

Racial Ideology and Hiring Decisions in Silicon Valley

Edward J. W. Park

This article examines the hiring practices of assembly workers in the high technology industry in Silicon Valley. While recent works have viewed "the significance of race" question with empirical analysis of the labor force, this study focuses on the employers and their subjectivity in making recruitment and hiring decisions. The ethnographic data reveals the central role of racial ideology in the recruitment and hiring process. Furthermore, the data demonstrates how racial ideology can have both an exclusionary and an inclusionary function in shaping the composition of the work force. Based on the findings, I propose a greater sensitivity to employer racial bias in recruitment and hiring decision making and call for a more nuanced approach to examining racial inequality.

KEY WORDS: race; racial ideology; high technology industry.

The causes of racial inequality in contemporary American economy remain one of the most intensely debated topics in sociology (Wilson 1980, 1987, 1996; Waldinger and Bailey 1991; Thomas 1993; Cancio, Evans, Maume 1996; Farkas and Vicknair 1996; Maume, Cancio, and Evans 1996; Moss and Tilly 1996). The persistence of racial inequality between whites and African Americans despite legislative reforms brought on by the Civil Rights Movement has forced social scientists to search for more complex reasons behind racial inequality than outright discrimination and has implicated a range of economic and social issues (Farley and Allen 1987; Roy and Stack 1988; Gill 1989; Smith and Welsh 1989; O'Neill 1990; Neckerman and Kirschenman 1991). At the same time, the influx of Asian Americans and Latinos since the immigration reforms of the 1960s has brought an increasingly comparative dimension to the debate. Factors that Asian Americans and Latinos have helped to bring into the debate have included levels of educational

Direct correspondence to Edward J. W. Park, Assistant Professor, Department of Sociology, University of Southern California, Los Angeles, CA 90089-2539; e-mail: ejpark@mizar.usc.edu.

attainment, rates of entrepreneurship, and the formation of ethnic enclaves to explain the relative economic positions of these new groups in the American economy and to shed comparative light on the black-white economic inequality (Light 1979; Wilson 1987; Light and Bonacich 1988; Nee and Sanders 1996; Zhou and Logan 1989; Waldinger 1994; Portes and Zhou, 1996). In this debate, William Julius Wilson's *The Declining Significance of Race* (1978) and *The Truly Disadvantaged* (1987) have defined much of the central issues for both social scientists and policy makers. However, after three decades of intense discussion, two key issues raised in his studies remain unresolved and contested (Thomas and Hughes 1986; Payne 1989; Waldinger and Bailey 1991; Thomas 1993; Cancio, Evans, Maume 1996; Farkas and Vicknair 1996; Maume, Cancio, and Evans 1996). Briefly, the two key assertions raised by Wilson through these two works are: 1) much of the current racial inequality stems from the historical legacy of racism that pre-dates the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and the 1960s, not contemporary racist practices and 2) racial minorities, especially African Americans and Latinos, face economic exclusion due to their lack of skills and education, not racism on the part of employers. More recently, Wilson softened his position on both of these assertions in his much publicized and widely debated book *When Work Disappears* (1996).

Broadly conceived, the debate that Wilson has helped to generate has been about the centrality (in Wilson's term, "significance") of race in the contemporary American economy and, more specifically, in the organization of the labor market. Wilson argued that race, as a category standing on its own narrow epistemological ground, is only marginally important in the continuing racial inequality in the contemporary American economy (Wilson 1987, 1989). Instead, he argued that structural changes in the labor market characterized by the increasing demand for an educated and skilled labor force and the lack of political will to address the economic plight of the "underclass" are most responsible for current racial inequality confronting African Americans (Wilson 1987). To support his claim, he comparatively invokes Asian Americans and Latinos to argue that well-educated Asian Americans have gone to "prosper" despite their "harsh discriminatory treatment" while unskilled Mexican immigrants tend to find employment only in "secondary labor markets," adding them to the ranks of the working poor and the underclass (Wilson 1987: 141 and 179). The divided academic and political debates surrounding affirmative action, welfare and immigration reforms, industrial policy, and inner-city economic policies attest to the continuing debate Wilson helped to initiate (Thomas and Hughes 1986; Farley and Allen 1987; Payne 1989; Wilson 1989; O'Neill 1990; Waldinger and Bailey 1991; Thomas 1993).

