

SAMUEL COHN

Race,
Gender,
and
DISCRIMINATION
at
Work

Foundations of Social Inquiry



Race and Gender Discrimination at Work



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*To Mark Fossett,
who convinced me to study race in the first place,
and to Chris Williams,
who reminded me that integrated theories
of discrimination matter*



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1

Has the Problem of Discrimination Gone Away?

This book is about race and gender discrimination at work. It is a grim subject. It is not grim because discrimination is awful (although discrimination, when it exists, *is* awful). The subject is grim because most discussions of discrimination, both conservative and liberal, are pretty tedious. This is a debate with a large amount of posturing and hot air. Most people have already made up their minds about this topic *before* they study it. Either people think discrimination is an important force in U.S. society or they don't. Once they have decided this matter, they have their speeches written and ready to give, and they don't want to hear much about material from the other side.

If you are a committed leftist or feminist, you see the world in terms of the victimization of the weak by the strong. The world is filled with gross inequalities that are the results of predation by the powerful. The poor are poor because of exploitation by the rich; blacks are poor because of discrimination by whites; women are poor because of the sexism of men.

If you are a committed conservative, you see the world in terms of bureaucratic obstacles to meritocracy. The world is full of nonperformers who use special pleadings to keep the talented and energetic from getting their just rewards. The government taxes the successful so that it can write checks to the less enterprising. Minorities seek set-asides so that they don't have to compete with majority members with better test scores and greater abilities. Women seek reverse discrimination lawsuits to counterweight their own lack of commitment to the labor force and to cloud the legitimate accomplishments of men.

Because people have made up their minds about these issues already, they prefer to ignore facts that are inconsistent with their own

preconceived views. There are plenty of these facts to deal with. Race and gender in the United States are subjects that have been studied exhaustively. With these studies have come statistics that may be dry but that have a story to tell. They fit some aspects of the liberal's story, some aspects of the conservative's story, and some aspects of nobody's story. The statistics that fit nobody's story are the most interesting, because they suggest that what is going on in the workplace is not what most people expect.

If there is going to be a good-faith discussion of race and sex in the workplace, it has to be done with the facts; it has to be done with the numbers. Statistics are the ultimate honesty test. You can't just take one isolated example of blatant discrimination or blatant abuse of affirmative action and wave it around in the air as if this is what happens every day all the time. What happens every day all the time is what is measured in census statistics. Census statistics are numbers that count what happens to the population as a whole. Interesting stories occur, but it is important to know what is a "typical" horrible situation, what is "exceptional," and therefore not worth making a big fuss over.

Occasionally, national statistics do not speak to a critical issue. Then we are forced to go to the anecdotes, to the stories of what happens to particular people in particular firms. Even here, however, a little scientific discipline can depoliticize a discussion and allow for more careful consideration of the facts. There are a lot of good quantitative studies that allow one to carefully test liberal, conservative and neutral accounts of what is happening to men and women in specific companies. These studies suffer from not being economy-wide, but they gain by being able to rule out particular scenarios at particular times and places. To know that no discrimination occurred at Company X, or that at Company Y discrimination was severe against blacks but only when certain conditions occurred, helps frame a larger discussion. We can try to do as many studies of this sort as we can, collect the results from various companies, and see if the pieces of the mosaic we can find suggest what the larger picture may look like.

The studies presented here suggest that discrimination exists. It does not always take the form that many orthodox feminists and liberals claim. It does not occur for the reasons most people think it does. Discrimination is often absent from many places where it is supposed to be pervasive. Everyone knows that stereotypes about women and blacks are often false. Stereotypes about stereotyping are also false, however, and these need correction as well.

The story presented here is not the standard account of discrimination. The book provides statistics in lavish and copious detail because statistics are the only cure available for preconceptions. Most readers

will probably finish the book with the same political persuasions they began with. However, if liberals can now argue a liberal position in a manner consistent with the facts, and conservatives can argue a conservative position in a manner consistent with the facts, then the book will have served its purpose.

Some Introductory Definitions

Few things in the world are more boring than definitions. However, on controversial topics in which inflammatory language is common, developing a common agreed-upon language can take the sting and insult out of “buzzwords” and allow for calmer, more consensual discussion.

Ascriptive Status is a feature that one is born with. Gender, race, and ethnicity—and in some cases, religion and sexual preference—are attributes one can be born with.

