"THAT SINGLE-MOTHER ELEMENT"
How White Employers Typify Black Women

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Many employers assess their workforces with gendered and racialized imagery that can put groups of workers and applicants at a disadvantage in the labor market. Based on 78 interviews with white employers in Atlanta, the author reveals that some employers use a complex but widely shared stereotype of Black working-class women as single mothers to typify members of this group. These employers use this single-mother image to explain why they think Black women are poor workers, why they think Black women are reliable workers, and why they think Blacks are poorly prepared for the labor market. In focusing on these white employers' claims, the author concentrates not on the well-documented outcomes of labor market discrimination, such as differential rates of pay and promotion, but on how employers construct and use the images that may form the basis of it. This is especially relevant amid current attacks on affirmative action programs.

Affirmative action programs in the United States have come under attack recently as many citizens and politicians argue that racial-ethnic minorities now have the same chances of making it as do whites. A Black woman who walks through the door of the human resources department, according to affirmative action foes, has an equal or possibly even better chance of getting the job as the white woman who comes in after her, and they both have the same or better chances as the white man who comes in the next day. According to this argument, any "preferences" for racial-ethnic minorities in employment constitute discrimination against whites.

One of the many important factors that such attacks disregard is that the overwhelming majority of those who make decisions about whom to hire are white. A substantial literature documents that while whites no longer largely subscribe to beliefs that racial-ethnic minorities are inherently inferior to them, whites continue to harbor racist beliefs and make racist decisions largely based on perceived eco-

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nomic threat (Berg 1984; Bobo and Kluegel 1993; Bobo and Suh 1996; Farley et al. 1994; Feagin and Vera 1995; Frankenberg 1993; Sears 1988). In addition, research indicates that both men and women tend to evaluate women lower than men on a number of valued characteristics, even in the absence of evidence to substantiate such evaluations (Eagly and Wood 1982; Reskin 1988). This suggests that chances are, in fact, not equal in the aforementioned employment scenario. Potential and current employees still have to deal with the perceptions of white employers regarding their race and gender, as well as their sexuality, age, religion, class, and ability.

These forms of racism and sexism are less overt than in previous decades, but they still prevail and are arguably even more dangerous than outright slander because they are hidden within the rhetoric of "logic." Most whites in the 1990s vehemently claim that they are not racist or sexist and use a series of rationales, or *sincere fictions*, to explain the decisions they make that are harmful to racial-ethnic minorities and women (Essed 1991; Feagin and Vera 1995; Frankenberg 1993). These rationales are often based on stereotypes.

Researchers who have explored the content of these racist and sexist beliefs have documented how people feel about political matters dealing with race (Bobo and Kluegel 1993; Peffley, Hurwitz, and Sniderman 1997), the awarding of public assistance (Monson 1997), current "racial" events in the media (Feagin and Vera 1995), and integrated housing (Bobo and Zubrinsky 1996). Few studies, however, document the content of opinions held specifically by employers. Existing studies that have investigated this issue (Moss and Tilly 1991, 1995; Neckerman and Kirschenman 1991; Wilson 1996) have primarily focused on employers' views of Black men compared to white men, which has provided a beginning for our understanding of how employers think about race. However, these studies have not considered that employers' views of men are, in fact, also gendered. They have not satisfactorily answered or even asked important questions about how employers' views of Black men may differ from their views of Black women and how these gendered, racialized views contribute to the unique disadvantage of different groups in the labor market.

In this article, I examine the images some white employers use to construct claims about Black women in the labor market.[1] These images are largely stereotypical and can be used negatively. I demonstrate that the dynamics of these white employers' typifications of women and of Blacks differ from their images of Black women, indicating that this group may stand at a unique disadvantage to all other racial and gender groups.

I illustrate how some white employers use a complex but widely shared stereotype of Black working-class women as single mothers to typify members of this group. In somewhat contradictory ways, white employers use this image to explain (1) why they think Black women are poor workers, (2) why they think Black women are reliable workers, and (3) why they think Blacks—women and men—are poorly prepared for the labor market. Their construction of these claims may be based in part on evidence from what they see in their firms, but their views are colored by generalized cultural stereotypes about Black women. Because they may

use these images of a group to predict and assess the behavior of individuals, employers' typification of Black women as single mothers may provide the basis for discrimination.

In focusing on white employers' claims about Black womanhood, I concentrate not on the well-documented outcomes of labor market discrimination, such as differential rates of pay and promotion, but on how employers construct and use the images that may form the basis of it. Because these employers have the power to hire, fire, pay, and promote, their claims can be important for Black women's life chances. While I do not have data to link white employers' images of Black women with their employment decisions regarding members of this group, I argue that the evidence that shows that these images exist is compelling in itself. My analysis is focused on the previously unexplored intricacies of the single-mother image as used by some white employers.

To contextualize this analysis, I first briefly describe the process of stereotyping and its relation to statistical discrimination (Thurow 1975). I then highlight some common stereotypical images of women, Blacks, and Black women, identified in previous research. I draw on in-depth interviews recently conducted in Atlanta to identify and analyze how some white employers typify Black women and how these typifications seem to be based at least in part on stereotypical images. Finally, I analyze how these white employers use these typifications to make at least three claims about Black women, which I argue may provide them with legitimating rationales for discriminatory action.

STEREOTYPES AS THE BASIS FOR CLAIMS

Stereotypes and Statistical Discrimination

Stereotypes can have deleterious effects for employees and potential employees. If employers subscribe to stereotypes, whether they are gross overgeneralizations or derived more closely from evidence, they may use these views about groups of people to predict the behavior of individuals. Economists have identified the process of using characteristics associated with groups as substitutes for information about individuals as "statistical discrimination" (Aigner and Cain 1977; Bielby and Baron 1986; Kirschenman and Neckerman 1991; Moss and Tilly 1991; Thurow 1975). Basow argues that

> even when a generalization is valid (that is, it does describe group averages), we still cannot predict an individual's behavior or characteristics. Stereotypes, because they are more oversimplified and more rigidly held than such generalizations, have even less predictive value. (1986, 3)

Thus, stereotypes are not required to be false. For example, even if employers know that a higher percentage of Black women than white women are single moth-

ers—27.1 percent and 4.5 percent, respectively (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1995)[2]—they may still use this information in a stereotypical way that generates inequality. To assume that each Black woman who applies for an entry-level job at a firm is probably a single mother and make employment decisions based on that assumed status is to stereotype and engage in statistical discrimination.

