We investigated changes in skill requirements and the effects of these changes on Black men's access to entry-level jobs, using open-ended interviews of managers at 56 firms in four industries. Managers reported that due to heightened competitive pressure, "soft skills"—particularly motivation and ability to interact well with customers and coworkers—are becoming increasingly important. Many managers view Black men as lacking in these soft skills. This helps to explain Black men's growing disadvantage in labor markets.

"Soft" Skills and Race:

An Investigation of Black Men's Employment Problems

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The Black/White gap in hourly wages of young men in the United States, after narrowing for decades, began to widen in the mid-1970s, a period that also saw a growing racial gap in male employment rates (Bound & Freeman, 1992; Juhn, Murphy, & Pierce, 1991). Skill upgrading constitutes one source of growing racial inequality in employment and earnings. There is substantial evidence of skill upgrading in U.S. jobs, which has resulted from both compositional shifts and upgrading of requirements within specific jobs (Osterman, 1995). Indeed, Ferguson (1993) showed that an increasing payoff to basic math and reading skills can explain much of the racial wage divergence for men.

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The growth of "soft" or social skills is a factor that has been neglected in research on the racial gap in labor market outcomes, despite the fact that employer surveys have repeatedly identified such skills as the most important hiring criterion for entry-level jobs (Capelli, 1995). In this study, therefore, we examined the relationship between employer racial attitudes and their hiring practices, with special attention given to their use of soft skills. We defined soft skills as skills, abilities, and traits that pertain to personality, attitude, and behavior rather than to formal or technical knowledge. Based on 56 face-to-face interviews with employers, we sought to learn how employment gatekeepers conceived of soft skills in relation to hiring Black men for entry-level jobs.

According to our findings, employers reported an increasing need for soft skills—driven, they said, by heightened competitive pressure—and they rated Black men poorly in terms of such skills. Thus, the heightened competition that propels current business restructuring appears to contribute to increased labor market inequality by race.

SKILLS AND THE RACIAL GAP

Research on the labor market issues facing Black men shows that shifts in labor demand have contributed substantially to their worsening situation, but the nature of these demand shifts remains unclear (Moss & Tilly, 1991). As noted above, rising demand for skills could help explain the growing racial differential in both wages and employment rates. Black men lag behind their White counterparts in educational attainment (Bound & Freeman, 1992), in standardized tests administered in the public schools (Jencks, 1991), and in tests measured in national data sets, such as the Armed Forces Qualifying Test (AFQT) (Ferguson, 1993; O'Neill, 1990). If Blacks lag behind in skills, increasing demand for skills will put them at an increasing disadvantage. Bound and Freeman investigated this possibility with educational attainment but concluded that the equalizing effects of Black/White convergence in educational attainment should be greater than the disequalizing effects of a rising payoff to education. On the other hand, Ferguson (1993) found that a rising premium on basic skills, as measured by the AFQT, could explain much—perhaps all—of the increase in the Black/White male wage difference between 1980 and 1988.

These studies leave a number of questions unanswered. Some authors argue that defining job requirements in terms of individual knowledge greatly oversimplifies the requisites for successful job performance (Darrah, 1994; Vallas, 1990). In particular, Darrah noted that in most work contexts, successful

performance depends crucially on a set of relationships with other workers and managers. In service settings, relationships with customers are also critical. And as noted above, employers assign soft-skill traits like attitude or personality paramount importance in hiring decisions (Capelli, 1995). Holzer's (1996) employer survey found decreased representation of Black men in jobs whose tasks required hard skills (such as reading and arithmetic) but also in jobs whose tasks called for soft skills (such as interaction with customers face to face or by telephone). Thus, soft skills—captured neither by educational attainment nor by standardized test scores—are important, both in their own right and in facilitating the learning and exercise of hard skills.

Because employer assessments of the soft skills of current or potential workers are inevitably subjective, racial discrimination can enter into such assessments. Becker (1957) offered a helpful distinction among forms of discrimination originating with customers, coworkers, and employers. Phelps (1972) and Arrow (1972a, 1972b , 1973) moved beyond Becker's notion of a "taste for discrimination" (a distaste for contact with members of a given group) by suggesting that employers may engage in statistical discrimination. That is, given the impossibility of measuring individual productivity in advance, employers may discriminate against whole classes of people based on (correct or incorrect) perceptions of the mean productivity (or variation in productivity) for these classes.

Research in social psychology and organizational demography (Tsui, Egan, & O'Reilly, 1992) has added richness to these relatively austere economic models of discrimination. Such research builds on the similarity-attraction hypothesis (positing that people use demographic traits to infer similarity in attitudes, which is an important basis for attraction) and on self-categorization theory (holding, likewise, that people rely on traits to define groups from which they draw positive self-identity). Surveys consistently find an expressed preference for coworkers who are homogeneous by race and other characteristics (Shellenbarger, 1993; Tajfel & Turner, 1986), and in fact homogeneous groups outperform other groups along some dimensions (Jackson, 1991). Similarly, racial and other demographic differences in a superior-subordinate pair are linked to discomfort and less favorable performance evaluations of the subordinate (Ford, Kraiger, & Schectman, 1986; Greenhaus, Parasuraman, & Wormley, 1990; Kraiger & Ford, 1985; Sackett & DuBois, 1991; Tsui & O'Reilly, 1989). Thus, a taste for discrimination appears to be anchored deeply in individuals' self-definition and attraction to others and has measurable effects in actual work settings.

