In the last chapter, we found that black officers are more likely than white officers to separate at times of promotion. Black officers are also less likely to leave voluntarily in between promotions. To better understand why this difference exists, this chapter draws on the project’s extensive semistructured one-on-one and group interviews. We present the common perceptions offered by the officers in these discussions as to why career progression differs for blacks.

Blacks and whites offer distinct and often contradictory explanations for group differences in career progress. Each of these explanations for differences in the career progress of blacks should not be interpreted simply as fact; they are the perceptions of members of these groups. Perceptions are important in that they represent how members of each group interpret their experiences in the career-management system; however, an individual’s perception of an interaction may be inaccurate if he or she misjudges the motives or assumptions of other individuals in the interaction. As one black female officer stated: “When there is a personality conflict, it’s always hard to say what caused it. Do they hate officers [from my

1We found similar differences for other minority males and females. However, as discussed elsewhere, the sample sizes for these groups were too small for precise measurement of retention and promotion differences, and the bases we visited had too few of these officers for the focus groups discussed in this chapter and the next one.

2For research demonstrating how race can affect the meaning individuals ascribe to the actions of others in an interaction, see Hamilton and Trolier (1986), Inman and Baron (1996), and Poskocil (1977).
occupation field? Or is it because I’m female or black or from [a southern state]?” In a similar vein, a white officer commented, “It’s tough to confront minorities without it possibly being interpreted as being a racial thing.” Where possible, we also discuss other evidence, both from our research and the research of others, that supports or refutes individuals’ perceptions. Chapter Five presents a similar discussion regarding the perceptions of gender difference in career progression.

Except where stated otherwise, the issues presented in this chapter apply equally to both black men and women officers. Black women did not raise any issues in our discussions that were not also discussed by either black men or white women. Issues related to gender for black women will be discussed in the next chapter. Perceptions generically attributed to white officers in this chapter indicate perceptions that were expressed by both white men and women in our discussions. Our conversations with white women focused primarily on gender issues; as a consequence, some racial issues were discussed with white males but not with white females. Where we had little basis to assert that white women concurred or disagreed with comments by white males, we have attributed the perspective only to white males. Therefore, readers should note that white women did not necessarily disagree with perspectives attributed to white males.

ANALYTIC APPROACH

A complete description of who was interviewed and how the interviews were conducted can be found in Appendix D, but a brief explication of our analytic approach is warranted here. We interviewed three sets of individuals: officers with duties to manage aspects of officer careers (primarily detailers and assignment officers, training personnel, officers who organize and assist promotion boards, and officers responsible for officer policy on headquarters staffs); senior officers who have recently sat on boards deciding promotions to O-5 and O-6; and midcareer officers (O-3 and O-4). These three groups were selected to help us understand how the officer career and promotion system is supposed to run and how the system is perceived to run. In total, we interviewed 233 officers:
• 45 career managers,
• 45 promotion board members,
• 143 midcareer officers.

We conducted one-on-one or small group interviews with career managers that were exploratory and unstructured in nature. These interviews were part of the study team’s initial exercise to learn the basics of how officer careers progress. Most of the information from these interviews appeared in Chapter Two, which described officer career-management policies and practices. Our discussions with recent promotion board members took place as semistructured focus groups, according to a loosely scripted protocol. The protocol focused on the process followed during board deliberations and what distinguishes successful candidates. We allowed discussions to deviate considerably from the protocol when they took an informative turn.

We held interviews and focus groups with midcareer officers as part of our site visits to one major installation from each service. The RAND study team provided each base with detailed specifications regarding how discussion participants were to be selected. In general, we selected participants from each racial/gender group to ensure representation from the full range of occupational specialties and commissioning sources.

We conducted one-on-one interviews with roughly one-quarter of the midcareer officers in our sample; the rest we interviewed in focus groups. Table 7 presents the racial and gender background of the midcareer officers we interviewed. As with the promotion board focus groups, both the one-on-one and focus group discussions with midcareer officers were conducted using semistructured protocols. Again, we allowed discussions to deviate from the protocol when they took an informative turn.

