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JENNIFER PARKER TALWAR

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CONTRADICTORY ASSUMPTIONS IN THE MINIMUM-WAGE WORKPLACE

A Focus on Immigrants, the American-Born, and Employer Preferences in Brooklyn, New York

JENNIFER PARKER TALWAR
Pennsylvania State University, Berks-Lehigh Valley

JENNIFER PARKER TALWAR is an assistant professor of sociology at Penn State University, Berks-Lehigh Valley. She is currently a postdoctoral fellow at the Social Science Research Council. Her main research interests include international migration, transnational work processes, globalization, and inner-city employment.

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A study of fast-food restaurants in Brooklyn, New York, examines factors contributing to inner-city racial minorities' underrepresentation in low-wage consumer-service jobs. Stressing the importance of "geocultural context" and workplace social relations, it helps broaden the framework around other qualitative studies attempting to understand race and ethnic patterns in the growing service-based economy. Findings demonstrate a hiring preference for the foreign-born, shaped by factors rooted in both the neighborhood context and the workplace. In-depth assessment of workplace interactions and conflicts reveals a set of contradictory assumptions between managers and employees, contributing to a "self-fulfilling prophecy" and reduced employment rates among American-born racial minorities.

A growing literature widely acknowledges that labor market tendencies in the service economy including racial biases and greater emphasis on subjectively defined hiring criteria are significant factors affecting racial minorities' disproportionate representation among the inner-city jobless (Waldinger 1993; Kirschenman, Moss, and Tilly 1995; Wilson 1997; Newman 1999). Going beyond the importance of "hard" skills requirements (such as educational attainment and achievement scores) that have traditionally helped to explain racial gaps in earnings and employment status, many studies have demonstrated a link between employers' reliance on social or "soft" skills and reduced minority, particularly black, employment. Kirschenman, Moss, and Tilly (1995), for instance, in a study of employers in Chicago, found that black workers were rated lower than others on social features such as interaction skills and motivation and that employers' greater reliance on subjective rather than formal methods for screening applicants was correlated with reduced black employment. Similarly, Waldinger (1993), in a study of hotel and restaurant employers in Los Angeles, found that employers were critical of black workers' social skills.

These studies link findings with employers' stereotypical views of racial minorities and discriminatory hiring practices. Varying degrees of discrimination are related to urban-suburban differences, type of occupation, and the internalization of race and ethnic stereotypes (Kirschenman and Neckerman 1991; Kirschenman, Moss, and Tilly 1995; Moss and Tilly 1996; Kasinitz 1996; Newman 1999). Joined by a body of other literature that examines the effect of immigration on native-born employment (Waldinger 1996; White and Liang 1998;

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Freeman 1998; Tienda 1998; Leiter and Tomaskovic-Devey 2000), these low-wage employment studies posit an association between discriminatory practices against the native-born and employer preferences for foreign-born workers.

Relying on direct employer surveys, these studies argue the need for qualitative assessment when measuring work criteria and hiring practices in the service economy. They depart from quantitative approaches that rely on cross-section and time-series micro data to measure hard skills such as educational levels, job training, and work experience. Quantitative analysis, while appropriate in non-service-based work settings that tend to emphasize hard skills, is limited in measuring the kind of soft skills that are important in service-oriented enterprises, particularly because of the subjective ways in which employers perceive and interpret appropriate social behavior in the context of work demands. While there is disagreement within the literature as to the strength of the relationship between the growing service-related economy and reduced minority employment, and criticism for lack of attentiveness to gender and other social differences, it is surprising that it has not broadened its methodological framework to include in-depth analysis of the labor process (Kirschenman, Moss, and Tilly 1995; Holzer 1995).

These qualitative studies of low-wage service work do not go so far as to study the social processes at the level of the firm that may contribute to racial gaps in employment. While they contribute to our understanding of employer practices, they are not able to explain such things as how hiring practices may be shaped by interactions and conflicts between and among managers and employees. Furthermore, they do not explain variations between individual employers based on location or geocultural context (cultural features of the firm's location). Geocultural context is important for explaining individual variation in regard to the race and ethnic composition of employers and employees. Likewise, work criteria in customer-service-based firms tend to reflect features of the locality. Language(s) spoken and cultural particularities of a neighborhood, for example, would seem to help shape job criteria, especially as they relate to local marketing strategies and interacting with customers and also because neighborhood features help determine the racial and ethnic composition of an available labor supply.

Based on a study of fast-food restaurants in Brooklyn, New York, this article intends to broaden the framework of the qualitative literature on employment practices in the low-wage services by focusing on

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workplace social relations. By social relations, I am referring to interactions and conflicts that transpire between and among managers and employees. I argue that factors endemic to the workplace are important to understanding racial minorities' participation in low-wage work sectors of the service economy. Furthermore, by focusing on a particular geocultural context, I argue the need to be attentive to how specific neighborhood dynamics may influence job criteria and hiring practices. The selected neighborhood in Brooklyn is a shopping area historically popular among New York City's racial minorities, especially its black population. In the past several years, however, the demographics of this area have come to reflect the vast ethnic and national diversity of New York's new populations due to the influx of immigrants from around the world, especially the Third World.

I argue that the kinds of social distinctions employers make in the workplace are based on a combination of factors, including the ethnic and racial composition of their workforces and labor supplies. In the Brooklyn case, employers articulate distinctions among a global workforce and labor supply that is largely black and Latino/Latina and in accordance with perceived fast-food work demands. Like previous studies, I show that new immigration plays a significant role in employers' "markers of productivity" but that the distinction between *black* and *nonblack* (highly prevalent in previous studies) is not as decisive as the distinction fast-food employers make between the immigrant and the American-born, regardless of race. Part of this distinction is rooted in the composition of the available labor supply in Brooklyn, largely consisting of a global workforce of black and Latino/Latina, both foreign- and native-born. While employers show cognitive signs of both pure and statistical discrimination, they reflect less on race as a category and more on categories of national origin, intertwined with class, culture, and gender.

Social skills requirements, combined with changing technologies, growing numbers of immigrant managers, and the precipitous decline in the real value of minimum wage, reinforce employer preferences in favor of immigrants and the upwardly mobile. But, similar to what Kirschenman and Neckerman (1991) argue, workplace social relations tend to reinforce irrational "tastes" for or measures of discrimination, eventuating into "rational, profit-maximizing behavior." Native-born Latino/Latina, as well as black males, in this case, still tend to be the most adversely affected. This study goes further than previous studies,

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however, by analyzing the source of employer-made distinctions and their effect in reinforcing a negative workplace climate. Such distinctions, I argue, are often premised on contradictory assumptions rooted in incongruity between how employers perceive the work values and "attitude"[1] of their American-born employees and their applicability to customer-service work and the ways in which these same employees articulate their own values and work ethics in relation to fast-food work. Such contradictory assumptions contribute to a self-fulfilling prophecy, reinforcing negative stereotypes and affecting hiring practices that do not tend to favor American-born racial minorities.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research is based on participant observation and interviews in fast-food restaurants in a neighborhood in Brooklyn, New York, between 1992 and 1996. I began my research in 1992 when I worked in a Burger King restaurant for three months to study workplace culture as part of a course assignment in graduate school. I worked alongside Latin American and West Indian immigrants as well as men and women of American-born racial minorities. There were small numbers of South Asian immigrants and American-born white employees. Among them were high school and college students, fathers and mothers; many worked two or three different jobs. I was struck by the amount of employees supporting families or independent livelihoods on their fast-food jobs. I had worked at a McDonald's in suburbia in the mid-1980s as a teenager where it seemed that everyone worked for pocket change. Had something changed over the years? Or were conditions in the city just different? I wondered why it was that hard-working people with families were earning minimum wages after years of experience in jobs that we have long thought to be for teenagers on their way to college or at least a better job. It seemed important to learn more about this industry, as its employment practices in the city seemed to defy our traditional stereotypes of the fast-food worker.