Another example of how employers may stereotype individuals based on the characteristics associated with the group to which they belong involves women and rates of turnover. "If women have higher turnover rates, and employers know this, then, based on this gender difference in turnover, they may engage in statistical discrimination" (England and Browne 1992, 35) by not hiring women, not paying women as much as men, not promoting women as rapidly as men, or firing women more readily than men. This example indicates that employers assume that "workers will conform to the average performance of others with the same ascriptive characteristics" (Folbre 1994, 21). Yet, the assumptions they make are often not correct; women as a group have turnover rates similar to men when controls for type of job and cohort are introduced (Lynch 1991; Price 1977; Waite and Berryman 1985). Using assumptions, whether erroneous or empirically based, about group characteristics as a proxy for individual productivity is a powerful tool employers use to make decisions about workers.

Stereotypes of Women, Blacks, and Black Women

Black feminists have identified many of the stereotypes about Black women that are prevalent in U.S. culture. These include reliance on welfare, sexual promiscuity, "emasculating" tendencies, and single motherhood (Collins 1990; Davis 1981; Essed 1991; Guy-Sheftall 1990; hooks 1981; Marshall 1996; Mink 1990; Morton 1991; Mullins 1994; Roberts 1994; Sims-Wood 1988; Weitz and Gordon 1993; Wilkinson 1987). Other scholars have identified a similarly negative list of associations with Black men in white U.S. culture: shiftlessness, aloofness, laziness, and involvement with crime, gangs, and drugs (Hacker [1992] 1995; Kirschenman and Neckerman 1991; Majors and Mancini Billson 1992; West 1993; Wilson 1987, 1996).

These negative stereotypes flourish in part because whites in the United States have a history of viewing Blacks "as an undifferentiated mass of people" (Fordham and Ogbu 1986) without individual characteristics or identities. Negative stereotypes of white women as a group are less easy to identify, since white women are less likely than Black women to be seen as a monolithic group and are also less likely to be viewed negatively in this majority-white culture. Identifying negative stereotypes of white men as a group is difficult as well for the same reasons. This is not to say that no negative stereotypes of white men and women exist, but only that such stereotypes that combine whites' gender and race are less common and less all-encompassing than those of Black women and men.

Stereotypes, both negative and positive, influence the thinking and decision making of employers (Berg 1984). For example, employers tend to think about

women in the workforce as mothers (Hochschild 1997). As Sokoloff explains, "Once in the labor market, women—all women—are treated as mothers—former, actual, or potential" (1980, 216-17).[3] The cultural image of motherhood, which is not a stereotypically negative image, can still be used by employers in a negative way. Sokoloff argues that if a woman in the labor force has children,

> The rationalization given is that she will be unreliable because of the need to be absent if her children are sick. This apologia persists despite the fact that male turnover and absenteeism rates are similar to women's, the crucial difference being that women have traditionally left the market for lack of child care and other family services, while men have left a particular job for personal advancement. Men's reasons for leaving are always more acceptable, for men are understood as workers; women, on the other hand, are understood as mothers. (1980, 219)

This demonstrates how employers construct an image of women in the workplace using the stereotypes surrounding motherhood as some of their primary defining characteristics. Men who work outside the home for pay may also be fathers, but no stereotypes prompt employers to fear that men's parental roles threaten their productivity.

Employers' images of women as mothers tend to be a disadvantage to women for at least three reasons. First, the image is used negatively, as employers associate it with a weak commitment to paid work. Second, employers do not readily evoke a fatherhood image for men and assume that men with children are worse workers than men without children.[4] Finally, the assumption that all women workers are plagued by the burdens and responsibilities of motherhood is inaccurate. While a large percentage of women in the paid labor force do have children under the age of 18, 75.3 percent do not (U.S. Department of Commerce 1996).[5] Despite this, employers who assume that women in their workplaces are mothers who are less committed workers than men are allowing this stereotype to influence the way they think about members of their workforces. It follows that such thinking would play a part in the decisions they make about who to hire, fire, promote, and pay better. More precisely, such stereotypical thinking forms the basis for rationales about why members of their workforces should be hired, fired, promoted, or paid better.

In addition to the stereotype of women as mothers who tend to be late to and absent from work, employers evoke racial stereotypes as sincere fictions. Kirschenman and Neckerman (1991) and Wilson (1996) demonstrate how employers subscribe to common stereotypes of Black men as lazy, dishonest, involved with drugs, and lacking a work ethic. Different from the way they take motherhood—a generally positive culture image—and make it negative, employers grab onto the overwhelmingly negative stereotypes that U.S. white culture perpetuates about Black men. Employers are able to list the characteristics they associate with Black men, which they have adopted from the larger racist white culture, and discuss why they feel justified in not hiring Black men because of such characteristics (Kirschenman and Neckerman 1991; Moss and Tilly 1995).

Employers conceivably also evoke racial stereotypes of Black women, although employers' stereotypes of Black women have been given much less scholarly attention than those of Black men. Collins (1990) and Mullins (1994) argue that the image of the matriarch surrounds Black women and relates to their experiences in both the home and the paid labor market. The matriarch, according to Collins (1990, 72), is a single Black working woman with children. The image of the matriarch also carries the connotation of an "overly aggressive, unfeminine" woman who spends "too much time away from home" working. She is "the 'bad' Black mother" who has to work so much that she "cannot properly supervise her children and is a major contributing factor to her children's school failure" (1990, 74). Collins (1990) and Mullins (1994) suggest that this controlling image, sustained by those with the power to define it, is dangerous because it puts the responsibility and blame for the perceived deficiencies in all African Americans, especially men, directly onto Black women. hooks also speaks to the issue of the "sexist/racist representations that would have everyone believe that black women are responsible for the many dilemmas black families are facing. Black women are blamed for poverty, joblessness, black male aggression, and violence both inside and outside the home" (1995, 82-83).