Inequality is the unequal allocation of benefits. We normally study inequality among groups with different ascriptive statuses, although any subgroups can be studied in this way. Any benefit can be distributed unequally; people differ in their access to social status, leisure, relationships, and power. However, the most obvious unequally distributed resources are economic: income, jobs, and wages. Income is the total revenue that people receive. This includes salaries, bank interest, dividends, capital gains, lottery winnings, gifts, and other more obscure sources of funds. We care about income because how much money people have determines the general quality of their lives. The largest component of most people's income is wages. This book will spend a lot of time discussing the determinants of inequality in wages—and employment matters as well, because anyone without a job has earnings of zero. Therefore this book gives a lot of attention to differences in who does or does not have a job and why.

Establishing racial or gender inequality in income or employment says nothing about the causes of this inequality. It also says nothing about the social desirability of this inequality. In a hypothetical society where French people earn all the money and Germans earn none, it could be that none of the Germans wants to work and everybody's happy. The mere presence of inequality says nothing about sexism, racism, or any other underlying social property. What causes inequality in each case has to be assessed individually.

Discrimination is the provision of unequal benefits to people of different ascriptive statuses despite identical qualifications and merit. Race and gender inequality may or may not be caused by discrimination. Whether or not discrimination is occurring in a given setting is an enormously political question for which social scientists are expected to

have defensible answers. Many of the debates about discrimination are arguments over whether hidden qualification and merit considerations explain away differences that superficially look discriminatory. These debates can become impassioned. Other arguments explore *why* discrimination exists, if it does exist. There is legitimate disagreement about these issues as well.

Prejudice is an attitude of hostility held by members of one ascriptive group towards members of another. Prejudice and discrimination are not the same. Prejudice involves what people think; discrimination involves what they do. One is attitude; the other is behavior. Prejudice is measured with social surveys. There are a number of fairly reliable indices that can be used to measure people's feelings about other social groups. Discrimination is measured with economic behavior. Who is hired? How much are they paid? Are there "neutral" qualification factors to account for these differences?

It is possible, even common, for people with very prejudiced attitudes to engage in very little discrimination. It is also possible for people who always think and speak in egalitarian terms to discriminate substantially in their economic actions.

Note as well that it is not at all obvious that discrimination is caused by prejudice, or that changing levels of prejudice will affect levels of discrimination. *Discrimination is affected by differences in levels of prejudice and by differences in people's ability to act on prejudiced beliefs.*

Imagine a Ku Klux Klansman as an employer in an isolated all-black town. He may despise African Americans, but if he wants to hire someone, he may have no choice but to hire a black. This is an extreme example but illustrates an important theme of this book. Economic and social realities often prevent prejudiced people from acting in a prejudiced way, or encourage nonprejudiced people to engage in active discrimination.

One can only understand the racial and gendered dynamics of workplaces by understanding not only the attitudes of individual workers and employers, but also the realistic constraints they are operating under that limit their freedom of action. Sometimes these constraints are political; sometimes they are legal. Sometimes they are narrowly sociological.

However, often as not, in a profit-maximizing organization, the factors that provide the most crippling constraints are economic. Market realities are an overriding fact of life in corporations. Rising international competition and corporate reorganizations have made profitability and rational response to financial pressure a key component of modern organizational life.

One cannot study discrimination just as a psychological process, or as a cultural process, or as ethnic identity, or as childhood socialization. These things are important, but one has to come to terms with the hard,

cold economic realities that managers and workers face when they make decisions about staffing and remuneration. Supervisors are making calculations about their bottom lines at the same time they are implementing policies that may have profound impacts on men and women, blacks and whites. The policies are not implemented in a race-blind or gender-blind vacuum. However, understanding the interactions between market pressures, organizational realities, and race and gender roles becomes the key to explaining whether or not discrimination will occur and who will benefit from changing patterns of inequality within the corporation.

Recent Trends in Inequality

The first question one should ask in any study of racial or gender inequality is, "Is there any?" There is no sense in reading a whole book on a phenomenon that doesn't exist. Most readers would be willing to grant that some sort of racial and gender inequality exists without poring over tables of social statistics.

However, an intelligent conservative could argue, "Sure, race and gender discrimination exist, but they are steadily diminishing. There may have been massive inequalities in the 1950s and 1960s. However, these were based on attitudes that have long since disappeared. It is no longer socially acceptable to manifest the crude forms of prejudice that used to exist at an earlier time, and nowadays people behave themselves. Elaborate discussions of racism and sexism only increase the divisions between groups when these differences are quietly being resolved on their own. Why study the problems of the sixties with the rhetoric of the sixties when today these things no longer apply?"