I was particularly struck by managers' assumptions about workers that seemed to contradict workers' own work ethics and perceptions of working conditions. During my first day on the job, one manager informed me that the "niggers were lazy" and "especially if they were American." Throughout my study, managers (regardless of their ethnic

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and national origins) made comments directed toward American-born minority workers such as "they don't want to work," "they want something for nothing," and "they are not looking ahead." On the other hand, these same workers claimed to be "treated like slaves," "unappreciated," and experiencing poor life conditions that were not acknowledged by their employers.

My observations and interpretations of them were recorded in a notebook after each of my shifts and during my fifteen-minute breaks. I also carried a small notebook in my pocket and occasionally and unobtrusively jotted down details of my coworkers' and managers' comments and interactions while I was working. Because most of what I observed was unanticipated, I did not use a standardized recording form. But I often asked questions to provoke discussion on various topics. Each night, all of my notes were typed on a computer. Besides filing my notes chronologically, I coded them, using categories pertaining to the labor process including demographic features, hiring practices, ethnic/cultural conflict, worker resistance, work values and ethics, and employee conditions.

I did not conceal my identity as a sociologist. During my first day of work, I informed the managers and some of my coworkers of my sociological intentions—that I planned to write about fast-food work to fulfill requirements for a college thesis. But I was not taken seriously. I later learned that on the job, most fast-food workers assert what sociologists refer to as a "primary status" while downplaying their status as fast-food workers. Because of the low status and social stigma surrounding fast-food work, employees tend to view their jobs as "secondary" while calling attention to their more significant roles as mothers or fathers, students, and athletes or their professional status in a future career. My claim to being a sociologist was perceived in this context, while it was assumed that I had resorted to a minimum-wage job due to financial necessity, just like everyone else. In this way, my status was reassigned by the social setting while it helped me gain a firsthand perspective on workplace processes.

These experiences led me to a wider study of fast-food restaurants in New York City at large to examine the extent to which American-born minorities were being left out of jobs like fast food. Between 1992 and 1995, I spoke with more than one hundred participants in fast-food restaurants among the largest franchise chains in Queens, Brooklyn, and Manhattan. I found that a majority immigrant workforce was a norm in

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most restaurants and that managers, regardless of their own social backgrounds, including national origins, tended to hold similar views on the distinctions between immigrant and American-born workers. I then decided to go back to the Brooklyn neighborhood where I did my participant observation. It seemed important to understand, in an in-depth way, the sources of contradiction between managers' and American-born workers' perspectives and the extent to which it reflected a self-fulfilling prophecy resulting in what one manager referred to as the "fizzling out" of American-born minorities from the low-wage workplace. My approach was more formal this time as I did not apply for a job and instead sought authorization to conduct face-to-face interviews with managers and crewmembers.[2] I presented myself as a graduate student doing a thesis on fast-food work.

I conducted the interviews in 1995 and 1996 in two different restaurants, including a Burger King and a McDonald's restaurant. The respondents were selected based on manager permission, accessibility, occupational title (manager or crewmember), and national origin. I interviewed 19 people including five managers and ten crewmembers. The managers were African American, Puerto Rican, and South Asian, and two were American-born of European descent. They ranged in age from twenty-five to forty-five years. Five workers were African American; three were of Puerto Rican descent, born in New York; one was Italian American; and five were from the West Indian islands. They ranged in age from eighteen to forty-five years. To protect the privacy of these respondents, their real names have not been used. The interviews lasted between forty-five minutes and three hours, in one or two sessions. All were conducted in English. The interview guide included questions concerning hiring practices, the composition of the labor supply, perceptions of the labor supply and workforce, work criteria, labor processes, and divisions of labor. (See the appendix for the interview guide.) All of the interviews were taped and transcribed. Data were coded and analyzed with the same categories used in the preliminary part of this study. I draw on data from both the participant observation and formal interviews throughout this article. The data presented are intended as a significant qualitative representation of employment processes in a particular geocultural context and are not intended to be generalized.

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FINDINGS

"TOO MUCH ATTITUDE" AND THE RISE IN NEOCONSERVATISM

As previous studies have shown, the "underclass" stereotype affects employers' perceptions of inner-city youth and the kinds of distinctions they make based on race, ethnicity, class, age, and national origin (Kirschenman and Neckerman 1991; Kirschenman, Moss, and Tilly 1995; Moss and Tilly 1996; Kasinitz 1996; Newman 1999). One of the principle characteristics of this stereotype is what employers in my study seem to universally convey: "too much attitude." Such "attitude," I argue, insofar as it is perceived to exist by managers, can be seen as not simply derived from pathological inner-city traits but, rather, may stem in good part from workplace social relations. The perceived attitude and work values of inner-city youth play a major role in employer bias and hiring preferences that have not favored them. Employers in my study commonly talked about too much attitude characterizing inner-city youth that is perceived to be an attitude of resistance to legitimate forms of work and lack of adherence to mainstream social values. Too much attitude can also be seen as a form of resistance to service roles. This attitude of resistance is represented in popular culture. Chantelle (Ariyan A. Johnson), an African American cashier in the film *Just Another Girl on the IRT* (1992), talks back to a white middle-class customer who insulted her in a small grocery store on the Upper West Side and loses her job. And the lyrics of a rap song that reached the top of the charts suggest that working at a fast-food restaurant means a lack of talent.

Service management literature has been complaining about American youth's lack of service etiquette since the mid-1980s (Albrecht and Zemke 1985; Crompton and Sanderson 1990). A national survey of three thousand employers conducted in 1995 by the Census Bureau of Hiring, Training and Management Practices in American business revealed that employers are most concerned with the job applicant's "attitude" and "behavior" more than anything else (Applebome 1995). Does this reflect a general attitude problem among U.S. youth? Or is it,

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as Robert Zemsky, codirector of the group that developed this employer survey, asks, "something in the culture now that young people get dumped upon?" (Applebome 1995)

I argue in this article that work values and attitude on the job are affected by the experience of working including the perception employees have about what can be gained through working. What is emphasized is that attitude may be partly shaped by the workplace experience and conditions—a reflection of factors endemic to low-wage jobs—and not solely by external factors. I found that fast-food managers link their perception of a poor work ethic and attitude to a different value orientation plaguing American youth, which they blame on poor family values, media propaganda, peer pressure, and individualism. They even link values to economic structural factors that affect the family.

The emphasis on values by employers may reflect a number of factors. First, it may be related to the transforming labor market. The biggest job growth in the low-wage economy is in the retail trades and services where work criteria reflect an emphasis on customer service. Values and attitudes are considered important to the customer-employee interaction. Coupled with this, there is a growing need to control the workforce due to the "wage squeeze" (Gordon 1996). Although there have been recent hikes in the minimum wage, it remains drastically lower, in real terms, than its peak in 1972. The emphasis on values may also reflect the rise in neoconservatism in the United States since the Reagan era. According to Michael Hughey and Arthur Vidich (1992), this has brought back earlier conceptions of the Protestant work ethic grounded in "a morality of self discipline, hard work, and civic mindedness" and the "sanctity of the traditional family." The growing competition for low-wage jobs in the biggest American cities reinforces the importance of a conservative work ethic, especially as increasing numbers of immigrants join the labor market. Immigrants serve as a reference group for employers that link neoconservative values with the immigrant work ethic and, in turn, link poor work ethics with the native-born.