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3Protocols for the promotion board focus groups can be found in Appendix C.
4See Appendix C for a detailed description of the selection criteria.
5Protocols for the one-on-one interviews and focus groups with midcareer officers can be found in Appendix C. We used the protocols as a general guide for the discussions and to ensure that each focus group addressed all the key issues.
Table 7
Racial and Gender Background of Midcareer Officers in Our Discussions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Race/Gender</th>
<th>Proportion of Officers Interviewed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>White Men</td>
<td>0.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black Men</td>
<td>0.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White Women</td>
<td>0.27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black Women</td>
<td>0.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>1.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

With the midcareer officers, we conducted separate focus groups for black males, white males, black females, and white females in order to provide an environment for discussion in which people felt free to express opinions and share experiences. The RAND interview teams were mixed along both racial and gender lines and had substantial diversity with regard to academic discipline, military research experience, and personal military service.\(^6\) To begin each focus group, participants described their career experiences. This was followed by a more general discussion of important aspects such as occupational assignment, duty assignment, performance evaluation, promotion, and retention. Many focus groups brought up issues related to race and gender during this discussion. If these issues did not arise, the interview team asked about minorities and women at the end of the general discussion.

We did not video or audio tape any of the discussions in order to minimize subjects’ protection concerns and because we felt taping might inhibit some from fully participating in a discussion. Interviewers kept general notes during one-on-one conversations then transcribed the notes shortly after the interview. Each focus group employed a dedicated note-taker who kept a detailed record of

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\(^6\)Logistically, it was not possible for us to always match the race/gender of a focus group discussion leader to that of the discussion group’s participants. This might have biased our data toward an understatement of perceived racial differences, as prior studies have shown that in responding to a white interviewer, blacks tend to underplay expressions of racial differences in experiences or attitudes (see Anderson et al., 1988; Davis, 1987). Similar behavior is expected with white responses to a black interviewer (Hatchett and Schuman, 1975–76).
Officers' Perceptions of Racial Differences in Career Progression

the group discussion. While this prevented us from compiling verbatim transcripts of the discussions, our notes are quite detailed, and we feel they serve as a solid basis from which to determine the relative emphasis participants placed on various issues and concerns.

The semistructured discussion format and the nature of our notes limited our ability to apply a formal content analysis to the interview transcripts. To ensure that our analysis was as careful as possible, several members of the study team independently reviewed the discussion notes. Each person evaluated the relative importance that each racial/gender group placed on a specified set of issues, and the study team reviewed the separate evaluations. The findings reported in this chapter are the result of that process.

Throughout this chapter we employ only broad descriptive adjectives to characterize the relative level of agreement with a perception or concern. Unlike survey methods, qualitative interviewing methods are not designed to strictly quantify the proportion of participants who adhere to a particular opinion. Instead, this chapter and the next build on the strength of qualitative data, providing a rich understanding of complex attitudes and relationships. Qualitative data analysis is particularly useful for developing hypotheses about the reasons for patterns revealed in quantitative data gathered from the same setting.7

Most of the information we report is taken from the focus groups and interviews with midcareer officers. Occasionally, we refer to comments made by either career managers or promotion board members. To ensure that the source is clear, we refer to each group as follows:

- “midcareer officers” or “officers,”
- “officer career managers” or “managers,”
- “promotion board members” or “board members.”

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7For a discussion of the strengths and weaknesses of qualitative data analysis, see Miles and Huberman (1994) or Rubin and Rubin (1995).
COMPETITIVENESS OF PERFORMANCE OR BIAS IN THE CAREER-MANAGEMENT SYSTEM

Most midcareer white officers whom we interviewed stated that they expected no meaningful differences between the career progression of black and white officers. By and large, they did not believe that black officers are disadvantaged in their career progression because of their race.

The consensus among the white male officers in our discussions was that career success and promotion are driven by performance only. One white officer succinctly stated, "Performance is all that matters." The following exchange from a focus group with promotion board members further supports this view:

_Interviewer:_ What makes a candidate competitive for promotion?
_Board member 1:_ A sustained manner of performance. Not just one report.
_Board member 2:_ That’s the only real absolute. You can compensate for bad assignments, but you must have sustained demonstrated performance.