Recently, Wilson has reconsidered his position on employers' racial bias in hiring decisions. More specifically, in *When Work Disappears* (1996: Chapter 5, "The Meaning and Significance of Race"), Wilson cites the findings of his own Urban Poverty and Family Life Study's survey of Chicago area employers to reassess how racial images and ideology play an important role in shaping employment

decisions. After citing numerous examples of negative employer perception of African American workers that alternatively underscore their criminality, poor work ethic, and militancy, Wilson concedes that “race is obviously a factor in many of their current [hiring] decisions” (Wilson 1996, 127). However, Wilson warns against reducing the inequality in hiring outcomes to employer racism. In particular, he argues that much of the negative images of African American workers—especially African American male workers—stems legitimately from their lack of “soft” skills (“personalities suitable to work environment, good grooming, group-oriented work behaviors, etc”) that are differentiated from “hard” skills such as education, training, and work experience) (Wilson 1996, 136; see Moss and Tilly 1996). In addition, Wilson notes that numerous African American employers subscribe to these same negative images which, according to Wilson, somehow ameliorate “racist intent” of these images (Wilson 1996, 127). Moreover, he argues that the solution for overcoming these racial images and barriers lies not in addressing the attitudes of employers but in sustaining a growing labor market since only in a “slack labor market . . . employers are—and indeed, can afford to be—more selective in recruitment and in granting promotions” (Wilson 1996, 145). Ultimately, while Wilson has taken a close look at the role of race in the hiring process, he remains convinced that race remains in the margins as an “externality” to the structural realities of the economy.

DATA AND METHODS

This study seeks to examine the significance of race through a qualitative study of the assembly labor force in the high technology industry in Silicon Valley. The choice of this labor force as a case study is shaped by Wilson’s theoretical assertions. First, the high technology industry in Silicon Valley is one of the newest manufacturing industries. As an industry that began in the 1970s, the high technology industry came after the Civil Rights Movement and, ostensibly, without any “historical legacies” of racism in the organization of its labor market: whatever racial inequality that exists in the industry reflects “present-day” racial considerations, not entrenched practices of the past. Second, the assembly work in the high technology industry is quintessential de-skilled work. The California Employment Development Department estimates that assemblers in the high technology industry require an average of 10 to 20 hours of on-the-job training (Park 1992). Without neither education nor training requirements, there are few formal barriers to the assembly labor market, lessening the impact of human capital differences between various racial groups. Finally, the high technology industrial growth in Silicon Valley coincided with the influx of Asian and Latino immigrants to the U.S. (Portes and Rumbaut 1996). As a major destination point for these immigrant groups and located close to large African American populations in nearby cities

(East Palo Alto, Hayward, Oakland), Silicon Valley's high technology employers had a diverse labor pool from which to recruit their workers.

The data for this study was gathered from 1989 to 1993. In-depth interviews were conducted with 21 high technology managers and 20 assembly workers. The managers were chosen through a snowball sample, stratified by the size of the firm and the race of the owner (for small firms). Seven of the managers were from large (>100 employees), publicly traded firms; seven were from small (<100 employees), white-owned firms; and the final seven were from small, Asian American-owned firms. All of the managers had positions that included the responsibility for recruiting and hiring assembly workers. Among the assembly workers, ten were Asian American, five were Latino, and five were white and they were divided evenly between white- and Asian-owned firms. This interview data is supplemented by three dissertations that collectively interviewed over 100 high technology workers, managers, union organizers, and personnel officers in Silicon Valley's high technology industry (Keller 1981; Hossfeld 1988; and Park 1992).

Despite the popular image of high technology employment as highly skilled work, a substantial share of the employment in Silicon Valley's high technology industry comes from the modest assembly work. In the high technology industry, assembly work ranges from "stuffing" computer chips into circuit boards to installing disk drives into computer cases. Typically, assembly work consists of tedious and repetitive tasks with very small parts and requires a great deal of manual dexterity and mental patience. However, as a "core" industry, assembly workers receive higher wages and benefits (especially medical insurance) than their counter-parts in the large secondary labor market in light manufacturing and service industries—making high technology assembly work an attractive source of low-skill, entry-level employment. All of the workers interviewed for this article had worked in the secondary labor market. And invariably, they cited higher wages and medical insurance as key reasons for leaving their previous jobs to become assembly workers and had family members and friends who were looking to make the same transition for the same reasons. Given the relative attractiveness of assembly work, high technology managers can recruit from a large and diverse pool of applicants.