My data, however, suggest that American inner-city youth who are working reflect some of these same neoconservative values regarding work and family. These values, as articulated by my employee respondents, include the notion that work itself should carry intrinsic social value. They include an emphasis on the "breadwinner wage"—the norm that by working they should be able to support a family. They

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include a future orientation—having goals and aspirations—and the idea that working should be a means for social elevation. A belief in these values, however, embodies certain expectations in the workplace. First, employees believe that the social value they hold intrinsic to work will be recognized by their employers, the larger society, and the government. In other words, they believe that they should be treated with respect by their employers and by customers because they are doing "honest work." They also believe that they should be protected by federal, state, and city workplace laws. Second, they believe that working should provide a means for supporting themselves and their families. Wages, work schedules, and benefits should allow for this. Third, they believe that their work experience should carry some value in the labor market at large. Working hard and being loyal to an employer should pay off in the long run in terms of better wages, opportunities for advancement, or being able to find a better job. It is when these expectations regarding work, family, and social mobility are not met that employees display signs of discontent, helping to reify employers' stereotypes regarding negative attitude.

"NO PRIDE IN THEIR WORK"

The characterization of the "underclass" by employers in low-wage sectors like fast-food restaurants in New York City is invariably shaped by their reference to young immigrant workers. The explanations provided by employers for the American versus foreign distinction are rooted in factors specific to U.S. versus Third World culture rather than factors rooted in race or ethnicity, class, or gender. Nonetheless, in practicality, and given the composition of fast-food job seekers, the American versus foreign distinction is also rooted in social class. What managers say invariably refers to a distinction between the most disadvantaged American minorities, largely black and Latino/Latina, and an upwardly mobile immigrant population that comes from poor as well as middle-class households. Middle-class Americans, regardless of their race and ethnic backgrounds, do not tend to work in minimum-wage fast-food jobs. They have "better" opportunities, including more prestigious low-wage retail jobs. Managers, irrespective of their ethnic and national origin, were surprisingly uniform in their perspectives. Loren, an African American manager born and raised in New

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York City, was most explicit about the foreign versus American distinction among low-wage workers:

> People who are born here, they are more into saying I don't need this. There is not the same pride in their work as much as people who come from somewhere else and say, "Hey, this is my life. I have to start from somewhere. And when I get to this place, I will move to the next place." That is what I am seeing from people who are coming from other places. Believe it or not, I see those kinds of people being hired in the future than the ones who are just saying, "I don't need this job. I don't need you. I am just here for the paycheck." And there is a lot of that going on by people who are born here.

He links this attitude to what he perceives to be a comfortable lifestyle and a lack of a future orientation:

> They live with their parents. They have boyfriends or girlfriends, they are pretty stable. They are just comfortable at minimum wage and working 20 hours a week and doing this for the moment. They are not looking ahead. That is what is unfortunate about people who are born here. That is what I am recognizing at this store. Not all, but a majority. They are not looking ahead. That is where the problem starts.

Loren implies how the company criteria involving motivation and company loyalty, values embedded in nineteenth-century Protestant conceptions of work, are affecting managers' preferences for immigrants. This conception of work is articulated within the context of a neoconservative moral structure in which values are linked to the traditional family, self-reliance, hard work, and civic mindedness (Weber 1958; Hughey and Vidich 1992). "I am just here for the paycheck" is, to this manager, an unacceptable purpose for working. The manager is implying that an employee must not only work but must be proud of his or her work and exhibit this "pride" while working. Furthermore, employees must be upwardly mobile or at least believe they are by "looking ahead." Julio, a New York City–born Puerto Rican manager in downtown Brooklyn, was also explicit about how he perceives differences between immigrants and the American-born. He said,

> The big difference I do notice is that a lot of the foreign-born come here knowing mopping or sweeping because they have done it before. The ones who are born here, are not used to mopping, cleaning . . . like they

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> have had everything handed to them. It is a lot more frustrating sometimes because like you got people in orientation that you explain to them mopping and sweeping and they get up and say "No, I am not going to work here because I don't mop and sweep." I find that rather strange sometimes.

Julio relates this to a lack of good parenting and a greater interest in "partying" than working:

> Most of the ones who are foreign born, they come here and their parents push them because it is the American dream. Like I brought you to America to seek the American dream. And a lot of people who were born here, they think the American dream is something that is given to you. People, who come here, they realize that the American dream is what you work for. You reap what you sow literally. So they push themselves hard because they know—a lot of people tell them it is a waste of time to go to school—but they know that all the sacrifices now have to pay off sooner or later.

He contrasted this with the American-born:

> A lot of kids who are born here, I notice that, it is like they work here, they don't want to come to work, they want to leave early. Fridays and Saturdays are very difficult for them. Friday evening rolls around and people try and call in sick. Partiers. I try and tell them that a party is nothing. You don't understand they tell me—that I am not of their generation. I try to tell them when I was your age I was in your same place.

In general, managers tend to counterpose the negative traits of the American-born to the positive traits of immigrants. According to managers, the foreign-born "come here knowing mopping and sweeping," and the Americans "don't mop and sweep." To the foreign-born, the "American dream is what you work for," and to the Americans, the "American dream is something that is given to you." The foreign-born "know that all the sacrifices now have to pay off sooner or later." The Americans, on the other hand, are perceived by managers as "partiers" and "not looking ahead." In this way, it seems that the imputed traits of immigrants have come to reflect employers' expectations and labor criteria for all workers. Managers, in general, expressed the idea that a poor work ethic among the American-born affects the way the work is

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performed. Loren links the "no pride in their work" to an inability to respond to the organization's emphasis on customer service. As he says,

> Some people are automatic. The ones who are automatic have that pride. Again if there is something on the floor pick it up. If something spills you gotta mop it. If a customer is sick you try to encourage them. Some people have this naturally and that comes from the way they are brought up. Others are quick to say if something comes off the wrong way, or bumps you "what is your problem" as opposed to "excuse me." A lot of people make a big issue out of a customer coming back and saying "my french fries are cold." "Well I didn't give them." That is not the point. The person at Burger King has to accept this. "You didn't get nice hot french fries? This has to be changed." Maybe the customer sat 20 minutes under the air conditioning and the french fries got cold. But Burger King states that they want the customer taken care of regardless.

Another manager, Bill, who is American-born of European descent, explained how he thought skills and manners associated with interacting with people are not traits to be learned in the workplace. Rather, as Bill said, these are features that should be central parts of the childhood socialization process. Immigrants are perceived as appropriately socialized, while the new generation born in America is perceived as deprived of appropriate socialization. Managers seem to resent having to teach these skills. As Bill said,

> Me trying to explain that to some people, they really don't understand. They say, "She didn't have to tell me that way." Yes, yelling and screaming is not the way to go all the time. But she [customer] has a reason to be upset. There are people who can really understand and there are those who can't. The ones who can't have never been around that surrounding.

