"It isn't all white Americans...."

Intergroup conflict in the multi-ethnic workplace*

by

Michael Lichter

and

Roger Waldinger

Department of Sociology
UCLA
Los Angeles, CA 90095

September 1998

*Thanks to the John Randolph Haynes and Dora Haynes Foundation for support of the research on which this paper is based.
Social science thinking about discrimination grew up in a simpler, if uglier America of binary Euro/African-American relations. In that “b/w” world, to borrow language from Gary Becker’s pathbreaking treatise on *The Economics of Discrimination* (1957), the relevant questions had to do with the consequences of w’s aversion for interacting with b’s. Whites might have a distaste for contact with blacks, as the economists thought, in which case w employers enduring psychic discomforts as a result of hiring b workers would deduct the costs from all b’s wages; similarly, w skilled workers would insist on a wage premium to offset the unpleasantness of co-existence with b’s. Alternatively, as the sociologists were likely to insist, Euro-Americans would be concerned with maintaining social distance and preserving status and power differentials, in which case occupational and other forms of segregation were likely to ensue (Bonacich, 1973; Wilson, 1978).

Though the debate over both the motivations and mechanisms of discrimination has continued, we have now moved to a different, more complicated, less certain world. At century’s end, a new ethnic order is slowly emerging, thanks, in part to the civil rights revolution, but more directly as a result of the re-emergence of mass immigration. Coming mainly from Latin America and Asia, the newcomers have produced a growing population that sits athwart the binary categories of black and white. Socio-economic diversity distinguishes today’s immigrants from their predecessors, the middle-class status of so many immigrants further complicating the question of where they fit in the American racial order. Still, low-skilled, labor migrants loom large among the new foreign-born Americans; the immigrants at the bottom of the labor market comprise a new group of
outsiders, stigmatized by foreign tongue, distinctive physical features, and an often illegal status.

As America's lower, working-class diversifies, new principles for allocating jobs to categorically different groups may be on the rise. Researchers have already begun to inquire into the shape of employers' preferences. One might imagine, especially in the immigrant dense regions of southern California, south Florida, or New York, that Euro-Americans' apprehension over the political and demographic consequences of immigration might lead them to revise their long-held racial antipathy for blacks. And yet, as work by Kirschenman and Neckerman (1991; and Neckerman and Kirschenman, 1992), Moss and Tilly (1996), and Waldinger (1997) have shown, the past appears to be serving as prologue: the legacy of American racism yields a continuing prejudice against hiring African-Americans, even if the alternative involves recruiting from Mexicans or Central Americans, toward whom Euro-American employers often evince considerable aversion.

Employers might also take into account the views of their employees or customers, which, for simplicity's sake, can be characterized as involving preferences for interactions with like others ("own preferences") or aversions to dealing with outsiders ("other aversions"). Economic theories of discrimination suggest that these preferences are exogenous, but that view provides less help now than it did in the bad old b/w days, when the economists could make reasonable assumptions about whites' tastes, even if they didn't know how to explain them. Each group of immigrants is likely to arrive with its own set of preferences and aversions, of which the most predictable component is likely to be a preference for interacting with others of one's own kind, though discomfort with, if
not distaste for, all sorts of others is likely to be a common phenomenon as well. The complexity of the ethnic order makes the hierarchy of aversions a matter of greater import, in particular, as regards the immigrants' "tastes" for contacts with African-Americans. While the immigrants surely bring a set of particularized hatreds and dislikes with them, history points to the advantages of adopting the Euro-American dislike for African-Americans (Roediger, 1991). Still, joining the bandwagon may be harder today than it was earlier in the century, when the "swarthy" immigrants from southern and eastern Europe succeeded in making themselves "white". African-Americans have their "own preferences" and other aversions and these are no longer as irrelevant as they were earlier in the century, or even when Becker wrote almost 40 years ago. The greater resources of the expanded African-American middle class make the tastes of African-Americans less easy to ignore, while the changed ideological climate reduce the scope for open displays of any "distaste" for contact with African-Americans (Feagin, 1991). And as hyphenated Americans, African-Americans are likely to share some of the same preferences and aversions as their Euro-counterparts, of which the most important relates to the linguistic environment of work.

Alternatively, preferences may be endogenous, that is, they may be embedded in existing practices and a sense of customary justice which grants priority to transactions with insiders and their associates. As the literature tells us, the implantation of an ethnic network may bear little or no relation to group-specific preferences, as such. In the labor market, for example, employers often mobilize ethnic connections without quite knowing what they are doing, simply because exploiting the connections between incumbents and
their contact provides a quick, cheap, and effective way of securing a reliable workforce.

As it happens, these same practices also shape the employment relationship by imparting a set of understandings common to workers and employers, reducing the probability that informal understandings or implicit contracts will be broken, making network recruitment a convenient habit, once begun.