The ways that employers, specifically, use such cultural stereotypes of Black women have not been adequately explored in social scientific work. As suggested in the forward to the book, *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, but Some of Us Are Brave* (Berry 1982), the focus of scholarly work about women in general is often limited to white women, and work about African Americans in general often only scrutinizes the situations of Black men (for criticisms, see Eagly and Kite 1987; hooks 1981; Hull, Bell Scott, and Smith 1982). Black women are merely assumed to be included in one or both of these categories. While there are undoubtedly some aspects of how employers typify women and Blacks in general that are relevant to Black women, the specific ways employers typify this group deserve distinct attention.

METHODS AND DATA

The data I use were collected in Atlanta as part of an extensive project, the Multi-City Study of Urban Inequality.[6] Study design involved three components: interviews of household respondents, a telephone survey of employers, and face-to-face interviews with employers.

The household interviews were conducted with a stratified, random sample of residents in the summer and fall of 1993.[7] Each respondent in the household interviews was asked to name her or his occupation and employer and, if unemployed, the place she or he last worked.[8] The employers for the telephone survey were drawn randomly from a list of employers named by each household respondent who had a job requiring no more than a high school degree.[9] Another random sam-

ple was then drawn from the list of employers who had completed the telephone survey, and these employers were interviewed in person in more depth. The data for this article come from the in-depth, face-to-face interviews with white employers from the metropolitan Atlanta sample.[10]

The employer study was designed to test theories of industrial restructuring and the changing skill needs of employers for "low-skill" workers. Therefore, all of the sample jobs in the employer survey require a high school diploma or less education. Common sample jobs include clerical worker, cashier, and sales representative. The average hourly wage for all jobs combined is $7.93, ranging from $4.25 to $23.08.

Two interviewers, a white woman and a white man, separately conducted face-to-face, structured, in-depth interviews with Atlanta employers in 45 firms from July 1994 to March 1995, obtaining a 75 percent completion rate in the final sample.[11] The interviews were conducted at the employers' places of business, most often in private offices or rooms, and all interviews were tape-recorded with respondents' consent. Interviewers asked a series of questions focusing on employers' skill demands and their perceptions of the available workforce.

Three persons were targeted for interviews in each firm, when possible. These included the president or CEO of each firm, a human resource representative, and the direct supervisor of the job named by the household respondent. Because some firms did not have each of the three targeted positions and some potential respondents in each position declined participation, the average number of interviews per firm is 2.16. Of the 97 interview respondents, 57 percent are white men, 24 percent are white women, 12 percent are Black men, 6 percent are Black women, and 1 percent is Asian women.

Because I am primarily interested in white employers' images of Black women for the current analysis, I use only the interviews of white employers (78 total). Of these, 27 (34.6 percent) white respondents are presidents, CEOs, or related positions; 22 (28.2 percent) are human resource representatives; and 29 (37.2 percent) are supervisors of the sample job. Of the white respondents, 23 (29.5 percent) are women, and 55 (70.5 percent) are men. While it is also important to understand Black employers' images of Black employees, the current data set better allows me to thoroughly analyze white employers' images than to compare those of white and Black employers. Since most employers in the United States are white, the analysis of the ways they typify employees is an important component of understanding labor market dynamics. White women and white men were almost equally likely to express views about Black women employees that reveal their use of negative racial and gender imagery. As the remainder of the article makes clear, however, some of the most explicit examples of this imagery come from white men.

In my analysis of the transcribed interviews, I employed the open, axial, and selective coding strategies laid out by Strauss and Corbin (1990) and the comparative scheme outlined by Ragin (1994). In the initial coding phases, I noted and recorded repetitive themes in employers' descriptions of workers. I found at this stage that the concepts of family and motherhood came up often in white employ-

ers' discussions of women employees and applicants but not as often and in different ways in their discussions of men. In further coding phases where I examined these concepts in different contexts than those I had originally seen, I realized that employers were not simply talking about their men and women employees differently but that they also differentiated between Black and white women employees and applicants. In descriptions of white women, many employers referred to motherhood, but when speaking about Black women, employers invoked the image of single motherhood. I then reexamined the data to explore the prevalence of this image and to search out deviant cases. Selective coding strategies allowed me to focus more specifically on the category of single motherhood and identify the contexts and ways in which it was used.

The systematic expression by some white employers, both within and among firms in the sample, of the image of Black women as single mothers emerged through this coding process, providing a picture of how these white employers typified Black women and how the construction of this image, largely based on stereotypes, may provide the basis for discriminatory behavior against Black women.

Because the Atlanta metropolitan area is 26 percent Black and the city of Atlanta, itself, is 67 percent Black (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1990), some may argue that the high level of contact between whites and Blacks in such an area would work to minimize the stereotyping between groups (Allport 1954). However, housing and jobs are still heavily segregated in the metropolitan area (Hewitt forthcoming; Ihlanfeldt and Young 1996; Robinson 1991), and issues such as transportation and politics continue to be racialized in ways that indicate that racial stereotypes flourish (Rutheiser 1996). Thus, while Atlanta's current and historical racial dynamics make it a unique U.S. city to study, it is important to understand the employment situation of Black workers in a city that considers itself progressive in terms of race (Rutheiser 1996).

Throughout my discussion of the data, I report percentages of employers who typified Black women in particular ways, but it is important to note that these percentages do not necessarily correspond with employers' perceptions in the larger population. These qualitative data reveal white employers' accounts of their workforces and are valuable for their portrayal of the complex, nuanced manner in which race and gender stereotypes color the ostensibly objective processes by which some employers evaluate applicants and employees.

THE TYPIFICATION OF BLACK WOMEN

Many white employers typified Black women as single mothers, an image constructed largely from existing cultural stereotypes and conservative rhetoric rather than from information about particular employees and applicants. To contextualize how these employers used this image, I briefly discuss their perceptions of women and Blacks in general. I then discuss how these white employers' typifications of

Black women are both related to and unique from their images of women (implicitly assumed to be white) and Blacks (implicitly assumed to be men).

Images of Women

As the literature suggests, one of the most pervasive images white employers held is the woman worker as mother, a role that employers often further associated with tardiness and absenteeism. For example, one human resources manager at an insurance company that is composed of almost half men and half women stated,

> If I look at our attendance record I would in fact not doubt that the people who have been documented and who have been terminated for attendance reasons were women, and those people are primarily out not because they're ill, but because kids are ill or the husband is ill or the parent. (White man, human resources manager, insurance company)

This employer indicated that women—not men—had problematic attendance rates and speculated that women had family responsibilities that detracted from their paid work duties so much that they needed to be fired. Constructing an image of women in which their assumed motherhood is a large liability in the labor market, he left little room for the possibility that women may have been absent for reasons other than family or that men may have ever needed to be off the job for family reasons.

