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White women and affirmative action in employment in six southern cities

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Abstract

The purpose of this research is to examine data from 167 randomly selected businesses on the impact of affirmative action and white female employment in six representative Florida cities. OLS regression analysis was used to explore the independent effects of affirmative action among other employment-related predictors. While white women are doing relatively well in the job market, employer support for affirmative action has no significant influence on their employment, even at higher job levels.

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1. Introduction

In the attempt to help women deal with employment barriers and create greater equity in the job market, the federal government enacted legislation to prohibit sex discrimination and provide greater job opportunities for women. Affirmative action was one of these government programs, and while its focus has primarily been on African Americans, white women are also included in this controversial policy. However, there have been few empirical studies exploring the extent to which affirmative action affects white females either in getting jobs or gaining promotion. The purpose of this study is to investigate this possible policy impact, and to do so in the South where traditional gender-role norms are still prevalent and blacks are perceived as the most disadvantaged group in the job market.

Since the 1970s, affirmative action has required employers to seek out and give preference to women and minorities in occupations where they are under-represented. The effects of affirmative action on white women's success in the job market are difficult to assess because the period

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of implementation of affirmative action in the 1970s and 1980s coincided with the rapid increase of women in the labor force (Reskin, 1998). Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, white women's progress in the labor market and increased earnings seemed to be due to better education and more work experience, factors unrelated to affirmative action (O'Neill & O'Neill, 2000).

The popular assumption is that white women have been the primary beneficiaries of affirmative action. The basis for this argument is the assertion that because white women are the best educated among disadvantaged groups, employers have been more likely to hire them under affirmative action guidelines. Evidence for this is the substantial gains women have made in the job market since the late 1970s, including in high-level management positions and in the professions of law and medicine (Hartmann, 1996). Furthermore, a major survey of employers in four major cities indicated that firms with affirmative action policies were 15% more likely to have hired white women, even controlling for other factors that affected hiring decisions (Holzer & Neumark, 1999).

Other social scientists take a less sanguine view of the role of affirmative action. Affirmative action has become such a controversial and politically divisive policy that it is no longer able to secure the public support necessary to be effective (Sniderman & Piazza, 1993). These political forces have resulted in a lack of enforcement and a backlog of cases for federal enforcement agencies that have severely limited the influence of affirmative action policy (Schiller, 2001). Moreover, Loury (1996) contends that there is much less sex discrimination today, due mainly to the 1964 Civil Rights Act and other legislation, so that women can achieve employment without government assistance.

2. Explanatory variables

It is important to look at affirmative action in the context of other employment-related factors. Larger businesses (SIZE), as measured by number of employees, are more likely to hire disadvantaged groups than small businesses (Brown, Hamilton, & Medoff, 1990; Holzer, 1996). Large firms pay higher wages and benefits and, therefore, attract more applicants. National and regional-affiliated businesses attract and employ more minorities than do locally owned firms (TYPE). National or regional firms express a greater visibility and concern for the importance of diversity, as well as a larger fear of lawsuits and negative press coverage if women are refused employment (Huffman, 1999). Additionally, the KIND of business may impact the employment of white women. Industries, retail stores, and restaurants are relatively open to the public and more committed to a diverse work force than traditionally segregated businesses like financial institutions (banks, real estate, insurance) and private recreational businesses (bowling alleys and country clubs) (Button, 1989). The LOCATION of businesses, in terms of proximity to black and other minority neighborhoods, may expose white women to added competition for jobs (Moss & Tilly, 2001). Businesses with many white female customers (FMCUSTOM) are also more likely to hire and promote white women in order to improve social interactions and thereby boost female business (Lee, 1998).