Kirschenman and Neckerman's (1991; Neckerman & Kirschenman, 1991) qualitative study provided direct evidence on employer perceptions of racial groups. Based upon face-to-face interviews with employers in Chicago and

its surrounding suburbs, they found that employers used race as a primary distinction while making recruiting, screening, and hiring decisions. They reported that Chicago employers rated Blacks, and particularly Black men, worse than Whites and Latinos, both in terms of basic hard skills and in terms of soft skills such as work ethic. Waldinger (1993) reported similar findings from interviews with employers in the hotel and restaurant industries in Los Angeles.

Given the stress employers place on soft skills, it is important to explore more fully employer perceptions of the soft skills of Black men. We extended previous qualitative research by interviewing employers in additional cities and a broad range of industries. Most important, we investigated in more detail how and why employers formed negative assessments of the soft skills of Black men and why employers sought increased levels of soft skills in entry-level jobs.

METHOD AND DATA

We conducted 66 face-to-face, open-ended interviews with 75 employer representatives at 56 organizations in 1991 and 1992. The 66 interviews included 6 revisits to organizations, and 4 separate interviews of a second person during visits to organizations. We spoke to multiple respondents in about one third of the organizations.

Although our interviews were open-ended, they were structured to generate comparable data across interviewees. The same 46-item instrument was used in all 56 initial interviews. Probes and follow-up questions depended on the responses to these 46 questions, and follow-up interviews varied in focus. We maintained a consistent tone of professional yet friendly, nonjudgmental interest throughout all interviews.

We spoke to employers in the Los Angeles and Detroit metropolitan areas.[1] We chose firms from four industries: auto parts manufacturers, retail clothing stores, insurance companies, and the public sector (somewhat expansively defined to include some public utilities and private hospitals, as well as local government agencies). This cross-section of industries included a range of entry-level jobs available to workers with a high school education or less. Within each industry, we sampled both suburban and central city establishments of varying size. Where possible, we included Black-owned businesses in the sample.[2]

Thus, our sample was designed to capture differing social and demographic contexts (by metro area and central city/suburb), different skill needs, employment practices, and market conditions (by industry and firm size), and

differing commitments to Black employment (by race of owner among smaller businesses). However, analysis in this article primarily identifies *common* themes across these categories. In particular, although the two metropolitan areas offered contrasting environments (Kirschenman, Moss, & Tilly 1996; Moss & Tilly, 1995a), we found little inter-area difference in the employer characteristics under study and primarily report pooled results.

Interviews gathered information on the largest category of entry-level jobs requiring no more than a high school degree at each organization—a category we call the *sample job*.[3] Questions fall into five sections: general background on the respondent and company; skill levels and needs for the job in question; the recruitment/screening/hiring process and criteria; area business climate and company location decisions; and evaluation of different racial, ethnic, and gender groups as employees. (A copy of the instrument is available from the authors on request.) Table 1 includes a profile of some of the basic characteristics of the sampled firms.[4] In another article (Moss & Tilly, 1995a), we described the variety of barriers to Black men that emerged in the interviews.

In the next section of this article, we briefly report on changes in the demand for soft skills in each of the four industries we sampled. Following that, we explore how employers perceived the soft skills of Black men, and then we offer conclusions and implications for policy.[5]

Several caveats should be offered. Although proportions are reported in the findings, these are purely indicative and should not be interpreted as sample estimates of a larger population. Although many respondents spoke openly about race, a substantial minority were visibly cautious. Many of our findings rely on retrospective evaluation by informants of change over time; such evaluations must be interpreted with some caution. Finally, all interviews were conducted during the early stages of recovery from a nationwide recession, which surely affected employer perceptions of the labor market.

THE GROWING IMPORTANCE OF SOFT SKILLS

Again, we defined soft skills as skills, abilities, and traits that pertain to personality, attitude, and behavior rather than to formal or technical knowledge.[6] Two clusters of soft skills were important to the employers surveyed. The first, *interaction*, involves ability to interact with customers, coworkers, and supervisors. This cluster includes friendliness, teamwork, ability to fit in, and appropriate affect, grooming, and attire. The interaction category is related to concepts of *emotional labor* (Hochschild, 1983; Wharton, 1993) and *nurturant social skills* (England, 1992; Kilbourne, England, & Beron, 1994). A second cluster, *motivation*, takes in characteristics such as enthusi-

TABLE 1: Characteristics of the 58 Sites

Variable	*Proportion (%) or Mean*
Industry	
Auto parts manufacturing	33
Retail clothing	29
Insurance	14
Public sector	24
Location	
Inner city	47
Rest of city	12
Suburban	24
Mixed	17
Relocated in last 10 years or so	14
If so, when relocated	1977
Other background firm characteristics	
Any part of firm unionized	39
Sample job unionized	37
Minority-owned	11
Mean firm size	1,795
Employment rising	16
Employment falling	51
Sample job entry wage	$6.54
Rising competition in product market	59
Employee demographics	
Black	32
Latino	27
Of color	64
Female	50
Normalized employee demographics (index)[a]	
Black	1.9
Latino	0.8

a. To normalize the proportions of employees who were Black and Latino, we divided by the proportions of the metropolitan population who were Black and Latino, respectively. A normalized index of 1.0 means that the proportion of a group in the workplace matches that in the population; a higher index signifies overrepresentation of the group in that workplace.

asm, positive work attitude, commitment, dependability, and willingness to learn. We distinguish both from hard skills, including skills in math, reading, and writing; knowledge of particular job procedures; "brightness;" ability to learn; educational attainment; and physical strength.