"The ones who have never been around that surrounding" specifically implies the expectation that customer-service skills do result from "good" childhood socialization. But it is reflected in more than simply verbal interactions. Good socialization is reflected in one's demeanor, the "way they carry themselves." George, a white American manager, explained,

> I know for a fact. I see the guys here. I look at them. The way they carry themselves. I don't do this at home. Believe it. Trust me. I know you

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> don't wash dishes, you don't clean. I know for a fact. I know your mother does all your laundry and everything else. I know. The majority who come here are like that. The ones who have the pride in their work are under some situation where they really feel the need to grow and grow and grow and grow. Until these guys [American-born] get it, they are going to be that way anyway. "I don't need to do this."

The perceived lack of pride and motivation, which is linked to the lack of a strong work ethic among the American-born, is also considered by some managers to reflect "outside forces," such as the drug trade, that offer more prestige and more money. As Bill said,

> We have a lot of outside forces where you can make a quick buck doing things illegally. Unlike here where everyone starts at minimum wage. So you make minimum wage and you got to wear that uniform and there is a lot of pressure. So why do they want to take a job like this?

According to managers, outside forces particular to the youth generation that was raised in the United States include the strong emphasis on individualism. Individualism, it is believed, constrains the development of social skills. Television and other technological innovations such as the Walkman and video games contribute to social isolation and, hence, a lack of ability to deal with the kinds of pressures workers confront when dealing with the public. As Julio suggested,

> There is a lot of stress in this job at times. As you came in yourself, you see the front counter. There are a lot of customers. Some of these customers get on you. A lot of these young kids are not used to dealing with pressure. Being heaped and being heaped. A lot of them put on their walkmans. The bigger (newer) generation, I was telling people, they watch television, play video games. They are locked in a room most of the time where everything comes to them. So then when they deal with the public it is harder for them to deal with them.

Julio explains how it was different a generation ago:

> I come from a different generation. We would go on the street and we had to invent our own games and invent our own fun, our imagination would go wild. But now things are in such a way that you can isolate yourself and it is a lot harder to deal with the public.

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Managers implicitly suggest that those who come from countries where these modern technologies are not widely affordable, as they are in the United States, are better prepared to apply the kinds of social skills that fast-food work requires.

The social stigma of working in fast-food restaurants is perceived by managers to be an added pressure on American-born youth. This peer pressure—particular to the current generation—affects the work ethic and creates a problem for managers in terms of assigning American-born workers certain tasks. Sandeep, a manager from India, explained:

> A lot of them, if they are working here in uniform in back and you want them to go in the lobby or go to another store to pick up something, they want to change their clothes. They want to change everything completely. Like they don't want their friends to see them. A lot of people just look down on working here. "Oh you are just a burger flipper."

Julio tries to reason with the source of this social stigma that affects the American-born more than immigrants:

> It is the picture that was probably painted for them, on advertisements, maybe in comedy clubs, maybe throughout the years. Maybe they are those customers who were turned away. . . . Again, someone who is from somewhere else, not listening to all the things that people are saying—they haven't been associated with it—"You are hiring? Hey great." When they come here to work they appreciate it.

According to managers, in general, their foreign-born employees are less vulnerable to peer pressure prevalent in the American youth culture. As Sandeep said, "You got workers here, most of the workers who come from other countries come to work in their uniform. They get here and just take their jacket off." In this way, managers claim, there is no limit in the assignment of tasks such as the running of errands outside the restaurant or working in the dining room.

Managers further claim that the foreign-born are more future oriented—the delaying of immediate gratification such as going to parties when one is scheduled to work. The foreign-born, then, are perceived to be more adaptable to the industry's scheduling and flexible demands in the assignment of tasks. The future orientation characteristic appears to carry intrinsic value in this industry as well. It is a value that earns fundamental respect from employers. This is partly because it has been a

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major source of self-respect by many managers, especially American-born racial minorities who consider themselves successful and self-made. They attribute their success to a work ethic built on a "future orientation," or, as Weber might see it, "transvaluations of earlier Protestant conceptions of America" (Hughey and Vidich 1992; Weber 1958).

These managers seem intolerant of those who do not have this same orientation. Part of this intolerance seems to reflect on their lack of ability to influence youth. Juan, a Latino American manager, said he tries to tell his employees "that a party is nothing. You don't understand they tell me, as I am not of their generation. I try to tell them when I was your age I was in your same place." Similarly, Loren said,

> I tell young kids today when they get here, "Let me tell you something. All your Whitney Houstons, all your Sylvestor Stallones and all your Donald Trumps have worked in fast food before so you just take note of that. Try to find out why and be aware of what people really have been doing and what they've been against . . . all the young basketball players . . . maybe those are skills that don't have to use so much brains, but all the people who do have to use brains have worked at Burger King or McDonald's. They joke about it now because they remember the days. I try to tell kids today that they should be getting a start somewhere. You can't just be an engineer one day. And nobody is going to give you the keys to any corporation without knowing you a little bit. So you are going to have to work buddy, whether you like it or not.

Managers identify more with and hold greater respect for their foreign-born employees. This is vividly reflected in how they talk about their foreign-born employees. For example, Julio spoke highly about a number of former coworkers who immigrated to this country:

> One person, he is a Doctor and for four years, he literally just went to college and worked here. He had no social life whatsoever. He was born in Jamaica. He had no social life for four years. Now he is an anesthesiologist at Lennox County Hill Hospital. He has all the time in the world. Much more relaxed. It paid off. He is only 26 years old, also. He has everything ahead of him now. Another one is a teacher. The third one, she is a registered nurse. There are a couple of nurses. The biggest thing about them is that none of them were born here or their parents were not born here. They all came from different countries. They came from other countries, they went to school here, they worked here, and they busted

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> their behinds in order to make it, doctors, lawyers. We also have some that went into the police force.

While these managers make distinctions between foreign- and American-born employees, they also make distinctions between themselves and American-born youth. Both Loren, as an African American, and Julio, as a Latino American, for instance, have very similar experiences. They both started out as crewmembers while they were teenagers and in high school. They both aspired to and climbed the fast-food job ladder at an early age. They have both been in the industry for nearly a decade. When I asked Loren what he believes makes him different from other American-born employees, he said,

> I was born in Brooklyn. But I will tell you one thing. I got all my thought patterns and all my everything from my family. My family is strictly hard work, serious business. If I talked back at my mother it was like I had swung at her. I see kids with their parents now "Ma, shut up. You don't know what you are talking about." What? If I said that I'd be history. I think it comes from the home. What they see their parents doing. What they see their parent's friends doing. What they see their brothers and sisters doing and getting away with. Parents. I believe in them.

While he acknowledges general societal forces that are influencing today's American youth, he also believes that, at some level, it is the parents' responsibility to counteract these forces:

> No. It is not always their fault. There are a lot of hard working parents who have nothing against their children. But it is not the majority, unfortunately. A lot of what I have seen is coming from the parents. Look at the language he is using. Look at the way she is carrying herself. And it is no wonder. And again, you talk about someone coming from somewhere else, they are raised from hard work, I'm sure. Hard work whether it is McDonald's or sweeping the streets. They better be the best garbage picker upper you can be to get ahead. Hey, there is no pride in the work when it comes down to other people saying, "I don't need this."

Managers, invariably, point to changing family values to explain what they perceive as the poor work ethic among American youth today. But some managers also referred to the changing structural conditions of the family today. As George said,

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> Some of the people who were born here, they are at a disadvantage because their parents don't push them as hard [as immigrants]. And then some of them, their parents both have to work. Some have to work two jobs. So they are not home. So you have a child who goes to school, he may be all by himself in the day at home. Nobody asks him how he does in school, what did he do for the tests. So, a lot of them are unmotivated. But you can't blame the parent either. Sometimes it is just the system. You get caught in the cycle that never ends.[3] And it is very difficult to break that cycle.

