

THE PARADOXES OF DIVERSITY: RACE, CLASS, AND
GENDER RELATIONS IN A FEDERAL BUREAUCRACY

by

LINDA B. BENBOW

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Sociology in partial
fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy,
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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Sociology in satisfaction of the Dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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Abstract

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by

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This qualitative study analyzes the perspective of urban postal workers regarding their experiences in a diverse workplace. It will describe the social relations of workers and shows how race, gender, and class are implicated in those relationships. The research design involves in-depth interviews, participant-observation, and analysis of postal and postal union literature. The theoretical framework undergirding this research is multidimensional; theories of diversity in the workplace will be incorporated with race, class, and gender theories. The premise of this research is that diversity problems are rooted in the organizational structure. Power differences are inherent in hierarchically arranged bureaucratic settings and traditionally white male dominated organizations, which are under a process of workforce diversification, are resistant to cultural change.

In these organizations, structural differences in power and access to social resources work their way out in social diversity conflicts. These differences are exacerbated because the organization is paradoxically diverse. That is, the organization is diverse at the national level but is highly segregated by race, class, and gender in local urban areas contributing to elements of occupational integration, tokenism (Kanter, 1977), and resegregation (Reskin & Roos, 1990). This organizational context contributes

to the “paradoxes of diversity” which is a theoretical framework developed in this study to examine employee perceptions of inter and intra-group relations within an urban postal facility. This study adds to our knowledge of diversity in organizations by examining employee relations in a post-civil rights workplace. It represents a shift from the single ingroup-outgroup dimension to a sociological focus on understanding how job structures and employee perceptions have implications for workplace diversity.

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PART ONE: INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Overview of the Problem

In light of demographic changes in the American population, coupled with civil rights legislation and affirmative action programs, an increasing number of women and racial minorities have gained access to positions in organizations that were previously held by white male workers. The employment of women and racial/ethnic minorities in the public work force has grown considerably in the past 20 years and projections have suggested that such growth can be expected to continue into the immediate future (Johnston, et al, 1988). Since the publication of Workforce 2000 by the Hudson Institute, (Johnston & Packer, 1987) which projected these changes, there has been a rising preoccupation with managing cultural diversity (Sanchez & Brock, 1996:1). However, research has found that very few companies in the United States are managing multicultural workforces effectively. A survey of 1,405 companies indicated that only 70 thought they were doing a “very good job” managing diversity (Iverson, 2000:13).

Over the last century, the United States Postal Service (USPS), with nearly 800,000 employees nationwide, has become one of the largest and most diverse workforces in the United States. Since the 1964 Civil Rights Act, which forbids discrimination based on race and gender, the Postal Service has become an attractive work setting for those groups, minorities and women, who have been historically disadvantaged in the workplace. As a result, racial-ethnic groups and women have captured a greater share of federal government employment (Cornwell & Kellough, 1994:4). The federal government, in the post-civil rights era, is the largest employer of

African-Americans (Waldinger, 1996; Hacker, 1992:111; & Jaynes & Williams, 1989:244). In comparison to their predecessors, research has found that black workers who entered the service during the 1980s are less likely to be degree holders, are younger, and have less prior work experience (Zwerling & Silver, 1992:652). Latinos and Asians are still underrepresented in postal positions but their numbers are also growing, particularly in urban areas of the country where they tend to live. Women represented approximately 52 percent of the clerk craft and 76 percent of transitional employees during the late 1990s. It has been projected that they will become the majority of postal clerks during the 21st century (APWU, “The Changing Postal Workforce,” 1996).

Given the level of diversification of its workforce, the USPS is a model setting to examine the successes, failures, and continuing struggles of managing a culturally diversity workforce. *Vis-à-vis* the private sector, the inclusion of African-Americans, Asians, Latinos, and women in the Service is a notable achievement, which contributes, in part, to the belief that blacks and women have experienced unprecedented success in the public sector (Wilson, 1978:151; Waldinger, 1996:206; Higginbotham & Romero, 1997). In fact, African Americans are overrepresented among postal employees; they represent 25 percent of postal employees (Hacker, 1992). Notwithstanding inclusion and civil service protections, the USPS is not exempt from discriminatory job structures and practices (Tomaskovic-Devey, 1993:173), which disadvantage minorities and women who are concentrated in lower-echelon jobs (Cornwell & Kellough, 1994:1). The organization began as a white male and middle class dominated institution and this culture still prevails—that is whites exercising power over people of color, men exercising power over women, and not just supervisors over workers but in particular the

middle class exercising power over the working and lower classes. Even a diversity program, characterized by postal managers as progressive, has not reduced but in many ways has exacerbated inter and intra group conflicts. On many levels these conflicts have perpetuated a workplace climate that “resembles [a] nation whose citizens are at war with each other” (Henderson, 1994). The increase in diversity complements a dramatic increase in employee discontent, work-related violence, incidents of reported and unreported sexual harassment, and employee grievances filed and awaiting arbitration (Greenwald, 1998:2). Although it is not implied that diversity is the causal variable for the discordant and antagonistic environment that exists; it does, however, suggest that this situation is disquieting and, at the very least, supports the need for this kind of study.

Statement of the Problem

The federal government has played an inconsistent role in its attempts to include African Americans, women, and most recently the inclusion of Latinos and Asian workers. Nevertheless, the organization’s reconstructive policies, which predate the Civil Rights Act of 1964, initiated what has now become, in the post-civil rights era, an unprecedented increase in the diversification of its workforce. Due to residential segregation (Massey & Denton, 1993) that contributes to the concentration of racial-ethnic minorities in the urban centers of the country, urban postal facilities are more diverse than suburban or rural facilities. African Americans, Latinos, and Asians are concentrated in urban facilities where the job structure contributes to occupational integration, resegregation, and tokenism of employees by race, class, and gender.

The effects of these paradoxes of diversity are many. First, the traditional workplace conflicts—between blacks and whites, males and females, managers and

employees—which center on access to and equitable considerations in the organization are much more complicated, the researcher argues. They are complicated by the arrangement of workers by race, class, and gender in jobs and work areas that are integrated, segregated, and where minorities are present in token representation in upper echelon positions; racial-ethnic minorities are the few among the many in these positions. White employees are highly represented in upper echelon positions, despite the fact that they are the numerical minority in the facility. While it can be argued that this stems from their higher levels of educational attainment vis-à-vis racial-ethnic minorities, many postal occupations, even upper echelon positions, do not require high levels of educational attainment. Although promotion practices changed considerably in the mid-1990s to a more merit-based approach, on-the-job training is still considered an important avenue of upward mobility in the Service.

Another problematic effect of the paradoxes of diversity is that the vast majority of racial-ethnic employees rarely work with or in the vicinity of white workers unless they do so as their subordinates. This is also applicable for female workers. The majority of these workers are racial-ethnics who primarily work with each other or as subordinates of male employees. As well, due to job structures, employees tend to work with those from a similar social class or as the subordinates of middle class employees. One effect of this configuration of employees is white, middle class, and male domination over organizational power and resources. Due to the above configuration of workers, day-to-day conflicts between employees manifest themselves in inter and intra-group conflicts that contribute to the saliency of race, class, and gender conflicts in the workplace (Wharton, 2000; Reskin & Charles, 1999) resulting in contradictory relations

among employees. For example, conflicts between supervisor-employee and employee-employee conflicts get more complicated in paradoxically diverse organizations because they are perceived as and linked to identities and group membership. For example, a conflict between a male supervisor and female employee that might be defined as an inter-gender conflict can become an inter-racial issue if the supervisor is white and the employee black. If the parties in a conflict are a black supervisor and black employee, the conflict might work its way out through a language of class differences. The root cause of the conflict might originate in work related matters but work themselves out through racial, class, or gender differences. Although this research will show that there are also elements of inter and intra-group cooperation and negotiations, the conflicts between groups exacerbates the powerlessness of racial-ethnic minorities, working class, and female postal employees, vis-à-vis white, middle class, and male employees.

The study will attempt to examine work life in a diverse work setting and will try to show that employee relations must be understood within the context in which it occurs. Thus, for example, one study of race and job dismissals in the U.S. Postal Service found that blacks are twice as likely as whites to be involuntarily dismissed from their jobs. The researchers conclude that white racism contributes to this pattern and suggest that if racial discrimination occurs in the public sector, where there are employee protections, it must be “even more common in nonpublic sectors of the labor market (Zwerling & Silver, 1992:653). My study suggests that the level of discipline and involuntary terminations of racial-ethnic minorities, and in particular black postal employees, is not always due to direct white racism. Typical of many urban postal facilities at the present time, most of the employees and their supervisors, who are responsible for initiating

disciplinary actions, are racial-ethnic minorities. This does not suggest that white racism does not play an indirect role. Another problematic aspect of this contention is that it is not feasible to extrapolate findings in one kind of organization and make them applicable to a different kind of organization. The private sector has more leeway to discriminate at the hiring line than public sector organizations.

Building on these insights, this research contends that, as a hierarchical system, bureaucracy perpetuates the interests of the powerful over the powerless (Ferguson, 1984:116). Thus, power differences are not produced by diversity; rather, they would exist even if the workplace were not diverse. Depending on the level of diversity and complexity of the organization, however, interpersonal conflicts take on a different character when parties to the conflicts—the powerful and powerless—interpret the conflicts as related to the manner in which they experience diversity. Thus competition between groups for control of economic, political, and social structures (Cox, 1993; Jacques, 1997) takes on a different practical character because those in conflict may mobilize or try to mobilize ethnic/racial, gender, or class solidarity to support their particular position, with very little regard for traditional ingroup-outgroup boundaries. This could not happen in a homogenous workplace.

Purpose of the Study

What is interesting and distinct about this study of diversity in the workplace is that it will take a macro-micro approach to the study of diversity by trying to show how the job structure and culture of the organization, the level of diversity in the organization, and the perceptions of employees shape interpersonal conflicts. In work settings that are paradoxically diverse, interpersonal conflicts turn into intra and inter-group struggles that

vary according to the dimensions of group identification available to participants, contributing to the contradictory behaviors among employees.

This study will attempt to fill a void in the literature because it moves beyond notions of how to get minorities, women, and the working poor into white, male and middle-class dominated organizations. This study moves beyond formulae for successful diversification of the workforce or how-to guidelines for managing and celebrating diversity, to an examination of the perceptions of employees and social interaction patterns that occur in the organization. Such an endeavor must have an appropriate framework (such as the paradoxes of diversity framework) which takes into consideration that an organization, which essentially embraces the philosophy of multiculturalism and diversity, has elements of occupational integration, resegregation (Reskin & Roos, 1990) and tokenism (Kanter, 1977), among racial-ethnic employees within an urban facility. This study joins other researchers who posit that a theory of diversity and the problems associated with it must consider worker characteristics and the context of the work environment because inequities are sustained by behavior as well as structures (Bielby & Baron, 1984; Tomaskovic-Devey, 1993; Chemers, Oskamp, & Costanzo, 1995; Jackson, 1992). It will join a developing body of literature, which examines organizations historically and contextually in an effort to contribute to the formulation of ecologically valid understandings of the nature and effects of demographic diversity in organizations. This study will contribute to such an understanding by addressing the following research questions:

1. How have social and political changes in the United States from 1776 to 1964 shaped the diversification of the postal work force?

2. How do the paradoxes of diversity shape employee perceptions of race relations among different racial groups in the organization?
3. How effective are employees at mobilizing racial solidarity to support a particular position?
4. How do the paradoxes of diversity shape employee perceptions of gender relations among male and female employees in the organization?
5. How effective are employees at mobilizing gender solidarity to support a particular position?
6. How do the paradoxes of diversity shape employee perceptions of social class relations among middle and working class employees?
7. How effective are employees at mobilizing social class solidarity to support a particular position?
8. Are “celebrating” and “managing diversity” the only means of minimizing race, class, and gender inequities in the organization?

Summary

The intent of this study is to examine diversity in a federal bureaucracy. It will try to show that when organizations are paradoxically diverse this contributes to contradictory relations among diverse groups, individualization of experiences, and thus, a lower salience of race, class, and gender conflicts in the workplace. The chapters will be organized as follows: Following this introduction to the study, Part One will discuss the research design in Chapter II and provide a review of the literature related to diversity in organizations and develop the paradoxes of diversity framework in Chapter III. In order to provide a context for understanding the paradoxes of diversity, Part Two will

present an historical overview of women's and African Americans' entrance into postal work in Chapter IV and a description of the work context in an urban mail processing facility in Chapter V. Part Three will consist of employee perceptions of race, class, and gender relations in the USPS in Chapter VI (Facility Integration), Chapter VII (Facility Resegregation), and Chapter VIII (Occupational Tokenism), respectively, and present conclusions and suggestions for further research in Chapter VIII.

CHAPTER II

RESEARCH DESIGN

Introduction

Since perceptions play an important role in the successful diversification of an organization's workforce (Schneider & Northcraft, 1999), I conducted interviews of men and women past and present postal employees from diverse race, social class, and occupational backgrounds. I also conducted an analysis of postal documents, postal and union newsletters, and spent time as a participant observer, in order to illuminate the structural features of the organization and examine the ways in which interpersonal conflicts are manifested in the perceptions and everyday experiences of demographically diverse groups and individuals.

Although all of the methodological approaches utilized in this study are qualitative, interview data is the most important source for answering the questions posed in this research, since personal accounts are especially appropriate for "figuring out what events mean, how people adapt, and how they view what has happened to them and around them" (Rubin & Rubin, 1995:34). As Alford suggests in The Craft of Inquiry: Theories, Methods, Evidence (1998), I utilize a foreground historical argument in order to present an overview of the development of diversity in the Service. This form of inquiry is utilized to present an historical overview of women's and African American's efforts to attain postal positions and the duplicitous role the government played in the process. Analysis of postal and union documents and participant observation will be utilized to formulate a foreground interpretive argument, which examines the structure

and culture of the organization. All three sources of data (interviews, postal documents, and observations) are combined to examine inter and intra-group relations in the Service in an attempt to show the ways in which the paradoxes of diversity impact race, class, and gender relations in an urban postal facility.

Selecting the Site

The site for this study is a New York City mail processing facility that operates 24 hours a day and seven days a week. I chose this area because these facilities are representative of urban postal facilities that are more demographically diverse than suburban and rural facilities. I chose this facility because I had access to the facility because I know workers who work there.

Recruitment of Participants

I utilized snowball sampling of employees. After each interview, I asked the postal worker who volunteered to participate in the study to recommend others I could interview and each of the subsequently interviewed participants were asked for further recommendations. Since this study is specifically about race, class, and gender relations, I purposefully included male and female participants from a diverse range of racial characteristics—black, white, Asian, and Latino postal workers—and supervisors and non-supervisors, people with different education and class backgrounds, different age categories, and numbers of years with the organization. I began each interview with questions that focused on the participant's social class and familial background. These questions were followed by open-ended questions regarding the participant's experiences in the Postal Service and perceptions of other employees (see Appendix A-

Questionnaire). I conducted 40 formal interviews, 50 informal interviews, and several participant-observation sessions.

Interviews

Due to the nature of the research questions, the confidentiality of participants is of utmost importance. The training I have received as an oral historian makes me particularly sensitive to the possibility of harm to participants. Since many of the participants presently work for the organization and those who have retired have continued contact with former coworkers, I was honest about the intended use of the interview. In order to minimize the threat of physical, financial, or emotional harm to participants, I asked for permission to record the proceedings and informed participants that they had the right to not answer any question(s) presented to them, and could delete a response, or ask to end the interview at any point in the process. Additionally, I assured respondents that the identity of participants would remain confidential and that names, work locations, or any other identifying characteristics would not be disclosed in the final manuscript. However, this was not enough to assure some employees, so many opted to talk with me in different extra-postal settings about working in the organization but did not want to have their responses recorded. In these cases I made notes of our conversations and utilized them throughout the analysis. Ethical concerns are complicated; however, as someone who has many years of experience both interviewing and working in postal facilities, I utilized a collaborative-conversational stance during the interviews. This minimized the possibility of participants feeling exploited or appropriated during the interview.

A disadvantage of my being a former postal worker and using the collaborative-conversational stance was that respondents in both the formal and informal interviews consistently assumed that I knew what they meant when they spoke in postal jargon or would finish open-ended questions by stating, “You know what I mean.” Many respondents also did not hesitate, during the interview, to ask me what I thought about a particular postal event they described. The most difficult aspect of conducting interviews was managing my dual insider-outsider status. I worked for the Postal Service for 11 years, from 1979 to 1990.

Observations of the Facility

I conducted several observations at a large urban mail processing facility at different times of the day and days of the week. I scheduled my visits with a tour guide, as it is extremely difficult to gain access to postal facilities since the terrorist and anthrax incidents following 9-11. He took me to different areas of the facility and showed me the mail flow process and how each machine works. On one visit I only paid attention to how machines worked, on another I took notes on how employees behaved as I walked through the building, appearing to be a manager in a suit jacket. On another visit I wore jeans and a sweatshirt, appearing to be a worker, and sat in the cafeteria and the smoking room and just listened to conversations employees had with each other or engaged in small talk with them. My participation level was minimal and I did not feel the urge to disclose my presence.

Content Analysis of Postal Documents

In order to provide a context for understanding the paradoxes of diversity in urban postal facilities, I analyzed postal documents and postal and union newsletters and postal correspondence sent to employees and supervisors. I utilize data from these sources to illuminate the structural and cultural features, as well as the ideology, of the organization. This same data is utilized to present a view of labor-management relations, the work climate, and the organization's perceived successes, failures, and continuing struggles to diversify its workforce. In addition to the U.S. Postal Service Annual Reports, handbooks, and labor-relations and training manuals, I utilized excerpts from the following newsletters from 1993-2003:

- The American Postal Worker – American Postal Workers Union, AFL-CIO
- New York Metro Area: Update - United States Postal Service
- Express NY: Postal Employee News and Information for the NY Cluster
- The Postal Supervisor - National Association of Postal Supervisors
- New York Metro Area: EAS Update
- The Union Mail – NY Metro Area Postal Union

Limitations of Study

As with all qualitative research, the conclusions drawn from this study will be suggestive rather than definitive (Babbie, 1992:306). It is important to note that the sample size, procedures for participant selection, and restrictions that my gender and race placed on the characteristics of the sample, while appropriate for a qualitative study, may not support generalizability to all urban postal facilities. However, the theoretical framework, the paradoxes of diversity, may be applicable and generalizable to large organizations that have uneven patterns of diversity in work areas and occupations.

Personal History

My own involvement with the United States Postal Service began in 1977 when I took the clerk-carrier examination in the Bronx, NY and began working as a Christmas temporary worker. I worked in this capacity for two years and was appointed as a substitute clerk in October 1979 and assigned to a facility in Manhattan, NY. During the first 5 years of Service I worked on Tour 3 (4pm to 12:30am or 7pm to 3:30am) and in many different areas of postal operations. I worked the manual cases, sorted parcel post packages, and worked in the foreign airmail and express mail sections. After becoming a full time regular employee in 1984, I began working on the Flat Sorting Machine. Since I did not pass the dexterity examination, after training, I applied for a position at another station and worked the Flat Sorting Machine and in various other aspects of mail sorting activities on Tour 1 (midnight to 8:30am). I worked in this capacity for a year then passed the typing test and received a position in the Personnel Department and was assigned to work in the Labor Relations Office. I stayed in this position for five years, from 1987 to 1991; there I worked all aspects of processing disciplinary actions, Merit System cases, and returns to duties. Although, I was still a level 5 personnel clerk, I learned a great deal about postal rules and regulations and postal legal matters when I began working as the secretary to the manager of labor relations.

I believe that this position, more than any other, influenced my perception and thinking about the Service and about the possibility of one day doing research on the subject. It was an enlightening position because I was able, by filing, typing and reading letters, taking minutes at labor-management meetings, or just overhearing conversations, to see both management and employee views relative to labor-management issues.

During 1985, I began attending Brooklyn College and majored in Sociology and Women's Studies. The combined effect of going to college and working in Labor Relations piqued my intellectual interest in ingroup-outgroup dynamics. Through my studies of disadvantaged groups and experiences in the Service I began to grapple with an issue that has concerned me most of my adult life, which is: How do organizational policies shape social (individual, group, and organizational) behaviors?

I resigned from the Postal Service in 1991 and began attending college full time and worked part time in a family law firm. After graduating from Brooklyn College in 1994, I began graduate studies at the City University Graduate Center. I was accepted into the Organizational Effectiveness program in the Sociology department and began learning about theories and schools of thought in organizational studies and doing research in different kinds of organizations. Although my work tends to focus on issues of diversity, it is grounded in the human relations school of organization theory. It is here that my work merges most intimately with my interest. Thus, my research endeavor has an emphasis on how we can motivate the organization, groups, and individuals to work in greater accord by examining those aspects of the organization life, which have both positive and negative effects on behavior.

CHAPTER III

DIVERSITY IN ORGANIZATIONS

Introduction

Throughout the past two decades, organizational theorists and managers have wrestled with issues related to work force diversification in the United States. Much of this concern developed after the publication of Workforce 2000 (Johnston and Packer, 1987), which projected the changing demographics of American workers. That study predicted that more women would enter the work force and a larger share of new entrants will be racial-ethnic minorities. As predicted, as we move further into the 21st century, the level of diversity in the American workforce is unprecedented. Our organizations are more diverse than ever; however, true diversity is still a goal and not a reality in many organizations. The purpose of this chapter is to present an overview of diversity studies, discuss the demographic makeup of the contemporary USPS, and the complexities of its diversity initiative.

The Challenges of Organizational Diversification

In the United States, a proliferation of diversity studies developed in the wake of Johnston and Packer's forecast. Most of the earliest diversity studies were concerned with the costs and benefits of inclusion of African Americans and women in traditionally white male employment settings. This branch of diversity studies is characterized as ethnic or race-based studies. The theoretical approach which dominates in these studies is ingroup outgroup dynamics within organizational settings. They are, on the whole,

comparative studies of ethnic group differences in communication styles, cooperative behavior, and competitiveness. The emphasis of this approach is to try to understand how cultural differences between in-groups and out-groups, relative to values, norms, and goals, contribute to on-the-job conflicts. One of the most succinct conceptualization of in-group and out-groups has been offered by Triandis (1995). He suggested that collectivists tend to apply cooperative norms to other parties they identify as members of their in-group. In-groups are composed of individuals who share norms, values, goals, and work ethic and are contrasted with out-groups, who are perceived as having norms, values, goals, and a work ethic that are dissimilar to members of the in-group.

The relevance of these kinds of studies is that they show that ethnic-racial conflicts flourish in organizations and that these conflicts stem from dominant group efforts to preserve status differences in the workplace. In sum, the studies show that “discrimination toward a group or class of people must be understood at the level on which it occurs—inter-group dynamics” (Elmes and Connelly, 1997:151). However they are uni-dimensional in scope and do not take into consideration the complexities of social group identity in the modern society. As well, these studies have been largely inconclusive and have not been able to effectively determine the extent to which group differences make a difference in the work place. Despite the shortcomings and limited applicability of in-group out-groups theories, a great deal of management theory utilizes this theoretical approach to formulate organizational policies.

Another branch of diversity studies has been characterized as demography-as-destiny studies. One group of writers bemoans the increasing diversification of the

workforce. These theorists hypothesize that in diverse work settings, individuals and members of different groups are prone to self-segregation and separatism because of perceived conflicts of interests that result in a decline in trust, communication, and cooperation (O'Reilly, et al, 1989). However, the ideas in this body of works are not novel; they are sentimentally and perhaps nostalgically embedded in the work of Chester Barnard (1968) who stated that the question of "fitness" between members of work groups is important. Fitness, according to Barnard involves objective elements such as equivalent levels of education, experience, personal distinction, prestige, race, and nationality. As well, "fitness" involves subjective criteria, in the Barnardian view, such as comparable manners, speech, and appearance. People are more likely, accordingly to be influenced by the opinion of demographically and ideologically similar others when they work in decision-making teams (McQuire, 1985).

Triandis (1995) shares a similar view, he states, "If there is too large a cultural distance, it may be better to keep the ethnic groups separate and select those among each group who are objectively similar to work together and coordinate the actions of the separate groups, rather than to mix the individuals directly" (31). It has been suggested that the potential for conflict in culturally homogenous work groups is significantly less than in culturally diverse groups (Cox, 1993:157). Affirmative action policy, in particular Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 which prohibits discrimination in employment on the basis of race, color, religion, sex, or national origin and the increasing demographic diversity of society, significantly limits an organizational member's ability to control the influx of minorities and women into formerly white male dominated

workplaces. We cannot turn back the hands of time; thus, this approach also has limited applicability in the modern American workforce.

Another branch of diversity-as-destiny studies which accepts, less fervently, the realities of the increased diversification of the American workforce has examined the impact of diversity on the turnover, promotion, and the performance of white and black workers (Pfeffer and O'Reilly, 1987; Tsui and O'Reilly, 1989; Jackson and Associates, 1992). Still other theorists have examined leadership, communication, decision-making, group dynamics, and organizational culture (Schein, 1996a; Senge, 1996; Cox, 1993; Thomas, 1991; Argyris, 1993; Steffy and Grimes, 1992; Szilagy and Wallace, 1990). These studies of the effects of diversity on group processes and performance have been inconclusive; most implicitly and covertly, however, blame the victim. For example, minorities are implicitly blamed for their situation when it has been suggested that compared to white males, the high turnover, absenteeism, and lower levels of workplace satisfaction among minorities and women is because organizations "have not been as successful in managing women and racio-ethnic minorities" (Cox and Blake, 1991:46). Although Cox and Blake also note that differences in job satisfaction may stem from cultural conflict with dominant white male culture and career growth differences, their ideas of the potential benefits of multicultural organizations gets lost in the message. It is upstaged by those who suggest that due to cultural problems that minorities have, related to language deficits and inappropriate on-the-job attitudes, they are not able to take full advantage of employment opportunities in the modern, service-based, job market (Johnston and Packer, 1987:xxvi). There are no suggestions in either of the above

schemas for how researchers and managers can identify structural inequities and engage in proactive activities in order to minimize problems such that we can begin a process of actually creating multicultural organizations that move beyond celebrating diversity or fearing it. The manifest function of these studies is to formulate theories for how we can attain an inclusive workforce where there is a minimum of intergroup conflict based on identity politics. The latent function of them is that they have expressed a growing concern about the increased diversification of society. These concerns have led to the institutionalization and diversification of diversity.

Managerialism is the most recent development in the field of demography-as-destiny approach; it represents the institutionalization of diversity. Organizational theorists have used a wide range of labels to characterize managerialism, such as managing diversity, affirmative action, valuing differences, valuing diversity, and multiculturalism (Thomas, 1991:306). The three most commonly recognized terms for managerialism, which have been conceptualized by Thomas as affirmative action, understanding diversity, and managing diversity. (1991:313). Brief definitions of each will be offered, as these concepts do not have the same meaning, although they are commonly used interchangeably. Affirmative action refers to equality or the forced compliance with multiculturalism, according to Grossman, (2000). Understanding diversity refers to organizational attempts to educate managers and employees about similarities and differences among them based on multiple dimensions. The hope is that awareness will contribute to cross-cultural communication, understanding, and perhaps diminish interpersonal conflicts that, it is believed, stem from these differences.

Managing diversity is about equity and fairness in the workplace (Grossman, 2000). It follows that managing diversity writings are primarily designed to help managers enhance their capacity to effectively foster a sense of fairness among diverse workers such that group conflicts are minimized and subsequently contribute to a competitive advantage for the organization. This has contributed to corporate pluralism in organizations throughout society. The motto is that diversity (differences) means better, and the organizational challenge, accordingly, is to get minorities and women into positions at all levels of organizations. Thus, it is generally agreed by “managerialists” that diversity must be valued and effectively managed. However, in a study of how parks and recreation agencies addressed issues of diversity, Allison (1999) states that social and political discussions of diversity efforts have become more value-laden and value-loaded, which creates organizational barriers in the form of resentment and non-responsiveness toward people of color and women.

Opposition to the institutionalization of managerialism is based on the belief that there are enormous negative potentials of race-based policies. Frederick Lynch, for example, states, “Overly zealous ‘strong managers’ anxious to ‘get right with the future,’ could construct a coercive, corporate pluralism, furthering the dangerous legal trend toward making individual rights and equal opportunity secondary to group membership and proportional representation” (1992:81). His assessment of demography-as-destiny and race-based strategies is that they are somehow designed to replace white male baby boomers with younger minorities. These misgivings can only be characterized as misguided, considering the fact that minorities trail behind whites on all socioeconomic

indicators. Thus, theoretically and practically, minorities, and in particularly young minorities who fare the worst in this regard, are much less likely than whites or older educated minorities to have the kinds of skills and training which would enable them to compete for the skilled occupations that white male baby boomers are supposedly vacating.

Originally a theoretical approach to address issues related to ethnic, race, and gender differences among workers, managerialism, under the rubric of managing diversity, has become a philosophical movement in American organizations. The challenge for organizational managers, accordingly, is to successfully apply the skills, insights, energy, and commitment of diverse work forces and groups in order to make organizations better (Bolman and Deal, 1991). In the past decade this approach has grown in leaps and bounds. Diversity, some have celebrated and others have lamented, has undergone a process of diversification. Presently managing diversity, as R. Roosevelt Thomas (1991) explains, has to be broad enough to encompass all dimensions of diversity which include, race and gender, but also age, tenure in organization, functional background, education level, physical status, lifestyle, union versus nonunion, sexual preference, and religion (307). Grossman (2000) questions whether this increased diversification of diversity has marginalized racial issues. An equally critical perspective has been offered by Nkomo (1992) who states that conspicuously absent from studies of race in organizations is any suggestion or recognition of the different sociohistorical experience of African Americans in the United States or within particular kinds of organization. This study suggests that recognition of intra-racial relations, which occurs

between racial-ethnics among people from different class backgrounds, is also conspicuously absent in the post-civil rights era organizational studies of class relations in the workplace that are still confined to employee-management relations.

Nevertheless, ideas abound about what managers should do about diversity. Solomon holds the view that there is not much we can do. She maintains, “Despite growing awareness of workplace diversity in many organizations, hostility continues to exist among employees. Racism that exists in the community exists in the workplace—It’s nothing more than a reflection of the community at large” (1992:30). Some human resources theorists hold a more promising view. They argue that most diversity problems are rooted in organizational culture, and the goal of managers is to acknowledge that conflict is inevitable but act in ways that will minimize conflict. A multitude of plans and strategies by managerial theorists have been developed in response to the idea that the most practical goal for managers is to facilitate organizational change rather than to try to change people. Cultural change, it is asserted, will lead to changes in the ideas and behavior of workers. Thus, according to Henderson (1994), a value change at the organizational level will contribute to new assumptions about the effectiveness and positive benefits of diversity and will alter the day-to-day actions and ultimately ameliorate conflicts that stem from diversity (12-13). Grossman (2000) and others question the extent to which this is an effective approach, since it is believed that workplace disputes that “arise out of or are complicated by social diversity” are rooted in class, gender, race and ethnicity (Donnellon & Kolb, 1994:139). My study suggests, as the following discussion will show, that although workplace disputes are complicated by

social diversity, diversity does not cause these conflicts. When trying to understand diversity in an organization, it is important to consider the extent of diversification of the workforce and the way in which the organization addresses diversity in the workplace.

Diversity in the USPS

Despite a long, controversial, and embattled history towards inclusion, the USPS is presently one of the most diverse organizations in the United States¹. It is extremely difficult to obtain objective data on race and gender by postal districts; however, some indication of the overall demographic makeup of New York District postal workers is available. The obvious problem with this data is that it misrepresents the actual representation of minorities and women by double counting minority women. Based on data from a recent GAO report (2000, 2003) on diversity in the USPS, the vast majority of workers in the New York district are minorities and women; together they comprise 70 percent of the civilian labor force and 81 percent of postal workers in the district. Nevertheless, as indicated by the national data and by interviewee accounts, the vast majority of postal workers in the New York district are men and women of color; as white women are underrepresented in postal positions, nationally and in urban centers.

Nationwide, according to postal officials, the representation of minorities in the USPS exceeds their representation in the United States workforce. Among minority groups, African-Americans (Blacks) are over-represented; they comprise 21.3 percent of the national postal work force. Their over-representation in the federal government, one

¹ The USPS, as a branch of the federal government, is under no legal constraints to disclose the demographic makeup of its workforce. Most of the data provided, therefore, comes from reports by oversight committees rather than from the USPS itself.

of the nation's largest high-quality employers of African Americans (Wilson, 1987; Hacker, 1992; Waldinger, 1996) has remained constant or increased since the late 1960s. Hispanics represent 7 percent of the postal workforce and are under-represented in comparison to the national workforce. Asian American Pacific Islanders also represent 7 percent of the postal workforce. Black and white women respectively represent 10 and 22 percent of the postal workforce nationwide (GAO, 2003:2). Due to the historical resistance that women faced in their efforts to attain postal positions, their current representation in the USPS is less than their representation in the U.S. workforce. According to the American Postal Workers Union (APWU), which represents the majority of USPS employees who are clerk-craft workers, the current representation of women is expected to grow because they represent over 50 percent of non-career and transitional workers. The majority of these workers, it is expected, will subsequently join the USPS career workforce. This factor significantly impacts gender relations in urban postal facilities, which will be discussed in a later chapter.

There is no doubt that the USPS has made significant progress in the diversification of its workforce. However, the organization is only diverse on a national level. Urban postal districts throughout the country are more appropriately characterized as paradoxically diverse. This is due, in part, to the civilian labor force in major urban cities throughout the United States that have a majority female and minority labor force. The result is that in most urban centers, the workers in these facilities are predominantly racial-ethnic minorities and women. For example, in the New York district, racial-ethnic minorities and women represent 81 percent of postal workers and 70 percent of the

civilian labor force; in Los Angeles, racial-ethnic minorities and women represent 95 percent of postal employees and 75 percent of the civilian labor force; in Chicago racial-ethnic minorities and women represent 92 percent of postal workers and 66 percent of the civilian labor force; in Atlanta racial-ethnic minorities and women represent 73 percent of postal workers and 59 percent of the civilian labor force. With very few exceptions, this pattern found in urban centers significantly impacts the perception and interpersonal relations among postal workers. Urban postal facilities are also occupationally skewed by race and gender.

Racial-ethnic minorities and women continue to be segregated in urban mail processing facilities and are also over-represented among low echelon employees, despite gains in their overall representation in postal positions. As well, a significant impact on diversity and thus, relations between employees, relates to the overabundance of women in initial level supervisory positions and the slightly higher black female promotion rate vis-à-vis black males. The quest for promotions, recognition, and organizational resources for groups and individuals who do not see themselves as having equal access to them is most problematic in postal work environments. Structural inequities create a great deal of frustration and anxiety among postal workers; however, the ways in which they attempt to negotiate the inequities stems, in part, from the fact that racial-ethnic minorities, women, and the working class work primarily with each other or are represented as tokens in otherwise homogenous work settings.

The ways by which racial ethnic minorities negotiate diversity-related conflicts also stems from the way in which the organization addresses diversity issues. A recent

article, which examined job satisfaction within the USPS, suggests that the organization attempts to level the diversity playing field by trying to establish appropriate representations of all groups at all levels within the organization; however this has been difficult to say the least. Fraser, Kick, & Barber (2002) suggest that most employees believe that the organizational culture is hegemonic, in that it continues to be controlled by white males; employees have the perception that the USPS has a non-meritocratic workplace culture, which disadvantages minorities but favors whites and women (2002). A GAO report (2003) suggests that this is not an unfair assessment. At all stages of the promotion process (applications, considered best qualified, and promoted), the largest proportion of all applications come from white men and women who are over-represented among those who are considered best qualified and promoted. The implication of this data is obvious. As we move up the organizational structure, whites hold positions of authority and autonomy, and because of the nature of these positions, they predominate in positions that cannot be replaced by technology. Employees are, according to Fraser, Kick, & Barber (2002) responding to an organizational culture and their perceptions of unfairness and favoritism among certain racial-ethnic groups. In an attempt to quell these kinds of concerns, the Service does not specifically say what it is doing to establish appropriate levels of representation, but states rather forcefully that it is not trying to impose racial-gender quotas. It is the position of this researcher that employee perceptions of diversity are largely shaped by how they experience diversity; how the organization addresses diversity is important in this regard.

Since the late 1980s there has been a number of government hearing and reports, as well as studies of race and gender relations in the USPS. In response, the organization has become hyper-vigilant to reassure the American public that it is doing everything that it can to manage diversity in the organization. One of its earliest attempts to manage diversity was to revise its literature and training brochures. With assistance from diversity specialists, the organization has replaced offensive commentaries with more politically correct language. An example of the kinds of language that was considered offensive is a statement found in a supervisory training manual (1987) which stated:

“What is quality? Quality is getting done correctly the first time with least amount of people, in the shortest amount of time. **Quality has much in common with sex.** Everyone is for it. Everyone feels they understand. Everyone thinks execution is only a matter of following natural inclinations” (Supervisory Training System Course, 1987:97).

More recently, the USPS also hired a private consulting firm, Tulin DiversiTeam Associates, to provide diversity training to postal managers and supervisors. To provide clarification of concepts related to discriminatory practices, page one of the manual states:

“*Intent* is how or what a person “means” by behaving in a certain way with an individual or a group; *behavior* is the action actually taken - - what a person, or an organization does; and *impact* is how that action affects a person, a group of people, or an organization” (Tulin,1997:1).

The consulting firm, which conceptualizes discrimination in the narrow sense defined above, does not take into consideration everyday acts of discrimination or institutionalized discrimination, both of which may occur without “intent.” Thus, the training consists primarily of helping supervisors and managers to identify individual level barriers to diversity such as denial of issues, lack of awareness, a compulsion to fix

“them” rather than “us,” an inability to observe issues outside of one’s own reality, and a need for control in all areas of one’s job, and a lack of trust about how others perceive and respond to diversity issues (Tulin, 1997:29). However, Tulin’s training program also advocates quality management systems, based on the work of W.E.Deming (1986), as an approach to managing diversity. In this regard, managers are advised that people are different from one another which should be utilized for optimization of abilities; people learn in different ways and at different speeds; organizational transformation requires leadership; in order to intrinsically motivate employees management must not deny them dignity and self-esteem (Tulin, 1997:22).

In addition to sending out a host of diversity awareness letters from district managers to all employees, USPS also publishes scriptographic (picture) booklets, since the early 1990s, designed to increase awareness about diversity. One such booklet, About Understanding Diversity, uses cartoon figures to define concepts related to diversity (1992 and 1995) and states the Diversity Mission Statement, as follows:

“The Postal Service requires new thinking and new structures that regard Diversity Development as fundamental to business success to achieve our corporate goals of employee commitment, customer satisfaction and revenue generation. Our mission is to listen to the needs of our customers and employees and respond with diversity initiatives to balance corporate goals with employee goals. We aim to unite our internal customers with concepts, methods, and guidance which ensures[s] diversity is valued and successfully managed in the workplace. We build partnerships with customers that will meet the diverse needs of the communities we serve. We will assist all employees in building tools and techniques that institutionalize the concepts, values, and practices of diversity.”

In sum, the USPS 23 diversity initiatives fall into six interest areas, as follows:

- Policy, structure and staffing
- Goal setting and accountability

- Recruitment and outreach
- Promotion and outreach
- Education and communications
- Supplier diversity

Some of the strategies developed by the Vice-President of Diversity Development include establishing accountability for diversity and diversity-related activities in the merit evaluations of postal career executives; creating a development program for employees at Levels EAS-19 and above which is similar to the succession planning process for postal career executives; designing a Career Management Program, to provide advancement opportunities from initial-level to mid-level management positions.

In line with the organization's stated mission to promote acceptance of diversity inside and outside of the workplace, in 1996 it created a national awards program for Diversity Achievement to recognize the ways in which postal employees have made significant contributions to "encourage, promote, and celebrate diversity within the U.S. Postal" (*Postal Life*, July/August, 1999). The categories for which employees judged are: Partnership, Individual, Leadership, Lifetime Achievement, and Team. Eligibility for the award is based on excellent performance in realizing the diversity goals of one or more of the three voices of CustomerPerfect: Voice of the Customer (recognizing the diverse needs of customers and developing services to meet needs arising from that diversity); Voice of the Business (initiate actions to address diversity issues that positively impact business and financial performance; Voice of the Employee (demonstrate actions that support the diverse employee mix and address the needs and

challenges of employee populations) (*Postal Life*, March/April, 2000). The focus of the Voice of the Employee is to improve workplace relations between management and employees who feel as though they are “second class citizens.” It suggests that employees treat each other with “dignity and respect,” and that managers and supervisors should comply with collective bargaining agreements and conduct regularly scheduled Labor-Management Committee meetings.

Beyond these kinds of initiatives, the USPS is somewhat unsure of how to address the multiple social identities of its employees or the conflicts that the organization believes stem from them. Although there is the mention of “biological differences” related to gender (and body size; skin, hair and eye color) or phenotypes and the occasional use of the word “race” in postal documents, the postal service generally views diversity as related to gender and cultural differences. Cultural differences, according to postal documentation, refers to ethnicity and culture (customs, language and sense of identity often shared by people with similar roots), family life (including family size, values, traditions and social class), beliefs (one’s religion or philosophy of life), geography (how one feels about being from a certain neighborhood, city or region) experiences (in school, work, travel, recreation...and with other people) (About Understanding Diversity, 1997:4). However broad the above range of issues tends to be, the Service does not know how to minimize employee conflicts, which they believe stem from cultural and gender differences among workers. The primary emphasis of the USPS diversity initiatives focuses on managing and celebrating cultural diversity and the inclusion and promotion of one or another underrepresented group.

Managing cultural diversity in the Service has also included, since the late 1980s, an emphasis on celebrating cultural diversity when postal districts began to officially sponsor station celebrations for Black History Month, Hispanic Heritage Month, Asian Heritage Month, and Women's History Month. These celebrations were sometimes small, consisting of a cultural or historic display of notable accomplishments of various racial-ethnic groups. At other times, depending on the resources provided and a station's representation of a particular racial group, grand productions were used to celebrate the cultural arts and achievements of particular groups. One of the most popular and well-attended events was Multi-Cultural Day, a NY Metro Area-wide celebration of diversity, which was open to postal workers and their family members. Volunteer employees put together a schedule of events, which have included Irish bagpipe music, Asian, African, Salsa, Reggae, and Jamaican dancers, a Native American pow-wow, children's activities, and an international food buffet. The first of these was a Multicultural Day event held on May 28, 1997. Employees volunteered to participate at all levels of the planning and production of the event, which was sponsored by the district. However, these events usually bring out a variety of reactions from employees. On the one hand, many employees participated in these events and believed that they were the least the organization could do to show its appreciation for workers and their families. On the other hand, those constant and forever present divisions among employees surfaced at the slightest provocation.

At the first Multicultural Day festival, a number of Caribbean employees were agitated that there were very few dishes representing their culture. One woman said to a

group of other women that she felt that management thinks that everyone who is black is African-American and it was not fair that they had an abundance of foods that African-Americans eat. She said, “Where are the rice and beans, where are the plantains?” She said that she was going to complain. Despite these kinds of incidents, which occurred every year among one group or another, Multicultural Day was considered a festive event among employees, but increasingly management thought the event was a waste of scarce resources. In the past few years, these kinds of events have been scaled down to lunchtime celebrations that do not include food or family members. Rather, they now consist of an occasional performance of a traditional ceremony, dance routine, arts and crafts, or fashion show by racial-ethnic group members.

Celebrating diversity, despite the disappearance of these celebratory events, is presently institutionalized in the USPS. Diversity is acknowledged as one of the strengths of the organization:

“Diversity is a strong competitive advantage for the Postal Service. It is a source of skills and ideas we need to better serve our customers. Valuing diversity ensures that opportunity and responsibility is shared by all employees. It allows any organization to realize the full talents of its employees, and it results in efficiency, competitiveness, and ethical reputation in the marketplace that attracts customers to do business with us. The Postal Service is committed to maintaining a respect for individual differences, a value for varying opinions, and a treatment for one another with appreciation regardless of gender, age, race, religion, language, nationality, or lifestyle” (EAS UPDATE, May 12, 1997).

The Office of Diversity Development also produces a monthly newsletter, *Diversity Talk*, which is disseminated via email to EAS employees that addresses a range of topics related to managing diversity, affirmative employment, and special programs. There is

also a “Did You Know?” segment of the newsletter, which heralds the accomplishments of racial-ethnic minorities and demographic trends among the various groups. In spite of these celebratory proclamations, diversification of its workforce is also viewed as one of weaknesses of the organization. Organizational officials do not deny that workplace relations in the Service have been in a state of crisis for several decades. In a feeble attempt to minimize workplace divisiveness, the organization combines the two issues, conflict and diversity, and affirms the importance of employees treating each other with “Dignity and Respect.” This cultural change has been one that has been almost impossible for employees to embrace, regardless of racial, cultural, and gender differences among them. This re-conceptualization of workplace conflicts, which includes but makes diversity problematic, is difficult to reconcile. This difficulty stems, in part, from the fact that the conditions that contribute to workplace tensions such as the militaristic and autocratic management style predate diversification of the workforce by decades, if not centuries.

Another problematic aspect of this re-conceptualization is that it suggests that supervisors, despite organizational goals that do not promote these ideals, must treat all employees as they would want to be treated—fairly. Concurrently, supervisors are advised to “be keenly aware of the *changes in values*, work ethic, and motivations of their employees” (*Postal Supervisor*, November 6, 1998). This seems to suggest that newer and more demographically diverse postal workers are viewed as having a different work ethic due to their culture. At times, the ways in which these “differences” are conveyed unwittingly contribute to the perpetuation of stereotypical views of racial-

ethnic minorities, women, and working class employees. Take, for example, the following discussion in a *Diversity Talk-USPS Diversity Development* newsletter that states:

“You may have noticed a difference in the way employees and managers from different cultures approach making the needed and appropriate decisions on a timely basis. Hispanics are brought up to protect relationships over deadlines and results, while African Americans and Asians see people issues as more important than tasks and schedules, respectively. If you do not understand how decisions are made ask probing questions to understand how another employee or manager arrived at the decision” (July, 2004:5).

The above statement implicitly compares racial-ethnic minorities to a white reference group who make “appropriate decisions” in a way that is implicitly characterized as better. The statement also suggests that it is acceptable in the culture of the workplace to question supervisors about the way they go about making decisions, which is absolutely not the case. One of the goals of the cultural changes initiated by Voice of the Employee survey results is to create a more inclusive work environment where everyone has a right to their opinion and to voice it; however, that motto has not made its way down to rank and file employees. At the rank and file level of the organization, the management style is still autocratic and militaristic, regardless of the race, class, and gender differences among employees and supervisors. Erroneously absent from this article is any discussion of the way in which the changes in the nature of work in postal facilities, which is now predominately automated, may contribute to a change in the way in which employees and supervisors, regardless of demographic differences, make decisions. Nevertheless, newer and more diverse workers are a difference that the organization must embrace in light of the changing demographic

composition of its employees and customers. However, every effort to rectify organizational conflicts perceived to be associated with diversity is met with controversy to which the USPS has been unable to resolve in a manner that is satisfactory to most postal employees. One such controversy relates to the creation of a “special emphasis” diversity program for Hispanic postal employees. When asked what he thought of the diversity program in the Service, a white male with 20 years of Service stated:

“There are two aspects to the program, one that covers all workers of colors and the other is a Hispanic diversity specialist who deals specifically with Latino workers...I think it is sad that those programs are needed. It takes me back to working in [Personnel] the information is there, it is available, but we don’t give it out...people of color have a need to get information so they create programs to serve their needs. The people have to go to the program because it won’t come to them. The workers have to know that the program exists, where to go, and why they are going there. They will show them how to develop a career in the service but I am not sure of whether or not people are that aware of the program. People who run it or part of the program come into contact with people but most are not aware of the program. Decisions are made based upon who knows you and who likes you. The training that these programs provide aren’t that efficient and they are off the clock, and inconvenient for employees. Those who make use of the program are the people who are most connected anyway.”

Conversely, another white male stated:

“It’s not fair, they say that they have these programs to help them get jobs and promotions. It’s not fair but then again, I guess it is no different from ethnic organizations like the Greek, Italian, or Irish Fraternal Order or something like that that [white] people used to help them get in the Post Office back in the day. But I think it just keeps people focused on race when sometimes that doesn’t matter that much anymore. The Post Office has all races and ethnic groups; I don’t think that people are discriminated against. Everybody’s here. They have a lot of Black and Hispanic supervisors and managers. It don’t make no sense for them to have these programs but they do so what can I say.”

When told that race based organizations, with the exception of the Hispanic Diversity Program, were no longer supported by the Service, an African American woman who

retired in the early 1990s stated:

“Wonderful. They had the Greek organization. They had the Italian. They had the Black, Chinese, Japanese. What kind of business is this? The Hispanic. To me, it was just ridiculous. It is not supposed to be any discrimination but everybody’s got their own thing. I think it is wonderful. I think it is good. They had the Franciscan Brothers or somebody that had the breakfast all the time. Everybody had an organization. I went to a luncheon for one of those black organizations and I heard these black supervisors talking about they are going to help young black people get in the PO. I laughed. How are they going to help young black people to get in PO and they didn’t even do nothing for them while they were in there [before they retired].”

When asked what he thought about the special emphasis some groups are given in the Service, an Asian male manager who had 15 years in the Service stated the following, he stated:

“I don’t get involved in all the political stuff in the PO so I never really thought about it. I got help from my coworkers and from the Women’s Program coordinator when I decided to apply for a management position. The Program gave me some information about how to apply for postal positions but that was it. I never went back. I just asked the manager I was working with [a white male] and he was very helpful, in fact, he was instrumental in helping me get a higher-level position. He liked me and I was a good worker so I worked under him in a detail and when a position opened up in his office, I applied for it and got it. I don’t go for a lot of that identity politics stuff.”

There is a sentiment among many urban postal employees that diversity should be an organizational goal, although most employees do not know a great deal about the diversity initiative in the Service. When asked when did the Women’s Program end, an African American senior manager, stated:

“Actually, I think it is still in existence. It’s just that it is not quite as visible as it was at one time. The premise was that until females had their fair share of promotional opportunities they had a Women’s Program and Hispanic Program....those are the two special emphasis programs....because it was felt that those two areas were not fully tapped as far as talent out there. So there’s still a

Women's Program. Actually they call it something different now. They call it Diversity Development. Again, it is not quite as visible....I don't think the people that work in it know what it is. That job title developed.... Manager, Diversity Development and a few other positions which use the terminology Diversity Development. I think they basically keep records on how many positions, Level 19 and above for example, I don't know exactly what they do.....but they look at how many Asians are in those positions, how many Native-Americans, how many African-Americans, they keep statistics on those kinds of things."

A Hispanic male stated:

"I don't know what they do but I am glad they have one [Diversity Specialist] because we need more Latino employees and managers because sometimes they discriminate against us if we don't speak proper English, they think we're not smart enough to be supervisors but how smart do you have to be to do that dumb job. They just don't want to see us with authority...but I never went to the office for help with anything. I don't know. Maybe one day I will want to be a supervisor and then I'll go and see if they can help me but no, I don't know what they do."

An African American male with 15 years in the Service said:

"I don't know what they do. I don't read postal literature or anything like that so I don't know what they do."

Postal workers in the facility are reluctant to speak about racial issues, but are not oblivious to them. They expressed their views that race/ethnic based programs are unfair. It follows that the Diversity Development Program in the Service, which was created during the 1980s to address issues pertaining to all special interest and historically disadvantaged groups (i.e. African Americans, homosexuals, Asians, and people with disabilities), was not initially embraced by postal workers. However, due to the proliferation of organizational diversity campaigns, employees espoused the organization's view that the diversity initiative was necessary due to under-utilization and under-representation of certain groups.

Diversity Means Everyone, Everywhere, Everyday?

One of the most contentious aspects of diversity in the USPS is the organization's claim that "diversity does not focus on a few select groups. It is for everyone, everywhere, everyday. It includes every employee in every unit and area, and it impacts all operations" (EAS UPDATE, May 12, 1997). In 1994, however, the only Latino on the Board of Governors of the USPS stated that African Americans were "over-represented" and Hispanics were "underrepresented" within the organization. In response to this allegation and outcries from Latino political figures, the Postal Service created the USPS Hispanic Program. It was introduced as a new aspect of Diversity Development in the NY Metro Area during 1997 under the direction of a newly-appointed Hispanic Program Specialist.

The overall objective of the Hispanic Program, according to the director, is to "ensure that Hispanics are fully utilized in the Postal Service workforce, and that they have an equal opportunity to participate and compete in every aspect of employment." The specific aims, according to the article, are to include "finding candidates for management jobs; ensuring equal treatment for Hispanics in hiring, training and promotions; acting as liaison between the Hispanic business community and the Postal Service; and assisting development of Spanish-language information for Hispanic customers (New York Metro Area, UPDATE, March/April, 1997:8).

Although postal employees have come to accept diversity as an organizational goal, many also have the perception that the Service should not have a diversity initiative that focuses on one particular group, which they perceive as unfair. For instance, an

Asian woman made the following comment:

“I think they should have something for Asians too. They have an Asian Association but it is not within the Postal Service so we don’t get special treatment and we should because they discriminate against us. They think that we don’t know our jobs and sometimes they try to talk down to us just because we’re Asian and it’s not fair. I got a management position but it took me forever. I don’t know how many interviews I went on. They just didn’t want to see an Asian woman with the job but I kept trying until I finally got it.”

An African American woman with 18 years in the USPS said,

“It is just another vehicle by which those groups who came in behind us [blacks] are able to use the system to their advantage and then they turn around and walk all over us. Everybody steps on the blacks. We were here before Hispanics but now they are our supervisors and the Asians are doing it too. They come in and the next thing you know they are managers.”

Postal workers agitation towards racial/ethnic-based initiatives such as the Hispanic Program has become public. For instance, the USPS Bilingual Post Offices have divided postal workers. In a *Postal Life* article entitled, “English as a 2nd Language,” the Service presents with pride the “second” languages spoken at the post office, i.e. Spanish in a New Mexico postal facility, Chinese in a San Francisco (Chinatown) postal facility, and Yiddish or Hebrew in a postal facility in a Brooklyn, New York (a Hasidic community) (May/June, 1997). In response to the article, the following comments made by postal workers were published in the Dialogue section of *Postal Life* magazines:

“The title of the article “English as a 2nd Language”...is outrageous. Shame on you. It is a perfect example of political correctness and cultural diversity run amok. Any mentally competent resident of the United States should be able to speak and understand English, and the Postal Service should not pander to those who choose not to communicate in English. The English language is one of the

primary bonds that unite us as Americans. The Postal Service should promote the similarities between us and not seek to accentuate the differences between us” (September/October, 1997).

“No nation, no people have ever gone through such a drastic demographic change as we are experiencing in America today. There are no examples to cite to believe this experiment will be a success. The strength of a nation exists in the harmony of its people, and that includes a common language. For the USPS to promote anything but our national language can only add to disharmony” (March/April, 1998).

The Paradoxes of Diversity: A Theoretical Framework

The vast majority of diversity related studies are confined to conceptual frameworks. Explicitly and implicitly, diversity studies make several assumptions about the nature of diverse workplaces. With very little attention to public-private sector distinctions, they presume that we need to facilitate the entrance of minorities into white male dominated organizations. They suggest that diversification of organizations in multi-ethnic societies is problematic because individuals validate their social identity by showing favoritism for their own social category or “in-group,” at the expense of “out-groups” to which they do not belong (Tajfel, et al, 1971; Elmes & Connelley, 1997). Cross-cultural research and laboratory experiments have found that in group identification is independent of negative attitudes toward out-groups and that much in-group prejudice and inter-group discrimination is motivated by preferential treatment for in-group members rather than direct hostility toward out-group members (Allport, 1954; Brewer, 1999). Nevertheless, social diversification studies assume that hostility is a natural result of competition between groups for control of economic, political, and social structures (Jacques, 1997; Kanter, 1977; Cox, 1993). This study assumes that the extent

to which there are group conflicts in organizations depends on several factors such as the level of diversity in the organization and the perceptions of employees, both of which are intimately related.

The Service is one of the most diverse national organizations in the country. However, one of the most consistent features of the USPS is that diversity is not an organizational-wide phenomenon. Racial ethnic and female postal employees from working class backgrounds are largely confined, due in part to residential segregation, to the urban postal districts of the country. In the Service there is also occupational stratification where racial-ethnic, women, and working class employees are concentrated in low echelon positions and whites, men, and middle class workers are concentrated in upper echelon administrative and support specialist positions. Racial ethnic and female postal employees were once excluded from an occupation where they now predominate, contributing to patterns of resegregation in urban facilities (Reskin & Roos, 1990). In urban postal facilities, some racial ethnic and female postal employees work in occupations where they are tokens (the few among the many), a concept developed by Kanter (1977). It is also the case that due to the configuration and spatial distribution of workers, racial ethnic members and women also experience integration in some work areas within urban postal facilities. Interpretation of race, class, and gender relations in this environment requires an analytical framework that takes into consideration “the kinds of situations that arise when workers of certain kinds and in certain proportions work with workers of certain kinds and in certain proportions under different circumstances” (Hughes, 1946:117; Kanter, 1977). Given the complex context of urban

facilities, employee relations are contradictory and difficult to interpret.

The paradoxes of diversity framework suggests that race, class, and gender conflicts are not always salient in diverse workplaces (Wharton, 2000; Reskin and Charles, 1999) because workers' perceptions of diversity related issues tend to vary, based on their daily experiences working with demographically diverse others. This framework posits that it is necessary to examine, structurally and occupationally, the extent to which workers work with demographically diverse others. It must also take into consideration that workers' perceptions of those who are considered "others" will vary based on the level of diversity they experience at work and on a daily basis. When an organization is paradoxically diverse it contributes to contradictory behaviors among organizational members who must negotiate similarities with in-group individuals as well as with out-group individuals, creating multiple levels of conflicts as well as negotiations across demographic lines. The framework used in this study, the paradoxes of diversity, will add to diversity literature and help further our understanding of inter- and intra-group relations at work.