This meritocratic view of the career-management system implies that race or gender, in and of itself, does not affect an officer’s success. As one officer stated, "My experience is that good officers get promoted and they get the good jobs. You get promoted for ability, not race or sex. I’ve never seen good minority officers or women officers not get jobs if they were good.” The presence of black officers at the highest ranks in the services—Colin Powell for example—was often offered as proof against discrimination in the system.

Some white male officers went a step further in challenging the notion that black males are disadvantaged in the career-management system. These officers believed that it is white officers

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8It is possible that white officers expressed an expectation of no meaningful racial differences because they thought this to be the most appropriate response, rather than what they actually believed. For highly charged issues, such as abortion, race, or homosexuality, responses to interview or survey questions can be particularly sensitive to social norms, as the expression of actual beliefs can embarrass respondents or a group with which they are affiliated (Dovidio and Fazio, 1992).
who are at a disadvantage in the career-management system. They offered as proof of this advantage the promotion goals of board precepts and other personnel policies that explicitly treated minorities and women differently.

As we described above, during the interviews RAND researchers informed officers that differences could be seen in the career progression of black officers without expressing the nature of these differences. Three primary themes emerged in the explanations offered by white male officers for any racial differences in rated performance. These officers felt that:

- On average, black officers enter with weaker skills and abilities; in particular, historically black colleges and universities do not prepare students well for the rigorous demands of an officer’s career.
- Black officers tend to separate themselves socially and don’t work as hard to develop the peer and mentoring relationships that are critically important to an officer’s success.
- Civilian employers aggressively recruit black officers in an effort to meet their own affirmative action goals, and some blacks use the military as a stepping stone to a good civilian job explicitly because of its equitable treatment of minorities.

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9Discussion leaders initially asked participants whether they thought racial or gender differences existed in the career progress of officers. In those discussions where participants stated that they thought no differences existed, discussion leaders then asserted that administrative data showed differences do exist, without indicating to participants which group was disadvantaged. Discussion leaders then again asked participants to identify what differences they might expect and why they developed. If after further discussion, the participants continued to identify the wrong group as disadvantaged, the discussion leader would assert the correct findings from the administrative data and ask the participants to again comment on why they thought such differences occurred.

10It is common for those who are successful to believe that an evaluation system is based on merit, and for those who fail to blame their lack of success on unfair treatment (Saal and Moore, 1993; Sherman et al., 1983). Evaluators tend to set lower minimum competency standards and higher standards for demonstrated ability for women and minorities; thus, these groups find it harder to prove their performance is based on ability (Biernat and Kobrynowicz, 1997).
Thus, the common thread that ran through our discussions with white male officers was their overwhelming rejection of the notion that black officers are systematically disadvantaged in the career-management system. Instead, an individual black officer’s failure to attain senior rank was attributed directly to factors such as his or her preference for civilian life or weaknesses in his or her skills and abilities.\footnote{Kluegel (1990) asserts that whites have increasingly come to ascribe the primary cause of racial differences to differences in educational attainment and individual personality characteristics, rather than to inequities in a stratification system. This “allows privileged whites to avoid blame for the gap while endorsing an explanation commonly viewed as unprejudiced” (p. 523).}

Nearly all black officers in our discussions concurred with the expressed belief among white officers that job performance, and its recognition, are the primary drivers of an officer’s success. As one black officer stated, “To get promoted, you need good performance in the right jobs.” By and large, the black officers we interviewed accepted the fairness of the promotion board deliberations, given the information that is presented to the board. Further, black officers rejected the notion that they received an advantage in the process. Instead, most of them expressed a belief that factors other than an individual’s ability often affect the evaluation and recognition of a black officer’s performance. Thus, nearly all black officers in our discussions expected that the measured career progress of blacks would be weaker than the progress of their white peers.

In general, black officers raised three issues that they believe limit their ability to develop competitive career records for promotion boards to consider:

- White officers expect black officers to have weaker skills and abilities; to overcome this expectation, the “performance bar” gets increased for black officers.
- Cultural barriers make it harder for black officers to develop the strong peer and mentor relationships that provide access to information and resources necessary for career success.
- Black officers are less likely to get career-enhancing assignments or be selected for participation in important missions.
Thus, most officers, black and white, accepted the basic fairness with which promotion boards review the records of black officers. A broad consensus existed in our discussions that the difficulties black officers have in their career development lie in establishing competitive performance records. The issues raised in our discussions with blacks and whites to explain these difficulties were: precommissioning preparation, skills, and abilities; social integration and the formation of peer and mentor relationships; assignment patterns; and competing opportunities. The remainder of this chapter summarizes the discussions on these issues and the issue of bias in favor of black officers.