In terms of how Julio succeeded in overcoming such structural obstacles, he referred back to an explanation of family values:

> My parents made sure I did my work. Made sure I studied hard. Made sure I was accessible to a library. My mother bought me an encyclopedia set. So I didn't have to go breaking my neck in a library. . . . So I think the blame must be shared between the system, and among the family. Somehow they have to work together to try to knock down this barrier that seems to be preventing kids from getting a good education.

Many of the distinctions employees made between themselves and other Americans referred to family values. But their explanations also tended to be situated in the context of how they perceived changing structural conditions in the society at large—changes they have seen and experienced since they started in the industry. Outside forces such as the drug trade, media influences, technological developments, and peer pressure were thought to affect attitude, work ethics, and work performance. Family values were regarded as necessary, and even obligatory, to counteract these outside forces. But families were also viewed as structurally constrained by changing economic conditions that force, at minimum, both parents into the workplace or, at worst, break them apart due to heightening material tensions. Employers, in general, recognize a growing contradiction between family values and the ability to abide by these values in the changing American workplace.

THE "BURGER FLIPPER" STIGMA

While managers agree on the work ethic distinction between foreign-born and domestic workers, American-born workers reject this same distinction. What managers say about their American-born

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employees is never wholly consistent with what these same workers say about their own experiences and work values and what I have observed in the workplace. When employees do show signs of resistance or simply complain about their work they are referring to very specific conditions and relations with their employers. By examining what American youth say and my observations of the social relations and conditions in the workplace, we can at least begin to see in more precise ways how the characteristics that managers speak of, including attitude, may be shaped through the work experience rather than solely external conditions. It is rooted in their racial, cultural, and class position. I questioned American-born fast-food employees about the work ethics of American youth. Their responses referred to their own experiences, what they know and have talked about among friends, family, and acquaintances. While they often referred to the workplace conditions at the fast-food restaurant, what they said usually had a larger context.

According to crewmembers, the shaping of work values is linked to larger structural factors including the family, social/material conditions, labor market opportunities, and the illicit economy. On the other hand, work values seemed to be affirmed in the personal or private realm of family and friends rather than in the workplace or public at large. In this way, and just as managers do, crewmembers tended to associate their values with a personal/individual/family value system rather than a value system held by society at large.

While immigrants distinguish themselves from "Americans," the American-born tend to distinguish themselves from other Americans. American-born workers, for example, at some level blame Americans, in general, for their perceived lack of motivation to work in minimum-wage jobs. Yet, crewmembers differed in explaining the underlying cause of this lack of motivation. For some, Americans are simply lazy. But for others, Americans are "too into being handicapped." "Being handicapped" implies doing what one can for the most money, which often means illegal activity.[4] Edward, a second-generation Antiguan who identifies himself as African American, said that they are

> too much into drugs, into the drug gang, which a lot of my friends are. I know I was when I was younger. But it was stupid. I am not going to jail and ruin my life. And a lot of them are out there robbing people.

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At the same time, Edward does not totally dismiss a criminal lifestyle as irrational. Being handicapped also means to him a kind of giving up on or dismissal of the mainstream way of life when the opportunities for success seem unattainable, especially considering what entry-level jobs like fast food offer. It takes a special kind of person not to be handicapped, as he implies here:

> A lot of people want to start from the top and keep going. Not many people are really strong willed enough and will take the embarrassment and the putdowns from other people to start from minimum wage and work your way up. It is messed up. But we have a lot of strong willed people here. So regardless of what they say about fast food, we are cool about it. But the money is an issue.

Edward is distinguishing between two dominant societal values regarding work that American youth without skills and education are constantly caught between. One regards money and prestige (consumerist values), and the other concerns making an "honest living." Both have their costs. The first—"to start from the top"—usually means resorting to illegal activity and therefore great risk of being criminalized. The latter means taking a low-wage, low-status job and therefore being subject to often demeaning conditions and social embarrassment. Neither is socially acceptable. But the latter, at least historically, has held the promise of a long-term payoff, premised on the American Dream. But, the experience of working itself is what often makes workers lose faith in this long-term payoff.

It is not difficult to realize the dilemma Edward posits. It is based on personal experience. Edward, as he tells his story, was involved in the drug trade and rejected this for what he considered a more socially legitimate path. Now, after years of fast-food experience, he has burns, scars, and permanent injuries on his hands and arms. He had planned and aspired to become a fast-food manager and has changed his mind because of what he has experienced in the industry. It seems that unfavorable work conditions compounded by poor material/living circumstances and lack of job alternatives help shape a particular work ethic or set of values among employees in the restaurant workplace. As Edward said,

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> That is why a lot of employees here, I have seen them take money, take food. But in a way I can't blame them because they are not getting enough money in here. A lot of people in here have families and children and they are not making enough to support them. And plus it is bad enough they are going through that. They are getting stressed out. They want you to do everything in here in such little time and for nothing. So I can't really blame them when they want to take money from the cash register and get over.

In this sense, he implies that "to take money" from the employer and "getting over" is rational and legitimate in the workplace because employees are just trying to make a living from wages that do not provide enough to do just that. He is making a distinction between "robbing from people" (the activity of the "handicapped") and "taking" from the employer (the activity of the employees). It is different and legitimate because they are performing work that is worth more than what they are actually getting paid. In other words, employees are taking what is rightfully theirs.

James Tucker (1993), in a study of temporary workers, found that employees commonly respond to "offensive behavior" on the part of their employers in various ways including "theft, sabotage, or noncooperation." Jason Ditton (1977), in "Perks, Pilferage, and the Fiddle," showed how low-wage workers have historically been situated in a "double-bind" system whereby part of the worker's wages are paid "in-kind" as part of a structure of "invisible wages." "His wages are geared down to an invisible pilferage value of his job, but his attempt to secure this invisible value could well lose him his job, and, land him in court" (p. 45). Importantly, employers in this system maintain the power to define the action, either as a "perk" or as a "theft."[5]

In the fast-food restaurant, "taking" from the employer—if caught—is reason for dismissal. But rather than the employer having the power to define the particular action, the institution has institutionalized the definitions of various actions. Stealing money from the cash register, for example, is grounds for dismissal. And so is taking, or giving away, food. But, there are many forms of taking besides taking money from the cash register. And there are different ways to steal food that are interpreted as legitimate and not defined as stealing. Sometimes employees steal by exploiting the workplace rules. For example, at the fast-food restaurant where I worked, employees are allowed to eat (on the premises) food that has already been "put down" after the store

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closes (prepared food that will not be sold). ("Putting down" refers to the beginning stage of preparing a food item.) A nightly ritual while I was working there was for employees to put down whatever they wanted to eat for the night—plus a little extra. This had to be done while customers were in the store so that managers thought it was being prepared for the customers. Roy, my crew trainer while I was working at Burger King, usually coordinated these efforts.

Another form of taking from the employer is the giving of free food to friends who come into the store as customers. The commonality of this practice forms the basis for employers' preferences to hire outside of the neighborhood. Managers are suspicious of any cashier who is serving a friend or relative. Consequently, due to fear of losing their jobs, cashiers encourage friends and relatives not to come into the store (or at least not get on their line) while they are working. Moreover, employees tend to seek jobs outside their own neighborhoods.