In another example, the interviewer asked a supervisor of clerical workers if the company's hiring procedures had changed any in the past few years, to which the supervisor responded,

> Yes, because there's some questions you can't ask when you're interviewing, you know. Years ago you could ask them anything, you know. "Are you pregnant? Do you have children? Do you have someone to keep your children while you are at work? Are your children sick often?" You can't ask those questions anymore. (White woman, supervisor, insurance company)

This supervisor of employees in a woman-dominated occupation clearly defined motherhood as part of womanhood and alluded to the potential problems this conflation can bring to her workforce.

These examples suggest that women's family responsibilities are one of the primary concerns employers had about women workers. Forty-two percent of white employers, without prompting from interviewers, brought up the images of motherhood and family when they talked about women. Employers often made these characterizations of women as mothers without empirical knowledge of their actual family situations. For example, the employer who wanted to know about her women applicants' pregnancies and day care situations was talking about women whom she had not yet even met. White employers' construction of the image of women applicants and workers as mothers, and their concern over the problems that

motherhood entails in their workplaces, has the potential to damage women's chances in the labor market.

Seven white employers, three of whom worked for the same company, brought up the notion of family in conjunction with men. The most common comments these employers made were about men having to monetarily support their families, and just one of these employers indicated that men's familial roles could be problematic. Clearly, many white employers' images of parenthood and the effects of parenthood on paid labor market responsibilities differ along gender lines.

Images of Blacks

White employers in Atlanta characterized Black workers negatively in well over two-thirds of the interviews, with images regarding time, skills, education, laziness, and belligerence. For example, an employment manager at a very large organization made this remark regarding Black employees, who made up 58 percent of the sample job, data entry workers: "I have noticed maybe a slight difference in the perception of time. Tardiness, a certain degree of tardiness seems more acceptable" (White woman, employment manager, educational institution). This is not simply her observation that members of one group work differently than members of another group; it is an evocation of a common stereotype that Blacks are generally late. Throughout the interview, this employment manager also stressed that she only processes employees' applications and does not "deal with them [the employees] directly," which makes her perception about employee norms somewhat suspect. An administrative specialist in the same organization explained why she thought Blacks were not faring well in the labor market:

> It goes back to just education issues, that a lot of Blacks are maybe only getting through high school. And whether it is because of economic issues or whether they just don't have the drive, or y'know, a variety of factors. But they don't pursue, I guess, y'know, being more educated than just being able to get by. (White woman, administrative specialist, educational institution)

This employer subscribed to another stereotype, that of Blacks' laziness and lack of motivation, as one of the primary causes for their lack of advancement in the labor market. In these examples, employers were doing more than simply reporting empirical differences in Black and white workers' levels of productivity. They were invoking stereotypes to make claims that helped them explain the deficiencies they perceive in Blacks. Interestingly, both of these employers said that they had very little day-to-day contact with employees, but both were in the position to make hiring decisions about them.

Many white Atlanta employers also expressed their irritation with what they perceived as Black workers' tendency to complain, cause problems, and cry "Discrimination!" For example, when asked if she noticed any differences between Black and

white workers, one area director for teachers' aides, a job filled only by women, responded,

> The insubordination, and what I would almost say belligerence, is maybe more prevalent in Blacks than in whites. I think my Black employees definitely question much more management than my white employees do. . . . I have more Black employee, Black complaints than any other type of complaints. They love to complain about their manager. . . . They're more likely to call and complain either about their manager or new company policies or procedures or something they've been asked to do. And they're also more likely to say to me that, it's because they're Black. (White woman, area director, child care center)

This employer, one of two white supervisors over a workforce that is 75 percent Black, emphatically expressed her irritation with Black employees' insistence on "bringing race" into every issue. Throughout the rest of the interview, she repeatedly defended the decisions she had made that only Black employees had questioned, which indicated her unwillingness to consider the validity of their concerns. The other supervisor at this organization also commented at length on how she was "constantly getting this racial stuff thrown in my face" (White woman, branch manager, child care center). "It just seems like every time you turn around," she said, "they want to blame things on racial issues." This manager noted that she planned to make some changes in their hiring practices so that they would have "more kind of a 50/50 thing" of white and Black employees as compared to the 25/75 ratio they had at the time of the interview.

Another employer similarly described the workplace as a venue for Black employees to express belligerence. This employer, a branch manager of pest control sales representatives, 78 percent of whom are Black, said this when asked about differences between Black and white workers:

> Well obviously the answer is that Black workers don't work as good as the white workers. I have less trouble out of my white people than my Black. Ninety percent of the problems I have with employees are with the Black employees. . . . The productivity is down. They're harder to manage. They won't come in on time. They come up with silly excuses not to be to work. . . . They come up with all these . . . well, that's the court-goingest people I've ever seen in my life. . . . Like I said, white guys really don't cause me any problem. They do what I tell them to do. The Black guys don't, so I have to write them up on a corrective action report and then the first thing they say to me is, "Why didn't you write so and so up on it? . . . Well you don't reprimand this white guy for doing this? Why did you reprimand me, because I'm Black?" and that kind of thing. (White man, branch manager, pest control service)

This characterization of Black employees who do not work hard, cause trouble, are late, lie, and then "use race" to try to compensate for those things is probably the strongest example from the interviews of white employers using stereotypes to construct a negative image of Blacks. Moreover, this example highlights white employers' resistance to believing that Blacks ever experience racial discrimination. Well

over half of white interview respondents mentioned a tendency for Black employees to "bring race" into all situations, and none of these ever acknowledged the possibility that Black employees do often experience racial discrimination. The construction of this image of Blacks as complainers who indiscriminately "play the race card" works to ensure that Blacks' concerns will not be acknowledged as legitimate (Essed 1991).