**PRECOMMISSIONING PREPARATION AND SKILLS**

A clear parallel existed in the discussions among black and white officers regarding the precommissioning preparation, skills, and abilities of black officers. Nearly all white officers expressed a belief that promotion and career success are driven by performance; therefore, most white officers concluded that the promotion failure of individual black officers necessarily derives from their weaker performance. The cause of this weaker performance is seen as stemming from weaker skills, abilities, or precommissioning preparation of the particular black officer. “The service has lowered standards to admit more minorities, so of course they look worse than whites,” stated one white officer. Another stated that the services are “bending over backwards to keep unqualified officers in.”

Black officers clearly perceived this attitude to be widespread among white officers. Many black officers in our discussions believed that in each new situation, others assume them to be less capable. “Some people automatically expect [of blacks] some things, intellectually, athletically. They expect these across the board,” commented one black officer. Another black officer commented:

> People question your ability for basic oral and written skills, especially if you come from a historically black university. It used to piss me off to get “you speak well.” I think I am supposed to be on a peer level with them. . . . Small white colleges are thought to be okay, especially small white military colleges. Whereas, if I’m black, I am not expected to speak and write as well.
Some black officers expressed a sense that white officers are quick to judge all black officers on the failings of any one black officer. One officer commented, “It also depends on the guy there before you. Say there was a minority officer who didn’t do a good job. Then they put other minorities in the same category when they come along.”

Many black officers whom we interviewed felt that their successes are not given the same attention as their failures. These black officers believed that others attribute a black officer’s success to the service’s affirmative action efforts, rather than to his or her skills and abilities. As one black officer commented:

What gets me even more is that when we do make it, it’s assumed that we have done so because we are token, or that we got there through affirmative action, not because we were the best at our job. But if you are put in a position and you are white, the issue of why you are there is never questioned.

As a result, most black officers felt that they must constantly prove themselves capable, while other officers are assumed capable until they prove otherwise. A black officer observed, “I have to work twice as hard as the next person. I cannot be average.”

That said, some black officers in our discussions acknowledged their belief that the services do bring in a number of blacks with weaker skills and preparation. Commenting on the ROTC programs at historically black colleges, one officer stated, “If ROTC programs would force more English and writing, it would be a big help.” A different black officer offered, “Sometimes people get rushed and are not ready for prime time and fall on their face.”

We examined outside sources to expand upon this belief. DoD-wide data sources do not contain information for assessing officers’ precommissioning preparation. The limited research on this issue is based on Navy and Marine Corps data. These data indicate, on average, that black officers tend to receive their bachelor’s degree from colleges that are less competitive than those attended by their white peers (North and Smith, 1993; Mehay, 1995). Black Marine Corps officer candidates are more likely than white candidates to
receive aptitude score waivers and subsequently perform less well during TBS training (North et al., 1994; North and Smith, 1993).

A few studies have examined career outcomes after controlling for measures of performance or precommissioning preparation. North et al. (1995) have controlled for TBS performance scores, general classification test scores, and completion of various professional military education courses in estimating chances of promotion to Captain and Major among Marine officers. These background and preparation measures have not explained why black males were substantially less likely to be promoted to Captain and Major than were their white peers in fiscal years 1987–93.

In contrast to North et al., in a study of unrestricted line Navy officers, Mehay (1995) has found that controlling for college GPA and type of degree reduces the racial difference in chances of promotion from O-3 to O-4 by more than 50 percent. When Mehay added a control for ratings given on performance evaluation reports, the racial difference in promotion chances became statistically insignificant. This finding supports the belief among the officers participating in this study that promotion board decisions fairly reflect officers’ performance evaluations. However, because the performance evaluations are subjective evaluations of officers’ performance, they could reflect any systematic biases regarding minority officers by raters.