Such an argument becomes even more cogent in the light of policy debates. In a world where racial and sexual inequality are declining rapidly, the case can be made for the weakening or even the elimination of antidiscrimination programs (such as affirmative action) because the problems these policies were designed to solve are largely disappearing from view. However, if levels of race and gender inequality today were the same as those found in the 1940s, one could hardly claim these problems are evaporating, and the case for continuing antidiscrimination programs would be more convincing.¹

Racial Inequality

One of the reasons why for so much debate over how much racial inequality exists in the United States is that different statistics show different things. The issue is not that quantitative data are all screwed up and that

anybody can make anything look like anything by cooking numbers. Actually, the statistics are relatively consistent and hard to manipulate. The issue is that some aspects of American life show persistent discrimination and some show extraordinary reductions in discrimination. There has been progress on some fronts but not on others.

If you want to make the strongest possible case for the existence of discrimination, consider employment and unemployment statistics. No numbers look quite as bad as employment and unemployment figures.

Table 1.1 shows the employment rates for the U.S. male civilian population over the age of 16 by race. The employment rate is the ratio of people with jobs to the general population. The left column shows the white male employment rate, the middle column shows the black male rate, and the right column shows the difference. Note that the racial employment gap for 1997 is virtually identical to the gap that existed in 1950. Racial inequality in job holding has not changed one bit. From an employment standpoint, it is almost as if the Civil Rights Movement had not happened. Note that from 1950 to 1980, the gap actually got worse rather than better. This surprises many liberals, because the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s include the years of the Civil Rights Movement, the years of the inner city riots of the late 1960s, and the years in which the federal government was strongly committed to racial progress and the elimination of inequality. Reynolds Farley (1996) presents detailed historical data on the black-white employment gap showing that not really

TABLE 1.1 Employment Rates for the U.S. Male Civilian Population over the Age of 16 by Race

	<i>White</i>	<i>Black</i>	<i>Gap</i> (W-B)
1950	77.6	73.0	4.6
1960	79.4	73.5	5.9
1970	76.8	69.7	7.1
1980	73.4	60.4	13.0
1990	73.2	61.8	11.4
1997	76.7	72.2	4.5

SOURCES: 1950: Census of Population. 1955–90 White and Black: Economic Report to the President 1996. 1997: Bureau of Labor Statistics Website. Black figures for 1955–70 are adjustments to published statistics for nonwhites. See Technical Appendix for details.

until 1988 was there any significant reduction in racial inequality in job holding. Even the improvements of the Bush-Clinton years only brought the gap back to that of the 1950s, hardly a period associated with glorious equal opportunity for all.

Note as well that white employment ratios changed only slightly during this period. All the fluctuation comes from black employment rates, which vary significantly. Farley's statistics strongly suggest that the driving force here is the national economy. When the economy was bad, as it was in the 1970s and early 1980s, blacks are particularly likely to be unemployed. Although whites suffer from recessions too, they experience far less job loss than do blacks. African Americans tend to bear the full brunt of downturns in the national economy, while whites are relatively cushioned. It appears that whites were preferred employees and blacks were less preferred. When the economy is strong enough to absorb everybody, both blacks and whites find jobs. When the economy is weak, the preferred workers are kept, and the less preferred workers are discarded, exacerbating racial differences in overall employment.

Table 1.2 shows estimates of unemployment rates rather than employment rates. Unemployment rates are the ratio of people looking for work but not finding any to all people participating in the labor force. This is not the same as the opposite of employment, because there is a third category, not in the labor force: people not looking for work, and therefore not working at all.

TABLE 1.2 Unemployment Rates for the U.S. Male Civilian Population over the Age of 16 by Race

	<i>White</i>	<i>Black</i>	<i>Gap</i> (W-B)
1950	4.7	8.5	3.8
1960	4.8	10.3	5.5
1970	4.0	6.5	2.5
1980	6.1	14.5	8.5
1990	4.8	11.8	7.0
1997	2.5	5.0	2.5

SOURCES: 1950: Census of Population. 1955-90 White and Black: Economic Report to the President 1996. 1997: Bureau of Labor Statistics Website. Black figures for 1955-70 are adjustments to published statistics for nonwhites. See Technical Appendix for details.

Unemployment rates still show significant racial disparities, but the differences are not as bad as those observed for employment rates. Like the employment situation, unemployment rates show no consistent trend towards improvement. Some decades show a reduction in gaps; others show gaps becoming intensified. Nevertheless, about one third of the 1950 gap in unemployment between blacks and whites has been eliminated, a reduction that is nontrivial. However, note that in 1990, not so long ago, the gap was almost twice that of 1950, and that this rate jumps around a lot. There is thus no guarantee that we are on any steady path towards progress, even though current indicators are not bad.