Employers hold the power to construct images of groups based on whatever information is available to them. As these examples illustrate, white employers often use negative stereotypes of Blacks to typify this group, which undoubtedly hinders Black workers' chances in the labor market. While white employers' images of Blacks may or may not be partly based on empirical observations, the final example in which the employer paints such a positive portrait of his white employees and a troubling one of Blacks indicates that employers rely heavily on other sources, such as prevalent racist stereotypes, to construct these images.

Images of Black Women

Not separate from some white employers' images of women and Blacks, but still distinct, are their typifications of Black women. Some white employers stereotype women workers as mothers, regardless of the women's actual parental status. Many also typify Black workers as having a number of very negative attributes, such as laziness, poor education, and a tendency to lie. An interesting point about these typifications is that they do not explicitly refer to Black women even though Black women are members of each group. The absence of specific references to Black women in employers' discussions of these two groups led me to look further in the data for those specific references.

One head cashier provided an excellent example of how some employers' perceptions of Black women may be distinctive from their perceptions of women in general (i.e., white women). Regarding the cashiers she supervised, 3 of whom were men and 27 of whom were women, she found that "*Men* are more dependable. . . . They don't have as many emotional problems. They're not as emotional and they're, y'know, they seem to be able to come to work more. . . . Women are a little bit harder to work with" (White woman, head cashier, grocery store). Then, when asked about differences between Black men and Black women specifically, she said, "Between those two . . . I think the *women* are a little bit more dependable. . . . They do most, most of the work." Her perception of Black women was vastly different from the first group of women to enter her mind: white women. This example underscores the need to pay specific attention to the ways employers view Black women.

Almost a quarter of the white respondents (24 percent) explicitly used the single-mother image at some point in their interviews when referring to Black women. An example of an employer using this type of imagery is a superintendent who hired elementary school instructional aides, a job filled solely by women.

> We are pressed to find minority workers in the work force. . . . I think your typical white instructional aide that comes to us has a four-year degree. And [we get] a large number of Black single-parent applicants who are not as skilled . . . not educated. (White man, superintendent for personnel, elementary school)

This respondent talked about white applicants and employees without making any reference to their family situations, yet he said that the Black applicants he gets are unskilled single mothers. This statement reveals the melding of single motherhood with Black women in his claims and a further assumption that single mothers are unskilled and uneducated.

In an additional 12 percent of the interviews, employers linked Black women with single motherhood less explicitly than in the example above. For example, an employer may have talked about the topic of race by referring to differences between workers from the "inner city" and the "suburbs," using these words as code words for Black and white. The employer may have then talked about how it is difficult to find employees in the inner city (meaning among Blacks) because of the high percentage of single mothers there who are on welfare and do not work for pay. Employers in these implicit instances did not always put "Black woman" and "single mother" in the same sentence, but throughout interviews they made the connections.

White employers referred to white women, or women generally, as single mothers in only a handful of interviews, while they made these explicit and implicit associations of Black women and single motherhood in more than one-third of the interviews. In no cases did employers talk about either Black men or white men having sole responsibility for children.

It is important to note that no questions about single motherhood were included on the interview instrument. Employers brought up this imagery on their own, often in conjunction with explicit questions about race.[12] Some of the questions to which responses about single motherhood and Black women frequently came up include the following:

- "What skills and qualities do you look for in a worker for [sample job]?"
- "What are the main problems you face with your workforce, thinking specifically about [sample job]?"
- "We've talked to quite a few other managers who say there are significant differences between black and white workers, and I'm wondering what you think. Have you seen these differences?" (Probe: "We do know from other research that blacks and other minorities are doing badly in the labor market. Why do you think that is?") "Do you see any differences between men and women? City and suburban workers?"

In most cases where white employers used the single-motherhood image to refer to Black women, they used it negatively, as I illustrate in the remainder of this article. However, about 10 percent of white employers who used this image placed it in a positive context, such as how the workplace needs to change to accommodate the needs of single parents. In addition, about 6 percent of all white employers clearly

recognized and renounced racist and sexist practices in the workplace that can be especially damaging to Black women.

Direct supervisors of workers were the least likely to typify Black women as single mothers. About 31 percent of supervisors, 41 percent of human resource representatives, and 41 percent of high-level employers or CEOs brought up single-mother imagery in speaking about Black women.[13] This may be important in speaking to the accuracy of such typifications, since direct supervisors presumably have the most contact with employees, yet they were the least likely to typify Black women this way. Men and women employers were almost equally likely to typify Black women: 35 percent of women and 38 percent of men used the single-mother image. Men were, however, more likely to explicitly use the image.

The single-mother typification is unique to Black women. Employers who expressed this image did not follow one simplified form but made claims about Black women based on three different but related aspects of the single-mother typification: (1) Black women single mothers are poor employees because of their family distractions; (2) Black women single mothers are hard workers, desperate for their paychecks; and (3) Black women single mothers are deficient parents to all dysfunctional Blacks either in the workforce or unemployed. These claims are not mutually exclusive even though they may seem contradictory.

Single Black mothers: late and absent. Single Black mothers, in some white employers' views, are loyal to their children first and their jobs second. About one-quarter (24 percent) of those white employers who typified Black women as single mothers claimed that they were tardy and absent more often than all other workers, including white women, because Black women were assumed to have sole responsibility for their children. One manager of laundry workers, all of whom were Black and three-fourths of whom were women, provided an example of this association when he brought up the idea of family structure. The interviewer had asked him if he was happy with his available workforce, and he said he was not, because of the "family structure" in the inner city. Then he directly related family structure to the job performance of Black women. The interviewer asked him, "Does that have an impact, does family structure have an impact on, on their job performance?" He replied, "I think it's everything. I think it's the major thing that we have here that's a problem." When asked why, he proceeded to say,

> Well, right off the bat you've got a, a child care problem. With a single mother, there's a, a child care problem. Of course obviously there's a big financial problem.... You're gonna have a, experience a higher absenteeism rate and tardiness rate because of the fact that the children obviously are very important and come first and there's a whole set of things that happen where the mother has to be, ah, y'know, off her job for one reason or another. So you have a workforce where it's, it's a high rate of absenteeism. (White man, laundry/valet manager, hotel)

This employer clearly stated that the biggest problem with his workforce was the poor job performance of Black women, whom he could not distinguish from single

mothers. Then the interviewer asked him if he had the same type of problems, like absenteeism, from men. He replied,

> Well, I have. The, I realize that for the most part the men are not tied down with, with the kids. I know that. But yes, we have, have the same type of problems as far as basic work habits and coming to work with the men as we do with the ladies, but it's for a different set of reasons I believe. [Interviewer: Do you have any idea what their reasoning is?] Well I think black male has a very low self-esteem level. (White man, laundry/valet manager, hotel)

This employer, then, said that he observed the same absenteeism problems in men and women. But he stated that the biggest problem in his workforce was not the Black men's absenteeism, which he related to their self-esteem, but Black women's, because of their assumed single-mother family structure. This indicates that even when employers simply state their perception of facts, such as absenteeism rates, they construct claims often using stereotypical images to explain these facts. This process can result in an overwhelmingly negative typification of Black women, which can put individual Black women at a unique disadvantage in the labor market.