SOCIAL SEPARATION

Peer and mentor relationships are seen as key to an officer’s career success. They can provide access to information and resources that enhance an officer’s performance as well as the recognition received for this performance. One officer noted, “One learns the key things, but the nuances come from peers.” An exchange between two black officers in one of the focus groups carried a similar thought: (Officer

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12 Officer candidates in the Marine Corps are required to have a minimum combined SAT score of 1,000. An officer candidate with lower scores can be admitted only if he or she receives an aptitude waiver. It should be noted that the relationship between aptitude test score and performance as an officer is by no means clear. Analysis by the Center for Naval Analysis has found no relationship between aptitude test scores and promotion to Captain and Major. (North et al., 1994)
1) “If you did not have the gouge, you were in trouble. Most blacks were not in that clique. . . .” (Officer 2) “The gouge is a subjective process that we get shut out of.” Most of the black officers we interviewed felt that at one time or another, they had been shut out of social interactions. One officer commented, “There were also some functions that [my peers] didn’t invite me to (I was the only one not invited). We get shut out of some of the information flow because we don’t socialize with the others as much.” Yet some acknowledged that at times blacks also separate themselves from socializing with their peers:

A lot of minority officers choose not to participate. I have met blacks who have chosen not to socialize. . . . I have also met whites who chose not to socialize. It has a greater impact on blacks though. There are so few that it is noticed when you are not there.

There was a consensus regarding the value of mentors. As one officer observed, “If you have a mentor, you will go places, to better assignments, and assignments make or break a career. Two equal guys in equal assignments can go up or down on mentors.” Yet many black officers in our discussions felt that it was less common for senior officers to mentor young black officers. “The biggest hang-up in finding a mentor is that the [commanding officer] has to see himself as a young [junior officer] in you. [White officers] don’t see us that way,” commented one black officer.14

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13 The gouge is a Navy slang term used to describe the informal assistance that officers receive from their peers. An example might be trading information such as old class notes or telling a new shipmate about the Captain’s personal preferences regarding ship operations.

14 Social research has long argued that mentors are an important factor in determining an individual’s success in an organization (Dreher and Ash, 1989; Fagenson, 1989; Kanter, 1977; Kram, 1985; Thomas, 1990). Recent research has begun to focus particular attention on racial and gender differences in the chances of developing mentoring relations and the structures that such relationships take. In some settings, blacks have been found to be less likely to form mentoring relationships (Cox and Nkomo, 1991) while in others there has been no significant difference in the chances of forming mentoring relationships (Dreher and Cox, 1996).

The context and meaning of mentoring relationships can also be different for blacks and whites. Cross-race mentor relationships have been found to provide less psychosocial support than same race relationships (Thomas, 1990). Yet because white men tend to occupy more senior positions in organizations, the advantage received
Peer and mentor relationships are viewed as an integral component of an officer’s job, not just as important for his or her access to resources. One officer said, “You need to interact; if you don’t socialize, you are an outsider, not a team player.” Another officer offered, “Part of being an officer is socializing with each other, building unit cohesion, esprit, so some [socializing with your peers] is mandatory.”

Black officers in our discussions expressed a clear sense that it is harder for them to fit into the culture of the officer corps than it is for their white peers. They perceived the culture of the officer corps to be unmistakably white and middle class. Commenting on the difficulties of fitting into the military culture, one officer stated, “You need to avoid ‘black’ mannerisms—speech, walk—because the first impression is very important.” Echoes of this perspective were heard in the interviews with white officers; one white officer commented, “If people start walking around with different ‘chains,’ you may perceive the person is not part of the unit or doesn’t want to be.” Another white officer commented, “The ones that have the Ebony and Jet magazines out and get together with black enlisted personnel, they create a counterculture of their own making.”