Interaction and motivation skills differ from one another, and in much of our analysis, we distinguish between the two. However, we grouped them together under the rubric of soft skills because employers often subsumed both in terms like *attitude* and because many employers viewed both as more immutable than hard skills. Of course, soft skills are in part culturally defined,

TABLE 2: Most Important Qualities Looked for in Entry-Level Employees

	Frequency With Which Each Category Was Mentioned (Percent)		
Industry	*Hard Skills*	*Interaction*	*Motivation*
Auto parts manufacturing	58	32	63
Retail clothing	22	78	39
Insurance	67	67	78
Public sector	100	60	60

NOTE: Informants typically mentioned more than one desired quality.

and therefore employer assessments of soft skills will be confounded by differences in culture and by racial stereotyping. Indeed, the word *skills* is to some extent a misnomer, although employers most definitely conceptualize these attributes as contributing to individual productivity differences.

We asked almost all interviewees to identify the most important qualities they looked for when hiring entry-level workers. As Table 2 shows, interaction skills were by far the most important qualification in retail.[7] Motivation and hard skills received roughly equal emphasis in auto parts and insurance. Only in the public sector were hard skills mentioned most often. Overall, 86% of respondents included soft skills in their list of the most important hiring criteria, and almost half mentioned soft skills first in that list (Table 3).[8]

Employers reported that requirements for both hard and soft skills have recently been rising. Here, and wherever we asked retrospective questions, we asked respondents to discuss changes over the last 5 to 10 years *that affected the sample job* (the largest category of entry-level jobs requiring no more than a high school education). Although more employers (50%) reported hard-skill upgrading, the number citing increased requirements for soft skills was not far behind (43%).[9] Furthermore, although 1 employer in 10 described *falling* hard-skill requirements, not one respondent reported decreasing soft-skill needs. Soft-skill increases were reported most often in retail (65%) and insurance (63%), but less frequently in auto parts (26%) and the public sector (29%).[10]

Based on a large, representative survey, Osterman (1995) confirmed that behavioral traits were important hiring criteria for blue-collar jobs (one of the two top criteria in 82% of cases, and the top criterion in about half). However, he found that, among the 40% of employers reporting rising blue-collar job complexity, only one in seven cited increased demand for interpersonal skills or responsibility.[11]

Respondents in all four industries stated that competitive pressures have led to growing soft-skill needs (Moss & Tilly, 1996).[12] For instance, auto

TABLE 3: Skill Needs in Sample Jobs at the 58 Sites

Variable	*Proportion (%)*
Education, hard skills	
High school graduates as proportion of sample job workforce	70[a]
Require high school	17
Require basic literacy or math	83
Job entails SPC or other precise measurement of output	29
Soft skills	
Soft skills first in list among most important hiring criteria	47
Soft skills among most important hiring criteria	86
Changes in skill requirements	
Overall skill requirements rising	64
Hard skill requirements rising	50
Soft skill requirements rising	43
Overall skill requirements falling	3
Hard skill requirements falling	10
Soft skill requirements falling	0

a. This percentage is the mean of percentages reported at individual sites.

makers are pushing their suppliers to cut costs and increase quality. In response, many of the parts manufacturers are escalating basic and technical skill requirements. Some, however, are demanding more soft skills as well. For instance, a human resource manager at an alloy casting plant told us:

> Hiring used to be based on 90% experience, 10% attitude or work ethic. I find that changing. . . due to the [emphasis on] teamwork and total quality. Attitudes and people getting along with one another . . . —this is a big part now. I would almost say it's 50% to 60% being experience and the other 40% being attitude, work ethic, teamwork.

In retail clothing, heightened emphasis on customer service—again, spurred by intensified competition—has led companies to screen more carefully for soft skills when hiring sales clerks. One discount clothing chain has adopted the slogan "fast, fun, and friendly." According to a regional personnel representative for the chain, this means that now

> I tell my . . . personnel managers, "If they don't smile, don't hire them." I don't care how well-educated they are, how well-versed they are in retail, if they can't smile, they're not going to make a customer feel welcome. And we don't want them in our store.

On the other hand, respondents reported declining hard skill needs among sales clerks, due to optical scanning equipment and computerized cash registers.

Insurance companies increasingly demand computer literacy among their clerical workers. In addition, financial deregulation has heightened competition, leading insurers to adopt several strategies: downsizing, reorganization of work, and greater stress on customer service. As one human resource manager put it, "on a scale of 1 to 10 it [customer relations] is a 9.999. . . . There is much more emphasis now being placed on it."

Finally, in the public sector, budget cuts have combined with political demands for greater productivity and quality of service. In our public sector interviews, two thirds of respondents reported that they were looking for more skilled people. Although some of these respondents noted a greater need for some basic or technical skill, all mentioned a need for greater customer skills—in jobs ranging from clerk-typist to hospital housekeeper.

SOFT SKILLS AND RACE IN THE EYES OF EMPLOYERS

The emphasis employers place on soft skills disadvantages Black male job applicants. This is because many employers see Black men as lacking in precisely the skills they consider increasingly important. Indeed, in our sample, the employers placing the greatest emphasis on soft skills were those most likely to have negative views of Black men as workers.[13] The views employers hold of Black men in this regard were partly stereotype, partly cultural gap, and partly an accurate perception of the skills that many less educated Black men bring to the labor market.