The repeated action of network recruitment often produces ethnic concentrations or niches, conditions that in turn yield the motivation for rational discrimination. Fearful that outsiders might undercut wages, workers prefer to train co-ethnic neophytes whom they trust; anxious about the reliability and performance of job applicants who walk in off the street, employers prefer to hire the friends and relatives of their key workers; concerned that a vendor might not deliver on time, or that a customer might delay in paying the bill, business-owners look for know entities with track records of successful dealings with others. In effect, membership in an ethnic community tells co-ethnic actors that one can rely on another; for that reason, it also provides the grounds for excluding outsidies, who lack the traits, histories and relational ties conducive to collaboration or trust (Waldinger, 1996).

But our interest here lies elsewhere, with the consequences of ethnic embeddedness for the structure of group-specific preferences. As noted above, “purely” economic motivations provide the initial impulse for transactions with others of one’s own kind; but the motivational mix changes over time, especially if groups tend to build up an ethnic niche. Frequent interaction in a concentrated niche promotes a sense of group identity; if the niche is one of the salient traits that group members share in common, it
also becomes an interest that helps define who they are. Thus, greater attention is paid to
the boundaries that define the niche, and the characteristics of those who can and cannot
cross those boundaries. In the immigrant centers of New York, Los Angeles, or Miami,
where ethnic niching is pervasive (see Waldinger and Bozorgmehr, 1996), the build-up of
ethnic specializations provides ample reason for groups to exclude those who aren’t
members of the same ethnic club.

Motivation is one thing; opportunity another. Whatever the sources of groups’
“own preferences” and “other aversions,” it remains the case that the potential to act upon
predispositions will vary situationally. Workers are likely to always have at least some
leverage, but the weight of their preferences is likely to depend on intra-organizational
features. Organizations relying on informal, as opposed to formal, recruitment and
selection mechanisms have less scope to resist the views of incumbent workers, who, by
increasing access to their core associates, assure that outsiders remain a quantitative, often
small minority. In these tilted or unbalanced work settings, incumbents will find it
relatively easy to both express hostility and channel it toward specific out-groups (Kanter,
1976). By contrast, more bureaucratic recruitment and selection mechanisms are likely
to produce workgroups characterized by a higher level of ethnic diversity, a context less
conducive to targeted hostility, though one in which conflict may nonetheless occur
(Waldinger, forthcoming).

The nature of the job will similarly affect the degree to which employers prove
responsive to workers’ views. Since all work is fundamentally social, inter-dependency
makes both outsiders and employers dependent on cooperation from incumbent workers.
Where productivity may not be so much an individual as a group characteristic, the need to elicit the cooperation of the dominant ethnic group in the workforce may lead to management's assent to the exclusion of outsiders. On the other hand, interdependencies often span different occupational layers, in which case the closure potential of any one network is limited to the occupations it effectively controls.

The characteristics, needs, and preferences of the clientele can either reinforce or cut against workers' preferences. But preferences don't always come into play, since they must first be activated by the structure of interaction between customer and provider. Some contexts effectively hide the workforce from view: restaurant or hotel kitchens make for physical invisibility; one suspects that social distance between hotel guest and housekeeper has a similar effect. Factory workers are also likely to have a low profile: factories usually sell to other businesses, and those clients interact with owners, managers, salespeople, occasionally a supervisor or skilled worker, but rarely a rank and file employee. Thus, client preferences are likely to be influential only under a limited set of interactional conditions, most notably those settings in which a public has direct contact with the workforce. Even under these circumstances, "own preferences" may have a strongly functional nature, as when customers desire, or sometimes can only, speak with employees who can converse in the same tongue. We note that "own preferences" need not take a purely invidious form. Clients may not be so much concerned with the ethnicity of any particular employee, as with group representation, which in turn sends a signal about the organization and its hiring practices. We now turn to Los Angeles, the
capital of today's immigrant America, to seek insight into the shape of America's new ethnic order, and its impact on employment patterns.

**Background**

This paper draws on in-depth interviews, conducted in 1993 and 1994, with managers and owners in 230 establishments in Los Angeles County, including 44 restaurants, 46 printers, 41 hotels, and 39 furniture manufacturers, 24 department stores, and 36 hospitals.¹ With the exception of the restaurant sample, which was drawn from the Yellow Pages, and designed to include chains (varying in size from 3 to 55 units) and single-owned operations, our sample was drawn randomly from directories.² The organizations were located in a variety of areas within Los Angeles county, both within the central city, and in more suburbanized areas. With few exceptions, our organizations were drawn from the "mainstream economy", including few immigrant-owned firms.

The interviews were arranged with the highest ranking person involved in the hiring process and they were structured by an instrument involving a mix of closed- and open-ended questions. In the beginning of the interview, we identified the largest category of "low-skilled" jobs and then focused the remainder of our discussion on those jobs and the workers who filled them. The interviews lasted from an hour and a half to three hours; in most cases, interviews were recorded and subsequently transcribed; in other instances, detailed notes were made of interviewees' responses. The open-ended nature of the

---

¹ All employers are single-counted, even if they were owners or managers of multi-unit operations. Three of the hospital interviews involved persons not directly employed by hospitals; these were with the vice-president of a company supplying contract housekeeping services to hospitals; an official in a large public sector hospital workers' union; and two personnel officials in a local government department responsible for general health care services.