Why do such similar indicators as employment and unemployment show such different results? Cotton (1989) argues that one of the reasons the black unemployment indicator has declined is that obstacles to black employment are so high in some places that blacks become discouraged workers and drop out of the labor force. They stop looking for work, not because they are lazy but because there are no jobs for them. This removes them from the denominator of the fraction unemployed/looking for work, and therefore the unemployment rate improves. As a result, he argues, the unemployment statistics are practically worthless, and that instead employment statistics should be used. These numbers have a straightforward meaning: what percent of the population is holding jobs.

Cotton's complaints would seem to be like whining about a lobster dinner. After all, what can be bad about unemployment statistics going down? Unfortunately, his arguments have some merit. Later on, we present data from a study in Chicago (Tienda and Stier 1991) that shows a large percentage of the population really does fall into this category of discouraged worker, making the interpretation of unemployment rates quite ambiguous. The employment rates therefore come closer to the truth of what is actually happening to the job market for blacks and whites.²

That said, for the reader who adores unemployment statistics and does not want to give them up, the best that can be said from these is that race gaps are going up and down in a wild and somewhat random way, with no consistent trends towards improvement. If one accepts the tale of the employment statistics, there has been racial progress in the 1990s. However, these merely counteracted losses that occurred in the previous forty years. Overall since midcentury, no significant improvement in total black job holding or in black job holding relative to white job holding has occurred.

The story is less gloomy when income statistics are considered. Here real racial progress has occurred.

Table 1.3 shows the ratio of black male mean annual earnings to white male mean annual earnings from 1950 to 1997. In 1950, blacks earned slightly more than half the amount whites earned. In 1997, they earned slightly less than three-quarters the amount whites earned. This improvement from 53 percent of parity to 73 percent of parity is significant. Note as well there is a more or less consistent trend for the income gap to shrink over time. Progress has been stalled since 1980, but nevertheless, there is no period in which there has been a significant deterioration in black income relative to white. This is in contrast to employment statistics where such deterioration is relatively common.

Of course, the presence of racial inequality in income does not guarantee that discrimination is occurring. It could be that these differences stem from "legitimate" factors. For example, if blacks worked fewer hours than whites, they would earn less money. Working less could reflect discrimination in the job market. However, some conservatives might say it reflects lack of job skills or welfare dependency. Regardless of what caused the working less, working less by itself is a reasonable cause for lower earnings. Furthermore, blacks may have less education, and thus be less qualified for high-paying jobs. One could certainly not blame an employer for paying skilled workers a higher wage and unskilled workers a lower wage. On top of that, blacks may live in parts of the country that have a lower cost of living than that of predominately white areas. Because prices in the South are generally lower than those in the North, and blacks are more likely to live in the South than are whites, this could cause part of the income differential.

Farley (1985) investigated these factors, and all of them contribute in some way to the racial income gap. Using these factors, he was able to

TABLE 1.3 Black Median Annual Earnings as a Percentage of White Median Annual Earnings: U.S. Males

1950	53%
1960	58%
1970	64%
1980	73%
1990	72%
1997	73%

SOURCES: 1950–1990 Farley (1996). 1997: United States Statistical Abstract (1998).

make two-thirds of the racial gap in earnings disappear. After adjusting for hours worked, education and region, the 1979 black-white earnings ratio was 91 percent rather than 73 percent. 91 percent is a much less serious gap than 73 percent. However, a 9 percent shortfall is still noticeable. If you were in a job where someone else with the same qualifications as you working the same hours as you was earning 9 or 10 percent more than you, you would complain and rightfully so. If there is any income discrimination at all, it appears in this remaining gap. These gaps are small and shrinking but they are real.

There is one other piece of bad news to report. Farley (1996) repeated his analysis with 1989 rather than 1979 data. He found that when one adjusted for education, region, and other statistical controls, the "residual" black-white earning gap (the gap that could not be explained by nondiscriminatory factors) increased between 1989 and 1979. The component of earnings inequality that could not be explained by neutral factors such as education or hours worked increased over the course of the 1980s by about 20 percent. Overall, income differentials are declining, a trend that may be the result of improving black education and increased entry by blacks into high-status professional occupations. The statistics suggest, however, that it is not obvious that blacks and whites receive comparable treatment once they enter these high-status occupations.