To demonstrate the connection between soft skills and race in the eyes of employers, we examine in turn each of the two major soft-skill areas that our interviews highlighted: interaction and motivation. Then we address how and why employers form their perceptions of Black men. Finally, we provide evidence for the importance of the pre-employment interview—the main tool employers use to assess the soft skills of applicants—which poses particular barriers for Black applicants.

INTERACTION SKILLS

Employers voiced two main sets of concerns about the ability of Black men to interact effectively with customers and coworkers. First, a substantial minority of respondents—32%—described Black men as defensive, hostile, or having a difficult "attitude." The content of these comments ranged widely. A Latino store manager in a Black area of Los Angeles, who hires mostly

Latinos, flatly stated, "You know, a lot of people are afraid, they [Black men] project a certain image that makes you back off. . . . They're really scary." When asked, "How much of that do you think is perception, how much do you think is actually reality?" he responded, "I think 80% is reality. 80% of it's factual."

Other respondents stated that managers see Black men as difficult to control. For example, the Black female personnel manager of a Detroit retail store commented,

> Employers are sometimes intimidated by an uneducated Black male to come in. Their appearance really isn't up to par, their language, how they go about an interview. Whereas females Black or White, most people do feel, "I could control this person." . . . A lot of times people are physically intimidated by Black men. . . . The majority of our employers are not Black. And if you think that person may be a problem, [that] young Black men normally are bad, or [that] the ones in this area [are], you say, "I'm not going to hire that person, because I don't want trouble."

A White female personnel official from a Los Angeles public sector department offered a related perspective, laying part of the blame with White supervisors:

> There's kind of a being cool attitude that comes with walking down the street a certain way and wearing your colors or challenging those who look at you wrong, and they come to work with an awful lot of that baggage. And they have a very difficult time not looking for prejudice. If a supervisor gives him an instruction, they immediately look to see if it's meant, if it's said different to them because they're Black. Or if something goes wrong in the workforce, they have a tendency to blame the race, their being Black. . . . And I also think that part of the problem is that the supervisors and managers of these people have their own sets of expectations and their own sets of goals that don't address the diversity of these people, and it's kind of like, well, hell, if they're going to come work for me, they're going to damn well do it my way. . . . And my own personal feeling is that a lot of these young Black men who are being tough scare some of their supervisors. And so rather than address their behavior problems and deal with the issues, they will back away until they can find a way to get rid of them. We have a tendency to fear what we're not real familiar with.

Although a few respondents provided this level of detail, most of the negative responses were far briefer: "a lot of Black males have a chip on their shoulder," or "I get a strong sense of, with Black males at times of a hostility, of 'I deserve so and so, this belongs to me.' "

Our questions probed primarily for generalizations, but some respondents noted variation within race and gender categories. Even the store manager who described Black men as "really scary" added, "You know, there's a lot

of Black males that are nice; they usually project a different image. They don't want to project the same image as gangsters."

In addition to negative views of the demeanor of Black men, we found that many retail employers saw the racial composition of employment itself as an issue for customers. The Black male personnel manager of a large retail store located in a Detroit-area suburban mall stated that because the labor market area is 90% Black, "we are forced to have an Affirmative Action program for nonminorities in this particular store." In fact, the store has shifted away from walk-in applications to in-store or mail recruiting from the store's customer base. Given that the mall sits in an integrated suburb of Detroit, his statement implies a fear that an all-Black workforce would erode the White suburban customer base.

In subsequent interviews, we asked retail informants explicitly about attempts to keep the racial mix of store employees similar to that of customers. Seven of the 10 retail informants whom we asked, responded that this was indeed a management concern. Not all of them approved of the customer attitudes to which they were responding. For example, a White female personnel manager at a Los Angeles store said,

> At [a store she was posted at previously] we had a lot of customer complaints because it's primarily White, and we were always getting complaints that there were all Black employees and it's because they were Black. That would be the first thing the customer would bring up was "Black." It was because they were Black that they didn't do their job right.

Nonetheless, this informant and others—Black, White, and Latino alike—viewed the goal of race-matching staff with customers as a legitimate management objective.

MOTIVATION

Forty percent of respondents voiced perceptions of Black men as unmotivated employees. Once again, comments varied widely in substance. A Latino female personnel officer of a Los Angeles retail distribution warehouse, whose workforce is 72% Latino and only 6% Black, stated, "Black men are lazy. . . . Who is going to turn over? The uneducated Black." The White male owner of a small Detroit area plastic parts plant (46% Black, 54% White) said that in his experience, Black men "just don't care—like everybody owes them." "Black kids don't want to work," was the opinion of a White male owner of a small auto parts rebuilding shop in Los Angeles, whose workforce was entirely Hispanic female. "Black men are not responsible," added a Latina female personnel supervisor for a Los Angeles auto

parts manufacturer located next to a major Black area but with a workforce that was 85% Latino and less than 1% Black.

This is still a minority viewpoint. The majority of respondents stated that they saw no differences in work ethic by race, although surely, in some cases, they were simply proffering the socially approved response. As in the case of interaction, some respondents discussed variation within race/gender categories. A number of employers invoked such variation to dismiss racial differences:

> We have problem employees, who choose not to come to work as often as others, but that cuts across all racial lines, you know, so no, I wouldn't say that's the case as a blanket statement. We have problem people, but they're just problem people. Some of them happen to be Black and some of them happen to be White, but I wouldn't say it's any better or worse in any one group or the other.