Edward is also implying that one should not expect employees to have pride in their work, as managers suggest, and respect their employer or their jobs if the employer does not have the same respect for the employees. In other words, he is saying that employees value their jobs as much as managers value their employees who perform the work. Consequently, the social value attached to doing honest work is perceived by workers to be devalued in the workplace.

When workers do hold pride in their work, it is supposed to come from some influence external to the work organization, such as the family. According to current fast-food employees, especially American employees, it is the low wage (along with the lack of fringe benefits, job insecurity, and unstable work schedule) that partially degrades the work, for the work, they believe, should hold greater social value. Still, workers claim to feel embarrassed to wear their uniforms in public because society tells them they should be embarrassed but not for the underlying reasons for this embarrassment. Elliot Liebow (1967), three decades ago in *Tally's Corner*, pointed out that it made perfect sense that "street corner men" would hold little value for low-level jobs like dishwasher or janitor. As he said, "He cannot draw from a job those social values which other people do not put into it" (p. 59). Liebow refers to Alex Inkeles (1960), who found " a clear positive correlation between the over-all status of occupations and the experience of satisfaction in them" (p. 59).

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Honest work, according to employees, is devalued by peers, customers, and employers, who they claim often degrade them as fast-food employees. Fast-food employees and their managers commonly describe the ill treatment of workers—especially frontline workers—by customers. Customers are often perceived by crewmembers to embody the general societal stigma associated with the fast-food jobs, especially in regard to the low status of fast-food workers. Linked to this low status is the idea that those who work in fast-food restaurants simply cannot get a better job and therefore are individually at fault. Fast-food crewmembers claim that customers often express the belief that fast-food workers are "losers." One fast-food worker said that

> some of the customers they come in and they are like, they have an attitude and they take it out on us. They want to scream on us. They just be screamin' on us for absolutely no reason because we don't do anything to them.

Recently, I struck up a conversation with a McDonald's teenager walking in the Village of Manhattan who was making a McDonald's home delivery. She told me she did not like making deliveries because people "make fun of me all the time." When I asked Alice, a fast-food cashier from Guyana, if she thought there were any young people who might not try to work here, her response derived from her experiences with customers and how she thought the customers perceived her status as an employee. She said,

> When the customer come in, if they have to wait on their food they be nasty to you and then they say "*You better be glad you have this job because I think it is the only job you can get.*" So I guess, people like them. I guess they wouldn't come and work here because that is the way they treat us. [emphasis added].

Alice does not seem to internalize this perception held by customers. She said, "It is someone's choice whether or not to work in fast food," implying that the customer is simply wrong. Alice has been in New York City for only two years. Those who have been here for all or most of their lives may be more vulnerable to customers' defamation because they share the dominant values of society regarding fast-food jobs or because of peer pressure. This would support what managers say about an internalization of the social stigma of fast-food workers by the

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American-born or at least those who have been in the country for long enough to be affected by the stigma.

If workers have in fact internalized the social stigma, it is important to consider that it may not be based on what workers actually think about the value of their work. Rather, it may be an internalization of what society itself has internalized—a forced internalization of a false notion. In other words, the social stigma is rooted in the idea that fast-food work is degrading work in that it does not require skill and anyone can do it. The wage (more than anything else) confirms and symbolizes it. It is reinforced by what workers' tend to perceive as a lack of respect from their employers. An African American employee complained, referring to a manager from a "foreign country":

> If a company does not care about their employees, then the employees are not going to care about the company. . . . I think the main reason I don't like [the main manager] is that he really doesn't care about the employees. They are breaking the equipment. One of the ladies one time she hurt herself. She fell on the steps and twisted her ankle. He said, "Well she should have noticed the step. She should have been careful." I believe with the New York City safety code you are supposed to be wearing protective gear when you are doing equipment like that. All we have are gloves that come up to here. So if oil splashes on our hands it is fine. But if it slashes on our faces we are fucked. They don't care. That is why we hate him. When people take food, they don't give a fuck and I don't blame them. I hope he [the main manager] goes back [to the country where he came from]. I hope his car blows up. I wish he would just drop dead.

Managers' insensitivity in this regard is often associated with a lack of respect for employees, especially when employees believe they deserve respect. "If a company does not care about their employees" implies an expectation that an employer should care. It implies an expectation that employers should hold a social value on what workers commonly call honest work. When honest work is not perceived to earn respect from employers, then the social value of their work is considered to be devalued in the workplace. This devaluation is cultivated through the social relations between managers and workers.

The perceived lack of respect is exacerbated by the fact that workers tend to believe that the work that they do does indeed involve some degree of skill. Furthermore, they often feel like they are being taken

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advantage of when required to perform "skilled" labor without compensation. Another African American employee explained,

> You go through a lot of bull shit here. Especially when it comes to inspection time. We do things that I think the maintenance men should do. I remember when we didn't have a maintenance guy for about a month. We were doing extra things I think we shouldn't have been doing. If we were doing it then pay us extra for that. Pay us the difference. . . . [The manager] wants me to do a technical job for minimum wage and then do my regular job that day [referring to fixing the broilers and fryers]. When the company calls in for our master [technical expert] it costs something like 75 to 100 dollars. It is not a problem doing both but I am not getting paid the difference for fixing their equipment that is worth thousands and thousands of dollars. Because if those fryers and the broiler goes down they are losing hundreds of dollars and I don't feel that is right. They want me to do their equipment for nothing? That is not cool. You can't do that to people. That is like slave labor.

A perceived lack of respect for what fast-food workers do helps to explain how some employees assert a distinction between the job itself and the reasons for performing it. For instance, Peter, a second-generation Puerto Rican employee, says that managers try to make the "best buck" and "get the most out of workers." But he also legitimizes his role in conceding to these conditions by distinguishing himself from those who don't (the Americans who are "lazy") in terms of his distinctive family influence. Robert Merton, in developing the "reference group theory," showed the common tendency for people to judge unequal relationships not in absolute terms but by "taking their own orientation status point as a reference point" (Boudon 1991). Peter, for example, said,

> I was born in a family who believes in work. I would rather work three jobs than to be on welfare. Even when my father was laid off, he would go back to his old job and he would work at five dollars per hour instead of 15. He still wanted to maintain that pride he had.

The common reference to a strong work ethic rooted in the family represents a search for legitimation that is not found by workers in the workplace or in the society at large. This counters the widely held belief by managers that those who refuse to work in fast-food jobs, leave the industry, are not enthusiastic, or do not have a positive attitude on the job are plagued by some other value system. Rather, it is the fact that

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they hold the same values with the same expectations of work, with the same aspirations to grow and become something "better" when these values and expectations are not necessarily upheld in the workplace. Working is not perceived to be a means for fulfilling their aspirations, gaining social respect, or at least helping them obtain a better job.

Many of my respondents suggested that a fast-food job does not necessarily lead to a better job in the labor market at large. None of my respondents at the crew level—American-born and immigrant alike—believed that their fast-food jobs were going to have value in the larger labor market. Peter implied that putting his fast-food employment experience on a resume might hurt him when applying for office work. As he said,

> If I am applying for an office opportunity, I certainly wouldn't put this fast food job. I would put my other job. I would make up a good lie—that I had my other job instead of this. It is more prestigious.