Chapter Summary

Historically, African-American and women's presence in postal positions were unofficial and, at best, gaining access was difficult. Once the floodgates were opened by fair labor employment policies and, in particular, Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the presence of both groups has become significant and despite some recent decreases in their representation, their numbers are expected to grow. In fact, in comparison to their representation in the labor force, both African-American men and

women are over-represented among postal employees. They represent 23.3 percent of the total postal workforce (GAO Report, 2003); this is a decrease from their representation in 1992 which was 25 percent (Hacker, 1992:111). Although white women are underrepresented in postal positions, according to APWU, they represent 45 percent of the clerical workforce. The union notes, “Women make up 76 percent of the transitional employees, and transitional employment gives a glimpse of the hiring pool for career positions. Clearly we will go into the 21st century with a majority female workforce. In the clerk craft, the largest of the APWU crafts, females are already in the majority, at 52 percent” (*American Postal Workers*, 1996:12A). As well as the increased representation of African Americans and women, the representation of Latinos, a group given special consideration in hiring and promotions within the organization, and Asians is expected to grow.

As the above projections indicate, the USPS is in a state of increasing diversification. The USPS is at the vanguard because there are still innumerable organizations in the United States that have not diversified. Thus, the USPS has few examples it can look to for guidance on how to manage its diverse workforce. It has very little recourse but to spend a great deal of its resources to hire consultants and other organizational specialists to try to help the organization negotiate the interpersonal dynamics within its diverse workforce. However, although there are successes here and there, overall the organization has not been effective in managing and celebrating diversity. In the process of promoting diversity, philosophically and practically, the organization often pits one group of employees, with or without intent, against another. As well, the Service has remained unwilling or unable to address the issues of structural

inequities and a conflictual workplace culture that are at the root of the day-to-day problems that workers experience. This chapter suggests a theoretical framework, which takes a broad approach to diversity. It suggests that an organization going through a process of diversification should, at every stage of its development, identify and keep abreast of the extent to which the organization is paradoxically diverse—that is, has occupations and work areas where there is integration, resegregation, and tokenism. The following chapters will attempt to explore racial-ethnic groups' historical experiences in gaining access to the Service. It will attempt to identify those organizational policies and practices and perceptions of employees, in a contemporary urban facility that, perpetuate and sustain between group inequities.

PART TWO. THE POSTAL SERVICE THEN AND NOW

CHAPTER IV

THE JOURNEY: DEMOGRAPHIC CHANGE IN THE SERVICE

(1775 to 1975)

Introduction

This chapter will examine the exclusionary policies and practices that impeded women, African-Americans, and the non-middle class individuals from obtaining postal positions, from the late 18th century through the civil rights movement of the 1960s to 1975, the early stages of diversification of the organization. This historical context is important because it will be utilized to show in the later chapters that the initial contact that African-Americans and women, representatives of historically disadvantaged groups, had with the organization still impacts relations in diverse urban postal facilities. Due to insufficient records and the destruction or loss of early records (McMillin, 1938:1-2) it is impossible to construct a historically accurate account of the experiences of all excluded groups. This chapter will piece together a composite of the experiences of African-American and women postal workers. These groups will be examined because, although scattered, there is extant data on their experiences and they have worked in the Service for over a century—as opposed to other racial-ethnic groups such as Latinos and Asians whose official presence in the organization is a more contemporary and largely undocumented phenomenon. A preliminary discussion of the concept of social class among postal workers will also be undertaken in this chapter.

The Early Days: Traditional Resistance to “Out-groups”

When the Continental Congress named Benjamin Franklin the first Postmaster General in 1775, the postal system that the Congress created to help bind the new nation together, to support growth in commerce, and ensure a free flow of ideas and information, was primarily a white male dominated organization. Due to antifeminist and racist prejudices in the larger society, African-Americans, women, and the lower social classes were generally deemed too inferior (intellectually, physically, and ethically) to work in the public sector. However, there were exceptions. Women, from the inception of the United States Post Office, and African-Americans, since the Reconstruction era, worked for the organization in limited numbers.

Women’s Access to Postal Positions

According to McMillin, the first women to work for the Federal Government worked for the Post Office. Mrs. Elizabeth Cresswell, was postmaster at Charleston, MD, under the Continental Congress in 1786-87 and Ms. Mary K. Goddard, was postmaster at Baltimore, MD, and had been office holding for 14 years when the Constitution was signed in 1776. Goddard was placed in charge in 1775 and continued to hold the position until 1789 (McMillin, 1938:3). Although women began to work in official postal positions from the inception of the organization, the ones noted above who held high level positions were exceptions; the few women who worked in the Service mainly held low level positions or worked in an unofficial capacity alongside their husbands and fathers. In general, the presence of women in official government positions, including postal positions, was met with public opposition.

The traditional sentiment that women should not hold postal positions was so fervent that a women's sex disqualified her from Civil Service jobs in the Post Office until the mid-1960s because appointing officers had the authority to specify sex in making selections for positions (Kessler-Harris, 1982:308). Once women passed the Post Office civil service exam, their names were held on a "female register" which was opened at the discretion of the postmaster (Kessler-Harris, 1982:308). Although these practices were common in all industries, the federal government was among the worst offenders (Kessler-Harris, 1982:309). However, few and scattered, women were working for the federal government as copyists and low-grade clerks by 1862 (Kessler-Harris, 1982:143). And when they were hired, McMillin notes, women "as a rule....did not receive either titles, responsibility, or salaries" comparable to male postal workers (1938:4). Antifeminist sentiments contributed to public outrage when, in 1862, the Dead Letter Office of the Post Office Department, authorized to hire twenty-five clerks, gave eight of the positions to women. The number of "Ladies of the Dead Letter Office had doubled to 16 by 1863, however, their salaries were much below that of men clerks (McMillin, 1938:6)². When the Service discovered women to be as productive as their male colleagues, the department promptly hired more women, in limited numbers, at the reduced rate (Kessler-Harris, 1982:143) until the early 1900s. In addition to unequal pay between men and women, Kessler reports that in 1862 women postal employees were "ridiculed and insulted by male colleagues who stared, blew smoke in the women's faces, spit tobacco juice, and gave cat calls or made obnoxious remarks" (1982:143).

² Women received \$400 to \$700 annually (and only one woman had the latter salary), while the men received \$600 to \$900, with most receiving \$800 (McMillin, 1938:6).

African-Americans' Quest for Postal Positions

The primary difference in the early experiences of women and African-American's quest for postal positions is that, although both were considered second-class citizens (or non citizens, in the case of slaves), legislation prohibited African-Americans from working in the public sector except, in miniscule numbers, as messengers and laborers. "Even in the northern states in which the Negro was granted suffrage—and it was by no means a uniform practice—Negro service in public life before the Civil War, except as messenger or laborer, was nonexistent" (Krislov, 1967:10). Postal work was closed to nonwhite employment. Although, there is no way of knowing the extent to which slaves and free blacks delivered mail, it is clear that public sentiments contributed to the enactment of a policy against this practice, the passage of which was urged by Postmaster General Gideon Granger, in 1802.

Granger suggested, in a confidential letter that there were objections to Negro mail carriers of a nature too delicate to engraft into a report. Unflinchingly, Granger cautioned against "everything which tends to increase their knowledge of natural rights, of men and things, or that affords them the opportunity of associating, acquiring, and commuting sentiments and of establishing a chain or line of intelligence" (Krislov, (1967:9)³. In effect, mail distribution by African-Americans might teach blacks the pernicious doctrine that a man's rights do not depend on his color. Clearly racism is the operative concept since this was during a time when private contractors provided the bulk of mail service and there was no mechanism for enforcement of these kinds of prohibitive

³ Cited by Litwak, Leon. 1961. North of Slavery, page 58. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

decrees. In 1810 Congress legislated that only a free white person could be employed carrying the mail of the United States. This general prohibition was re-enacted in 1825 then modified in 1828 when Postmaster General John McLean ruled that Negroes were only permitted to carry mailbags from stagecoach to post office, provided they worked under white supervision. Prohibitions against African-American postal employment, despite attempted repeals, were not formally repealed until after the Civil War, in 1865 (Krislov, 1967:10).

It was not until the conciliatory patronage policy set up by the Republican Party during Reconstruction (1865-76) that African-Americans were formally allowed to work for the federal government. Foner notes, “In virtually every county with a sizable black population, blacks held some local office during Reconstruction” (1990:152). During this period blacks also held positions “at all levels of government” (Foner, 1990:150) and received patronage posts, which included postal positions. John W. Curry is believed to be the first African-American letter carrier. According to a two-page document retrieved from the Postal Historian, Curry began working for the Service in 1867 and served for 32 years in the Washington, D.C. Post Office. The first African-American postmaster has not been determined; however, the earliest known is Dr. Benjamin Boseman who was appointed postmaster of the Charleston, South Carolina, Post Office on March 18, 1873 and served until he died on February 23, 1881⁴.

In 1868, white Americans were deeply concerned with the dramatic innovations Reconstruction brought to American politics (Foner, 1990:142). For the first time since

⁴ African-American Postal History, Historian, USPS, June, 1989.

President Jackson designated the Postmaster General a cabinet member in 1829, African-Americans were able to gain access to the federal spoils system⁵. Those blacks who declared themselves Republicans, the dominant party during and after the Civil War, received a number of federal appointments. The appointment of black postal officials and postmasters to positions, requiring intelligence, diligence, and respectability, created a sense of anxiety among whites and pride among African-Americans⁶. Krislov notes that African-Americans “took great pride—perhaps excessive pride—in even minor appointments in the public sector” (Krislov, 1967:12). The recounting of African-American achievements, according to Krislov, approached the pathetic; Booker T. Washington expressed a similar sentiment:

“[A]nd the man who ran the elevator or merely washed windows in Washington, (particularly if the windows or elevators belonged to the United States Government) felt that he was in some way superior to a man who cleaned windows or ran an elevator in any other of the country. He felt that he was an office holder! [T]he average Negro naturally feels that there must be some special value to him as an individual, as well as to his race, in holding a position which white people don’t want him to hold, simply because he is a Negro” (Harlan and Blassingame, 1972:435).

When President Hayes ended Reconstruction in the South, the equal opportunity premise embedded in the civil rights initiative of the policies waned. However, Krislov suggests that significant black appointments to the federal service were made as compensatory measures during this time (1967:13). The significance of the African-American presence and the integral role they played in the historical development of the

⁵ The spoils system is also known as the patronage system whereby the party in office appoints members of their party to key decision making positions in the government.

⁶ Shortly after reconstruction Mr. W.W. Cox and his wife ran a post-office in their hometown in Mississippi. Mr. Cox and his wife generated a state of excitement throughout the state, because ‘coloured’ people held a postmaster position. By the end of the century, Mrs. Cox received nationwide acclaim for holding a postmistress position (Harlan and Blassingame, 1972:435; Franklin, 2000:342).

Service, remains overlooked and understated. Postmaster General Wanamaker (1889-1893) is accredited for “being personally responsible” for the invention of placing letterboxes at the people’s homes (Germano, 1984:26). However, Philip B. Downing, an African-American received two patents on October 27, 1891 for his letterbox invention (Webster, 1999:6). Other African-Americans have been credited for inventing other postal gadgets and devices. For example, William Barry, has been credited with inventing the postmarking and canceling machine and William Purvis, who was granted a patent for his invention of the fountain pen, was also accredited for inventing the hand stamp.

During the turn of the 20th century, communal violence directed at African American office holders also increased. Woodward sums up the practices of the period by stating, “While the state [South Carolina] had accustomed itself peacefully to dozens of Negro postmasters before, the appointment of one in 1898 at Lake City, touched off a mob that burned the postmaster up in his own house and shot down his family as they tried to escape” (1974:87). This reaction to black postal workers was not confined to a particular region or industry. Racial strife had reached a point of “unprecedented violence” throughout the country (Woodward, 1974:114).

Social Class in the Pre-Civil Rights Era Post Office

To understand the role that social class plays in the interaction patterns of postal workers in diverse urban facilities, we need to consider two dimensions—economic and behavioral. Marger notes that social classes can be understood as groupings of people who share roughly similar incomes and wealth, similar occupations, and similar levels of

education; the three aspects of class create economic commonality. The second dimension of class may be thought of, according to Max Weber⁷, as groupings in which people share not only similar socioeconomic status but also similar lifestyles—the two concepts are interdependent (Marger, 1999:26)⁸.

Traditionally, prior to the late 1960s, the basis of the class breakdown of postal workers was based on two concepts. The first is according to federal pay plans, which are hierarchically arranged according to an occupational ranking system. Theoretically, another indicator of class is status differences among workers. In this respect, the Dahrendorfian notion that society is divided into two opposing groups—those who have and do not have the authority to give orders to others (Dahrendorf, 1959) is quite evident in the postal bureaucracy. As Krislov indicates,

“It is likely that class and status considerations...are more firmly and constantly implanted in the awareness of the [federal bureaucracy] participants. Status must be kept in evidence in governmental service for two reasons. In the first place the stigmata create the distinction. In a democratic, bureaucratic structure, authority is transmitted largely through the establishment of the hierarchy. In the second place the signs of station deliberately, legally, and necessarily are overt; a constitutional order except under extraordinary circumstances insists upon publicized conferral of offices and power” (1967:98-99)⁹.

Race and gender intersect with class and status differences in federal bureaus; historically, it is quite evident in the Service where it was most commonly the case that

⁷ Gerth, Hans, and C. Wright Mills. 1946. From Max Weber. New York: Oxford University Press.

⁸ Although class and status are interdependent, according to Weber, this is not necessarily the case relative to contemporary postal workers. For example, some workers do not earn high salaries but have high levels of education and the converse is also quite prevalent; some workers have high salaries and low levels of education. The result is that status, in terms of life style differences, also varies in ways that indicate lack of class-status interdependency.

⁹ Krislov notes that although differentials such as titles, designations, and pay are less than in industry they are more visible in the public than in the private sector (1967:99). Status differences, discussed in a later chapter on class in the post-Civil Rights Service, are strictly enforced in terms of dress and comportment in the Service. For example, supervisors are expected to wear attire and comport themselves in ways which distinguish them from their employees.

women and African-American postal workers received lower grades and pay than Caucasian males. In the pre-civil rights era, hiring, promotion, and pay increases were given to white male postal workers more than to women and African-Americans. “In the federal service, the intermingling of [gender,] racial and class status problems [are] clearer than in most aspects of our society. Class lines are neatly and decisively etched in the specification of pay plans. Within these major divisions both class and status are carefully, even lovingly, demarcated” (Krislov, 1967:98). Krislov’s two-dimensional approach is in part Marxist and in part Weberian. The two parties in conflict in federal organizations are high class/status groups such as the administrators and managers who are often in conflict with the low status workers. However, in contemporary urban facilities, social class and status are theoretically and conceptually much more complex than Krislov’s dated conceptualization of them. Social class and status divisions are interrelated to race and gender divisions. The increased presence of African-Americans and women, who come from a myriad of social class backgrounds, has significantly altered social class relations among workers in contemporary urban postal facilities. Class and status are so complex that there are limits to the extent that they can be demarcated in urban postal facilities. However, since the social class background of postal workers did not significantly change until after the Civil Rights Act of 1964, an in-depth discussion of present-day social class relations will be discussed in a later chapter. For now, we offer an interpretative discussion of the pre-civil rights governmental policies and practices that facilitated the inclusion and, conversely, restrictions on

African-American and women's access to postal positions and equal opportunity in the federal job market.

The Duplicitous Role of the Federal Government

Despite the different time periods that women and African-Americans began postal work in official positions, there were striking similarities in the ways in which governmental policies and practices, depending on public sentiments, contributed to the ebb and flow of their presence in the organization until the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Zwerling and Silver (1992) posit that although it may seem that the "Postal Service has monopolistic power to discriminate against blacks more easily than is possible in the competitive private sector, its history, strict EEO, civil service, and union regulations, and empirical evident on government employment all suggest it is less likely to do so" (653). Conversely, Wells states, "Historically, the federal government has used discriminatory selection procedures to bar women and minorities from its civil service positions" (1984:32). Unequivocally, segregation of African-Americans [and female workers] from white male employees, a fundamental feature of the federal government before the 1960s, contributed to their unequal treatment (King, 1995:16). Although there is a tendency for theorists to suggest that the federal government was either protective or neglectful of the employments rights of historically disadvantaged groups, this paper suggests that it did both. Thus, it is in all probability more accurate to suggest that the federal government played a duplicitous role in women's and African-American's struggle to gain access to public sector positions.

I will review acts and executive orders that show that the federal government operated on both sides of the equality dilemma from the late 19th century until the enactment of civil rights policies in the late 1960s. On the one hand, the government's policies contributed to the inclusion of African-Americans and women in the public sector employment, enabling both opportunities for gainful employment and personal advancement, even if based on the exigency of wars and at the convenience of white men. Conversely, the federal government also sustained socially approved discriminatory and exclusionary policies and practices until a series of executive orders during the 1960s strengthened, but by no means equalized, the prospect of equal employment opportunities for women and minorities.

The Post Office, it has been suggested, was the first branch of the federal government that hired women, even as postmistresses, in the 18th century (McMillin, 1938:3). It is very likely that, as Fuchs-Epstein (1993:33) notes in her study of women in the law, the most practical reason for their early inclusion in the Service is that women, as in other endeavors and businesses formerly closed to them due to discrimination, assisted their fathers and husbands who were appointed or contracted to work the mails. This is most likely the case because historically most postal facilities were small one-room operations, customarily located in general stores or in small post offices where the postmaster and members of his or her family often lived and processed mail. Thus, it can be suggested that the Post Office was progressive for hiring women, although in limited numbers and under conditions that were extremely unequal to their male counterparts. For example, one of the earliest administrative acts of discrimination against women

occurred in 1853 when Congress passed a law to set up a separate federal pay scale for women. It set up four clerk classes who were paid from \$1,200 to \$1,800 and four sub-clerical classes who were paid \$720 to \$840 annual salary; women were placed in an intermediate class (McMillin, 1938:4). This statutorily-enacted salary difference between men and women, which did not change until 1923 (Wells: 1984:35), ensured that women who worked for the Service would not earn as much as men¹⁰.

In 1883, the Pendleton Act, most commonly referred to as the Civil Service Act, established competitive examinations in all federal departments. Congress gave Civil Service Commission (CSC) the responsibility for supervision over recruitment, examinations, promotions, and transfers of federal employees (Wells, 1984:33; Germano, 1984:23). The intent of the CSC, for at least three decades until the Woodrow Wilson administration (1913-1920), was to emphasize meritocracy in making appointments and to decrease inequality which was manifested in three ways: “First, the unequal treatment of Black Americans [and women] compared to Whites, which thereby conferred second-class citizenship upon them; second, such relations were frequently justified as being beneficial to Black Americans [and women] themselves, and their support for them was commonly invoked; and third, in Federal government department segregation was often disguised as a rational reorganization, the outcome of which happened to isolate Black American [and female] employees from their White peers and to consign them to the worst jobs” (King, 1995:9). The need for legislation was clear. Although women were

¹⁰ Although there are instances where women were contracted to deliver mail as post riders, they did so on a substitute basis or if they pretended to be a man. Otherwise, as a matter of practice, women were not allowed to deliver mail, in a formal capacity. Kessler-Harris (1990) provides a 1919 photograph of one of the first women, according to the Women in Industry Service, hired to deliver mail in Washington, DC (221).

appointed before the Civil War and African-Americans shortly thereafter, in 1883 women received a mere 10 percent of total federal appointments for that year (McMillin: 1938) and only 1 percent of the federal workforce was African-American (Wells, 1984:34) represented by 620 black civil servants (King, 1995:45).

CSC did not end abuses in the patronage system in the Post Office or level the playing field for women and African-Americans. Many postal facilities were exempt from its inspection because the provision covered only those facilities with fifty or more employees; thus, Congress defended its control of local appointments in the decades following the passage of the Act (King, 1995:45; Germano, 1984:23). The activities of CSC did, however, initially contribute to an increase in female and black public sector employment. By 1910 African-American federal employment increased to 6 percent (Wells, 1984:34) and women made up 35 percent of the federal workforce appointments in that year—accounting for over 8 percent of civil service. These gains were made despite the Commission’s acceptance of employment discrimination.

However, further growth in the presence of African-Americans and women in federal positions was stymied by three factors. First, following the attempts of other federal departments, in 1913 Postmaster General Albert S. Burleson established a formal policy of segregation in postal facilities that was already in practice informally¹¹, even if this resulted in the absence of facilities, such as lunchrooms, for black postal workers (King, 1995:30). Second, CSC enacted a policy of requiring that photographs be

¹¹ Bills were introduced, although none passed, in Congress to compel segregation in federal departments and prohibit the appointment of blacks in position of authority over Caucasians (Krislov, 1967:20). Women were already effectively segregated from male workers in that they occupied low level positions and were largely found doing jobs that were designated female work such as working mails that needed to be forwarded or sewing postal mail bags.

submitted with each applicant's application (Wells: 1984:35), which proved to be a "potent weapon for discrimination" (Krislov, 1967:21). This policy contributed to a decrease in the black federal workforce, from 6 percent in 1910 to 5 percent in 1914. The policy ensured that hiring officials could identify black applicants and discriminate against them—not hiring blacks or only hiring them for low-pay clerical and custodial positions (Wells, 1984:35) regardless of their qualifications. This practice did not end until 1939 and was followed by a fingerprint requirement in 1940 (King, 1995:48). Third, CSC restricted women's access to federal jobs, even before they reached the hiring queue, because it did not open examinations to women until 1919 and appointing officers had the legal right, according to the Commission, to specify the sex desired when requesting certification of eligibles (McMillin, 1938:20) until 1962 (Kessler-Harris, 1982:309).

The Gains of Wars/The Spoils of an Administration

The duplicitous role that the government played in its relations with African-Americans and women became more complex during the first few decades of the century. Jim Crow segregation which had spread throughout the country and labor strife in the northern centers effectively locked African-Americans out of postal positions until the migration, when it is estimated that over three hundred thousand African-Americans migrated from the South to states in the North and West for industrial employment (Franklin, 2000:376). Women's access to postal positions was also effectively blocked. Specifically, in 1913, Postmaster General Burleson amended the following regulations of the post office department:

“Section 157, Postal Laws and Regulations of 1913 is hereby amended to read as follows: No married woman will be appointed to a classified position in the [Post Office] nor will any woman occupying a classified position...be reappointed to such position when she shall marry, provided that these prohibitions shall not affect the appointment or reappointment of postmasters at first class office.....Whenever any woman employed in the [Post Office] marries, she shall, if retained in the Service, take oath of office anew” (cited in McMillin, 1938: 26).

Between World Wars I and II African-Americans and women’s postal appointments moved in parallel. Before World War I, with limited resistance from white males, both groups flocked to ‘good government’ jobs in the Post Office, despite “low pay and poor working conditions” (Germano, 1984:27) contributing, in part, to a significant increase in public sector employment. Thus, by the end of the First World War, in 1919, women made up 20 percent of the federal labor force, despite protective legislation in many states that “regulated the number of hours per day and week [women could work outside the home], prohibited night work for women, and prohibited women from working in certain occupations (such as bartending and mining)” (Lehrer, 1987:3). As of 1918, blacks made up 5 percent of the federal work force, which represented a 1 percent decrease from 1910 attributed to a CSC practice which required photographs be submitted with employment applications, as noted earlier. During this period, African-Americans, however, experienced substantial gains in employment opportunities in the federal government (Krislov, 1967:21).

In between the wars, due to racial tensions and fear of economic competition among whites, both African-Americans and women found it difficult to retain postal and other federal positions. Still, by 1928, African-Americans occupied 15 percent to 30 percent of all jobs in urban postal facilities, largely due to the growing number of

northern-educated blacks (Spero and Harris, 1931:180-1). After World War I, many were pushed out of these desirable positions. Woodward explains, “They were squeezed out of federal employment more and more. Negro postmen began to disappear from their old routes...”(1974:115). Women postal workers fared no better. “Section 213 of the federal government’s 1932 Federal Economy Act decreed that in the event of personnel reductions, married employees should be fired first if the spouse also held a job with the federal government¹². Unsympathetic supervisors used the Act to fire women, and within a year more than 1,600 female employees had been dismissed” (Kessler-Harris, 1982:257). Indicative of this phenomenon, an historical article in a postal magazine notes, “World War 1 brought women temporarily into the Post Office Department as carriers....” (A Century of Progress, Postal Life Series, 2000).

A number of policy changes in the 1930s contributed to the curtailment of the most blatant forms of discrimination in the labor market. Congress, in response to women’s organizations, repealed the marital clause in 1937. This was immediately followed by the Fair Labor Standards Act, 1938, (FLSA) which deemed that employers could no longer continue the practice of refusing to hire African-Americans and women and could no longer hire them for lower wages than white male workers (Kessler-Harris, 1982:314). The policy established a minimum wage and maximum number of hours per week employment regulations (Franklin, 2000:439). Quite significant for African-Americans and women, FLSA made it no longer necessary to indicate one’s race on applications and outlawed the submission of photographs with employment applications,

¹² In 1979, although perfunctory, postal applications still required disclosure of family members who work for the Service.

resulting in major in-roads in African-Americans and women's access to federal positions. The Ramspeck Act of 1940 extended meritocratic criteria to 80% of federal employees and the Civil Service Commission ruled that skin color is neither here nor there to the question of qualification for appointment in civil service positions.

Fair labor regulations, regardless of specificity and content, did not end the discriminatory role of the government, which became unmistakably clearer during the Roosevelt presidency. The mid-1930s was a period of expansion of the federal government and political regeneration among black legislators, judges, members of the board of education and city councils (Franklin, 2000:428). These members affectionately referred to as Roosevelt's black cabinetees unswervingly called the government to task. In 1941, Franklin D. Roosevelt created Executive Order 8802 in response to the urgent need to ameliorate race relations in the country. The order states, "...there shall be no discrimination in the employment of workers in defense industries or Government because of race, creed, color or national origin....and it is the duty of employers and of labor organizations....to provide for the full and equitable participation of all workers in defense industries, without discrimination because of race, creed, color, or national origin" (Franklin, 2000:480). The Fair Employment Practices Committee (FEPC) was set up to receive and investigate complaints of discrimination in violation of the order, however ineffectual it was in the face of personal interviews and other exclusionary policies set up by CSC such as the 'rule of three.' This regulation allowed hiring officials to select a white who ranked second over a black who ranked first. FEPC nevertheless

contributed to significant increases in African-American and female employment in the federal government.

The growth of the African-American presence, largely in urban centers, increased from 50,000 in 1933 to approximately 200,000 by the Truman presidency and the end of World War II, although many of the newly employed were in low, unskilled, and semiskilled positions. During the late 1940s, discriminatory treatment was normal and, in particular, the Post Office Department's record of bias treatment towards African-American workers was quite disgraceful. According to King, "Before 1942, at no time in the history of the New Orleans Post Office were there more than 38 Negro post office clerks and substitutes, while there were many Negro letter carriers" (1995:69). In fact, until the civil rights act of 1964, it was a southern tradition "that whites work inside and blacks outside" (Jet Magazine, April 19, 1956). Whites wanted to officiate over business matters in postal facilities and work inside these facilities enabled them to avoid extremely hot and humid conditions during the spring and summer months. In urban centers the opposite pattern prevailed. African-Americans were confined to clerical positions inside stations where white men supervised them. As well, they were discouraged from mail delivery due to the organization's tacit concern that perceptions of the organization would be devalued¹³.

By the end of the Second World War, the presence of women in federal positions, particularly in the Post Office, also increased. In reference to female employees, the Post Office Department's 1943 Annual Report states, "As of June 30, 1945, more than one in

¹³ In urban centers, such as NYC, and in suburban and rural areas white men are still disproportionately over-represented in letter carrier positions.

five postal employees was a woman” (A Century of Progress, Postal Life Series, 2000). However, growth was not stable and the relations between African-Americans and women with the organization were remained tenuous. Two years after the end of the war (1947) the number of civilian employees was cut in half between 1945 (3.8 million) and 1947 (1.9 million) and African-Americans were disproportionately represented among those who were displaced (Bradbury, 1952:46). The number of women employees in the federal civil service dropped 14 percent, from 40 percent to 26 percent in 1944 (Wells, 1984:35).

Even when employed by the government, career status was difficult to achieve for African-Americans and women, despite the government’s continued efforts at creating and implementing reconstruction policies. It was not until years after Truman’s 1948 executive order that a fair employment policy forbidding discrimination based on race, creed, color, and national origin, was implemented and portions of the government were desegregated and most government cafeterias were opened to blacks. (Franklin, 2000:432). During the postwar years, the Women’s Bureau received numerous complaints from women who worked for the Post Office; however, they were powerless to intervene¹⁴. According to Kessler-Harris, “The Bureau consistently held to the position that where the law did not explicitly forbid discrimination, it could do nothing. Baltimore postal service workers wrote bitterly to complain that though they had passed the appropriate civil service exams, their names were on a ‘female register, which the postmaster does not wish to open for appointments’ and they would therefore ‘never be

¹⁴ The Women’s Bureau was funded by the Department of Labor in 1919 to investigate the needs of women workers and to recommend legislative solutions (Kessler-Harris, 1982:171).

given the same security of status that is given the men with whom we work” (1982:308). In conferring with the Post Office Department, it assured the Bureau that it was “doing everything within its power to see that qualified individuals receive career status.” Kessler notes that” in fact a woman’s sex disqualified her from civil service jobs in the Post Office until the mid-sixties” (Kessler-Harris, 1982:308). Perhaps, in practice women were “disqualified” from civil service jobs but legally they were not ineligible. In the mid-1950s, President Truman’s Fair Deal policies and his labor legislation came into effect that opened up new employment and other opportunities for African-Americans and women. The goal of equal opportunity for all Americans was further extended by President Eisenhower who ordered his newly appointed five-man committee on Government Employment Policy to survey black employment in government departments and ordered all department heads to banish hiring bias against African-Americans and to make periodic reports to the White House. Eisenhower’s action was clearly a matter of political expediency. A top government aide reported that the President’s “forceful action came when heads of several companies objected to demands that they end hiring discrimination in view of the government’s own ‘disgraceful’ record” (Jet Magazine, March 3, 1955).

Nevertheless, Eisenhower’s Committee launched a nation-wide inspection tour of major U.S. installations to determine whether black federal workers were being hired and promoted without discrimination (Jet Magazine, September 12, 1957). Eisenhower also nominated several blacks for postmasterships during his tenure. Postmaster General Arthur Summerfield supported these efforts by refusing to back down on demands that

southern postmasters enforce non-discrimination orders and upgrade blacks on the basis of ability and seniority. Despite local opposition throughout the South, Summerfield determined to provide equal opportunities for promotion to supervisory positions solely on the basis of merit, and assigned an African-American, Joseph A. Clarke, to investigate discrimination complaints (*Jet Magazine*, April 19, 1956). This was indeed a progressive period for black postal workers both symbolically and practically.

Considering the propensity for organizations to portray workers of different races, ethnicities, and genders working together today, it may be hard for us to imagine but in 1956 postal workers witnessed the display of integration posters—pictures of white and black postal workers working together—in post offices and on postal trucks, much to the dismay of southern postmasters. More practically the equal opportunity premise that Postmaster General Summerfield embraced led, in 1955, to many African-Americans receiving high-level positions they never held before and over 300 were promoted to supervisory positions. Further, there were more black postmasters in the 1950s than during the late 1980s (Jaynes & Williams, 1989:244). The presence of black postmasters and postmistresses may very well explain why there were no protests or complaints of bias during this period, despite the fact that not a single black served on the 1,000-man postal inspection division. Women also made in-roads in postal positions during the 1950s and many were hired, particularly in the South, to work as window clerks in main post office buildings and as postmistresses, although it was still commonly the case that when women were hired they worked in non-career and low-level clerical positions.

The Postal Service, during this pre-affirmative action period, declared that it was pursuing a vigorous equal employment program. Assistant Postmaster General Frederick C. Belen stated, “This means....that we have not given, and do not intend to give anyone any preferential treatment simply because of his race, creed, or color, just as we will not tolerate anyone receiving less than equal treatment because of his race, creed, or color” (NY Amsterdam News, August 31, 1963). Despite the above noted gains and rhetoric, racism within organized labor and anti-black employment practices prevailed in the federal government. However, as the winds of the civil rights movement gained momentum, these were openly and vehemently protested. Black trade unionists demanded that the AFL-CIO end discrimination and segregation within its locals (Amsterdam News, 10/3/59, page 1). The Amsterdam News reported, “the need for action to crack down on Jim Crow in labor unions is imperative...the time is long past when the state and federal government and the labor movement can afford to evade their obligations to act vigorously and firmly against all manifestations of discrimination against Negroes and minorities” (April 15, 1961).

The Floodgates Open: Diversification of the U.S. Post Office

The Civil Rights and Women’s Movement of the early 1960s contributed to a hotbed of activist activities throughout the country. The Post Office in particular was one of the sites of protest among African-Americans and women who were demanding equal employment opportunities. The 1960s was a progressive period for these postal workers because the federal government supported their efforts. In effect, the policies of then President, John F. Kennedy, and the Postmaster General Arthur Summerfield gave credence to their demands. The issues of contention during this period were

multifaceted. One issue was segregation in postal facilities—despite desegregation orders such as the Fair employment executive order number 8802 and the Brown versus Board of Education decision of 1954. Segregation of blacks and whites in postal facilities and postal unions was a politically hot topic during the 1960s. As it stood, until 1961 lunchrooms and restrooms in southern postal facilities were segregated (Jet Magazine, November 30, 1967) despite prior legislation, which forbade segregation in government agencies. Postmaster General Arthur Summerfield cracked down on postal officials who refused to enforce non-discrimination orders in three southern states—Virginia, Alabama, and Texas. The officials balked at carrying out orders to end locker and rest room discrimination and to upgrade Negro employees into major categories (Jet Magazine, August 18, 1960). In 1966, Chicago’s first Negro postmaster Henry McGee reported that in his 38 years as a postal worker he saw conditions change from almost complete segregation to the present time “where opportunities for Negro advancement are limited only to ability and drive” (Jet Magazine, November 30, 1967).

The second issue contributing to tension among postal workers was inadequate restroom facilities for workers and the absence of them for women. An African-American female worker, who began working for the USPS in 1964, reported:

“When I first started in the Bronx, I recall that it was said that women had just recently started coming into the Service as regulars....they used to come in as temps like during the War, I understand, but as far as career positions, they started coming in around the 60’s, maybe the late 50’s, early 60’s. In fact, from what I understand some facilities didn’t even have restroom facilities for women. They had to make some arrangements or even share the same facilities that the men used....they had some kind of system, I guess, when a female was in there somebody would stand guard to make sure that no men entered.”

Finally, a third contentious issue was a system where postal workers were paid low salaries in comparison to similarly situated workers in the private sector¹⁵. This situation disadvantaged all postal workers but was particularly disadvantageous to African-American and women workers, many of the latter were also African-Americans¹⁶. In addition to low pay, this group had to contend with discriminatory hiring and promotion practices, representing a tripartite system of disadvantage in the contemporary USPS.

The Special Case: African-American Postal Workers

Employment of African-Americans postal workers was a two-faced problem and largely one that has not been recorded in African American history books¹⁷. On the one hand, African-Americans did not have trouble getting jobs in urban postal facilities after the end of World War II. Due to discrimination and segregation in the larger society, the Post Office was one of the main work sites where African-Americans with high school diplomas and college degrees sought employment. “The Post office is the graveyard of Negro college graduates. Ambitious black high school grads, swarmed to the Post Office and were hopelessly stuck in low-level, clerical jobs. Nevertheless, a kind of black, genteel and snobbishly elite class arose among black postal workers. For while their jobs

¹⁵ Germano (1983) reports that postal workers earned less than comparable municipal workers such as police and firefighters, in the 1950s.

¹⁶ White women have always been and remain underrepresented in postal positions compared to their representation in the labor market.

¹⁷ J.H. Franklin’s 8th edition of *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of African Americans* mentioned one sentence pertaining to African American postal workers (pg.342) despite their presence in the organization since the end of the Civil War.

didn't pay much, employment was steady, something that could not be said for many other jobs designated for Negroes" (Jet Magazine, November 30, 1967).

In the immediate years following civil rights legislation, African-Americans continued to flock into federal and, in particular, postal positions. "In ten of twelve of the nation's principal cities—New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, Philadelphia, Detroit, Houston, Cleveland, Washington, D.C., Dallas, and San Francisco—Negroes comprised a much larger percentage of the Post Office work force than their community population percentage" (Jet Magazine, November 30, 1967). For example, in 1967 New York had a black population of only 18.5 percent, but 34.1 percent of them worked in the Post Office; Chicago had a 32 percent black population but 63.3 percent worked in the Post Office; Los Angeles had a 17 percent black population but 56 percent worked in the Post Office; Detroit had a 36 percent black population but 56.6 percent worked in the Post Office (Jet Magazine, November 30, 1967). These percentages are indicative of the over-representation of black public sector employment. It began, according to Waldinger, during the postwar period. He notes that by 1950 there were African-American niches in public hospitals, transportation, and the post office. These public sector concentrations kept more African-Americans at work than did the entire manufacturing sector (1996:106).

The significant African-American presence in federal, state, and municipal government has led to a substantial increase in the size of the black middle class since the 1970s. This has contributed to the sentiment that the federal government is a ladder of opportunity for social mobility within the black community. Affirmative action

programs have been deemed the primary cause of this phenomenon. However, it has been noted that another contributing factor was the out-migration of white workers in response to declining salaries and working conditions in government jobs (Cohn, 2000:13) prior to the 1970 strike and reorganization. The quality of the jobs and promotions that African-American postal employees received, however, were problematic throughout the 1960s. Jet magazine reported that, during this period, promotions for black postal workers were “slow, uncertain, [and] often nonexistent” (November 30, 1967). In 1961, when President John F. Kennedy issued Executive order 10925, segregated work patterns and discrimination were widespread. At that time, less than 10 percent of the first-line supervisors were nonwhite. Even in places such as New York City, which had a large number of black workers, white men held the overwhelming majority of first-line supervisory, administrative, and executive positions.

Lawrence W. O’Brien, appointed Postmaster General in 1965 during President Johnson’s administration, hired an African-American, Ronald B. Lee as the director of the Office of Planning and Systems Analysis and approved the promotion or appointment of a number of African-Americans to high positions within the Service. O’Brien, however, did not escape criticism. “In Cleveland, OH, Ervin W. Wilkins who had 3 degrees, a bachelor’s, a master’s and one of law—is stuck in a clerical job. Although Wilkins blames token outside jobs integration which leaves a vast void of college-trained Negroes concentrated in jobs in hotels, transportation and the Post Office, the fact that he remains a lowly clerk despite his obviously superior training says something not so good about the Cleveland Post Office” (Jet Magazine, November 30, 1967). Due to efforts of

the government there was an 8 percent increase in minority supervisors by 1967 and an African-American, John Strachan, was appointed a postmaster in New York City by then President Johnson during this same year.

Strachan, who began work in the Service in 1941, prided himself for being the only black person in the country who was responsible for a half billion dollars worth of revenue. He said, “Even though the Postal Service used to be a last outpost for black degree holders who were denied jobs elsewhere, it can now be a first choice on which a career can be built. We all remember those days but it is somewhat better now” (Ebony, 1974:94). We know very little about the experiences of men like Strachan and the black managers who worked under him; however, they expressed their view that they had to “battle against all kinds of discrimination” and that they held positions that were traditionally held by whites. They also knew that their positions were unique because the majority of black postal workers held lower echelon jobs and the majority of the supervisors were white men¹⁸.

However, there is still a tendency to intertwine and, in fact, equate overrepresentation of African-American postal workers in the USPS with issues of diversity and inclusion. Some have gone so far as to suggest that their presence in the federal government, and the USPS in particular, is indicative of a more tolerant racial environment in the economic sphere. For example, Wilson notes that, from 1973 to 1974, 64 percent of all new federal employees came from minority groups. He also suggests that due to the growth in the black middle class, white employers can no longer

¹⁸ This situation had not changed when I entered NYC and Bronx, NY postal facilities in 1979.

confine black employees to segregated, low skill, or low pay jobs (1987). In sum, Wilson contends that social class and structural shifts in the labor market had more effect on the life chances of blacks than race relations. Further, he suggests that racial strife has moved from the economic sector to the socio-political order where black and white conflicts center around control of residential areas, schools, and local political systems rather than on control of jobs (Wilson, 1987:121).

Even if more in theory than in practice, African-Americans and historically disadvantaged groups find public sector employment attractive because it offers them the kinds of employment protections, both federal and civil service, which insulate them from blatant acts of overt discrimination at the hiring, compensation, and promotion queues. Public sector employment, by and large, ensures that those members of disadvantaged groups who are qualified do not have to contend with being confined to jobs, historically, allocated to members of their groups. Although postal work resembles factory work, and blacks and women are concentrated in lower echelon occupations, they are also found throughout all levels of postal work. As well, postal work is a reasonably well-paid job and contrary to Tomaskovic-Devey's foreboding (1993:158) that the entrance of minorities and women into formerly white male occupations leads to a precipitous drop in earnings, the wages of postal workers has grown impressively over the past few decades. Hacker also has a pessimistic view of the over-representation of African-Americans in the civil service. He believes that these positions such as postal workers and correctional officers become ghettoized. That is, as the number of blacks in these positions increases, the number of whites tends to decline (Hacker, 1992:110). This

is also questionable. There seem to be two factors in postal work that continue to make postal work a desirable occupation for skilled white workers. African-Americans employees, like their counterparts in the private sector, are found occupying positions at all levels of the organizations; however, they are over represented in low-level jobs (Waldinger, 1996:114); as well, African-Americans have lower educational attainment than whites. The combined effect of these two factors is that, although white workers may enter the Service in entry-level positions, their overall higher levels of educational attainment in the larger society, vis-à-vis black workers, significantly increase their chances of moving up in the organizational hierarchy. They have been and remain over-represented in upper-echelon positions in the USPS, even in urban centers where they are the numerical minority.

Nevertheless, postal work is viewed as the one bright light in the relatively dim jobs scene for blacks. According to Waldinger, “In 1990, one out of every four employed blacks held a government job; close to half of the country’s African-American civil servants worked on municipal payrolls. Blacks hold a much higher share of upper level jobs in the public sector than in the private sector; discrimination exerts a less powerful influence on public sector employees than on private sector counterparts; and the public sector seems to be a ladder of mobility into the middle class for blacks more than for whites” (Waldinger, 1996:207). Thus, some scholars suggest that “...public and nonprofit organizations have become havens for much of the black workforce.... Blacks account for over 20 percent of the nation’s armed services, twice their proportion in the

civilian economy. They hold almost a fifth of all positions in the Postal Service, and have similar ratios in many urban agencies (Hacker, 1992:116).

Due to the over-representation of blacks and people of color in urban postal positions, these jobs have taken on a “racial” character in the same way that they take on a gendered one (Tomaskovic-Devey, 1993:144); however, the character of the position is determined by location. The racial character of postal work varies according to geographical location. Where one particular group dominates postal work, it is viewed as a job for that particular group. For example, white workers dominate in suburban and rural postal facilities where a popular conception of postal work is that it is a white male’s job. Comparatively, since black workers dominate in urban facilities, in urban settings postal work is perceptually considered a job that blacks do. As well, contrary to popular stereotypes about the low skills level of black workers, the public sector concentration among African-Americans is not due to low skills or simple skill-based sorting processes; it was found in 1990 that New York municipal workers were far better educated than their private sector counterparts (Waldinger, 1996; Zwerling and Silver, 1992).

The other side of this enduring debate suggests that the public sector concentration of African-Americans should not be taken as an alleviation of, but rather indicative of, the race problem in our society (Hacker, 1992; Tomaskovic-Devey, 1993; Waldinger, 1996). The nature of racial strife has, nevertheless, changed in the post civil rights era. It is institutionalized and hidden in the social structures and everyday practices in bureaucracies (Smith, 1995). The structural inequities, which stem from

institutionalized disadvantage, are now obscured by tightly orchestrated diversity rhetoric.

African-American postal workers are structurally disadvantaged because of two factors that are common to their experiences in the USPS. First, they are concentrated in urban centers where they are the numerical majority. Their high numbers in these facilities contribute to defacto segregation, despite diversity in the organization as a whole. Second, African-American men and women postal workers are concentrated in low-level occupations and in those positions that are, in the larger scheme of things, expendable to the organization. For example, in urban facilities where they are the numerical minority, white men and women tend to gravitate into postal positions, such as postal carrier and administrative/technical support positions, where there is very little possibility that they can be replaced by technological innovations.

Despite the earnings potential that federal employment has offered, concern about blacks' mass entry into government dates back to the turn of the 20th century when Booker T. Washington foreboded blacks' entrance into and desire for labor in "organization[s], which seems to be founded on a sort of impersonal enmity to the man by whom he is employed" (Franklin, 2000:306). This is an important concern of this study because as noted by Waldinger, "government breeds bureaucrats, not entrepreneurs" (1996:113). The USPS in particular breeds a kind of dependency that is most problematic for African-Americans, for other racial-ethnic groups, and for women.

Chapter Summary

There is little question that the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which established relief against discrimination in public accommodations, authorized the Attorney General to institute suits to protect the constitutional rights of citizens, extended the Commission on Civil Rights (Title V), and created Equal Employment Opportunity (Title VII), contributed to more opportunities for African-Americans and women. In fact, these provisions made the Post Office, among other federal jobs, more desirable for historically disadvantaged groups. Intra-agency policy changes, which in part increased postal wages and made postal jobs more desirable for disadvantaged groups, did not by any means equalize the experience of black, white, male, and female postal workers. The most significant changes in the Service were due to the 1970 Postal Strike¹⁹ and the reorganization that followed.

The economic and labor market experiences of African-Americans and women have been the subject of continuous discussion since the beginning of the twentieth century and this interest continues as we move into the twenty-first century. While there is substantial evidence that the labor market experience of both groups has improved significantly since the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, there is also evidence that blacks and women still experience discrimination in the workplace. The USPS is an ideal setting to examine the successes and failures of diversity because blacks and women, as this chapter has shown, have been on an arduous journey, which began in 1775 for women and 1865 for African-Americans, to achieve work opportunities in the federal

¹⁹ For details of the Strike see: Germano, Thomas. 1984. "Labor Relations in the United States Postal Service: A Sociological Perspective. (Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation- City University Research and Graduate Center).

government. Their journey has contributed to the Postal Service's status as one of the most diverse organizations in the United States.

As this chapter has shown, the federal government has played a duplicitous role in the development of diversification of the Service. Until the late 1960s, gender and racial inequality was profound in postal work settings. There were striking similarities in the opposition both groups faced in postal facilities. Both African-Americans and women were deemed second-class citizens throughout society. Currently, African-Americans are over-represented in public sector and postal positions. Women hold close to 50 percent of clerk-carrier positions and over 76 percent of the long-term temporary postal positions. However, as recently as the 1970s African-Americans and women were still complaining bitterly that they were not obtaining deserved promotions; they also complained that managers singled them out for adverse actions. The problem of racial and gender discrimination in the Service—a white male and middle class dominated organization—had reached crisis proportion by the 1970s.

In the contemporary American workplace theories of race and gender relations, as well as the emerging importance of social class relations, are vibrant. However, when theories about race, class, and gender are amalgamated with theories of diversity the picture becomes muddled, which makes it difficult for us to discern what is actually going on in our workplaces. The intent of the following chapters is to examine both the positive and negative aspects of diversity which will help to develop diversity initiatives that are contextually appropriate rather than depend on inappropriate generalizations. More broadly, the study will also examine employee perceptions of their everyday

experiences and interactions among diverse workers within a diverse urban mail processing facility.

A presupposition of this study is that the concentration of ethnic-racial groups and women of color in urban postal facilities and in low level positions has a pernicious effect on the life chances and experiences of African American men and women. These factors, as well, intensify the impersonal enmity of the organization.

CHAPTER V
THE CONTEMPORARY WORK ENVIRONMENT:
AN URBAN MAIL PROCESSING FACILITY

Introduction

The Civil Rights Act of 1964 significantly changed the landscape of urban postal facilities. As shown earlier, the Act, which forbade discrimination based on race, sex, and creed, led to a dramatic increase in postal employment of African-Americans, women, and other racial-ethnic groups. Just as these groups gained a foothold in postal employment, during the 1970s, the organization went through a series of dramatic structural changes. One of those changes, the first major reorganization in 1971, involved increased mechanization and automation of postal work. In the contemporary scene, the vast majority of entry-level workers do work that is machine-oriented. Another significant change that occurred during the 1970s is that the USPS, with the exception of first-class mail, no longer monopolizes mail services. More recently, technological advances from faxing to Internet services have increased the competitive environment in the provision of mail services. Fear of privatization, which would significantly change postal operations, also concerns postal officials.

The intent of this chapter is to examine what it is like to work in a demographically diverse mail processing facility in an urban center, from the perspective of postal employees. Following a description of the organization, it will address the following issues: What is the process by which people get into the USPS? What are their initial impressions of the USPS? What is it like to work in a mail processing

facility? What is the culture of the organization? How do employees adjust to machine-oriented work?

The Organization

Even with ebbs and flows of its employees, the USPS is the second largest civilian employer in the nation, after Walmart. According to the Califano Report (2000), in fiscal year 1999 there were more than 900,000 Postal employees, including 800,000 career employees and more than 100,000 non-career employees. A more recent General Accounting Office (GAO) report showed a slight decline in career employees, from 786,446 in 2000 to 751,650 in 2002. There was no mention of whether or not this change in the number of career employees was offset by an increase in temporary or part-time employees or due to the deployment of machinery, decreasing the number of employees required by the organization.

A recent study of violence in the Postal Service, states that in comparison to the national civilian labor force, “postal employees are more likely to be male (63 vs. 54 percent); less likely to be white (65 vs. 78 percent); twice as likely to be Black (22 vs. 10); about as likely to be Hispanic (7 vs. 8 percent); and more likely to be Asian or other races (7 vs. 3 percent) (Califano, 2000:9). The demographic representation of national postal employees is: White males (41.1%) and White females (22.6%); African American males (11.2%) and African American females (10.1%); Hispanic American males (5.1%) and Hispanic American females (2.4%); Asian American males (4.5%) and Asian American females (2.5%); American Indian males and females (0.3%) each.

Hispanics, American Indians, and white women are underrepresented among postal workers (GAO Report, 2003:2).

The United States Postal Service (USPS) is organized into ten geographic areas; a vice-president heads each. Eighty-five performance clusters report to the areas. Each performance cluster includes about 10,000 employees. Within each performance cluster, a district manager and facility manager oversee operations and provide support services, such as human resources (Califano, et al, 2000:7). Currently, the United States Postal Service delivers approximately 180 billion pieces of mail each year and Postal workers perform a diverse range of jobs in a variety of settings, which includes window services, custodial, administrative, and personnel work. Four major unions represent more than 700,000 career employees who are covered by collective bargaining agreements. Thus, they have the right to bargain over wages, hours, and working conditions, but like other federal employees they do not have the right to strike. Binding arbitration resolves impasses in contract negotiations. Employees represented by unions are known as craft employees. The largest postal union, the American Postal Workers Union (APWU), represents more than 344,000 window and clerical workers in mail processing and distribution facilities. APWU also represents maintenance and motor vehicle employees in the Postal Service. The National Postal Mail Handlers Union (NPMHU) represents more than 61,000 employees who move and process mail.

This study will focus on an urban mail processing postal facilities which operate 24 hours a day, and on postal employees²⁰ who are primarily confined to a particular work setting for their entire work tour. These employees do not have a great deal of freedom to determine the ethnicity, race, gender or social class background of those they interact with on a daily basis.

Smaller unions represent nurses in the Postal Service and postal police (Califano, et al, 2000:7)²¹. Non-craft employees such as executives, managers, line supervisors, and specialists in human resources, labor relations, accounting, law, and information technology can join three management associations: The National Association of Postmasters of the United States, National League of Postmasters of the United States, and National Association of Postal Supervisors. Though these associations are not unions in the traditional sense, they are entitled by law to be consulted on supervisory classifications and benefits.

‘We Work for the Post Office’

The manner in which employees enter postal work has not changed significantly since 1971 when the United States Post Office was transformed into the United States Postal Service. Postal workers are required to take and pass an examination in order to become career employees. Traditionally, as the majority of those interviewed for this study indicated, potential workers hear about the examination from family members and

²⁰ This study will focus on the experiences of distribution clerks, mail processors, and mail handlers who distribute mail, handle automated equipment, and sort mail by hand. It will also include those supervisors and managers who oversee their work operations.

²¹ This study does not include carriers. However, as a point of information, the National Association of Letter Carriers (NALC), represent more than 240,000 city letter carriers; the National Rural Letter Carriers’ Association represents more than 55,000 career rural and 57, 000 substitute and relief carriers.

friends who worked for the Service at the time they applied for the position. Since the late 1980s, another manner in which prospective employees become aware of the examination period is through announcements listed in local newspapers. Additionally, another recent development is the proliferation of agencies that offer training programs designed to help people pass postal and other federal examinations. These for-profit agencies post advertisements in local newspapers in order to attract prospective students and train them on all aspects of taking and passing the clerk-carrier examination and keep them abreast of examination openings. These agencies also emphasize the high salaries and good benefits that the job offers, contributing to making postal positions accessible and highly attractive to ethnic-racial minorities and women. They do not, however, inform potential examinees about what it is like to work for the organization.

The Clerk-Carrier (Level-5) and Mail Handler-Mail Processor (Level-4) examinations are offered to the general public and are the most common entrance to postal work. In the urban area where the interviews for this study were conducted, the open examination period occurs every three to four years and testing sites are set up throughout the city. One of the respondents, a retired black woman, reported that she has returned to the Service to work as an examiner at several test sites. She noted that thousands of people report for the examination but stated,

“I don’t think many will pass the test because so many of them can’t read. Some of them didn’t even speak English. They couldn’t read the instructions, let alone, the exam. A lot of them were Chinese or something and they would try to cheat and tell each other how to answer questions. I had to tell them all the time to not talk during the exam....and those who could read didn’t understand how to take the test so it didn’t matter much if they cheated...they couldn’t read. They bring anybody in the Post Office now, as long as they’re alive it don’t matter.”

The passing mark for the examination is 70 percent; however, in the northeast urban centers, where thousands of people take and pass the exam, it is rare that those who receive scores that hover around the passing mark will actually get called from the waiting list for a career position. In spite of this, increased automation has significantly increased the use of part-time workers, according to APWU (*The Postal Worker*, July, 1996:4), which ensures that many of those who pass the examination will get an opportunity to work as casuals and transitional employees. Casuals and Transitional Employees are non-career craft employees who work in all aspects of mail processing as mail handlers and mail processors. Casuals do the same work as career employees; however, their pay is significantly lower and varies based on the district they work in. For example, Casuals in New York City earn \$9.50 per hour, approximately half the pay of entry-level clerks, and in Brooklyn, New York they earn \$7.00 per hour. Casuals could not work more than 89 days consecutively and did not receive health benefits, union representation, or other employee benefits. It is generally the case that Casuals can work continuously for years or even decades without getting hired as a career employee. Management would ensure that the Casuals they want to keep, based on work ethic, attendance, and punctuality, are scheduled for a day off on their 90th day and these workers would begin another 89 days tour thereafter.

Transitional Employees (TEs) were hired during the time when the organization was undergoing a series of reorganizations during the early 1990s. They were part-time employees who could work for 6 months at a time and were, like casuals, rehired for a number of 6-month tours. These workers did not receive health benefits, could not bid

for positions but were, unlike Casuals, represented by the American Postal Workers Union (APWU). Additionally, TEs, most of whom were women, were also paid a higher hourly wage than Casuals. A number of TEs were hired for career positions, as are Casuals with high scores on the entrance exam; however, the TE position was phased out in the late 1990s.

Depending on one's educational attainment, some level of planning or preparation is required in order to pass postal entrance examinations because they are timed tests, which seems to be intimidating to the average applicant who has a high school diploma. The mail handler exam contains address comparisons wherein prospective employees have to identify whether 2 addresses are the same or different. The mail processor exam, in addition to address comparisons, has an analytical component wherein applicants are asked to complete alphanumerical sequences. The Clerk-Carrier exam has several components consisting of address comparisons, sequencing, and memorization of addresses. Most of the respondents, as well as people I have spoken to who did not pass the exam, expressed their opinion that the address memorization portion of the test was the hardest section. Nevertheless, those who had knowledge of how to prepare for examinations, either through social networks or training programs, found them easier than those who did not.

On the whole, the postal examinations for entry-level positions are not difficult. They are designed to test one's ability to read, make comparisons, and think logically and for clerk-carriers to memorize addresses. They are practical examinations for the kinds of work done in the Service. Once an employee passes the examination his or her name

is maintained on a waiting list. Since the government requires the Service to maintain diversity in hiring and promotions, there is some manipulation of the waiting list such that the Service is allowed to bring in individuals from underrepresented groups such as Hispanics and Asians in some districts and special groups such as veterans and the handicapped. As postal positions become available—anywhere from 50 to 100 at a time—through attrition (terminations, promotions, retirements, and the creation of new jobs, prospective employees are called in for an interview²². The number of new employees in the facility varies from one year to another.

During the interview, prospective employees fill out an application, which is reviewed with them by a personnel clerk, and are scheduled for medical examinations. Providing applicants are fit for duty and pass a drug test, they are hired for a position.

When asked if the hiring process was fair, a white male respondent stated:

“It seems to me that they don’t have a hiring policy. If you pass the test, you got called and they asked simple questions. Is that fair? I don’t know but it seemed to me that they were hiring people of different backgrounds and I didn’t hear of any situations where one group was asked questions that were different from others. If you were breathing and you wanted to work and you got a high enough score you got the job. I guess it is fair.”

Although the above comment suggests that it is easy to get a postal job, this is not the case. It depends on one’s entry-level exam score, which must be 80-100 in order for someone to be called in for a career position from any particular hiring list. Once the list reaches the mid-80s another exam is usually given and another list generated shortly thereafter. It is often the case that Casuals with low scores, such as in the 70s, are called in for temporary work. Otherwise, once called in for a career position, as the above

²² Turnover in the facility is not that high; according to informants it is approximately 3 percent every year.

statement indicates, the interview process is a formality wherein official papers are processed and is not part of the formal screening process.

Employees initially hired for career positions are assigned as part time flexible schedule employees. These workers normally work full-time hours but are considered “part-timers” or “flexies” because they are not guaranteed a full day’s work and have no choice over their work hours, days off, or work assignments; these are determined by Human Resources when they conduct station need assessments. Most new employees begin work at the Service working on tours (or shifts) that begin anywhere from 4pm to 1am. This is primarily because most of the incoming mail begins arriving at processing centers after the close of the normal business day. These tour hours can be ideal for some workers, such as single mothers. Conversely, many of the respondents stated that the first tour they worked on was inconvenient and impinged upon their family responsibilities. Others complained that there is too much work on the evening tours, in comparison to work on the day or midnight tours. Still others said they liked working the evening tours because their days were free for them to take care of other matters, and they could avoid rush hour traffic traveling to and from work.