Other managers attributed apparent racial differences to class or neighborhood effects. Yet others noted distinctions within racial groups but still rated Black employees lower on average. For example, in a Los Angeles area discount store where the main workforce was Latino, the manager opined:

> I think the Hispanic people have a very serious work ethic. I have a lot of respect for them. They take pride in what they do. Some of the Black folks that I've worked with do, but I'd say a majority of them are just there putting in the time and kind of playing around.

In fact, although only a minority of respondents questioned the work ethic of Blacks, a substantial majority agreed with the idea that immigrants have a stronger work ethic than native-born workers—81% of Detroit respondents who ventured an opinion on this agreed, and 88% of Los Angeles respondents. This bodes ill for less-skilled Black workers, particularly in Los Angeles, because they increasingly compete with immigrant workers for jobs.

Table 4 summarizes the proportions of employers expressing negative views of the soft skills of Black men, broken down by firm characteristics. The data suggest that Los Angeles employers, those located in the inner city, those with fewer than 100 employees, and those not owned by minorities are more likely to state such negative views. However, these results should not be overinterpreted, given the small sample sizes and nonrandom sample. Furthermore, differences in the probability of stating negative views do not necessarily correspond to differences in the probability of holding or acting on the views. Consequently, the key finding reported in this table is that negative assessments of Black men's soft skills appear in all categories of employers.

TABLE 4: Percentage of Employers Expressing Negative Views of Black Men's Soft Skills, by Firm Characteristics

	Percentage of Employers Expressing a Negative View of Black Men as Employees, in Terms of:			
	Interaction (%)	*Motivation (%)*	*Either (%)*	*Sample Size (N)*
All employers	32	40	53	57
By metro area				
Detroit	23	31	44	31
Los Angeles	39	48	61	26
By location				
Inner city	46	46	68	28
Rest of city	33	33	50	6
Suburb	0	21	21	14
Mixed	33	56	60	9
By firm size				
<100 employees	33	50	67	12
100 or more	31	38	50	45
By ownership				
Nonminority-owned	32	44	57	50
Minority-owned	17	17	17	6

HOW AND WHY EMPLOYERS FORM THESE PERCEPTIONS

Employers indicated that they based their perceptions of Black men on experiences with past and present employees, on impressions of applicants, and on more general impressions from the media and from experiences outside work.[14] About half of respondents referred to their own employees, sometimes arguing that the immediacy of these observations rendered them objective. Stated a store manager,

> I think [Black men] feel things should be given to them and not earned. And because of that, they don't earn the right to keep jobs. Now that may be, you know, someone would say I may have an attitude problem, but that, I just look at pure facts. I mean with the people that I've had work for me.

In a few cases, employers drew inferences from differences across sites:

> Manufacturing human resource manager: The big problem with the inner-city male is transportation and to some degree the motivation to work. I have been in organizations in Glendale on the other side of the city, and our stability there was not as high.

> Store manager: I was at Culver City before I went to this store, and it seems like we had a very high turnover in that area, and it was a very, very busy store, and it was probably 95% Black. And I think there is a different work ethic.

A much smaller number described the applicant pool as a basis for assessments about Black men. In a number of cases, informants pleaded ignorance due to a lack of Black applicants: "It's hard for us to say [why Black men do poorly in the labor market], because we don't have a large enough community, so we don't interview very many Blacks, and we don't reject many Blacks."

Other employers, especially those in White or Hispanic areas, referred to contact with Blacks outside the workplace. A White male insurance manager outside Detroit reported:

> I am involved and attend an urban church, and we attend there working with the homeless and the retarded and people of that nature, [and] unless something is done to help these Black males, it is just a sorry situation.

Although no respondent specifically cited the media as a source for their impressions of Black men, the impact of the media was evident, as in these two comments by White Detroit area manufacturing managers:

> Manager 1: We have a lot guys out there with cocaine in their pocket and Uzis in the trunk.

> Manager 2: I think a lot of [the difficulty Black men face in the labor market] is based on their inability to complete schooling early on, for whatever reason. I don't know a lot of the statistics of the Black race but I do see that. I think that is a good fact. . . . It's going to take unfortunately a heck of a long time to fully eliminate discrimination. We hear about it in the news still, and it's a shame.

Those managers who spoke at length often wove together information from a wide variety of personal experiences inside and outside the workplace, combined with general knowledge shaped by the media. For instance, the White owner of a small manufacturing shop in a Los Angeles suburb related:

> [Forty years ago in Los Angeles] the workforce was Caucasian, and the lower end of the workforce, the labor end, was Black. . . . Through civil rights and so forth, the Black community elevated themselves into positions that weren't there [previously]. . . . As that workforce disappeared and the great migration from the Latin countries [took place], it became a Latino environment. We put an ad in the paper, we would have had very few Caucasian applicants. Even very few Black applicants.
>
> It seems that the Black kids maybe just don't want to work. . . . Why should they take an entry-level job when they can make more on some sort of welfare, unemployment, or dealing drugs? We have a lot of poor people in the city, a lot of homeless, people asking for money. . . . I was in the L.A. airport a while back and a Black man walks up to me and says "hey man, I need five bucks." It is a "gimme" attitude. I can remember as a kid a man coming into my father's

> store and saying, "I need money, can I sweep the floors for 50 cents?" But that is not the way it is anymore, now it's "can you spare a quarter" or "can you spare a dollar." Nobody wants to work for it.