More formal METHODS of recruitment, including newspaper ads and employment services, may favor white women and other minorities because they reduce potential employer prejudices (Cherry, 2001). White women and minority employers often evaluate white female

applicants favorably in terms of social, or interpersonal, skills and therefore see them as especially qualified for employment in a service-oriented job market. Moreover, these “soft” skills are employee TRAITS that are often preferred over formal credentials or “hard” skills (Moss & Tilly, 2001). To measure affirmative action policies, we asked employers “Do you personally support affirmative action as a policy to give preferences to blacks and females in hiring and promotion?” and scored their responses on a 3-point scale (0 = no; 1 = yes, somewhat; 2 = yes, a lot) (SUPPAA).

Finally, the supply side of the labor market is important as well. Larger proportions of white females as job applicants, as well as greater numbers of females in managerial positions, provide a boost to the employment of women (Holzer, 1996). However, employer perceptions that some women are not well qualified, perhaps due to increases in applicants who are recent welfare recipients with little education, may hinder females (NFMQUAL). Another demographic factor effecting white female jobholding in the South is the possible competition with African Americans (% BLK EMP) vying for employment (McClain & Tauber, 1998).

3. Methodology

This study is composed of six Florida cities. The cities are relatively small (average population size of 27,732 with a range from 7,000 to 64,000) and thus typical in size to most southern cities (Scher, 1997). We randomly selected a variety (in terms of size and function) of businesses from a combination of Chamber of Commerce and Yellow Page telephone book listings. The kinds and numbers of private establishments chosen were restaurants (39), industrial or manufacturing firms (23), financial businesses (banks, insurance, real estate, car dealers) (20), motels and apartment complexes (30), retail stores (43), and recreational establishments (bowling alleys and country clubs) (12). The total sample size was 167 with city size determining the apportionment of businesses by community. For each business we personally interviewed the primary person charged with hiring and promotion decisions. A letter of support from the local mayor encouraged participation, and business refusal rates averaged a relatively low number of three per city, for a high 88% overall response rate.

4. Results

White women compete well in the job markets of these communities. Indeed, white women hold a higher percentage of jobs overall (37%) than any other race/gender group, although white males (33%) and African Americans (26%) are not far behind. Hispanics are a small proportion of the population in these cities (4%) and therefore hold relatively few jobs. The figure for white women in our sample of businesses is only slightly higher than the 2000 U.S. Census reports for these cities which show 31% of the labor force (age 16 and over) is composed of white women.

White men dominate higher-level professional and managerial positions (49%), with white women holding 35% of these jobs. Blacks are a distant third, with only 14% employed at

Table 1
Regression estimates of white female employment in private sector

	Total percent white females	Percent white females, professional	Percent white females, skilled	Percent white females, unskilled
SIZE	1.23 (1.26)	2.49 (1.88)	4.32*** (1.55)	-3.27 (2.67)
TYPE	.695 (1.95)	1.04 (2.91)	2.19 (2.38)	1.11 (4.44)
LOCATION	-2.78 (3.27)	.296 (4.88)	-.535 (4.013)	4.24 (7.95)
% FEM APP	.425*** (.060)	.259*** (.090)	.386*** (.076)	.410*** (.128)
% BLK EMP	-.566*** (.061)	-.431*** (.091)	-.531*** (.074)	-.494*** (.160)
MGR	3.66 (3.14)	24.3*** (4.69)	-2.21 (3.88)	-5.52 (6.93)
KIND	7.38** (3.49)	.317 (5.21)	12.9*** (4.31)	-16.7* (9.16)
FMCUSTOM	-.042 (.079)	.082 (.118)	-.125 (.096)	-.238 (.207)
METHODS	-.041 (2.43)	.158 (3.62)	-3.05 (3.03)	6.99 (5.74)
SUPPAA	-.636 (2.48)	-6.34 (3.71)	-3.20 (3.01)	10.1 (7.71)
NFMQUAL	-6.91*** (2.56)	-8.50** (3.83)	-8.97*** (3.23)	-.856 (5.50)
TRAITS	-3.29 (2.32)	2.63 (3.46)	-3.45 (2.88)	-3.44 (6.06)
CONSTANT	32.2*** (6.86)	22.4** (10.2)	33.20*** (8.45)	.209 (15.7)
F	14.90***	5.99***	10.12***	3.21***
R ²	.544	.323	.458	.458
N	163	163	156	58

Source: In-depth interviews with employers from businesses in six Florida cities. Notes: Coefficients are derived using OLS regression. Standard errors in parentheses. The sample size for each city has been weighted to control for variations in number of businesses across all cities.