Despite the diversity of the labor pool, the assembly work force in the high technology industry in Silicon Valley has been dominated by Asian Americans. In 1990, Asian Americans accounted for 47 percent of the 19,000 assembly workers. Whites accounted for 25.4 percent while Latinos accounted for 21.6 percent, leaving African Americans with the remaining 5.5 percent of the assembly work force (*Global Electronics* 1992). As Hossfeld (1988; 1990) has shown, gender also plays a crucial role in the organization of Silicon Valley's assembly work. In 1990, women assembly workers outnumbered men, ranging from 2:1 for whites and Latinos to 3:2 for Asian Americans and African Americans (*Global Electronics* 1992). In this blue-collar segment of the industry, white and African American

men—the two traditional blue-collar work force in American manufacturing industries—account for less than 12 percent of the work force (9.7 percent and 2.1 percent respectively). While this racial difference is startling, aggregate numbers alone is not enough to implicate racial discrimination in the recruitment and hiring process. To examine the role of race directly, the following two sections describe the hiring practices and the racial ideology that are used to justify them.

RACE AND HIRING PRACTICES

As in all industries, the racial composition of the assembly workers is a direct product of individual hiring decisions made by personnel managers. While this is an obvious point, much of the current social science literature based on empirical data obfuscates this basic reality. Indeed, much of the current literature views the racial composition of a work force entirely as an outcome of internal, human capital characteristics of the workers and leaves the personnel managers out of the analysis (Thomas and Hughes 1986; Smith and Welsh 1989; Thomas 1993; Cancio, Evans, Maume 1996; Farkas and Vicknair 1996). In Silicon Valley, mechanisms behind the racial disparity is readily transparent with two inter-related hiring practices that work to intensify racial and ethnic concentration at the levels of a firm and the industry. First, various high technology companies “target” a certain ethnic group to fill their assembly work force. Over the years, Hewlett-Packard and Intel have relied on Vietnamese workers to fill their assembly work force while National Semiconductor and Advanced Micro Devices have relied on Filipinos (Rogers and Larsen 1984). Among the companies surveyed for this study, *all* of the firms targeted one or more Asian American ethnic groups or Latinos while *none* of the firms targeted African Americans or whites. Firms quickly gain reputations among assembly workers for favoring certain racial and ethnic groups, and this information serves to control the composition of applicants to individual firms. During my fieldwork, a Korean American woman who was laid off by a small disk drive manufacturer had this response to the news that Hewlett-Packard was hiring assembly workers:

I heard that Hewlett-Packard is hiring. It is the best place for assemblers to work in Silicon Valley. They pay high wages and provide great benefits. But I don't think they like Koreans that much. Most of the supervisors there are Vietnamese and Mexicans and so they hire Vietnamese and Mexican assemblers. Since I don't know any Koreans who work for Hewlett-Packard, I'll look elsewhere.

Once established, this reputation often becomes a part of the company image and culture. A common way for firms to send an implicit but an unequivocal message about which racial and ethnic group they privilege is to integrate ethnic-specific cultural practices at the work site and company functions for their assembly workers. By having the radio on the assembly floor set to a Chinese-language

station or by hiring a Vietnamese restaurant to cater a company picnic, firms remind the workers of the racial and ethnic dimensions of their employment as well as send a message about what groups are favored for employment. In an interview with the author, a Filipina supervisor at a major disk drive manufacturing facility shares this general observation regarding the role of race and ethnicity in the organization of assembly workers:

When ordinary people look at Silicon Valley, they say, "this is an American company, or that's a Japanese company" [referring to the ownership of the company] but for us assembly workers, we say, "this is a Filipino company, or that's a Vietnamese company" referring to whatever group has the most jobs in the assembly line.