Single Black mothers: desperate, thus reliable. Quite different from claiming that Black women are distracted and absent workers, another quarter (24 percent) of employers who typified Black women as single mothers noted how hard working their Black women employees were. However, almost half of these (43 percent) indicated that they did not view this as an admirable quality in members of this group as they might in members of other groups. Some employers attributed Black women's willingness to work hard to what they perceived as a desperate need for the money they made. Most of these women, these white employers implied, were just one step from being what Collins (1990) calls the "welfare mother," another highly devalued identity under attack in white U.S. culture. For example, one employer of Black and white women, in talking about his Black employees in comparison to white, said that

> the number of single parents in the inner city obviously is a much higher percentage. Those people absolutely have got to have income. They are supporting a family with one person running the household. From an ethic standpoint though, I would tell you it is more of a need-to-work situation than it is a real true work ethic. (White man, vice president for merchandising, grocery store)

Here, even when this employer gave Black women, whom he assumed were single mothers, the credit for working hard, he simultaneously devalued their work involvement because they lacked the appropriate type of work ethic.

It is possible that employers would want to hire Black women more than members of other groups based on this image of the desperate single mother (Kirschenman 1991). This stereotype, then, could theoretically put Black women at an advan-

tage in the labor market. However, not one employer specifically said that he or she would rather hire single mothers than any other group. The stereotype of the desperate single mother is more likely to put Black women at a disadvantage, available for exploitation because of their perceived need for their jobs.

Single Black mothers: the root of Black problems. When asked why they believed Blacks may be doing poorly in the labor market, many white employers asserted that Blacks lack certain necessary elements, such as education and morality. Employers often speculated that these perceived deficiencies were the result of being raised by single mothers. While it is true that a larger percentage of Black children are raised by single mothers—54.2 percent compared to 17.9 percent of white children (Bennett 1995)—it is unlikely that white employers who made this claim about Black workers actually knew which Black workers were and were not raised by women heads of household, and that they were able to directly compare levels of labor market success with family type.

About 55 percent of white employers who typified Black women as single mothers brought up this image in the context of poor mothering skills. Yet, this third and most commonly used image of Black women, the mothers of the Black workforce, reveals a striking paradox that affects Black women not only as the mothers but also as workers. Half of the employers who made claims about the poor mothering skills of Black single mothers also said that Black single mothers are poor workers because they are off work too often attending to their children's needs. Regardless of what these employers actually knew about these women's lives and responsibilities at home, they made judgments about Black women's adequacy in their public and private roles based on the stereotypes associated with Black single motherhood. Weitz and Gordon refer to Merton's (1957) description of "how ethnic groups can be 'damned if they do and damned if they don't': condemned as pushy or sly when they succeed despite discrimination and as lazy or stupid when they do not" (1993, 33). These white employers' simultaneous characterizations of Black women as bad workers and bad mothers reveals a similar logic.

An example of the paradox in which Black women are seen as both poor workers and poor mothers comes from a plant manager of 70 percent Black and 30 percent white women order processors. He talked about "single families," "single-parent families," and "single-parent moms" interchangeably. He also talked about space and race in a related way, using the terms "inner city," and "Black" as proxies for one another, and he spoke about single mothers only in the context of the problems of the inner city. When asked to identify the single biggest problem with his workers, he replied, "I'd say single-parent moms. [Interviewer: Why?] Missing work.... When somebody's sick they've got to go." This comment, within the context of his discussion of the deficiencies in the inner city, identifies Black single mothers as the weakest part of his workforce because of their family responsibilities. Paradoxically, he also talked about Black single mothers as poor parents.

> The people that I want, it would be hard to get those people to come downtown. And when we get into the inner city, in my opinion, work values change because you're talking about people that are primarily raised in a single family. Very poor environment, don't have a role model that shows them that work is good, that you should do your very best and a good job no matter where it is or who it's for. (White man, plant manager, manufacturing plant)

Continuing to contrast Black and white employees, this employer said,

> Well, I have if you're talking about, and I kind of touched on this a while ago, if you're talking about, I think there's a higher percentage chance that if you go in the inner city that a Black person is going to come from a single-parent home where there has not been any values taught or work ethic. But where, and I've got several out here, where a Black person has come from what I call a, quote, normal home, there is no difference at all. . . . I think that the chances that a Black person that's living in suburbia, the chances that he's coming from a normal home is greater. And therefore he's, he has the basic values that you want in a person. (White man, plant manager, manufacturing plant)

This employer unabashedly placed the lack of values and work ethic he perceived in his Black employees on the shoulders of single mothers. He simultaneously judged Black women the worst part of his workforce and the worst kind of parent. Even while admitting that Black women work hard, employers do not believe that these women—in the absence of a man—could provide the example of a "good work ethic." There seem to be few means by which Black women employees can balance work and family in a way that these employers find acceptable.