*** $p < .01$.

** $p < .05$.

* $p < .10$.

this high level despite blacks making up 38% of the labor force. At the skilled/semi-skilled level of employment, white women constitute 36%, slightly higher than white men (32%) and blacks (28%). At the lower job echelons of unskilled/mental laborers, such as motel housekeepers, restaurant dishwashers, and other manual laborers, white women number 25%. Blacks dominate this job category (41%), as they have historically in the South.

To explore the relationship between the various independent variables, including the measure of affirmative action, and the proportion of white women among employees, we utilized OLS regression procedures. Analyses were performed for total white female employment for all businesses as well as for the proportion of women at each occupational level: professional/managerial, skilled/semi-skilled, and mental/unskilled (Table 1).

The results indicate that the percentage of job applicants who are white women is the variable most highly and directly related to the level of female employment at all job levels. The results show that the greater the application efforts by white women to secure jobs, the more likely they are to be hired since they are perceived by most employers as good workers. Another factor that is consistently and strongly related to white female employment is the kind of business. This variable shows a positive relationship for employment at all levels except for professional/managerial jobs. This indicates that retail stores, restaurants and industries are most likely to employ white women, and this is the case for most employment levels. The most surprising finding is the high, negative relationships between black and white female employment. In every model this finding is apparent. Clearly there is intense job competition

between these two disadvantaged groups. Moreover, 21% of employers claimed that there was a lack of qualified white females to hire, a finding that significantly reduced female employment.

Our main interest here is the role of affirmative action. The results indicate that affirmative action was not significantly related to any level of white female employment when controlling for other variables. Similarly, even simple bivariate correlations between the measure of affirmative action and white female employment range from $-.03$ to $-.13$, very low and statistically insignificant correlations. Clearly affirmative action has no impact on women's employment status.

5. Conclusions

White women do very well in the private job market of these southern cities. Indeed, they outnumber white men and African Americans in the new service-oriented economy. Only at the higher levels of employment do white men continue to dominate the labor market. In terms of explanatory factors, white female job applicants, and the kinds of businesses are resource and contextual variables that are highly related to white female employment. A barrier to such employment, however, is the view by some employers that there is a lack of qualified white female applicants.

A more serious limitation for white women's employability is competition with African Americans. In the South, this finding is not surprising since blacks make up a relatively large proportion of the population and labor force. While blacks are disproportionately found at lower skill levels than white women, blacks compete with women at the professional/managerial level as well. Affirmative action is one factor that has assisted African Americans in job competition with women. A previous study supports this finding in that employer support for affirmative action had a positive, significant relationship with black employment, particularly at higher job levels (Button & Rienzo, 2003).

So why haven't white women been helped by affirmative action? The success of white female workers suggests they need no help. White women, compared with most blacks and Latinos, have greater education credentials and higher levels of required job skills, both of which make them more qualified in today's job market. Moreover, the emphasis of affirmative action historically has been on blacks more so than white women. The Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC), the primary federal enforcement agency for affirmative action, has not perceived that sex discrimination is its primary mission, especially in the South. Furthermore, affirmative action as a policy was conceived during the 1960s civil rights movement and was originally intended to create greater opportunities for blacks (Leiter & Leiter, 2002). Even following the Reagan Administration's weakened enforcement of affirmative action, there was still greater attention by EEOC to race rather than sex discrimination in employment. Finally, employers associate affirmative action primarily with blacks. Our interviews with business owners and managers indicated this, and other studies have shown this to be true as well (Leiter & Leiter, 2002; Skrentny, 2001). Thus while affirmative action may not be affecting white female laborers, white women have nonetheless proved successful in gaining jobs and influencing changes in the workplace that benefit all women.

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