Fast-food crew experience is not even perceived to prove beneficial in the industry beyond the restaurant or company one works for. For example, in moving from one fast-food restaurant to another, one usually starts at minimum wage all over again, regardless of any earned wage hikes in the previous restaurant. Ray, my crew trainer when I worked at Burger King, worked at a McDonald's restaurant for seven years until it was taken over by another ownership that brought in its own workers. He was making $7 per hour. He applied and was hired at the Burger King restaurant at the minimum-wage level.

Debbie, an American employee of European descent, applied for a fast-food job in New York City after lengthy experience at a McDonald's in Tennessee where she was making above minimum wage. She started at minimum wage in New York City because, as she said, managers told her "everyone here starts out at minimum wage." Peggy, a fast-food employee from Jamaica, did not even think to tell the manager who interviewed her that she had fast-food experience. The fact that work experience is not perceived to pay off in the long run helps to explain the diminished expectations fast-food workers have toward their roles as low-wage workers.

Even though some workers become fast-food managers, they are few and far between, and most never make it to a salaried position. While there is considerable variation between restaurants, opportunity for

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upward movement in fast-food restaurants, in general, is severely limited. This is due to the low ratio of managers to crewmembers (1:10), reduced turnover rate as one moves up the fast-food hierarchy, and an extensively layered hierarchy in which most management opportunity is at the lowest rungs and pays barely more than minimum wage. There are barriers to pursuing the job ladder as well. For instance, not all franchise companies and individual restaurants have a promote-from-below policy. Some, like Burger King restaurants in New York City that are owned by a New Jersey-based corporation, tend to hire people with postgraduate training into manager positions (particularly at the highest level) rather than promote their own crewmembers. When there is a promote-from-below policy, crewmembers are expected to commit an extensive amount of time during nonworking hours to preliminary management studies and training that is often unpaid. Most of my respondents, both American and foreign-born, did not plan to pursue the fast-food job ladder because they perceived it as impossible or because of the perceived lack of payoff in pursuing it. Several crewmembers cited the low management salaries and long, fluctuating hours as reasons for not pursuing the fast-food job ladder.

Working in a low-wage job for someone like Chantelle, the central character in *Just Another Girl on the IRT*, is an unsettling experience when there is no payoff in the job itself. This unsettled feeling is reinforced in her everyday life experiences. She is witness to the experience of growing hardship and denigration of her previous generation. Chantelle cannot sleep at night in her apartment in a Brooklyn housing project because her parents are fighting. She hears her father scream out, "They don't want to hire us black folks even if we're qualified." Her own parents, as Chantelle perceives it, bought into society's traditional work values but never achieved any gains. Work itself, then, is not perceived to pay off. As Chantelle claims, "My parents work from paycheck to paycheck. That's not gonna be me. After graduation I'm going straight to college."

Yet, the means for getting out of the low-wage sector by going to college is never guaranteed and not necessarily an expectation the larger society holds for the most disadvantaged inner-city youth. Employers and customers treat her and her coworkers, as Chantelle said, "like we were some street girls with no future." This kind of treatment by clientele serves as a constant and intolerable reminder that "having no future" is a real possibility. It is perpetuated by the underlying notion

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(partly rooted in the traditional notion of the Protestant work ethic) that they are individually responsible for their own future and, thus, individually to blame for not succeeding.

My American-born respondents tended to view their jobs as temporary but not necessarily because they were actively pursuing another career or better opportunities. Rather, it was because they felt that they "couldn't take it (the job) anymore" or would like to have something better in the immediate sense. It is not that they lack a "future orientation," as managers articulated. Rather, it is that their future is glaringly uncertain. The thought of the future made immediate needs crucial. The thought of getting stuck in the "cycle that never ends," getting locked into the present situation for the future, is a catalyst for seeking immediate change. Thus, it was more of a tendency among Americans to view the job on a day-to-day basis, making it a point to constantly inquire about other jobs. Or to constantly refer to what they would rather be doing—what may lead to what one manager referred to as the "hopping around" tendency.[6]

The consequences of poor material conditions on the part of customer-service workers help to explain managers' contradictory assumptions. In fast-food restaurants, attitude is supposed to embody positive qualities such as enthusiasm, motivation, and high energy. Material conditions (relative social class advantage) affect an employee's ability to fulfill these social criteria regarding attitude. It is not only due to disillusionment; it is also due to the everyday hardships workers endure to live by the very values managers perceive to be absent among these workers. Some of my American-born respondents working in fast-food restaurants in New York City work two and three jobs to support families and children.

These respondents are representative of increasing numbers of people "moonlighting" in fast-food jobs. They work sixty and eighty hours per week because of the value they place on their families and the value they place on providing a better future for their children. As Edward said, "A lot of people in here have families and children and they are not making enough to support them." In this way, they have a future orientation by living for their children. But, as Liebow (1967) put it, "Living on the edge of both economic and psychological subsistence, the [worker] is obliged to expend all his resources on maintaining himself from moment to moment" (p. 65). The future orientation of the "middle class," on the other hand, presumes "a surplus of resources to be

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invested in the future and a belief that the future will be sufficiently stable" (Liebow 1967, 65).

The lack of motivation and lack of enthusiasm managers speak of and claim to be manifestations of bad attitude may simply represent a feeling of disempowerment due to their social conditions and the feelings—both physical and psychological—that stem from what Jorge calls "the cycle that never ends." Disempowerment is expressed through tiredness, lack of energy (what Loren refers to when he says, "I can see it in the way they carry themselves"), and lack of desire to work in a way that expresses enthusiasm. But the manifestation of disempowerment is interpreted by managers to be a lack of motivation to work—a lack of a positive attitude—rather than rooted in a feeling of disempowerment itself. It becomes a vicious circle. Bad attitude is caused by overwork and unfulfilled expectations regarding work. It is reinforced by perceived oppressive conditions including low wages, biases in the workplace, lack of real and worthwhile opportunities for promotion, and a general lack of respect for performing honest work.

CONCLUSION

While qualitative studies of the low-wage service workplace have attempted to come to grips with the relationship between social skills requirements, service-based employment, and disproportionate labor-force participation by racial minorities, this study has pointed out the need to examine workplaces in depth, paying attention to both individual variance between firms, including geocultural contexts, and the cultivation of social relations in the workplace. In so doing, I have stressed the importance of qualitative approaches that capture social interactions firsthand, such as participant observation, rather than relying exclusively on employer interviews. It is also important to capture the voices of nonmanager employees, as their perceptions and experiences often differ from their employers. While a qualitative approach, as such, cannot be generalized across whole work sectors, it contributes to the broader literature by adding in-depth analytical insight.

My findings suggest that hiring practices that do not favor American-born racial minorities are partly shaped by factors rooted in the workplace rather than solely by external factors. Social relations in the fast-food restaurants I examined are partly built on a set of contradictory

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assumptions held by employers. Employers tend to believe that their American-born employees hold poor cultural values including immediate gratification, conspicuous consumption, and "wanting something for nothing." These values are associated with social stagnation, welfare dependency, and "living off the street." Attitude according to managers is a reflection of the poor American work ethic that is exhibited by the American-born and culminates in poor social skills that are inapplicable to customer-service-related work.

Associating these values with racial minorities is hardly new and was a dominant form of association by white ethnics during the civil rights movement. But attitude—as we have learned from my employee respondents and, insofar as it is perceived to exist by managers, playing itself out through antagonistic employee-manager relations—can be viewed as a rejection of social stagnation and welfare dependency on the part of poor minority American youth who are experiencing the hardships their own parents have faced. I found that it is usually minority Americans from the poorest material conditions or backgrounds who depend on and defend neoconservative values the most—because working, they believe, should be an avenue for sustaining a livelihood, supporting a family, and achieving social mobility. But this does not necessarily mean that they believe that hard work holds any real promise for the future. This belief is often shattered through real-life work experience.

