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# Men's mobility into management from blue collar and white collar jobs: Race differences across the early work-career

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## ABSTRACT

Within the context of the “particularistic mobility thesis” we examine racial differences in the incidence, and determinants of, as well as timing to, mobility into management across the critical early career years at a refined level, namely, when groups share similar white collar and blue collar jobs. Findings from a Panel Study of Income Dynamics sample of men support theory and indicate that from both job levels a racial hierarchy exists: African Americans have the lowest rate of mobility, reach management through a route that is relatively formal and structured by a traditional range of stratification-based causal factors and take longest to reach management. Whites, in contrast, have the highest mobility rate, reach management through a relatively informal path that is less structured by traditional stratification-based factors, and reach management the quickest, and, across all three issues Latinos occupy an intermediate ground between African Americans and Latinos. Further, as predicted by theory, racial differences, particularly, relative to whites, are greater among those tracked from blue collar jobs than white collar jobs. Discussed are implications of the findings for understanding racial disadvantage in the American labor market across the work-career and on an inter-generational basis.

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## 1. Introduction

In the last fifteen years, sociologists have begun to document that racial inequities pervade men's race-based mobility into coveted managerial positions (for a review see [Huffman and Cohen, 2007](#)). To date, these inequities are best revealed when individuals are compared at the most refined level undertaken in existing studies, namely, among those working in the same occupational category ([Huffman and Cohen, 2007](#); [Wilson et al., 1999](#); [Smith, 2005](#); [Maume, 1999](#)). When compared at this level, African Americans emerge as most disadvantaged, having the lowest mobility rate and experiencing a discriminatorily-induced formal route to achieving mobility, i.e., “loading up” on human capital such as education and tenure with present employer as a prerequisite to reaching management ([Smith, 2005, 2002](#)). In contrast, Whites are most advantaged, enjoying the highest mobility rates and have more options to reach management, utilizing either the formal route or an informal one based on social networks ([Wilson et al., 1999](#)), while Latinos experience mobility rates and a degree of formality in the route to reaching management that is intermediate between African American and Whites ([Smith, 2005](#)).

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Our understanding of racial inequality in men's prospects for mobility into management, nevertheless, remains incomplete. First, studies have failed to compare groups on bases that are more refined than at the occupational level. Occupations are comprised of aggregations of jobs which display significant variation in workplace roles and accompanying rewards and status (Kalleberg, 2010; Wilson and Roscigno, 2010). Comparisons of those in substantially similar jobs, in contrast, constitute about as "level a playing field" as can be obtained in stratification research (Tomaskovic-Devey and Skaggs, 1999; Smith, 2005). Indeed, incumbents in similar jobs, "tend to perform similar work tasks and activities performed in a work role" (Bridges and Villemez, 1994:32) and share a similar stratification-relevant profile, consisting of similar skill sets deriving from common accumulations of pre-work human capital, e.g. education, as well as licensure/certifications, and levels of on-the-job skill acquisition (Featherman and Hauser, 1977). Along these lines, when mobility analyses are conducted simultaneously at different levels of the hierarchical job structure – for example, from traditional "blue collar" and "white collar" jobs – a nuanced account of the importance of race in explaining prospects for mobility into managerial positions is produced (Wilson et al., 1999). Specifically, it captures the effects of causal factors such as individual and institutional discrimination as well as equal employment protections that vary across the hierarchical job structure (Kalleberg 2009; Bridges and Villemez 1994).

Second, studies have failed to adopt a "work-career" perspective, i.e. examining how mobility dynamics unfold at distinct stages of the work career. In fact, sociological research has documented that workplace experiences at one phase of the career—the early years – is a "stratification table-setter" (Setterston and Mayer 1992). In the context of mobility, findings from gender-based studies indicate that movement across the early career stage better predicts occupational placement at later career stages than, for example, on-the-job skill acquisition and tenure with employer (Moen et al., 1992; DiPrete and Soule 1988). Both race- and gender-based studies reach a similar conclusion in the context of earnings: differences in early career wages are a crucial predictor of racial gaps across the remainder of the work career (Marini 1997; Thomas et al., 1994). These findings, overall, provide a firm basis for maintaining that examining mobility prospects at an early career stage provides a unique opportunity to gauge the root causes of socioeconomic trajectories: this examination isolates the initial impact of traditional "supply side" and "demand side" individual, background, and structural factors as well as those that are situational/contextual in nature such as cohort effects, historical context, and age-graded transitions in the early adult lifespan (Setterston and Mayer, 1992; Marini, 1997) that have medium- and long-term consequences.

Third, studies have not examined crucial "stratification aspects of mobility" including, the timing to reaching managerial positions. The timing of mobility it determines the amount of time one enjoys the material and symbolic benefits from incumbency in a privileged position. These rewards are far ranging, for example, longer periods of time in management increase the probability of moving up in reward-relevant authority hierarchies at the management level (Wilson and McBrier 2005). In addition, longer periods of time in management create advantages in the ability to assist significant others, for example, amassing the material resources and social capital related to informational and personnel networks that can facilitate opportunities for one's children (Setterston and Mayer, 1992; Tomaskovic-Devey and Stainback, 2007).

This study addresses these limitations in prior sociological research. It uses data from The Panel Study of Income Dynamics (PSID) to examine the merits of a theoretical perspective which maintains that across the early career years race structures the rate of mobility (incidence), the process by which mobility unfolds (determinants), and the speed at which mobility takes place (timing), into managerial positions when African American, Latino, and White men are tracked from similar white collar jobs and blue collar jobs. This analysis should yield new and important insights into the depth of racial inequality in mobility prospects and, more broadly, racial stratification in the contemporary American labor market.

## 2. The particularistic mobility thesis

### 2.1. The basics

The "particularistic mobility thesis" maintains that across the early career years there are race-specific prospects for mobility into management when tracked from similar white collar and blue collar jobs. This perspective distills studies with a structural and social psychological bent over the last several decades regarding the race-based recruitment and promotion practices of managers and executives primarily within White owned and managed workplaces (e.g. Pettigrew 1985; Dobbin 2009; Smith 2012; Smith, 2005; Smith, 2002; Sheriden 1997; Hite 2007; Baldi and McBrier, 1998; Powell and Butterfield 1994; Roscigno 2007; Federal Glass Ceiling Commission 1995; Tsui and O'Reilly, 1989; Smith and Elliott 2002; Wilson et al., 1999; Maume 1999; Castilla, 2008; Park and Sandefur 2003; Mundra et al., 1995; Tomkiewitz and Brenner, 1996). Overall, encompassing case studies, treatises, and survey-based analyses, approximately one-fourth of the studies comprising this perspective reference, but do not explicitly examine early career dynamics or conduct job-level analyses.

The particularistic mobility thesis maintains that race-based promotion practices regarding similarly situated workers across the early-career years cannot be understood apart from the workplace environment in which they are embedded. First, they unfold in an environment governed by an avowed ideology of meritocracy whose tenets are consonant with "modern racism" (Pettigrew 1985) and, thus, assumes an institutional and ostensibly non-racial character. Accordingly, the dynamics that render minorities disadvantaged in mobility prospects on a basis that is devoid of the traditional ill-will and blatant discriminatory intent associated with "Jim Crow" racism (Smith, 2005; Tomaskovic-Devey and Stainback,

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