Initial training classes do not orient workers to work on the work floor or to the flow of the mail; rather, the orientation is largely intended to inform employees of Postal rules and regulations. The orientation involves presentations given by members of the different human resources departments such as Labor Relations, Safety, and Employee Benefits. The overviews convey a sense of the interrelated aspects of different departments in a complex bureaucracy and provide some of the basic rules and

regulations related to conduct expectations. However, many of the people I interviewed said they left orientation with little more than a vague sense of what was expected of them and where they could go for help with job related matters. Many respondents, regardless of years in service, said they had no recollection of orientation but admitted that they “must have attended orientation.” One of the reasons that the rules and regulations do not congeal for employees is because the discussants give their presentations in postal vernacular, using terminology that is hard for new employees to understand. When asked about orientation, a black female respondent who worked for the Service for 8 years stated,

“I don’t know what they were talking about. It was two long, boring, days. We were asleep with our eyes open, okay, I was sleep with my eyes open. All of that postal mumbo jumbo. It didn’t make any sense then but after I was there for a while some of it made sense.”

As indicated in the comment above, most employees learn the rules and regulations on-the-job, through social networks, and from supervisors who inform and remind them of employee restrictions and interdictions.

At the end of the two day orientation, employees are given their work assignments; a large portion of those who attend orientation class together are usually assigned to the same pay locations and work in the proximity of each other during their first few months in the Service. When they report for duty on their first day of work, a supervisor meets them at the clock-in area and they are shown their timecard readers and are assigned locker rooms. The supervisor also escorts the group to their assigned work

area²³. The workroom floors are huge spaces the size of city blocks and with the exception of a few makeshift offices there are no walls that divide the different work areas. Placards hung on the walls or from the overhead tray belts distinguish one section from another.

Depending on the supervisor, as they escort the new workers to their work area, they will engage in small talk and perhaps welcome them to the Service. However, it is quite common that the supervisor will not say any more to new employees than is necessary to get them to their designated work sites. Several respondents said they felt depersonalized by the way they were ‘ordered’ around on their first day of work. An African-American woman with 7 years in the Service said the following:

“It was more like it was very non-personal. It was sort of cold. Militant. It was business. It is almost like they turn you into a number. It was just like this is a business and that is it. It was like you were just a body.”

A white male with 25 years in the Service reported his first impressions:

“My first impression was that it was bureaucratic. First of all it was this huge ass building and I felt like....the first day we went everywhere, they used us everywhere and I got confused as to where I was supposed to be. I just kind of had that feeling that it was military...forms to fill out, lines to stand on.”

First Impressions

Largely, new employees’ initial impressions about work in the Service depend on one’s background and prior work experiences rather than other factors such as whether they have a friend or relative working for the Service. If a new postal employee had worked in a service industry, a factory setting, or in another federal agency before

²³ These employees are administratively assigned a work area based on the needs of the service; however, new employees cannot bid for positions and do not have official assignments.

working for the Service their first impressions were not as extreme as those who did not. For those who came into the Service from semi-professional positions or had little to no work experience prior to working in the Service, their initial impressions ranged from shock and dismay to apathy or haughtiness. New employees, overwhelmingly, stated that the factory work setting of the mail processing facility was disconcerting.

Most of the respondents, and postal workers that I have spoken to over the years said they had the wrong initial impression of work in the Service. They held the sentiment that the façade of postal facilities are nice but give a false impression of what it is like to work inside. A white male employee stated,

“Wow, I felt it was like a dungeon. That was my first impression. It was at GPO, the main building, the fanciest building out of all of them and inside it was like a factory....dust cluttered.....just mail and papers piled up all over the place. Constant work. Work, work, work and you were constantly threatened. [Supervisors said] ‘You can’t fall asleep, you can’t fall asleep.’ That was the first impressions they gave you.”

Although all were aware of their job titles before they began working for the Service, their belief, right up to the point of reporting to work on their first day, was that work in the Service would involve wearing a uniform and selling postage stamps. An African-American woman, whose father also worked for the USPS, began working as a postal clerk in 1964. She made the following statement when asked her first impression of work for the organization:

“When I first started working for the Post Office, I thought as a clerk I would be wearing a crisp white blouse with a tie [and] selling stamps at the window (laughs). I had no idea whatsoever. I know my father used to bring home scheme cards but I really didn’t connect it with what I envisioned as employment in the Postal Service. I really didn’t connect it. Okay, so it was kind of, it was real shocking when I first started working.”

Although there are exceptions, particularly among workers who entered the Service with at least some college credits or a degree, it is uncommon for workers to begin thinking about building a career during their first three to five years in the Service. During these first few years, when they are part-time flexible employees most are too unfamiliar with postal regulations and procedures to navigate the application process for higher level positions. The vast majority of new employees are not aware that they can apply for higher-level positions. Many believe, erroneously, that they are not qualified to apply for these positions because they are part-time employees. Nonetheless, the most significant hindrance to the establishment of career goals among newer employees is that they enter the Service with no plans for making this job their lifetime career. Most of the respondents explained their entrance into the Service vaguely, as though they were not quite sure how it happened. The vast majority of respondents stated that working for the Service was not a career goal and that the only reason they wanted to work for the Service was because it offered higher wages and better benefits than jobs they had before working for the Service.

With the exception of those who worked full-time for private companies in low-level administrative positions, most respondents had previously worked in tenuous (part-time) employment situations with very few, if any benefits prior to entering the Service. Some of the positions they reported to hold before working for the Service were bus drivers for private companies, temporary workers at United Parcel Service, nursing home attendants, waitresses, and factory workers. As well, some respondents reported that they were unemployed, high school graduates, housewives, or college students when they

applied for a position in the Service. An African-American woman with 18 years in the Service, stated the following:

“I thought the salary was good compared to my last job as a daycare worker. It was maybe a little less than double the amount I made working in daycare; it [the daycare job] was really a low-income job but it was a rewarding job. I realize that now.”

With only one exception, respondents stated that when they began working for the Service, they did not intend to stay. By all accounts, the Service offers higher than average earnings for entry-level and temporary positions. For example, effective November 2001, entry-level part-time flexible clerks (Grade 5, Step D) earned \$19.15 and transitional employees (Grade 4) earned \$11.95 per hour (APWU, Jan/Feb, 2002). These wages not only attract workers to the job but also have the effect of keeping them there. One African-American female respondent who worked for the Service for 10 years in the 1980s then resigned in the early 1990s stated,

“The longer you stay in the Post Office, the harder it is to leave. I never wanted to work there from the first day but what can I say, I got pregnant shortly after I began working there. The next thing you know I got married and then had another baby and then a car and credit cards. Where was I going? I had to provide for my kids and I was making good money. You get caught up in it.”

This sentiment is echoed throughout the interviews. It is clear that “once you enter the world of postal salaries and benefits it’s hard to leave, even if you hate it” (Franzen, 1994:65). An Asian woman with over 20 years of service said:

“You don’t know how lucky you are that you left the Post Office. That is one thing that I regret. I regret not leaving a long time ago like when I had [my child] twelve years ago. I should have not come back after I had [my child]. I was thinking about it a lot and I kept putting off returning to work but then I said, ‘What the heck. I have to work so I might as well go back. I had a good job and was making good money for someone who didn’t have a good education. I didn’t go to college. I barely made it out of high school so I mean where was I going,

making this kind of money. That's why I tell [my child] all the time, 'You better get a good education. Don't be a dummy, like me.' I want [my child] to have choices."

The only respondent, a black male mail handler, who stated that he aspired to become a postal employee, began work for the Service shortly after he graduated from high school in the late 1960s. When asked why he wanted to become a postal worker, he stated,

"I don't know, I just liked the way they look in their uniforms and I knew people who worked for the Service so I just thought it would be a good government job. I never wanted to do anything else so when I began working, I knew that I was going to stay."

When asked how he felt when he learned, as the other respondents, that he would neither wear a uniform nor sell stamps, he stated,

"I didn't care by then because like I said I was making good money, more than the other guys in my neighborhood. I was proud to be a postal worker but not anymore, I can't wait until I can retire. I will never work another day in my life!"

An African American woman stated,

"It didn't seem like much of a choice. Between my mother and my sister who were already working there I was sort of propelled into the system, without any knowledge about what was going on. They said, it's a good job. You get a retirement. You make good money. It's a job you'll have for life. You'll be secure."

Based on the reports I received from respondents and conversations I had with Postal workers, very few state that they are proud to work for the Service. There is a tendency, however, for higher-level officials to express a sense of "purpose," or a "mission" in regards to their work. They were, as well, more likely than other workers to express some degree of pride in their work but they also expressed a great deal of on-the-job frustration related to the amount of work they are required to do, non-existent support services, and "ineffective" and "incompetent" upper echelon officials. Postal employees,

who have the kind of jobs that give them the opportunity to use their brains, even if it is only a matter of inputting data on a computer or generating reports, expressed a sense of pride when they discussed their jobs. Those workers who engage in work where they provide a direct, face-to-face, service to other employees²⁴ also expressed higher levels of pride in their work, in comparison to workers who work on the work floor for their entire workday.

When pressed for a response to the question of pride in work, employees had the tendency to say that they feel proud to work for the Service because they provide a service to the public; however, they were ambiguous about the issue of having pride for their jobs in the Service. Most of the respondents noted that they were proud of the amount of money they earn/earned in the Service. Still others expressed a sense of shame in regards to work in the Service. A Hispanic female administrative clerk who has worked for the organization for 15 years stated,

“I don’t think about it. I just come to work, do my job and go home.”

A black female mail processor stated,

“I don’t tell anyone that I work for the Postal Service.”

When asked what she tells people when they ask where she works, she said,

“I try to avoid the conversation but when it comes up, I just say I work downtown or I work for the government. It’s just too much negativity around postal workers; I don’t want them to think I am some kind of insane violent person who is about to ‘Go Postal’ on them”²⁵.

²⁴ Those workers who provide a service to the public, such as several respondents who worked as a window clerk, also expressed pride in their work; however, the primary respondents of this study were postal workers who work in a mail processing facility and who generally do not interact with the public.

²⁵ The term ‘Going Postal’ refers to the mass murders of postal workers by other postal workers, primarily those who were terminated or pending termination from the job. These acts of violence began in the 1980s in the Midwest of the country.

Regardless of title, number of years employed, and demographics, the issue of stress resonated throughout my interviews; most employees stated that they experienced on-the-job stress. This qualitative finding contradicts a recent report of workplace violence conducted in the Service. The “Califano Report” found that postal employees are less likely than national employees to say they experienced any problems with distress and anxiety (2000:27). The different findings may result, in part, from the fact that all of the respondents in this study work in an urban mail processing facility as opposed to the national sample of postal workers used in the report. There are two factors that are identified as contributing to on-the-job stress and, in effect, low levels of worker satisfaction in urban mail processing facilities. They are the organizational culture and the quality of work.

The Work Climate

Since the early 1900’s, a number of commentaries, news reports, and cartoons have tried to depict, describe, or caricature what it is like to work for the Service. Jonathan Franzen, presents one of the most accurate, metaphorically speaking, depictions of the Service:

“Like the Catholic Clergy, the Postal Service is stranger to us than we are to it...despite its ubiquity, the post office remains among the most recondite of American work environments. It’s a foreign country within the country” (1994:64).

The culture of a workplace has an incredible impact on the way that employees understand themselves and their relations to each other and the organization. Most of the respondents of this study stated that when they were new to the Service they were

exasperated by the militaristic, authoritarian, culture of the organization. The process of adjustment to the USPS culture occurs through tertiary socialization and begins, if not during the examination, application and/or interview processes, most assuredly in the two-day orientation class when new employees are introduced to the language of subordination. The language of subordination involves hierarchical concepts in reference to managers and employees. For example, managers and supervisors are consistently designated as “superiors” and employees as “subordinates.” Although the application of authoritarianism and militarism varies from one work section to another some commonly used terms among supervisors and managers are ‘failure to comply,’ ‘insubordination,’ and ‘corrective action.’ Initially, most new workers, especially those who worked in private industries and females, find the use of these terms irksome and offensive. Interestingly, depending on the social class background of employees, initially many employees do not know the meaning of these words; thus, many react to the tone of their supervisor rather than to the meaning of these concepts.

The different orientations that public and private organizations have towards their employees can be used to understand the use of a language of subordination in the Service. Private sector organizations have more leeway than the Service to discriminate at the hiring line and, therefore, to choose those workers who have the kinds of skills and work ethic that are valued by the organization. Even if they hire a member of a minority racial-ethnic group, they will invariably choose one who they at least think will have similar characteristics as the dominant work group, however discriminatory these valuations may ultimately be. In the private sector, workers come into a company that

believes and makes them believe that they are the best qualified for the position and to varying degrees they are treated accordingly. If, over the course of time, a private company finds that they have incorrectly assessed an employee's skills, commitment, and potential they terminate them with impunity. The Service, due to Civil Service provisions, does not have this leeway either during hiring or termination.

The USPS, because it is a federal employer, is legally obligated to hire anyone who passes the written and medical examinations. If a new employee passes the 89-day probationary period, they are bargaining unit employees and the Service must go through a grievance procedure, a time and resource consuming process, in order to terminate them. The orientation of postal officials to new workers, in particular, and all workers in general, is significantly more guarded than in private industry. Postal supervisors typically assume that employees do not have the skills, commitment, work ethic, or proper "attitude" to do the job. However, their perceptions about worker characteristics tend to vary based on the demographics of employees (race, class, gender, for example) and the requirements of the work area. A top-down militaristic style of management is used to enforce productivity among employees who are not trusted to give a fair day's work. Thus, the use of the language of subordination is an effective device to keep employees aware of their tenuous status. It also prepares new employees for the authoritarian culture of the organization.

In general, as reported in the Califano Report (2000:30), "postal employees have more negative attitudes than employees in the national workforce about work, coworkers, and management." The authoritarian culture of the organization is one aspect of life in

the Service that contributes to the initial strangeness as well as to negative attitudes about the organization. Control of employees by supervisors and communication styles were the common complaints noted in the interviews conducted for this study, regardless of the race, gender, and class background of respondents. All interviewees expressed the sentiment that supervisors and managers control, or attempt to control, every aspect of the work lives of employees from beginning to end tour clock hits and every aspect in between. There are, in general, very few venues in the Service where lower level employees can take initiative. They must tell supervisors when they step off²⁶ to go to the lavatory, and some supervisors require employees to ask if they can go. Employees are required to ask supervisors, in writing, on official forms, for permission to leave early, be absent, late, or to change their rest days. Employees are also required to bring in evidence of illness when they have been out sick. Supervision is viewed as autocratic; supervisors tell employees what, when, and how to do everything.

As automation has brought significant changes to the way in which work is performed, it has also contributed to an increased emphasis that management places on employee discipline. This topic will be discussed in later chapters more extensively; for now it will suffice to say that this manager-employee relation is usually contentious.

Postal management has attempted to improve workplace relationships and often speaks of their successes in 1998 when there were only 100,000 grievances in process.

Interpersonal interactions have been identified as a key source of problems in the workplace. Upper management has promoted employee participation in all stages of

²⁶ A “step off” is leaving the work area for a personal break.

operations in order to build confidence, self-esteem and instill a feeling of belong to the organization. Nevertheless, workplace relations continue to decline. Postal employees are filing more grievances than ever, a recent Postal Supervisor editorial announced. These tens of thousands of grievances are costing the Service millions of dollars and hamstringing the organization's modernization efforts (2001:2).

Poor communication between postal employees is viewed as an impediment to improved management-employee relations, by all of the employees interviewed for this study. Lower level employees such as clerks, mail handlers and mail processors report that they do not like the fact that information in the Service is conveyed so narrowly. This can be conceptualized as the least common denominator syndrome. That is, employees are only told the least amount of information that supervisors and managers feel they need to know in order to get their jobs done. Managers and supervisors have divergent views regarding this issue. The narrowing down of information and directives is deemed efficient among supervisors who consider it much too time consuming to explain things to employees. The postal manager's overall orientation to employees, which is one of distrust, is also evident in these seemingly mundane exchanges of information. One supervisor, an African-American woman, when asked about service talks that are designed to communicate such matters as organizational goals and safe working conditions, said:

“You have 18 employees and 3 machines....you have a service talk and let them sign the sheet acknowledging that they received the talk and understand it but they may want to start getting into a conversation [about it]. You have to understand that at the same time employees will play on you and try to prolong something so that they don't have to continue doing what they have to do....If they can turn a service talk into a half an hour they will go there. This is the way

they are....So, you have some who just want to play games....But if you are trying to give a service talk and you are trying to tell them to listen to and understand what you are saying. Then you are going to ask them: Do you understand and you know that you can not take time for this feedback so you say, Go back to work.”

The least common denominator syndrome contributes to a culture of silence among postal workers: Workers rarely talk back, ask questions, or engage conversationally with supervisors. They listen when spoken to but rarely reply except to ask for further directions or to say, “Okay.” They do not maintain any more than necessary eye contact with supervisors. Although there are some exceptions such as among employees and supervisors who have worked with each other for long periods of time, most employees rarely smile at or joke with supervisors. Rather, employees talk unfavorably about supervisors after they or the supervisor walks away. Quite often employees say things like, “What a fucking joke?,” “He/She is such a pain in the ass!,” “I bet you his wife runs the show at home and he’s only a big shot at work.” Sometimes employees joke but other times they complain bitterly about supervisors. An African American woman said she had a supervisor that she hated and reported that one day she was so tired of the supervisor picking on her that she had to sign out for the day because she wanted to assault the supervisor. She said,

“I had had it with her bullshit. Everyday it was something with her. I wasn’t doing anything that the other workers weren’t doing but every time I turned around she was threatening me or writing me up for stupid petty things. I went to the union and all they said was try to get another bid [assignment]. The union is worthless around here. They can’t do a thing about these supervisors and the supervisors are outrageous. They are the worst but it is nothing you can do so you can’t beat them, you might as well join them. I was just so glad when I got out of there because somebody was going to get hurt.”

As evident in the comment above, this employee, like most, reported that no matter what her supervisor said she did not verbally respond to her comments. She said she would talk with her co-workers about the supervisor but as the situation between her and the supervisor got nastier, her co-workers began to distance themselves and did not want to talk to her about the supervisor. The employee said that her co-workers started acting like they were too busy to speak to her, changed their break patterns to avoid her, and would not respond to her complaints about the supervisor when she managed to make them aware of incidents that transpired between her and the supervisor. She noted that her co-workers were particularly keen at making it appear to the supervisor that they did not sympathize with her. Over the course of time in the work area, not only the supervisor but also her co-workers perceived her as the “disgruntled employee” although they initially complained about similar grievances towards the supervisors.

Fraser, Kick, and Barber (2002) posit that a “culture of silence” limits workers ability to resist adverse working conditions and abusive managerial treatment for fear of retribution. I also used this concept in a paper originally written in 1994 to explain how a culture of silence contributes to low educational attainment among impoverished African American children (Benbow, 2006). A culture of silence can be situational wherein a group uses patterned silence, nonverbal communication, and a restricted code as a protective device. It is conceptualized as a culture when this communication style is intergenerational. However, a culture of silence can be a situational response to adverse structural conditions, although seemingly counterproductive. It is also worthy to note that postal employees have used this technique for fear of management retribution since

the turn of the last century (See Germano unpublished dissertation). Postal officials and APWU also encourage silence among postal employees.

Due to employee's fear of retribution, postal workers are extremely reluctant to participate in interviews and surveys related to their employment. Very interestingly, employees tell each other that they should not talk about what happens on the job to outsiders. I recall interviewing a female postal worker and called to ask her follow up questions and she told me that her sister, a postal worker, told her that she should not have done the interview. However, it is also the case that management occasionally reminds employees that they should be careful about what they say in public about job related matters. For example, in a Service Talk entitled, "If you can't say something nice..." a postal worker who called in to a New York morning radio program was lambasted for calling Publishers Clearing House mail "junk mail;" the worker ended his call by stating that as a postal worker his best option might be to polish his Uzi machine gun and take care of the Publishers Clearing House people himself. The article went on to say,

"Let's all keep in mind that the Postal Service pays our salaries, and that our customers foot the bill. There are plenty of good things we can talk about in public, so if we're going to say anything all about our employer, customers, or co-workers, let it be something positive."

The issue of communication between upper echelon officials and lower level employees is a contentious one in the Service. The Service spends a fair amount of resources informing employees of what they should and should not do. Headquarter officials carefully prepare and deliver directives and admonitions to employees via satellite television monitors which are located in the cafeteria or via Service Talks, such

as the one described above, which are delivered to employees by their supervisors. Although higher echelon officials try to be diplomatic in the tone of their directives, which are not at all delivered jocundly, the top-down militaristic style of management contributes to a situation where, they are perceived by workers as indicative of the ‘Just do as you are told’ attitude of managers. While there is often a tendency among postal employees to overstate the emphasis on directives or to ironically joke about them, they are nonetheless significant for how employees understand themselves and their relationship to the organization. When asked why she does not like her job, an African American female with 8 years in the Service stated:

“I go to work and I can feel the power struggle going on. Management just messes with you. They have testosterone problems. They don’t mess with the old-timers because they stick together. But they come to us with all kinds of nonsense every day. Do this, don’t do that, do it this way, look that way. I mean a supervisor had the nerve to tell me that my skirt was too short and that I had better not report to work like that again or she would send me home. I said, ‘Go ahead.’ Cause I will get a day off for nothing in the end because I will grieve it. They have no right to tell people about what they wear. My skirt was to my knee. Maybe it was her problem because I looked nice that day but it’s not mine. I’m just going to do what I have to do. It’s like I’m a freedom fighter but I don’t know what I am fighting for.”

The autocratic style of management contributes to a great deal of bitterness among workers and their unions. While there is a stated emphasis placed on empowering employees and encouraging self-managed work units, most employees believe they are rarely consulted when management makes decisions that affect employees, even when those decisions are not related to mail processing. For example, a turnstile gate complete with a metal detector, described by employees as “bars,” was installed at the processing facility during summer 2000, and very little information about it was given to employees.

Management claimed the gate was installed for safety reasons, but did not explain how the employees were made safer by this device or why it was necessary since there were no incidents of gun violence in this facility. Employees were also upset to be required to insert an electronic key into the door in order to gain access to the building. What many of the employees did not know, according to APWU, is that each key is personalized with the employee's social security number; thus, it is a surveillance device. One employee, in an unusual protest, made a tee shirt that depicted the mail processing facility as a correctional facility. On the tee shirt, postal workers are sorting mail and peering out through bars. In captions it states, "Morgan Penitentiary Lock Down: 30 Years to Life. Only the Mail Gets Out." The Manager told employees that they could not wear the tee shirts on the work floor and threatened disciplinary action.

The local union, New York Metro Area Postal Union (APWU), which represents the largest proportion of workers in the facility was quite outspoken about these and other conditions in postal facilities. Hostility is bountiful between labor and management. The language that they use to characterize each other is blatantly belligerent. When, for example, management instituted an Employee of the Month Program, the union president fired back. He stated,

"I cannot believe that some workers are so gullible to believe that management only wants to reward excellence. In my opinion, this program should go right out the window. Given the years of abuse, aggravation, and harassment employees have endured from management, the employee should be awarded 'employee of the century'....The truth is they want you to work yourselves to death and once you're gone, all the sick leave you've managed to accumulate for being a 'good' employee goes back into the system" (The Union Mail, March, 2001, vol. 44, no.3).

Perhaps, one direct effect of this emphasis on control over what employees do and say is indicated in the Califano Report, which states that postal employees were more likely than national workers to say they have “recently been losing confidence in [themselves] (17 vs.10 percent)” (2000:29). Supervisory control has always been a key management goal; thus management by intimidation is not a new concept. As well, the belief that employees are irresponsible is also endemic in bureaucratic organizations and contributes to and, in fact, perpetuates infantile behavior among employees. Both supervisory and managerial respondents, regardless of race and gender, routinely referred to postal workers, affectionately or hardheartedly, as “immature,” “irresponsible,” “children,” and “animals.” An African-American female supervisor, with 18 years of service, made this commentary:

“I’m like the Mom, the sister they didn’t have...you wear so many hats. You’re like the schoolteacher....You’re like the dumping ground where they can just dump all this junk that they had going on in them for so long and maybe nobody else would listen to them.”

An African-American female executive who was about to retire from the USPS when the interview was conducted, made the following comment,

“I read someplace that they describe the postal workforce as an immature work force in that without focusing on the vision of the service they focus more on themselves and what’s in it for them. Yeah. And it’s true. I would say that a great many supervisors and most of the employees only look at it from the point of view of what’s good for them without considering themselves as shareholders in the business itself.”

Oddly, the same female executive added,

“And you’re like the father figure where when they need to get smacked on the butt, you smack them and send them off.”

A white male supervisor with over 20 years of Service stated that male restrooms walls are filled with graffiti. He characterized these as “stupid, childish, immature, and not just sexual but also racial slurs.” He further stated,

“You can notice patterns of behavior, which indicates that the employees are going to be problem children, so to speak, and during that [first] 90-days²⁷ [supervisors should] give them a poor evaluation and get them out but I don’t see that happening.”

The issue of communication styles among managers has been one that has been given quite a bit of consideration since the mid 1990s and, in recent years, has expanded to include the overall treatment of postal workers. For example, The American Postal Worker, an AFL-CIO publication, complained that postal officials utilized a management style characterized as an “unrestrained and tyrannical exercise of power by intimidation” (October, 1996; p.12). During 1997, the Service began warning managers about their abusive behavior and made strides to improve workplace relationships by mandating that individuals be treated with ‘respect and dignity.’ The Vice President of Human Resources stated, “We are working to eliminate or greatly reduce what everyone recognizes as tension between managers and craft employees....We’re not saying this is a union problem. It’s postal management’s responsibility to deal with workplace relationships in a proactive, positive, way” (*Update*, 1998:10).

In a local union newsletter a union representative made the following commentary:

“In far too many instances, and in far too many installations, little if anything is being done about the abusive and threatening manner of supervisors and managers. This writer personally has experienced bullying tactics of management. If they can’t control you, or if you voice your opinion, management

²⁷ New employees are on probation for their first 89 days in the Service and are formally evaluated on their 90th day of work.

will try to put you in your place....Some managers need to know that being part of management does not give them a license to degrade, intimidate or threaten; after all, we are all God's children" (The Union Mail, Feb. 2001 v44#2).

A black male employee with twenty years of service declared:

They are fucked up. The way they talk to you. They try to intimidate you. They want you to walk around scared all the damn time but I refuse. I refuse to be scared of them. I tell you this much though, I hate them. I hate every last one of them."

In addition to the outrage indicated above, a sense of resignation about how managers interact with employees also prevails among postal workers. A Hispanic woman made the following comment:

"I don't pay any attention to them. I can tell, even before they speak, if they are going to speak to me in a nasty way. Immediately, I listen for what they want me to do, the rest I don't pay attention to. I don't even hear them."

An Asian woman mid-level administrator said,

"They just don't know how to talk to people. They think because I am Chinese or because I am a female that I don't know anything so sometimes they talk down to me, especially the white men. Yet, they have to come to me for advice about this or that. Sometimes I put them in their place. Sometimes I just don't pay them any mind."

These kinds of complaints are not confined to employees and unions; managers have also reported the use of abusive language among upper echelon officials, such as among postmasters. In The Postal Supervisor, the following is noted,

"[S]upervisors and managers are belittled and otherwise attacked as being absolutely worthless. Many times, the language [of postmasters] is coarse, obscene and unprintable" (October 3, 1997).

A 1999 newsletter from the Vice President, Area Operations (January, 1999) pleaded with all employees to support the following principles of successful communication in the workplace:

- **Listen**

It is important to listen, even if you do not always agree with what is being said. Failure to listen leads to misunderstandings and misinterpretations.

- **Show Respect**

We hear this term often, but what does it really mean? It means valuing other points of view, differences, and the positive worth of others. Respect creates an environment where everyone feels appreciated.

- **Use Careful Language**

Choose your words and tone carefully. Profanity, threats, sexual references, and demeaning comments are unacceptable. Remember, speak to others as you would like to be spoken to.

- **Be Accountable**

You are responsible for your words and behavior. We all have a job to do together, everyday. Know your roles and the roles of others you deal with.

Despite several reorganizations since 1971, several changes in its logo, a more competitive and customer service philosophy and now, as the principles noted above indicate, a human resources approach, the culture of the workplace and managers' orientation to workers have not changed in ways that are fundamental for employees. In general, supervisors have a two-faced way of interacting with their employees. On the one hand, they address employees by their last name. For instance, they may say, "Mr. Smith, report to the break up area." While they rarely say please, they will thank

employees for a job well done. On the other hand, they are traditionally short with employees, especially if they are concerned about the mail processing count or under pressure to get the mail out of the facility. Since most of their work tours consist of both issues, getting the mail done and getting the mail out, they spend a considerable amount of time correcting employees, “Would you stop handling the mail this or that way,” or “You can not listen to your headset on the machine. Put it away.” They also tend to threaten employees by saying things like, “If I have to tell you one more time to do A, B, or C, corrective action will be taken” or “Go change your shoes or you will be signed out and if I have to tell you again, corrective action will be taken.” Supervisors often speak to employees by stating phrases from the contract, which is particularly troubling for new employees who sometimes do not know what “insubordination” or “trying to receive remunerations for services not performed” means. However, what is most troubling to employees is the tone of voice of supervisors. Most supervisors, particularly those on the work floor, tend to speak to employees as though employees are just a name and a social security number. For instance, it is common to see supervisors turn away from employees as they give them instructions. At the same time the supervisors will speak to employees, as they look past them. Sometimes the supervisors are merely multi-tasking such that they are watching one employee while talking to another but it is such a consistent pattern of interaction that it has the overall effect of making employees feel diminished. Supervisors also have a tendency to speak sarcastically to employees, “You have got to be kidding!,” “What side of the bed did you wake up on?,” “Why don’t you use your head?,” or “Keep it up and you will be out of here in a minute!”

Given this environment, do supervisors listen to employees? No. Do supervisors show employees respect? In limited ways supervisors are respectful to employees. Do supervisors use careful language? Yes, supervisors are extremely careful in an open environment to use the kind of language that cannot be held against them. An employee reported, for instance, that she asked her supervisor for a copy of a 3971 (Request for Leave Form) and her supervisor said, "I'll give it to you when I feel like it. So you'll just have to wait!" Supervisors also have a tendency to make sexist, racist, and elitist comments about employees as they talk among themselves but sometimes they make these kinds of comments to employees. For instance, a Caribbean employee reported that her supervisor said, "What boat did you come off? Was it a boat or a refrigerator?" A Hispanic woman was told by her supervisor that her dress was not appropriate for work and the supervisor said she looked as though she was "going to a fiesta" An African American female was told by her supervisor that her jeans were too tight and that she "looks like a whore." These kinds of comments are inappropriate but employees rarely take a confrontational stance. Rather, they tend to ignore these kinds of comments, no matter how humiliated they may feel. One employee made a comment that seems to express the sentiment of most employees regarding these kinds of incidents. She said, "You have to ignore them because they are ignorant. Otherwise, what can you do?"

Mail Processing

Since the 1971 reorganization, one goal of the Service is to have all mail worked by machine. Indeed, the nature of postal work has changed significantly due to the increase use of mechanization and automation. These developments have impacted

every aspect of work in the mails; work in rural and suburban and carrier operations, however, has not been as thoroughly affected as work in urban mail processing facilities. In a NAPS (National Association of Postal Supervisors) newsletter commentary, which discussed how members of Congress and the Service protect small post offices that are losing money, while closing or consolidating mail-processing facilities, a rural post office was described as a “musty old building with a wood stove for heat and a door for air conditioning.” (*Postal Supervisor*, 9/11/2001).

It would be misleading to suggest that rural stations are as antiquated as the one described above, nevertheless, a large percentage of work at the station level is still done manually, in contrast to urban mail processing facilities. The latter operate twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week and the facility used in this study has approximately 4,200 employees. This facility is a huge building, which takes up two square city blocks with two adjoining buildings consisting of 2.1 million square feet. The first sight of the work floors with their 60-foot ceilings and 110 mail processing machines often renders new employees speechless. All respondents reported that their first sight of the work floor left them flabbergasted. Most made comments about the noise, the size of the machinery, and the dust and dirt involved in working the mails. When I conducted observations of this facility during 2002, I felt light-headed when I looked up above the machines at the miles and miles of color-coded fixed mechanized tray lines—carrying mail from one destination to another in countless directions. These lines are monitored by Mail Flow Controllers who set up and change the flow of each tray line as well as respond to problems on the lines.

Most of the major processing centers in the country have one floor—an island concept—where the mail comes into one end of the building and is processed as it flows through the building, ultimately, leaving at the other end of the building. However, the facility used in this study is housed in a multi-level building where mail is processed on six of the ten stories of the building. The multiple-level building extends the strangeness of working in a mail-processing center. It takes some workers years and, in fact, many never attain at working knowledge of mail flow and the interconnectedness of the different work sections. All mail-processing facilities have similar work units and equipment.

Observations of this facility, which had changed considerably since I worked there over a decade ago, consisted of walking tours of the building, which began in the Transportation Unit and followed the flow of the mail throughout the building. Most of the work done in the Transportation Unit consists of manual labor in a series of work areas and bays where the trucks come in to drop off and pick up mail. Despite the abundance of mechanized and automated mail processing which occurs later, the initial work in the highly congested transportation area is 99 percent manual labor, which is primarily conducted by men. It is one of the most sex segregated and masculine work areas in the facility. The work in this area, although manual and consisting of a number of interrelated work units, can be conceptualized as a human assembly line where the workers are both an appendage to the machine and the machine itself.

A mail handler is stationed at every bay to unload trucks as they pull into bays. Among this group, there is a competition as to who can unload their truck the fastest. The

mail handlers will push each postal container (postcon) of mail off the trucks and call out its destination to a floor person, another mail handler, who transports the container to the various breakup areas. The process in which they work is reminiscent of a water brigade or passing of a torch in a relay race. They take a great deal of pride in their working class based celebration of their maleness. As the workers unload their individual trucks, they compete with each other as to who can unload trucks the fastest. They neither keep track of who is the fastest nor do they congratulate the fastest person, at any given time during the course of the work day or night; but during the course of the competition and workday or night, they often jokingly insult each other about the competition. For example, they will taunt each other by saying: "You can't keep up with me!!" "You're too slow!!" They call each other names such as "Stiff," or "You waste!" The purpose of the competition is passing the time away but also to get the trucks unloaded as fast as possible. As they wait for the next truck the mail handlers stand around listening to the sounds of a distant radio. Two or perhaps three employees talk to each other while standing at their bay stations, go on "step-offs" (a personal break), or help the floor mail handlers clear the work area.

The type of work they engage in and the way they go about doing their jobs is male centered; these workers have some control over the work area, which is significantly different from areas where female workers predominate. Although some female mail handlers work in the transportation unit, very few work as truck unloaders on a regular basis. Those females who do work as truck unloaders are usually unassigned mail handlers who volunteer to work in the area because they are released from machine

work and can look forward to the a number of breaks between unloading trucks. Men assigned to the area do not seem bothered when females work as temporary truck unloaders; however, they have a great deal of control over work in the area and seem quite protective of their “turf.” One manager said that over a period of time the supervisors in the transportation area have lost control over the work area. He stated:

“People come to work but they manage to get themselves in areas they like to work in. When I went to work there, workers worked in one area but had a bid assignment for another area. So it was hard ... to find workers working in their assigned areas. Eventually the employees began to take possession of those areas they worked in. It got to the point that when a supervisor would ask the employee to work in their bid assignment, they would get uptight or have attitudes because they felt like they worked the area for the past ten years and want to know why they’re being moved now. They think they’re being picked on.”

When asked why this is a problem, the manager said:

“So, for example, Supervisor A and Supervisor B have individual pay locations. An employee who works for Supervisor B may be in Supervisor A’s pay location so when this employee wants to leave early or have a day off, they will submit the request to their pay location supervisor who may give them the day off without consulting the supervisor that the employee works with.”

While it is not common for women to work in certain areas of transportation, when they have bid assignments²⁸ in that unit, they usually engage in manual labor that is much less strenuous than unloading trucks. One area where women in the transportation unit work is the breakup area. In this section, male and female mail handlers manually separate mail by type (letters, flats, packages). There are usually about 6-8 employees working in this area. When I observed these workers on several occasions I noted that they worked at a leisurely pace, in contrast to the truck unloaders. There was music playing in the background and some workers bobbed to the music as they worked. Some

²⁸ Bid assignments are positions that regular employees apply for and are granted based on seniority.

workers talked to each other and to people as they walked past the area, as they worked. I also observed workers reading and thumbing through magazines. On one such visit I wore a suit jacket and wrote notes on a clipboard as I entered the area and although the workers saw me approach the section with a manager they did not try to pretend they were not reading magazines. At one point I asked the supervisor why the workers behaved in this manner and he said:

“The Postmaster General could pass through and they won’t even speed it up apace. They have no idea who you are but you think they’d care enough about their jobs to pretend to be working when someone they don’t know comes into the area. It’s no better that they know I am a manager and they still don’t care. Funny thing is that if I confront one of them they immediately get defensive and want to act like I’m mistreating them or violating their rights. Sometimes I just want to go ask one of them: ‘Need a reading lamp? Got enough light?’ But I know that would only make matters worse because one of them will have the nerve to say, ‘No, we could use some more light for the fine print!’(Laughs)”

All of the areas in the transportation unit offer workers, males and females, a degree of autonomy over the pace of the work that most other workers in mail processing facilities do not have. Most of the work done outside of the transportation area is processed via automation; thus, the vast majority of workers are doing work that ties them to machines.

Working the Machines: Mechanization and Automation

The proliferation of mechanization and automation has significantly changed the nature of postal work. It has become close to impossible to get an entry-level position that does not require machine work, with the exception of mail handler or custodian.

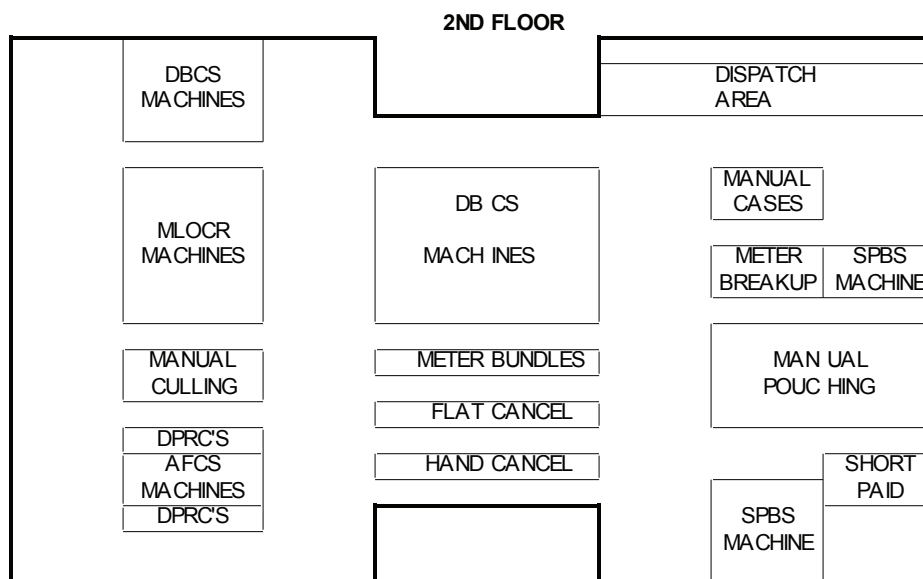
In general, all machine employees, in an effort to ensure that employees work safely and operate the machines properly, are given a tour of the machine and told how it

operates. New machine workers such as mail processors are usually assigned to work with regular employees²⁹ until they learn how the machines operate and the appropriate breakup of the mail. Whether new to the work area or new to the Service, when employees begin to work in a new work area, on-the-job training is swift. Before automation, manual workers were given no more than a two and a half minute overview of what they were supposed to do to sort mail. During ‘training,’ these workers were told to look at the first three numbers or the last two of a zip code, depending on whether they worked mixed states or city mails, respectively, and to put the mail in the appropriate box, bin, or carriage.

Since the 1980s, with the proliferation of mechanization and automation in mail processing facilities, the vast majority of employees now work on machines. See the floor plan (Figure 1) below which indicates the work areas on a floor in a mail processing facility, which is the initial phase of mail processing. The entire floor, which comprises a two city-block area, has only three work units (Manual Cases, Manual Pouching, and Hand Canceling) that operate with purely manual labor. The rest are all machine jobs (See Figure 1 below).

²⁹ Regulars are workers who have been in the Service for more than five years and have the right to bid for assigned positions based on location, days off, and work tours.

Figure 1 – Mail Processing Floor Plan



The initial training that machine workers receive is not as short as it was for manual workers; however, its extent depends on the type of machine worked and whether or not employees' performance is evaluated upon completion of training. The recent deployment of Automated Flat Sorting Machines (AFSM 100) which read and sort the flats by destination has significantly decreased the need to take the dexterity test. The most extensive machine training was on the Letter Sorting Machine (LSM), which involved both dexterity and scheme components and employees were terminated or

reassigned if they failed the examinations. This training is no longer given because the machines have been made obsolete by technological advances and have been replaced by Multi-line Optical Character Readers (MLOCR) and the Delivery Bar Code Sorters (DBCS). Thus, in contemporary mail processing facilities, most workers experience on-the-machine training.

When new employees begin working machines, although it is dusty and noisy, most find it more satisfying than one would imagine. Most new workers find the work exciting because they take great pride in keeping pace with the machines that give them the illusion of an accelerated workday. 'Time flies when you're having fun' is a motto that best describes their initial impression of machine work. What makes the job fun is that new employees usually work primarily with workers they attended orientation with. They develop a keen sense of camaraderie that stems in part from the newness of their positions and from their newfound friendships with people who are similar to themselves, in terms of race, class, and gender. Batch hiring by exam grades and location also tends to increase the possibility of employees beginning their careers with workers from similar backgrounds. Many of the workers are African-Americans or black females and a large portion of them are from working class backgrounds. However, even when they are from different racial backgrounds they usually have the opportunity to pair up with at least a few workers who are the same race and gender as they are.

How employees adjust themselves to work in the Service and on machines has much to do with their background, work experiences, and expectations of the organization. Regardless of these factors, most experienced employees describe

machine work as excruciating in a variety of ways. Rachleff describes the “human toll” that Letter Sorting Machine (LSM) operators experiences as hearing loss, eyesight impairment, and various stress related disorders (1982). Although LSM machines are now obsolete, the human toll that mechanization and automation incurs on workers continues, in contemporary mail processing facilities.

Revolutions in mail production over the past 50 years have resulted in the most efficient mail processing system in the history of the organization. Most machine work, which employees did manually 50 years ago, underwent a process of mechanization in the late 1950s and has now become automated. Machine work that once required a great deal of human effort (the input of data as well as loading and unloading mail on machines) has been replaced, in large part, by automated machines, which process the mail with very little human input. These jobs have been primarily deskilled as Braverman (1974) posits.

On today’s automated machines, employee input is reduced to loading and unloading machines; the work entails two employees standing at opposite ends of the machine and they walk back and forth the length of the machine for an 8 hour work day repeatedly loading and unloading and clearing mail jams. When a machine jams, workers will try to call a mechanic to come rather than try to clear the jam themselves, so that they can sit and rest until the machine is cleared. Another aspect of the physical toll is the repetitive motion of gathering mail off machines or putting mail on machines and lifting trays of mail. Machines can process anywhere from 20 to 30 thousand pieces of mail an hour. This creates a physical toll on employees who must work according to the speed of the

machine, whether they are loading or unloading it. Take for example the MLOCR machine, which reads the last two lines of the address, sprays a bar code, and sorts the mail by destination. Typically this machine involves two workers, a loader and an unloader. The loader will bring a carriage [metal framed container with stacks of trays in it] to the machine, pick up a one tray of letters at a time, and unload them an armful at a time into a hopper. As the machine is feeding the mail into the sort area, the loader continues to put trays of mail on the hopper, which never gets full unless the machine stops. Thus, employees may load a few trays and wait for a minute or so to catch their breath then start reloading the hopper again. Unloaders walk up and down the long side of the machine, which is about 100-150 feet, emptying bins and putting the mail into the appropriately labeled trays stationed alongside the machine. Sometimes workers will just empty the bins by handfuls of letters and walk over to the appropriate tray but sometimes they have to work very fast to empty the bins that get full because the machine will automatically stop if a bin gets full. Supervisors usually frown upon machine stops because it is recorded as “down time” and slows down the number of pieces of mail processed. The machine does not stop until all the mail is processed³⁰.

Sometimes employees cannot keep up with the pace by which some bins get full and the machine will stop. Other times, employees deliberately let the bins get full so that they can take a break from walking up and down the aisle. However, as the routine continues, loaders are responsible for putting sleeves on the full labeled trays. The weight of these trays varies by type of mail so they can be as light as 20 pounds or as

³⁰ Employees are replaced by other employees when they go on breaks and lunch is scheduled in such a way that employees with later begin times are cover machines while those from earlier tours go on lunch.

heavy as 40-50 pounds. Due to the constant lifting and pacing up and down the machine, on cement floors³¹, workers in this facility are plagued with physical complaints such as pains in their legs, Carpal Tunnel Syndrome, and hearing loss. Despite continuous safety talks about proper lifting procedures, many employee injuries, other than those caused by walking on cement floors or repetitive hand movements, occur due to lifting mail trays or parcels and pulling mail carts.

One of the most challenging aspects of machine work, besides the physical toll is boredom. Because of the way that work is structured, automated machine work is much less social than previously used mechanized machines. Employees have very little control over who they work with, although they try to get supervisors to pair them up with their friends. Even when working with friends, during the course of work, they can not engage in a great deal of conversation with their co-workers because there are only three employees working on a machine, a loader at one end of the machine and two unloaders who work on different sides of the machine. Thus, on automated machines where there are a limited number of workers, a sense of boredom engulfs new employees long before their 90-day probation period ends. The diminished sociability of automated machine work, in comparison to mechanized machine work which required 6 to 10 workers per machine, is described as “painfully boring,” by a female employee with 15 years of service who lamented:

“I will do anything to get off these machines. I just can’t take it anymore. I thought it would be better than being a mailhandler but being a mail processor on

³¹ Labor and management are aware of the problems employees experience as a result of the cement floors. In certain areas they place padding and wooden platforms on machines where employees are stationary. The number of employees with leg problems continues to increase; however, they are addressed on an individual basis with no attention to the way in which the cement floors contributes to this phenomenon.

a machine is ten times worse but I didn't know it when I changed jobs. Now I just wish I could get a job in an office but I don't even know how to go about getting one. I know they want typing but I can't type but I also heard that some office jobs don't require typing but I don't know how to get one. I know I can't do this for another 20 years. I do my job so nobody bothers me so I guess that is a good thing but I just don't like the work."

Employees deal with the mental and emotional tolls of machine work in a variety of ways. Some employees engage in a various forms of self-medication such as drinking and taking drugs. The increased awareness of chronic substance abuse problems in the past two decades has contributed to a highly developed Employee Assistance Program that tries to help employees with a host of problems they experience.

Another way that employees deal with the stress of their jobs is to adopt what supervisors characterized as a "craft mentality." Rather than being passively controlled by the *pace of the machine*, workers try to control the *pace of work* in a number of ways. Loaders might load mail into the hoppers in a steady pace and consistently enough to not attract the attention of supervisors, who will complain that they are not working fast enough, but not load the hoppers as fast as it is physically possible to do. Likewise, unloaders will empty or "sweep" the bins very fast for about for about 5-7 minutes and perhaps talk to each other from opposite sides of the machine or they will just stand by the machine and rest for a few minutes. Machine loaders usually rotate with the unloaders so that they do not have to continuously load the machine for the extent of the tour, which also helps to break the monotony of the work.

Employees can not misfeed mail or clog up automated machines as effectively as they could mechanized machines; nonetheless, they sometimes deliberately engage in behaviors that will increase the "down time" of machines. For example, an employee

might see that a piece of mail is jammed and try to dislodge it but might leave a small piece of the mail in the machine. Then employees will wait for the supervisor to come over to the machine to report the stoppage and pretend that they do not know what happened. The supervisor will have to call a mechanic, which they usually do via walkie-talkies. It could take a mechanic anywhere from 5 to 15 minutes to get to a jammed machine. Once they find the problem, it may take a few minutes for them to fix it. This entire process could take anywhere from 10 to 20 or 20 to 40 minutes.

Supervisors also report that occasionally employees have broken or sabotaged the machines. It was reported that an employee put a lemon peel over a lens in a machine. In this instance, the mechanics had to take the entire machine apart which took several weeks. Just as cynical, several supervisors reported that employees deliberately put their fingers into areas of the machine that causes them injury so they can go out on compensation. Supervisors believe they are in a no-win situation.

During the 1992 reorganization initiated by then Postmaster Runyon, the employee-management ratio was increased from fifteen to one to twenty-five or thirty to one; as a cost-saving device, implementation of this plan led to a 10 to 15 percent decrease in supervisory positions. All management positions are included in the supervisory count although some are managers and others are specialists who do not directly supervise employees. The effect of this is that a supervisor could have 40 or more employees under their supervision, which decreases their ability to survey workers. Automated machine work, which may seem to make supervision easier because it controls the pace of the work, makes surveillance of employees more difficult for

supervisors because, since there are only two workers on each machine, a supervisor may be responsible for a number of employees who work on different machines or in different work areas. Thus, supervisors have to be much more mobile than in the past when they stood at the beginning of an aisle, for much of their work day, as workers cased mail or keyed mail.

Today supervisors experience a great deal of stress trying to maintain control over employees in a work environment that has less support staff than in the past. Supervisors are now responsible for overseeing workers while they perform their duties such as paperwork related to employee attendance (a function that was previously designated to timekeepers) and accident reports, maintain mail-processing records, and respond to administrators' requests for information. They noted that the most problematic aspect of their job is making sure employees do their job, at what they perceive as an efficient rate, despite the fact that they can not stand over the machines to watch employees. Thus, perceptions play an important role here because supervisors' only objective measure of productivity are machine generated counts of mail processed within a given time period. This situation contributes to a great deal of tension and stress for supervisors who are concerned about production goals, thus they want to get employees they can depend on to do a good job to work with them. However, they have limited control over who works with them because employees are officially assigned by Human Resources to work sections based on the personnel needs of the section. When personnel needs exceed the number of assigned employees, supervisors try to get unassigned regulars or casuals employees and have some leeway to hand pick these workers. The result is that

supervisors have to put forth a great deal of effort to control those workers who they believe have a “craft mentality,” which they characterize as “trying to pass the time away doing as little as possible.”

When counts are low and mail is backed up, supervisors may admonish a team of workers on a particular machine but this is not effective because employees usually do not respond to this kind of reprimand, except with blank stare. Thus, supervisors try to identify individual employees who appear to be working slowly. Supervisors will often behave assertively towards these employees by threatening them or yelling at them in front of everyone but most employees respond curtly by saying, “I am working hard.” Supervisors have also written employees up for “trying to receive remunerations for services not performed,” if a slow worker extends a break but there is not much they can do if an employee works slower than the supervisor expects of them. Supervisors try to get employees to work fast by promising them rewards such as a pizza party, paid for by the supervisor, at the end of the week if the employees achieve a certain goal. Supervisors also stage competitions between machines and the winners are given some kind of reward such as a party, again sponsored by supervisors.

At one point, management initiated a reward program where employees were given chips to get free food from the cafeteria for reaching or exceeding goals. However, APWU told employees not to participate in the reward system because managers reaped the real benefits of increased productivity. A supervisor reported that APWU told employees that they were “killing” themselves for petty chips, worth a few dollars, while managers were given thousands of dollars in bonuses. The union also reminded

employees that when they get sick, which they attributed to worker speedups, management responds punitively. The reward initiative ended and supervisors, who also felt they were not being rewarded equitably, stopped production competitions. In general, supervisors try to appeal to employee sentiments to get them to work efficiently by promoting a team effort.

Employees' goals often conflict with supervisory goals. They are "trying to make it through" the workday and week. This does not suggest that employees do not care about getting the work done; most expressed their view that they work hard on the job and give a "fair day's work for a fair day's pay" or that they do "their" jobs. A consistent sentiment among workers, nonetheless, is that some employees did not do their fair share of the work. Employees described these employees as those who may be friends with the supervisors and those employees who make it appear that they are working hard but are not. They noted that supervisors could not do much about the latter employees because they usually work consistently enough to not attract the attention of their supervisors. Many employees believe that the hard workers make up for the work that "slackers" will not do. Employees rarely speak to each other or to supervisors about the pace of work. They may complain to their friends about other employees but they rarely take a confrontational stance. However, employees' rate of work is usually determined implicitly; they adjust their work based on the effort extended by other employees involved. They all tend to work at what they perceive as a "reasonable" rate and the pace of the group determines what they consider to be "reasonable." For example, if one of three employees works slow, the other two will adjust their pace so that they are not

working too much harder than the other employee. Sometimes, employees will verbally reprimand those employees who work very fast and are speeding up the work of other employees; however, they make sure that supervisors do not hear them. An employee said that a co-worker told him, "Stop busting everybody's balls. Slow it down!" as he walked past him on the machine. In sum, employees sometimes work according to the expectation of their supervisors if they have internalized the team concept but most employees, who are not as concerned as their supervisors with productivity counts, work at a steady pace.

Nevertheless, there are a number of areas which contribute to ongoing, everyday, conflict between supervisors and employees related to absenteeism, lateness, work assignments, and disrespect among workers.

Everyday Conflicts at Work

Absenteeism

One of the most significant sources of everyday conflict between supervisors and employees results from attendance related matters. The context of this conflict is that there are 3000 employees working in the facility on three tours (day, evening, and night with various begin times within each tour). On any given day, there are approximately 150 employees who are expected to but do not report to work³². Sick leave usage in the facility is approximately 4.5 percent but the organizational goal is 3.5 percent or less sick leave usage. Sick leave percentages are based upon the number of sick leave hours used

³² In actuality there are approximately 400-500 employees absent on any given day because a number of them are on official leaves due to annual leave usage and many who are on leave due to family and medical leaves.

versus the number of worked hours. For example, supervisors are responsible for a group of employees in particular pay locations. If the pay location(s) has 10 employees and they all came to work each day for a pay period (two weeks), the total work hours would be 800 hours. If one employee called in sick (“banged up”) for the entire two-week pay period, that would be 720 worked and 80 sick leave hours. This would equate to 11.1 percent sick leave usage. Another supervisor may have 20 employees in their pay location. If one employee called in sick for the entire pay period, then the sick leave percentage would be figured as 80 sick leave hours divided by 1520 work hours that would equal 5.27 percent sick leave. Thus, the more employees that are in a particular pay location the better it is for the supervisor since it helps to reduce their individual percentages.

This scenario has implications for both supervisors and employees. Supervisors’ ratings, which affect their merit increases, are affected by sick leave percentages. Supervisors cannot do much about employee absences due to FLMA (Family Leave Medical Act) sick leave usage. Thus, they engage in a concerted effort to control sick leave usage that is not covered by FMLA. Under these circumstances, an employee who came to work every day for the past 6 months but took a day of sick leave without permission in advance can find themselves being counseled by their supervisor. The union contract provides that medical documentation is not required for absences less than 3 days. However, supervisors have the authority to ask for medical documentation at their discretion and those supervisors with higher sick leave percentages, which tends to be those with less employees, must show that they took administrative actions in order to

protect their positions and merit increases. In turn, employees feel that supervisors abuse their authority when they request medical documentation for absences less than 3 days. Supervisors also request medical documentation for absences less than 3 days when an employee asks for a day off and when denied they call in sick. Upper management views these kinds of absences as a “disregard for authority” and supervisors, who do not have the discretion to sign employees out sometimes resent the responsibility of responding to these situations because operation managers make these decisions. For example, an African American supervisor with 20 years in the Service said:

“It gets me upset sometimes because I would like to give employees who have good attendance a chance to take a day off when they have a situation but they put you through changes. If an employee has a personal problem, I have to go and beg the foreman to let me sign the employee out but that means that I have to tell them the employee’s personal business and that’s not right. Then when they say no I have to tell the employee and they think it is my decision but I tell them it is out of my control but it doesn’t matter. So when a good person bangs up I have to give them an oral discussion or a letter of warning, whatever the next step [in the disciplinary process] and I feel bad. The kicker is that the ones who don’t come to work regularly get away with it because they know how to cover their tails. So what can you do? Your hands are tied and it’s not fair.”

Whether or not the initial supervisors make the decision to discipline employees they are responsible for initiating “corrective action.” At times employees who have irregular attendance will admit that they “messed up;” it is more common, however, that employees view requests for medical documentation and formal discipline due to absences as “punitive.” Diversity does not cause these conflicts but contributes to their intensification in several ways.

Employees on tour 3 (begin times between 4pm and 7pm) are more likely than other employees to not report to work as scheduled. Many of the employees on this tour

are mothers and many are black women in female-headed households who have problems getting and keeping child caretakers. Sometimes they depend on family members or extra-familial sources of childcare arrangements that are tenuous because these employees work during hours that are outside what are considered “normal” work hours. It was found in an employee survey that many female employees do not report to work as scheduled due to problems with childcare arrangements.

This was, and continues to be, a significant source of employee absenteeism. In response to what was considered a crisis during the late 1980s, management met with the union to discuss how childcare responsibilities and problems with childcare arrangements were contributing to higher than average sick leave usage among employees on this tour. At one point labor-management negotiations discussed the pros and cons of setting up a day care in the facility; however, management was concerned that an onsite day care facility would disrupt employee work patterns because they would visit their children during work hours. As discussion continued, it was found that the only feasible area to place a day care in the facility would require that children use the elevators. This presented a safety issue and was deemed unacceptable and the talks began to break down. As the discussion concluded, management took the position that employees are responsible to report to work as schedule, regardless of their home situations, and high absenteeism on tour 3 continues to be a problem.

Another way in which diversification impacts attendance related matters is that employees often perceive supervisors’ actions as “personal” and discriminatory based on any number of demographic differences between them. For instance, employees say

supervisors actions were because “I’m a black,” or “I’m a woman,” or “It’s because they think they are better than me,” or because “I’m a man,” or “I’m a Latino,” or “I am Asian.” Finally, some supervisors have the perception that employees abuse sick leave because they do not have a work ethic; stereotypes about race, the working class, and women fuel their perceptions because most of the employees are people of color, from working class backgrounds, and women. These variables tend to intersect for black single mothers, as the above example indicates. Similar complaints are applicable to lateness, another source of tension between employees and supervisors.