² Our list of acute care medical hospitals in Los Angeles County was taken primarily from a local street guide, supplemented by a regional business directory.
interview produced both a conversational tone, and lengthy, often highly detailed
discussions of matters perceived as important by respondents. Consequently, they allow
for a quasi-ethnographic investigation, in which the transcripts and detailed notes provide
cues to patterns initially unanticipated by the researchers.

As it happens, our interest principally focussed on employers’ ethnic preferences,
the subject of another paper and broader project, and we did not directly inquire into the
ethnic preferences of customers or clients. However, the subject arose frequently, often
by itself, though frequently provoked by our query concerning managing the region’s
multi-ethnic workforce:

Many people these days say that “managing diversity” is the human resources
challenge of the 1990s. In what way is “managing diversity” a challenge for you?

Most respondents initially answered with a laugh or a derisive grunt, then replying
either that “we’ve always been diverse; there’s no change”, or that “it is a big challenge.”
“Diversity” was not always understood as intended; that a number of respondents used the
dubious term “people of diversity” or referred to “diverse people” as a kind of people,
reveals that it has achieved true buzzwordhood, referring to something entirely different
from what it really means. In this sense, “we’ve always been diverse” may mean only that
the firm has always had non-white or immigrant employees, not necessarily from differing
backgrounds. Likewise, the comment that diversity is a “big challenge” may mean only
that the managers don’t speak Spanish very well.

Nonetheless, many of the employers we spoke with employed workers from many
different backgrounds. Hospitals were, on average, the largest and most diverse
organizations we contacted, and so many of them had particular detailed answers to our
question. Asked about the challenge of diversity, this HR manager from a large HMO told us:

As our minority population grows, we need to employ a diverse group of employees. Once you get into the workplace, you can't just have an X number of everything to make everybody happy. We have to work with the employee groups and have them understand each other's cultural differences and learn how to get along because there's going to be some inherent conflicts. To me, that's really the challenge. The real challenge is how are we going to get them to get along and meet the end goal of serving the member. (620)

Responses to our "managing diversity" question, as the comment above indicates, both generated description of the diversity, as well as its correlates, which sometimes entailed conflict, though in other instances, involved more positive outcomes, at least as viewed from our interviewees' standpoint. Other items in the questionnaire also elicited responses that highlighted employee or customer preferences, especially our questions about the "work ethic" of different groups. Our failure to ask about customer or worker preferences as such probably did bias our responses, yielding answers that invariably focused on revealed preferences, which usually presented themselves in conflictual form.

In the end, we have coded all of the responses pertaining to ethnic conflict or preferences among non-supervisory workers; and between the latter group and customers. In our coding, "conflict" and "preference" both entailed some overt expression, as distinguished from mutually agreed upon separation among groups. Initially, we coded based on "human" reading of all documents. Then, making use of the Nudist software program for qualitative data analysis, we used words keywords generated from our first pass, such as "conflict", "hate", "fight", etc., to identify other instances of conflict. In the end, we identified 86 instances of ethnic conflict. The coded responses, cross-tabulated by
the groups in question and industry are presented in Table 1. By definition, we exclude management behavior and belief from the scope of this paper. We gladly concede that management’s beliefs and behaviors are worthy of detailed treatment, but that is for another time, another place.

-----------------------------

Table 1 about here

-----------------------------

Before discussing the role of ethnic preferences and conflict, we should note that organizations generally seek to quell conflict within the workforce. Many of the organizations that we visited claimed to have a “zero tolerance” policy, as regards ethnic conflict. When successful, those policies minimized tensions, either by separating warring parties, insisting, as a printer put it, that “You’re required to get along or you can’t stay here.” (Printco), or simply, by cooling the conflict out. “Usually what happens is an associate doesn’t feel comfortable because of, maybe the diversity or whatever, they usually leave on their own.” (407) Moreover, conflict management and conflict reduction was often part of our respondents’ job description, especially the human resource managers with whom we were particularly likely speak in hotels, department stores, and hospitals. Consequently, respondents who told us that “we have no conflicts” were telling us that they were doing a good job, while respondents from the more bureaucratic organizations were framing conflict in ways that reflected HR ideology: “there are inevitably culture clashes,” but “that it all works out though. There are difficulties
understanding each other, but no real conflicts.” (422) Since conflict was thus inconsistent with the prevailing managerial ideology, and reports of conflict could in some ways be read as indicators of failure, respondents were probably biased to minimize, rather than maximize, the degree of tension among the workers.