Even more important than how employers form their perceptions of Black men is why they hold these views. We argue that the negative views are a complicated combination of stereotypes, realities, and conflicting cultures. The evidence that stereotypes are involved is straightforward. On the one hand, some respondents voiced clearly stereotypical attitudes: "Black men are lazy. . . . They've got no respect for anyone"; and "I'm no doctor. . . but I'm convinced, having dealt with grievance and unrest. . . that Black men, and to some extent Black women, do not deal with stress physically as well as some other races."

On the other hand, certain managers charged that other managers harbored stereotypical views:

> People have a tendency to look toward, even if they don't voice it, they deal with their stereotypes. It's easy to identify someone as a female or identify someone as Black male or a White male. And so whatever it is that they have of their expectations of those people, they will project that.

In particular, some managers claimed that their peers engaged in statistical discrimination or generalized from a visible but unrepresentative subset of Black men:

> I think that many employers may feel that because of the large numbers of Black males who are in prison and have problems, that there is a tendency for those who are out and in the workforce to do mischievous things. That's unfortunate.

And one informant, a Black female manager at a Detroit area utility, contended that employers hold Blacks to a different standard than Whites:

> When Blacks and Hispanics and whomever come into the work group, and they are not part of the majority, then one thing they need to know is that they cannot always do what they see others doing, and that is key. That is a lesson that needs to be taught. I think the rules aren't always the same, and it may not always be intentional. A lot is institutional and lot of it is people just not understanding others.

We believe that the perceptions stated by employers contain an element of reality as well. We have no independent way of verifying the statements employers made. However, some comments offered substantial detail and specificity, and some referred to "objective" measures such as absenteeism. More convincing, a variety of other research, including ethnography (Anderson, 1990; Wilson, 1987), surveys (Wilson, 1987), and focus groups (Jobs for the Future, 1995), reports that many young Black men in U.S. inner cities

really do act "tough" and that they really are skeptical of what legitimate jobs offer and find other alternatives attractive. Wilson (1987), for instance, concluded that poor neighborhoods generated less opportunity to develop interaction skills and motivation. Anderson (1990) cautioned, however, that although young, inner-city Black men may lag in the skills most sought by employers, they possess a wealth of other soft skills needed to survive and thrive in dangerous environments.

Wilson (1987) argued that soft-skill problems are the product of poor neighborhoods; a number of our informants argued instead that such skills—and particularly motivation—are endogenous to the workplace and labor market. As a Black human resource official of a Detroit-area insurer expressed it,

> I think business drives the work ethic. . . . If business is lax. . . then people have casual attitudes about their jobs. . . . You are one thing up to the point of entering the business world, but then you are something else. I'm not the same person I was 15 years ago. I had to take on certain thoughts and attitudes whether I liked it or not.

Several others agreed that motivation is more a function of management than of the workforce. When asked about racial differences in the work ethic, a White male manager of contracted public-sector workers mused,

> I think it's how you motivate each group. Two or three years ago, I would have probably said, well, the Black race isn't as motivated as the Oriental or the Hispanic. But I've seen that if you motivate, that you have to motivate each group differently.

A White male public-sector human resource official added that work ethic may vary by job:

> If I take security, or I take the basic labor jobs, I'm not so sure that when they were Caucasian-dominated 20 years ago, that people weren't leaning on a shovel and goldbricking. Many times, the classifications we normally associate with being more lazy or finding ways to avoid work, are the entry-level, lower skilled ones. And now those happen to be dominated by Blacks and to a lesser extent Hispanics right now.

A small number of informants also argued that workers can be trained to relate well to customers. Even a store manager who commented that "it does take a certain kind of person" to be "fast, fun, and friendly," added, "but if you work with a person, I think that you could pretty much [get them to] be fast, fun, and friendly."

The ability of employers to shape work attitudes is strikingly evident in the contrast between two department store distribution warehouses located in the same Latino neighborhood in the Los Angeles area. In one case,

personnel officials complained sarcastically about employees' laziness, their propensity for theft, the presence of "gang bangers" wearing their gang colors, and even the poor personal hygiene of the workforce. Turnover in this warehouse stands at 25%, even after personnel beefed up screening to select more stable employees. In the second warehouse, however, turnover is 2%. Although this warehouse also employs large numbers of present and past gang members, managers have successfully imposed a dress code that bans the wearing of colors. The key to the remarkably low turnover, according to the vice president for human resources, "is simply locating your operation in an area where you don't have an awful lot of competition, and what competition you do have, you meet or exceed all pay and benefits they offer." And indeed, this warehouse pays its entry-level workers from 50 cents to $2.50 more per hour than its competitor. The contrast suggests that efficiency wage models (Akerlof & Yellen, 1986) help to explain worker attitude and effort.

In addition to stereotype and reality, interviewees spoke of cultural gaps between young Black men and their supervisors, coworkers, and customers—especially as an explanation of difficulties in interaction. A Black human resource manager at an insurance company described the problems of cultural translation:

> I think that, as I attend executive meetings, and in many cases, I'm the only Black man there, the cultural diversity and the strangeness that different people bring to one another—oftentimes people aren't prepared to receive what another person may be prepared to offer. And I think that through that lack of communication, a lot of times things are misunderstood. When problems occur, if I work for you and you had a problem with me, you may not know how to approach me and vice versa, I may not know how to approach you.

White respondents also referred to "a difference in understanding," but were more likely to pose it as a failure of the Black men themselves: "[Young Black men] don't present themselves well to the employer, just because they don't know, they don't realize how they're communicating, or not communicating." This conforms with the view, expressed in focus groups by young, inner-city Black and Latino men, that code switching—being able to present oneself and communicate in ways acceptable to majority White culture—is the most important skill needed to find and keep a job (Jobs for the Future, 1995).

