class world are also likely to have difficulty in the typical job interview. A spotty work record will have to be justified; misunderstanding and suspicion may undermine rapport and hamper communication. However qualified they are for the job, inner-city black applicants are more likely to fail subjective "tests" of productivity given during the interview.

Finally, employers who use skills tests have on average a higher proportion of black workers in the sample job than employers who do not test. Again, our results do not indicate that skills tests involve no racial bias but simply that skills tests are less biased than more subjective means of assessing job applicants. It should be emphasized that the survey on which these results were based took place in the context of legal restrictions on the use of employment tests and in a particular social context. The findings may not be generalizable to the time before these legal restrictions were enacted, nor do they indicate the likely effects of lifting these restrictions.

Our study was restricted to entry-level jobs and excluded professional, managerial, and technical positions; therefore, our results cannot be generalized to higher-level positions or to promotion rather than hiring. It is possible that promotion decisions are less prone to racial bias because employers have more information about individual job performance and need not guess about productivity based on markers such as race or class. Consistent with this, one study shows that educational credentials are more influential in hiring than in promotion (Bills 1988). On the other hand, to the extent that higher-level positions require contact with clients, supervision of staff, or interaction with executive or professional personnel, then the hiring criteria are likely to emphasize social skills and cultural compatibility, and promotion decisions may be more subjective. More research will be needed to distinguish these two effects.

The ways some employers have adapted to increasing skill demands and declining labor force quality are not race- or class-neutral. By directing recruitment away from inner-city neighborhoods, employers may provide themselves with a higher-skilled applicant pool but at the expense of qualified inner-city applicants. Attention should be given to ways that inner-city residents can demonstrate their competence, whether through certification by schools, screening by labor market intermediaries, or more extensive testing by employers. If rewards are not forthcoming for those who do improve their educational and work skills, inner-city residents' motivation to get education and training is likely to diminish.

Although we have emphasized the role of racial bias in the hiring process, the findings of this study are consistent with other interpretations of inner-city residents' employment problems. Problems of skills mismatch are evident in employers' concern with "quality" not "quantity" of applicants. Researchers' criticisms of the quality of ghetto schools are certainly echoed by employers. Finally, this work supports the emphasis others have given to job networks, suggesting that personal and institutional "connections" may be even more important in the inner city than they are elsewhere.

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