Given the diversity of the workforce, no less impressive in our eyes than in those of our respondents, our interviews illuminated all sorts of conflicts, above and beyond those involved in ethnic tensions, as such. In light of the space constraints, we simply note that gender, sexual preference, and occupational privileges were among the issues around which groups contended, and move on.

Workers’ preferences and workplace conflict

Since so much of the recent literature on economic aspects of ethnicity emphasizes the role of social networks, it tends to either downplay or miss those processes that give rise to ethnic conflicts at work. By their very nature, ethnic networks tend to sort groups into different places in the labor market, evidence of which frequently appeared in our research. To the extent that the networks create niches they also diminish the potential for inter-group conflict, as noted by a fast food manager, who when asked about the consequences of diversity, replied: “In my store, there’s no problem. We’re all Latinos. (101).”

However, the tacit exclusion produced through network recruitment is always less than perfect; furthermore, organizations sometimes actively seek to diversify the workforce. Consequently, outsiders leak in, yielding the potential for the conflictual outcomes we describe below.
The intergroup tensions, highlighted by our data, can arise from any number of sources, as we noted in the introduction. Managers often invoked conflicting customs and language or cultural differences for the conflicts that they experienced: "There will always be throwbacks from an age when people believed that they didn't have to work with any other type of employee or any culture or any other language, etc." (602) Sometimes this kind of conflict was neutral in the sense that strife resulted from misunderstanding, of a more or less innocent sort; at other times, conflict was driven by motivations of a different sort; often, as suggested by the quote below, the factors making for tension were mixed:

Semantics is a big problem. Just customs and how people treat each other. I've got people from Thailand, from the Philippines, from Mexico, from you know all over and we've had some very difficult time. How they respect authority, how they don't respect authority, how they respect women, how they don't respect women, difficulty with being a woman in management when you get some of this going on. And it's enough being in the United States and having people with prejudices against other people. But then I get somebody from Thailand who's prejudiced against someone from the Philippines and I have no idea what's going on there. So constantly being a mediator for some of those kinds of things. Some people talking their heads off and it seems to be certain ethnic groups, "excuse me but, be quiet while I talk to you," you know it goes on like this and some of their, one's polite and one country is not being polite in another. It's real, real, different. (615)

In other cases, hostilities which were manifest in the workplace reflected antagonisms which developed outside, as for example, when gang loyalties are brought onto the workflow. Outside events also added to the brew; for example, the disturbances of 1992 made for work environments where "you could cut the atmosphere with a knife it was so tense." (330) We also detected hostility rooted in a sense of group position, most evident when groups were trying to exclude others; these were the types of tensions that managers highlighted when they talked — as they often did — about members of two groups "hating" each other.
While conflict was not pervasive (and again, we note the likely downward bias resulting from our methodology and sample), there was plenty of it; more impressive, and more bewildering to managers, was the range of groups involved: Mexicans against Puerto Ricans, Filipinos against blacks, Armenians v hispanics, Belizeans pitted against Bangladeshis -- just about any set seemed a real possibility to the managers with whom we spoke. In part, the unusual mixtures meant that circumnavigating a multi-ethnic workplace was a difficult task for workers and managers alike, with all sorts of unknowns and anxieties having the potential for stirring up trouble:

We tell employees that's the workplace now. It isn't all you know white Americans and you know it's very different. We have to be careful of the kind of jokes we tell and how we conduct ourselves and how we you know if we talk about "the crazy people in the middle east and that", you know, and here's an Iranian sitting there. It causes problems. (618)

*Black/Latino conflict:* Many people have written about competition between immigrant Latinos and native born blacks, often assuming that because many blacks lack a college education, and because the same is true of most Latino immigrants, that they must be vying for the same jobs. This ignores the fact that blacks are native born English speakers, and even the less-educated among them are usually better educated than the average Latino immigrant. These differences, as well as the network processes that we have just described tend to separate blacks and Latinos and thus reduce the potential for conflict. Nonetheless, there is still plenty of contact, especially in larger organizations, like hospitals or department stores, that hire are on a large scale, and therefore rely on bureaucratic recruitment and selection mechanisms. And even the smaller organizations,
which are more apt to hire from among the existing workforce, will also hire walks-ins or place help wanted ads in the newspaper, thereby opening the door for boundary crossing.

There is far more black/Latino contact than there is black/Latino conflict. 21 of the interviews reporting ethnic conflict made note of tension among African-Americans and Latinos, but the incidence of inter-group tension is clearly skewed. A variety of groups are on edge in department stores and hospitals, but the type of bipolar conflicts which pit blacks against Latinos seems relatively rare. Rather, the locus of conflict is in furniture, an industry with many plants in and around the once black, now increasingly Latino, south Central ghetto, and where firm size is relatively small, and managerial styles tend toward the non-bureaucratic. Most of our interviews focused on production jobs, held almost exclusively by men, and the gendered nature of the work does seem linked to the competition over jobs around so which so much of the conflict seems to turn.