The area where the most racial progress has been made is education. Educational gaps between blacks and whites have practically disappeared. Table 1.4 shows the median years of education completed by black and white males over the age of 25 between 1950 and 1997. In 1950, there was a sizable difference between the races. The average white male had a three-year educational advantage over the average black male. The average black man had less than a seventh-grade education. Such lack of education would truly have disqualified many African Americans from high-status occupations. Whites had just less than a tenth-grade education, but the difference between grade nine and grade six is substantial.

By 1997, these differences had vanished. Both blacks and whites had more than twelve years of education. They were separated by only 0.4 years. Over 85 percent of the racial gap in education had been eliminated! This is a remarkable turnaround. Note as well that the progress here has been relatively steady. Every decade except the 1980s produced improvement, and even the 1980s produced no harm.

The story gets a little more complicated when one considers high school and college graduation rates separately. The greatest progress has been made in high school graduation, where the two races in 1997 are practically equal. College graduation rates still show some racial differentials, due in part to blacks being less likely to attend college in the

TABLE 1.4 Median Years of Education Completed by U.S. Males Age 25 and over by Race

	<i>White</i>	<i>Black</i>	<i>Gap</i> (W-B)
1950	9.8	6.8	3.0
1960	10.9	8.2	2.7
1970	12.1	9.8	2.3
1980	12.5	12.0	0.5
1990	13.0	12.5	0.5
1995	13.1	12.7	0.4

SOURCES: 1950: Census of Population. 1955–90 White and Black: Economic Report to the President 1996. 1997: Current Population Survey, January 1997, from Ferret Website. Black figures for 1955–70 are adjustments to published statistics for nonwhites. See Technical Appendix for details.

first place. However, despite some adverse trends in the 1980s, college graduation differences between the races are declining as well (Hacker 1995). The few significant racial differences in the percentage of adults without a high school diploma or GED are especially notable. Because the lack of a high school diploma is an extremely serious barrier to employment, the creation of equal high school graduation rates means that there is no longer an educational deficit among African Americans that forces membership in the underclass; African Americans are no longer incapable of qualifying for a respectable blue collar job.

Some individuals, both liberals and conservatives, are still convinced that differences in skills between the races continue to exist. Liberals might argue that school funding is unequally distributed. If whites go to lavish well-financed schools and blacks attend underfunded schools with inadequate resources and teachers, then blacks will still have a skills deficit even after graduation because their schools taught them less. Conservatives might make a related case, arguing that blacks have been the beneficiaries of social promotions and school systems that are reluctant to impose standards on lower-class children who pose disciplinary problems. It is also sometimes argued that blacks are more likely to come from households headed by single females and where financial pressures, social psychological stress, and reduced parental capacity to monitor children lead to lower motivation and performance in school (Garfinkel and McClanahan 1986).

Some of these arguments may have merit. However, even if there was once a skills deficit between blacks and whites, it is shrinking quickly. This shows up most conspicuously in test scores.

Table 1.5 shows trends in test scores for 17-year-olds from 1975–1990. The figures in Table 1.5 are National Assessment of Educational Progress scores for reading, math, and science. For all years, there was a gap in test scores between blacks and whites in every subject that was examined. However, what is dramatic is how fast that gap is closing. Between 1975 and 1990, 44 percent of the racial gap in both reading and math disappeared. That nearly half the differences between blacks and whites in test scores could be made to go away in fifteen years is remarkable. Improvements in science scores have not been as pronounced, but differences in scientific aptitude are decreasing as well.

Thus, the argument that blacks suffer from a human capital deficit relative to whites is becoming increasingly invalid. Such an argument may have had some credibility in the 1940s and 1950s when Jim Crow laws and segregated schools produced high rates of black illiteracy. However, contemporary conditions are different. Some of this improvement can probably be linked to increased social mobility among African Americans. Educational attainment is strongly related to the social class of one's parents. Upper-class parents, both black and white, pressure their children to do well in school. Lower-class parents, both black and white, tend to have lower educational aspirations for their children. A garage mechanic who always got Cs in school will not think it is the worst thing in the world if their son also gets Cs and becomes an auto mechanic just

TABLE 1.5 Trends in Racial Differences in National Assessment of Educational Progress Test Scores for 17-Year-Olds 1975–90

	<i>Reading</i>	<i>Math</i>	<i>Science</i>
Gap 1975 (In Points)	52.4	37.5	57.5
Gap 1990 (In Points)	29.3	21.0	47.9
Percent of Gap Eliminated	44%	44%	17%

SOURCE: Bernstein (1995).