Second, once a particular firm "specializes" in one or more racial and ethnic groups, the employer relies on personal networks of existing employees to recruit new workers. These personal networks—such as family, friends, churches, and community organizations—are overwhelmingly race and ethnic specific and recruitment of workers through these networks further intensifies the racial and ethnic hiring patterns of a firm. When the labor market becomes too tight for personal ties to recruit enough workers, more formal—but nevertheless race and ethnic specific—methods such as advertising in Asian- or Spanish-language newspapers are used. As Hossfeld (1988) has shown, one of the outcomes of this hiring strategy is the development of racial and ethnic paternalism in the management-worker relationship that can then be used to exert additional control over the workers. For instance, a Korean American woman working for a large firm observes that it would be exceedingly difficult for the predominantly Korean American assemblers to organize because "this company has been very generous in giving jobs to Korean Americans" and that "many Korean workers feel a personal debt is owed to the company for giving them this opportunity" (Park 1992:92). A Filipina worker who works in a small white-owned company puts it in a different way, stating:

By hiring only Filipinos, the owner wants us to view them as a *patron* who personally cares about the well being of the Filipino people. I know they do this only so we will feel indebted to them and not cause any trouble. But most Filipinos in the company don't feel the way I do.

RACIAL IDEOLOGY

The tremendous racial disparities in the assembly work force as well as the racialized hiring practices are obvious social realities in the high technology industry. A Taiwanese American owner of a small assembly contracting company observes:

Whenever I have visitors from Taiwan come over and take a tour of different companies, they all comment on the assembly lines. They want to know why there are so many Asians and Mexicans working as assemblers. It's funny. When you see the assembly lines in the Valley, all you see are rows and rows of black heads and busy hands.

The fact that assembly jobs do not require extensive educational background or technical training undermines individual-based human capital explanations that are so prevalent in explaining racial inequality in other segments of the high technology labor market. Faced with these realities, the employers readily offer group-based racial explanations to defend their hiring practices—both for their individual firms and the high technology industry as a whole. In my fieldwork, the issue of racial composition of the assembly work force was so overwhelming, almost all of the employers directly addressed the issue without ever being prompted to do so. In addition, the fact that it is Asian Americans and Latinos who are employed in large numbers force employers to engage in a comparative discussion about race since the absence of African Americans and whites is so conspicuous.

The high technology employers deploy racial explanations in various ways, operating at multiple levels. At the most basic level, employers rely on “classic racism” that invoke blatant racist images. A white male employment agency director tells the following story to Karen Hossfeld (1988:256) that reveals the racial hiring queue in Silicon Valley:

If you tell people that there's a job call Monday morning downtown at 9:00, this is what happens: The Chinese and the Koreans show up the night before, and camp outside the door, so they'll be the first in line . . . Between 8:00 and 9:00, the whites show up. The Mexicans come in the afternoon, after their siesta, and the blacks roll by—maybe—sometimes the next day.

Another white personnel manager of a disk drive manufacturing facility argues:

Asians are best suited for this type of tedious and detailed work because they are very patient people—they can endure almost anything. I would not hire blacks because I think they will climb the walls after a week of sitting all day putting little screws in little holes. As a group, blacks are hardly a patient people. As for whites, they probably think that they are too good for this kind of a job. Some white person might take it because they might be desperate, but if the economy improves, they'll be gone. Then, I'll have to find someone else and that's just too much trouble.

Even as some theorists have argued that “classic racism” has largely disappeared, blatant racist and sexist statements appear on a regular basis in ethnographic studies (see Hossfeld, 1988; Reskin and Roos 1990; Wilson 1996). In their study of African Americans in Chicago's entry-level labor market, Neckerman and Kirschenman (1991:441–2) deflate the importance of “classic racism,” even as they report white employers stating that African American men are “more likely to falsify their applications,” have “a chip on their shoulders,” and are “not willing to ‘play the game.’”

While the presence of blatant racism is troubling, the majority of racial explanations are more nuanced. In these explanations, innate and immutable notions recede as more sociological and cultural explanations emerge. A typical explanation in this regard underscores the “positive” cultural qualities of Asian Americans and Latinos that make them ideal candidates for the specific requirements of assembly work while relying on more sociological explanations to explain why

whites and African Americans would not. A white personnel manager who holds a Master's degree in sociology from a local university offers this explanation for his hiring decisions:

Asians work hard due to their Confucian culture. They have loyalty to the company and view the company like a family. Latinos in America also work hard because they had to. Working as migrant farmers for all these years has instilled a hard work ethic in them. Whites are falling behind because they have been too comfortable. Whites would not take such a hard job for this kind of money. And blacks. I think they have lost much of their work ethic, and it's really the fault of the welfare system. Why work when you can have the same income and maybe even better benefits from the welfare office?