The interviews suggest that neither group is overwhelmed with love for the other. A respondent in a large, non-profit hospital on LA’s westside told us that “We have Latino and black conflict. The blacks say that the Latinos have a chip on their shoulder. Latinos say that the black supervisors take sides.” (624) A restaurant manager reported that “Blacks and whites think they are better than the Latinos because they speak English. (107).” A furniture manufacturer indicated that “Blacks aren’t happy that there are so many Latinos.” (519)

Both Latinos and African-Americans entered the workworld with antagonisms that often threatened to spill over on to the shop floor. “I think that some of our employees,” said a furniture manufacturer:
...some of our younger employees were probably gang members before they came to work, and so we really discourage graffiti inside of the plant and the Hispanics outnumber the blacks and we let them know that if they do it in the property they will be given their checks and be fired. (501)

Any pre-existing rivalries were likely to be exacerbated by other differences among the groups. Language, about which more later, is one tension-producing factor:

It's difficult to have a half Hispanic, half black housekeeping department because the Hispanic employees generally speak Spanish to each other and the black employees don't understand it. And because the work ethic and job performance [of the Hispanics] outshine [the blacks] so it creates animosity between them. (T312BEVP)

As the quote suggests, and as we have argued elsewhere (Waldinger, 1997; Lichter, forthcoming), it is entirely possible that blacks and Hispanics have different expectations about what constitutes a reasonable day's work, in which case the willingness of Hispanics to put in more work than blacks could raise employers' expectations, making black workers understandably upset.

The bulk of our reports of black/Latino conflict came from the furniture industry, followed by hotels, and restaurants. In these cases, African-American workers tend to find themselves a small minority, working alongside a large and growing population of Latino immigrants, which has expanded largely through reliance on network recruitment. In these situations, as suggested above, the simple fact of being a minority made African-Americans more vulnerable to the views and actions of the numerically dominant Latino workforce. When asked why "the people that are not Hispanic don't last very long," a furniture manufacturer explained that: "We have hired a few blacks and they quit on their own. They don't want to be a minority." (533) A black manager, overseeing operations for a company providing janitorial services to the hospital evidence, an instance in which out-
sourcing has prompted the replacement of Latino for African-American workers, further underlined the difficulties associated with the ethnically tilted situation:

I see it in hospitals, like in one hospital we have, you see, the blacks on one side of the room, the Hispanics are on the other side of the room, at one of these general meetings. And you can hear in it some of the questions that come up, and some of the answers that come up, the representation from the unions. There's a certain amount of animosity because the union representative is speaking in Spanish. So it comes up, there's an attitudinal thing. I think the blacks feel probably threatened because there's so many Hispanics here. (608)

Not only were African-Americans likely to be a small minority in these Latino dominated contexts, the nature of the work made them highly dependent on their Latino co-workers. Almost all of our respondents rated "ability to work successfully with co-workers," as a key skill expected of any applicant. But inter-ethnic conflict often threatened that cooperation, putting African-American workers at risk, precisely because of their status as numerical minorities. Cooperation was particularly important in furniture manufacturing, since jobs are highly interdependent and new workers learn from experienced hands. Those same conditions made conflict more common than in any of the other industries, shaping the job opportunities available to African-American workers, as a furniture manufacturer, with a lifetime of experience, helpfully explained:

The shop has always been 98 percent Latino. I have hired some blacks. You put two men on a machine, the Mexicans won't work with a black. They aggravate him till he quits. You can't make it inter-racially. I'm not going to be a sociologist and tell them "you're in the same boat, ought to work together." The only place where we have blacks is in the trucks, because they work by themselves. (Though) blacks have been much less stable, that's in the plant. Among the drivers, they've been very good. (538)

Conflict among Latino immigrant groups: For the most part, we interviewed a Euro-American population for whom awareness of diversity among Latinos – let alone, intra-Latino conflict – was often a novel acquisition. A hotel manager told us that "To
me an Anglo, they're all hispanic. We tend to see them as all alike." However, experience taught this manager, and his colleagues, another lesson: "I know that Mexicans don't like Salvadorans." (311)

Indeed, managers were often surprised by both the intensity of the intra-Latino conflicts, as well as the plethora of sub-ethnic groups engulfed by tension. Regional antagonisms transported from the home country threatened to re-emerge in southern California: One of our furniture manufacturers, referring to three Mexican states, noted that "you have everybody from the Puebla area or Zacatecas area or something like that and what occurs is that they don't talk to people from Jalisco. (502). Conflicts among nationalities cropped up along with sub-national dislikes, as noted by a man who had only recently moved to California:

The thing that surprised me was the prejudices that did exist between the various Hispanic groups. You have the Mexicans from Chihuahua over here and the Mexicans from Guerrero and then the Colombians. They are very cliquish and nationalistic. There has been conflict, because of the nationalities, and among the Mexicans, the particular state. It's not just blacks. That was a surprise to me. (F506GARC)

"Not just blacks" was a common refrain, echoed by a hotelier who told us that "I've noticed that more Spanish people will fight among themselves than black people. (410)."