The lack of nurturing and lack of education Black men receive was a recurrent theme in the interviews, and employers typically attributed these negative characteristics to the failings of single mothers rather than to other factors, such as the underfunding of school systems to which voters limit tax dollars. One regional insurance company vice president, in speaking about why Black men have not fared well in the workforce, said,

> I think when you find a large number of those people are unemployed, I think either they don't want to be employed or they don't have the . . . they're not educated. And that could come from family background or lack of nurturing. Single-parent families could come into that because education might not be as strong. . . . As in large numbers, maybe you have more single-parent families in minority communities that don't put an emphasis on education.[14] (White man, regional vice president, insurance company)

With similar themes to those I describe above, more than half of white employers noted that Blacks grow up in homes where there is no emphasis placed on education, a large reliance on welfare, no role models (i.e., *fathers* who work), and no mothers around to care for the children. To these employers, the work involvement of the single mother is not seen as a useful role model for her children, especially not for boys. This evidence indicates that in no small measure, Black women in the

entry-level labor force must face the image of themselves as distracted, desperate, uneducated, unmarried women who are just one step away from welfare and whose deficient parenting abilities generate many of the perceived inadequacies of Black workers generally.

CONCLUSION

More than one-third of white employers in this sample from Atlanta either explicitly or implicitly spoke about Black women in terms of single motherhood. Encompassed in this typification of Black women are claims about their tendency to be tardy and absent because of child care responsibilities, their desperation for a paycheck, and their poor mothering skills. The images these white employers used to describe Black women applicants and employees were largely negative and often seemed to be based on stereotypes. These stereotypes, when used to typify Black women as a group, can provide the basis for statistical discrimination against individual Black women.

The articulation of these typifications of Black women is an expression of white employers' power. Employers are in the position to define Black women in terms of single motherhood and use that image, if needed, as a rationale for maintaining the segregated and stratified workplaces that perpetuate the status quo, with white men at the top. Collins describes the use of images such as these in this way:

> As part of a generalized ideology of domination, these controlling images of Black womanhood take on special meaning because the authority to define these symbols is a major instrument of power. In order to exercise power, elite white men and their representatives must be in a position to manipulate appropriate symbols concerning Black women. (1990, 67)

Stereotypes of Black women as single mothers, because of cultural assumptions about single motherhood as an inherently negative state, can make the positive characteristics of individual Black women (and of single mothers) invisible. It is likely that these stereotypes are also shaped by class, since professional Black women may be less susceptible than Black women in entry-level positions to employers' assumptions about their need for money, their responsibilities outside work, and their values. White employers' creation of claims about racial, gender, and class groups, such as entry-level Black women, seems less about assessing the actual characteristics of individuals in those groups than it is about maintaining inequality. No matter what characteristics one-third of white employers in this sample used to assess Black women, the resulting typification was overwhelmingly negative, leaving Black women with few acceptable alternatives of action.

However, employers who use stereotypes to typify groups probably do not consider themselves racist, sexist, or classist. As Frankenberg (1993) and Feagin and Vera (1995) point out, whites ironically tend to use stereotypes to absolve them-

selves of responsibility in perpetuating a racist society. They use sincere fictions (Feagin and Vera 1995), which are individual-level reproductions of societal-level mythologies about women and racial-ethnic minorities, to justify their attitudes toward members of these groups. Because these attitudes about women and racial-ethnic minorities are seen as sensible instead of racist or sexist, the power of employers who use sincere fictions as a basis for their views is even more extreme because it is likely to be sanctioned in society.

Why did some white employers typify Black women as single mothers while other white employers did not? This has no easy answer. Considering that interviewers asked no questions about single motherhood, it seems important that the image came up with the frequency that it did. Thus, questioning why some employers did not bring up this image seems, in some ways, misguided. However, if we are to better understand these employers and these typifications, it is important to isolate the conditions under which the typifications did and did not emerge.

The white employers who did not typify Black women as single mothers often used guarded and carefully chosen language in answering any questions about race. "Let me see, how should I phrase this" was a typical qualifier. Any attempt to glean racial attitudes from whites also produces difficulties in determining whether those who assert egalitarian views really espouse those views or whether they merely do not want interviewers to view them as racist. A number of platitudes, such as "I don't even see race," "I look at each individual," and "People are people," came up among both white employers who did and those who did not typify Black women as single mothers, which alludes to the rhetorical character of such responses.

Other white employers, throughout their interviews, seemed genuinely concerned about avoiding the types of stereotyping I have described.

> I don't think it is fair to make, ah, judgments on blacks in general based on the 10 or 12 that work for me, or whites in general based on the 10 or 12 that work for me. I, I don't think you can do that. I don't think that's fair to either one of them. (White man, supervisor of order processors, manufacturing company)

Employers in this group gave considered and thoughtful responses to questions about race, the wording of which indicated that they may have received diversity training at their workplaces. Indeed, many of these employers came from larger corporations where such training would not be unusual. These white employers had clearly integrated this sort of thinking into their larger attitudes about the labor force, and the consistency of their responses throughout their interviews indicated that they were not simply concerned with appearing politically correct. The success of diversity training programs may only be anecdotal, however, since other white employers in the same companies did make overtly negative claims about Blacks in general.

Some white employers did not have any Black women working for them and did not bring them up at all in questions about the labor force. While some of the white employers who typified Black women as single mothers had very few Black

women employees, none of these employers simply had no Black women employees. This may be looked at positively because if single-mother typifications were coming from white employers with no Black women in their workforces, this may constitute evidence that these typifications are preventing employers from hiring Black women. Fortunately, this is not the case.

Quite different from having no Black women employees, some employers who did not typify Black women as single mothers indicated that they knew information about their Black women workers' lives that contradicted the single-mother stereotype. One mentioned that their company recently lost a Black woman clerical worker because she got married and moved away. Another noted that the husband of one of her Black day care workers came to work to see her sometimes. Some others spoke of older Black women in their workforces.

Finally, white employers who did not typify Black women as single mothers tended to be direct supervisors: 69 percent of direct supervisors compared to 59 percent of both human resource representatives and high-level employers or CEOs did not subscribe to this imagery. The most striking industrial difference between employers who did and did not typify Black women as single mothers is in manufacturing: 19 manufacturing employers did not typify Black women this way, while 2 did. Women (35 percent) used this imagery to about the same degree as men (38 percent).