Another common set of explanations links the perceived political positions of the respective racial groups in the broader society to the Silicon Valley's hiring queue for assembly workers. From this perspective, the search for an acquiescent labor force encourages employers to find workers who are less likely to assert their rights, either individually through filing a formal complaint to a regulatory agency or filing a lawsuit or collectively through the labor unions. The perceived racial difference in each of the groups' willingness to "rock the boat" is a recurrent theme in the explanation of the composition of assembly workers in Silicon Valley. A white owner of a graphics card manufacturing company that has *never* hired an African American assembler makes the following observation:

As a small businessman, my main fear is having a worker who is bent on filing formal complaints or lawsuits. It would surely drive me out of business. As I see it, Asians and Mexicans are generally not like that. If they have a problem, they try and solve it personally, or they just go to another company. But whites and blacks, they like to stand up for their rights, even if it means they can drive me out of business and all of the other workers lose their jobs. For blacks, I'm afraid that they will not just involve lawyers but bring outsiders, like the NAACP or the Black Panther's Party or whatever they have now. Then I'm really dead.

His observations are echoed by a Filipino American owner of a disk drive manufacturing contractor who observes:

All you have to do is turn on the evening news to see who would make a good worker. You never see Asians marching on the street. Sometimes you might see Mexicans, but that is very rare. On the other hand, you see whites and blacks protesting this or that all the time. I have tons of competitors who would love to take my business from me. I can't afford trouble in my company and that's why I tend to hire Asians first, then Latinos.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The research findings presented in this article shed light on several fronts in the contemporary debate in racial inequality and the American economy. First, the findings show that race is still a major factor in the employer's hiring decision-making process. In the assembly lines of the high technology industry in Silicon Valley, where historical effects and formal education and technical skill requirements are minimal, race occupies a central place in the minds of employers as they

make decisions regarding who to hire and who to avoid. In their *strategic use* of race, high technology employers rely both on crudest forms of racism *and* more nuanced racial explanations that nonetheless unequally structure the labor market opportunities for different racial groups. Whether a personnel manager believes that African Americans, by nature, lack patience, or lost their work ethic due to the welfare state, or are politically too empowered, all of these factors undermine African American employment opportunities in the high technology industry with devastating consequences. At the same time, the findings also show that racial discrimination finds different expressions for different groups: the same racial logic that causes employers to avoid African Americans and whites make Asian Americans and Latinos attractive. On this front, *racial discrimination* can have both an exclusionary as well as an inclusionary impact.

Second, this case study of assembly workers in Silicon Valley demonstrates the intersection of hiring decisions and the broader social context of race relations and politics. As respondents clearly demonstrate, broader race relations and politics are readily used to inform individual hiring decisions. High technology personnel managers routinely link the broad societal images of “passive Asians,” “desperate Latinos,” and “militant blacks” to help them hire individual workers and create a work force that they believe is less likely to demand rights individually or organize collectively. Much of the current discussion on the significance of race in the economy fails to capture the interpenetration between the politics of hiring and the broader politics of race. The findings here suggest that hiring decisions are not above racial politics at large but are intimately and inescapably interlinked.

Finally, the findings also raise important questions regarding the research strategy behind measuring the significance of race in the economy. Aggregate statistical analyses that rely on various regression models to decompose race effects are ultimately incomplete. As the recent debate between Cancio, Evans, and Maume (1996) and Farkas and Vicknair (1996) clearly shows, debates generated solely by empirical analysis will invariably lead to further debates about adding the “next” independent variable to refine the regression analysis. Since there is no conceptual way to make racial discrimination an independent variable in empirical analysis, the significance of race can only be arrived at when all other conceivable variables are taken into account, leaving racial discrimination as the only “undecomposed” variable in the regression analysis (see Iams and Thornton 1975; Jones and Kelley 1984). Given the conceptual and practical impasse this represents, ethnographic methods that directly address the subjectivity of employers have much to contribute. Ultimately, the significance of race question is about the *intentionality* of those who make hiring decisions and consequently have tremendous powers over people’s daily lives. In this respect, it is important to demystify the social mechanisms of labor recruitment and hiring and place the subjectivity of the employers at the center of the discussion.

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