Lateness

The USPS policy is that employees are required to report to work as scheduled and are subject to disciplinary action if they report late four times within any 30-day period. The policy is clear to supervisors but not as clear to employees. Many are under the mistaken assumption that a 30-day period means a calendar month. Those who know the policy may opt to call in sick to avoid the fourth lateness in a 30-day period, which contributes to sick leave usage rates. Whether or not they are aware of the official policy, many employees feel they have valid reasons for being late such as a delay in public transportation, which they view as “circumstances beyond their control.” Supervisors believe that employees have a responsibility to ensure that they leave for work in sufficient time to report to work on time. They believe that there are no “valid excuses” for being late. Furthermore, supervisors believe that chronic lateness is an indication that the employee does not want to follow the rules and regulations and has “a problem with authority.” The decision to take disciplinary action against an employee is, theoretically,

at the discretion of the supervisor, and managers give them more leeway to make these decisions than they do attendance related matters. Therefore, some employees who are chronically late may be disciplined and other employees are not disciplined. Employees believe that this is yet another example of the way in which supervisors engage in favoritism. Employees often say that they are disciplined because supervisors do not like or do not know them and let employees they like get away with tardiness.

As with other work related issues, many employees often view supervisor's corrective action as discriminatory. Since most of the supervisors and employees are black, some employees say that supervisors overlook the lateness of black employees. Men say that women are given a break in regards to lateness and conversely women say that men are given a break. Employee perceptions regarding this issue are based on a combination of accurate information (they notice when other employees are late) and misinformation (employees talk about who is and is not disciplined for lateness) that they often use to justify why they should not be disciplined. Supervisors' response is always, "Worry about yourself," a sentiment also expressed by employees. Many employees report to work regularly and on time and some of them believe, as do supervisors, that there is no excuse for tardiness. Take for instance, the following conversation between two female casuals (temporary) and single mothers I overheard on an observation:

Female 1: I'm always late, like 15 or 20 minutes. I get my kids up before dawn but I am always late.

Female 2: I have a son too and I make it here on time. You could get fired for that. They may not reappoint you. How often are you late?

Female 1: Almost everyday!

Female 2: Talk to your supervisor. Maybe they will let you come in late but they probably won't. You're just going to have to get your kids up earlier. I have a child and I get here on time. A lot of women have to

do the same. So they probably can't accommodate everybody.

Female 1: Kids need their sleep. I can't get them up earlier.

Female 2: Kids don't need sleep. Kids adjust. It doesn't matter what time they get up so don't make it seem like such a big deal. You better get here on time or you will be without a job because the PO don't care about any of that. They hired you to come in at 8am.

Assignments

While employees bid for their regular work assignments, management has the right to move employees to other work areas based upon work loads, as long as they move employees according to the agreed upon pecking order. Casuals, non-career part timers, are moved first. Career part time flexible employees who are officially unassigned but report to the same work area on a daily basis are moved next. Finally full time regular assigned employees are moved based on "juniority." The protocol is that junior employees are moved first. Supervisors and employees alike complain that on a daily basis, this issue is problematic. On the one hand, employees have the perception that when they are moved from one work area to another they are being penalized. Sometimes employees are moved to a similar work area such as from one flat sorting machine to another or to another work area of the same operation. At other times, employees are moved to an entirely different work area. Nevertheless, several issues concern employees. First, employees think that it is not fair that they are moved. They believe that they should get a "break" if they finish the work in their operation and not more work to do in another work location. Casuals and part time flexible employees feel they are the "workhorses" and are moved to do the "other people's work." In most instances, part time employees believe they are made to do the work that regular

employees do not do. This is one source of tension. The other source of tension stems from employees' view that the practice of breaking up teams and moving employees to other work areas is discriminatory.

The sentiment among employees that supervisors engage in discrimination when they move employees predates diversification of the facility. When the facility was not as diverse as it is now, employees believed that supervisors were discriminating against them for personal reasons. In the current state of diversity, in addition to personal reasons, employees now believe that supervisors engage in discrimination when all or most of a "team" moved from one location to another is of a specific race, nationality, religious sect, or gender. In response to these incidents, although most employees do nothing, some will engage in a slow-down, call union representatives, or file contract-related grievances. Usually these grievances are settled as expeditiously as possible so that they do not go out of the station and into the formal grievance process. The results of these grievances are consistent; there is no policy change implemented because supervisors can usually show that if a particular demographic group was moved it was based on seniority. Thus, employees continue to call union representatives and file grievances that managers perceive as baseless. Employees also respond to these moves by speaking to supervisors in ways that supervisors believe are "disrespectful," another source of everyday conflict between employees and supervisors.

Disrespect

During orientation, before employees actually begin working, they are repeatedly told the importance of doing as they are told and that they should not question

supervisors. Sometimes employees believe that supervisors are moving them from one work area to another for personal reasons and to be punitive towards them. This sentiment is not uncommon. Many employees tend to think that supervisors are “picking” on them whenever they believe that they are being treated differently from other employees or when they believe they are being treated differently from how they are usually treated. For instance, an Asian male employee said:

“A black female supervisor always moves us. She moved us from working the flats machines to tying out boxes of flats because we are Asian. She didn’t move any of the black sub clerks. She doesn’t treat them the way she treats us.”

Even supervisors have the perception they are not treated fairly. During interviews several supervisors said that they were “being punished” by management when they were moved from one work area to another or to a different begin time. However, newer employees (those with fewer than five years in the Service) are more likely than others to verbally respond to supervisor directives in ways that are perceived as “hostile,” “aggressive,” or “disrespectful.” Supervisors and employees alike believe that race and gender relations are the contributing factors.

Supervisors, the majority of whom are black women, believe that young black male employees are more likely than others to respond “disrespectfully” to their directives. They have the perception that these employees are more disrespectful to them than they are to white supervisors. However, there are so few white supervisors on the work floor that they do not have many examples that they could offer to verify their perception. Most supervisors, black men and women, said that non-black male employees are also more likely to be “disrespectful” but they are not as “hostile” as

young black male employees. For example, white male employees, it was reported, will boastfully tell supervisors that they “know their rights” and call a union representative when they believe they are treated unfairly. Conversely, supervisors reported that young black males will “refuse a direct order” of a supervisor, use obscenities, act threatening towards them, and leave the work floor without permission. Supervisors also said that Asian male employees sometimes get upset when they are moved or reprimanded but that they usually do not respond directly to supervisors. An African American male supervisor said, for example:

“I have a group of Asian employees, some men and some women. They usually work pretty good so I can’t complain about that, really. Every now and then I have to speak to one of them for extending a break or something and sometimes they get upset when they are moved to another pay location but they usually don’t say anything. I can tell that they are upset or they may call for the union but they don’t say anything. I have some that just don’t come to work regularly, that is my biggest problem with them. But again they don’t say anything to supervisors. They kind of talk to each more than anything else. And they do it in their language so you don’t know what they’re saying. That gets to me because I know they are being rude but I can’t do anything about it because it’s just a feeling.”

Likewise, some employees said that supervisors speak disrespectfully towards them because of their race and/or gender. The most common complaints among employees are that supervisors are “rude,” “hostile,” and speak to them “like they are children.” Very similar to supervisors, they have no comparison group because most of the supervisors are black but they suggest that the way supervisors speak to them is because of their race. This complaint was evident among black, Hispanic, and Asian employees. In fact, some employees said that black supervisors are “rude” and “more hostile” than other supervisors although most indicated that they never worked under a

white, Asian, or Hispanic supervisor. A black female clerk with 10 years in the Service reported an incident that occurred between her and a black female supervisor. She said:

“She told me to go to the break up area [where mail which comes off the machines is wrapped with plastic binders as it is prepared to leave the station] and I told her that I couldn’t lift those heavy boxes and that I wasn’t a mail handler. I should have just called for the union before it got out of hand but I didn’t think she would go there. She had the nerve to tell me I had better watch my back, and for what, just because I told her it wasn’t my job. One word led to another and she ended up telling me that I had some nerve speaking to her the way I did and that she would smack me down. I was so shocked I repeated what she said so everyone could hear and then I reported her to the floor manager. He filed this phony report to the inspectors and claimed that no one heard her say anything to me. He said that employees told him that they heard me say, ‘Oh, so you’re going to smack me, go ahead and smack me and we’ll see who loses their job.’ Would you believe that shit. They didn’t write her up or anything but if I said that I would have been fired for threatening her. These people are something else but that is the way they do things. They play games with your job and they’re allowed to get away with anything short of murder just because they are supervisors.”

Conversely, some racial ethnic employees believe that there is no racial differences in the way supervisors speak to employees. These employees said that “all supervisors” speak to employees “any way they feel like it” because they have the power to do so and that the organizational zero tolerance for violence policy, despite the credo to treat employees with “dignity and respect,” contributes to these kinds of abuses. Note the follow comment made by a postal employee in the Federal Times:

“Postal supervisors always threaten us with our jobs. They demand we follow direct orders, disrespect our intelligence, abuse their authority and constantly lie to cover up their abuses. The supervisors have the right to push employees over the edge, knowing that they are allowed to do this because of the “zero tolerance” policy. Supervisors and managers at all levels do not effectively supervise nor properly train employees. There is no respect at all for the employees. And you wonder why there are so many shootings?” (1996).

It is also the case that sometimes employees react to supervisors by disobeying their directives, which contributes to the problems they experience on the job. All of these conflicts contribute in different ways to the high employee discipline rate found in the facility. Management, despite my written requests for this information, would not reveal the number of employees disciplined in the facility; however, employees have the perception that every year nearly half of the employees in the facility are disciplined for employee violations of the contract.

The Disciplinary Process

Grievance Procedure

As bargaining employees, there are contractual agreements relative to the disciplinary process. The initial step in the grievance process is an oral discussion, followed by the possibility of intervention processes such as EAP (Employee Assistance Program), REDRESS (Resolve Employee Disputes-Reach Equitable Solution Swiftly), or mediation. After these initial steps, a formal Letter of Warning is issued which generally advises the employee that further infractions of the rules and regulations will result in further disciplinary actions up to and including removal or termination of employment. Suspensions of 7, 14, and 21 days respectively are prerequisites to removal/termination. At each step of the formal disciplinary process, management and union officials can agree to a reduction of the punishment, so a 7-day suspension can be reduced to a 3-day suspension, or any reduced term. However, a 7-day suspension on record, even if it were reduced, would result in the issuance of a 14-day suspension for the next infraction. This

policy was instituted in the mid-1980s when the organization realized that employees could accumulate a history of non-sequential suspensions.

There are 4 steps in the grievance procedure. In the first step of the process, the supervisor and employee, who can choose to be accompanied by a union shop steward, meet to discuss the merits of the case. If they do not reach a resolution, the union representative appeals for a step two. At this point in the process employees cannot represent themselves. At Step 2 of the appeals process, a manager of the work area reviews the disciplinary action and discusses it with a union shop steward, who pleads the case on behalf of the employee. The organization protocol is to resolve disputes at the lowest possible step in the grievance procedure; however, if a case is not resolved at Step 2 it goes on to Step 3 in the process. At Step 3 a Labor Relations Representative and a Union Officer meet to discuss the merits of the case. Up to this point, suspensions are “paper” suspensions and Step 3s are usually held before the date of termination for removal cases, to minimize the number of back pay awards for cases modified at any point up to Step 3 in the process. However, if the case is denied at Step 3, the employee will serve the allocated time “in the streets” and the union requests an arbitration hearing, the fourth step in the grievance procedure. At arbitration, labor and management present their cases to an arbitrator/administrative judge and a binding decision is made to return an employee to duty, with or without back pay, or to modify a suspension.

Chapter Summary

The above discussion of how workers experience work in a mail processing facility is indicative of systematic problems related to machine oriented work and the

culture of the USPS. Machine oriented work has been problematic for all involved, managers and workers. These challenges are made more difficult because of the militaristic, autocratic managerial style. It is in this climate that workers, both managers and employees, experience one of the largest and most contentious workplaces in the United States. These problems are both structural and systematic which necessitates that they are addressed in this manner. Nevertheless, in an attempt to foster a climate of change without addressing these problems, management has begun to refocus their ideas about workplace conflict. Now that the organization has significantly increased diversification of the postal work force, they now perceive workplace conflicts and articulate them as related to diversity. The organization interprets a divisive culture of conflict in terms of 'managing,' 'valuing,' or 'celebrating' diversity although the culture of conflict predates diversification of the organization. It is important for our understanding of diversification of formerly white, male, and middle class organizations to consider that the manner in which the organization diversifies its workforce and the ways in which employees experience diversity plays a significant role in workplace conflicts and negotiations. The following discussion will present the research findings as they relate to the paradoxes of diversity—the fact that employees experience elements of integration, resegregation, and tokenism—and how these experiences help shape employees perceptions of race, class, and gender relationships.

PART THREE. PERCEPTIONS OF RACE, CLASS, AND
GENDER RELATIONS IN THE POSTAL SERVICE

CHAPTER VI

FACILITY INTEGRATION

Introduction

The Service holds the view that it has a responsibility to diversify its workforce and facilitate worker acceptance of those who are “similar and different” from themselves. In this regard, the Service has a diversity campaign that is superlative. Posters, contests, awards, newsletters, conflict resolution protocols, and a host of diversity change agents³³ are some of the means by which organizational resources are utilized to address the problem. However, organizational members believe that attitudes related to race, social class, and gender divisions are part of the history and culture of our society and that there is very little it can do to obstruct the influx of the negative effects of societal relations into the organization. Still, the Service has a two-fold problem, which leaves it assiduously reflecting on the numerical distribution and representation of equal employment opportunity groups. With very little success, thus far, the organization must figure out how to integrate the vast number of districts and facilities that are predominantly white, middle class, and male without upsetting the status quo in non-urban postal facilities. Largely due to residential patterns and civilian labor pools, diversification in the Service is confined to urban areas of the country. Thus, the organization must also facilitate a cooperative workforce in increasingly diverse urban

³³ Diversity Change Agents are diversity specialists who are extensively trained to promote multiculturalism and conflict resolution.

postal facilities, amid accusations that the Service is one of the most contentious and violent workplaces in the country.

The urban facility where this research was conducted is characterized as integrated. Approximately 45 percent of the workforce is of African descent (African American and Caribbean American). Hispanics are the next largest racial-ethnic group; they represent approximately 20 percent and Asians, the most recent entrants, represent approximately 10 percent of the workforce. Whites represent approximately 24 percent of the workforce. Although the representation of equal employment racial groups in the facility bears no resemblance to their representation in society, most diversity specialists and practitioners would consider the facility racially diverse. The vast majority of racial ethnic postal workers come from poor to working class family backgrounds and many have moved into middle class occupations and lifestyles. The facility, although still male-centered is comprised of approximately 50 percent female workforce.

Given the presence of various races, social classes, and men and women, observations of the facility contribute to an initial belief that the facility and work areas within it are integrated. The structure of machine operations contributes to this impression because workers do not have a great deal of leeway to choose the workers they will work with during the course of the workday. Supervisors wait for employees as they clock in, take their time disks, and assign temporary employees to work areas or assign regular employees (who bid for their positions) to different machines in particular work areas. Manual mail sorting operations and non-machine operations such as light duty operations also appear to consist of diverse groups of workers. Thus, when work

areas, the cafeteria, and smoke room of the facility are observed, they appear to be quite diverse.

It is no wonder that in this facility, many employees have contradictory perceptions of the organization's diversity initiative. Some employees think that diversity programs are necessary while others think diversity programs are divisive. Still other employees think diversity programs are not necessary given the level of diversity they see among employees. Whether or not employees embrace or resent the organization's diversity programs, employee perceptions of employee relations across demographic lines are largely shaped by the degree to which they experience diversity in their daily work environment.

This chapter will utilize the paradoxes of diversity framework to examine employee perceptions race, social class, and gender relations in an integrated urban facility. The framework suggests that patterns of occupational integration shape employee perceptions of relations that are difficult for individuals, groups, and the organization to reconcile.

Race Relations

Employees who work in integrated work areas of the facility were either reluctant to speak about or ambiguous about race relations on the job. Their apparent taciturnity may stem from the fact that they work with many different racial groups, more or less amicably. This tendency towards taciturnity about work related issues might also stem from the culture of the organization. Germano notes that during the early 1900s President Roosevelt issued a "gag rule" which prohibited federal and postal employees

from engaging in any discussions, outside of departments, that were designed to influence legislation which would further the interest of said workers (1984:27). Although most postal employees have no direct knowledge of this executive order, which was found to be unconstitutional and overturned by the passage of the Lloyd-LaFollette Act, the gag rule still impacts the behavior of postal employees, if not all federal workers to some extent. This culture of silence, more recently discussed in the work of Fraser, Kick, and Barber (2002) who conducted research in a postal facility, is indicative of the culture of the organization as a whole and is not confined to particular racial groups or individuals. The gag rule operates informally but it is nevertheless as effective as if it was a formal rule. For instance, a Latino male with 8 years in the Service gave the following report of his perception of what happened to a former president of the union, APWU, who spoke publicly about race relations in the organization:

“Oh the [APWU] union president who replaced McMillan had to go. Smith was forever talking about racial issues all on the news and everything. He went on the news [Fall, 2000] and told reporters that the PO was racist because they closed plants in NJ and Washington [DC] where most of the workers are white when there were reports of anthrax going through the mail. Smith said the PO left our facility open and tried to cover up the fact that anthrax was found on several of the machines. Then they cleaned it up with us in the building and gave us [if they wanted] gloves and pills to keep us from getting sick if we were in contact with the stuff. Will Smith said management did this because most of the workers in the building are black and Hispanic. I am not really sure how the negative vibe about Smith got started but he only served one term as president. They voted him and his whole team out. I don't know how much management helped to get him out of there but I think they must have helped by telling workers that Smith was too belligerent and uncooperative with management and they probably supported the team that ran against Smith. They do things like that around here. I would not be surprised. You just never know.”

In this culture, it was not surprising to find that most employees were reluctant to discuss race relations. Initially, most employees regardless of their race said that race relations in the facility were not problematic and that they “get along with everybody” and do not “see color” in regards to their interaction with other racial groups. An African American worker with 12 years in the Service made the following comment:

“I never felt that someone didn’t like me because of the color of my skin. I felt that they didn’t like me because of my aura or my attitude. I felt like don’t bother me because I am doing my job and maybe they didn’t like me because of that. But like Mr. G (a white general foreman) was cool with me so I can’t say that all whites didn’t like me because I am black or because I am a woman. Maybe they didn’t like me because I didn’t give them the time of day. I didn’t give them any more conversation than what I had to. But I didn’t think it was because of my color.”

An Asian male manager with 18 years in the Service also thought that race was not a significant factor affecting how he relates to others. He stated:

“I don’t like it when people judge each other based on race. I mean I know it affects people. Blacks are the most hated group in society so I would never say race is not important but I don’t judge people based on their race. I try to get along with everybody, white, black, Spanish. It just doesn’t matter to me. I have coworkers of all races and we all get along, have lunch together, play cards and I see a lot of that in the PO. I mean sometimes I see groups sticking to their own kind but a lot of them are newer employees.”

An African American woman who retired from the Service in 1990 after working for 30 years said that although most of the employees were people of color, many of the supervisors were white during the 1970s and 1980s. She made the following comment:

“I didn’t have that many white employees around me. Most of us were black. I didn’t work with that many white people. Like I said, they were pushed out of the way [given detailed positions] so we never worked with that many of them. But the front-line people, they used to laugh and joke with us and what not. Every now and then you got somebody who was really stern but most of the time they were pretty nice. They weren’t that bad. I remember one day....there was this white supervisor that every time somebody got up, he would sit in their seat. I

said, “Why are you always sitting in everybody’s seat?” He said, ‘My feet are killing me.’ He always had these sneakers on.”

Even when confronted with what appears to be racial patterns, some employees were reluctant to attribute these phenomena to race. For example, in one instance employees were asked what contributes to the fact that many of the offices in the facility appear to be integrated; however, most of the administrators in these offices are white and most of the clerks are black and Hispanic. When an employee was asked why this pattern prevails, a white female administrator with 25 years of service said:

“They end up in those positions because of differential skills. Whites have more education than blacks. Although most [blacks] are hard working and dedicated workers who bring a lot to their tasks, they just don’t have the educational attainment to get managerial positions. There’s no conspiracy here. The district manager is a black woman and I’ve worked with lots of black administrators and union officials. Most of them [union officials] are blacks. If you want to know why the clerks working under white men aren’t white women, well there aren’t that many of us in the Service.”

An African American male who worked in racially diverse areas of the facility for 8 years then resigned in 1988 made the following similar assessment, he said:

“When I was there it was obvious that whites were doing one job and we were doing another. The whites were administrators and the higher up you went the whiter it was. Now I can tell you, from what I remember, it was not perceived as a race thing....I could have felt that it was underlying racial but they treated the whites the same. The white young men were given a hard time too. I don’t recall any outright racial kinds of things. I encountered it at UPS but I can’t. Everything is so objective in the PO and the PO as well as government service in general was known to give you [blacks] a chance.”

Employees were also asked what they thought about a widely publicized incident that occurred in 1997 when a high-ranking postal official in the facility where this research was conducted circulated a glossary of “ebonics¹” terms on the USPS electronic

message system to other postal employees. Postal managers characterized the incident as racially motivated and unwittingly referred to it as individual act of discrimination—an act committed by individuals or small groups that intent to harm members of racial-ethnic groups (Feagin & Feagin, 1978). In part, the email entitled, “Ebonics Made Easy,” states:

“In an effort to improve intra-office communication, a program of EBONICS FAMILIARIZATION has been implemented. All level 1 and level 2 managers are requested to review the following examples and incorporate them whenever applicable. Further examples will follow at regular intervals...DISAPOINTMENT – My parole officer tol’ me if I miss DISAPOINTMENT dey gonna send me back to the big house...FORECLOSE – If I pays alimony dis month I’ll have no money left FORECLOSE....”

The incident was perceived by the president of the local metro area union, APWU, as a “problem of racism and sexism which surfaced in the New York Post Office...and aired in the news media across the country.” They also demanded that the Postmaster General take “immediate and appropriate action” (*The Union Mail*, April, 1997:1). In this article, the union president also urged all members of New York Metro “to take the time to sit down with your children, grandchildren, family members, and neighbors and discuss the subject of racism candidly and objectively.” In response, the manager was removed from his position and later reinstated in a non-supervisory position in a different facility. Very interestingly, there were mixed reactions to the incident. Some of the employees said they thought the manager deserved to be punished for “his racist” remarks. Other employees, Asians and Latinos who said they did not know the manager personally, said they heard about the incident and were told that the manager did not write the email comments. Nevertheless, they said that he should have known better than to circulate the

message on the USPS electronic message system. A white male administrator, however, thought that the Service was exploiting the situation to make it appear that they do not tolerate racial bias. He said:

“He’s just the fall guy. They [management] know that there is a race problem in the PO but they ignore it. Like for example, they know that blacks and Asians hate each other but they pretend it does not exist. They only deal with race relations when it hits the news but then they make one person the example to supposedly send a message to all employees. Should they do more? I don’t know but it’s unfair to make somebody a scapegoat. It’s not fair and it doesn’t send a message because people just ignore the real problem.”

The above sentiment was not confined to white workers, some African American workers who knew the manager reported similar perceptions of what occurred. An African American woman with 16 years in the Service stated:

“I hate to say it but I could deal with [him] better than I can deal with some black women [managers] because I don’t get no shocks and no pettiness from him. He doesn’t put on a dress today and pants tomorrow...I never had any problems with him and racism and I worked with him for a long time even before he became a manager. He can be whatever he wants to be off the job but on the job he was [name deleted].”

Another African American female manager who worked under the manager when she was a clerk said:

“[Name deleted] was a real cool guy. All of the workers were black and Spanish so who knew anything about him being a racist. All I know is that he was a good guy. He worked the shit out of you but he gave us good breaks if we did our job and he was fair with us. He didn’t play favorites. So what can I say? I don’t think he is a racist. What he did was just down right dumb. He’s must be getting old and forgetting shit because he should have known better than to do that in the Post Office.”

Many of the racial ethnic employees expressed their view that the organization

has been quite open to the inclusion of racially diverse groups and most of the employees noted that the Service is more diverse than other places they have worked. Most of the employees also remarked about the large number of racial ethnic supervisors and managers in the Service.

However, in contrast to those employees who suggest that race is not a problem in the Service, other racial ethnic workers thought that race relations in the Service are problematic. All of the racial ethnic employees interviewed said that they never heard a white employee say anything directly racist. Rather they suggest that sometimes whites say things that are inherently racist such as inferring that the behavior of an individual person of color accounts for the behavior of all members of the group. They also reported that white employees, whenever they could, would avoid speaking or interacting with people of a different race. A black male said,

“Yeah, they just ignore you and act like you’re not there. White supervisors can’t do that but white workers will do that all the time. It made me feel uncomfortable at first but I am used to it. If they speak, I speak. If they don’t, I don’t.”

An Asian woman with 15 years in the Service report, similarly, that white managers sometimes speak to her in ways that make her feel they are putting her down because of her race. She said,

“Sometimes the whites [managers] talk down to me because I am Asian. They turn their noses up and act tough and order me around and sometimes I have to put them in their place because my job is to help them get their jobs done and I try to accommodate them. I know my job but I don’t have to put up with belittling comments from them. They think because I am Chinese that I don’t know what they are saying or something. Like they talk to me like if they are saying, ‘Can’t you understand English?’ I didn’t go to college but I was born here and I went to school here so I know exactly what they are saying but they think we all just stepped off the boat. They make me laugh. Sometimes, the problem is that they don’t know the limits of what my office can do for them or they don’t know what

it is they are asking for but I tell them not to make it my problem because I know my job and I do it. They are just so full of themselves. They think the world has to stand still to give them what they want.”

Organizational Minimization of Race

Although racist behavior is subtler and people are much more inclined to say what they believe to be politically correct, incidents that are perceived as racist occur but are often understated by managers. For example, a white manager reported the following incident. He said,

“The supervisors on the work floor complained that managers, most of whom are white, are disrespectful to them and they believed that it was due to their race. Most of the supervisors are black women so it could be related to that too but when the supervisor of the managers spoke to them about it they said things like some of the managers have an attitude. They spoke about one manager, in particular. When he asked them what the manager did that was racist, they said that he has an attitude and comes to the work area and doesn’t speak to anyone unless he is telling them what to do. He was befuddled, like what the hell was he supposed to do about that? He couldn’t believe they tried to say white managers are racist when they didn’t do or say to the supervisors. I know [name deleted] and I know he is not racist but the supervisors think that if white managers don’t act friendly towards them that it is due to race and that is just not the case. Everybody’s just so sensitive.”

Organizational managers support the minimization of race related incidents because they are not sure what is racist and do not try to listen to or understand the reaction of supervisors who try to address the issue of race. Likewise, management downplays the sentiments of employees who believe they are treated unfairly because of their race. A female reported that a supervisor wrote her up several times for minor infractions for which he allowed other employees to engage in. She reported that a white supervisor gave employees in her unit their paychecks but told her she had to wait to the end of the day. When she protested that he was being racist, he suspended her for 7 days

for disrespecting a supervisor. The employee reported that when she told his supervisor about the incident, the manager told her that there are other black employees in the area and the supervisor never formally disciplined the other employees. The employee also reported the incident to an EEO representative who gave her a similar response. The representative told the employees that she had the right to file a complaint but that it would probably be found baseless. The EEO representative then told the employee that she should either try to get along with the supervisor or bid out of the section. This is an example of the way in which organizational actors institutionalize racial issues so that they remain within the confines of work areas within the organization.

Racist comments, nonetheless, are literally written on the walls. For example, a white male manager reported that it is not uncommon to find racist graffiti in the locker rooms and hallways in these areas, which are more integrated than others. He said that the graffiti has been so offensive that managers, who have also made racist comments and jokes at the expense of workers of color, have spoken to employees about it during service talks as well as continuously paint over the graffiti. Employees also report their perception that race relations impact their life chances. Racial ethnic employees believe that although postal reorganizations in the past two decades have led to decreased upper level positions and therefore diminished opportunities for upward mobility, their chances have always been blocked due to racial discrimination. For instance, an African American woman stated:

“I think that I didn’t move up or our chance to move up was because of racial issues but that was never to be discussed. That is like a black market in the South. You don’t bring that up. Oh yeah, on occasion. They say, the Postmaster (general) and everybody up there is white. Oh yeah, they have a black woman in

charge of the union but she was like one of those people on the plantation. What do they call them? She was the overseer. She was the one who got together with management to get all of these things out the contract and delay the contract. Meanwhile she got paid a lot of money to represent you...and doing a fine job of it (laughs). Shit, I paid my dues but I wasn't part of the union."

Another African American woman alluded to a similar sentiment:

"They all come in here and walk all over black people. We are always the last to get anything. The Latinos came in here and pushed us aside, now the Asians are doing it. They come in here and move up very fast and we're still at the bottom of the boat. It's just white racism as usual. Whites don't mind working with Hispanics and Asians because they think they are better than black people so they move them up and everybody knows it. Sometimes it makes me mad because like I work with this white guy who always talks badly or makes jokes about blacks and Hispanics. I mean I don't dislike the guy or anything like that. He's pretty cool most of the time and I like working with him but every now and then his true colors come out...once he said, 'I could never live near those people in the projects because they play their music too loud, who could sleep with all of that racket.' Now I know he is talking about blacks and Latinos but I try not to take it personally. But what gets to me sometimes is that here I am, a black woman, and he just comes out of his mouth and says anything with no regard for my feelings. Nothing's changed. Because we are black they think they can say anything they want to us and that's the way it's always been in society. But let me say something about the Jews, Italians, Irish, or whatever and they'll get doubly offended."

A Hispanic male with 8 years in the Service said:

"I try to get along with everyone but I don't really work with white people. Most of my coworkers are black, Latino, and Chinese but whenever I had to deal with whites, they were administrators and they have a sense of superiority. I really don't know if it is because they are white and or if they are higher level but they think they are better than everyone else but that is nothing new. They have always had the upper hand over Latinos and took over our countries all over the world so it doesn't surprise me that they think they are better than everyone else. Sometimes they don't know I am Latino so they don't act funny but as soon as they know....[when asked how do they know the employee stated: because of my accent] they try to talk down to me."

Management's response to race related matters contribute to a tendency among employees to individualize their experiences, even though they are intimately aware of

systematic racism. Management is somewhat insensitive to employees' claims of race-based incidents. They are perceived as the "perception" of the individual employee. The individualization of race is also sustained by the patterns of diversity found in the facility, which are contradictory, at best. This issue will be discussed in the Conclusions chapter because it is a significant factor that stems, in part, from the paradoxes of diversity in the facility. In the meantime, it will suffice to say nevertheless that many of the racial ethnic employees have a perception that race relations impact favoritism, friendships, and mentoring relationships on the job.

Favoritism

When employees were asked to what they like least about working in the facility, most mentioned their perception that favoritism within postal facilities contributes to how employees experience employment in the Service. These employees believe that most employees get positions—details (temporary positions), laterals and promotions—because of social networks. This is indicated in the following comments made by an African American woman who worked for the organization for 20 years:

“They have a saying in here. ‘You’re only as good, in the PO, as your Godfather. If your Godfather³⁵ is there, you’re protected. Once he leaves, you’re out there in the middle of the ocean without a life raft....I see it happen a lot. If someone likes you, you’re okay.’”

This sentiment is consistent with the findings of Fraser, Kick, and Barber (2002) who did a study of postal employees; they found that “51 percent stated that the workplace was only occasionally fair or seldom fair (455). Similarly, without

³⁵ A Godfather, in the Service, is a high ranking official who utilizes their position and power to ensure that their cronies get organizational opportunities such as experience, training, and promotions.

reservation, employees of my study expressed their view that all employees—whites, blacks, Hispanics, and Asians—get jobs because of who they know. An African

American female who works in the facility for the past 12 years stated:

“Nothing about the job is encouraging. I would hear things like, ‘Oh they will pay for your education if you go into certain fields,’ but I don’t think that applied to everyone in general. I think it applied to who you know or who you did sexual favors to. I strongly believe that because in a lot of instances clerks that I know became serious with a supervisor and the next thing you know they were up for supervisor or they went back to school or they got on the day tour...things like that whereas if they weren’t with that supervisor or if they weren’t doing something with that GF [General Foreman] they wouldn’t have got that. It’s somebody that they knew or made a connection with or something. In most cases, I’m not going to say in every case, but in most cases. You could come in there with a BA [bachelor’s degree] and if you didn’t know somebody you were still a clerk like everybody else.”

The sentiment that favoritism contributes to where employees find themselves, their opportunity for occupational mobility, and access to the kinds of training that will contribute to all of the above is quite strong among postal employees. This sentiment has a long history in the organization and contributed, in part, to the 1970 reorganization of the Post Office, which was designed to diminish political appointments and favoritism. Postal employees said they thought that all workers with the power to do so engage in favoritism which advantages or disadvantages certain individuals and groups. Nonetheless, they noted that political considerations are not anomalous to the Service; most employees believe favoritism is a fact of organizational life. Thus, some employees thought the promotion procedure was not fair and was directly related to race. Note the response of a Hispanic male with 8 years in the Service who said,

“Whites will always have their way in the PO. It’s a white man’s world and it’s a white man’s job. They always get the jobs they want and nobody says a damn thing, no matter what they do.”

On the contrary, other employees believe that race was not a factor in regards to favoritism on the job. For instance, a white male employee with 18 years in the Service said he did not think that promotions in the Service were fair, he said:

“I would say that some where along the line it was deemed (by management) that it was their time. It didn’t make a difference what their qualifications were. It was a matter of, well, maybe this person has been putting in for it for a number of years or maybe this person was a friend or well-liked by the people who were actually making the decision of who they were going to promote. So, no I don’t think it is fair. I don’t think it was fair when I made it either....because the same situation occurred in [year deleted]. I was detailed...again these women and men...all white people got details to a [name deleted] unit and they were looking for helpers. [A white female manager] in much the same way that she got me in the executive office took the lead and suggested that I put in for the detail and [the white male manager] knew me when he was a supervisor and we got along very well. So when the supervisory job came out, I put in for it and the person who did my evaluation was another white man and [the white male manager who knew me] was very well connected with all of these people because he was in management for a very long time. He dealt with postmasters, operations managers, people in power and he did my evaluation. And I got called for an interview and probably did just as well on that interview as I did on others but I don’t think I made it because of my qualifications as much as because people were pushing for me. So, no I don’t think it is a fair process.”

What employees perceive as “fair” fluctuates. An African American woman who interviewed to become a supervisor 28 times before getting promoted said the promotion procedure was fair but not necessarily the best way to get the best qualified. She said,

“It’s fair. Let’s put it this way...I don’t think the procedure necessarily provides an opportunity for the best qualified people. Not always. What I envision as the fairest way to determine whether or not a person meets the qualification of a position is to put them in the position and let them show what they have rather than going by a routine interview type questions. In fact, at the workshops that we gave on interview techniques [we said,] “When you go in for an interview, you should know this, you should study this.” We gave them a whole list of

acronyms. What difference does it make if they know what an acronym mean as to whether or not they can do a job.....what form numbers...who needs to know that a Form 1767 is hazardous condition report. Why is it important for someone to know the number of a form. What's important is that fact that form....you know that the form exists and how it's used. And so, it becomes a game after a while.....you learn to play the game. So when you go in for that interview, you do your homework....you study this, you study that and if you come across well, if you speak well, if you articulate well, then you have a good chance of getting a position.”

Conversely, other employees have a perception that there is white privilege in the Service that is detrimental to good employee relations and on the effectiveness of the organization, as follows:

“We're all at the point now...what is taking so long for somebody to come in here and kind of fix some of this stuff....you know because some of this stuff is wrong....some of this stuff don't make any sense....and how could you. Let me explain something to you. There's one hundred trucks...a hundred. There's 36 post cons on a truck. So if you get 100 trucks, you got 3,600 post cons and if 10 pieces of mail is on each truck, you wind up with 36,000 pieces of mail. Okay, all of that mail is not going to be worked. Some of it is deck transfers. Some of it belongs to the [other] side of the building and you're not getting it in the first place. How did you work 36,000 pieces of mail? Where did you get it from? That means that nothing went to the [other] side of the building to be worked....which is a damn lie. That means that you didn't have deck transfers. How can you out and out boldly lie about those numbers like that? How can you inflate those counts to make it look like you're doing one hell of a job and not understand that if somebody's paying attention your ass is grass. I think it's ridiculous...they take chances that are unbelievable....I believe that if they gave my manager [a black male] the plant manager's job they would be all over him like white on rice. Okay, you know how they claim they want to kill that good-old-boys network? It is alive and kicking and if you want to know where it's at, it's at [gives address of postal facility]. It's alive and kicking cause somebody's got to know somebody to be allowing all of this stuff to go on.”

Friendships

Work floor employees who work in integrated work areas said that they work with postal employees of different racial backgrounds and that they get along with each

other “at least enough to get the job done.” As expected, white employees said they get along well with people of different races and some of their friends on the job were black, Hispanic and Asian. White employees said that these were “on the job friends” who they worked with on the job and occasionally talked to during smoking and other breaks. They acknowledged that they did not associate with these workers on their days off or outside of the workplace. Racial-ethnic group members were more likely than white employees to say that they had on the job friends of different racial groups and that they occasionally associated with these friends outside of the job. However, they noted that most of their extra organizational associations were primarily with coworkers who were members of their racial-ethnic group. They also said that occasionally they celebrated holidays and birthdays on the job with across race friends but most of these kinds of celebrations among co-workers were primarily with members of their race. On the job friendships, whether confined to the job and superficial or extending beyond its borders, have implications for work relations among diverse workers.

One such implication is that despite the proliferation of automation and machine-oriented work, which do not require large teams of workers, employees go through great lengths to work with their friends who are, in most cases, of the same racial background as they are. For example, an African American female supervisor reported the following incident:

“Only 3 days ago last week, I had the responsibility of being at the control desk where they do manpower control and that assignment entails a supervisor to service each machine on the floor by giving work assignments to all of the employees. So, I come in, I look at the volume and assign the people. So, how do I do it? Formerly, a supervisor would come in early and be very selective of the people that she selected to go on her machine. She was trying to select the

people who were known to be the fast keyers and that would key fast for high productivity. Some employees considered that insulting because she blatantly did this procedure at the desk in front of all the supervisors. So, I am at the desk and they [supervisors and employees] had complained that there was no fairness. So, I asked all the regulars to place their disks on my desk face down and I explained to them that my duties were to assign them to machines. Their disks were faced down; I gave each supervisor a number of disks depending on how many employees they needed. That was holy hell. Holy, hell. Could you get any fairer than that? I didn't discriminate. I didn't pick anybody. The disks were faced down. Oh, they went off. They went ballistic. So, now....I did not care....for three days, they were going to get that fair process that they [employees] wanted.”

The employees were concerned about the effect of this process, which was that they were not working with their friends. During the time that the supervisor continued this routine, the workers were extremely unhappy and uncooperative with each other. When asked how she knew the workers were uncooperative with each other, the supervisor reported that most of the machine workers are black and Asian and each group took turns complaining about the work ethic of the other group. She also noted, quite indicative of workers who are discontented, that the workers took longer than usual step off (breaks) and left their assigned machines to talk to their friends at other machines. The supervisor reported that the workers were “miserable” until supervisors returned to the old procedure of allocating machine assignments on the basis of putting people who work well together. The people who worked well together were of the same race, resulting in machines that were staffed primarily by one or another racial group despite the overall diversity of the work area and despite the fact that workers may play cards and have casual conversations with workers of different races. This tendency for workers to want to work with their friends who are more than likely members of their race impacts other kinds of employee relations that have implications for their career prospects.

Mentoring

Although some workers said they did not have an on the job mentor, most of the employees who acknowledged having a mentor or role model noted that the people who have been the most influential to them in terms of their postal careers have been the same race as themselves. All of the white respondents stated that their mentors were white men who held mid to upper level managerial positions. Several of these respondents noted that these men “took them under their wing,” and “showed them how to play the game” and get the most out of their postal careers. A white female manager with 16 years in the Service said the following:

“Getting a job in the Service was a godsend. I grew up in a working class family but also a troubled family. My dad had a drinking problem and was abusive to my mother. When the marriage fell apart, I was the oldest so I had to go to work to help my mother. I did well in school but I had to make money so after high school I kind of floundered around from one office job to another but I wasn’t making any money. Then shortly after I began working in the PO I met a manager [white man] who told me what I needed to do to move up in the organization. He helped me to think of the job as a career and not just another job. He had a lot to do with me being where I am today because he gave me a lot of opportunities to get the kinds of experiences I needed in order to move up. They called him my ‘Godfather’ and sometimes they rumored that we were dating but he was just a very good friend.”

Black employees who worked in integrated work areas also reported being mentored by blacks who were upper level employees or family members who work for the Service. An African American female supervisor reported,

“That woman, Ms. [name deleted] was dynamic. She was the type of [general] supervisor, she knew her supervisors...she had her whole floor under total control. She had her assignments posted. She always had her daily work packages that superiors get. She would read her package daily; she would underline any pertinent information. This is the daily package where they have a lot of information compiled about postal operations and incidents that occurred such as

[mail destination] labels wrong....all of the would be put in this package. She would read this package daily and anything that pertained to our operation, she would underline it in red. She expected you to know it and so we made sure that we read it. We got our schedules and knew when we were supposed to be off. I liked the idea that she was a manager that understood that supervisors needed to do paperwork on a continuous basis and provided a relief supervisor so we could do it. That is how she ran her floor. I admired her for that and she was a superb coordinator. She always shared information. She always did her control books every month. Every month, every supervisor had to go over every entry in their control book to explain it to her. What it was, why it was, and what you were doing about it. I have never had anyone like that, I admired that woman; she was great. She taught me a lot of things. She shared everything with us. She told us what was available, as far as jobs were concerned.”

An African American woman with 20 years in the Service reported that her mentor was her sister who also works for the Service. She said:

“My older sister works there and she always told me never to use my sick leave if you want a position. Not that I was looking for a position but I wanted to go into the accounting department because in school that is what I took up. That was like sewed up. I would go there see all of these old-timers in that office. It was like they were never going to leave there. Anyway, she told me ‘Don’t use your sick leave,’ and I would say that because of her I have over a thousand hours of sick leave.”

An African American male said that his mentor was his mother, a personnel clerk, who was very involved in the organization and who had always spoke to him about the possibility of him working for the organization and becoming a manager. He said,

“After I got here I could not believe that my mother encouraged me to work here. This place is unbelievable sometimes. Sure, there are black supervisors and managers but that don’t mean a damn thing. They aren’t any better than the white ones. They all screw you around. I would never want to be a supervisor. All I want to do is hopefully retire and I will never, ever, work for the white man again. Never.”

Even when not directly mentored by anyone, several African American employees reported that they were inspired by and saw black managers as role models. An African American female with 9 years in the Service reported,

“When I began working in the Service I could not believe how many black people work here. I was also impressed that so many of the supervisors and managers are black. I didn’t particularly want to become a supervisor but by seeing them it made me feel like there was a possibility if I decided to go that route. I didn’t know any of the managers personally but when I saw them on the work floor, it made me feel good to see them in these high level positions. Now some people think they are nothing but Uncle Tom sell-outs to upper management who are whites but I didn’t think of it that way. I was proud to see them in these positions.”

As was the case with African American employees, Latinos also reported, in most instances, that they were mentored by other Latinos. A Latina who had 12 years in the Service reported that when she began working in the Service she worked with a general supervisor who was also Latino. She said,

“His parents are from the same town in Puerto Rico that my parents lived in when they were children. I guess he took a liking to me. I don’t know but he was very nice to me. He showed me how to do the count and I did that for two years. For two years I didn’t have to work the flat machines. It was good. I liked the job. I was just waiting for an office job anyway because I passed the typing test but at least I didn’t have to work the machines and he used to send me out for his lunch and stuff like that. Everybody, including his girlfriend, thought I was dating him but I wasn’t. He was just nice to me, showed me how to do paperwork, and told me a lot about making it in the Service but I don’t think I am the supervisor type so I never tried to do that but he told me how to do it which was nice of him.”

An African American clerk with 10 years in the Service said:

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African American clerk with 10 years in the Service said:

African American clerk with 10 years in the Service said:

“I had white males but only one white female supervisor. She was very nice to me. She was rarely out of character. She was genuinely nice to me and she often said she liked me working for her and I liked working for her but that was a double-edged sword. I think because I worked good for her she didn’t really try to help me move up. Once I applied for an entry-level management position in

another district. She always told me I had a lot of potential to move up in the PO and I worked hard. Whatever I didn’t know how to do I asked her how to do it or I just followed her lead on how to run the office. I asked her for a recommendation for the job. It was similar to what I was doing but a higher level and she wrote one short paragraph. One short paragraph. I couldn’t believe it. I worked like a dog for her. I did everything and whatever I didn’t know how to do I made it my business to learn so I couldn’t believe she didn’t write an exceptional recommendation for me. She could have helped me but she didn’t. I’m not really sure why.”

Of those employees who were mentored by a person of a different race, Asians were more likely than Blacks and Hispanics to be mentored by a white employee. An Asian male said,

“Yes, I was mentored by the manager [a white male] of [name of area deleted]. I was on the work floor and he asked for help from my supervisor who let me work for the manager on several occasions. After the manager saw that I was a good worker, he asked me if I wanted to work with him and he got me a detail in his office. He showed me the ropes and when there was an opening in his office he helped me apply for the position, coached me for the interview, and of course, wrote an excellent letter of recommendation for me. I don’t know if I would have gotten the job without his help. I know I am more than qualified for the job but without his help nobody would have known me.”

Employees who work in integrated work areas are more likely than other employees to be ambivalent about their perceptions of race relations. Some believe that race relations between whites and racial ethnic minorities are not problematic because they work with each other in more or less amicable ways. Still others believe that race relations are problematic. The most significant factors which contribute to the ambiguity of their perceptions is that the organization has a culture of silence regarding the issue of

race relations; managers minimize race relations and discredit employees accounts of these experiences; and given these factors employees tend to individualize and personalize their experiences. Nevertheless, when employees discuss the work climate and relationships with coworkers, race relations seem to be an important factor shaping their perceptions. Employees who work in integrated work areas are equally ambivalent about social class relations in the facility.

Social Class Relations

A hallmark of the modern bureaucracy, classical and contemporary social class theorists would agree, is inequality among the ranks. The basis of inequality is the hierarchical structure of these organizations, which rank employees on the basis of authority (Dahrendorf, 1959). This is the basis of the class structure in the Postal Service but does not significantly explain social class relations among employees. In the Service, career postal workers, for all intents and purposes, are middle class. This reflects their high salaries and “higher educational and training requirements than those associated with blue-collar employment” (Wilson, 1978:95). Although all postal employees are theoretically middle class, the lifestyles and life chances of these workers, the nature of their work experiences, as well as life chances (opportunities to acquire organizational and social resources), varies considerably. Thus, class, for the purpose of this study, cannot be conceptualized as “groups of people who share not only similar occupations, incomes, and levels of education but also similar lifestyles” (Marger, 2002:27). To understand class among postal workers, it is not appropriate to utilize a socioeconomic status composite. The concept of class is much more complex in the Service.

Indeed, the concept of class is difficult to operationalize in the context of postal

facilities because it is extremely variable. Education, skills, training, occupational standing, and earnings are traditional indicators of one's class standing. In the Postal Service these indicators are sometimes skewed by other factors such as seniority, initiative, and personal connections. For example, one may find that a high level official may have a high school diploma, a high occupational standing, and very high earnings. At the other end of the continuum, it is possible to find a college graduate who works as a mail clerk; their status in the organization and level of autonomy, it follows, will be much lower than the high level official who has a high school diploma. It does not follow that the earnings of the mail clerk will be lower than a manager or supervisor because overtime hours can significantly increase one's income. In terms of the distribution, these are outliers. In the Service there is no norm relative to the match between education, occupational standing, and earnings but a structure of inequality between employees and supervisors exists.

Promotions – The Intersection of Race and Class

Traditionally, prior to massive automation of postal operations, postal promotions to supervisory, administrative, and managerial positions were competitive and based on several extra-educational factors. If employees displayed the appropriate work ethic and were liked by their supervisors and managers, they were given a chance to receive the kind of training that would enable them to learn the skills of upper level positions. This is no longer the case. In the contemporary postal environment, with its emphasis on credentials and customer service, middle class or credentialed employees, regardless of race and gender, are far more able to take advantage of the opportunity structure of the

organization. For example, during the early 1970's, as mechanization and automation increased, there was a great demand for mechanics. Career employees who passed the mechanic aptitude test were sent for training and those who passed training were assigned to this higher-level position. At that time, a large percentage of black men held these positions. During the 1980's the procedure was changed--employees who passed the aptitude test were required to go before an interview panel. The immediate and continued effect of this policy was that the percentage of black and Latino mechanics decreased and the number of white and Asian mechanics increased dramatically. An African American female supervisor eloquently expresses the effect of the interview process on lower class employees,

“I think what they actually need to do is cut out this willy-nilly interview process because they're not interviewing worth a crap. Okay...you sit on this supposed panel of three people and these people supposedly interview you for twenty minutes and makes this grandiose decision that I think they can make according to your paperwork. Let me fill out my application and if there's some more question that need to be asked it should go along with the application...I think what the interview does is that it gets your hopes up so high that you actually have this legitimate shot and I think nine times out of ten...when those panels sit down they already know who they are going to deal with. I don't think they get any surprises. I think they look at those 991's [Application for Promotion] and they pick up the phones...they do a little networking... 'Who's this one...Have you ever heard of this person...What do you know about so and so.' So you already know. Okay, and if these spots are picked and predetermined why put somebody through this grueling process...Everybody has a different degree of nervousness. The panel itself has a lot to do with how comfortable you are going to feel. Especially if you get so nervous that you can't answer a question. I've seen people come out of there all rattled, with headaches and filled with tension. I'm like this is ridiculous. To some people it is really important. Then the list comes out to show who got the job and I think it's really disappointing the way that they do it.”

Middle class employees know, through social networks if not through actual learning experiences, how to make the interview situation work for them. They are more

aware than employees from poor and working class families of what to wear, say, and do in this setting, which gives them an advantage. The outcome of the interview process is that they are deemed best qualified, in the contemporary scene. The most recent changes in the procedure for promoting supervisors has also significantly benefited middle class employees. Prior to 1994, employees seeking supervisory positions filled out an application for promotion and, if successful, were interviewed by a 3-member panel of upper level supervisors and managers and began on the job training in the position. With the inception of the Associate Supervisor Program (ASP), employees are now required to pass a written aptitude test and are only provisionally appointed to the position until they pass a training program. This has significantly diminished lower class employee participation in the program because even if they have the opportunity to act in the position and thus learn how to do the job, as was a traditional way in which employees became supervisors, they have a difficult time passing the aptitude test and the supervisory training program.

Some employees have deemed this new procedure fair primarily because employees are graded based upon their actual performance in the position. However, other employees believe that an aspect of the program designed to bring in college graduates and people with managerial experience in the private sector is a form of institutionalized discrimination, regardless of intent. An African American female supervisor said the following about the program:

“They went to NJ and brought in a whole bunch of white boys and every chance they get or any changes they make...they go back there and bring in some more white boys. They are supervisors (level 16) and they come in and make acting plant manager at a level 24. They come in and they make them acting managers

for a tour, level 18's and 20's. Yeah. And the push is not for them...right now. I don't know what condition the black male or female is going to be in the next twenty years...It seems to me that they're coming to take those jobs back. We're making too much money for unskilled labor...they tell it to us time and time and

time again...and I don't think right now the push is to bring in a whole bunch of minorities. They want to take some of those jobs back...plus they're moving into a whole different way of managing...they want us to think of the place as more of a business...they want to privatize as much as possible...which they are fighting to do as much as possible...every day and every which way they can. Okay, and they're not thinking let's go Black...the mainstay of the Post Office from WWII until now. They're not thinking that. They're thinking, 'Let's get some of these highly educated, highly motivated business oriented people,' which are normally whites and or Chinese who have degrees and lets use some of them...and that's basically what they're doing. It seems to me, it's like they're weeding blacks out. Okay. The spots and positions that they have..okay...they're in there...they can't take them out...but they're not giving them nothing else. And the younger black men who are coming in? They're not being pushed to do a dag-on thing. I really think that if they started pushing black males to do something that would be like defeating the purpose...because how are you going to get all your young college educated Caucasians in if the blacks started pushing for these jobs and they're already there.”

The results of the new promotion procedure and these kinds of institutional practices, as noted above, is that despite the inclusion of racial-ethnic minorities into the postal workforce, white over-representation in managerial positions increases as one moves up the organizational structure. For example, white men represent 41 percent of postal workers and hold 43 percent of mid-level management positions (EAS grades 15-18). In comparison, white men hold 56 percent of higher-level management positions (EAS grades 19-26). The racial hierarchy is even more striking when the representation of white men and women in upper echelon positions is examined. They represent 64 percent of postal workers; however, they hold 67 percent of positions in EAS grades 15-18 and 73 percent of positions in EAS grades 19-26. Comparable results are found at the district level.

In the postal district where this study was conducted, for example, white men represent 19 percent of the employees; however, white men hold 28 percent of the EAS grades 16-26 positions (GAO, 2000) and most of them are holding positions at EAS grades 20-26. Some suggest that this phenomenon is better than it was in past years when there were a limited number of racial ethnic EAS employees. However, contemporarily, many of the racial ethnic EAS employees hold low-level managerial positions such as initial level of supervisor and many of these employees are women. However, all things are not equal for women. While black women are over-represented in initial level supervisory positions, approximately 3.5 percent of white women, who make up approximately 5 percent of the employees in district, work in offices as administrative managers. The quality of the work lives of white female administrators is significantly different from that of black female supervisors who comprise more than 50 percent of the initial level supervisors in the district. This phenomenon is mirrored in the facility where many racial ethnic supervisors have a sense of resignation about the fact that many of the upper level managers are white and most of the clerks, mail processors, and handlers who work under them are racial ethnic employees.

Nonetheless, many racial ethnic employees believe that some of the managers get their jobs because they have credentials while others believe that white managers get their positions because of social networks. This sentiment is particularly strong among African American supervisors where both male and females find that they have no opportunity for upward mobility in a job they thought would be a “stepping-stone” to a better position. For instance, an African American female supervisor with 18 years of

service reported a conversation she had with a white male supervisor who “is known for making racist remarks.” She said the supervisor told her that he knows someone in

Human Resources who told him that there would be an opening in an administrative office and that he would be given the job. She said she found it almost impossible to get into an office position and does not know who to go to or how to go about getting one of these jobs, even though she believes she is more than qualified for an administrative position. She continued,

“But it seems easy if you are white. They go to their white friends in high places and they get what they want. They understand each other. They come from the same communities. They do the same things. I would not be surprised if he got the job.”

An African American female clerk said:

“Again, that’s where the Godfather role comes in. I say that because most of those men (white managers) in there got their positions through somebody who they know. Who are they going to bring on board, in their group, but someone like themselves. That is what they are going to do. And that’s how they do...they talk with one another....regardless of what the black employees know....you can’t belong to that group. I call it the good ole boys club. You can’t belong to that club. Now, that might change because all it takes is for one person in there to be different. That person might say, “Hey, wait a minute there is someone in here who knows this job.” But then you still have someone in that small group that reflects everybody else....and I think...in our department....that one person in our group has the other group thinking that we (black clerks) don’t know what we’re doing.”

Some employees in integrated work areas take a confrontational, although individualistic, approach to white middle class advantage in the Service. An African American female supervisor with 16 years in the Service said:

“I think that they don’t have to prove anything...they don’t have to know anything. Okay...its like just being white is often times good enough. When you see the caliber of the people that they bring in. When you see the job knowledge that these people lack, basic, everyday knowledge. When you see that this person has not come up through the ranks or have not been in the ranks long enough to have an understanding of how to move mail which is what the job calls for [such as] how to deal with people. These people do not have these skills...and I kid you not...I believe that it is because they are white, period. That’s why they get put in those positions...because it couldn’t be any other reason. It just could not be.”

Employees are particularly sensitive about the practice of hiring managers who do not come up through the ranks. They are also concerned that many of those who enter the organization in this manner are white. However, some racial ethnic employees who work in integrated work areas believe that managers, regardless of race, get their positions because they have educational credentials. These kinds of contradictory perceptions of the same phenomena minimize employee conflicts, without managerial intervention, because there is very little consensus among lower-level employees. Thus, their sense of resignation festers.

One thing employees seem to have in common is that they believe, regardless of the race of their “superiors,” that it is in their individual best interest to get along with their upwardly mobile supervisors and managers. In fact, many of the employees said they try not to resent middle class managers even though they sometimes laud their positions and credentials over them. Several racial ethnic employees said that they see these managers “come and go” so they do not take it personally. A Latina office clerk who reported that she has a high school diploma said,

“Oh, I don’t pay them any mind because I have been in this office for many years and I have seen them come and go. They come in like big shots, telling people what to do and ordering you around but then they have to come down to earth when they have to ask us, clerks, for information that will help them do their jobs. I believe in God and I know that he will see me through all trials and tribulations

so I just put myself in his hands. But you know these managers come in here and have their noses in the air but it is also true, I have to say, that sometimes they come in and they will be so nice to you. Then when they learn their jobs, mind you we clerks hold their hands every step of the way and cover them so they don't

make fools of themselves in front of the manager, then they act like we're dirt and don't even say good morning. That's when they think they know their jobs but they don't stay long anyway so we just ignore them until they get the next promotion because that is all it is about for most of them."

Race is an important divide between managers and employees. However, most of the employees, racial ethnics and whites, noted that in the authoritarian climate of the Service, social class, as a result of different experiences, understandings, and expectations of the world, is the most significant factor which sets them apart from their supervisors. The contradiction here is that racial ethnic employees stated that they like the fact that many of the supervisors and managers in the facility are from racial ethnic groups and conversely, racial ethnic employees in integrated work areas said that racial ethnic supervisors have more in common with white supervisors and managers and often try to identify with them rather than have solidarity with racial ethnic employees. For example, a female clerk with 16 years in the facility said:

"This is the same person who also says what he wants to say but don't really respect us as...I don't know....it may be because of the color of our skin....it may be because we are black...it may be because we are of lower class. I find that in the PO, if you're management you are way up here and if you are a clerk you are way down there.....and the two will never meet...In the PO I think they think, 'Oh, they are just a clerk.' I heard a black supervisor say, 'I don't like dealing with clerks, I'd rather deal with EAS.' And we are talking about a title. It has nothing to do with my intelligence. When you say something like that...something is wrong here because if you think that holding a title means that you are smarter than me, you have a lot to learn."