Despite public and scholarly preoccupation with black/Latino conflict, we heard more frequent reports of intra-Latino conflict. These reports are the all more credible, as they were often accompanied by positive assessments of the immigrants' performance, as with a factory manager who thought that Latino immigrants "have fairly decent work ethic", but the told us that "one of my biggest bitches is intra-group conflict"(523). The frequency of these reports may reflect the high levels of Latino representation in both our sample,
and LA's workforce, and thus imply a lower level of conflict, relatively speaking, than in
the case of Latinos and African-Americans. Nonetheless, we were impressed by the
intensity of the intra-Latino conflicts that management reported, as in the following
example:

Hotel Manager: The biggest diversity problem is within Hispanic countries. ....
Fights in garage because of insults, Central American and Mexican conflict. There
is outward non-tolerance. That's where it is. Call each other names. Set each other
up. More diversity problems between Hispanic workforce than cross-culturally.
(T319CENT)

As the managers saw it, the widespread and intense antipathy among Latino
groups often had to do with imported, own preferences: in general, people prefer to work
alongside people like themselves; for Latino immigrants, people from other Latin
American countries are *not* like themselves. Such "own preferences" were frequently
accompanied by "other aversions": indeed, some managers suggested that the antipathies
expressed in the workplace stemmed from deep-seated rivalries between countries that the
immigrants brought with them to the U.S., rather than from developments on the job:

Within their own sub-cultures, Mexicans think that Salvadorans are quote unquote
below them or visa-versa. We have had employee problems with employees from
one group or another. We've had employee fights... we find out that the
Salvadorans want to work together on the same floor, or the Hondurans. If we
have pairs they prefer the two women together to be from the same background.
....We accommodate them but we also want them to learn to work with other
people... We have terminated employees for constantly bickering among
themselves and it's not work related. They curse each other "hey, you slob! You
come from El Salvador" (T316UNIV).

On the other hand, most of the reports of intra-Latino conflict highlighted the
tension deriving from job competition among Latino groups, particularly between
Mexicans and Salvadorans. As we noted earlier, once a group establishes a niche in an
occupation or industry, it may come to see the relevant jobs as a sort of group property.
Promoting hiring through networks helps maintain the niche. But in occupations where there is rapid turnover or where more formal hiring methods are frequently applied, maintaining the niche may require other measures. The isolation of black workers as described above is one of the techniques for maintaining control over a niche, but the task is not so hard, because employers often share worker prejudices against black workers, and because black workers have difficulty functioning in a predominantly Spanish-speaking environment. Further, African Americans are unable to expand or maintain their footholds as well as immigrants, because they have smaller families and their personal networks, as far as we can tell, are not as large or as strong as those forged by immigrants in the migration process. By contrast, because Central American workers are more difficult to exclude through informal means and can naturally cope in a monolingual Spanish environment, they are likely to work alongside Mexicans, with contact thus creating the potential for conflict.

Conflict between whites and others: As whites have both moved up occupationally and out residentially, they have become relatively scarce in the kinds of entry level jobs that we studied. Furthermore, most of the whites in these jobs were women — sales clerks in department stores, clerical workers of various types in hospitals, wait staff in restaurants. While one is reluctant to accept stereotyped views that suggest that women are less likely to express conflict overtly than men, our interviews were certainly consistent with this belief. Factory owners and managers, for example, highlighted conflict among African-American and Latino men working on the shop floor, but were also quite likely to note that "I've had in the office a couple of black employees at various times, usually a
couple of girls in the office who are black,” with whom there had apparently been no problem.

In hospitals, few of the menial jobs are held by whites, who usually predominate in professional and especially managerial posts. Hospitals are also predominantly female organizations, but doctors and upper management are mostly male. On the other hand, blacks are over-represented in hospitals, especially within the public sector, yielding considerable contact between African- and Euro-American workers at the lateral level, and a higher than average incidence of African-Americans overseeing Euro-American subordinates. These situations can generate tension aplenty: when conflict pits members of societally dominant groups against persons of societally subordinate groups, historical understandings and misunderstanding of those relationships shape conflict, while also providing a frame for comprehending it. As one experienced manager explained:

when we coach an associate who is of an ethnic background, and myself of course being Caucasian, there is that underlying tone in the associate’s voice that we’re discriminating. (402)

Tension between Euro- and African-American workers is particularly likely to take a racialized form, especially when there are questions regarding the concrete division of labor. Though theoretically rich, incidents of this sort, involving black/white conflict at the lateral level were fairly rare in our survey, reflecting the under-representation of white workers among the low level jobs on which we focused.