A Latina personnel official for a retail chain placed responsibility on both sides of the divide:

> I think [high Black male turnover] has a lot to do with the Black male culture. It's very, very difficult for the White male manager to relate to that. There isn't a lot of understanding. There isn't a lot of nurturing. There isn't a lot of

openness going in either direction. . . . I mean, the way you walk could turn somebody off, could turn a manager off.

She and her boss, a non-Latino White man, had recently been through a management diversity training, and expressed new awareness of these issues:

He: We do a little diversity test on that, how we perceive the Black male to be and how they really are.

She: It's amazing we all have the same, you know, the consensus was right there on the board.

He: We're trying to teach [managers] that it's a very good business decision to do that [hire minorities] because it's going to be a matter of necessity that we attract and retain various minority groups. . . . [Diversity training is] about teaching them to value [the other official's name] as a Hispanic individual and some of the cultural things about that, that she feels most close to. It's going to teach them that [she] may have a different set of values on certain issues than we do, appreciate and understand it.

In short, they claim that appropriate training can help close cultural gaps. On a related note, several auto parts manufacturers averred that the movement toward a team approach and employee involvement has reduced racial tensions by increasing communication among different skill and occupational groups.

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE PRE-EMPLOYMENT INTERVIEW

Most of our respondents identified the pre-employment interview as the most important source of information about a job applicant. The proportion rating the interview most important amounted to 81% of auto parts respondents, 82% of those in retail, 87.5% of those in insurance, and 80% of the small number of public sector units not subject to civil service hiring procedures. In a typical comment, a retail personnel official remarked that in hiring sales staff, "The individual presentation is probably the most important source of information and the most important qualities are their apparent ability to relate to the interviewer and have that extend to relating to customers."

The growing stress on soft skills would lead one to expect growing reliance on the interview to assess these characteristics. Indeed, although we did not specifically ask about it, a few respondents did project an increasingly important role for the interview. The central and potentially growing role of the interview is bad news for Black men, because the interviewing process incorporates racial bias (Stone, Stone, & Dipboye, 1992).

Although some respondents spoke proudly of their ability to assess an applicant via interview, others acknowledged some discomfort with the subjectivity involved. "I hate to say this, but a lot of it is gut feeling," stated the personnel director in an auto parts manufacturer in Detroit. A public sector

human resource official in Los Angeles commented: "Woven into that [the interview assessment] is all of the individual interviewer prejudices, how they see the job, how they evaluate the candidate and how they present it. You cannot get away from that."

In general, public sector agencies place much less emphasis on personal interviews to screen candidates. A major Detroit area local government no longer conducts pre-employment interviews at all, according to an official, because interviews were not really used in hiring decisions and could have been interpreted as discriminatory. He argued that private-sector reliance on the interview is indeed discriminatory:

> The phenomenon [of discrimination] is very much linked up with that compunction [sic] of the private sector with wanting to press the meat before they hire you. There is all kinds of ways that discrimination happens. A lot of it is unconscious. We are past the point where on a mass basis, people are doing overt discrimination intentionally, but we still have it out there. . . . [People] don't examine their practices and question whether the impact of what they do is in fact racist.

CONCLUSIONS

We find that due to competitive pressure, employers are demanding more soft skills, even in low-skill jobs. Soft skills include interaction and motivation, and employers are valuing both more highly. However, many managers perceive Black men as possessing fewer soft skills, along both dimensions. Thus, the same increases in competitive pressure that drive corporate downsizing and restructuring are contributing to widening racial inequality in labor market outcomes.

Employers base their perceptions of Black men on assessments of current or past employees and applicants, as well as interaction outside the workplace, and media images of Blacks. Three factors underlie negative evaluations of Black men as workers: racial stereotypes, cultural differences between employers and young Black men, and actual skill differences. The actual skill differences themselves are in part endogenous to the work situation. Moreover, in a work world characterized by increasing levels of interaction, racially biased attitudes held by customers or coworkers of other racial groups can themselves lead to lower measured productivity—that is, productivity differences can be the direct result of discrimination.

Our findings suggest some potential avenues for improvement of Black men's labor market experience—including both public policy and private, company-level policy. Several types of public policy can affect the demand

for Black male labor. At the macrolevel, policies to reduce unemployment will aid Black men, who stand at the end of hiring queues (Freeman, 1989, 1990). The nearly double-digit unemployment rates in Detroit and Los Angeles at the time of our interviews were reflected in employer use of screening—rather than training—to obtain the worker skills they needed. But when labor markets are tighter, employers cannot be as selective. At the microlevel, affirmative action policies can spur employer efforts to hire Blacks, and minority contracting requirements and assistance for community economic development can help to sustain businesses that are committed to hiring Blacks and other disadvantaged groups.

Public policy can also act on the supply side, through training and support services for young, inner-city Black men. Based on our findings, there should be a high payoff to programs that teach code switching to assist inner-city Blacks in bridging the cultural divide with employers.

Company policies can also affect both demand and supply of labor. Demand-side policies would heighten business receptivity to young, less educated Black men. In this regard, several respondents touted diversity training. Others spoke about the importance of learning to manage in a way that elicits motivation. A number of managers reported that team-based management methods also help resolve difficulties in interaction. Minority contracting by private-sector customers, such as the Big Three automakers, extends beyond the reach of governmental minority contracting. Two Detroit area auto parts manufacturers that are minority contractors expounded to us at length about their efforts to hire and retain Black employees at every level. Employers can also create supply-side impacts by training less skilled Black men, for example, through school-to-work transition programs.

