FACTORS AFFECTING THE UPWARD MOBILITY OF BLACK MANAGERS IN PRIVATE SECTOR ORGANIZATIONS

Stella M. Nkomo and Taylor Cox, Jr.

Compared to the 1970s blacks made less progress in moving into the managerial occupational category in the private sector during the 1980s decade. This study utilized a model of intrafirm mobility to examine the factors affecting the upward mobility of black managers in private sector organizations. Results indicated that line position experience, company seniority, mentor assistance, organization size, and the rate of job vacancies were the best predictors of management promotions. Implications of these findings for the economic prosperity of the black community are discussed.

Many researchers would agree that black Americans have made some progress in moving into the managerial occupational category in the private sector. According to the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, the number of blacks holding jobs classified as "managers and officials" increased 135 percent between 1972 and 1982, to 174,003. Farley and Allen in a comparative study of the occupational distribution of whites and nonwhites using 1980 census data found that between 1970 and 1980 the number of black men holding executive, administrative, or managerial jobs rose 8 percent each year compared to 3.5 percent for white men. For black women the rate was 13.6 percent each year compared to 10 percent for white women. However, blacks made less progress in moving into managerial jobs in the 1980s compared to the 1970s. Recent figures indicate a total of 189,012 (4.9 percent) blacks in the managerial job category in 1987 in firms required to report annually to the EEOC. In percentage terms black males represent 2.9 percent of officials and managers while black women represent 2 percent of the total number.
In addition to the slowing of the entry of blacks into managerial jobs, many black managers in the private sector fear they have little chance of ascending to the upper levels of corporations. These fears are supported by a 1985 survey of the nation's 1,000 largest companies by Korn/Ferry International which found only four black senior executives, one more than the search firm found in 1979. Irons and Moore in their study of black managers in the banking industry found that eight out of ten black managers in their sample felt their chances of promotion were not as good as those of their white peers. Recent articles in the nonacademic press report that many black managers, frustrated with their limited upward movement in corporations, have abandoned their positions to start their own businesses.

The experience of blacks attempting to integrate mainstream economic institutions of the United States has implications for the racial integration and economic prosperity of blacks in the larger society. First, some economists have argued that blacks must acquire marketable skills and seek opportunities in the private sector as a means of economic progress. Not only is this goal important in terms of individual economic gains but there are also major ramifications for the employment status of black Americans as a group. Gaining upward mobility in corporations will help place blacks in key decision-making positions. In the long-term this should have a positive effect on private sector employment practices and create greater opportunities for minority employees. Second, the cohort of blacks who are entering corporations represent middle class blacks who have educational and sociocultural histories that most closely parallel those of white Americans. This similarity should facilitate their integration into white-majority institutions and sets them up as role models for other blacks aspiring to achieve economic success. It is important to all blacks that the experience of this cohort be closely monitored and results be communicated through published accounts. Such information can provide important input for guidance to political, educational, and business leaders interested in developing strategies for the long-term economic achievement of the black community.

To date much of the research on the limited upward mobility of blacks has utilized general macro-level attainment models to explain race gaps in occupational distribution. We argue that to understand the upward mobility of black managers in the private sector it is important to understand what factors affect their promotion opportunities after entry. The passage of Title VII of the Civil Rights of 1964 generally resulted in greater scrutiny and monitoring of employer personnel decisions at the job can-