Customers: Own Preferences and Other Aversions
Thus far, we have emphasized the *exclusionary* impact of own preferences and other aversions; but they need not work in one direction only. For many of the organizations providing services or goods in multi-ethnic Los Angeles, the reality is one of a workplace far less diverse than that of the clientele. The region’s new demography is largely irrelevant to the factories, and impinges only mildly on the restaurants, which mainly service a neighborhood clientele and maintain kitchens that are largely hidden, and likewise on the hotels, where the immigrant workforce is concentrated in positions with limited guest contact. But retailers and hospitals are in constant with the new, ethnic Los Angeles, and the “own preferences” of the region’s new inhabitants, lead organizations in these industries to change the workforce in ways that make it mirror the customer base.

Both retailing and hospital sought to serve a diverse clientele, and that imperative pushed them toward outreach while also breeding an aversion to reliance on hiring through workers’ contacts. “Diversity is in both our customers and our work force, and we want to bring it in to our workforce,” explained a department store manager. (422) A unit of one the region’s most important HMO saw diversity “as a reality based on, from the personnel standpoint, on our applicant pool; from a business standpoint, from our membership. You want to have a workforce that’s representative and can respond to the needs of our members.” (602) A department store manager told us that clientele and employees “parallel each other steadily. You need to truly understand that you have a melting pot in your workforce and you have to look at your workforce and clientele objectively as a marketing group.” And for these reasons, employees should:

reflect the cultural diversity of your clientele. If I could hire 10 percent black, 10 percent Filipino, 8 percent white, 7 percent hispanic, and really get it in line with
what's really going on, as far as how people live in this area... what more could you ask for? (405)

While the clientele can vary – yielding, in one case, a workforce that is “white, because it matches the demographics of the area” – the quest “to match our store to the people who come to the store” motivates managers to “try hard to have Spanish speaking people, and the middle Eastern language group (Persians, Iranians, Afghans, Armenian).” (421)

Similar factors shaped personnel policies among the hospitals.

But one should not think that hospitals or department stores had been bitten by the multicultural bug; rather they, were simply listening to the marketplace, which told them that sensitivity to ethnic matters counted, and then responding in appropriate ways.

Customers “don’t just notice the merchandise,” explained a manager at an old-line department store, “they look at the people who are working there.” Consequently, both retailers and hospitals were likely to have concluded that “the employee base has to reflect the customer base.” (400)

The goal of satisfying the “own preferences” of LA’s multi-ethnic consumer market made diversity desirable: “When you are out hiring folks... make sure, to consciously make sure that we have a wide variety of people working at the store, so many Blacks, so many Hispanics, and that seems to help business a lot.” (620) Not only do customers pay attention to the composition of the people trying to service their needs; they are willing to mouth off when not happy about the faces they see. A top of the line department store in the South Bay received “letters from African American customers asking where are the African American employees?”, the firm is “now training to focus on an African American base(409).” Noting that “the biggest challenge I have is getting the
right candidate into the store,” a manager underlined the impact of customers’ ethnic preferences:

I have customers in Huntington Beach who do not want someone who is Korean and Vietnamese waiting on them...conversely I have a customer in West Covina who is East Asian or Hispanic and sometimes they are extremely uncomfortable in being waited on by someone who is Caucasian. (D402)

Considerations such as these not only led stores to recruit among a diverse pool, but also to engage in monitoring practices that would ensure adequate representation of the different components of the customer base. “I like to have a balanced work force,” explained a department store manager. “It’s always on our mind. (423)”

Language – symbol of alterity, locus of conflict: Whether resulting from passive adaptation to the environment or the deliberate recruitment efforts described above, the advent of L.A.’s large foreign-born labor force introduced “foreign tongues” into the workplace. In such immigrant dense industries as hotels or furniture, reliance on network recruitment has produced a monolingual workworld in which Spanish, not English, is the lingua franca, a development which impedes access to anyone who doesn’t speak Spanish, a group including whites, Asians, and, most importantly, blacks.

Department stores and hospitals recruit more bureaucratically; by reducing the hold maintained by the social networks of employees, they have produced more a more diverse workforce, while also seeking diversity in its own right, as noted above. But the infiltration of an ethnically mixed group has also transformed many of these organizations into a tower of Babel, where linguistic differences highlighted boundaries and reminded workers and customers of both “own preferences” and “other aversions.
Consequently, public use of "foreign" tongues served as a catalyst of customer and worker conflict, yielding pressures toward exclusion, exactly opposite to those described above. Though stores tried to accommodate to the linguistic needs of their immigrant workforce, managers also insisted that "We need them to speak English. We have a very diverse ethnic population in our company and in the stores (419)." Clearly, the mix of languages among workers and customers was a source of tension, and one that many managers want to alleviate. "We have customers complaining (using a whining voice) that 'they can't speak English and they live in California.'" (410) Similarly, our HR hospital respondents reported that English-speaking patients and visitors, evince "a lot of dissatisfaction with people who speak another language…. " (602)

Use of languages arouses unhappiness for a variety of reasons, some of which are purely functional in nature. In a hospital environment, for example, "Patients, they will ask you things, and, and, in English, inevitably if you don't understand them, you know, they get very apprehensive and they get upset." (608) When immigrant sales people or service providers speak Spanish, Farsi, or Tagalog, adverse reactions arise for reasons that have nothing to do with foreigners or foreignness as such, as for example, when "the American customer who gets offended when he or she hears associates speaking in another language, and gets offended, thinking they're talking or laughing about them. (402)."