At least two goals can fuel these company-level policies. To some extent, companies undertake them to enhance their public image—a not insubstantial issue in cities like Detroit and Los Angeles, where racial and ethnic conflict shape local politics. But companies also seek to incorporate inner-city Black men—along with other disadvantaged groups—in order to tap a growing workforce that is ignored or underused by many employers (Johnston & Packer, 1987).

In addition, the renewed national policy dialogue on skills offers some potentially positive elements. The 1991 Secretary's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills (SCANS) and subsequent efforts to promote national skill standards (Bailey & Merritt, 1994) have highlighted the importance of soft skills—but they have also emphasized that these are indeed skills that can be learned rather than simply innate qualities. The SCANS report, for example, identified *interpersonal skills* as one of five main competencies. To

the extent that employers accept this view (for which there is considerable evidence; see Capelli, 1995), they may be more willing to train for such skills rather than simply screening for them.

To guide public and company-level policy, additional research is called for, on two tracks.[15] First, additional evidence is needed to corroborate or refute the patterns we identified. Such evidence could emerge from replication of the study on larger, more representative samples (as we are doing now) and from other methodologies (large-scale surveys, focus groups, and other approaches to studying employers and their prospective workers). Second, to the extent that our conclusions are valid, they call out for further exploration of how employer stereotypes are formed and modified, how White employers and Black employees actually differ along cultural dimensions such as values and language, and to what extent worker and/or manager retraining can bridge these gaps. These broader questions call not just for added empirical work, but for a more complete theorization of the role of race in organizations (Ferdman, 1992; Nkomo, 1992). With answers to these questions, we can seek to modify the effects of trends that are otherwise likely to spell growing disadvantage for Black men.

NOTES

1. We chose these cities primarily to conduct research in parallel with household surveys on labor market dynamics and other issues, oversampling communities of color, that have recently been undertaken in these cities (Johnson, Oliver, & Bobo, 1994). Both were cities in recession at the time of the study: over 1991-1992, unemployment averaged 9.1% in the Detroit metropolitan area and 8.8% in Los Angeles.

2. The sample was drawn from the Yellow Pages in each city, business directories, and more idiosyncratic sources such as suggestions from academic, business, community, and union contacts. Because the goal was an initial, small study focused on qualitative findings, we sought variety without requiring statistical reliability. At sampled companies, initial contact was made with the highest-ranking personnel official who had detailed knowledge of the hiring process. Interviews were typically conducted with this person or a deputy. Interviews typically lasted about 1.25 hours, and were taped and transcribed for analysis.

3. Typical occupations discussed within each industry were as follows. Auto parts manufacturing: mainly unskilled and semiskilled machine operators, although relatively skilled machinist jobs were discussed in a small number of cases. Retail clothing: cashier, clerk. Insurance: clerical jobs including data entry, file clerk, and customer service representative (in many companies these jobs were being combined). Public sector: this industry had the most varied set of occupations, including manual blue-collar, service, and clerical jobs.

4. Although the sample included 56 firms, Table 1 reports on 58 sites, because at one retailer, we gathered separate information on store, office, and warehouse sites. Across 49 variables, a mean of 1.8 observations out of the 58 sites had missing values. Most had no missing values; the highest number of missing values was 10. Where proportions are reported in this article, they omit missing values.

5. In another article (Moss & Tilly, 1995b), we reported results of regression analysis on these data.

6. One difficulty is that when employers discussed "speech" or "communication skills," they tended to combine hard skills such as knowledge of grammar with soft skills such as use of affectively or culturally appropriate speech. In this analysis, we counted references to spoken communication skills as soft skills; excluding them does not substantially alter the quantitative or qualitative findings we report.

7. Given small sample sizes, these differences in proportions should be interpreted with some caution.

8. Although soft skills are highly sought, certain soft skills may not be highly rewarded. For instance, England, Herbert, Kilbourne, Reid, and Megdal (1994) reported that occupations involving "nurturance" offered lower wages, even after controlling for gender composition.

9. Reported rises in hard skills and reported rises in soft skills were positively correlated, with $r = 0.24$.

10. Detroit employers viewed soft skills as less important and were less likely to report increases in soft skills than their Los Angeles counterparts. However, these differences were quite small after taking into account the somewhat different industry mixes of the samples in the two metropolitan areas.

11. Possible reasons for this discrepancy include the fact that Osterman limited his sample to firms employing 50 or more, that he coded open-ended responses in a way that excluded multiple types of skill changes, and that the "blue collar" category omits the service and clerical jobs that characterized much of our sample. Of course, it is also quite possible that the industries we sampled are not fully representative of U.S. employment, or that the operations managers surveyed by Osterman have different perceptions of skill changes than the human resource managers we interviewed.

12. We discuss qualitative findings about growing demands for soft skills at more length in Moss and Tilly, 1996.

13. The correlations between variables indicating the importance of soft skills and negative perceptions of Black men were generally small (ranging from 0.01 to 0.25) but positive, with one exception: there was a negative correlation between negative perceptions of Black men other than those related to interaction or motivation, and the placement of soft skills first on the list of the most important qualities for an entry-level job.

14. We did not directly ask employers to state the basis for their perceptions, but as they discussed the perceptions, these patterns emerged.

15. We are indebted to two anonymous referees for suggesting these directions for future research

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