An African American male who is about to retire gave a similar response:

“You have some white supervisors who will sit down and talk to you the same way that black supervisors will talk to you. They will come over to the case and talk to you. They will act very civil. Then you have some who will try to say whatever they can to you. It works both ways. It is something about the PO. I

always say that it must be some kind of mist that they spray on people in here. They all think the same way, the majority of them, and it has a lot to do with that level. That EAS title. They feel that it gives them the right to say whatever they want to say to you and that is all of them. It doesn't matter if it a black supervisor or a white supervisor. Although some of them [white supervisors] are really racist...they stay away from you...but if they get the chance they will fire you. Other than that they all think the same way. You are just a clerk. You are nothing. The PO needs to get away from that. I am just so glad I am about to retire. I will never work for anyone else as long as I live. I have paid my dues.”

A white female clerk with 18 years in the Service also noted that the race of supervisors did not matter and that although she never had a problem working with supervisors of different races, she noted that supervisors “have a sense of superiority that is fostered by the Post Office where how you feel and what you think does not matter if you're not a manager.” The resulting animosity contributes to a great deal of strife between supervisors and employees.

Violence

Violence towards supervisors and fear of violence among supervisors is not uncommon. Some of the incidents are interracial and others are intra-racial. Social class differences seem to contribute to the contestations that occur between employees. Fighting, arguing, and proving your point—in no uncertain terms—is very much a way of life among the urban poor and working classes who comprise most of the more recent employees in the facility. This stance inevitably clashes with those who espouse a middle-class cultural value of less emotionality and what they consider as more “refined” behavior. In urban postal facilities, it is not surprising that in the authoritarian

atmosphere of the Postal Service, a great deal of the on-the-job fights, arguments, actual or imagined threats of violence, occur between supervisor and the supervised.

Most of the violent incidents given a degree of managerial attention are those that are directed at supervisors and performed by employees and commonly involve newer employees. The following comment made by a black female supervisor summarizes the potential for violence between supervisors and employees, as follows:

“The Postal Service has had quite a bit of violence in the work place so we, as supervisors, have to be now social workers, psychiatrist, and mothers and we have to find ways to work with the employees even if it means that we have to be humble....humble in the sense that it’s guarded humbleness. You can not let the person take over you cause you are the supervisor but you have to look at the situation and if it is a particular case where you can say that it is not significant or important...we can work this out....let it go....to diffuse the situation so this is the approach that I use.”

Employees who engage in violent acts towards supervisors or in behavior that supervisors perceive as threatening do so with a belief that the supervisor’s actions against them (discipline) are forms of violence or personal vendettas rather than corrective in nature. This perception is due, in part, to belief among postal employees that favoritism, cronyism, and nepotism dominate postal work relations. It is in this context that you find that workers engage in retaliatory acts against their supervisors, as reported in the following comments:

“This one supervisor...she told me that they sent her from Church St. to Morgan to avoid an incident that was occurring with her which showed indications that it could become more pronounced forms of violence. For example, she went outside one day and all of her tires were slashed and letters of threat were submitted to her. Just recently, someone close to me, a former partner,...a threat note was submitted to her and they had to removed her from her assignment and put her in a secure assignment.”

“Whatever happened between him and (the hearing officer) and his case...that’s what got him upset because she handled his case at arbitration or MSPB and it turned out that he wasn’t going to get the money that he thought he was going to get and he was very upset. So he came in with a gun....he was going to shoot her

and they ushered her out the back.”

Despite Calafano’s report (2003), which suggests that postal employees are less likely to be violent on the job than employees in the private sector, fear of violence is prevalent among supervisors and is consequential for relations between them and their employees. On the one hand, some supervisors’ fear of violence leads them to act too hastily and aggressively towards their employees. On the other hand, some supervisors have a tendency to become immobilized by their fear of violence. Fear of violence among postal supervisors is revealed in the following comments:

“Because we got irate people coming up there because they were losing their job or somebody had garnished their money and they came to our office to put in complaints and they wanted their money right then. And they would come in....it was dangerous really. You never knew if someone was going to come in there and blow your head off. And that’s why they put security things under the desks. You never know.”

“I mean come on....you are out there busting your behind. It is like a front-line in the dag gone army, you know, with the employee as enemy sometimes.....Yeah, because these are different people with different personalities. First of all, you don’t know how an employee is coming in there. You don’t know how they are going to act. You don’t know whether that person is going to go back outside.....come in tomorrow and shoot you because you are telling them to do something that they don’t want to do...(When asked if she feels threatened on the job, she said,) Not really, I don’t but I know that it can happen. I remember while I was in Morgan, this guy came upstairs looking for a supervisor on Tour 1 but the supervisor wasn’t there and then I found out later on that that employee had a gun...looking for that supervisor. Supposed he found him.....you could show your driver’s license and get into the PO.”

The social class divide based on authority and cultural differences and racial

divide among postal employees is clear in the preceding discussion; however, employees' views vary. Some employees who work in diverse work areas have the perception that white employees are advantaged in the Service because they have higher level of educational attainment, or more human capital, than black and Latino workers. Other employees believe that the "good ole boys club" or social networks enables whites to move into upper echelon positions with ease, regardless of educational differences between them and racial ethnic employees. Still other employees believe that the organizational hierarchy is the most significant factor that structures relations between employees and supervisors/managers. They note that the superior disposition of upper echelon employees stem from the authoritarian culture of the organization and is not related to race relations. The, more or less, cooperative environment in integrated work areas stem from employees' tendency to disregard the attitude of their supervisors and managers, although occasional confrontational incidents occur.

Gender Relations

In the federal bureaucracy men dominate in upper echelon and women in lower echelon positions (Cornwell & Kellough, 1994:1; GAO Report, 2003) and in different occupations (Reskin, 1994). However, due to structural and demographic changes in the Service, there has been a significant increase in the employment of females. The increased utilization of mechanization and automation has no doubt contributed to this significant increase in presence of female postal workers over the past few decades. Despite the fact that women make up approximately half of all postal workers in the contemporary scene, women continue to work in large numbers in those areas that

continue to connect them to social expectations of their gender roles (Amott & Matthaei, 1996:14). For instance, in a ratio of 2:1 (female to male) the vast majority of female employees work in occupations that confine them to machines—such as on mail-processing machines. However, men also work in these positions; thus, there is a high degree of occupational diversity among lower level employees in the facility where this research was conducted.

Although a study of wage differentials in the public and private sectors found that in the Service, women and nonwhites' wages are similar to those of comparable white men (Asher & Popkin, 1984), wage differentials do exist. The most significant contributing factors stem from two sources. First, women's employment status in the organization contributes to wage differentials. Women hold more than 60% of the long-term temporary positions in the facility. These employees have the benefits of union representation, after a long struggle by APWU; however, their pay is considerably lower than that of career employees. The median pay of these employees is also lower than that of men who work in the same capacity because women are less likely to take advantage of non-mandatory overtime. Second, women's differential pay also stems from the fact that, although female postal employees are moving into supervisory positions in large numbers, they are disproportionately represented (72% nationally) in low level administrative and initial level supervisory positions. At the local level, however, women have consistently held the position of president of the largest local employee union (APWU), and are increasingly employed in formerly male dominated high-level managerial positions, which give the perception that women are making great strides in

the organization. Given the contradictory status of women in the organization and facility, it is problematic to characterize gender relations although it is assumed, given the historic battles women have undertaken to achieve some sense of parity with male postal employees, that relations between them are conflictful. This assumption does very little to convey what it is like to be a female postal employee in the male-dominated, sexually charged, work environment in an urban postal facility.

‘All Things Being Equal?’

Many of the older and retired employees interviewed indicated that when they entered the Postal Service in the 1960’s there were limited facilities for women. They did not have locker rooms that were comparable to those provided to men, and in many work areas and stations there were no bathroom facilities for women. Women also did not work in certain work areas. An African American female who retired from the facility stated:

“When I first started in the Bronx, I recall that it was said that women had just recently started coming into the Service as regulars....they used to come in as temps during the War, I understand, but as far as career positions, they started coming in around the 60’s, maybe the late 50’s. In fact, from what I understand some facilities didn’t even have restroom facilities for women. They had to make some arrangements or even share the same facilities that the men used....they had some kind of system, I guess, when a female was in there somebody would stand guard to make sure that no men entered. But that was before my time...this is just hearsay. Another unusual thing for me was, when I worked in the Bronx there were no female mail handlers, when I got reinstated at Grand Central in the late 1960s, I was surprised to see females in mailhandler positions....there had been none in the Bronx, we used to case mail and do manual sweeps on the letter aisles...and I used to volunteer to do that. “

Presently women have all of the amenities that men have in the facility. As well,

women are no longer formally excluded from any postal work areas or occupations; thus, female postal employees work in more areas of postal operations than they did just a few decades ago. However, there are work areas and occupations that have a very limited numbers of female workers such as truck drivers, mechanics, and transportation units where mail is brought in and transported out of the facility. Nevertheless, many of the older female employees who had more than 20 years on the job also expressed their view that the Service is more receptive to female workers, and that relations between male and female postal employees have improved significantly over the past few decades. A retired Latina employee reflected on how relations between the sexes were when she entered the facility when it reopened in 1979. She said:

“On the one hand, and being a woman to begin with, men weren’t used to having women around on the work floor. So when they [women] came into the work force there were a lot of things going on. Men couldn’t talk the way that they used to because now there were women around and you had to be careful what you said. On the other hand, men treated women like something new or some sort of challenge. A lot of things were going on with the influx of women and when it became Hispanic and black women or minorities in general, there was this sense of forced integration that was happening in the Postal Service that not a lot of people took kindly to. You could feel it in the air but it wasn’t said. It was a lot more in undertones than in the stories I heard from people who came in years earlier.”

Younger and less tenured female workers are more divided about relations between men and women postal employees in the facility. Some females said that men and women work together amicably and that when the situation allows for it male and female workers work as teammates. Other women said that men were sometimes uncooperative with them and did not help them lift heavy items. For example, an African American female mail handler with 8 years in the Service said:

“I had this situation where I was struggling with this heavy bag and I asked this man for help. I guess I shouldn’t have asked him because he didn’t work in the section but I didn’t think about it. He started ranting that it was my job and if I

couldn’t do it then I need to quit. I couldn’t believe him. He called the union and the union rep came on the floor and told my supervisor when happened like it was a big deal. I mean I wasn’t in trouble or anything but the supervisor told me, ‘Don’t lift what you can’t lift,’ but to ask him for help if I need it so that we could avoid these kinds of scenes.”

However, some females and males said that men help female employees lift heavy items.

These employees said that men and women get along; they share information about postal procedures, the temperament of supervisors and managers, have lunch and play cards together. A Latina female said:

“The men that we worked with were true gentlemen. They really were nice even though personally, myself, I tried to carry my weight myself. But I liked the idea that some of the men were gentlemen and would come over and if they saw....for any reason....that you were struggling with something....they did it for you and alleviated you from that responsibility. And then, on the other hand, there were some that were contrary to that. They were down-right get over men that were going to just....if you were going to do it for them, they let you do it for them....I didn’t expect a man to help me with anything. I came in....I was more or less the most mature person on my whole crew. I was used to working and I didn’t desire to have anyone do my job for me or assist me in my job. I felt proud of taking on my responsibility and fulfilling it and I did it well. But like I said there were times when the men would be a gentlemen and if they saw something, they would insist on doing it.”

Another female said that the unspoken traditional norm was that women did not do work that involved heavy lifting but when they did so, men would help them. She noted that as the number of women in the facility increased, men’s attitude about women began to change. She said:

“Some of my female counterparts warned me, ‘Don’t you drop any sacks.’ Because they felt that if I did it then they all would be required to do it? So...females just didn’t drop sacks. I mean, I didn’t see a problem with it because

it wasn't like you were lifting it....it was like...you were letting it fall to the floor and securing it...then you dragged it over to wherever it was going to be placed on a skid to be taken down to the trucks. But that was part of the culture. We don't

want to drop sacks...so we didn't do it. Once you start doing it then we all will have to do it. So when you needed a sack dropped you called one of the guys over and they dropped the sacks. They [men] didn't have a problem with that. Later in my career I can recall discussions among male employees who said if she's getting the same pay I'm getting, why can't she [women] do the same work.”

A number of women reported, however, that the attitude of men towards female postal employees has not changed. They stated that women are expected to be submissive to the wants and needs of male managers and supervisors. Females reported that if they do not behave submissively to men, they might be removed from the work area or forced to leave a particular work area because men would make the environment difficult for them. For instance an African American female retiree reported that she used to work in an area where the manager had the secretary make him coffee before he reported to work each morning. She recounted the following:

“He put [name of female clerk deleted] out of the office and he brought in the first girl....I forgot her name. She came in and she was a very good worker. The first day she was in there they told her to make coffee. She got up out of her seat and told them all off. She said she wasn't making no coffee.....that was not part of her job description. They had to make their own coffee. I thought I would die. I laughed until I almost cried. I laughed so much. I didn't know what to do. Yeah. And they were running around. They were used to that coffee because [the other female clerk] would come in and put the coffee on and everybody would come in and get some. Honey, they were having a fit in there because she didn't make the coffee. She came in and did her work and that was it but then she left. She got a bid for another job. They were all glad so then they brought in another girl who didn't mind making them some coffee.”

The tendency for sex role spillover (Gutek & Morasch, 1982) to occur in the Service is very common. Most of the female respondents said that they either experienced or witnessed these kinds of incidents where men expect or ask women to do tasks they believe women should do and that the managers, no matter how inconvenient, will not do tasks they think women should do or that people beneath them should do. For instance, a female clerk said that her male manager often comes out of his office, walks past the copy machine, and asks her to make one of two copies of a document while he stands at her desk waiting for them. When asked, female clerks indicated that these kinds of power-based behaviors on the part of managers are not necessarily gender-based because they said that female managers sometimes behave in similar ways.

Although women have contradictory perceptions of relations between men and women, it is clear that the Service has come a long way in trying to make the organization accommodate the needs of women employees. Thus, the organization takes the position that “all things” between male and females are equal and women have the same chances as men to be successful in the organization. They do not address the more subtle aspects of gender relations that differentially shape the experiences of males and females. In the facility, disrespect for women is common and manifests in many different ways. For instance, an African American female clerk declared:

“The men in there have very little respect for women in the PO. They really do. You can hear it by the way that clerks talk. You can hear some of management speak that way. Curse words but also...he [a white manager] made a statement that he was so horny today that he should have laid down with his wife before he got in and that he could not wait to get home. That is something that you do not say. If that is the way you talk with men then that is the way you speak with men but not in front of women.” [Note: Earlier in the interview she reported that most

of the women in the work area are black and Latino and most of the managers are white men.]

Indicative of the climate in the facility, several men disclosed that the men's restrooms, locker rooms, and stairwell walls are covered with sexist graffiti. According to a male postal employee who recently retired, "you could not imagine the things they write about women. All kinds of vulgar things, I can't even say. They paint the walls over and over again and it just starts up again." These non-public settings where men engage in putting down women are not limited to writings on walls. A female employee reported this comment she heard a manager say in a meeting:

"When a man dies his wife gets insurance and then some other man is buffing [having sex with] his wife."

Sexist, off-colored jokes, and a myriad of sex-related conduct is quite typical in the facility. It stems from casual flirting to sexual relationships on the job. The way in which women and men experience sexuality on the job tends to vary by based on employee's gender, race, and class. Sexual harassment is also a common problem in the Service, according to postal officials.

Sexuality in the Workplace

While the extent of each factor is not quantifiable there are historical, environmental, and social factors, which seem to contribute to the sexualized environment in the facility. First, from the inception of the organization and the traditional nature of postal work, the USPS has been and continues to have a male-dominant culture. Sexuality in the work place is increased by environmental factors. For

instance, the facility is in an urban environment where employees do not live within the vicinity of the work site. Thus, there is an element of anonymity on the job. Another factor that contributes to the sexualized environment in the facility is that the facility is open for business 7 days a week, 24 hours a day, and has over 3 thousand employees.

This factor increases the extent to which employees can be anonymous. Finally, a significant factor that contributes to sexuality in the work place is the demographic makeup of male and female employees. According to postal officials, who discussed providing childcare services at the facility during the early 1990s, many of the females in the facility live in female-headed households with children. Many of these women are seeking relationships with marriageable men that are, according to Wilson (1987), largely unavailable in the urban centers where they live. However, many of the men they work with, according to the Califano Report, are “more likely to be married than in the national workforce” (2000:7). Interview data supports this assertion.

Most employees acknowledged that one of the first things that employees notice, beyond the size, noise level, and dust in the facility, is that the environment is sexually charged. Male-female fraternization is common; however, homosexual, or alleged homosexual relationships are discussed but negatively sanctioned. The following report made by an African American woman with 12 years in the Service is indicative of this climate:

“I was working with this black woman who couldn’t hear so we used to write each other notes. At first it was to explain the job to her and so we were passing notes to each other a lot as we worked. But then we started being friendly because we worked together, just the two of us sorting parcels, four days a week. Every now and then her boyfriend would come to the area to talk to her. One day she was writing a note to me and he came over and snatched it out of her hand and

read it. We were talking about our kids so I didn't think nothing of it but then he snatched her by her collar and pulled her into a corner. As I was leaving work that day, he confronted me outside the building and told me I had better stay away from his woman and stormed away mumbling something. Then that next day, when I reported to work the manager of the floor told me that the man and his supervisors wanted to meet with me and that he would go with me. The supervisor spoke for his employee and told me that he thinks I am trying to take his woman away from him because he heard I am gay. His manager said he seen

me in their work area and that I did not belong there and that his employee believes I walk through the area to taunt him. He said that if he ever sees me in the work area he was going to write me up [formal disciplinary action] and for what I did not know. I told the manager that I only walked through the area sometimes to go to the cafeteria but it didn't matter, they continued to reprimand me. I was completely baffled but what made it painful for me is that all of the men, except my manager who is white, were black and Latino men and I'm a Latina woman and they teamed up on me because the employee said he heard I am gay and was trying to take his woman. I talked with my manager as we returned to our work area and he said he didn't want any trouble so he was removing the woman from the work area and told me to watch my back."

While homosexual sexuality is taboo in the facility, both male and female employees reported that sex is a constant source of on-the-job conversations. Thus, conversations about who is having sex with whom and who was allegedly caught in this or that sexual act in an office or stairwell are quite common the facility. Employees talk about sexuality and sex, in general and jokingly. They frequently talk about sex among co-workers. Employees have a perception that intimate postal relationships between men and women are extramarital, serial, or multi-partnered. In this environment, there is a great deal of fodder for their gossip about real and imagined sexual interactions. Some employees find this aspect of the work environment interesting. An African American female retiree stated,

"Then there were people that had such an attitude about their life....that I really didn't realize was there. I didn't realize that that type of attitude was even around because I came from a pretty sheltered life....Men and women working together

and trying to be each other's boyfriend and girlfriend and they were married and had families at home. And this...to me....I found that amazing. But I ran into all kinds of situations....I found it very interesting because I study....I like to study people so I found that very interesting.”

Some employees, in addition, find the sexualized environment exciting. Many

women reported that when new females come into the facility, the men behave as though they are in a contest to get their attention—characterized as a “mating ritual.”

Interestingly, people often describe female postal employees as “dull,” “fat,” “out of shape,” “masculine,” women. Without even knowing the caricature, or in spite of it, women postal employees make it their business to not fit it. As young women walk to their assigned work areas in their freshly made faces, coordinated jean clothing and accessories, they are aware that they are closely watched by the men they pass. Women reported that men leer at them, make catcalls, and surreptitiously clown around to get the attention of females. Frequently, older women tell younger and newer female employees to be careful in their dealings with postal men; most young women, however, conveyed that they were flattered by the attention of the men. An African American woman who has 25 years in the Service, for instance, said:

“Yeah, I know they are dogs but I used to like the attention that men gave me on the job. Now that I am older, they don't give me a second look and I see them looking and gawking at the skinny, shapely girls, with their tight asses and I remember when I used to be like them.”

In the facility, men and women talk about sex and sexuality so much that it is a source of passing the time away and in the process they titillate each other with their conversations. It follows that sexual conversations, including bantering, has the dual purpose of passing the time away and flirting with each other. Yelvington views flirting

in the workplace as a form of men exercising power over lower status women employees. He claims, “flirting in the factory was carried on as part of serious ‘tracking’ or as a more immediate attempt to exercise power or utilize sex in order to acquire other kinds of resources” (Yelvington, 1995:24). This study indicates that it is important to consider that women also engage in flirting that is no less powerful than when men flirt. Whether deliberately or unconsciously, overtly or covertly, many men and women engage in the sexual presentation of themselves. They make their sexual exploits with fellow employees known to other employees by talking about their relationships or openly engaging in seductive behaviors towards each other. For instance, they may stand in each other’s personal space, touch each other, and kiss on the job. In the process, men and women gain personally and sometimes professionally from sex in the workplace. This supports research by Williams, et al (1999), which found that some women enjoy and even profit from sexualized interactions at work. However, in the sexually charged environment of the facility women’s losses may outweigh their gains. For example, all female postal employees lose when they engage in public displays of affection with men on the job because due to sexism, in a male-dominated society (and organization), they are held to a different standard of expected behavior and viewed as “promiscuous.” Whether or not these women are interested or available, men view them as such and are prone to make sexual advances towards them. A Hispanic woman gave the following account, indicative of this phenomenon:

“Shortly after I began working in the PO I started seeing this guy. We were cool and everything but it wasn’t anything serious but people thought it was because we hung around each other a lot on breaks and everything. Then I noticed that when I worked with guys they would get friendly and ask me about my friend. I

didn't really tell them that we were not seriously dating but after a while of working with a guy he would touch me on my hand or arm and I didn't pay any mind to it but then he would touch my hair and then weeks or months later he would touch my waist and then it never failed that at some point he would touch my behind and then act like it was a mistake. Sometimes they would just keep walking or talking as though nothing happened. I can't tell you how many times that happened to me. At one point I started acting real crazy about it. As soon as a man touches me, I don't care where, I tell them a piece of my mind and you know

what? Then they started saying I was stuck up and I have an attitude but I don't care, don't touch me. Go touch your wife!"

I would argue that in diverse work settings the extent to which women actually "enjoy" and "profit" from sexualized interactions varies by race.

Race is an important factor that shapes social interaction and sexual behavior in the facility. Although employees of all races are involved, the numerical majority, black and Hispanic women are more likely than Asian and white women to experience the most blatant forms and negative consequences of sexuality in the workplace. This does not mean to suggest that white and Asian women do not experience sexism or other forms of sexual exploitation in this sexualized environment. My study does suggest; however, that these women are not subjected to the same kinds of public and blatant disrespect that black and Hispanic women are routinely subjected to³⁶. Take, for example, the following sexually blatant comment reported by an African American female clerk:

"I've had men say things to me that I would not want them to say to her [my daughter] I had one man tell me, 'You have hair on your chest?' I said, Yeah. He said, 'I bet you have hair on your nipples too.' I got so angry. That's not something that you say to somebody. I've had another man tell me, at this time, [name of male deleted] and I were together. Yeah, and thank God he didn't turn out to be like them in there. But a man said to me, 'I want to go to bed with you.' I said you know that I am involved with someone and he said, 'Well, he's not your husband.' This is how they are...to speak so freely....how much respect do

³⁶ Asian and white women are most likely to experience sexism in administrative offices where they work in token representation. Their experiences will be discussed in Chapter 8.

you have for me to come out of your mouth and say something like that. I never experienced anything like that. Even if somebody thought that, no one ever said anything like that to me when I worked outside of the PO. I don't know if it is the PO or what but it's just something about it that's too degrading. Again, I'm there because of the money and I told my daughter, 'I don't want you to work there and I know it's a job and you look at my paycheck and you say I make good money but I just think that there is something better out there for you.' There is a whole

different class of people out there for you to sit down and converse with.”

Similarly, a Hispanic woman said:

“Yeah so I was walking behind the machines to go on a break and this guy comes up behind me. Okay, I saw him looking at me before and we said hello a few times. It was very casual flirting but what he said to me he had no right to say. He came up behind me and said: ‘You look so good in those jeans. Your ass looks like a red delicious apple.’ I can't even tell you what else he said. I was kind of new in the PO but I am no young girl but I swear I have never been approached like that in my life. I told him not to speak to me like that and I ran to the locker room. I couldn't believe it. I could not tell my husband what happened because he would have been so mad he would have demanded that I quit the job and we just can't afford for me to not work. So I didn't say anything but I told my girlfriend and I started crying. I felt humiliated.”

In this environment, racist stereotypes about black and Hispanic women's sexuality are bountiful. Symbolic violence in the form of derogatory comments about these women is common in the facility and liberally publicized. These women are routinely characterized as “looking for uncommitted sex,” “easy,” and “low-lives.” These women do not have to actually engage in disreputable behavior on the job to acquire a “reputation;” all they have to do is look and dress sexy, talk with different men on the job, or leave the work floor or building with a man. Because bad reputations are liberally applied to these women, some shy away from relationships with male postal workers to avoid this form of symbolic violence. An African American female clerk

made the following comment,

“I’d never go out with anybody in the PO...even if it was the only man on earth. Because I’ve learned something in the PO. People don’t accept honest relationships, normally. They talk about you. They make a situation dirty that could be clean and honest so I don’t like that. And I don’t feel like I want to be a part of that. So whatever they say, they can say because I have had 18 years there and no one has ever said anything derogatory about me on a personal or intimate

level. So I don’t care what they say because they can’t come up with anything. But I would never do it because in 18 years I have seen and heard people saying so many derogatory things about people who do have relationships. People who could have good, clean, decent relationships.”

The sexual presentation of oneself is a particularly human element; it is what human beings do in a variety of ways. However, when black and Hispanic women engage in the sexual presentation of themselves at work (such as behaving affectionately towards men) their behaviors are perceived as verification of the sexual stereotypes employees have about them. Their behaviors are encapsulated in the following statement by an African American female supervisor:

“Oh, yeah, you got these little postal love affairs, where people be in love in one month and done gave it up [had sex] and the whole nine yards. [She is] following the guy around and everything. They are in the cafeteria in plain view...laying on top, excuse me, leaning on top of each other kissing with tongues and lips and everything. I mean look nobody wants to go in there and tell them that they’re not home. You try to be professional and you go to the young lady and say, “Me and you need to talk.” You take her around the back area where nobody is and you try to explain to her the appropriateness of her behavior at work and you’re speaking to her as supervisor to an employee...then you try to explain it to her...her behavior as a woman....then you try to explain to her the facts of life of relationships in the Post Office and then she doesn’t pay you any mind. Then the next day she’s right back in the swing room hugged up with homeboy and then in two weeks he’s on to somebody else. And she’s walking around like somebody kicked her guts out.”

Much to the disadvantage of black and Hispanic women, even when they do not engage in open displays of affection with men, speculation and rumors about their

involvement with men on the job and sexual behavior is common. There are hundreds of tales circulating in the facility about specific men and women, past and present postal employees, who engage or were engaged in sexual relationships with each other. Explicit details of sexual escapades in offices and stairways are what employees' talk about; what these tales have in common is the demeaning ways in which women are portrayed. The idea is that men are not responsible for desiring sex with a woman or more than one woman or for desiring sex on the job because they are sexual creatures. Employees often say, "Men will be men;" however, they say women, especially black and Hispanic women, should "have more respect" for themselves. In the same instance these women are accused of being "seductresses" who make men, according to the perception of some male postal employees, behave out of character. The result is that black and Hispanic women are not only demeaned but also demonized in the course of these kinds of exchanges of information whether or not the alleged incidents actually occurred.

Most employees noted that public displays of sexuality and sexual presentations of oneself are rare among white and Asian women. Although they may be engaged in intimate relations with male postal employees they do not fraternize on the job. There are very few white women on the work floor; thus, the ways in which they experience sex in the workplace is different; it tends to occur in administrative offices where they are found in token representation and where their experiences are much less public than that which occurs on the work floor. Asian women tend to work and take breaks with other Asian women; thus, they are also not subjected to the more blatant forms of workplace sexuality. An Asian administrator said, "In our culture it is taboo to engage in public displays of affection."

Interracial Intimate Relationships

Racial groups in the facility have different interracial relationship patterns. Black and Hispanic employees tend to get involved in relationships with members of their own race or with each other. Asian employees tend to fraternize with each other and generally do not respond to the advances of non-Asian employees. Due to the tensions between Asian and black employees, in the facility, the level of fraternization between them is limited. An Asian male employee with 8 years in the Service said that many of the Asian employees are married and that even when they engage in on-the-job or extra-marital relationships, they tend to be very private about them. As well, white employees tend to fraternize with same race others. However, sexuality, race, and social class interconnect when white and black employees get involved in intimate relationships in the facility.

Although there is the occasional white man/Asian woman or black man/white woman pairing, black women and white men are the most common interracial pairing that occurs in the facility. Since most white men in the facility hold high status positions, black women may experience personal and professional benefits from their involvement with white men. In some cases black women, particular those from poor to working class backgrounds may experience social gains from relationships with white men due to the privileges of whiteness in our society even if the men are not managers. For instance, a black woman who dated a white male co-worker said:

“He was really down to earth. He was very nice to me and my children. I did a lot of things that I probably would not have experienced if I was dating someone else. We did things together. We had fun. We talked about things and went places, to dinner, to shows, on vacation and stuff together. Yeah, sometimes there were miscommunication problems because we come from different cultures. Sometimes we just didn’t see eye to eye but that happens with all couples. We

generally liked being together though and it wasn't, as some people believed, all about sex.”

The above comment indicates one of the most significant problems that interracial couples experience in the facility because many employees view their relationship as based on sex. An African American female said that she occasionally went on breaks with an Asian male co-worker. She said that no one said anything about them working together but one day as walked past a group of black male employees one of them said, “Hey, geisha girl,” and all of the men laughed. A blatant example of the tendency for employees to view interracial relationships as fundamentally sexual relationships is evident in the comment of a white female clerk who said that she knows a black female and white male couple. She characterized them as “a penis and vagina.” When asked why she views the couple in this manner, she said, “Well, it’s just that they exude so much sexuality. It’s like they’re walking genitalia.” In general, employees disapprove of these relationships and black women are often symbolically victimized when they get involved in relationships with men of a different race. The awareness of the historical relationship between black women and white men is always present in the minds of many African American postal employees. Thus, they have the perception that the line between these women and slave women, who were made to sleep with their masters, is very thin. They have a perception that black women who date white men are willing participants in their own subjugation. Symbolically these women are referred to as prostitutes who are “sell outs,” to their race. The belief is that these women are dating white men in exchange for favors and postal positions. A black female clerk said that she

heard people talk about a white male manager and his “harem” of black women. She said, “Yeah, and all of these women have high positions.” Relationships between white men and black women (as well as the black men and white women) are referred to in disrespectful ways. The derogatory perception of interracial relationships may wane over the course of time as particular interracial pairings are viewed as long-term or “serious” relationships; however, a myriad of factors intervene and most of these relationships do not stand the test of time.

Sexual Harassment

Sexual harassment in the workplace is a common problem in the Service. It is, in part, facilitated by the sexually charged atmosphere of the Postal Service where dating among employees, intimate discussions of sex, tales of sexual relations on and off the job, as well as sexual harassment commonly occurs at all levels of the organization (Becker, 1996:14), despite the organizational concern about and efforts to curtail these behaviors. This is not surprising because the extent of sexual harassment (or perceptions of sexual harassment) are influenced by “environmental tolerance of harassment, the perceived commitment of organizational officials to effectively handle harassment problems, and the implementation of policies and procedures to combat such problems” (Gruber, 1998). The Service has a zero-tolerance sexual harassment policy that is quite punitive towards employees, most of whom are male. The policy is not as effective as it could be for many reasons.

Schultz (2003) holds the view that it does not matter whether someone intends or does not intend to sexually harass another; it is a question of whether someone is

offended. This is a problematic conceptualization because employees in the facility do not always perceive sexually offensive behavior as offensive enough to file a complaint. First, the sexualized environment characterized by an ambiance that supports flirtatious behavior, sexual jokes, and crude language (Gutek, 1985) implicitly tolerates sexual harassment despite the organization's policy. Second, many of the women in the facility, the majority of whom are racial ethnics and from poor to working class backgrounds, perceive the sexual behavior of men as annoying. They acknowledged the inappropriateness of men calling them "baby," "honey," and "sweetheart," as well as talking about sex on the job. However, sexual expressiveness, sexual jokes and innuendos, are common in their homes and communities; thus, unlike middle class women who are personally offended by these behaviors, most working class women did not perceive talking about sex playfully or the sexist comments of male employees as harmful or harassing. Thus, working class women tolerate a great deal of sex-related behaviors on the part of their male co-workers. Even more troubling is that many women did not know the formal definition of sexual advances that are uncomfortable and sexual harassment. Male employees also reported that they do not know the difference, although some male employees indicated that female employees "sexually harassed" them.

Several male employees reported that women have followed them around and made suggestive comments that made them feel uncomfortable but that the women would "eventually get the message" and leave them alone. Most men, similar to women, did not go through the formal grievance process and did not believe that management would

handle the situation in a responsible manner if they did so. There was some implicit indication that men thought that going through the grievance procedure would undermine their sense of their manhood because “people would be talking” about them on the work floor once it was known that they filed a complaint. For all of the reasons noted above, both women and men are reluctant to file sexual harassment complaints. It follows that despite the Merit Systems Protection Board (MSPB), (1981), finding that most sexual harassment in the federal government is most often carried out by co-workers, most of the sexual harassment cases that occur in the facility are between male supervisors and managers and their female subordinates.

Female Employees and Male Managers/Supervisors

Employees appear to be more sensitive about sex and sexuality between low and high status employees than they are about sexuality among co-workers. In particular, they have the perception that male managers/supervisors exploit young and female employees. Women, young and old, who have the perception that they have been exploited or witnessed the exploitation of other young women in the facility, told countless stories of these incidents. Many of the older women reported what they perceived to be a typical scene where supervisors and managers choose nice looking women, who are most often young, to do detail assignments such as make copies, do mail counts, or answer phones for them. A retired African American woman reported:

“Like I say, I’m no raving beauty and I know it...I’ve always had a little bit of a weight problem so I wasn’t attractive in that way but I did notice that there were some women who were, might have been considered, attractive who got good details. Case in point, when I was a [position deleted] in 1986, I shared an office with several supervisors and the general clerks worked in the outer office and my desk was inside. So there were two general clerks assigned to the office and if one of them was out then they would utilize one of the people from the floor. So I happen to look up one day and this young lady I had never seen before, light

brown-skinned, kind of attractive, was working in the office. I said to my general

supervisor, 'Who's she?' [He responded], 'Oh, that's so and so...[name of assigned clerk] called in sick.' I said, 'Yeah, but she just walked in the door, evidently.' She was a maxi-clerk. A sub-clerk who had just gotten promoted to regular. I said, 'But all she is doing is answering the phone. Can she type?' [He responded], 'No.' I said, 'Well all she is doing is answering the phone. From now on you get one of the more senior people. Give one of the more senior people an opportunity to get a break from the work floor.' But that was that. The male mentality, I call it. And they picked and chose based on the way a person looked and in fact I kind of made a joke of it and the response of one of the male supervisors to me was, 'Well, in offices you should have attractive people.' They really believed that it made a difference, it didn't make any difference what their skill level was as long as they were attractive and they look nice."

Traditionally, race trumped good looks as it was reported that managers often found details for white women that took them off of the work floor. Another female retiree reported,

"I didn't like the way they catered to the white girls when they came in. They pushed them into offices or pushed them into details right away. They were prejudiced in that area. It was just, it just seemed like a code, to me, that when they came into the postal system, right away they had something for them to do. Different things, like they would put them into offices or put them to walk around with clip boards collecting things. They had something for these white women to do. They didn't stay on the floor that long. They stayed there for a little while but not as long as anybody else. Nobody ever said anything....it was just....that just happens. I didn't even pay them any attention because I was too busy trying to work and make my money. I didn't care what was going on around me. That was my attitude. I really didn't care what was going on around me I just wanted to make money to get out of debt in my house and to make sure that I could put something away for my children's education. That was the main thing of me working. I noticed it but I didn't care. I really didn't."

In the contemporary scene, a host of job-related problems occurs when male supervisors and managers become romantically involved with female employees. The most obvious problem is that supervisors and managers give these women special considerations on the job, which sets the stage for a climate of favoritism. At times, the

special considerations that supervisors or managers give to these women include

extended breaks or remuneration for time not spent working. Employees reported many incidents in which the parties involved in these kinds of relationships were formally disciplined. They reported that sometimes the discipline commonly involves reassign of the employee and/or supervisor to different work areas. Several employees also mentioned that they believe that African American and Latino employees are disciplined more vehemently than white managers who engage in the same kind of fraternization.

For instance an African American female reported the following incident that involved her manager, an African American male, who was dating a younger Hispanic clerk. She said:

“Yes, yes, yes. The affair went on for quite a few years. Everybody knew the two were lovers but nobody said anything about it, openly. Maybe somebody made an anonymous call to the postmaster or something but for a long time they were cozy as two peas in a pod. He was married and about to retire and the girl was single with a couple of children. She spent most of the night in the office with the manager and many nights you didn’t see neither one of them for hours at a time and sometimes she was scheduled to be at work and wasn’t there. What happened was they brought in another manager to train in the area and I don’t know whether it was a set up or not but he took notice to what was going on and reported it to the big boys. When the inspectors came and started looking through all the paperwork and time clock hits for the girl, they found all kinds of discrepancies. I mean they checked phone records and everything and when it was all over the manager was a level 5 clerk and the girl was terminated. I would have felt sorry for the manager if he wasn’t such a bastard. He had an air about him like everyone was beneath him but in the end he had to go sort mail with the same mail handlers he mistreated year after year after year. He was just a few years away from retiring and he lost that big time pension he would’ve gotten if he retired as a manager. I heard his wife left him and his kids, even though they were adults, were upset. All of that for a piece of ass but I have to say that I have seen white managers do the same shit and nothing like that happened to them.”

Even more problematic is that male supervisors and managers, who receive sexual

harassment training and an abundance of literature on the subject, are as oblivious as employees to what actually connotes sexual harassment. In fact, supervisors and managers are desensitized to the issue. They are desensitized because, according to a recent letter to supervisors from the Vice Present of Area Operations (February, 2006), managers engage in behaviors that support the sexualized ambiance found in the facility.

The letter states:

“[W]e cannot laugh at off-color or sexually explicit jokes and then expect employees that work with us not to tell similar jokes when we’re not around. We can’t listen to sexually explicit talk or radio programs in our office and then expect other employees not to listen to similar programs on the workroom floor. We can’t have sexually explicit material in our desk and expect bargaining unit employees not to have similar material in their lockers. We can’t leer at employees who work with us and expect other not to do the same.”

The letter specifically calls for managers to take on the added responsibility of an EAS employee by modeling “the behavior that we expect our employees to display.” This supports the contention that “merely providing employees with information about sexual harassment is not effective in deterring more serious, personal, forms of harassment” (Gruber, 1998:301).

Everyone acknowledges the increase in sexuality and sexual harassment in the facility but they do not understand it in the same manner. For instance, when an Asian male manager was asked what accounts for the perceived increase, he said that although he believes that sexual harassment occurs, he also believes that women can be “harassers” and that they sometimes make false complaints which they use as a “bargaining chip.” A white male supervisor with 25 years on the job reported his experiences when an EEO complaint was filed against him. He said:

“Yes, a woman filed a case. What happened was that she began making sexual comments to me and while I told her that I wasn’t interested I didn’t want to do anything to hurt her. I told other managers about the things she was saying, but I didn’t do anything formally. Managers can’t file sexual harassment cases against employees so there was no where for me to go. Eventually, an employee approached me and said that the employee said something to her that was strange. So, I told her to come back to me about it if anything else happened. Then another employee said the young lady approached her saying that they were rivals for my affection and that people think they are going to have a fight. At that point, I felt that I needed to do something. Another supervisor said we had to approach it delicately. I was asked to write a time line. Based on that, she made a statement that we had a relationship and we had sex, and with that they called in witnesses but no one supported her statement. It was deemed that she fabricated the story and they put her on a different floor. They didn’t take action against her or me. Then she filed an official EEO complaint saying that I created a hostile environment....I harassed her, didn’t stop rumors about her, paid 4 white men to follow her home, and that she was being penalized because she was sent to another work area. So, it went to REDRESS. They agreed to everything she asked for except giving her copies of other people’s statements but then she decided, after several hours, that she would not sign an agreement. As the accused, it is a very stressful procedure. It was not remediation. In my case it was about how do they appease her, because she is the accuser. I had no say about what I wanted so it was no resolution for me. I was in a lose-lose situation. Unless REDRESS is done properly, where everyone involved has a say in what they want to resolve the issue, it was not fair. It was a professional atmosphere but it was not fair.”

Additionally problematic for the organizational climate is that some supervisors and managers believe that employees engage in behaviors which contribute to their own victimization or use the right to file a sexual harassment complaint, which they believe are groundless, as a weapon against supervisors. Conversely, employees believe the Service’s sexual harassment policy is sound; they believe that the problem, however, is that managers and supervisors are not getting the message or are interpreting the sexual harassment policy in their own way. On the other hand, the union believes that Service

fails to take action against managers and supervisors who have sexually harassed

employees and victimize employees, in most cases females who report they have been sexually harassed. In *The Union Mail*, (March, 2000), the President of APWU spoke about an incident which occurred in the facility. He stated:

“Although the PMG’s message specifically directs employees who feel they are being sexually harassed to ‘report it...to someone who can do something about it’...because ‘help is available....’ The local received a letter of warning sent to an employee who reported she had been sexually harassed—and it charges her with ‘failure to follow instructions. As if being harassed wasn’t enough, her supervisor instructed her to attend a sexual harassment class—and because she didn’t believe that this would resolve anything and maybe would make her feel even more victimized—she’s been threatened with suspension, reduction in grade or pay, or removal from the Postal Service.”

In this climate of different perceptions, it is clear that there is a growing concern that the increase in the number of employee sexual harassment cases in the Service is costly. The Vice President of Area Operations reported in a letter to all EAS employees that sexual harassment is a cost the Postal Service cannot afford. He noted that the “resolution of a single case could cost as much as \$300,000 which is the equivalent of 909,091 first class letters. In response to the growing financial toll the organization incurs, the Service created and has been using a REDRESS (Resolve, Employee, Disputes, Reach, Equitable, Solutions, Swiftly) Program whereby a mediator, paid for by management, the employee represented by the National Alliance, and the accused and his representative try to settle cases that have not been resolved at the local level before they are sent to EEOC in Washington, D.C. APWU fervently warns employees that in the REDRESS Program employees are losing because they are giving up their rights because they are asking for and receiving bad advice from the National Alliance, which is not

recognized in the National Agreement as a USPS union (*The Union Mail*, February, 2000). The Service has to do more to curtail sexual harassment because despite its zero tolerance policy, which has been characterized as draconian according to some experts in the field (Schultz, 2003), the environment contributes to sexually motivated behaviors.

Chapter Summary

This discussion utilized the paradoxes of diversity framework to examine employee perceptions of race, class, and gender relations in integrated work areas of the facility. Most employees indicated that they work well with diverse others but have ambivalent perceptions of those they consider different from themselves. Despite a reluctance to discuss the issue of race and claims that everyone works well together, most employees said they have on the job friends of other racial groups but indicated that they prefer to work with members of their race. Employees also have a perception that race affected their opportunities because they were not promoted or they felt that they were mistreated by supervisors or managers because of their race. Employees of all races have a perception that those in authority engage in racial favoritism because they help members of their race achieve experiences that will enable them to move up in the organization. However, most racial ethnic employees believe that white employees benefit the most from favoritism because the power holders in the facility are white. Employees have a perception that the organization individualizes racial matters. Despite an “aggressive” diversity protocol, organizational leaders do not discuss race relations in the Service unless a race-related matter is publicized in the media. Employees are equally ambivalent about social class relations in the facility.

Despite some difficulty with the operationalization of the concept of social class in context of the Service, which has traditionally promoted employees based on experience and merit rather than based on credentials, middle class and working class employees are most easily divided along occupational lines. Employees who work in areas where there are both working and middle class employees believe that middle class employees have more opportunity than others to move up in the organization because they have higher levels of human capital such as educational attainment. Other employees believe that the “good ole boy’s club” still operates effectively in the Service to ensure that white, middle class, men and women will move up in the organizational hierarchy. What seems to disturb employees is that middle class managers, many of whom are white, have what they referred to as a “superior attitude” towards employees. However, most employees believe this is due to the authoritarian culture of the organization that individuals utilize inappropriately. This tendency for employees to individualize the experiences and behavior of employees is also apparent in gender relations in the facility.

The Service has come a long way to accommodate women employees. Organization leaders believe that women have the same opportunities as men to move up in the organization and relations between men and women appear amicable. However, the organization culture continues to be male-dominated. The factors which contributes to the sexualized environment found in the facility is that it is located in an urban environment, operates 24 hours a day, 7 days a week with thousands of employees, and many of the women are single mothers and most of the men are married.

Employees are ambivalent about sexuality in the workplace. Male and female employees think that sex in the workplace is an exciting and interesting aspect of work in the facility. However, sex-related conversations and gossip, inappropriate interactions, and sexual presentations of self on the job disadvantage female employees, the majority of whom are black and Hispanic. The result is that employees have a perception that men do not respect women because of the high level of fraternization, sex play, flirting, and sexual solicitation that occurs in the facility. From the perspective of the organization and unions, the most problematic aspect of the sexuality between coworkers is intimate relation between male managers/supervisors and female employees. In this male dominated culture, employees tolerate sexuality and even supervisors are involved in sex-related conduct on the job. Further, many employees are reluctant to file complaints because they do not know the difference between “inappropriate sexual behavior” and “sexual harassment.” Employees, men and women, also have the perception that the organization will further victimize them if they come forward to complain about sexual harassment.

Still the number of cases has increased in a climate where women fear retribution and men fear humiliation and manager believe that women cause their own victimization and sometimes use the right to file a grievance as a weapon against them. The largest union, APWU, has led a campaign of trying to get the organization to do more than “say it will help” and to behave more responsibly towards those who report incidents of sexual harassment amid the male-centered culture of the organization. In the facility, employees believe that women contribute to their own victimization and supervisors have the

perception that they are victimized by female employees who use their ability to file an

EEO complaint of sexual harassment to retaliate against them for personal reasons.

In integrated work areas, employees are highly ambivalence regarding race, class, and gender relations among them. Relations in less diverse areas of the facility, the following chapter related to employee perceptions in resegregated work areas will show, are less ambiguous and more problematic than in integrated work areas.

CHAPTER VII

FACILITY RESEGREGATION

Introduction

Racial-ethnic minorities and women have become over-represented in many of the work areas that are designated as integrated. This pattern, conceptualized by Reskin and Roos (1990) as resegregation, was nascent during the late 1960s as blacks, followed by Latinos, flocked into urban postal facilities. The concept of resegregation which was originally utilized to examine the experience of women who moved into formerly male dominated organizations which they were excluded from due to sex discrimination (Reskin & Roos, 1990), will be utilized to illuminate the ways in which the concentration of racial ethnic groups in this facility affects relations between postal employees. Resegregation became fully developed by the mid-1980s when white workers began to retire from urban mail processing facilities, or left them to work in less integrated carrier stations, or fled from increasingly diverse urban postal facilities to predominantly white and new postal facilities in the suburbs (Rachleff, 1982). These new postal facilities, according to Rachleff, were designed to decrease informal work group activities, such as employees working closely together and commiserating about work conditions, which culminated in the 1970 wildcat strikes (1982:84). An unintended effect of the reorganization is that it led to the increased concentration of racial ethnic groups in urban facilities. Racial ethnic groups are the numerical majority of the employees on the work floor and hold most of the initial level supervisory positions in the facility. The effect of resegregation is that racial-ethnic employees believe their opportunities for advancement

are limited due to reorganizations and there is also fear that as automation increases the Service will decrease its work force. These factors have sustained tensions (which will be examined in the following discussion) between interracial, intra-racial, and male and female employees.

Interracial Relations

Racial Ethnic and White Employees

The most significant and obvious result of resegregation of urban postal facilities is that racial ethnic employees rarely come into regular and sustained contact with white employees. When they do have regular contact with each other, it is usually in a situation where racial ethnic employees are the subordinates of white employees. How do racial ethnic employees understand this pattern? On the one hand, some racial ethnic employees believe that white employees have higher educational attainment that enables them to effectively compete for upper echelon positions. However, many racial ethnic employees also believe that white employees, due to racism, are given extra-educational considerations that also give them a competitive edge for upper echelon positions. As these positions have become more limited due to the proliferation of automation and reorganizations during the past few decades, some racial ethnic employees believe that positions with authority and autonomy are systematically given to white employees even when they do not have credentials. Actually, white employees represent approximately 24% of postal employees in the facility and are overrepresented in upper echelon positions. They hold approximately 30% of these positions; however, the misperception of racial ethnic employees is that whites hold “most of the upper-level” positions. In

part, this perception is due to the fact that there are very few white employees on the work floor. White employees are given details (special assignments) that take them away from work floor operations and concurrently provide them with the kinds of experiences, which increase their chances of successfully competing for upper level positions. An African American female with 15 years in the Service said, as many other racial ethnic employees reported, that she has rarely worked with white employees:

“If we have a white employee, they are doing the count. Always. And we only have one or two on tour [number deleted]. When I first saw them I thought that they were Puerto Rican but they weren’t. They still have count jobs. They don’t have jobs doing mail. I don’t know why they do that but it is a fact. It is a known fact. Why, I don’t know. I can’t answer that....I think it’s crazy but it is just the way it is.” . FDR is a carrier station so you have a lot of white carriers, supervisors, and so forth. Even in JAF, the majority of white people were carriers or upper management, upper-upper management in the offices. But on the work floor there weren’t too many whites. At [the mail processing facility] if we have any white supervisors, we may have one or two. There are none on tour [number deleted].”

An African American female employee with 8 years in the Service said:

“I don’t know how they end up in these positions. I would assume that somewhere along the line in the Postal Service they have someone they could write to and I expect that if there is a key white person in human relations or employee relations....that these people can probably go sit with them and discuss personal and intimate things about their feelings and experiences on the work floor to the point that, one, they would do something unethical to remove them or to lead them into a position.”

An African American female supervisor said:

“How else can this ratio come about in the office because you go in GPO and you wonder where these people [white administrators] come from? They are not on the work floor. EAP [Employee Assistance Program] is another example. 90% of the psychiatrists and counselors, they are all white. Who is doing the hiring? It’s like a tale of two post offices, one for whites and one for blacks.”

A retired African American female postal worker said that, although race relations had somewhat changed over the course of her tenure, this situation had been going on since she began working for the Service in the 1960s. She said:

“I didn’t like the way they catered to the white girls when they came in. They pushed them into offices or pushed into details right away. They were prejudiced in that area. It just seemed like a code, to me, that when they came into the postal system, right away they had something for them to do...Different things, like they would put them into offices or put them to walk around with clip boards collecting things. They had something for these white women to do. They didn’t stay on the floor that long. They stayed there for a little while but not as long as anybody else. Nobody ever said anything....nobody said anything....it was just....that just happens.”

More recent postal entrants share this perception that white workers are given special considerations in the acquisition of positions. For example, a Latino male with 12 years in the Service said the following:

“I knew this white guy who came in with me. We used to volunteer to work as mail handlers so we could get away from the machines. After about a month or two he was assigned to watch the elevators. I was working like a dog, running from here to there transporting mail all day, and he would be sitting at the elevator just taking mail off and putting it on when it came but mail only came at certain times. So here I am breaking my ass and he’s sitting there filling out applications for a promotion with a freaking smirk on his face. He got in with a management-training program within a year or so and that’s all she wrote. He’s now a big shot manager. Okay, I don’t have a degree or anything and he did so he was destined to move up but the point was that he didn’t do a damn thing to earn the promotion he got, at least not the first one.”

Whether due to individual or institutionalized discrimination, the result of the virtual disappearance of white employees is that, in most of the work areas on the work floor, most of the employees are racial ethnic minorities. However, this does not diminish the extent to which race relations shape relations among employees. It is also true that workers in resegregated work areas are even more reluctant than those who work

in integrated areas to discuss race relations. When racial ethnic employees discussed race relations on the job, they often mentioned that in the Service white workers are the key decision-makers or powerholders (Pfeffer, 1992; Ospina, 1996:87). Nonetheless, their perceptions are contradictory. For instance, nostalgically older racial ethnic employees have mentioned that white supervisors they worked under decades ago were firm but nice to them. A black male retiree said:

“I didn’t have problems with white supervisors. Most of my supervisors were white men and some women. Some of them were decent and some of them weren’t but I did my job and they left me alone.”

An African American female employee who was about to retire said that white and black supervisors did not behave differently. She said,

“They all have the same job to do. No real difference in how they do it. They are nice to some people and not nice to others. It all depends on what they’re up against because some people give them a hard way to go and sometimes they get personal with people.”

Then she reported the following incident that does not seem to support her earlier contention:

“I remember there was this black girl who started dating a white guy. They were hot and heavy, always together. A white manager didn’t like it one bit and they started harassing her and writing her up for every little thing. I mean, if she was one minute late they wrote her up. A lot of people told her to look out. I told her, ‘You better watch yourself because you’ll be without a job and who’s gonna take care of your kids.’ Well, she couldn’t hear it and the next thing you knew they fired her and she didn’t get her job back and just like everybody told her that white guy who loved her so much went about his business and found another girlfriend. He didn’t want nothing to do with her after she lost her job. That’s how they are. They will smile in your face but don’t date their white sons because they don’t like it. They will show you who you think you are.”

Some older employees have the perception that white supervisors were not racist and others thought they were racist. This is not an uncommon perception among employees who have been in the facility for more than a decade and have witnessed the change from predominantly white supervisors in the early 1980s to the present time when most of the supervisors are racial ethnics. Newer employees, those who came in during the 1990s, who are less likely than their predecessors to have worked under white supervisors are more likely to have the perception that race plays no role in labor-management relations. For instance, during interviews, employees were asked to respond to a study done in a northeast urban postal facility which found that black employees were twice as likely as white employees to be terminated from their postal positions (Zwerling and Silver, 1992). Invariably, younger employees said race relations has nothing to do with the discipline rate in the facility because most of the employees are racial ethnics and most of their initial level supervisors, who would be responsible for initiating disciplinary actions, are also people of color.

Conversely, an African American female supervisor with 27 years in the Service said that race nevertheless affects disciplinary rates even though most of her workers are black. She believes that race impacts who gets disciplined but it is due to the behavior of employees and not due to discriminatory practices by supervisors. She said the following:

“Well, where I run into a problem at is I don’t deal with a lot of white employees. Okay. Even down at [name of station deleted] the white employees that I had to supervise, the bottom line is that they do come to work. That’s one thing that I’m going to give them. Even the ones I have now. They come to work. Their problem is basically missing from your place of assignment, creating disturbances on the work floor. Yeah, cause they get loud and boisterous cause they know their

rights and they know this and they know that and they argue with supervisors. They will argue with...those young beebop boys will give you a run for your money. They have a tendency to be a little bit more show boaty and loud. But I would not say, from my personal experience, I cannot say that Blacks are more likely to get it [disciplined] than whites because when I look at it and I'm watching the whites they may not be doing shit. Nothing. But they come to work everyday. They come to work on time. For the most part they be on their assignments but they might not be doing a damn thing. They might not be worth two cents but they are there, where they belong, every day. You couldn't get rid of them if you wanted to. It's the black ones that totally screw themselves in the ground and they mess up their records so you can easily get them."

A white male supervisor, who gave a similar response, said that he does not believe supervisors engage in racial discrimination. He said,

"I don't like to discipline employees but my hands are tied. It's unfortunate because most of my employees are black, Asian, and Latino so most of the employees who are disciplined and terminated are black, Asian, and Latinos but what can I do? They don't come to work. They come to work late. I mean sometimes their absences are legitimate. I had this one clerk who was sick and had a disabled child but she had so many unexcused absences, even after she was returned to duty because she was absent all the time. So they told me I had to terminate her again. I didn't want to but what could I do? On the other hand, some employees just do it to themselves. They come in late; they call in sick and don't bring a doctor's note. If you're sick every other week, this is not the job for you because it's not about supervisors or race issues. Management simply won't tolerate it. They get the printouts which lists lateness and absences and they don't ask questions. They tell us we have to take action. It has nothing to do with race."

A white female administrator responded likewise, she said:

"I know of situations where a white supervisor didn't like a particular person of a different color. It could be racial but at the same time that white person may treat another black employee better, like take them under his wing. So, what makes it racial for one and not racial for the other? It is hard for me to say that an incident was definitely racial."

Nevertheless, there are instances when race comes to the fore in less ambiguous ways. One particular incident was recounted by a white female supervisor with 20 years in the Service who reported that racial-ethnic supervisors, the majority of whom are black employees, often have behind the scene clashes with white administrators and managers.

He said:

“I felt sorry for [name deleted]. He confronted a black supervisor about a condition on the work floor....this is not the first time this happened....and the supervisor started saying that she didn't like the way he spoke to her. I guess she told other supervisors and the whole situation got out of hand because the supervisors started complaining that the administrators and managers speak down to them because they are black and they had a big meeting about it. I mean it worked out but it was unfair that one person was being called a racist when it wasn't about that. It's just that some managers speak forcefully because of their frustration with a situation but just because most of the supervisors are black they think it is racist. The truth is that the managers would probably speak with the same tone even if the supervisors were white too. But I can see why the supervisors might think it is about race. But I know [name deleted] and he is not a racist. He just doesn't know how to speak to people sometimes. But he is not the only one guilty of that.”