But customer dissatisfaction is also related to own preferences and other aversions, and not just among Anglos. "The Baldwin Hills store is definitely an African-American population," noted a regional personnel manager. "From a language standpoint, there
have been situations when I've had to tell workers to speak English on the floor” (419)

Moreover, the adverse reaction goes beyond an allergy to Spanish. One manager fretted about customer complaints “In the downtown stores, [where] the Filipino workers would speak to each other in Tagalog” (419); another griped about “The Middle Eastern, who is intent upon using their native language instead of English.” As an overt indicator of change, language crystallizes resentment and anxiety:

The Filipino workers that work here are, I would consider them rude, because they get in a group, and they speak their language, and no one else around can understand. And I've heard that throughout the hospital. They just find that to be rude. They're saying it's just part of their culture (607)

Conclusion

The multi-ethnic workplace of late 20th century Los Angeles is a conflicted, but far from Hobbesian world. Given our topic, we have put the spotlight on inter-ethnic tensions at work, but we need to remind the reader that just over a third of the 230 organizations we visited made mention of explicit ethnic conflicts or preferences on the part of customers and workers. Of course, it is not entirely whether our reports indicate that conflict is high, low, or at the level that one would expect. Immigration, the fundamental transforming factor, is a network-driven process, and the prominent role played by ethnic networks in the labor market make for ethnic separation, not generally considered an optimal outcome. High levels of intra-ethnic conflict are also organizationally dysfunctionally, which is why many of the organizations we contacted try hard to keep peace, cooling conflict out whenever possible, and removing the troublemakers when necessary.
Contact is usually thought preferable to separation, but this is also what makes for conflict. The conditions under which contact occur vary in ways that structure and crystallize the inter-group tensions that we have reviewed. One axis of variation involves the nature of the recruitment process. Some of the industries we studied – most notably, furniture, restaurants, and hotels – rely heavily on network recruitment, which in turn produces an ethnically tilted situation, in which one group predominates heavily. Outsiders inevitably leak in, but they find themselves highly vulnerable to the views and actions of the numerical dominants. Moreover, the latter are relatively free to act upon their preferences, since the interdependency within the work group is high, and management has few incentives to insist otherwise. These situations impinge with particular force on African-Americans, who often comprise a small proportion of the workforce, lack the community resources of other immigrant groups, and are frequently disliked by employers as well.

The conditions of conflict are quite different in larger organizations that connect with a mass public. In this case, bureaucracy and market promote diversity, with a multi-ethnic clientele seeking similar looking faces and similar sounding voices in the service interaction. As we've noted, "own preferences" in the service interaction yield exclusionary effects along with integrating impacts, though we put the emphasis on the latter.

Where bureaucratic mechanisms of recruitment and selection prevail – as in hospitals or department stores – they also weaken the grip of network-based processes of social reproduction, increasing the degree of ethnic heterogeneity. Under these
circumstances, tilted groups of the type found in restaurant kitchens or furniture factories appear less often. Ethnic majorities are therefore less common, and where found, not so dominant numerically. Sales workers are less interdependent than in production, which in turn means that they are less exposed to the views, and possible coercive actions, of their colleagues. Lower level hospital employees work more closely together, but since they are also dependent on higher-level workers, themselves often of different ethnic origins, they have less leverage to act on own preferences or other aversions. While mixing thus provides the ingredients for conflict, it also diffuses the tension and prevents, or forestalls, the emergence of a clear target group.

Before concluding, we must note that our paper looks at the face of ethnic conflict at the bottom, and for that reason probably understates the level and intensity of inter-group tensions at work. After all, our study focused on the least skilled jobs, which as our respondents reminded, “nobody wants,” which implied that ethnic succession, along with network-based processes of ethnic segregation, kept insider and outsider groups apart. The situation is likely to be rather different higher up the hierarchy, especially since there seems to be a perpetual scarcity of “good jobs” and oversupply of workers looking for them. Under these conditions, there is plenty of incentive for insiders to hold on to what they have and outsiders to do everything they can to break in. For that reason, all is not likely to be quiet on the multi-ethnic, labor front.
References


Table 1: Inter-ethnic conflict in the low-skilled labor market

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Black/ Latino</th>
<th>Intra-Latino</th>
<th>Asians v. Others</th>
<th>Multi-group</th>
<th>All types</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Department Stores</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Furniture</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hospitals</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hotels</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Printing</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Restaurants</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>21</strong></td>
<td><strong>25</strong></td>
<td><strong>8</strong></td>
<td><strong>32</strong></td>
<td><strong>86</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>