The white employers who evoked the single-mother image were most often trying to explain why things were the way they were in their workplaces rather than simply reporting which workers were single mothers and which were not. They were evoking this image of single motherhood as a tool they could use to understand their workplaces. In their explanations, or claims, single motherhood is a salient issue that affects their workforces in at least the three ways I describe above. While these interview data do not allow me to verify the accuracy of these claims, they do allow me to better understand the complex way that some white employers construct explanations for what happens in their workplaces. It is possible that some of these explanations were based on white employers' experiences with one, two, or many Black women. It seems more probable, however, given the prevalence and negativity of the single-mother stereotype for Black women in the larger U.S. culture, combined with evidence suggesting that employers with less direct contact with Black women were more likely to characterize them as single mothers, that these explanations are based on stereotypes. Using stereotypes to construct claims about workers is part of the power employers have over that workforce, not only because this practice may form the basis for discriminatory action but also because it works to perpetuate the stereotypes themselves. As long as whites dominate positions of power and authority in companies, some significant proportion will continue to play a large part in defining Black womanhood for members of the larger culture. These data provide evidence that the ways some white employers define Black womanhood are overwhelmingly negative.

If these white employers' claims have any basis in fact, then companies employing workers with no more than a high school education have many acceptable alter-

natives for action. They may implement child care facilities at low cost to their employees to minimize workers' "distractions." Companies may also pay workers a living wage so that "desperation" for their paychecks does not leave workers in precarious working situations. In addition, companies may invest in the educational systems that train their labor pools.

If employers' claims about Black women as single mothers are, in fact, erroneous and based on stereotypes, as other research would suggest (Browne and Kennelly 1999), the current legislative and judicial trend to roll back affirmative action programs is clearly problematic. Affirmative action programs attempt to counteract the prejudicial attitudes that factor into hiring, firing, promotion, and wage rate decisions, and I have identified the ways that such prejudicial attitudes may lurk within the everyday practices of organizational life. The ways some white employers typify Black women indicates the continuing need for this legal deterrent to acting on such typifications.

Knowing the content of white employers' stereotypes is important in counteracting them. This evidence indicates that some white employers do not see all racial and gender groups equally. These white employers often see Black women as single mothers, and while single motherhood is not inherently negative, the image is confounded in conservative rhetoric that white employers can use in a negative way. Attacks on affirmative action have ignored the fact that whites continue to be in most positions of power in the labor market and that at least some of these employers do harbor racist, sexist views that can disadvantage Black women.

NOTES

1. I purposely use the term *Black* rather than *African American* because I am focusing on white employers' images of members of this racial group. Since the Black persons to whom I refer were not able to report their own race, and the possibility exists that they may have origins other than Africa, I avoid using the term *African American* throughout the text.

2. These numbers only reflect women ages 15 to 44 in the population since data are not available for older groups. Also, these are percentages of never-married mothers and do not reflect divorced or separated women with children (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1995).

3. Although employers assume that their women employees are mothers, they have been very reluctant to restructure their workplaces in ways that would allow parents to better balance their home and paid labor market duties (Hochschild 1997).

4. If anything, employers who have taken men's fatherhood into account have historically used it in a positive way for men, as a rationale to pay men a "family wage" (Gerson 1993; Hartmann 1976).

5. This is not to suggest that workplaces do not need to undergo major structural changes to accommodate the needs of parents in the workforce. It is simply to say that employers who assume that women are mothers are incorrect, and since this assumption can disadvantage individual women, it is problematic.

6. This study was also conducted in Boston, Detroit, and Los Angeles.

7. In the Atlanta Metropolitan Area, 1,529 interviews were completed, 829 with Black residents, 651 with white residents, and 49 with residents of other races, reflecting an overall completion rate of 75 percent. This represents an oversampling of Black and low-income households.

8. Before drawing the sample for the employer telephone surveys from this list of firms, the researchers eliminated any firms named by household respondents who reported having jobs that required

more than a high school education. They also dropped firms where the respondent's occupation was only a "negligible proportion of the firm's workforce—for example, a custodian in an insurance company" (Kirschenman, Moss, and Tilly 1992, 18). The sample for the employer telephone survey was then drawn from the remaining firms named.

9. In the summer of 1994, 269 employer telephone surveys were completed, with a completion rate of 60 percent.

10. The counties included in the Atlanta Metropolitan Area include Clayton, Cobb, DeKalb, Douglas, Fayette, Fulton, Gwinett, Henry, and Rockdale. Before drawing this final sample, firms that had been named by household respondents and contacted for the telephone survey were stratified into nine categories (cells) by occupation (service with public contact, service without public contact, and blue collar or manual) and by whether the firm had gone through either a change in location, technology, or work organization. Following the precedent set by Kirschenman and Neckerman (1991), the firms were stratified by these three occupational categories to isolate different occupational groups. Change in location, technology, or work organization was used as a stratifying variable because of Multi-City Study of Urban Inequality researchers' hypotheses that part of the increase in employers' requirements for skills is due to changing composition of firms (Kirschenman, Moss, and Tilly, 1992).

11. The researchers, Sherry Lee and Tuck Bartholomew, initially sent letters to the highest ranking person in each firm, introducing the project as a study of workforce issues of entry-level workers in Atlanta. The interviewers then called employers, beginning with the first ones in each category, to set up appointments for interviews. If the highest ranking person refused, the interviewers asked to speak to other levels of employers in the organization, which often resulted in completed interviews in those firms. The 75 percent completion rate reflects the firms at which interviews were completed out of the total firms contacted in each cell.

12. In two interviews, the interviewer did bring up the term *single mother* even though it was not included on the interview instrument. The interviewer noticed that parts of these two employers' accounts seemed to contain allusions to single mothers, which prompted her to ask for confirmation. In one case, this was confirmed; the employer had been talking about single mothers without using the term. In the other case, the interviewer's hunch was not confirmed. Since I am primarily concerned in this project with how employers, themselves, bring up this image, I do not count these two cases among those in which white employers typified Black women in terms of single motherhood.

13. These percentages reflect the number of employers in this sample who used this imagery, but it is not possible to conduct statistical tests to verify the differences between these groups.

14. This employer, as some others did, used the term *single-parent families* instead of the more explicit term *single-mother families*. Instead of concluding that they used this term to refer to either single fathers or single mothers, within the context of their discussions I find it more reasonable that they used the popular term *single parent* to mean *single mother.* In 1994, 85.7 percent of all Black and non-Hispanic white single parents were women (Bennett 1995). In addition to this, instances of employers bringing up family matters such as day care when talking about male employees were so rare, and instances of their talking about women and children simultaneously were so common, I conclude that the term *single parent* was a code for single mothers, not fathers.

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