Another supervisor, a white male with 25 years in the Service, said that he was involved in an incident that was not racist on his part but was perceived as racial by black employees. He stated,

“Sometimes people just get touchy about race. Just last week I called the workflow and told the manager that him and his supervisors could come up to get some food leftover from a manager's meeting. When I got on the elevator the supervisors were getting off. We exchanged greetings and one said, ‘So what kind of meeting were you managers having that you called us to get your leftover scraps?’ At first I was so shocked I had to take a deep breath before responding and even when I did I kind of minced my words and just tried to explain that it was a lot of food left and whenever that happens we try to give it to workflow managers and supervisors so it doesn't get thrown away. Well, it didn't go over well. They kind of huffed and walked away and I really felt bad. Here I was trying to do something nice and it got turned into a race thing. They didn't say it but I know that is what they meant because after all most of the managers, although not all of us in the meetings, are white. I wish I could say I understand

how they feel but I'm white so no I don't know what it means to be black in the PO. I was just trying to do something I thought would be nice. It is always something in the PO."

When asked about his perception of the racial climate in the facility a Hispanic female with 15 years in the Service said,

"Look at who is making the decisions and who is following them. They are white and we are black. Well, most of us are black. And it seems to me that it doesn't even matter when we have blacks, latinos, and Chinese managers. They act the same as white ones. They don't give a shit about us workers."

The opportunities that individuals have in the facility and interactions between them are perceived as racial whenever there are racial differences between parties. However, most employees are unsure about the issue of race because the line between labor management relations and race relations is difficult to decipher. When a manager has negative interactions with different race employees, there is a tendency among employees to understand these incidents in terms of race. A retired African American male mail handler with 25 years in the Service believes that the contentious climate in the Service makes the racial climate problematic. He gave the following account that he perceives as indicative of this phenomenon:

"Oh, I was there when they had a lot of black ETs [Electronic Technicians]. It was in the 1970s when they first formalized the position. The Post Office started sending a lot of guys to Oklahoma to train for the position and a lot of black guys I knew went for it. A lot of them passed the training but then in the 1980s they started discriminating against them. They instituted another step in the process. All of a sudden they decided that ETs had to go on an interview. Well, that knocked a lot of black guys out of that position because they didn't pass the interview to even get the chance to go into training and that was that. Whites and Asians [men] took over the job. I saw it happen. They don't like to see black people with the kind of skills that will give them a competitive edge. They don't want to see that so they will do anything to keep us down. That's when a lot of guys started going into transportation work to get away from the work floor and LSMs [Letter Sorting Machines]. So that is how that happened."

Postal employees with tenure (more than two decades on the job), such as the employee noted above, have a broad view of race relations in the Service. The sentiment of these employees is that race relations are problematic but institutionalized—imbedded in policies and practices such as labor management relations—much to the benefit of whites who are over-represented in professional-managerial positions (Feagin & Feagin, 1978; Smith, 1995). Because most of the employees in the facility are racial ethnics, most recently hired employees (those with less than 10 years in the Service) who did not witness the kinds of organizational transitions mentioned in the above quote are less critical about race relations in the Service. There is a tendency among postal workers to conceptualize “race relations” as referring to black-white relations. However, in a multiracial or multicultural organization, it is important to examine relations between all racial groups and not just between racial ethnic and white employees.

Racial Ethnic Employees

When racial ethnic employees interact with each other in problematic ways, there is a tendency for employees to perceive these incidents as the result of the labor-management climate of the Service. During interviews, most racial ethnic employees initially reported favorable interactions with their co-workers. They readily noted that they get along with their co-workers, regardless of race. Thus, during visits to the station, it appeared that employees from different groups speak with each other as they work; they sit with each other in the cafeteria eating and play cards together. As well, most racial ethnic employees stated that they been involved, on and off the job, in celebrating

birthdays, the birth of a child, weddings, and other special occasions with members of different racial groups. Despite reports of amicable relations between individuals of certain racial groups, it was apparent through interview and observational data that although employee groupings are integrated, one race usually predominates in these integrated groupings. It is also the case that integrated groupings usually consist of employees who work together and their relations with each other are primarily limited to the job; although they may occasionally share meals together, attend a wedding, or other festive event of a person of another race. Otherwise, African Americans tend to associate with other African Americans, Latinos with Latinos, and Asian with Asian employees.

Given this environment, employees hold strong stereotypical views of what they believe to be inherent characteristics of different groups. These views sometimes impede their ability to forge lasting relationships and friendships with racially different others because sometimes employees actually verbalize the stereotypes they have of other racial groups in the confidence or perhaps in jest with someone of the particular group. For example, a Latina with 12 years in the Service said that she worked with many African American co-workers and that some of the women would make comments which made her feel they were denigrating her culture. She said,

“Well, one time a black woman said that Puerto Ricans ‘will cut you in a minute.’ I was so upset by that comment. We were good friends. We used to go shopping. We used to go to dinner together and sometimes I would bring her food for lunch and she would do the same with me but after she said that comment I started staying away from her and then she went to another work area and that was it. We lost contact with each other.”

Although most employees say race relations in the facility “are not that bad,” racial put-downs, intended or not, are common in the Service. This occurs despite continuous

cultural awareness newsletters and diversity related training workshops offered to postal supervisors which are designed to make them sensitive to “similarities and differences” between groups. Employees sometimes appropriate the language of diversity without fully understanding the implications of their behavior towards those they perceive as “others.” For example, an African American female supervisor with 20 years in the Service made the following comment:

“Knowing, like the Asians, for some reason or another they need to be closely grouped together and they seem to not open up to other people and knowing that they are like that and it is a comfortable niche for them....you as a supervisor knowing that they work in a diverse environment....you have to find a way to get them to mingle a little bit. For example, I had a guy who spoke broken English and very poorly and I think he was insecure with that so he was making poor connections with the other employees when they were trying to communicate so they came up with a situation one day...I believe it had to do with the sweeping process or the time of the rotation so they [other employees] couldn't get him to understand the rotation. I felt that they didn't even want to communicate or work with him because they couldn't understand him. I got them all together and told them, “You know, we are supposed to be a crew.” First I took him on the side. I started to talk to him to get a feel for what was happening. I saw that he was opening up to me. I said to him, ‘You did this (work) wonderfully,’ but he didn't do it the way that they did it. I said, ‘You know everything you did is okay but maybe if you explain to them why you do it this way, they can understand your procedure but if you don't tell them they can't read your mind.’ I said, ‘You may not be able to speak our language as clearly as you would like but if you communicate with them, you will learn to talk better.’ I told them that they are responsible for training him and they could not do it without talking to him. I am not doing the job so they have to get them together to work it out. I swear to God, from that day on we could not get [name deleted] to stop talking. So that is where diversity comes in...when you look at a situation and understand where they are coming from and you can work in a way that you can get everybody to understand everybody. They may not accept everyone but they can understand the work process.”

The tendency to inappropriately apply “diversity” related language and protocol is not confined to one particular racial group. Similar to the comment made by an African American supervisor, a white male administrator, who stated that he is fair to employees and does not discriminate against them, said the following in regards to black and Latino female clerks who work in his area:

“Well sometimes I have to take into consideration the fact that some of my workers are disadvantaged in society and they don’t do things in the manner that they should but it is not because they don’t care about the job they do or anything like that. Sometimes they just don’t know. [When asked for an example, he said:] They may not have good spelling or they may not know how to file alphabetically. I mean I try to help them to learn these kinds of things because it affects the way they do their job but sometimes it is more problematic. I had a Spanish and a black worker. Both females. They had some serious comprehension problems. It was so frustrating dealing with them sometimes. How many times I had to tell them the same instructions over and over again. It is hard to understand when people lack basic skills and common sense. It makes you wonder why they didn’t learn these things in school. But what can you do? You can’t fire them because they can’t think on their feet or because they don’t know what they should know. I mean they really do try to do the best they can but their best just isn’t good enough but it doesn’t mean you get rid of them. You just have to work with what you have because they were really nice, pleasant, ladies otherwise. I really like them as people but they drove me crazy getting the work done.”

Inter-ethnic conflicts tend to develop and wane as the composition of each group varies from one decade to another. During the 1970s, when Latinos began working in the facility in large numbers, there was a very high level of conflict and misunderstandings between African American and Latino employees. In reference to these conflicts, a Latina employee with 25 years in the Service said:

“It was kind of weird because we have black people in my family. We are all races in one. Some people in my family look Asian, some look like Indians, some are very white skinned and others are black. We don’t pay much attention to that kind of stuff but I remember when there was a time when black postal workers

used to treat us bad because they thought that supervisors favored us but I don't think that was true. Some of us got details and some of us didn't but they thought white supervisors were favoring us. It is true that Latino supervisors kind of looked out for us because we were the minority but whites look out for each other and blacks look out for each other. There is no difference but there were problems. Some of my friends on the job are black. We're cool. We hang out together. We look out for each other but I have had incidents where black women would say things that made me uncomfortable. There were these women I worked with who used to give me dirty looks and would not speak to me, for no reason. I tried to be friendly with them but after a while I just said forget it. At times I would go in the locker room and hear them talking, saying things like "those spics" are like this or that. I even had a black friend who said, 'Spanish people are clannish. They will gang up on you in a minute and they won't hesitate to cut you. I saw it when I lived in East Harlem.' She said she wasn't talking about me but it made me feel bad then I got mad at her and eventually we went out separate ways."

An African American administrator, with 30 years in the Service, also recounted the tension between Latinos and African American employees. She said,

"I have this Hispanic manager who hates black people. I mean black women. He goes out of his way to make it hard for us. He just picks, picks, picks at you if you're a black woman. He never did anything to me personally but everybody knows he does not like black women. I don't know what his problem is but it was so funny because he put his hands on a black woman. He turned her around by the shoulder to get her attention and she claimed that he injured her back. She has been out for over a year claiming a back injury. I think he will think about it before he puts his hands on another black woman. They aren't even trying to make her return to duty, that I know of, because then they would have to deal with what this man did. He is nasty. Just nasty. The way he looks at black women when he has to speak to us is awful. It's like we are garbage. I mean he looks at you like he hates you. I don't know how he is with black men but he hates black women."

Some of the resentment between African American and Latino employees stem from traditional perceptions that one group gets more postal resources such as details, training, and promotional opportunities than the other. Latinos, conversely, say blacks get more opportunities because they are the numerical majority in the facility. Both

groups claim the other “looks out for their own kind.” The “special emphasis” status that Latinos have due to the development of the USPS Hispanic Program has not helped to ameliorate tensions between them and African American employees. However, some of these tensions have lessened and these employees are more likely, than a decade or two ago, to have friendships that extend beyond the job and to engage in inter-ethnic dating. Based on employee perceptions, the most intense inter-ethnic relations at the present time are between African American and Asian employees.

Black-white relations shape relations between African Americans and Asian employees. That is, these employees relate to each other based on perceptions of the other group’s relations with organizational power holders who are predominantly white postal employees. Some African American employees have the perception that Asian employees are given more consideration than they are by white postal employees. In reference to this conflict, an African American female retiree said the following:

“That goes back to what I said about these white girls who came in and were pushed up into these job much quicker than the blacks and before I left [early 1990s] I noticed that a lot of Spanish people were being pushed up. A lot of Orientals were being pushed up, too. Now, I don’t know why that is because I think they feel that they do a better job [than blacks] so they want to push them up. Now, I found, I’m gonna tell you something that I found with Orientals. Orientals are very, very hard workers and they will work their backs off but I found that they don’t do a good job. They never complete things. They run and they do this and they go and they do that and they don’t complete all the steps that have to be done. They’re always taking short cuts. That’s how they can get so many things done. Now, the Hispanics...I don’t know. All I know is that they were moving up too. They feel like they [African-Americans] don’t work to their potential and these people work better...they [Asians] are always going the extra mile...running up and down....driving you crazy. But they always look like they are doing more than anybody else.”

An African American male clerk with 12 years in the Service said:

“Yeah, I work with a lot of Asians. A lot of people say you can’t trust them but I never paid much attention to that. I just work with everybody but I don’t have any Asian friends. They stick to themselves. Sometimes they don’t speak English well and sometimes they pretend like they don’t speak English so they don’t have to associate with you. I think it is because we are black. I’ve seen them with white workers and supervisors and they don’t act funny with them like they do with the blacks they work with everyday. It doesn’t make sense but that is how they are.”

African American employees believe upper echelon administrators and managers give Asians special consideration; conversely, Asian American employees have a perception that African Americans employees are given special consideration from African American supervisors. Some Asian employees said they resented working under black supervisors, who are the majority of the initial level supervisors on the work floor. They believe that black supervisors overlooked negligent behavior of black employees but will discipline or reprimand Asian employees for behaviors they allow among black employees, such as taking extended step-offs, absenteeism, or disrespect to supervisors. Supervisors, on the contrary, said they do not discriminate but believe that Asian employees are hypersensitive. Asian employees, according to a Latino male supervisor, “think that everyone is out to get them when really all we want to do is make sure they, like everyone else, do the job they are hired to do.” Similarly, a white female manager made the following observation:

“I have seen things that were perceived as racial. I have some Asians who say that a black supervisor makes them sweep machines and moves them from one place to another and it is hard to determine, because you have a class/caste system in the PO where one is over the other, and if a lower level group is moved and they are all Asian. Is it due to race or is it due to the fact that they are lower level? The Asians will say, ‘Why are we being moved and not another group?’ Sometimes managerial decisions are made so that production time is not lost but employees don’t understand this. The Asians often go to shop stewards about

these incidents. It is difficult because you don't want to alienate yourself from the Asian employees but you don't want any employee to think that they can get preferential treatment because they just happen to feel that someone is doing something to them because of race. Also the rules and regulations are very ambiguous such as employees must be regular in attendance. Well, does that mean employees must report every day or almost every day? So supervisors just kind of feel their way along and make decisions as they go. Sometimes employees see the inconsistencies and will think that it is because of race especially if the supervisor and employees are of a different race. Everything is a matter of interpretation."

Compounding their beliefs that the other is given special consideration, or perhaps because of this perception, some supervisors believe African American and Asian employees who work in resegregated work areas have a different work ethic. On the one hand, there is the idea that Asian employees cannot be trusted. An African American supervisor, in reference to how employees have changed during the past few decades, recounted the following incident:

"Are you asking if the type of employees changed because I know that when we came in during the early 80's we were trained to know that you don't walk past a piece of mail on the floor. Now I see mail on the floor that is stepped on with multiple footprints. Yeah, something, somewhere, has changed because the people do not feel the same. I mean I have had to call inspectors to watch employees who are sabotaging the machines. Yeah, they know that they can put a piece of mail in the machine a different way and it will jam the machine. And that means that somebody has to come and get that jam out. It may take 5 or 10 minutes to get that piece of mail out...the way the jam it in there. I had to let the inspectors know that I believe that this person, an Asian man, is sabotaging the mail so that they could watch him. It is sickening. It is unbelievable that this is going on. People just don't care. The employee that we were watching, he put a piece of lemon in the machine and no one could find out why the machine wouldn't work. He had put a little piece of lemon which blocked the eye of the machine. So the machine wouldn't work. It was a stop....you couldn't find the stop and the mechanic had to go through the whole machine and they looked inside this one spot and there was a piece of lemon in there. There is no way that the piece of lemon could have gotten in there unless it was placed in there. What kind of people are these? I mean what is going on?"

On the other hand, when reflecting on the difficulties of managing a diverse [Asian and black] work force, a white male manager said that the two groups are “different.” He said:

“They are different because they have a different attitude. They have a different work ethic. They believe that anything that they want they should have, like a day off. They don’t seem to care. And a lot of the new policies create this because they say that you’re not supposed to be treated differently because of your race, sex, age, culture and everyone falls into one or more of those categories. So, for example, Asian workers will say, ‘I want Chinese New Years off,’ and you can’t let all of them off because services are needed. So, you have to deal with who is a regular [full-time employee] and even then the lowest one on the totem pole will say that they are being discriminated against if you tell them no. It is difficult to manage that because they always say what about the Jews getting days off for their holidays. What about the Christians getting days off for their holidays and they are right but what can you do. Everybody can’t get the day off.”

In this context, African American and Asian employees both have the perception that the other group is to blame for relations between them. Inter-racial ethnic EEO complaints and disciplinary actions have increased dramatically. Although it was very difficult to find Asian employees who would agree to do the interview, those I spoke to, middle level managers who moved up through the ranks, said that there have always been tensions between African Americans and Asian employees and that these tensions are more evident because there are more Asian employees in the facility. They said that they always got along with everyone but that sometimes African American workers “play one-upmanship.” When asked what she meant by the comment, an Asian administrator said:

“I had an African American manager who, pardon my expression but she, was a bitch. I filed an EEO complaint against her and I won my case. I don’t want to go into details about it but she was unfair to me. She was picking on me. I don’t know whether she didn’t like me or didn’t like Asians. It didn’t matter to me. I filed a complaint of racial discrimination. What else could I do? We are both

women, I am not disabled. It was so frustrating dealing with her. That is the worst part of the job, when you have someone over you who don't sufficiently like you. I mean it is one thing if they don't like you but leave you alone to do your job, it is another when they just single you out for no reason."

Likewise, an Asian male manager said that he always worked with African Americans and Latinos and did not have problems working with them. He did mention, however, that some supervisors were xenophobic. He said that white and black supervisors treated Asian employees different because they are perceived as recent immigrants who come here to take jobs away from Americans. He said the following:

"I work with everyone and I get along with everybody. White, black, Hispanic, it never made a difference. Some of my best friends in college were people of different races. So I never had a problem working with people of different races but I know race is a problem for some people. I mean I have people in my family who would die if they knew I went out with a Spanish or black girl. Forget about it, they would have a heart attack. But I don't judge people by the color of their skin but I know other people do. I have seen it. Some of the Chinese guys I worked with were treated badly by supervisors. They would make them do the work while the black employees went on continuous breaks. Or they [supervisors] would speak to us in this tone, as though we didn't understand English. Some of the guys didn't speak English well but most of us spoke it very well. It's a cultural thing. We don't say much to people in authority so they think you don't know anything but I went to college and some of my Asian coworkers did too. How many of these supervisors went to college? They can't talk down to me because I am a manager. They respect me but it wasn't always that way."

Ethnic race relations between African Americans, Latinos, and Asians are problematic because each group has the perception that the other is given preferential treatment. There is also a perception among Latinos and Asians that the numerically dominant group in the facility, African Americans, is given special consideration by African American supervisors to the disadvantage of other racial ethnic groups. All racial ethnic groups have the perception that the work ethic of the other group contributes

to inter-ethnic work tensions. Another source of tension among racial ethnic employees in resegregated work areas is intra-racial conflicts.

Intra-racial Relations

A hallmark of the modern bureaucracy is inequality among the ranks. The basis of inequality is the hierarchical structure of these organizations that rank employees on the basis of authority and access to resources needed to facilitate operations; thus, employees are stratified along these lines. Traditionally, upward mobility within the Service was on the basis of merit and knowledge of postal procedures. Contemporarily, two changes in the Service affect movement up the organizational hierarchy. First, there have been several reorganizations since the 1970s, which have significantly decreased upper echelon positions. Second, as with most organizations in the present service economy, there has been an increased demand for not only 'skilled' but also credentialed employees. The overall effect is that the Postal Service's increased demand for credentialed workers has resulted in the stratification of employees on the basis of their social class affiliation. The resulting differential access to postal opportunities and resources contributes to conflict between workers of different social class groupings.

In the authoritarian climate of the service, social class differences typically manifest themselves between supervisors, who may or may not be 'middle class' according to their socioeconomic status but think of themselves as upwardly mobile, and employees who are primarily from working class and working poor backgrounds. The result of these differences is that, regardless of the race of supervisors, employees believe that there is a barrier between those in authority and their subordinates. The following

comment made by an African American employee is indicative of this perception:

“You have some white supervisors who will sit down and talk to you the same way that black supervisors will talk to you. They will come over to the case and talk to you. They will act very civil. Then you have some who will try to say whatever they can to you. It works both ways. It is something about the PO...I always say that it must be some kind of mist that they spray on people in there. They all think the same way, the majority of them and it has a lot to do with that level. That EAS title. They feel that it gives them the right to say whatever they want to say to you and that is all of them. It doesn't matter if it a black supervisor or a white supervisor. Although some of them [white supervisors] are really racist they stay away from you but if they get the chance they will fire you. Other than that they all think the same way. You are just a clerk, you are nothing. The PO needs to get away from that.”

An African American male with 15 years in the Service made a similar response, he said:

“There is this person who says what he wants to say but don't really respect us. I don't know, it may be because of the color of our skin because we are black. It may be because we are of lower class. I find that in the PO, if you're management you are way up there and if you are a clerk you are way down here and the two will never meet. In the PO I think they think, 'Oh, they are just a clerk.' It doesn't matter, black or white. I heard a black supervisor say, 'I don't like dealing with clerks, I'd rather deal with EAS.' And we are talking about a title. It has nothing to do with my intelligence. When you say something like that...something is wrong here because if you think that holding a title means that you are smarter than me, you have a lot to learn.”

Race relations in the larger society factors into these sentiments which is revealed in the following remark made by an African American female supervisor with 20 years in the Service:

“One of the major things you hear. I think they wrote an article in, of all places, the NY Times...which when people read the NY Times...they happen to think it is law. It said that you have uneducated, un this, un that...I can't remember the words...predominantly black work force working in the Post Office making 20 thousand to fifty thousand dollars or better and that you have college educated degree carrying people that are taking jobs in McDonald's because they can't find anything else. And when you look at a society where most of those college educated people are coming out of the suburbs with all of their dreams and all of

their whiteness...looking for jobs...and you have a government agency that is predominantly black...supposedly unskilled...making the type of money that we do....I think they want those jobs back.”

Similarly, a Latino male said:

“Again, that’s where the god-father role comes in. I say that because most of those men [white managers] in there got their positions...through somebody who they know. Who are they going to bring on board, in their group, but someone like themselves. That is what they are going to do. I call it the Good Ole Boys Club. You can’t belong to that club. Now, that might change because all it takes is for one person in there to be different. But then you still have someone in that group that reflects everybody else and I think, in our department, that one person in our group has the other group thinking that we don’t know what we’re doing.”

The black-white conflict noted in the perceptions of employees affects the opportunity structure of the Service, but race relations between whites and blacks, most employees believe, does not affect their everyday experiences on the job. In the urban facility where this research was done, similar to other urban facilities, the vast majority of the employees are black. Thus, intra-racial conflicts between middle class and working class blacks, based on differential access to resources, seem to be the most important arena of conflict.

Social Class and Other Ties that Unbind

Black postal employees can be conceptually divided into two groups---by class and by entry point. For the purpose of this study, employees who came in the Service prior to 1979 are considered traditional black postal workers; these workers are approaching their retirement years and many left on early-outs during the 1992 reorganization. The employees who came in during the early 1990s are considered newer employees and a large percentage of them are TEs (long term temporary employees who

could work for years and years without many of the fringe benefits enjoyed by career employees). Conflicts between these two groups stem from different experiences and, therefore, expectations of the organization.

The traditional black postal workers--prior to the Civil Rights Act--were degree holders. There is a great deal of commentary on the opportunities that the Postal Service offered to middle class blacks (Wilson, 1978; Hacker, 1992; Waldinger, 1996). These workers saw the organization as a "money-making proposition" because they were allowed to come into this "good government job" at a time when racial discrimination in the private sector was the norm. The organization they entered was highly authoritarian but most of these workers were older and had prior work experiences. They understood that they had to show respect to those in authority if they wanted to keep their jobs. During this period, those in authority were predominantly white. The pre-civil rights act black postal workers were the vanguard of groups and individuals who contested blacks' inability to receive the promotions they were qualified for.

The new black employees are younger than their predecessors and are predominantly from working and working poor class backgrounds. These workers are similarly situated to their middle class predecessors because their ability to obtain positions in the private sector is also limited. They differ from their predecessors because it is not just race, but rather race and social class that lock them out of private sector jobs. They do not have the educational attainment, skills, or employment histories that enable them to compete for private sector positions. Newer black postal employees also differ from their predecessors because many of them had at least some college. The newer

employees are, largely, high school graduates who had little or no prior work experience before working for the Postal Service. A large proportion of these employees are also females whereas the majority of black postal workers, up to the late 1970s, were men.

The organization is still a viable ladder to the attainment of middle class lifestyles among African Americans. However, the organization that working class and working poor blacks entered is very different from the one that their predecessors entered. With the exception of carrier operations, most postal facilities are now large mail processing plants and relations between supervisors and employees are more authoritarian. The organization, due to structural changes, is also more hierarchically arranged and the unions are weaker. These differences lead to very different on-the-job opportunities. Black workers are stratified along social class lines because older black workers and those who come into the service with degrees are more suited than newcomers to take advantage of the increasingly narrow opportunity structure of the Postal Service. Thus, many of those blacks who have come into positions of authority are members of the black middle class by virtue of their education, earnings, and on-the-job training. In addition, many older black workers embrace a middle class lifestyle and ethos despite their occupational standing.

Relations between these two groups are contradictory, as they are with other diverse groups in the facility. On the one hand, postal employees appear to prefer to work with members of their own race; they work better together and are more likely to have friendships that extend beyond the job. It is primarily among same race others that racial ethnic employees establish their most enduring on the job friendships. They work

together, share meals together, go on breaks together. More importantly, in this large facility which takes up two square city blocks and operates 24 hours, 7 days a week, same race co-workers provide a source of stimulation in an environment that is characterized, by most work floor workers, as monotonous. The result of shared experiences on the job and in society at large, black workers provide each other with a source of comfort as they often share life stories—triumphs, tragedies, and comedies—as they go about doing their jobs. Most of the relations between them are within class relations; however, it is very common for employees to have and sustain relations across social class lines. In particular, as they move up through the ranks, there is a tendency to maintain relations with long-term friends who may have remained clerks. The legacy of enslavement and continued disadvantage as a result of stereotypes, prejudice, and racial discrimination in the United States is a common bond that binds members of the group to each other. However, in this facility, there are also ongoing conflicts between the black middle and working classes.

Waldinger (1996) makes reference to a nascent intra-black conflict in municipal organizations. He notes that middle class blacks are the authority figures in city bureaucracies, while poor and working class blacks are their clients. In the Service, the class divide between middle class blacks who have the opportunity to move up in the organizational structure—no matter how limited that movement may be in the contemporary scene—and are employed in positions of authority over working class blacks is not nascent as suggested by Waldinger (1996) but multifaceted.

Labor-management relations are the most significant source of conflict between

black postal employees who work in resegregated urban facilities. The most significant, and thus problematic, aspect of the conflicts between the black middle class and their working class counterpart generally revolves around the issue of authority. Many of the black employees who came in the service before 1979 are in positions of authority or, by virtue of their seniority and/or knowledge of the work, are stand-ins for those in authority because they are more likely than others to be confidants of supervisors and managers and to work as acting supervisors. Even when these employees are not in positions of authority, older employees commonly instruct and mentor newer employees. Dahrendorf (1959) suggests that authority (and not relationships to the means of production) is the most important class division in the modern society. The labor-management division produces conflicts between those with authority (managers) and those without authority (workers) within organizations. He suggests that these conflicts are related to the conditions of work, pay, benefits and other matters that are negotiated by unions and represents a win-win situation for management and employees; thus, workers neither achieve class-consciousness nor settle conflicts. There is both conflict and consensus, according to Dahrendorf. The issue of authority is of great concern to all postal employees; however, the organization is authoritarian despite its rhetoric of “treating people with dignity and respect.”

The most significant labor-management concern among older and middle class black postal employees in the urban facility where this study was conducted is their perception that younger and working class black employees do not have respect for authority. An African American female supervisor with 20 years in the Service stated:

“Now the new people, I find, are far more challenging and they don’t have the same type of cultural background that the older people have. They have their own style...their own beliefs....not all of them...but a great percentage of them. They are challenging in the sense that they don’t possess the same type of criteria that the older group have. [They think] ‘So what, you are a supervisor, big deal. I don’t have to listen to you. Who are you? Who do you think you are?’ Their values as far as authority definitely has an impact on how they are going to perform and be focused on their job in the sense that, if you are going to always challenge a person about a directive that they give you then certainly you are going to be unfocused on getting the job done. So the challenge is always to find a way to reach this younger group....younger mind-wise.....to target in on getting the job done. They need more. They need more explanations, more understanding, more...just more of everything. Whereas the older group....I feel that they didn’t need much of that....they went right in and they did their work.”

This sentiment among supervisors and older employees that newer and younger employees do not have respect for authority figures is combined, quite intimately, with a sense of nostalgia for the good old days when the majority of the employees were black and their supervisors were white. An African American supervisor with 25 years in the Service made the following comment:

“The employees who came in during the late 70s [when the facility reopened after a fire] to me, were more like the traditional type employees. Although, you still met opposition from them but they basically had respect for authority figures...meaning supervisors, teachers, policemen. You could see that they possessed respect for authority figures. They were more mature in the sense that they took on more of a sense of an understanding of their job responsibilities and they fulfilled their job challenges.”

Another black female supervisor with 22 years in the Service said:

“I’m telling you, some of the people they have now are a little scary. Scariest than psychotic guys...you know they are a little off...every station has one. You know who they are but I think it’s those guys who are walking down the hallway that might look really decent.....and you say, ‘Excuse me, but would you mind picking up those boxes and moving them...’ And he says, ‘Who the fuck you talking to? You’re not my supervisor.’ Now what am I supposed to do? It’s like they come right off the street, South Bronx, Harlem, Bed Stuy. They don’t leave the street at

the door. You know how, no matter where you came from, you went to work and you left the street at the door and put on a little professional thing. It wasn't like you were kissing the supervisor's behind, you just did what you were told, not today."

An African American retiree gave a similar response. He said:

"We didn't run into this kind of stuff about people telling the supervisor off. No. They might mumble under their breath but they aren't going to tell them off because they are afraid that they will lose their job. But the people who come in now came in with an attitude of, 'Hey, I don't care if I lose this job, I'll get another one. Who are you? You don't talk to me that way.' It was a whole different attitude because we went through the black is beautiful thing....with more positive feelings about ourselves. When they came in....they felt, 'Oh, you can't tell me what to do. I'm as good as you are.' I felt that they have a whole different outlook from what we had."

An African American female manager who retired said:

"I think they're a little spoiled...they're more spoiled. I can recall being hired as a sub and having to work 12 hour days, 6 days a week. That was part of the job and now when you tell an employee that you need them for overtime, they go calling for their shop steward. In other words, when we were hired we knew that there was the possibility that we would have to work overtime so it was accepted but nowadays employees....I guess they're...maybe they're smarter than we were....they feel that they have rights and that they are going to stand up for their rights but they are a little spoiled."

Different attitudes towards those in authority stem from demographic differences between middle and working class black employees. The latter are younger and have less job experience prior to working for the Service. Working class employees who work under predominantly black supervision expect that they should be treated with more regard by their supervisors. Conversely, older employees who now work as supervisors and live a relatively secure middle class lifestyle did not expect, a few decades ago, to be treated with regard by their predominantly white supervisors. They worked in an

environment where the most one could hope for was that their supervisors were not overtly racist. The uncertainty of the environment led employees to be generally respectful to their supervisors. These supervisors believe that it is in part due to the individual proclivities of certain employees to be disrespectful towards them; however, they also believe that employees are disrespectful to them because they are black. An African American female supervisor reported her perception of this phenomenon:

“Just looking at the caliber of employees that they’re bringing in now. You have employees that answer you back which is a new phenomenon to me. You have employees that will curse. You know, (they say) ‘I don’t know who that bitch think she talking to.’ I’m like who the hell are they talking to...not to me. I have seen this on the other side of the building. You have employees who will challenge a supervisor. First of all, somebody over there didn’t indoctrinate them properly.”

Black supervisors also believe that newer employees do not have the work ethic of older employees. They repeatedly expressed their perception that new employees have a poor work ethic most evident in tardiness and poor attendance. Several supervisors made the following comments:

“We have young, basically tour one is young. Many of the ladies have children and they don’t seem to have that work ethic that is old and dear to many of us. Where you get yourself and you work and take care of your business no matter what. Our problem with them is that we can’t depend on them to show up when you need them. Let’s say we’re talking about twenty people. Okay, I’m talking about five don’t want to be bothered....let’s say ten don’t want to be bothered (working as acting supervisors). Let’s say five of them, you’ve given a shot and they have not worked out. Period. Whether they come every day or not. The other five ain’t coming to work regular enough or they’re not going to be there at twelve. They might show up at one o’clock in the morning, two-thirty with a story. They may come in and they can’t stay because they have to leave. Stuff like that. They’re not dependable enough.”

Another supervisor said:

“They are not worrying about tomorrow and the next day and next year. I don’t

know what happened to them. I think maybe somebody must have given them too much so that they don't understand that they have to work. They don't understand the sacrifice and amount of energy you're supposed to put in to something to feel like you're getting rewarded in the first place or to reap the benefits. It's important for them to come to work and that's important to help their feelings of self-worth and achievement. Maybe it isn't even the money. Maybe it's about handling your business and what you're supposed to be doing. How can you take your job as this willy-nilly affair to where you go to it when you feel like it."

Supervisors' responses to the behavior of their employees vary. Sometimes the supervisors will speak to the employee to give them a chance to correct their behavior and at other times they will respond with formal disciplinary actions. However, there are generational and class based differences in the way in which employees respond to supervisors. Working class blacks are more likely than middle class blacks to react to their superiors by making inappropriate verbal and nonverbal gestures that, in part, explains the high disciplinary rate in the facility, even though most of the front-line supervisors who initiate formal disciplinary actions are also black. While a large percentage of the discipline meted out relates to absenteeism and attendance related problems, a large proportion of them are more subjective such as 'disrespect to a supervisor,' 'insubordination,' and 'threatening' behaviors.

In some ways these kinds of discipline actions are directly related to employees' perceptions that there are "cultural differences" between African American middle class and working class employees. An African American male supervisor said:

"It's the older, more rigid, more professional [black] supervisors, okay. They are hard nose, hard core, break them down, get rid of them kinds of guys and you have this new generation who aren't going for that kind of crap. They're bumping up against these young [black] guys who are wild. To me it's like culture shock. You don't know where they [young blacks] are coming from."

These perceived cultural differences have a significant impact on relations between black employees that are reflected in many of the comments black employees made about speech, dress, and comportment differences between black employees. Middle class black employees seem very concerned about the kind of speech working class employees engage in, because they are concerned that it verifies racial stereotypes that whites have of black people. An African American supervisor with 20 years in the Service said:

“Yes, in some of the instances and in some...the newer ones...black women and men...you should hear the mouths on some of these people.....you would not believe it. The language and the way they address each other and the out and out nastiness and the whole attitude behind it...I think that some of it is that the Post Office uses so many casuals [seasonal temporary employees], TE's [long term temporary employees], this, that and the other. I don't know how many checks they do. Have they been arrested? Any problems with other employers? Have you ever been on drugs?”

Since most of the employees in the facility are black, it is common for them, regardless of class, to speak Black English on the job. However, middle class minded employees believe that the use of nonstandard English on a consistent basis justifies the limited opportunity for upward mobility among working class blacks. For instance, an African American female employee with 19 years in the Service said:

“In the PO, God I hate to say this but, we have an employee in our office, who it is just her way of speaking. I could understand perfectly why she would not get a position or anything. It is so embarrassing, some of the things she says, I just shake my head. So, a lot of times, they think we're not intelligent, just black people in general. It subjects them to not get a promotion. They will say, 'No, that person can't do that job. They're not that smart.' It can only be education or upbringing that would hinder anybody from getting a position in the PO, at least for some jobs..... So that's where I'd say education and upbringing probably hinders you” (SM, 25).

Middle class black employees, primarily supervisors, also expressed their concern that working class black employees dress in ways that undermine their chances of success on the job and makes “black people look bad.” They mentioned that working class black employees wear clothing that is too tight, too short, and too revealing. A supervisor mentioned that he does not allow employees to come on the work floor with clothing he considers too revealing. He said an employee came to work with a halter top on and he sent her to her locker to put on a tee shirt. He complained that employees should know better than to come to work with inappropriate attire but complained that he has sent employees home on several occasions. On the other hand, working class black employees believe that supervisors have mistreated them because they wear dreadlocks, Afro-centric clothing, or braids. These employees consistently said that middle class black employees deem their clothing and hairstyles as unacceptable, on the one hand, and indicative of other personality or character defects, on the other hand. Appearance, in this setting is not irrelevant to employment and other kinds of opportunities. For example, a manager complained that “nice looking young ladies” were routinely given detail and other assignments which took them off the work floor, “for no other reason than they were nice looking.” Likewise, not having the proper hairstyle can affect employment consideration. For instance, an African American female supervisor with 25 years in the Service said:

“I was doing his job in his title and he was not going to treat me like I’m a child....which I didn’t let him do. Then he told [someone] what kind of manager am I anyway with braids in my hair, looking like a rasta. But there is nothing wrong with braids and I wasn’t going to change them. He wanted me to change my hair and I refused to change it. Then he went around saying stupid things about me...which was so petty. Yes, people look at people and judge them

according to the way they dress or the way that they act. Or if someone came in with a process [men's permed hair] or with a du rag on their head or with a red rag tied around their arm.....they would think that that person is in a gang. Yes, I do....I couldn't get my job [a detail managerial position] with my braids."

A male mail handler who retired from the Service said that he experienced a great deal of discrimination by middle class supervisors and managers who mistreated him because he wore dread locks. He said:

"That's just the way we are, as a people. They mistreated me because I wore dreads. I was too black for them but that was their problem, not mine but I did go through a lot of unwarranted harassment because of my hair or was it because of my faith. I don't know but I will tell you one thing. As a people we need to stop worrying about how somebody looks. That's the slave mentality that keeps us divided. Worrying about who's light skinned and who has good hair and who has a suit on. None of that has nothing to do with anything."

In addition to appearances, how employees comport themselves on the job is an issues that concerns middle class employees. Middle class blacks expressed their view that the use of exaggerated expressive techniques such as talking and laughing loudly or using their hands and facial expressions to convey their feelings among working class employees is inappropriate in the work setting and presents a negative image of black people as a group. Middle class employees said they are appalled by some of the on the job behaviors of working class employees such as open displays of affection, talking loud, and using profanity which they perceive as cultural differences between them.

The belief that employees have cultural differences is not limited to behaviors on the job but intertwined with behaviors off the job. Many of the older and middle class employees experienced the civil rights movement and are much more aware of the impact that segregation and communal violence had on black people. They are also more aware

of racism within the organization. In common many of these employees said that they had to struggle against racial discrimination in order to keep their jobs and/or try to move up in the organization. These employees believe that newer employees do not have to contend with the racism they faced on a daily basis and take the job for granted. One African American female manager with 18 years in the Service said:

“Yeah, I remember the day when you couldn’t do enough work if you were black. All they did was find more work for you to do but we used to do it and we didn’t complain the way employees do now. I remember working in an office where I had so much work, it was killing me and nobody wanted to hear my complaints but I just did my work the best I could. Eventually I got a promotion and would you believe they hired two white girls to replace me. Not one but two white girls were doing the job I left. That is how they do us. New employees have no idea what we went through.”

Middle class black employees believe that working class youth take the job for granted and always want to be rewarded, subjectively and objectively for working. These sentiments are reflected in the following comments made by an African American female supervisor:

“In some cases...I believe that in the late 1970s they did hire a lot of young people but the young people were surrounded by a lot of older people and it was still at an era where people’s values were different so that the older people could guide and mold them a little bit better and be more successful with getting them to conform to the postal environment. I find that the new people are far more challenging. You have to put more into them. They are the type of people that always feel that they should get a tangible reward for what they do and that is a value connection there. Whereas the other people...they more or less understood that the salary was more or less the reward.”

On a broader, historical, level middle class black employees also have the perception that working class and younger blacks do not work or live in ways that respect the struggles of their ancestors. For instance, an African American supervisor said:

“90% of my employees are black and I look at them and I say, ‘Wake up...take this job...this job is a money-making proposition...take it and work it for what it’s worth. Try to get everything you can out of it. Instead of worrying about how to pay for this crap that you buying your kids at McDonald’s you could be taking this boy to Disney World if you would just try to come to work.’ I have grown women...grown...grown women...every six or seven months come tell me how proud they are of themselves because they got a two-week check...they made it to work every day for two weeks. And I try to tell them...do you understand...do you see now the difference...do you see...no wonder you don’t have respect for the job because you won’t come here and make the money to see that it could make a difference in your life. They’re settling for these two, three, four hundred dollar checks and you’re happy. And then when you come to work and see that your check is close to nine hundred dollars...you can not understand it. And I have so many of them.”

An African American female retiree responded similarly:

“They [employees who came in during the late 1960’s] were more dedicated to work....The ones who came in with me. We came in with more dedication to work and nobody thought about stealing. That was out of the question....every now and then somebody would be caught. But it was very, very few people....for the simple reason that we remembered that at orientation they said inspectors were everywhere, looking down from the ceilings. And we went by that rule. If they left money in the bathroom, it would stay there until it rot. Nobody would touch that money, you hear me. If you dropped money on the floor, somebody would take it to the supervisor. They would not keep it. It was a whole different scenario on honesty and people having to work....knowing that they had a decent job and they wanted to keep it.”

There is also concern among middle class black employees that their jobs are harder because most of their employees are black. An African American female supervisor with 18 years in the Service recounted a conversation she had with a white administrator and said the following:

“See the problem is as he told me. He did not want to work with the employees on the work floor. He didn’t have to say it but I know what he means. I hate to say it but I know that he means the niggers....working with niggers....because that is who is doing me in every day that I go in.”

Some of the difficulties of supervising a predominantly same race workforce, according to some African American supervisors, are that they believe their employees expect special considerations because of the historical mistreatment African Americans experience in the larger society. An African American supervisor with 23 years in the Service said she believes this creates a burden for her because she has to play many roles, beyond supervision, with her employees:

“Yes...I’m like the Mom, the sister they didn’t have...you wear so many hats. You’re like the schoolteacher...and you’re like the father figure where when they need to get smacked on the butt, you smack them and send them off. You’re like the dumping ground where they can just dump all this junk that they had going on in them for so long and maybe nobody else would listen to them.”

The frustrations of having to play multiple roles with black employees seems to be exasperating to black supervisors because they believe that their efforts go unrecognized by an organization whose bottom line concern is with productivity and by employees who do not appreciate their efforts to work with them. Ironically, African American and Hispanic employees expressed their view that they like working under white supervisors. For example, an African American male employee with 15 years in the Service said:

“I had this one supervisor when I first came in the PO. He is a white man but he was the best supervisor I ever had. He was cool. He was very nice to all the workers. He didn’t play games with us. When we had to work, he was straight up about it and we worked hard. So he was a good guy, we worked for him and he worked with us. I’ve never had a supervisor like him since then. Some of these supervisors are off the hook. Once we had a black supervisor who drove us crazy, all of us bid out of the section...every last one of us.”

Other racial ethnic employees expressed the view that they prefer racial ethnic

supervisors because they are more sensitive to the difficulties their groups have experienced in the Postal Service. An African American male with 15 years in the Service said:

“I prefer to work with a black supervisor because one thing about black people, we speak our minds. We don’t hide what we think then stab you in the back while you’re not looking. I can deal with that because they are up front. I mean most are. They tell you, they warn you. Then if you don’t take heed they do what they have to do, I guess, but they’re not phony like some white supervisors. Okay, I only worked with one so I can’t speak for all but the one white supervisor I worked with was full of shit. He would act like everything was everything and he’s in the office writing you up. They will put you in the street without a second thought. They don’t care but black people will tell you what is coming down the pipe and if they can they will give you a chance to get yourself together.”

In addition to having more trust for African American and Hispanic supervisors, many African American and Hispanic employees also expressed that they are proud to see African and Hispanic American supervisors and managers. An African American administrator said her favorite supervisor was a black woman whom she characterized as “the best.” She said:

“She looked out for her workers and was very protective of us. She showed us the ropes and demanded the best from all of us. We did our job and she was nice to us. She was just an all around good person and supervisor. She was fair with us. If you messed up she got on you but she didn’t do it in a deliberately nasty way like some supervisors.”

A Hispanic male responded similarly:

“I don’t have a preference who I work under but all of my supervisors, except one was black and a few Latinos. I got along with all of them. My best supervisors were in the [name of area deleted] section where I work for the past few years. Most of the supervisors are black and we get along. They work with us and we work with them. As long as you come to work and do your job you won’t have a problem and that is what I do.”

However, many of the black employees believe that their racial ethnic supervisors should be more responsive to their concerns and experiences. An African American female with 10 years in the Service reported that she was having problems with unreliable babysitters that contributed to her coming to work late and being absent on several occasions. The employee said she reported her situation to her supervisor and the supervisor showed no concern for her dilemma. She said:

“Sometimes it is tough working for black people. I mean I am black so I am not saying all blacks are no good supervisors or anything like that but some of them are just too mean spirited. They talk to you like you’re their child and they will write you up, if they don’t like you, for any little thing. A supervisor made me go to EAP because I had babysitter problems. What kind of shit is that? I didn’t fucking need to go to EAP. I don’t take drugs and I don’t drink but I have to go to EAP but you have some workers who are stone cold druggies and some are alcoholics but the supervisors don’t say anything to them. They protect the ones they like even if they don’t do any work but me, I had to go to EAP or I was gonna lose my job so I had to go and I work my ass off but they don’t care about that. I can’t say I would prefer white supervisors because I had some at [another company- name deleted] and sometimes they weren’t nice people especially when things went wrong and then they spoke to us like we were dogs but most of the time they kind of acted like we were part of the team even though we knew otherwise.”

Related to the issue of having concern for the plight of members of your racial group, there is a perception among working class blacks that older black employees are trying to be “postal workers” and forget that they are “black postal workers.” This sentiment is noted in the following comment made by an African American female clerk:

“Yeah but even the blacks who have the positions won’t see you get ahead, neither. Like the incident that I told you about with Ms. P. Their way of thinking is that they had a hard way to go so you will have a hard way to go. It doesn’t mean that, if you help me get a job, I owe you my life or that I can’t do the job because I am confident that anything I go up against...I have some kind of confidence in me that I am capable of doing the job. I don’t want anything from anyone in there because you like me or is my best friend or anything....I want you

to know that I can do that job. Maybe they feel that, “No, if I put my friend here they will want all the breaks.” And some of us do think that way.”

Another source of frustration, on the part of middle class black supervisors, is their perception that working class black employees are too nonchalant about the job; thus, they believe it is hard to draw the line with their employees. Several supervisors said, “When you give them an inch, they take a mile.” It follows that the work ethic of black working class employees is a common complaint among black middle class employees who believe that these employees have poor work habits and are not willing to give a fair days work for the salaries they earn. This is evident in the following comments made by a black female supervisor:

“The newcomers come in there with this terrible attitude. It’s just about money. There is no other job where you get paid this amount of money with the skills that these people have. A lot of them don’t have any skills. Okay, the ones that do have skills try to move up within the PO but the ones who don’t have skills, are just like (have the attitude that) ‘I don’t have to do nothing.’ I can just sit here and just do this. Because you watch them. They are more lax. They are more into styling and socializing and having fun.”

Commonly, older employees said that they had to struggle against racial discrimination in order to keep their jobs and/or try to move up in the organization. These employees believe that newer employees do not have to contend with the racism they faced on a daily basis and they believe that this is the one of the reasons newer employees are nonchalant about this ‘good government job.’ Middle class black supervisors’ also expressed their perception that working class black employees do not understand the significance of being disciplined. Take for instance, the following account provided by an African American supervisor with 20 years in the Service:

“You know, I just this year...I wrote them up...Some of my employees. Okay...first they got their letters of warnings and they were shocked and they were indignant...and I told them it was time...all the excuses and all the pettiness, the party was over...that they had to stop...that their records warranted that some kind of action be taken against them. I explained to them that if they did not show any improvement from the time they got the letter of warning, I gave them five months to improve and if they did not show any improvement I would put them in the street, which I just did. Some of them really think that it’s a vacation. The shit isn’t fazing them one bit. [An employee asked] ‘Can I go out on this day?’ [I said] ‘No. Y’all ain’t getting it [the message].’ I’m tearing your butt and you think you’re going on vacation and have the nerve to want to go out on a specific day. Have you ever? And when you’re dealing with stuff like that, yeah, it’s frustrating cause how your behind don’t know that I’m hurting you. How you don’t know that this hurts you? How you don’t know to fight me back and get a shop steward? With my employees, I tell them everything, every step of the way...I had one lady tell me she wasn’t getting a shop steward because she needed a vacation anyway. They don’t get it. And she has been removed from the Postal Service three times.”

Tensions between black employees are not confined to manager-supervisor relations, although conflicts readily manifests in their relations. For example, black supervisors from working class backgrounds also expressed their perception that there is some level of disconnect between them and middle class black managers. This sentiment is apparent in the comment made by an African American female said:

“I used to go to every dance and every scholarship thing that they had. Then it became too political. In order words, sometimes they [high level black officials] would speak to you and sometimes they don’t. Everybody paid the same amount for the ticket and it’s like...it just became too terrible. I mean, I was going there having a good time. We all work together, whatever. But you would see too much snobbery....noses pushed up. I mean and then you go there because you see somebody that’s climbing [moving up in the organization] so they have something to recognize them and the person that’s being recognized only speaks to some of the people there. Instead of going to whole tables or all the tables they would go to some tables and only speak to certain people at the table and some tables they didn’t even go to. Even worse you try to speak to them or congratulate them and they look right through you and don’t speak or even acknowledge you. It was ridiculous. Here I am paying money to celebrate your success and you’re acting like you’re too good to speak or they just look at you like they never even

saw your face before. It just came to the point where [I questioned,] “What the heck is going on around here?”

It is clear that negative stereotypes impact relations between middle class and working class black employees. Without prompting, middle class black employees made a point to say that they did not feel comfortable making, what they believed to be, derogatory statements about other black people and I am not suggesting that they are racist. I believe that relations between middle and working class blacks disadvantage working class blacks and that the structure of the work environment, where blacks are the numerical majority, seems to create and perpetuate the apparent divide between these groups, much to the disadvantage of all black employees. At present, all postal employees are structurally disadvantaged because upward mobility in the organization has been diminished due to several reorganizations of the organization. However, some are more disadvantaged than others. For African American employees, movement upward in the organization is a myth. This is compounded by fact that they are largely segregated into urban postal facilities where white employees have more opportunity to move up in the organization. While this is common knowledge to postal employees, in urban postal facilities, black middle class employees usually supervise and manage other black employees. The reality of this structure of opportunity makes black middle class employees very sensitive about their opportunity for upward mobility and much of their concern about this issue gets focused on making sure that they can distinguish themselves and are distinguished by others from their working class counterparts who have no opportunity for mobility, at least within the organization.

Gender Relations

Women did not come into postal work in large numbers until the early 1960's. Before that time, women's postal opportunities were similar to that of blacks. They were let in these jobs during times of need, such as during wars, and summarily dismissed when the men returned home. Protective legislation which prohibited women from working on the night shift and federal regulations, which prohibited spouses working for the same agency, barred women's access to postal work. These regulations contributed to the idea that postal work is "men's work." Despite the dramatic increase in women's rate of employment on postal jobs since 1964 and the high promotion rate of black females into initial level supervisory positions, which creates the perception among male postal workers that the organization is becoming female-centered, according to Fraser, Kick & Barber (2002) this sentiment continues to influence relations between men and women postal employees. Typical of many urban postal facilities, most of the employees in this facility are black. Therefore this discussion will largely focus on relations between black employees with particular attention to the male-dominated culture that contributes to segregation of men and women into different occupations and violence against female employees.

The vast majority of men in the facility are married and most are married to women who do not work for the Service. In contrast, the vast majority of women in the facility are single mothers, although a small percentage of them are married. Although automation and machine work have contributed to higher than normal levels of integration among male and female postal employees, many men believe, although they

were reluctant to express their view, that postal work is not a place where women should work. Although many of the women said that they got along well with male co-workers most said that men have “a negative attitude” towards postal women. The perception that women have of men is evident in the comment of a black female clerk who said that many of the male managers resent a woman who is in charge of the facility. She said:

“But women managers who are over male supervisors....they tend to not want to take orders from that woman because of the position that she holds. You have so many of the men in there who felt, ‘I’m not going to do anything for her....who does she think she is coming in here upsetting the apple cart.’ They choose not to work with her. They chose to sabotage her and what she did was bring in her own people and a lot of them didn’t like that. They saw that she means business. Because she is a woman, it really bothered them. It bothered so many of them. I’ve heard a lot...I mean managers...not supervisors, managers who are under her say, ‘Who does she think she is....that black woman.’ And they turn around and see somebody black standing there but they keep going. So because she is a woman, they don’t want to work for her. Managers don’t like taking any orders from women because they feel that women aren’t intelligent enough to make decisions....to perform the duties that are asked of us....outside of having babies” I think a lot of them think, ‘Why don’t they stay home and have some children.’ Men in general feel that way it doesn’t matter if they are white or black.”

In this climate, many females noted that men make derogatory comments about postal women. They believe that men do not give them the regard that they give to women who do not work in the Service. This sentiment is captured in the following comment by a female supervisor who reported the following incident that occurred. She said:

“One day she [another female supervisor] went to the General Foreman [a white man] and told him that she did not want to stay [for overtime] but had someone to replace her. He said something about people playing games and decided that all supervisors had to stay for overtime. She told him that she couldn’t stay because she did not have anyone to meet her at the train station and did not want to walk home alone in the middle of the night. She asked him how would he feel if it was his wife or daughter was in this position. The foreman said, ‘My wife and daughter do not work at the PO but you do.’ She said she wanted to say ‘Fuck

you,' but you can't. But that is the kind of shit that makes you mad. I mean, I like working but its things like this that makes you hate this job. There is so much stupidity.”

Women's Work

Women make up approximately half of the employees in the facility and their presence is most likely to increase because the automation of postal work no longer requires heavy lifting and intense physical labor. Yet, male chauvinism continues to fuel expectations of women and their place in the facility. Women rarely work in complete isolation from men but the level of gender segregation is high. Most of the mail processors, administrative and personnel office clerks, and initial level supervisors are females. These are roles that continue to connect women to their caretaker roles at home or sex-role spillover (Gutek & Morasch, 1982). In these roles women are taking care of things: machines, data entry and paperwork, and people. Women perceive these kinds of positions as advantageous and disadvantageous.

Women who work on machines find the job attractive because they have shift hours that enable them to be at home with their children during daytime hours. Women who work in administrative offices also find the job attractive because they are able to be at home with their children during evenings and weekends. Office supervisors readily mention that the absentee rate among office workers is lower than the absentee rate of women who work on the evening and midnight tours. Supervisors, the majority of whom are females, also find their job attractive because although they may work on rotating work schedules, they have more autonomy than clerks and are able to maintain contact with family members. This is reflected in the comment of an African American

supervisor:

“It’s also a privilege when you have young children and your child can contact you and I felt that that was a privilege for me because my daughter was a latchkey kid at such a young age so I would say, “When you get home call me. This is where I am.” If you’re on the work floor you don’t have that privilege because nobody can call you.”

Reskin and Roos (1990) hypothesized that when women come to dominate in formerly male occupations, the status of the occupation diminishes and women are paid less than men. The status of postal work has decreased in the past three decades as blacks and women have flocked into these positions; however, the authoritarian culture of the organization and violence in postal facilities have significantly contributed to the diminished desirability of the occupation. Women are not paid less than men; all postal employees are paid according to EAS pay scales. However, the mail processing position has the lowest status and pay of all clerical positions and large numbers of women have always held this position from its inception in the mid-1980s.

Where resegregation has had its most significant gendered effect is among supervisors. Initial level supervisory positions have undergone a process of resegregation over the past two decades and the status of this position has declined to the role of “caretaker.” Most supervisors, prior to the mid-1980s were white men and now black females predominantly hold these positions. This position, which was once thought to be a ‘stepping stone,’ has now become a ‘dead-end’ job, according to the perception of female supervisors. What are the factors that have contributed to this demographic shift? How do black female supervisor experience their role? What are employees’ perceptions of black female supervisors?

Hacker (1992) speculates that organizations that are mandated to hire blacks will give preference to black women rather than black men because they are less apt to present themselves as “black” in demeanor and appearance. This happens to be true for all workers and probably more so for black employees. In the Service, almost anyone, male or female, who presents themselves as “black” is not likely to become a supervisor in the Postal Service, even in urban areas where blacks are the majority. Hacker also suggests that black women are given preference over black men because they are perceived by the organization as less assertive and more accommodating. If this idea is used to examine the predominance of black female supervisors in urban postal facilities, it reveals a paradox associated with black postal workers and begs the question: In what ways are black female supervisors less assertive/accommodating? To whom? Under what circumstances?

African American female supervisors are assertive in their efforts to achieve some level of upward mobility in the organization. An African American female supervisor said:

“I would have to say that black women obviously possess more assertive and aggressive traits as far as moving up the ladder. It is the same like when I went to college. There were more black women and than black men. Even when I traveled I saw more black women than men. It seems to be something that, for some reason or another, it’s a black thing as far as black men are concerned. They move up the ladder slower than black women. Black women are just naturally aggressive. When they go into a work place, they are always striving for a better place, a better level. They are striving because black women are head of household so it becomes natural for them to just want to strive for upward mobility. Perhaps that is the reason. It just automatically comes naturally. If there is a vacancy, they say why not put in for it because they have taken charge for so long, it would be unrealistic for them to avoid moving into those capacities where there is openings. Whereas black men, I believe, they probably let their insecure beliefs hold them back, in some cases. I feel that they don’t possess the same security that black women possess. They just feel that being a black man, they are not willing to take the risk or the challenge. Or their egotistic aspect of

them takes the dive for someone saying no so they don't take the challenge.”

Black female supervisors have the potential to be a force for change within the organization because they are the numerical majority but are accommodating in the sense that they do not challenge the status quo. The situation of black female front-line supervisors is very complex. They inevitably experience the same tensions that all front-line supervisors do because they are buffers between management and the workers. Therefore, it appears that they must walk a fine line between being assertive and accommodating. Black female supervisors are obliged to identify with the mandates of their managers who are predominantly white and at the same time they must identify, at varying levels of consciousness, with the needs of their workers who are predominantly black. To this extent they play a contradictory role between employees and management (Dahrendorf, 1959); however, this dilemma is confounded by race.

The idea that supervisors are supposed to be color-blind is a very common one among postal management. However, it is a myth more than a reality. Even when their interactions are positive, race seems to impact the stance that people take toward each other. For example, a white male supervisor who works with a group of black women clerks said that he knows that some of them can not work at the level that he desires but tries to work with them because he feels that due to the disadvantages blacks experience in the larger society they may be doing the best that they can. This does not mean to suggest that this kind of sentiment is desirable among supervisors, as it tends to perpetuate stereotypes; however, it is rare to find a black postal official who would voice

this kind of sentiment. Although one black female supervisor said she wants her employees to do the best job they can and does not believe that some of them do so, it is rare that a black official will say that they let a black employee do less than what is expected of them due to racial considerations. This situation is paradoxical for black women supervisors because they take an individualistic view such that it is common to hear them say that their employees, most of whom are black, “have it much easier than they did,” or “can do better if they tried harder.”