The American-born versus immigrant difference cited by managers constitutes a cultural breakdown of the category of race, especially in regard to those of African and Latin American ancestry. But it is also a class-based category. Middle-class American racial minorities do not typically seek fast-food jobs in New York City because they have better opportunities elsewhere. (Among customer-service and retail enterprises, fast-food restaurants rank among the lowest, while jobs at The Gap, Friday's restaurants, and Urban Underground tend to be sought after by middle-class youth.) Immigrants who seek fast-food jobs are usually a step above their American counterparts in regard to material conditions, family stability, and life chances. Among a fast-food workforce dominated by people of color in New York City, then, features of nationality, ethnicity, and class help shape employer preferences, biases, and discriminatory practices. One could reasonably postulate that the main factor that contributes to managers' tendencies to prefer the foreign-born to the American-born have to do with the social

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class of the typical American-born applicant. On the other hand, the distinctions employers make are not perceived and articulated as such, and the consequences are cultural rather than class based. They are generalized to include and exclude whole social groups based on ethnicity and national origin, irrespective of social-class background, and become the basis for stereotypical assessments and discriminatory hiring practices.

The particular kinds of social relations that have been cultivated in fast-food restaurants help to explain why inner-city American youth have been disproportionately represented among the inner-city jobless. Employees' expectations about work, rooted in neoconservative, Protestant work values, often clash with the reality of workplace conditions including the kinds of opportunities minimum-wage jobs provide today. The clashing of values and reality among inner-city workers, interacting with employers' internalization of the "underclass" concept, may imply a continued perpetuation of what is commonly called by employers in the low-wage service economy the cycle that never ends. The growing service-based economy and its subjectively determined hiring criteria would seem to exacerbate these dynamics and contribute to a self-fulfilling prophecy. In this way, this study supports the findings of previous qualitative studies that indicate a relationship between the demand for soft skills and declining labor-force participation rates by racial minorities. On the other hand, it qualifies these findings by demonstrating the way managers' perceptions of employees' social skills are structurally embedded in workplace dynamics.

APPENDIX
Interview Guide

Crewmembers

Demographic information
- Where are you from?
- What is your ethnic background?
- Where are your parents from?
- Where do you live now?
- What do your parents do for a career/livelihood?
- Age and sex

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Workplace
- What is your position?
- What exactly do you do here?
- How long have you been working here?
- How did you get this job?
- How many hours do you work per week?
- Can you move up in this restaurant? What are the criteria? What do you have to do?
- Would you call what you do a skilled job?
- How many hours do you work here per week? How many nights is that?
- How many hours do you work per week in general?
- There are many people here from other countries. Do you find this interesting?
- What do you like best about working here?
- Why did you select this restaurant to apply for a job?
- Did you know someone who was working here before you started?

Work history/experience
- Do you have another job?
- Could you give me a history of your job experience and education and how you began working here?

Personal/family
- Who do you live with?
- Who works in a paid job in your house? Specify details.
- What do your parents do for careers?

Work ethic
- What drives you to remain in this line of work?
- Why do you think some people refuse to work here, even when they have no alternatives elsewhere?
- Why do you think that people leave this job even when they don't have another job?
- If you had the opportunity to work in the most ideal job, what would it be?

Managers/employers
- How would you say the managers are perceived here? As authority figures, friends, etc?

Features of employees
- There are many people here from other countries; it must be interesting to work here.

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How many African Americans would you say are working here?
Is there any difference between the work that women do and the work that men do?
I noticed that more women work in the front at the cashier positions. Why do you think that is?
If you had to name a number of characteristics of the kind of people who work here, what would be those characteristics?

Future
How long do you plan on working here?
When people leave here, where do they go?
Would you say that fast-food experience, in general, helps you obtain other jobs or pursue upward mobility in the industry?
Would you put this experience on a resume?

Managers/employers

Demographic information
Your position
How long you have been working here
Was this your first job?
Where are you from?
Where are your parents from?
What do your parents do for a career?
Where do you live?
Who do you live with?

Restaurant features
How would you describe this restaurant?
Is it a neighborhood restaurant?
Who are your clientele?
Please describe your marketing strategies.

Hiring practices
How do you go about finding your employees?
What kind of person do you look for in an applicant?
What kinds of skills are required to work here?
Are there any special characteristics that are required to work in this neighborhood?
What countries are represented among the managers and crewmembers?

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Employee features/perceptions

- I recently read statistics that show high unemployment rates among young black and Latino/Latina youth. Is this accurate according to your experiences? What accounts for these statistics?
- Since you have worked here, do you notice any changes in the kinds of people who are coming in to look for a job?
- Do you notice any differences between and among your employees in terms of work ethics, motivations, etc.? What is the basis for these differences?
- Where do your employees live?

Workplace

- What is the average amount of time people work here?
- Do you notice any conflicts between and among your crewmembers and managers?
- Is there any difference between the work that men do and the work that women do?
- What percentage of the workforce is full-time and part-time?

Job ladder—opportunities for mobility

- How did you decide to pursue a manager position?
- How did you become a manager?
- What do your parents and friends think about what you do?
- Are you planning to move up further in the hierarchy?
- What kinds of opportunities are there for crewmembers to move up the hierarchy?
- Do you think that fast-food employment helps one get a job in the larger labor market?

Future

- What are your plans for the future?

NOTES

1. "Attitude" is a term used by managers to describe the general demeanor of an employee when assessing one's qualifications for customer-service work. More specifically, *too much attitude* is a negative term used to describe a defiant personality who is inappropriate for interacting with customers and unsuited for contributing to a compliant and "upbeat" workplace ambiance.

2. Crewmember is the name of the entry-level position in McDonald's and Burger King restaurants.

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3. The "cycle that never ends" is a concept that came up frequently during the course of my research. Both managers and crewmembers used it to refer to the way people get locked into the low-wage labor market indefinitely, tending to "hop around" from one low-wage job to the next. There was general agreement among most respondents that low-wage jobs in the service economy tend to be dead end in nature and do not pay wages high enough to support improving one's human capital through such things as higher educational attainment and job training that would enable one to break the cycle.

4. *Handicapped* is an inner-city term used to describe people who earn a livelihood through illicit means, including the drug trade, and other forms of criminal activity.

5. Ditton (1977) examined the historical emergence of three categories of what he calls "kind payment." *Perks* refer to employers/managers and the white-collar employed in which an employee is legally paid part of her wages in kind. *Pilferage* refers to blue-collar employees in which stealing from the employer is institutionalized in an abstract sense. Low wages are supposed to be compensated for through the act of stealing, but the outcome of being caught is unpredictable. It is a "double-bind" system: "His wages are geared down to an invisible pilferage value of his job, but his attempt to secure this invisible value could well lose him his job, and, land him in court" (p. 45). In any case, management maintains the power to define the action, either as a perk or as theft. *Unequivocal theft* refers to the "unemployed poor," in which in all cases the "offender will be defined as a thief." In this case, "the worker has to steal part of his own wages."

6. Several managers mentioned the "hopping around" tendency. It refers to a pattern of horizontal movement across the low-wage labor market by increasing number of people. The temporary, contingent, dead-end, and low-wage features of low-end, service-related jobs contribute to this tendency.

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