Most black female supervisors do not consider how structural arrangements in the Service impact the motivation and aspirations of employees or their relations with them. This is particularly problematic. On the one hand, it contributes to supervisors who endear themselves to their employees in ways that are detrimental to their own success on the job. On the other, sometimes they are particularly rules-driven and closed-minded in their interactions with workers that negatively impacts not only relations with their employees but also the morale of workers. Although negative sentiments among employees was not as common in work areas with fewer numbers of black women supervisors, in resegregated areas where there was a high concentration of black women supervisors, it was very common. One employee stated,

“I find that in the PO that black (woman) supervisors are the hardest to work for and I don’t know why....I don’t know why they feel that the next black woman is intimidating or out to get their jobs.”

A female clerk said:

“People are just...I don’t know.....when they get in these higher positions, they are so into proving. Maybe it is installed in them....I don’t know. I don’t have to like it. I am going to do whatever I am asked but I don’t have to like it. It’s just that black women are so....they are so judgmental....always worrying about how this

one looks and the other one talks. They say things like, ‘This one don’t look right. Look at what she is wearing. The other one don’t talk right.’ It’s just so much pettiness. White people may do that too but it’s done in a different way.”

In this environment, employees often said that they preferred to work for men and even supervisors, not surprisingly, expressed their view that women employees are more cooperative with male supervisors. A black female supervisor stated,

“The majority of the employees will listen better to a male supervisor than to a female one. You will find that a man can come and be less stern and more lax and still get the job done. I will be honest with you, we are very happy when there is a male supervisor on the floor...Because there are just so many women supervisors. We don’t, you know, there has been a time when there was only one male supervisor on the floor. Employees do what male supervisor tell them to do and the men [supervisors] notice it sometimes....the women [supervisors] notice it all the time. You know, it is not so bad to have one [male supervisor] to get different views, too.”

Even female supervisors who work in resegregated areas said they disliked working with women. A black female supervisor said:

“Because sometimes they are so dag gone petty... sometimes. I really hate saying this because I am a female but sometimes they get so petty and they get so dag gone personal. I don’t know what it is...they just get so...it’s something. Personally, me myself, I prefer to have more male supervisors because it is just less pettiness.....the females tend to have more things to complain about and some of it is just so unnecessary. I can’t think of an example....but more problems seems to arise.”

Another said:

“I do too. I do too....Because they aren’t trying to prove a damn thing. They feel that it is already proven, them being white.....I don’t know what it is but I prefer working for a white man....I hate to say it but I could deal with (a white male supervisor accused of being a racist) better than I can deal with some black women because I don’t get no shocks or no.....no pettiness. He doesn’t put on a dress today and pants tomorrow.....If I deal with [name deleted] a black woman, manager. Today she is a monster and tomorrow she is trying to be kind. I don’t have time for that. Today she is important, ‘I am an MDO.’ I don’t have time for that....you are who and what you are. If you want me to do something I will do it. I would rather work for a black man. I would rather work for a white man. A

woman, I have only worked for one white woman and I didn't have any problems. I don't understand. And another thing, black people don't listen. They have a thing about, 'I said so.' A white man might listen to you and might still not do it but he will listen. You talk to a black woman and they say, 'Yeah, yeah, yeah, but do it this way.' It is a difference.....Then you have some black women who are being cute.....When they start talking, they have to be dramatic....I don't know.

Gender seems to be a significant factor in the level of respect employees give to supervisors. Many employees and black female supervisors said that racial ethnic employees seem to show more respect to white male supervisors. However, race may be the most important factor because there are very few white female supervisors on the work floor; however, black supervisors have the perception that employees are much more cooperative with them. An African American supervisor suggested that this may be due to fear of retribution, or what can be conceptualized as symbolic fear. She said:

“[Black employees] are definitely less prone to provoke them [white supervisors] and more likely to agree with mandates placed upon them. I believe that it is because they would fear retribution because they would assume that the powers that be beyond the white female supervisor will be her counterpart [a white man]. So ultimately that means that that person [a white female supervisor] would have a better chance of negotiating something than a black supervisor. The mere fact that there is some commonality between them [whites]. Because they all think the same, if a white goes to an upper management, a white [person] and says that this black beast did so and so, they will believe them and want to do something about the situation.”

In resegregated work areas where the majority of female supervisors are black, they are held to a contradictory standard. They must be motherly to their employees in order to produce a somewhat cooperative work environment. Conversely, they have to be 'tough' enough to get uncooperative employees, who perceive them as structurally powerless, to be cooperative or suffer the consequences of not being cooperative. This climate prevails in the facility because most of the supervisors are black women and most

the employees are black, Hispanic, and Asian. Thus, while numbers seem to make a difference, they do not insulate black female supervisors from the same powerlessness that tokens, the few among the many, experience.

African American female postal employees are highly visible “public creatures,” a perceptual tendency which disadvantages the few among the many (Kanter, 1977). Due to preconceived notions and racist and sexist stereotypes of black women, and even though they are the numerically dominant group in the facility and district, they experience many of the negative aspects of being “public creatures.” They are noticed for their “non-ability traits,” their “public dignity” is routinely violated, and their mistakes are highlighted (Kanter, 1977:216). These disadvantages are most readily apparent in regards to violence black women are subjected to in the facility.

Violence Against Women

Since the 1980's there have been several incidents of mass shootings in postal facilities. Based on news reports, most of these incidents occurred in the Midwestern and southern regions of the country. The shooters, in most of these cases, were white men who were disgruntled due to terminations or pending terminations from employment with the Postal Service. All of the shootings occurred in small suburban facilities. The size of large urban mail plants is a factor that lessens the possibility of the mass killings we have witnessed in suburban stations. Large urban facilities operate 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Each of the three primary tours has over 1,000 workers; these facilities are virtual cities within cities. It is often the case that employees and supervisors who do not get along have the ability to move to another area of the building or to another tour. This

decreases the likelihood of large-scale acts of violence. In fact, most of the respondents of this study do not believe that violence is a problem in urban postal facilities, even when describing situations that are indicative of this phenomenon: An African American clerk said:

“As long as I have been [name of facility deleted] I have never heard of any incidents of violence. I’ve seen people get angry and women fighting in the locker room but no, not too many people would hurt you. Even in a lot of cases where a person didn’t like what a supervisor said or did to them...they will turn more to drinking more than anything else but I’ve never seen them become violent.”

Another African American female retiree concurred that she had never heard of violence on the job, which is not evident in the account she gave. She said:

“Well. I haven’t really heard, well actually I’ve heard of arguments that got kind of raunchy. Wait a minute. When we were on the floor, this girl chased this supervisor with a knife. Yeah, she was going to cut his neck. I don’t know what that was all about but she chased him with a knife. And what other violence.....No, I haven’t seen too much violence. A lot of arguments but not really fights.”

Perception of how people conceptualize violence is an important issue here. It is however clear that in this large urban facilities various forms of violence are prevalent and most of these acts of violence stem from intimate relations between male and female postal employees. It is also the case that black women (and to a lesser extent Hispanic women) are overwhelmingly the victims of the violence and, unlike the mass killings that occurred in suburban facilities, employees and the organization particularize these incidents. They are perceived and portrayed as the acts of individuals and, to the extent possible; they are contained within the walls of the Service. The organizational context is also an important factor.

In this large postal facility, with work tours that are not compatible with family life, “postal love affairs” often contribute to acts of violence between employees. The size of the facilities is a contributing factor because it allows for a degree of anonymity in which these kinds of relationships can flourish. Work tours contribute to sexual relationships between postal workers because most work on evening and midnight tours. Another contributing factor is marital rates; male postal employees are much more likely than females to be married. What they all have in common though are feelings of loneliness, isolation, and boredom. It is not surprising that many rely on other employees who have similar experiences for someone to talk to and spend time with. This kind of socializing inevitably leads to the development of emotional bonds, no matter how tenuous, and sexual relationships between workers. Because of the tenuousness of these relationships that are namely, extramarital, serial, and multi-partnered, the potential that violence will occur is high. The topic frequents the gossip airways of the facility. Take for instance the following accounts given by several employees of women postal employees, including supervisors, fighting each other over men:

“I heard of two young ladies fighting over a male. It wasn’t when I was there. I was off that day. I don’t think it was appropriately handled but it did happen....They [supervisors) squashed it and they didn’t even make a record of it and I feel that it is okay if you want to resolve it but technically I feel that you should make a record of it for future references in case it reoccurs and that you have something to go on to make a case whole.”

“Two women supervisors were fighting but didn’t happen in the PO. It happened in the parking lot, so to speak. It was reported that Supervisor B was dating Supervisor A’s husband. They were allowed to agree that the fight never occurred even though they were physically separated by postal inspectors.”

“I have one lady who wants to fight these girls on Tour 2. She wants to fight the guy. I’m like, this is ridiculous. Back in the day, you come into the Post Office and you mess with the wrong guy you’d say [to yourself], ‘Wow, I made a fucking mistake.’ You dust yourself off and you keep going but these young women are out for revenge. I just had a situation where I had to take this guy and girl into the supervisor’s locker room. The guy said the girl was mad because he didn’t want to date her anymore and was dating another girl and she was talking about him and spreading rumors. He said he didn’t want to confront her because he was afraid he might hurt the girl. I talked with them and told them both to stop the nonsense.”

These forms of violence are not limited to on-the-job fights and arguments. Employees routinely reported incidents of violence. Many employees conveyed that they knew or heard of incidents where women were assaulted by men but did not report these incidents because they feared retribution from the men involved. For example a female postal worker reported that her friend was dating a manager. She recounted the following:

“She told me that he got upset with her because [name deleted-a white male manager] asked her to make him a plate of food at a Christmas party they were having in the work area. He did it deliberately because everybody knew the Latino manager was possessive of her even though he was married and had only been dating her for a couple of months. Anyway, what happened was that after work that day he took my friend out for drinks and confronted her about making the plate for the supervisor. She thought it was all over with after they had argued and everything but when the manager took her home that night he stopped in a deserted business area downtown, told her to get out the car, and beat the shit out of her. When I saw my friend I almost did not recognize her. I just started crying and crying and telling her to report his ass to the inspectors and she took pictures but she didn’t report it. She was scared. She said if he lost his job because of her he might kill her. My friend was out of work for close to a month because of her injuries. At first we were all numb. Then we were walking around sad like somebody died but then I got so mad because he just left the station to work in another one where he could do that to another woman, what he did to my friend and everybody in [the work area] knew what happened. I don’t trust these men and I would never date one of them. Postal men are no good. They just use you and I’m not having it because to tell you the truth, if any man did to me what happened to my friend I would go to jail. I would go to jail for murder. I hate to

say it and I'm not talking about going postal but that is how I feel. What gave him the right to do that to her? Because he is a fucking manager?"

The male-dominated culture of the Service facilitates these kinds of incidents. An African American woman who was also "assaulted" by a male postal employee said that she did not report the incident because the perpetrator knew everything about her and could easily find her or her family members if he lost his job. The deaths of female postal employees caused by their postal lovers, boyfriends, and non-postal husbands have also been reported. One incident, which reportedly occurred in the early 1970s involved a woman who ended a long term affair with a male postal employee and he stabbed her to death in the employee swing room. Another incident involved a woman who was having an affair with a male postal worker and was shot to death by her husband. Also, an interviewee reported that a female postal worker who was considered "easy" by most of the workers in the station was found dead in her apartment. She reported that the police found telephone numbers of male postal workers in the woman's belongings and half of the men in the station were called in for questioning by the police. The case was never solved, according to the informant. Another employee reported that she had a male employee who publicly threatened to kill his wife. She said:

"I had a male employee who tried to murder his wife. It reached the newspapers. He was a little volatile while he was at work but you try to work with people the best way that you can so we always tried to diffuse the situation. We had reached the point where it was better that that happened...the incident with his wife [he tried to murder her on a train track. After beating her, he tried to throw her in front of an oncoming train] because I think something would have happened in the PO eventually. I saw it in him. He was having a lot of attendance related problems and he would get frustrated and kind of like tended to look violent."

These kinds of incidents are indicative of the fact that, actually and symbolically,

women postal employees are subjected to the will of male postal employees. These acts of within the facility or involving postal employees who work in the facility are not given the organizational or public attention they deserve. As long as they do not involve mass murders, they are individualized, personalized, and largely taken for granted and perceived as outside of the purview of the organization. Yet, postal employees are the common denominator in all of these incidents. The organization cannot deny this fact. Just recently, her intimate partner, not a postal employee, who suspected her of dating a co-worker, reportedly beat a postal female clerk close to death. Violence as a result of relationships between men and women postal employees in urban facilities is overshadowed by the mass murders that occurred in suburban postal facilities. Further contributing to the mystification of male-female violence in these facilities, a study of violence in the Service, the Califano Report (2000), which was commissioned and paid for by the Service, suggested that violence in the Service is actually less common than in private organizations. However, postal employees and their unions do not believe the results of the Califano report.

Chapter Summary

This discussion examined employee perceptions of interracial, intra-racial, and gender relations in a resegregated urban postal facility. Racial ethnic employees are the numerical majority in the facility. Interracial relationships are shaped by the fact that there are very few white employees on the work floor. White employees are disproportionately represented in administrative and upper echelon positions; thus, racial

ethnic employees who work on the work floor rarely maintain sustained contact with white employees. The perception of this phenomenon varies among racial ethnic employees. Some believe that this is simply due to the fact that whites have higher educational attainment than racial ethnic employees which enables them to move into upper level positions with ease. Other racial ethnic employees believe that racial discrimination also contributes to where employees work. White employees, even when they do not have high levels of education, are given special consideration in details and other kinds of assignments. These opportunities enable whites to work in positions that take them away from the work floor operations and, in many instances, provide them with experiences that enable them to effectively compete for upper level positions. Nevertheless, racial ethnic employees expressed contradictory perceptions of racial relations between employees and supervisors. Some said that there was no difference in the behavior of white and black supervisors. They believe that the authoritarian culture of the organization, despite its rhetoric of treating employees with dignity and respect contributes to a high discipline rate among employees. They also noted that most of the employees and supervisors are racial ethnic employees; there are, however, indications that race relations are problematic in those instances where white and racial ethnic employees maintain sustained contact.

There was reluctance on the part of employees to discuss race relations or to think of race as referring to black-white relations, despite the racial makeup of the facility also includes Hispanics and Asians. In this environment, race seems to come to the fore in interpersonal relations between employees when there is sustained contact between racially different parties. During these instances, people perceive interactions between

them as motivated by racial considerations. However, when parties are the same race, employees have a tendency to perceive similar kinds of interactions as resulting from poor labor-management relations in the organization. Because most of the employees in the facility are racial ethnic minorities and most work areas appear integrated, there are distinct racial patterns among employees.

Although racial ethnic employees appear to have amicable relations between them and most reported having friends and associates of different races most tend to associate and have the most endearing relationships with people of their own racial background. Given this tendency, employees hold strong stereotypical views of the inherent capabilities of other racial groups. They frequently and fluently engage in negative commentaries and racial put-downs of each other even though they claim amicable relations. Despite the organization's diversity initiative, cultural awareness newsletters and training, employees and supervisors utilized diversity rhetoric and language in ways that perpetuate stereotypes and interethnic conflicts.

In the facility, inter-ethnic relations tend to develop and change according to the composition of employees. Relations between them are largely shaped by limited opportunities for advancement and, along with the virtual disappearance of white employees from work floor operations, fear that automation will eliminate jobs in the facility. As Hispanic employees began to join the ranks of black and white postal employees in the facility during the late 1970s, there was a great deal of tension between Hispanic and black employees. There are still some tensions between black and Hispanic employees because the organization created a "special" hiring and promotion initiative for the Hispanics who are underrepresented in the organization. Some of the tensions

between these two groups have waned, at least in the facility, as the number of Asian employees has increased. Tensions between these groups stem from the perception that Asian employees are given more consideration by whites for upper echelon positions because the perception is that Asians are more cooperative workers. Black employees, it follows, have a perception that Asians think they are “better workers” than black workers but are actually “foreigners” who are coming into the organization and getting positions for which they had to fight long battles to obtain. Asian employees have a perception that black employees, who are the numerical majority, engage in racial favoritism by engaging in preferential treatment of black employees.

Black employees are conceptually divided into two classes—middle and working classes. Despite common disadvantages due to racial discrimination and cultural affinities that bind these groups together, they are divided by different levels of education, entry points, and expectations of the organization contributing to contradictory relations between them. The most significant intra-black conflicts are related to lack of respect for authority for supervision, a poor work ethic, and inappropriate attitudes and comportment of working class black employees. African American and Hispanic employees expressed their view that they are pleased to see racial ethnics holding supervisory positions and that these supervisors try to be responsive to their concerns based on racial identification. Conversely they expressed their perception that African American and Hispanic supervisors are not responsive to their concerns. The concerns of each group are largely shaped by the fact that many of the upper level positions are held by white employees and opportunities for upward mobility for lower level employees and initial level supervisors has significantly decreased.

Another impact of resegregation in the facility is that many of the front line supervisors are women that have implications for gender relations. Despite the dramatic increase in female postal employees and their movement into supervisory positions, creating the perception among male employees that the organization is becoming female-centered, the organization is male-centered. Women are largely found in personnel offices, machine-oriented occupations, and working as initial level supervisors where their primary roles continue to connect them to sex-typed jobs. This discussion examined females who work as initial level supervisors because this occupation has most recently undergone a process of resegregation that significantly affects the experience of the women who hold this position. There are no real differences in the pay of men and women postal employees, but the status of supervisory positions has been downgraded and the position is no longer a stepping-stone to higher-level positions. Black female supervisors experience many of the negative effects of resegregation and the powerlessness of tokens in supervisory positions. They perceive their role as that of “baby sitter” and employees, likewise, view them in maternal ways. These women are highly visible public creatures and suffer many of the perceptual tendencies identified by Kanter (1977). Another problematic aspect to the high levels of resegregation among female postal employees that also stems from a male-centered and sexualized work environment where women are disregarded, disrespected, sexualized and, as a result, victimized.

In the resegregated facility, there are many different levels of conflict between employees. Managerialism, the organization’s approach to managing a diverse work force, has proven to be ineffective in achieving a work force where employees treat each

other with “respect and dignity.” The most recent initiative on the part of the organization to manage a diverse work force is the inclusion of a psychological component to entry-level examinations so that they can possibly weed out “troublesome” employees before they are hired. This may be effective in the short-run; however, in the long run the organization must consider the uneven patterns of diversity between districts and within facilities. Ultimately, this study attempts to show that local context matters a great deal in shaping employees perceptions and therefore behaviors on the job. It will continue by examining employee relations in work areas where there is token representation of particular groups.

CHAPTER VIII

OCCUPATIONAL TOKENISM

Introduction

The seminal work on tokenism, a demographic composition theory developed by Kanter (1977) has been extensively utilized to examine the work experiences of women who move into male-dominated occupations. The proportional rarity of tokens, according to Kanter, is associated with perceptual tendencies: higher visibility, contrast or exaggeration of differences, and assimilation involving the use of generalizations about a person's social type, all of which create performance pressures for tokens and have implication for behavior in the organization (1977:210-212). A line of psychologically based research is being developed which examines the experiences of token men in female-dominated work settings (Tsui, et al, 1992; Chattopadhyay, 1999; Williams, 1995; Young & James, 2001). These studies suggest that token majorities are succeeding in female-dominated occupations, and appear less negatively impacted by tokenism than similarly situated women (Benokraitis & Feagin, 1986; Fairhurst & Snavely, 1983; Floge & Merrill, 1985; Fottler, 1976; Johnson & Schulman, 1989; Kadusin, 1976; Ott, 1989; Schreiber, 1979) and may be advantaged by scarcity (Grimm & Stern, 1974; Yoder & Sinnott, 1985; Williams, 1992).

Conversely, some research suggests that token majorities in female-dominated occupations experience many of the negative consequences of the performance pressures women tokens experience such as low job satisfaction, and high turnover rates (Young & Hayes, 2001; Chattopadhyay, 1999; Tsui, et al, 1992). There is also a study that moves

beyond gender to explore the effects of the social status of race and of token differences defined by race (Yoder, Aniakudo & Berendsen, 1996). The researchers found that raters perceived white women tokens as experiencing better social relations, more supportive colleagues, and lower stress than African American women tokens. It is important, in spite of this, to consider that “accurate conclusions about work attitudes and behavior cannot be reached by studying people in token positions, since there may be always an element of compensation or distortion involved” (Kanter, 1977:236).

My study will add to this literature by examining the perceptions of postal employees in various work settings where one or another demographic group is found in token representation. This research suggests, as Kanter implies but did not examine in her influential study of tokens, that visibility due to proportional rarity in the workplace can be advantageous to a group(s), depending on the configuration of demographic variables involved. In this regard, it is important to consider that in multiracial, multiethnic, organizations work groups are not bipartite, as in Kanter’s and most other studies of tokens, but consists of people with a range of social identities. As well, due to configuration of employees in different work areas and variations in occupational statuses in the facility, it is also the case that tokens in one work area may be dominants in another work area or in the organization as a whole. Thus, the following discussion of tokens will examine perceptions of employees as they vary by the intersection of ascribed (race and gender) and achieved (occupational) statuses.

The Race-Gender-Class Hierarchy

In the facility the following demographic compositions prevail: African American represent approximately 45 percent, whites represent 24 percent, Hispanics represent 20 percent, and Asians represent 10 percent of the employees. Due to the racial configuration of employees throughout occupational categories, certain groups are over-represented in different occupational categories. For example, black, Hispanic, and Asian employees are highly represented in clerk craft positions, which include most employees in work floor operations. Black women are over represented in initial level administrative and supervisory positions. White men and women are over represented in mid-level administrative-support specialists and upper echelon professionalial positions. Due to this configuration of employees, on the one hand, many of the employees work in occupations and work areas where most of their equally situated co-workers are the same race, class, and gender. On the other hand, due to this configuration of employees, all demographic groups may find themselves in token representation in certain occupations and work areas; nevertheless they do not experience these tendencies in the same way.

White Token Professionals

When white upper level professionals, administrators, and technical specialists (referred to as ‘professionals’) work outside of administrative offices, they are usually tokens among racial ethnic dominants. In these settings white professionals are highly visible, they are “public creatures” but they do not have low levels of power and opportunities. Due to their high status in the organization, they experience the most positive effects of tokenism. Thus, unlike token women in corporations, the technical

abilities of these professionals are not overshadowed by their physical appearance. In contrast, white professionals are not noticed for their non-ability traits (Kanter, 1977:216) but rather because of the privileges of whiteness (McIntosh, 2003) their technical abilities are taken for granted by other employees. An African American supervisor made the following comments which she thought was indicative of how white professionals, even low level ones, are perceived by postal employees in the facility:

“We don’t have that many white supervisors on our job so I can’t get in to that. I meant at one time we had a white female supervisor on the job. I mean professionals and employees looked at her like the great white hope. I know that is a crazy thing but that is what I’ve heard them say. Professionals said, ‘She’ll come and straighten this place out.’ Yeah, I experienced that first hand. This is what happened. A white supervisor comes in and the upper professionals say, ‘Give this group of people [employees] to the white supervisor. She was a female. [The professionals said] ‘She’ll straighten them out.’ Okay, in return the supervisor....the white supervisor...wrote maybe 5 of them up for any and every little thing and then said, ‘I don’t want to be bothered with them anymore.’ Then upper management gave them back to the supervisor who had them before and believe it or not they [the employees] were worse. Because now they were ready to rebel. You understand. So the white supervisor writes everyone up to solve her problems and the black supervisor has to return to the result of the white supervisor’s actions which was a bunch of angry workers.”

Employees have the perception that they do not respond to professionals differently based on race; however, some suggest that they do. All of the supervisors interviewed for this study stated that they believe white professionals are given more respect by employees. An African American male supervisor, although he noted that there were few white supervisors in the facility, reported what he considers a “regularly occurring situation,” as follows:

“You don’t know how many times workers give me an attitude. I tell them to report here or there. Or maybe I will have to discuss their attendance with them. It doesn’t matter; they get upset and act like I have no right to tell them where to

go or what to do. It gets kind of frustrating sometimes because I have to constantly remind them that I am the supervisor and I tell them what to do and not the reverse. I talk with my buddies about it and they say it is me. I am too nice because I talk to people nicely but then they give me an attitude. I know where these employees are coming from so I don't take it personally but I also saw some of them interact with a white supervisor we had in the area for about a year and they did not give him a hard way to do. When he told an employee to report somewhere, you don't hear a peep from the employees. They do whatever he says but with me, they have to complain, huff and puff, storm away. I have had employees say, 'I'm not going nowhere,' or 'why are you moving me?' I would not lie, I have never seen that happen to a white supervisor or professional."

As suggested by Kanter (1977) white token professionals are highly visible.

However, unlike token women whose mishaps are made public as evidence that they are not capable of high-level positions, the mistakes of token white professionals are, according to the perception of many racial-ethnic employees, handled privately or excused by their superiors. Note the response of an Asian office worker:

"My professional, he was always a little tipsy [intoxicated] on the job. He would go around the place reeking of alcohol and no one ever said anything. He would be having these power meetings and would be so drunk that everyone had to know but they didn't do anything until he was so drunk at a [name of area work area deleted] meeting that they couldn't ignore it. They claimed he had to go to EAP but I don't know if he actually did because he didn't stop drinking but then he got a lateral transfer so I don't know what happened to him."

An African American female clerk made a similar comment regarding her white professional:

"If she had a bump on her lip, she would take [a day] off. If she had a headache, she would take off. What kind of business is this? It was just hypocritical because if her subordinates were late or absent she would get very upset. Who knows what they said to her behind closed doors but it was like hush-hush. I heard she was put on restriction because of her attendance problems but it had went on for years and years before that happened. With the clerks, if something happened, they were talking about it all over [the work area.] and another thing,

they don't give clerks the kind of chances they give professionals. If she was a clerk and not white she would have been fired, instead she was promoted.”

As well as being protected by their managers, according to racial ethnic employees, these employees are extremely private about their on the job and personal experiences. Token white professionals are enveloped in a cloak of privacy. Most racial ethnic employees reported that they knew very little about the white professionals they worked under. They noted that these professionals spoke openly about mundane matters such as the birth of a child, death of a loved one, family illness, or move to a new home but said very little if anything about their personal lives. Racial ethnic employees said that most of what they knew about their professionals was those things that were observable.

To some extent, the privacy afforded and utilized among white token professionals may stem from the fact that they, similar to token women in corporate settings, are expected to represent all white professionals and not just themselves (Kanter, 1977:215). They are “forced into the position of keeping secrets and carefully contriving a public performance” (Kanter, 1977:214) and try to maintain a public stance that is above reproach. Thus, their public dignity is rarely violated because, although they are highly visible, they are also private showpieces whose mistakes and shortcomings are covered up or excused by their similarly situated professionals. In addition, by virtue of the level of autonomy they have in their positions, they have great deal of leeway to keep their mishaps and divergences private even in this highly public work environment. Racial-ethnic employees believe that upper echelon professionals who are primarily white assist lower level white professionals in this regard by allowing them *carte blanche* to create work schedules and duties that accommodate their personal needs. Thus, unlike

token women in corporations, when white professionals do “stumble” they are not perceived as representing “all” white professionals. The power of whiteness in the facility contributes to a belief that individual white professionals who “mess up” on the job are exceptions to the rule rather than the rule. For example, a Latina with 15 years in the Service gave the following account of an incident that occurred:

“The white female employee was dating the white professional. They acted like husband and wife on the job but they were both married to other people on the outside. Every time there was something ‘special’ to do or they needed an acting supervisor she was the person chosen even though she had less seniority than most of the people in the [area]. Even when she wasn’t officially an acting supervisor, she was going around the place telling people what to do and acting like she was a supervisor, with his permission of course. It was sickening. I think she was the only white person in the office and all of us were working our asses off and here she was sitting in the office with the professional. Day in and day out this went on. I’m not kidding. All morning they had breakfast while she supposedly did paperwork for him...just chatting, chatting, chatting, laughing, laughing, laughing. All afternoon they had lunch with the same chatting and laughing going on and all the employees could see them through the office window. That was funny. They put a window in the professional’s office to watch us, the employees. I mean literally, they had maintenance come in and cut a window in the wall and install glass so they could watch us but that was before [the white woman’s name deleted] got in good with the professional. But little did they know, we were watching them and that was their downfall. They were just too chummy and too touchy feely with each other. After about two years of this, she got a promotion to supervisor then the two idiots, mind you they were both married on the outside, went to an out of state training with several employees and instead of them having the sense enough to keep it on the down low, they were seen going in and out of each other’s room at all times of day and night. Shortly after that a supervisor, a black woman, who had more seniority as a supervisor and more education than [white supervisor’s name deleted] put in a complaint that she was bypassed for the acting position in the [area] because of her race and she had the records to show that every time there was an opening the white supervisor was given the detail and paid higher level. Well, that did it for them. Both of them were demoted to obscure stations and tours and I heard the professional of all professionals was fit to be tied [upset] but the funny thing is that everybody knew what was going on before it hit the fan. If it was two of us [people of color] carrying on like that they would have put an end to the shenanigans sooner rather than later but it could have went on forever if it wasn’t for the complaint because they [professionals] knew all along.”

The white manager and supervisor, it was reported by another professional, “should have known better than to behave in such a cavalier way.” When a white professional was asked if he knew about the incident, he said, “Shameful, that’s all I have to say. Period.” Quite typical, there was no indication among employees who knew about the incident that the white professional represented “white professionals” but rather an individual professional who lost his sense of discretion.

One negative aspect of high visibility that white professional are subjected to is that they are blamed for problems that occur in the facility and in the organization as a whole, quite similar to that of token women in the corporation (Kanter, 1977). This sentiment stems from the perception among racial-ethnic and work floor employees that white administrators and professionals make decisions as though “they forgot how it is to be a worker on the work floor.” For example, an African American postal employee in the facility said she was so impressed with the organizational changes the Postmaster General initiated that she wanted to give him a hug. The picture of her hugging the Postmaster General was featured in a postal newsletter. When the employee who reported the incident was asked what she thought about it, she poignantly captured the resentment many racial-ethnic employees feel towards white token professionals. She said:

“I’d like to know where she works at. It amazes me when I find people who actually say that they are happy and they like the job they do in the Post Office. I’d like to know why can’t I be one of those people. I’d love to get to that point. But I don’t think that the Postmaster General should come near me because I’d have a few things to say and he would not want me in a picture with him in the paper. [I would say:] Why have you allowed some of these things to go on. Are

you aware that there are problems that exist which are blatant, hard-core, pure crap going on? Why can't you make the decision to privatize or not? Who's making decisions to allow certain people to be in certain positions? How much do you know? Is anybody answering that 800 [anonymous complaint] hotline? What do you do with that stuff [information from hotline]? I want to know how can they just beat you down [black supervisors] and leave you swinging in the breeze and expect you to get the job done? I want to know how do they [white upper echelon professionals] feel about people who come to work everyday and do their job and get their behinds kicked? How do they react to employees who have problems and make them aware of those problems and make them aware of their concerns and they keep on going to their nice solid offices with their big wooden desks and their million plagues. They come out the wood work every six months and come on the work floor and don't even acknowledge that you're standing there because they have a bigger plan in mind. Maybe that is true, but they never come to ask our opinion before they make changes and it's an age-old problem that the Post Office has."

These negative sentiments towards white professionals are associated with the effect their decisions have on employees' work lives. Token white professionals in the facility are not perceived as causing problems because they are powerless or not capable of performing their jobs due to their physical characteristics, in contrast to the perception of token women in corporate settings (Kanter, 1977). Rather, racial ethnic employees' perception of token white professionals is that they are the "movers and shakers" who make decisions that "make their work lives harder." They are, as well, perceived as the initiators of policies which "don't make sense" on the work floor. Because the token white professionals view themselves as symbols of organizational professionalism, unlike token women in Kanter's study (1977:220), they are under no performance pressures to try to become socially responsive to the negative views employees have of them as organizational leaders.

Within the USPS, white postal employees are the numerical majority nationally. However, in the facility where they are the numerical minority, they tend to act as majority group members; they control the culture of the work environment because they make or are involved in the creation and implementation of postal policies. Like tokens, on an individual level, white professionals are concerned with performance evaluations because they contribute to merit increases in pay and to more opportunities to move up in the organization. However, like members of the majority or dominant group as described by Kanter (1977), they are not particularly concerned that poor performance of individuals will have a negative impact on future opportunities for members of their social category. Because these employees behave as majority/dominant group members, they experience many other positive effects of high status groups, although they are the numerical minority in the facility.

First, in the facility, interactions between groups are largely shaped by assumptions made about the culture, competence, and behavior of the master status occupant (Jackson, Thoits, & Taylor, 1995) rather than to the individual's ability to perform a specific task (Hughes, 1945; Kanter, 1977). Unlike tokens who have the perception that their performance ratings are based, at least in part, on their master status and not their actual achievements (Jackson, et al, 1995), white token professionals do not believe that their performance ratings are based on their "master status" but on their actual achievements on the job. Racial-ethnic employees believe that white token professionals do not have to put extra effort, compared to racial ethnic professionals, to have their achievements noticed because most, if not all, of their superiors are also white. Second, token white professionals are not forced into playing limited and caricatured

roles in the organization because their organizational roles are similar to the stereotyped assumptions made about members of their social type. Unlike tokens, stereotypes about white token professionals are not related to their non-work related roles. The most significant stereotype that racial-ethnic employees have about white professionals is that they “manipulate” objects and organizational resources, which is what they actually do in their occupational roles. Third, very similar to majority group members, white token professionals, according to the perception of racial-ethnic employees, tend to exaggerate their own commonalities (Kanter, 1977), in effect excluding members of the numerical majority. This is indicative in the following comment made by an African American male with 20 years in the Service:

“White professionals stick together. They support each other’s views. Even if they don’t agree with another white professional, they will not say it in public and most of the time, from what I’ve seen, they overly support each other. They say ‘that’s a wonderful idea’ or ‘that’s brilliant’ to everything they say. They never say that a white professional is wrong or anything like that. They never say something one of them said doesn’t make sense. I mean they may say it to each other in private but never, ever, in meetings. In meetings it more or less the whites brigade.”

Related to this tendency to exaggerate their commonalities, white token professional often view racial ethnic managers as less competent. A white male professional said:

It’s embarrassing. Some of these people can’t speak right. I don’t mean to sound like everybody has to speak perfect English because there is no such thing. We all speak English incorrectly but some of these professionals [off tape he noted they are black] don’t know how to speak. Sometimes you can’t even make sense of what they are saying. They just ramble on. Another problem that I notice is that in meetings they don’t know what to say out of their mouths in a supposed professional environment. To make matters worse, you should see some of the stuff they write that they call reports. They can’t write sentences.

Forget about subject verb agreement. They don't have a clue. They can't spell. It's embarrassing. How can you run an organization with stuff like this going on?"

Finally, another positive effect of their token status is that unlike racial ethnic and women tokens vis-à-vis white men, white token professionals are not reminded of their differences from the numerical majority through jokes or exclusion from the kinds of informal activities that have an impact on their work or life chances. In the Service, the reverse is more accurate. An African American female professional said that most of the meetings she attends are facilitated by white upper level professionals, administrators, and specialists who know each other, spend time together on and off the job, and who make jokes at the expense of racial ethnic supervisors and employees.

She said:

"Yeah, most of them are buddies. Everybody knows that. They have their husbands and wives clubs [associate off the job with each other] and their dinner parties and we're not invited but we hear about them because they don't make it a secret. They talk openly about them like they want us to know we're not included. It kind of feels that way in meetings too because they act like they know more about the PO than anyone else and they hardly let you complete a sentence before they jump in and try to make it seem like you don't know what you're talking about or they try to piggy back off what you said to show that they can top you. I know you're going to think this strange but they try to act like they are more committed to the growth of the organization which is just not true but they always point to the employees, most of them are black, and how they are irresponsible and hurting the public image of the PO. Sometimes they make jokes about the employees and make it seem like they are not talking about racial issues but it feels that way sometimes. I mean, excuse me, but I am black, too. Of course I feel like they are making fun of me. But they don't talk about what happened out in the Midwest where that white postal employee shot up the place and killed all those people. They certainly don't make jokes about that and you better not make a joke out of it either!"

In sum, the combined effects of their race and organizational status increase the positive effects that token professionals experience in the facility. However, white female professionals are more likely than white men to experience some negative aspects

of being tokens in the facility. White females are underrepresented in the organization. In the district, they are more likely than other employees to work in mid-level administrative positions in the district office and window services rather than in mail processing facilities. In the facility, there are very few white women on the work floor; most work as administrators and specialists. Some of these women have a perception that they are affected by their gender and their race.

Due to gender discrimination, white female professionals have the perception that they have limited opportunities to move up in the organization. This may not be an inaccurate perception because organizationally entry-level management positions, EAS grades 11 through 14, are overwhelmingly female. White women held 62.47 percent of these positions in fiscal years 2000 through 2002 (GAO, 2003:12), despite their underrepresentation in the organization. Structurally and personally, white female professionals in the facility have a perception that due to gender discrimination they have to contend with sexist behavior on the part of men who predominate in upper level positions. A white female executive said the following:

“I worked hard to get to this position. I did what I had to do. I didn’t do well in school but when I started in the PO I realized what I wanted to do right away and I set my sights on that. I was always a good writer so that helped a lot to open doors for me. And I used every position I had as a stepping-stone to the next. I can’t even tell you how many professional training classes I’ve been to. I didn’t sleep with anyone to get my job but that is what people think about women in the PO. No matter how competent we are, people think you slept your way to the top. I remember being the only women in professional meetings. Sometimes men would try to blame area for certain problems and embarrass me. They forget that we are colleagues. I would call them up and tell them about problems or oversights that come out of their offices but they didn’t do the same with me so after a while I started playing the game their way so they could see how it feels. Then some of them started calling me with issues so we could take care of things

before they blow up in our faces. I worked with them but some men just think women belong at home. What can I say?"

White female token professionals experience many of the job performance pressures Kanter observed among token women in the corporation (1977). White female professionals in the facility believe that they "have to put in extra effort" to have their achievements acknowledged as due to their efforts. Like token women in Kanter's study, these women also have a perception that they have to resist "stereotypes" of women as mothers or "as women who sleep their way to the top." They noted that in meetings men often tell jokes or make sexist remarks about women but try to infer that they are not talking about the women in their presence. These women also indicated that they believe they are excluded from "the good ole boys club;" however, black employees believe that white women have a racial advantage. They are considered "insiders" who are given the information and opportunities necessary to move up in the organization.

Similar to the "token stress" experienced by elite black leaders in the United States (Jackson, et al, 1995:543) white female professionals have the perception that in addition to having the burden of having to show greater competence because they are women, because they are white they feel a sense of isolation in situations where most or all of their co-workers and employees are black, Hispanic, and Asian. White women token professionals have a perception that they are surrounded by people who are "culturally" different from themselves and, like token women in Kanter's study, they believe they must relinquish aspects of their own identity in order to minimize uncomfortable interactions between them and their racial ethnic co-workers and

employees. In effect, they have the perception that being “white” in a predominantly racial ethnic environment is “stressful” because they have the dual responsibility to be sensitive to racial issues and work cooperatively with racial ethnic co-workers, many of whom believe they got their job because they are white women, and at the same time they must get racial ethnic employees to be productive workers.

White Token Clerks

Similar to white female token professionals, white token clerks consistently reported that they experience negative effects of “being white and surrounded by people of color;” in effect, they are the “few whites among the many blacks.” Some white token clerks said that black, Hispanic, and Asian employees have a different sense of humor and talk about things that they can’t relate to. They said they talk to these employees but were “not necessarily friends on or off the job.” Similar to female token supervisors, several white clerks said they feel “alienated” by being surrounded by people of color so they tend to just do their job and go home. Some white token clerks reported that they believe that racial-ethnic work floor supervisors and professionals engage in favoritism that is an advantage to racial-ethnic employees. A white female clerk with 10 years in the Service who reports that she “generally gets along with her co-workers,” said:

“I’ve seen it over and over again where a black or Spanish supervisor will do favors for certain same race employees. I don’t know for sure but it seems like they take them under their wing and they are given breaks all the time. Sometimes I think it is just natural that people help their own kind so I don’t take it personally. I just do my job so when the stuff hits the fan, I’m clear.”

Similarly, a white male mail processor said:

“Hey, I don’t take it personally but they look out for their own kind. Everybody does that. Whites look out for whites, black looks out for blacks, Hispanics look out for Hispanics. I’ve been here for a long time and I don’t have problems on the job but I know that I can’t depend on any of them to look out for me. Look at me. I am white and that is what they see so I am the last one they will do a favor for. That’s just the way it goes. “

Token white clerks tend to work more or less cooperatively with racial-ethnic employees; however, they believe that they are “different” from their co-workers. Thus, many white token clerks only speak to their racial ethnic co-workers when they have to relay work related matters. When a white male clerk was asked about this issue he said that the race of his co-workers does not matter to him personally but that he knows a few white clerks who believe that the racial-ethnic clerks are “beneath” them. When asked what they meant, he said:

“Well, some whites believe that most of the employees on the work floor are “low lives.” I’ve heard them talk about how a lot of the employees are drinking and using drugs. I mean they say the women are loose and the men are just sleeping around. They also talk about how these employees are irresponsible and don’t come to work. Some of them are loud and rude, that’s what they say. That’s why they don’t associate with them [racial ethnic employees].”

White token clerks also have a perception that racial ethnic employees believe they have allegiances with the “white upper echelon.” However, some white clerks believe that similar to racial ethnic clerks, they have limited opportunity to advance in the organization because they do not have the educational background necessary in the modern bureaucracy. As members of the working class, several white clerks reported that they deliberately include themselves in work-related conversations with racial-ethnic employees so that they know that they are “oppressed” too but believe that there is an

ambiance of mistrust between them and the racial ethnic supervisors and employees they work with.

Although white tokens clerk report some negative effect of being tokens, their racial ethnic coworkers believe that they experience some positive effects of being tokens. These employees have the perception that professionals and supervisors, most of whom are racial-ethnic group members, give more regard to white clerks because they are perceived as being more responsible workers. Many racial ethnic employees believe that because of this perception of whites clerks they are sometimes given opportunities that they do not deserve. In effect, the power of whiteness in our society beholds white postal workers with virtues that their token representation does not diminish but, in fact, may enhance.

Employees of color consistently mentioned their perception that the work ethic of white clerks is no different from that of other workers—“some try to get over and do as little work as possible,” and “some try to do the best they can at whatever job they do.” However, several employees mentioned that most supervisors often give white employees more leeway than they do other employees. An Asian male employee with 20 years in the Service gave the following report:

“I worked with four men, two white, a black and a Hispanic in an area. The foreman used to come by the area to chat with us and see how things were going every night. I mean, literally the professional would acknowledge the white men for the work we did. He would just say, ‘Hey, [name deleted] You’re doing a fantastic job here. You and [name of other white employee deleted].’ It was like the rest of us weren’t there. Now some of it could have been because they seniors in the area but we, the ones who were overlooked did all the backbreaking work that went on in the area. I mean we would be working and working and working and the two white guys would be talking to each other or to the foreman and he

never acknowledged us. It was like we didn't exist but we were doing the work. I just said this is bullshit and got out of there.”

In addition to a tendency for supervisors to give white clerks more leeway, an African American female clerk with 10 year in the Service reported that professionals and supervisors also pay more attention to the utterances of white employees. She recounted the following incident:

“What happened was I told my supervisor that we were processing these actions that didn't have to be done because we never initiated it [the action] in the first place so there was no need to reverse it. She said, ‘Don't worry yourself about this stuff. If that is the way they want it done, so be it. I'm gonna tell you something for your own good. Don't make waves.’ So I just said, ‘Forget about it,’ but I was talking to a white employee in another [area] about it because our [areas] worked together on these [actions] so I told her that the step wasn't necessary and she said, ‘You have a good point. That makes sense.’ And the next thing I knew she spoke with her [white] supervisor about it, they wrote up a big letter to whoever, and the white employee was given an award and shortly after that a promotion to supervisor because of her idea. I was upset about it but by then the supervisor who told me to mind my business, so to speak, was no longer around. I told the white employee congratulations on the award and she pretended that she didn't remember it was my idea but that's the way things go.”

Employees also have a perception that supervisors often overlook the misbehavior of white employees, despite their token status and high visibility on the work floor. On the one hand an African American supervisor reported that some of her white employees do not put a great deal of effort into their work but otherwise follow the rules and know their rights so there is very little she can do in terms of correcting their behavior. On the other hand, racial ethnic employees have the perception that supervisors of color fear that any corrective actions (discipline) towards white employees that is not initiated by a white supervisor or supported by a white professional will create problems for the supervisors.

For example, an African American office worker complained that white employees and disabled veterans are given special considerations. She said:

“Now you have white supervisors who will overlook what they [disabled veterans] do because of the way they came in. If you bang up [absent] or you’re reading a magazine, they will reprimand you for that. They will want to write you up if you take a day off before or after your layoff days. They want to do things like that but with the retarded white guys they can do the same thing and they won’t say anything. Their [supervisor’s] reasoning is there is something wrong with them. I have had a woman sitting next to me cutting out coupons and the supervisor never once said anything to that employee. She was a white woman. If I was cutting out coupons, they would have said something to me. I have seen them do that in there. Why, I do not know. I’ve seen a situation where one of the Kennedy boys [reference is made to ex-President Kennedy’s initiative to provide federal jobs to Vietnam disabled veterans] was found walking around the building during a fire drill. He had magazines in his bag that he was taking home with him. That’s stealing and he didn’t get fired. If it was a black employee, they would have been fired.”

An Asian woman clerk complained:

“I worked with this white woman. She was the only white person in the work area. She quietly did her work and rarely got involved in group conversations or gossip so she was nice in that regard but she didn’t do any work. She worked slowly. Sometimes people complained that she wasn’t working but the supervisors never said anything to her. It was as though they were afraid. They never said anything to her but sometimes they were very mean to the rest of us. They would yell and scream for the littlest thing and when this [white] woman’s work got backed up, they distributed it to all of us so we had to do it but they never said anything to her and it wasn’t fair.”

Employees have the perception that white token clerks experience some positive and negative consequences of their race and status in the facility. Due to racial stereotypes and discrimination, racial ethnic employees experience the most negative effects of tokenism. However, their experiences, similar to that of white tokens, tends to vary based on occupational status.

Racial Ethnic Token Professionals

Due to the configuration of employees and the overrepresentation of whites in upper echelon positions, when racial ethnics hold high level positions or work in professional and semi-professional offices they are tokens because most of these positions continue to be held by whites. Thus, the number of racial ethnic employees in these settings decreases as you move up the occupational hierarchy. In semi-professional and professional settings in the facility, racial ethnic group professionals experience many of the high visibility performance pressures Kanter suggests in her study of token women in corporate settings (1977). Racial ethnic professionals are highly visible because of their social type, have a “burden of representing the category and not just themselves” (Kanter, 1977:214) and their technical abilities are overshadowed by their physical appearance (Kanter, 1977:216).

As token representatives of their racial group, many racial ethnic professionals believe that people think they got their jobs to fill affirmative action mandates and that they are fundamentally not qualified for their positions. These professionals expressed their view that they have a responsibility to themselves and to members of their race to show that they are competent in their positions and go the “extra mile” to do so. In effect, they believe they have to show “greater competence” in order to appear competent (Jackson, et al, 1995). Most of these employees have the perception that their technical abilities, similar to token women in corporate settings, are overshadowed by their physical appearance (Kanter, 1977:215). However, racial ethnic professionals do not experience performance pressures in the same ways.

Non-Asian professionals have the perception that managers view Asian American professionals more favorably than similarly situated African American and Hispanic Americans professionals. Several white professionals confirmed this view. They said that Asian employees, clerks and professionals, have a better work ethic and are more competent in their area of expertise than blacks and Hispanics. When asked for an example of what they meant, they were either reluctant to give an example or said they did not have a particular incident to portray this phenomenon. A white female professional said, for instance: "It's just a feeling."

In contrast to Asian professionals, African American and Hispanic Americans professionals have the perception that their white colleagues and superiors view them as "exceptional" members of their group. As noted by a sociologist, who was keenly aware of group relations in organizations, "Individual Negroes are sometimes accepted as good fellows, although the price may be that they allow themselves to be considered exceptions, different from and superior to the common run of Negroes; a definition intended to be flattering to the individual, but derogatory to Negroes as a group" (Hughes, 1946:115). This sentiment is still relevant today. Yelvington notes that employees in multiracial work settings "may relate to other workers from another ethnic group one-on-one but distinguish between those they relate to and other members of the group who possess the hated characteristics" (1995:155). This sentiment is evident in the following exchange recounted by an African-American female professional who had over 35 years of service. She said:

"It was a week long, mail processing, initial level supervisor training....I was the only female and I was the only black person in the class....The funny thing is that

most of the participants were from the New England area and I think there was one person that was from the Bronx and I was the only one from New York [Manhattan]. There were people from Massachusetts, Connecticut, etc. etc. So, one evening after dinner, we had dinner provided for us at the site and then after dinner we would have a cocktail or whatever and this guy....I forgot where he was from...New England....he said, 'You know [name deleted] you've changed my view of black people. I always had such a negative view of black people. Not all people are the same.' I think he had one too many [drinks] or he wouldn't have admitted that. It was an odd thing but it took courage to even say that. I was very naive at the time. I didn't have a problem with it. Hey, I'm glad that I showed him that people are people. It doesn't matter what color you are or what your background is....you are going to find good and bad people among all groups of people."

This woman indicated she was flattered by the comment of the white professional because she thought he was "being friendly" to her but that she now knows that his comments were derogatory. Her experience is not uncommon among some racial ethnic professionals. A Hispanic professional with 20 years in the Service recounted a similar experience in which he was told he was an exception to his race, as follows:

"Once I was working in this area with a group of black workers and this old white man asked me about mailing an international package. I worked the area for a long time so I knew the ins and outs of [international] mailing requirements so he asked and I helped him get his package ready. He didn't know what he was doing so I wrapped the package, told him how to tape it up and weighted it, told him the postage rate. The next day he came by the section and told me 'thank you.' It wasn't necessary for him to come back to thank me again because I was just doing my job so I thought it was nice of him to do that. But then he comes out of the blue and says, "You're different from your kind." At first I didn't know what he meant so I asked him and he told me, 'You're a smart and kind man. Not like your kind.'"

Still other black and Hispanic professionals reported that they were never told but have a "feeling" that they are viewed as "exceptional" members of their racial group by white professionals. However, several of them mentioned that the only way in which the "feel

exceptional” is because they work “twice as hard” as their white colleagues and believe that their efforts are “undervalued” by their “superiors.” An African American male with 22 years in the Service said:

“We get the work and they get the credit. Everybody knows how things go around here. I worked my tail off to get promotions. I am probably going no further because I am beginning to think about retirement but I work my tail off to get here and what do I see? The same crap going on up here was going on down there. Whites get the credit and we do the work and it gets more blatant, the higher up you do. I hear professionals say the ideas of whites are “exceptional” or “brilliant” and rest assured they’re the ones who get the nice bonuses but when I say something or the other black in the area says something that I think is worthy of consideration, my professional says, “Oh, let me get back to you on that,” and that’s the end of it until you present your view again. And that may turn into saying it again and again without it being given any serious consideration. But I tell you, a white man or woman says something and they make a big deal out of it and it’s just sickening sometimes but you know where it is coming from so you have to not take it personally but sometimes it’s hard not to.”

All racial ethnic professionals have a perception that they have experienced discrimination in the facility. However, Hispanic and Asian professionals are more likely than black employees, who are over represented in the facility, to work in areas where they are tokens. Hispanic and Asian token professionals reported that they have experienced racial discrimination; they noted that both white and blacks have engaged in behaviors that have disadvantaged members of their respective groups. In common, Hispanic and Asian token professionals have the perception that they are perceived as “immigrants” although all said they were born and/or “raised” in the United States. Thus, they are perceived as coming from an “alien” culture and, more importantly, taking jobs away from black and white employees. The latter sentiment seems to have been exacerbated, as indicated earlier, by the USPS Hispanic Program initiative that has

created a special emphasis program to increase the presence of Hispanics in all levels of the organization. The rapid rate of employment of Asians in the Service has also contributed to a belief among other racial ethnic employees that Asians are “invading” the Service and taking opportunities away from them. For example, Asian Americans “comprise 2.6 percent of the civilian labor force. Oddly, they are over-represented in the federal service (3.5 percent) and in the U.S. Postal Service (4.3 percent)” (Kim & Lewis, 1994). Despite the representation of these groups in the organization as a whole, in the facility they are more likely than other racial groups to find themselves in the numerical minority in areas outside of the work floor.

Both Hispanic and Asian token professionals have the perception that they are “outsiders” in the facility, particularly when they hold high-level positions. Several Hispanic professionals said they found it “incredibly” hard to get promotions. They indicated that they experienced discrimination from black employees and white employees. Many of them moved up in the organization when educational credentials were not as important as on the job skills and knowledge. However, they indicated that although they spoke English, their accent was a significant barrier to advancement in the organization. Asian professionals, with somewhat higher levels of education than Hispanic employees, said that they found it “somewhat” hard to move up in the organization. Both groups have the perception that among professionals, they are repeatedly reminded of their difference through “derogatory comments about members of their racial group, as well as through “jokes, interruptions, exclusion from formal activities, and various ‘loyalty’ tests” (Jackson, et al, 1995). Both groups indicated that

discrimination by white postal employees was much more subtle than discrimination by black employees. An Asian female professional said that her black female manager “often treated me different” from the other employees in her work area. She said that she filed an EEO complaint and won her case but the manager continued to speak to her in disrespectful ways that embarrassed her in front of her colleagues and did not provide her with information that was disclosed to others. She felt “trapped in a more militant stance than they might otherwise take” (Kanter, 1977:236). For example, she said that when she first came into the work area she tried to be friendly, open to suggestions, and supportive of the goals of her unit but after several years of differential treatment, she finds herself responding in ways that are uncharacteristic. She said,

“They thought I was some kind of Asian exotic little thing who would put up with all kind of nonsense but that is not me. I was born and raised here and I went to school with a lot of blacks and Spanish people so I am not new to this scene. I show them that Asians aren’t these passive little things who don’t speak up for their rights. That is not me.”

Asian and Hispanic professionals have the perception that the black numerical majority have more opportunities for upward mobility and are “insiders” because the facility is “culturally black.” In spite of this, many black professionals believe that they experience more discrimination than Hispanic and Asian employees in the facility. African Americans female supervisors, the vast majority of supervisors in the facility, experience the powerlessness of tokens due to their double-minority status in the larger society; they are members of two historically disadvantaged groups--women and blacks.

Further contributing to this dilemma, black women are, paradoxically, over-represented at the local level (in urban facilities) but tokens on a national level.

Collectively these statuses contribute to black women experiencing many of the psychological traumas of tokens; a contributing factor is stereotyping of their supervisory role. Black female supervisors are perceived as organizational “mothers” or “caretakers.” In other words, stereotypes are maintained when there are only a representative few of a particular category, as suggested by Kanter; but they are also maintained when there is an abundance of a demographic group. Contributing to this phenomenon is our societal view of mothers, which tends to vary by race. From the days of slavery, sterilization of black women, the black matriarch debate promulgated by Moynihan (1965), to the present debate on welfare mothers, it is apparent that white mothers are not viewed as derogatorily as black mothers even when both are subordinate in the home and in workplaces. This context bears upon black female postal supervisors and greatly influences expectations and perceptions of them as well as their behavior on the job. Many black female supervisors are in the ambiguous and unenviable position of trying to conform to or overcome the stereotypical role of caretaker or “mammy.”

Many black female supervisors expressed their feelings about the role they play in postal organizations in both positive and negative terms. For example, many of the black women supervisors expressed their belief that their employees see them as “mothers,” and some seem to take pride in this perception. An African American supervisor gave a list of all the roles she plays with her employees:

“I’m like the Mom, the sister they didn’t have.....where when they need to get smacked on the butt, you smack them and send them off. You’re like the dumping ground where they can just dump all this junk that they had going on in them for so long and maybe nobody else would listen to them.”

Another supervisor noted that at least 5 hours each workday is spent, as follows:

“Is listening to one hundred....there used to be a TV show...what was it?...A Million Stories in the Naked City. Well, they don’t have nothing on the Post Office.....Every day...the same people...here they come. We have some employees that never open their mouths. They come to work, they do their job...you never know they are there. But I have 8 that are going to give you a run for your money every day. Everyday. You have some people who want to vent about stuff that happens in their private life. They want to vent about stuff where they have the answer their self but they just want to say it to somebody. And of course, because I’m the trusted, no nonsense, listen to you until I can’t take it anymore supervisor...they tell me all kinds of stuff.”

Managing the work is superimposed with managing the workers in ways which have very little to do with getting the work done, which makes black female supervisors, from an organizational perspective, ideal for the position. As stated earlier, the organization benefits from this arrangement and is not likely to make changes that would require supervisors to supervise instead of mother the workers. It is a known but tacit understanding among these supervisors that “mothering” is a part of the role of supervisor, at least for women. The degree of mothering inherent in the position is evident in the following ironic comment:

“This is really going to be funny. I have, let’s say, and hour and a half worth of paperwork. That includes man-hour counts, that includes productivity counts, that includes attendance. That’s about an hour and a half worth of paperwork. The other part of my job includes safety where I have to make sure that the area is safe and the area is secure and that equipment is good and if there is enough equipment and good housekeeping where we have spills and hazardous situations where people can fall and hurt themselves and the whole nine yards. Okay, let’s say that’s part of my job. That is an all day, on-going process....I’d say, every ten minutes on the hour I’m going to be checking for these things. They incorporate it in me, I just automatically look for these things. The rest of my time comes to dealing with people and their problems. Okay, so I would say three hours to the job and making sure it gets done and the other five hours to the people...listening to their wants...listening to their needs...hearing their concerns.”

While some black women supervisors take pride in and conform to the mother

role, characterized as role encapsulation by Kanter (1977), other black female supervisors resist conforming to the stereotypical role but nevertheless are viewed as “bad mothers” which has a negative impact on relations between them and their employees. However, some of the “good/bad mother” behaviors of supervisors are facilitated by the authoritarian, rules-driven, structure of the postal hierarchy. Supervisors make decisions for employees at every step of the work process; the result is that employees sometimes act like children. A black female supervisor noted her discontent with the parent-child, or maternalistic, context of the Service. She said:

“Yeah, you treat them like children and they keep waiting for you to beat them. Attention is attention. You beat a child and they want you to keep beating them. You know what I’m saying, you treat them like adults and they’ll start acting like adults.”

Another said:

“Okay, it sounds like I might treat them like children but the concerns they have are more petty. You hear people say, ‘Well, you know it’s hard. It’s hard to work and have kids.’ (I say) ‘Is that why you been showing up one day a week for the last three weeks? Because you have kids?’ What? We have women who have worked for plantations who had a baby in the morning and went back in the field at night. Sometimes I can’t believe them. That’s stretching it a little bit far, you know, okay, but women have always had children and worked, especially in the black community so don’t stand there and tell me you have kids and how hard it is and nobody understands. Of course people understand but your momma did it for you. Why are you not willing to give up the same for the kids you have.”

It follows, on the other hand, that employees expressed resentment against supervisors who treat them like children, and they also acknowledged the infantilizing aspects of postal employment. When asked what the bad characteristics of supervisors are, a female clerk said:

“The worst supervisor would have to be a black woman, Ms. P. She had to be the

worst. It wasn't so much how she treated me but how she treated other people. I can't see anybody doing the things she did. It was like she thrived on it. It gave her strength. I just feel like we are all human beings and no one in there is your child. I treat my child a certain way but I would not treat people in the PO like they are my child. I have no right to reprimand you because I am in authority. I can speak to you but I won't degrade you. I won't say reprimand because there may come a time where I have to but I will speak to you one on one, it would never be within a group. I would not degrade you. So, she would have to be the worst."

The ways in which black female supervisors respond to role encapsulation and their employees stems from the relative powerlessness they experience in their positions. Supervisory positions have increasingly become more powerless as the structure of the organization has become more hierarchical since the reorganization of 1992. However, the psychological impact and the frustrations of black women's powerlessness in supervisory positions are significantly different from the experiences of white male supervisors. The impact of black women's powerlessness on the job, I believe, is intensified by its replication of their experiences outside of the organization where, collectively, they are women who can not shield themselves from the subordinate status of being black in America and all that follows from that. Below are comments made by black female supervisors, which are indicative of this duality of powerlessness. The result is a complex range of emotions which alienates these supervisors from the organization due to their sense of helplessness as well as their identification with the plights of their subordinates:

"[A] lot of time the employee will talk to a front-line supervisor and the worst part about it is that the supervisor can't help them. We are not allowed to give a person a day off. We have to go in and tell our superiors why they should give someone a day off but that means we have to make a case for employees by

telling their business and it's just so unnecessary because they are only going to sign out people they want to sign out. But we have to make pleas for employees so confidentiality does not exist in the PO.”

“I think it goes with the territory. I think that it does. Okay, the people need to feel that you at least care...or that you will at least listen...if I can't do nothing else for them. Okay, and they have to work for me everyday and I depend on them to get the job done. At the very least I owe them is to listen and for about 99% of them, that's all I can do is listen.”

“I don't think it is fair because at [the station] we are [a block away from] the swing room. They have to go all the way to the swing room and then go downstairs to have coffee. Before coffee was 15 minutes and the swing room was right there....now they have to walk a whole block and then go to the swing room and get on line to get coffee...You can't do all of that in 15 minutes....It makes no sense. First of all, someone [an executive or manager] should come to the floor, say to themselves, 'Coffee,' then walk, in a safe manner to the swing room. They would have to take at least 20 [minutes]. Okay, nothing is carved in stone...you know that the station is made like this so then allow the 20 minutes, regardless of whether the boss is on the floor. You get more done this way.”

As the last quote indicates, black female supervisors do not want to be viewed by higher level officials, who are predominantly white, as sympathetic to their black employees because they believe this would imply that they are not good supervisors. Thus, they covertly give their employees the breaks that they feel employees deserve, which is typical of supervisors. In this manner, they achieve a balance between the accommodation of workers, on the one hand, and management on the other. However, the price that black female supervisors pay for these kinds of behaviors is a great deal of work-related stress. In addition to fear of upper management's response to their treatment of black employees, these supervisors also believe that black employees expect special treatment from them based on racial considerations and that they may, in turn, be taken advantaged of by employees. The following example portrayed by an African

American female supervisor is indicative of this concern:

“Well, I think the black female supervisor may be worried more about being a black female than being a supervisor and if she could have separated the two maybe they [female clerks] would not want to beat her up, you know what I mean? It’s like, if I’m your supervisor and I’m worried about your hair and what you wear and why you talking to that man and this man and then I’m talking to your man. Why would you be involved in all this kind of stuff? It’s ridiculous. We had a supervisor ...she got into an incident...I don’t know what she did...most people give her the utmost respect and take a lot of mess from her but most of the time she is upright and upstanding, until she had a few drinks. Plus she’s kind of close to the people she works with, her employees, women. Some of these employees, women, people don’t always keep things [to themselves] and use your trust or take your friendship as a kindness so maybe some of them did not care for her on this particular day and she came in and she might have had a few drinks and one of the ladies called security on her. Now do you know what it’s like for a bonafide, upstanding, upright supervisor to have security called on her because the employees are claiming she’s drunk and security’s harassing her. (Laughs). The employees we have now are treacherous. Then I hear supervisors talking about this one and that woman. They are not here for that.”

In accordance to their mistrust of employees below them and managers above them, many black female supervisors are deeply concerned that one party or another might misconstrue every decision they make. When asked if black employees make demands of them that were related to the fact that they are black females, one supervisor said,

“Yes, yes, yes (laughs)...I don’t recall [any specific incidents] but it was as I already said. I think it was a feeling....maybe from within that certain things were expected of me as far as giving the black employees a break. I’m trying to think of an example but one doesn’t come immediately to mind.”

Another black female supervisor said that black employees expect black supervisors to give them breaks and, when they are not accommodated, employees get in trouble on the job. She said:

“A lot of times when you work with your own, sometimes employees become comfortable with the level of things that [they] can do because you know...For example, a person may be in a situation where they ask, ‘Come on, you are black, can’t you do me a favor?’ Which is probably no different from a white going to

their counterpart and saying the same thing. I would assume that if people were of an opposite race there would be less grievances. They would be more prone...because they don't have some kind of personal contact...to go to them and tell them, 'Listen, could you give me another chance? Could you give me a break. Why do you want to do this to me? Don't you understand me?' They would be more prone to avoid getting themselves in situations where they have to be confronted by their superior of a different race, meaning a white person. I honestly believe that.”

As members of the numerically dominant race in the facility, black male supervisors expressed their concerns that, like black female supervisors, they also have to contend with employee demands of them due to racial considerations and management's expectations of them as supervisors. However, black male professionals believe they experience more discrimination than black females, particularly in their efforts to achieve high-level positions. The cause of the disparity in promotions is not clear. It is clear however from breakdowns of promotions that black women achieve more promotions than black men. For instance, Executive and Administrative Schedule (EAS) GAO data (**See Table 1 below**) indicates that despite their lower representation in the postal workforce black women's representation in managerial positions was higher than that of black men for fiscal years 2000 through 2002.

Similar to blacks, White, Hispanic, and Asian women received higher levels of promotion into entry-level management positions (EAS grades 11 through 14). Oddly, in contrast to blacks, males in higher EAS levels (15 through 18 and 19 through 26) have higher levels of representation and receive more promotions than women of their respective racial groups (GAO Report, 2003). This is consistent with promotion patterns in the facility. Black women receive more promotions than black men. African American employees believe that there are both individualistic and structural factors, which contributes to this phenomenon.

Table 1: EAS promotions by Race and Gender, Fiscal Years 2000 through 2002

Race/Gender	Workforce representation (2000 – 2002)	Average representation of promotions for grade levels 11-14	Average representation of promotions for grade levels 15-18	Average representation of promotions for grade levels 19-26
Black Men	11.3*	1.37**	9.13**	7.93**
Black Women	10.1*	8.23**	11.40**	8.97**

* Number indicates percentage of total postal employees (approximately 900,000).

** Number indicates average percent of promotions (2000 to 2003). Total number of promotions declined from 7,117 to 5,320 over the three fiscal years indicated.

Source: GAO Report 2003

There is a perception among many that the young black males who are coming into the facility do not have the educational or other aspects of human capital which would give them an advantage to move up the organizational ladder. An employee noted that these employees are too young and immature and “have not figured out” what they want to do. An African American female supervisor characterized these employees as “coming in the door and getting their checks and getting over (not working) as much as possible and “not worrying about the future or upward mobility.” Some black employees said black male employees, particularly the younger ones, “are not ready.” Conversely, some employees believe that organizational factors contribute to the position of black men in the facility. A black female supervisor made the following observation:

“There is definitely not a big push to maneuver around black males. Especially black males that are just coming into the Postal Service. The black males that we have in any position of authority [have] been in the Post Office, like twenty, thirty, years already. They’re not pushed anywhere. They have these positions, they now call them dinosaurs. And the push now is to being in as many, can we say, Caucasian males as possible...[When the District hired supervisors from outside of the organization] They went to NJ and brought in a whole bunch of white boys and every chance they get or any changes they make, they go back there and bring in some more white boys. It’s like they’re weeding them [black men] out. The spots and positions they have, they can’t take them out, but they’re not giving them nothing else.”

Another black female supervisor said:

“They’re [black men] are not being pushed to do a dag-on thing. I really think if they started pushing black males to do something that would be like defeating the purpose because how are they going to get all of your young college educated Caucasians in if the blacks start pushing for these jobs and they’re already in the PO.”

Because of the limited number of black men who move into professional positions, they often find themselves in token representation as they move up the ranks in a facility where their racial group is the numerical majority. Black male professionals have the perception that they experience more discrimination than other racial ethnic groups in the facility. Several said that they believe that even when they have credentials they find it hard to move up in the Service. One black male mentioned, for example, that he came into the Service with a baccalaureate degree and despite doing well on promotion examinations it took him almost a decade to become a supervisor and almost a decade more to move into an administrative position. He believes that he is “overqualified” for all of the positions he had held but believes that he was held back because “they hire who they want, regardless of qualifications.” Another black male professional said that although he gets along with his co-workers who are predominantly white men and black females, he said that he is often made to feel that he does not belong in the unit. He said that his colleagues routinely disregard his contributions to discussions as well as to the work effort. Another black male professional in token representation in his office said that white male professionals often do collaborative work and do not involve him. He said he often feels excluded even though “people laugh in my face and act like we’re colleagues but I know I am not accepted.” All of the black male professionals have a perception that no matter what they do their efforts are not given the credit and acknowledgement that is given to their white colleagues and they believe it is due to racial discrimination. One black male professional said:

“They want to act like everything is equal but we all know that it is not. They make sure that whites get the exposure and experiences that make them look good

on paper. With us, we have to work twice as hard and then have to fight for our rights. But the funny thing is we can't say that our experiences are due to racial discrimination because people get insulted. They can't own up to what they do so they think that you're being a racist. Imagine that. I'm disadvantaged but I can't say that it has anything to do with race without committing professional suicide. I mean the Asians and the Hispanics and even black women can file EEO complaints and get away with it but not black men. We just have to deal with it."

Black male and female professionals expressed their view that racial discrimination accounts for differential treatment in all aspects of their work lives. Several acknowledged that they believe they are given more responsibility than their white colleagues. An observation of a work area in the facility, in part, is supportive of their perception. In the work unit, there were four white male professionals and two black female professionals. The two black females, who were the same level as the four white male professionals and who otherwise did the same administrative duties, supervised a clerical pool of predominantly black and Hispanic female employees. One of the two black female professionals said she originally supervised the work area with a white male. She explained with some resentment that when they hired a black female professional the white male with less seniority than her was taken out of the unit and relieved of the "babysitting" portion of the job. The experiences of racial ethnic professionals are conflict ridden and racial ethnic clerks fare no better.

Racial Ethnic Token Clerks

Since racial ethnic employees are the majority of workers in the facility, there are very few work areas where they work in token representation. When they work as tokens, however, it is usually in a situation where black, Asian, or Hispanic female clerks are tokens and the numerically dominant group is comprised of white professionals.

From women's entrance into the facility in the late 1960s to the present, white women have always received, according to the perception of racial ethnics, "special treatment." This does not suggest that white women do not experience sexism in the workplace or that they do not experience the negative consequences of being tokens in majority male settings (Kanter, 1977). However, the situation is more complex for racial ethnic female tokens; they have to contend with sexism and racism. In contrast to white women in corporate settings who have to contend with the effects of "visibility," (Kanter, 1977:214), racial ethnic women have to contend with "invisibility" because they make up a large proportion of employees in the facility. In effect, racial ethnic women are everywhere so their presence is largely taken for granted. Numbers matter a great deal but sometimes they do not seem to make a difference in the perceptual experiences of black females in the facility. For instance, an African American clerk said all of the clerks in her work area are black and Latino women and most of the professionals are white men. She spoke about the sexist and racist way in which the professionals speak. She said:

"They use curse words and stuff like that. One of them made a statement that he was so horny today that he should have laid down with his wife before he got in and that he couldn't wait to get home to....That is something that you do not say. If that is the way you talk with men then that is the way you speak with men but he said it in front of women. It was [names female employees] there at the time. When he left I said, 'You know he just doesn't care what he says around people.' He also made a remark one time. There was also another white man in the office asking us about a piece of [office] equipment that we had in there. At this time, he [white professional] had a tan and he made a comment about it. The other gentleman said, 'Look how dark you've gotten being out in the sun.'" He said, "Yeah, I'm almost...If I stayed in the sun any longer I would look like a Moolie," which is a term that Italian men use for blacks. Yeah. And I said, 'Hey!, Then he said, 'Oh, oh, oh.' But still he didn't think twice about it. I was sitting right

there. I'm a black woman. So, it's just some things you say, 'Only in the PO.' You sit there and you hear these kind of things."

Another African American female who works in a similar setting said:

"I hate it when they just act like you're not there. They say anything they want and sometimes it is really nasty. Sometimes they [white professionals] get together and talk about the plant manager, a black woman, and the things they say are not nice at all but they try to act like it is just the [plant] manager and not all black women but sometimes the things they say make us feel like they are talking about us. [When asked for an example, the employee stated:] Like one time they were talking about the plant manager when they came back from a meeting and one of them said she is 'worthless' and 'doesn't know her head from her knee,' meaning she is not doing a good job. I even heard them call her the 'B' word and stuff like that. They talk about black professionals that way. They say black professionals are dumb and stuff like that in front of us but what can you do as long as they don't talk to me like that I have nothing to say."

Invisibility is a significant problem for racial ethnic tokens. For example, on an observation of the facility, I visited a work site that was manned by three white male professionals and a black female clerk. The area consisted of a very large office surrounded by windows on three sides. The three professionals were seated around a gigantic computerized monitor. As we entered the room they were talking to each other and turned to greet us then began to tell us about their operation. They were particularly friendly with each other and my tour guide. As they chatted and made jokes with each other, I turned around and noticed the black female clerk sitting at a small desk in the corner of the room. Her desk was situated so that her back was towards the professionals and her desk was facing a brick wall. The three white male professionals explained their operation to us but did not mention what the clerk did and did not introduce her to us. As

she hovered over her work it would have been very easy for the casual observer to not even see her.

Racial ethnic clerks, male and female, have the perception that white professionals are sometimes arrogant, disrespectful, and dismissive towards them. A white manager, for instance, was given a surprise birthday party at an exclusive restaurant. The black and Hispanic clerks in the unit were not invited to the party; thus, the entire party consisted of one black person who did not work in the Service. When asked about the incident a black female clerk said:

“Yeah, well, this is the same person who also says what he wants to say but don’t really respect us...I don’t know....it may be because of the color of our skin....it may be because we are black...it may be because we are of lower class. I find that in the PO, if you’re management you are way up here and if you are a clerk you are way down there and the two will never meet. I’ll give you an example, for instance, schools. Because you go to school does not mean that when you come out with a degree you are smart; in every school and in every grade you have A, B, C, D students. Everyone who comes out with a degree does not necessarily mean that they are an A student or highly intelligent. I find that in the PO they feel that management are only A and B students and clerks are C and D students and that’s not so but that is their way of thinking. So, I didn’t have any feelings one way about not being invited to the party because if I was invited I probably would not have gone because if I don’t feel comfortable with you....I don’t care what title you hold...I’m not going to go anyway so it don’t matter to me. Even if word got back that it was said, ‘I don’t want black people in my house,’ it still wouldn’t bother me. That’s America. Racism is here so it wouldn’t bother me. I know how the majority of them think. Like, you have men in that same department who, if you are standing by the water cooler, will come out there and say, ‘Can we have some coffee together? Can I take you out to dinner?’ And I know that you’re the same person who, if you saw me in the street, you wouldn’t say hello to me. It happens all the time.”

Some white professionals are dismissive towards some racial ethnic employees and considerate of others, making it somewhat difficult to determine if their behavior towards their “subordinates” is due to gender, race, or social class differences. This

quandary is indicative of the following account offered by an African American woman who retired from the facility. She said,

“He [white male professional] was very pleasant to us. I never heard him say an angry word. He never treated [name of black female clerk deleted] and me bad at all. Never. He was always nice to us. But [his black female secretary] he didn’t like because she was old. Yeah, he didn’t like her. He used to tell her a lot of things which we didn’t know because he never said it in front of us. When [she] would go in his office he’d say, ‘I’m going to get rid of you. You old gray thing.’ Yeah. All kind of stuff he used to say to [her]. All kinds of things and I said, ‘Why don’t you take it to the union?’ And she used to say, ‘Oh, it doesn’t matter. Who cares?’ Anyway, he was nasty to [her] but he was very nice to us. But he treated the people in the back bad too. He didn’t treat them nice at all and I remember... [a black female clerk] used to complain that he would come in the office and never say good morning or nothing. She said he should bust his head on the wall for looking the other way. Yeah, they were all black and Spanish, mostly women but some men. He never treated them nice. As far as he was concerned, that was the typing pool and that is what it was, period. I never understood that because all of us were doing the same thing, more or less. But he never treated them nice in the back. That’s why I started taking a card when it was his birthday...I went in there and had everybody sign the card and gave it to him. He was so touched. Then he went out and bought a big thing of cookies and passed them around. He started being nicer. Then when he saw them in the hall, he said good morning to them. They were so shocked; they didn’t know what to say. They said, ‘What’s the matter with him?’ I said he just felt like people were being nice to him so he’s being nice to them. I saw the good side because he was in our office and we saw the kind side of him. He had his times when he was very stern and then we saw the good side of him and I said, ‘Why can’t he show people his good side? Why he always has to be so mean and nasty.’ See that was the corporate thing. The corporate chain. They felt that they had to be that way so that people would be afraid of them or something. I don’t know, whatever. But to me, it was ridiculous. I knew there was a compassionate side to this man but nobody saw it because he was always so mean.”

Similarly, a Hispanic female clerk said the following in regards to work in a setting where racial ethnic clerks are tokens:

“I work with many whites and they give me my work and I do it but sometimes the atmosphere gets a little stuffy like when things go wrong they try to blame it on us [racial ethnic] clerks and then they get all bent out of shape and start acting

like they are the chiefs and we are the little Indians. But most of the time we don't pay too much attention to them until the dust settles and they start acting like they have some sense. But I have had those experiences where a new professional comes in and starts ordering us around but that doesn't last too long either before they realize they need our help if they want to move on and most of them do."

The arrogant, dismissive, ways in which racial ethnic clerks are dealt with is not confined to female clerks. It is also evident in the comment of an African American male clerk who said:

"I really didn't have that much of a problem working with white managers in the area. They aren't particularly kind or unkind to me but sometimes they pull rank. Once I was told to report to the manager's office. Now here I am thinking that it had something to do with the excellent job I thought I was doing and when I got there we exchanged small talk and then he told me that he ordered lunch for several of the managers and wanted me to go across the street to pick it up. I was a bit taken back but it was all in a day's work. So no big deal but I remember when that happened and how it made me feel. So when I came back I put the lunch on the conference table with all the big shots sitting there. That was kind of humiliating because I wear pants just like they do but it was like I was the servant. I was mad, I have to admit."

Racial ethnic employees may be present in token status or token representation, as indicated above, because white employees hold many of the upper level positions in certain work areas in the facility. As well, whites are increasingly reluctant to pursue low-level federal employment settings such as the Service (Hacker, 1992). The result of this configuration is that whites have left racial ethnics fighting over the spoils the federal government has to offer them (Waldinger, 1996). Consistent with this theory, in this facility some Hispanic and Asian employees have the perception that black employees, the numerical majority, are given special consideration and other on-the-job perks. When Hispanic and Asian clerks work in token representation in predominantly black work areas, conflicts occur. Racial slurs, stereotyping, and exclusionary practices on the part

of African American clerks and supervisors is quite common, according to Hispanic and Asian clerks. Both groups indicate that the ways in which they respond to these gestures is to “ignore” them, which may account for the low levels of inflammatory interactions between these groups. However, as noted earlier, tensions between these groups are evident in the rising numbers of EEO discrimination cases in the facility. EEO was originally designed to protect racial ethnic group members from the discriminatory behavior of the whites majority in organizational settings. However, EEO cases that are initiated in the facility in the present context, overwhelmingly, involve racial ethnic complainants and defendants.

Chapter Summary

Due to high levels of visibility, there are differences and similarities between the experiences of token white employees and the token women in corporate work settings (Kanter, 1977). The technical abilities of token white employees in the facility are not overshadowed by their physical attributes; they are public creatures similar to token women in corporate settings but they are extremely private about their personal business, thus, their public dignity is rarely violated. Like women in corporate settings, white token professionals are expected to represent all professionals and not just themselves. When these professionals stumble and their public and private lives collide, their behavior is individualized; they are then portrayed as miscreants of the group as opposed to token women whose mishaps are taken as evidence that women are not fit for higher level positions. Employees blame token white professionals for many of the problems they experience in the organization because these employees are perceived as making

decisions without regard for how work floor employees are affected by their decisions. White professional token professionals, however, behave as though they are dominants in the facility. Unlike Kanter's tokens they do not believe their performance ratings are based on their master status but on their actual achievements. Stereotypes about members of this group are not related to their non-work related roles and they tend to exaggerate their own commonalities in the presence of the numerically dominant racial ethnic group members. White female professionals, who are under-represented in the organization and in the facility, are more likely than white males to experience negative consequences of being tokens. They have to resist stereotypes of women as "mother" and people who "sleep their way to the top" and sexist behavior and comments of men they work with. Many of these women believe they experience gender discrimination that limits their opportunities for upward mobility. In contrast, racial ethnic employees believe that white women are "insiders" who are given ample opportunities to move up in the organization. However, white female token professionals, have a perception that a source of "stress" on the job is due to the fact that most of the employees are "culturally" different from them. Some said they have to always be careful to do things in a manner that will not be perceived as "racist" even though are just doing their jobs.

White token clerks, similarly, have a perception that being surrounded by people who are "different" from them is stressful. These clerks believe they have to contend with being surrounded by people they perceive as "irresponsible" and "low lives" and at the same time acknowledge that due to structural inequities in the organization they experience some of the same disadvantages as the racial ethnic clerks they work with.

Conversely, racial ethnic employees believe that supervisors give white token clerks more leeway and overlook their misbehavior. While all employees tend to work more or less cooperatively, there is an atmosphere of mistrust between token white and racial ethnic clerks.

Racial ethnic token professionals are highly visible because of their social type. They have the perception that their technical abilities, very similar to token women are overshadowed by their physical appearance. Thus, some have been told and others believe that people think they got their jobs to fill affirmative action mandates. African American and Hispanic American professionals believe that Asian professionals are viewed more favorably. These employees have the perception that white professional believe Asians, employees and professionals, have a better work ethic and are more competent. All racial ethnic professionals believe they have experienced racial discrimination in the facility; however, Asians and Hispanic are more likely than black employees to work in token representation in some work areas. Members of both groups believe racial discrimination made it hard for them to move up in the organization. They also believe that they are perceived as immigrants who are taking jobs away from black postal employees. Black employees, however, have the perception that they experience more racial discrimination than other racial ethnic groups. Black men, in particular noted that they have lower rates of promotion than other groups and when given promotions they are “undervalued” in their roles. Black male professionals also have the perception that black women are more likely than they are to get promotions. Black female professionals, however, have a perception that they may get promotions but are usually

given more work responsibilities and given less authority in their positions than their white male counterparts.

Since racial ethnic employees are the vast majority of workers in the facility, there are very few work areas where they work in token representation. When they work as tokens it is usually in situations where racial ethnic clerks work among white professionals where they experience the negative effects of being “invisible;” they have the perception that they are often disrespected and disregarded by “superiors.” Due to the demographic configuration of workers in the facility, Asian and Hispanic tokens may also find themselves working in work settings where African Americans are the numerically dominant group. Conflicts between these groups consist of stereotyping, racial slurs, and exclusionary practices among black clerks towards Hispanic and Asian clerks. However, conflicts between these groups are latent on a daily basis but evident in the rising number of EEO cases involving members of racial ethnic groups. Relations within diverse organizations are quite complicated.

PART FOUR. DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

CHAPTER VI

THE PARADOXES OF DIVERSITY CONSIDERED

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to examine employees' perceptions of diversity in a federal bureaucracy. An urban postal facility was chosen for the site of the study because the United States Postal Service is one of the largest and most diverse organizations in the country. The paradoxes of diversity framework was developed to examine diversity in this organization because although the organization is nationally diverse, the vast majority of employees in urban facilities are racial-ethnics, from poor to working class backgrounds, and women. This framework suggests that when diversity in organizations is uneven it contributes to contradictory experiences and relations among diverse groups, the individualization of experiences, and thus, a low salience of race, class, and gender conflicts in the workplace.

Given this framework, the initial question addressed in this study is: How have social and political changes in the United States from 1776 to 1964 shaped the diversification of the postal work force? While paying close attention, in the contemporary scene, to the ways in which the opportunity structure and culture of the workplace shape intra and inter-group relations, the following three questions were asked: (a) How do the paradoxes of diversity shape employee perceptions of race, class, and gender relations among different racial groups in the organization? (b) How effective are employees at mobilizing race, class, and gender solidarity to support a particular position? (c) Are "celebrating" and "managing diversity" the only means of

minimizing race, class, and gender inequities in the organization?

Discussion

The federal government has played an inconsistent role in its attempts to include racial ethnic minorities and women into its workforce. Nevertheless, the organization's reconstructive policies have contributed to an exceptional increase in the diversification of its workforce. In the urban facility where this study was conducted, typical of urban facilities throughout the country, the vast majority, more than 75 percent of the employees are African Americans, Latinos, Asians, and women. White employees, both men and women, are underrepresented in the work site. Due to this configuration of employees, some occupations and work areas in the facility are integrated, other work areas are resegregated, and some employees work in areas where they are members of a token group contributing to what has been conceptualized as the paradoxes of diversity. It suggests that employees experience different levels of diversity and this in turn impacts their perceptions of others and shapes interpersonal relations on the job.

As a result of the paradoxes of diversity, intra-interpersonal struggles and contradictory behaviors abound in the facility yet there is a low salience of race, class, and gender conflicts. How are we to make sense of these findings? What implication do they have for the Postal Service and for other organizations undergoing a process of diversification? In the facility where this study was conducted, it seems that members of every race, class, and gender have the perception that other groups are favored and their own group experiences various degrees of discrimination. Perceptions of discrimination are in part the result of the residual effects of past discrimination that racial ethnic groups

and women experienced gaining access to postal positions. Therefore, every group has its historical memory of being unfairly disadvantaged vis-à-vis other groups.

Contemporarily, perceptions of discrimination, however, are sustained by employees' perception of the opportunity structure in the organization. In the facility, African American, Hispanic, and Asian employees believe that white employees, the numerical minority, have more opportunities for assignments and promotions. It is, however, also apparent from interview data that Hispanic and Asian employees believe that the numerically dominant group, African Americans, have more opportunities. Conversely, African American employees have the perception that the U.S. Postal Service's Hispanic Program gives Latino employees an unfair advantage in promotional considerations. Both groups have a perception that Asian employees, some with higher than average levels of educational attainment, have more opportunities than other racial ethnic groups for advancement in the organization. Even white employees, who appear from the perception of racial-ethnic employees to speedily move into managerial and comfortable positions in jobs that cannot be abolished or replaced by mechanization or automation, have the perception that they experience discrimination on the job. Men believe that women, particularly black women who make up more than half of the initial level supervisors in the facility, are given unfair promotional advantages. Racial-ethnic women, on the other hand, believe that due to racial discrimination their opportunities to move beyond the supervisory role are limited. Poor and working class employees believe, most emphatically, that middle class postal employees have unfair promotional and other kinds of organizational advantages. In this professed meritocratic work

environment, individuals and groups routinely see themselves as more or less disadvantaged by unfairness and favoritism.

Perceptions of discrimination are associated with social variables such as race, class, gender, age, length of service, and employment status. With so many crosscutting opportunities for conflict, one might ask whether employees' perceptions of discrimination are real. Perhaps the easy answer to this dilemma lies with the Thomas theorem that suggests "if men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences" (Thomas & Thomas, 1928:572). However, if conflicts are real, why is there so much variability in employees' views of race, class, and gender relations? If conflicts are real, to what extent do they generate social movement(s) within the organization? This study suggests that the various levels of diversity employees experience in their daily work lives mitigate perceptions of conflicts in integrated occupations and work areas and intensify them in resegregated work areas and in areas where employees find themselves working in token representation.

Employees who work in integrated areas and as racial ethnic tokens are somewhat complacent about social inequities and ambivalent about race, class, and gender relations. In integrated work areas, employees see people of all demographic groups working together more or less cooperatively. The fact that people tend to want to work, associate, and establish long term and intimate relations with those most similar to themselves is not viewed as problematic by employees. Tokens experience some of the negative effects of visibility; however, white male and female tokens are more likely to experience positive effects of high visibility due to their high status in the organization. Conversely, racial

ethnic employees are more likely to experience the negative effects of “invisibility” rather than “visibility” as suggested by Kanter (1977). In these work settings, racial ethnic tokens have the perception that their “superiors” disrespect them and that they have to constantly contend with stereotyping, racial slurs in the form of off-handed jokes, and exclusionary practices. Most employees in the facility, particularly those from working class backgrounds, view these kinds of incidents as an inevitable component of organizational life.

A sense of resignation among employees does not diminish their perception that racial discrimination is at the heart of the matter as they see white men and women, with and without educational credentials, move into positions of authority. The organization’s diversity initiative helps facilitate this sense of resignation among racial ethnic employees by making employees forever conscious of the fact that the Service is trying to do something about making people accept the “differences and similarities” between them. Thus, supervisors and employees alike seem to try to minimize those kinds of situations that will produce manifest conflicts. Employees in integrated areas and racial ethnic tokens just want to “make it through the day;” they rarely talk about social inequities in the Service except in whispers and in corners of their locker rooms with their close friends and confidants. Another factor that seems to contribute to the minimization of manifest conflicts is that employees see racial ethnic and women employees moving, however slowly, into positions of authority.

In comparison to other work areas, inter and intra-group conflicts are more fervent in resegregated work areas where the vast majority of employees are women

(approximately 60 percent) and African Americans, Hispanics, and Asians (80-90 percent). These employees were more reluctant than others to discuss race, class, and gender relations on the job. Yet, in this configuration of employees conflicts manifest in problematic interpersonal relations between individuals and groups. The result is a poor workplace climate indicated by increasingly higher rates of Employee Assistance Program (EAP) referrals, discipline of employees, and EEO complaints. African American employees, the majority of employees and supervisors in resegregated work areas, are not the cause of these conflicts but seem to be at the heart of the matter in several ways.

Because they are the numerical majority in many urban postal facilities, Waldinger suggests that African Americans developed an employment niche in the federal government (1996). A problematic aspect of this contention is that Waldinger describes the formation of ethnic niches based on the experiences of immigrants in the private sector (1996:21-26). He suggests that the civil service forms the other classic ethnic niche and implies that the formation of ethnic niches in the private sector is the same as those in the public sector, despite universalistic principles that govern public sector employment. Ethnic niches, Waldinger suggests, are based on social networks (1996:25). A social network has developed among African American postal employees in the form of a rudimentary ethnic hiring network. Thus, it is not uncommon to find that African American postal employees provide their friends and family members with information relative to postal exams. Many of these employees have friends and family members who work for the Service and sometimes in the same facility. However, there

is no evidence that African Americans have an ethnic niche, as defined by Waldinger (1996), in the Service.

Ethnic hiring networks in the private sector are more effectively developed than in the public sector. In the public sector, members of a particular ethnic group may give insider information that may help bring in new recruits from his or her group; however, entrance and promotions in the organization depend on rational-legal provisions. A group must have some control over the formal recruitment and promotion mechanisms in order for a social network to benefit their group. In the Service, these mechanisms remain under the sphere of influence of whites. Whites have always held most of the policy-making positions within the Service. Not much has changed in this regard. According to a GAO report (2003) white men and women are consistently over-represented among those considered “most qualified” for promotions and among those promoted. It follows that social networks in the government are much more tenuous than in the private sector. However, by virtue of promotional opportunities and their representation in the facility, African Americans have had some leverage, primarily through mentoring and participating on promotion panels, in helping members of their group move into low-level managerial positions.

Still, at some unconscious level, African American employees’ vision that the organization could become an African American employment niche is slowly fading away as they see new and young African Americans postal employees come into the organization without the social, personal, and professional characteristics they consider important for members of their group to do well and move up in the organization. The

result is a kind of intra-black class conflict where some African American employees have the perception that African American supervisors are supportive and dedicated workers and others believe these supervisors are hyper-vigilante, disrespectful, and hostile towards them. Intra-black conflict over who has and do not have authority, who is or is not respectful, who follows and does not follow the rules, who has or does not have a work ethic seem to be the points of contention. Some black employees have the perception that black supervisors have mentored, helped, and supported them; however, some black employees do not think that they are given any slack by their supervisors. Still others believe they work incredibly hard and that black supervisors do not give them a break. Some African American employees have, as well, complained that they prefer to work under white, male, supervisors.

Another factor that contributes to intra-black gender conflict is that African American men entered supervisory positions in considerable numbers during the late 1970s in the facility and throughout the city. Since then, these positions have become the domain of African American women. In this sexualized work environment the mixture of resentment and passion between African American men and women, many of who are single mothers, is volatile. Far too many men disrespect women by undermining and questioning the authority of female supervisors. Far too many men disrespect women with their sexual play and symbolic and, sometimes, real violence towards them. Unfortunately, far too many women accept the sexist behavior of men and, with no intent to blame the victim, disrespect themselves by mishandling their affairs with men, particularly by making them too public.

Amid intra-black conflicts there are also inter-ethnic conflicts in resegregated areas. African American employees have the perception that Hispanic and now Asian employees are coming into the facility taking low and entry level (custodial and clerical) positions that were once filled by African American employees. Hispanic and Asian employees have the perception that African American employees are given special perks and breaks because most of the supervisors are black. They believe that black supervisors are more likely to discipline them than African American employees who engage in the same or similar kinds of infractions of rules. Yet, most of the discipline meted out in resegregated work areas involves African American supervisors and employees. This does not mean to suggest that supervisors never go the extra mile for members of their own racial group; this tendency is evident among every racial group in the facility, despite testimonies about race-neutral policies. Nevertheless, Asian and Hispanic employees also complain about the way that African American supervisors speak to them. They have the perception that, not all, but many black supervisors have “a bad attitude” which they refer to generally as an abrasive tone of voice when giving directives. Conversely, black employees, including supervisors, have the perception that Hispanics and, to a greater extent, Asians have the attitude that they are better “people” and better “workers” than blacks and that they should be given more consideration on the job.

Furthermore, a growing sense of discontent among African American employees stems from their view that Hispanic and Asian, along with white, employees are passing them by as they move up the organizational ladder. Inter-ethnic conflicts have, as

Waldinger suggests, “focused on the roles of access and promotion;” however, his contention that “each phase yield[s] a change in the structure of employment protecting incumbents and impinging on the prospects of the newest entrants” (1996:207) overstates the case. In the facility where this study was done, African Americans, the numerically dominant group, have limited abilities to actually protect their employment prospects in the face of racially different new entrants. Thus, there is a tendency for employees in resegregated areas to have turf fights over issues related to the rules and regulations and have, or at least appear to have, some level of collective dissonance about who is involved in these battles and why. The groups involved simply do not understand the experiences or perspective of others, despite the intense hostility all racial ethnic groups have historically experienced in the labor market. Nonetheless, these conflicts are not about who is right or wrong. They are, to a large extent, about real issues that affect real people: access to jobs and promotions.

Conflicts in the facility are also about poor interpersonal communication and employees interacting with others based on stereotypes. Both of these issues are continuously addressed in training workshops for supervisors and managers but they have not made a significant impact on how employees relate to each other on the shop floor. Since resegregated work areas make up the bulk of employee workspace, relations in these areas contribute to a work environment which functions in a state of perpetual code orange contributing to high levels of anxiety, stress, and self-medication among employees.

Waldinger (1996) is correct when he suggests that whites have virtually

abandoned low-level postal positions, particularly those in urban areas, leaving behind the masses of racial ethnic employees and women who are in fierce competition for organizational resources. In this environment employees rarely rally collectively around any issue that they perceive as affecting individuals, even when an issue is a social and not personal matter. For example, when anthrax was found in the facility after the 9-11 incident, postal officials refused to close the facility. Management provided employees with antibiotics, masks, and gloves as they engaged in a clean up effort that took several weeks. At that time the union president tried to mobilize employees to consider that postal officials closed a predominantly white postal facility in New Jersey when traces of anthrax were found there. The union president, “furiously demanded that the building be shut down and that workers be tested” (New York Post, 2001). Although some employees became upset following news reports of the union’s position, the majority of them reported to work as scheduled and some employees began to perceive the union president’s comments as one of his many unwarranted diatribes on the Service. In effect, they individualized this incident as they do most others related to race, class, and gender relations in the facility.

Although the teamwork motto is promoted in all aspects of mail operations, employees are encouraged by the culture in the organization to perceive each other as individuals. In a diverse organization, individualism is a very effective form of social control because it is used to explain away employees’ accusations of favoritism. Thus, a culture of individualism silences employees. When employees have a perception that members of a particular group (race, class, or gender) are given preferential treatment

such as special assignments they are told by supervisors, “Worry about your self.” When employees have a perception that certain employees do not do their fair share of the work, they are told, “Worry about your self.” When employees have a perception that certain employees are unfairly promoted or not promoted they are told, “Worry about your self.”

The overall effect of this culture of individualism is that employees are extremely conscious of the rules and regulations. On the one hand, because the rules have become so elaborate over the past few decades, employees believe that they are too powerless to do anything about the extent to which the rules are fairly enforced. On the other hand, they utilize their knowledge of the rules and regulations, no matter how limited, to gauge what is and is not fair, in their perception, and at the same time protect themselves from unfair practices. In general, employees believe that supervisors have too much discretion in the application of rules. Conversely, supervisors believe they do not have enough discretion, particularly in regards to time and attendance matters that are monitored via the management information system. Would more work quotas, measurements, or more rules decrease conflicts and tensions between employees and supervisors?

In the Service, there are official work quotas and measurements for mail volumes but not for individual employees. At times supervisors try to impose quotas on individuals such as employees who do not move about with a sense of urgency but there are no official rules related to number of pieces of mail each individual employee must handle. Supervisors are more concerned about the amount of mail processed during an hour or a work tour rather than the output of individual employees. However, supervisors

also try to gauge what employees are doing by making assessments based on the output of machines. They can only speculate about the cause of increases or decreases in machine output; they have no rational way of determining what each individual employee is doing to affect ebbs and flows of machine output. Thus, the imposition of individual work measurements in most work areas is not feasible because of the nature of work is oriented around machine output and not individual output. Still, some employees believe that individual work quotas will be imposed when, and if, the organization becomes private. However, most employees cannot conceptualize what that would look like and have a sense of trepidation about individual quotas. Other employees believe individual quotas would impose a sense of fairness because those employees who are not “pulling their weight” will lose their jobs. One can only speculate that individual work quotas or work measurements might depersonalize some of the conflicts between supervisors and employees. At the same time individual work quotas could also contribute to more anguish for supervisors who would have to impose these measures and for employees who would have to somehow live up to them.

In an environment where there is a rule for every rule, it is not feasible to suggest more rules and regulations. In fact, the organization is, with military precision, so driven by rules that all employees, even supervisors and managers, believe they are treated like children. However, the emphasis on the rules and regulations is most infantilizing for non-managerial employees, the majority of workers, and it is particularly problematic for racial ethnic and women because they are kept personally and professionally subordinate to whites and men. In this facility, quite similar to other urban facilities where most of

the employees are African Americans, the emphasis on rules and regulations is most problematic because of the history of their relations with the federal government that can be characterized as one of dependency. The U.S. Postal Service, with its emphasis on rules and regulations cannot function effectively without a dependent, docile, labor pool and African Americans have been a significant source of that labor pool since the late 1960s. Close to 200,000 African American postal employees earn a decent family wage and in return are subjected to the kinds of indignities that would be deemed unacceptable in the private sector, despite having slightly higher levels of educational attainment than comparable private sector employees (Zwerling and Silver, 1992; Waldinger, 1996).

As long as employees continue to focus on their individual experiences, inter and intra-group conflicts are contained within the organization. However, every now and then members of racial ethnic groups and women postal employees ponder their experiences vis-à-vis other groups. For example, African American postal employees collectively worry about their future in the organization as automation and mechanization has decreased the need for workers, entry-level exams now include a psychological component, and promotions are harder to obtain due to an increased emphasis on educational attainment and downsizing of higher-level positions over the past few years. Another factor which contributes to their collective fear that the racial makeup of employees may change in the near future is the higher than average turnover rate of young black employees. These younger employees are easily disillusioned by the emphasis on rules and regulations in the Postal Service and much less likely than tenured black employees to accept what they perceive as mistreatment by their superiors. On the

other hand, their supervisors, most of who are black have the perception that younger blacks, from poor to working class backgrounds, do not know how to act professionally on the job and do not appreciate the sacrifices they made to gain access to a formerly white, middle class, and male work environment. Thus, as they see young Hispanic and Asian employees flocking into urban postal facilities, there is a collective fear among African Americans that they are losing ground in an organization that they are dependent upon for good salaries, benefits, and protective legislation.

The result of all of these dynamics is that despite the tendency for individuals and groups to interact somewhat delicately with each other on a daily basis, there is a constant state of tension between and within groups in the facility. If inter and intra-group relations in this facility are generalized to urban postal facilities throughout the country, the Postal Service has a deep and serious problem. What can the United States Postal Service do to improve race, class, and gender relations in the organization?

Implications for Diversity in the United States Postal Service

GAO continuously does studies of race in the Service; however its findings are not enlightening for the Postal Service. Since GAO is not a regulatory agency it has no authority to enforce changes in the status quo in the Service. The Postal Service usually responds to GAO reports with a brief statement such as “Thank you for your insights,” and continues with business as usual, in most cases. This does not mean to suggest that the Postal Service is doing nothing about trying to manage its diverse workforce. It has an extensive diversity initiative and spends millions every year for specialists, consultants, and multicultural training workshops, seminars, and pamphlets. However,

the emphasis on diversity in the Service is largely about leveling the playing field by trying to establish appropriate representations of all groups at all levels of the organization. The Service is a long way from achieving this goal. The Service also promotes “managing” and “celebrating” diversity. Likewise, this practice has not significantly changed the contentious climate of urban postal facilities. Everyone wants their cultural heritage celebrated; however, conceptually this does very little to promote a climate where multiculturalism is accepted by most employees.

Diversity policing, in the form of Diversity Change Agents (DCAs), is also problematic and ineffective in urban postal facilities. One aspect of the function of DCAs is to circulate among employees and bring to their attention any comments made that may be perceived as potentially racist or sexist. Diversity Change Agents publish monthly pamphlets about diversity developments in the Service and also contribute to the celebrating diversity climate in the organization by highlighting the accomplishments of this or that “minority” group in the United States. The Postal Service, like other organizations going through a process of diversification, has to commit to creating a climate where diversity is accepted by creating non-oppressive practices, programs, and policies.

One of the most oppressive practices that have been institutionalized in the Service is silence among employees. This residual effect of its military background has created a “feedback as punishment” syndrome in the organization that is unnecessary in a modern bureaucracy. Feedback as punishment syndrome is when management only speaks to employees to let them know that they did something wrong such as when there

is an infraction of the rules or poor performance on the job. It also incorporates a fear of retaliation among employees. They learn that speaking up for oneself or for matters that they may view as unjust will call attention to themselves and they may be singled out for retribution. If an organization is truly committed to diversity it has to commit itself to creating a climate where people have the opportunity to speak their minds without fear of retribution. Communication at all levels of the organization does not contribute to a break down in authority, as so many postal leaders presume. Most employees want to work and do the best they can, sometimes under less than ideal circumstances, to get the job done. An important feature absent from the work lives of employees, promoted by the culture of silence in postal facilities, is acknowledgment of their humanity. Perhaps it is a utopian idea to suggest that diverse organizations must create a climate where racial ethnic employees and women have the opportunity to speak to organizational leaders. The ability to voice ones opinions and to give expression to ones work experiences is only the initial step in the process of opening up communication channels. Organizational leaders also have to commit to listening to employees, really listening, and utilizing the information they receive to make positive changes in the work lives of employees.

In order for the Service, in particular, and diverse organizations in general to become as effective as possible they must be willing to be progressive, think outside the box, and create a three-prong approach to “managing diversity” that includes a focus on improving race relations, class relations, and gender relations. Other organizations going through diversification could also learn from the example of the Service. Every

organization, however, is somewhat unique and would have to shape the particulars of their race, class, and gender based initiatives according to the level of diversity and the functioning of employees within their organization. What follows is a conceptualization of some issues that might be addressed in race, class, and gender based initiatives in the Postal Service:

Race-Based Initiatives

Postal employees are particularly resentful of race-based initiatives that promote the interest of one group over others such as the Hispanic Diversity Program. Hispanic employees are under-represented in the Service in most areas outside of those States where they represent a large percentage of the labor pool. Passing postal entrance examinations has been a significant factor, due to language barriers, that contributes to locking this group out of access to postal positions. Discrimination within postal facilities has also made it incredibly difficult for Hispanics to gain access to higher-level positions once employed. Likewise, when it was found that Asian employees were underrepresented in the facility, despite their growing numbers in the local labor pool, a special hiring initiative was temporarily instituted. Thus, an initiative that gives a particular disenfranchised group the opportunity to gain access to postal positions is not unfair. Ideally, however, race-based initiatives in the Service should not single out a particular racial ethnic group for “special” consideration, such as developing a program around one group because it generates resentment among other groups. Most postal employees in this facility, even racial ethnic employees, are overwhelmingly against this kind of “special emphasis” program. However, employees seem to support the Diversity

Program, even though most employees have no idea what the Program actually does.

The Service has an even more serious problem related to race. The Service has to be willing to do more to integrate postal facilities on a national level such that racial ethnic groups are not segregated in urban postal facilities. Urban facilities are segregated because of the labor pool in urban centers; however, the organization should not complacently accept this situation or take the position that it is not responsible for integrating postal facilities, regardless of local labor pools because resegregated facilities are powder kegs full of racial ethnic resentment and, thus, conflict. One of the things the organization could do to increase integration of its facilities is to loosen regulations related to transfers. It appears managers can get transfers much easier than employees. Several employees mentioned that they applied for transfers to different States. One employee said she was denied a transfer because she was late for work several times during the six months period prior to applying for the transfer. Several other employees mentioned that they tried to transfer but could not get positions in their crafts. The union, APWU, has developed a list of employees who are interested in transferring; however, it has been largely ineffective because it is disconnected from postal policies. The Service could also encourage transfers by transferring employees from urban facilities to majority white suburban and rural facilities. This actually occurred during the 1992 reorganization. Many employees transferred to non-urban facilities throughout the country. However, several interviewees said that, as the few blacks and Latinos among the many whites, transferees reported that their new work environments were hostile and alienating. As they did in 1992, the Service could offer employees incentives to move to

other locales that are predominantly white; however, they have to be mindful of the situation they are putting people in and not make individuals pay the exclusive costs of organizational diversity by putting them in token situations—alienation in predominantly white facilities is a fact organizational life for many racial ethnic employees, however, it is not an attractive proposition.

Class-Based Initiatives

A problematic aspect of class relations in resegregated urban facilities is that many employees believe that they have no opportunity to move up, or even around, in the organization. Most employees also believe that the promotion process, from point of application to point of decision, is beyond unfair. They believe it is corrupt. This belief stems from employees' perception that people get promotions based on whom they know and who likes them rather than based on what they know. In recent years, the promotion process has become more rigorous and requires more soft and hard skills. Employees from non-middle class backgrounds have the perception that they are completely locked out of the process.

It follows that the Service could do more to open the opportunity structure such that it does not prohibit poor and working class employees from the opportunity to learn new skills so that they can compete for higher-level positions. The current emphasis on credentials in the Service seems to be a hoax to many employees who know that many of their managers attained their positions when degrees were not required. As well, there are many high level positions in the Postal Service that includes the kind of duties that can be learned on the job. This would require the initiation of on-the-job training

opportunities for all employees. Despite some negative commentary, most supervisors mentioned the perseverance of postal employees to learn and to do their jobs. The Postal Service could benefit by tapping into this energy by providing non-credentialed employees the opportunity to learn different aspects of postal operations. Ideally, the Service should make these opportunities available to new and younger employees as expeditiously as possible before they become disillusioned and disenchanted with the work environment.

Gender-Based Initiatives

Sexuality in male-dominated postal environments is extremely problematic. Despite the growing number of women who work for the Service and in the facility, there is still a climate that does not embrace or respect the presence of females. On one of my observations, I heard a black male ask a Korean male if he knew any Korean women who were interested in dating a black man. The black male laughed and said, “You would have to find me two Korean women because I like my women 6 feet tall and Korean women are short.” Both men and women find this kind of sexual play among employees funny, entertaining, and seductive. However, there are elements of sex and sexuality in the facility that is humiliating and hurtful to employees. Sexist comments and jokes at the expense of women, and sometimes men, are rampant in the facility. Serial monogamous and extra-marital relationships are, as well, ubiquitous among men and women. The prevalence of sexual harassment of women is also an organizational problem.

A desexualized work environment is not completely possible or desirable in an organization; however the Service has to do more to enlighten employees about sexual harassment. Managers receive materials and training workshops related to sexual harassment and provide employees with this information during 10-minute safety talks; however, too many employees have no idea what sexual harassment is and is not. Further, many employees do not know the line that separates sexuality from sexism; thus, they tend to tolerate behaviors that should not have to be tolerated in a work environment. Over the years, beyond being mistreated and used, women have been beaten, assaulted, and killed by male postal employees. The zero tolerance policy in the Service does little to curtail these incidents because far too many of these incidents go unreported. Women fear that the Service will not handle these kinds of situations responsibly and they fear retribution from the male employees involved. The Service cannot develop a policy of policing the sexuality of its employees but surely it could do more to provide employees with information that will help and encourage them to curtail sexuality in the workplace.

Finally, the Service could do more to move women, particularly women of color, into higher-level positions such that they are not locked into low-level administrative, initial-level supervisory positions, and sex-typed occupations. Race, class, and gender initiatives are not mutually exclusive but interrelated. If racial ethnic groups and women were not resegated in urban facilities, given opportunities for the acquisition of new skills, and have equal opportunity to move up in the organization, the Service would make great strides in deracializing and desexualizing the work environment and Postal Unions have a responsibility to work with the Service to this end.

A Final Comment

The United States Postal Service, although no longer a branch of the federal government since the 1970 reorganization, continues to receive government subsidies and continues to embrace reconstructive or protective policies for disadvantaged groups in society. In an effort to de-politicize the organization, the Service is a for-profit business bound by the dictates of the Postmaster General and United States Postal Service Board of Governors. This structure has done little to take politics out of postal work environments. Nepotism, cronyism, and favoritism still function quite effectively to ensure that white, male, and middle class postal employees dominate in the organization.

As a for-profit business with reconciliatory yearnings related to the representation of racial ethnic and women employees, the organization has to do more to address this aspect of the work environment, particularly in urban postal facilities where racial ethnic and women employees are over-represented. I would suggest that an effective approach to find out what is going on in these environments is the initiation of investigations of the work environment that are independent of the federal government.

One of the promises of this research is that it shows that conflicts between employees are latently channeled through social demographic variables such as race, class, and gender. There is no direct evidence that employees who work in diverse work areas do not hold stereotypical and negative views of each other based on group affiliation. However, in contrast to popular beliefs, employees who work in diverse areas in the facility have a tendency to try to be politically correct with each other. The overall effect of politeness seems to minimize high levels of manifest conflicts between employees of different races, classes, and genders. It is quite the reverse in non-diverse

work settings. In resegregated areas and in areas where employees work in token representation conflicts between individuals and groups are manifest although there is a tendency for workers to say they “get along.” Yet work related stressors, discipline, and a general climate of anger is incredibly high in these work environments. Also problematic is that the organization relates to employees as though they are mere members of categories, social security numbers, or non-entities. Without surprise, with hits and misses here and there employees bond with each other and become supportive co-workers, however, the problem is that so many treat each other as they are treated by the organization—as non-entities. This is incredibly problematic for establishing positive inter-group relations.

The organization must also do more to change the militaristic-autocratic culture of the workplace which, in the modern, technologically, advanced bureaucracy, is an outdated mode of social control of workers. The Service would benefit a great deal in this regard. Otherwise the organization must continuously, as it is presently attempting to do by instituting a psychological component to the entry level exam, search for more docile workers who will contend with the double-edge sword of the proliferation of rules. I would suggest that the emphasis on rules service is protective and oppressive for all employees. The rules allow employees to have some protections against arbitrary abuses in power. However, the rules are also oppressive because they are harmful to relatively powerless employees such as racial-ethnic and women employees who have so limited opportunities to think and speak for themselves. Work has the potential and therefore should become an opportunity for personal and professional growth of all employees. However, in urban postal facilities, work is far too an environment where suspicion,

mistrust, and at times terror prevails—despite the fact that employees have the incredible tenacity to persevere by any means necessary to hold on to their “good government job” which offers them good salaries, benefits, and union protection. Surely, the union could do more to stand up for the collective rights of its workers and stop making concessions to management which further dehumanizes, depersonalizes, and degrades the masses of postal employees.

APPENDIX A – QUESTIONNAIRE

Background Questions:

- Age?
- Gender?
- Race/Ethnicity?
- What is your marital and parental status?
- What was your level of education when you joined the organization?
- Have you continued or completed any educational degree programs since joining the organization?
- Has work in the Postal Service affected family life? How?

Postal Experiences:

- Why did you decide to work for the Postal Service?
- How long have you been with the Postal Service?
- Did you ever consider leaving the organization?
- What kinds of things have encouraged you to stay with the organization?
- What is your present position?
- What positions have you held?
- Are hiring, promotion, and termination policies fair to employees?
- Do you endeavor for a higher-level position in the Postal Service?
- Do you consider yourself successful in the organization? Why or why not?
- Do you consider yourself successful outside of the organization? Why or why not?
- Over the time that you have been with the organization, what are some of the major changes that you have seen? (Examples would be procedural and organizational changes, technological changes, and type of employees/managers)
- What do you think about privatization of the Postal Service?

Attitudes about other workers:

- If you had an on-the-job mentor (someone interested in helping you) describe your experience.
- Do you ever attend postal retirement or other kinds of parties?
- Do you socialize with postal worker when at work?
- Do you socialize with postal worker when not at work?
- What are the most important positive (and negative) characteristics of postal managers?
- What are the most important positive (and negative) characteristics of Postal supervisors?
- What are the most important positive (and negative) characteristics of employees? – Are newer employees different (work ethic, values) from older employees (those who came in prior to 1990)?
- What do you like most about working for the organization? -
- What gender do you prefer to work with? Why?
- What gender do you prefer to work under? Why?

- What race do you prefer to work with? Why?
- What race do you prefer to work under? Why?
- Have you ever experience violence or the fear of violence at work or off the job but connected to activities at work?

Attitudes about diversity:

- Is the organization doing all that it can to help women do their job better and advance in the organization?
- Is the organization doing all that it can to help minorities do their job better and advance in the organization?
- Is the organization doing all that it can to help white males (and females) do their job better and advance in the organization?
- Do any of the postal unions address the issues of racism, sexism, or elitism (other kinds of biases) with postal workers or postal managers?
- Have you ever discussed racism, sexism, or elitism (other kinds of biases) with postal workers, officials, or the union?
- Do you know of any other postal employees who might be will to do this interview?

APPENDIX B – CONSENT FORM

My name is Linda Benbow and I am a student in the Sociology Department at the Graduate School and University Center at the City University of New York (CUNY). I am the principal investigator of this project, entitled, “The Paradoxes of Diversity: Race, Class, and Gender Relations in a Federal Bureaucracy.” I would like permission to interview you about your experiences working in the Postal Service.

This interview will take approximately one hour. With your permission, I would like to tape this interview so I can record the details accurately. You have the option to do the interview without recording our conversation. All information gathered will be kept strictly confidential, and will be stored in a locked file cabinet. I am the only person who will have access to the tapes or notes taken during the interview. At any time during the interview you can refuse to answer any questions or ask me to delete a response or end the interview without any penalty. Your participation in this research project is completely voluntary and you can also refuse to be interviewed.

The only risk involved in this study is that you may experience some discomfort about answering questions about your experiences and feelings towards supervisors or fellow workers. The benefit of this research is that, in the future, there will be more information on how organizations can effectively manage diverse workforces.

I may publish the results of this research but the names of people and work locations, or any other identifying characteristics, will not be used in any of the publications. If you would like a copy of this study, please provide me with your address and I will send you a copy in the future.

If you have any questions about this research, you can call me at (845) 257-2779, benbow46@frontiernet.net. Or you may contact my academic advisor, Paul Attewell at (212) 817-8778, pattewell@gc.cuny.edu. The Institutional Review Board at City University Graduate Center has approved this research. However, if you have any questions about your rights as a participant in this study, you can contact Ms. Hilry Fisher (212-817-7523), hfisher@gc.cuny.edu, of the Office of Sponsored Research at the CUNY Graduate Center.

Thank you for your participation in the study. I will give you a copy of this form to take with you.

If you agree to be interviewed,
Please sign below:

I agree to have this interview
audio-taped: (circle one) Yes No

Participant’s signature (Date)

Investigator’s signature (Date)

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