Other black officers recognized that the nature of the social situation is not always so clear. A senior black officer noted, “Perception is reality to young minorities. The reality may be that they are not excluded, but that is their perception.” Yet young black officers with little experience interacting in such an environment can feel it difficult both to be accepted in and to accept this setting. A black promotion board member offered the following observation:

Anyone at lower social class than middle class feels less entitled. So they don’t think that the door is open. When there is, for instance, a “Hail and Farewell” to a captain, he or she has never seen parents who have done that type of socializing, so they exclude themselves from what should be fun. They think they will get ahead purely by hard work, but it is relationships that do it. It’s who trusts you. So they keep their nose to the grindstone, but they don’t participate.

from being mentored can be higher with white male mentors than mentors from other demographic groups (Dreher and Cox, 1996).
Some black midcareer officers indicated that it could be as difficult to find support and guidance from other black officers as it is to find support and guidance from the broader officer community. One black officer noted:

We don’t know how to mentor each other. . . . [There] was a black female high-ranking officer, and she had never had a meeting with other black females, had never been to a NNOA conference. It was a big deal that she was a Captain, but she never associated with other blacks. . . . When I called her, I figured she is a Captain, she is black, she has the gouge, she will steer me right. But she did nothing. We don’t know how to mentor.

Many black officers in our discussions perceived that others take notice when blacks socialize together, seeing this as an act of separatism. In that vein, a white officer commented that “the only thing that I’ve seen is a tendency with a small group of minority officers to hang out together.” The impression is that black officers feel that it is uncomfortable for a group of black officers to talk together. A black officer commented, “People will look at you because there are four of us sitting there talking and it’s a problem! Everybody gravitates to people like them. But it’s okay if 50 white guys are talking together.” As a result, black officers sometimes avoid gathering to talk, even though they would like to. Another black officer observed:

You need a minority looking out for you, but even they get sucked up in the system and do not want to be seen as taking care of other black officers. We cannot openly take care of each other. If we do, we are seen as being prejudiced.

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15 There is considerably less social research on who mentors than on who is mentored. Yet there are references in some general writings by black men about the difficulty of mentoring other blacks without being seen as favoring blacks (Jones, 1986; Feagin and Sikes, 1994).

16 National Naval Officers’ Association, an association of naval officers who are predominantly black.

17 There is ample evidence that in many settings, for example, integrated schools, personal friendships, or church membership, individuals socially self-segregate along racial or gender characteristics (Halliman, 1982; Whitley et al., 1984; and Metz, 1986).
Unfortunately, there are no aggregate data available to evaluate whether black officers on the whole have greater difficulty forming peer and mentor relationships. The 1992 Survey of Officer and Enlisted Personnel (SOEP) does show that black officers are somewhat less satisfied with their coworkers, but it also shows no significant racial differences in an officer’s perception of support from his or her supervisors (see Figure 11).  

ASSIGNMENTS

In our interviews many black officers expressed a sense that they are often shut out of career-enhancing assignments. Many black officers felt that others’ expectations about their skills and abilities and the difficulties they experience forming peer and mentor relationships limited their opportunities to get important career-enhancing assignments or to be selected for important missions. One white assignment officer commented that, in making duty assignments, “When it comes down to two people who look the same on paper, it will come down to further input about personal relations. Detailers used to log who would call regarding a particular officer.” A black officer commented:

Sometimes it is very hard [for minorities] to get the job—like being a black quarterback—no matter how good you are, no matter how hard you kick, scream, or beg, you still will not get the job. You are always placed in the safety position. You don’t have many options, and that gets you passed over.

Broader evidence of this perception can be found in the 1992 SOEP. White officers, in contrast, were somewhat more likely than black officers to perceive that they were in a career-enhancing assignment (see Figure 11).

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18The difference between black men and white men and between black women and white women in satisfaction with one’s coworkers is significant at the .05 level. The racial differences in perceived support from one’s supervisors are not significant at the .05 level.

19A detailer is an officer who makes assignment decisions in the Navy.

20The difference between black men and white men and between black women and white women in whether one’s current assignment will help in promotion is significant at the .05 level.
Black officers’ ability to develop competitive career records may also be aggravated by policies that the services have developed to increase the number of minority recruits. In discussions with officer managers and midcareer officers, we were told that the services place minority officers disproportionately in certain positions: recruiting and ROTC assignments, where they have high visibility to potential minority recruits, and the Equal Opportunity (EO) Office. Unfortunately, many officers regard these assignments as less desirable than assignments in their career field. These assignments take officers out of their particular occupational fields for a period of time, potentially weakening their ability to demonstrate “occupational credibility” in their career profile. Thus, while these policies may increase the services’ ability to recruit and retain minorities, they may simultaneously damage the long-term competitiveness of black officers for promotion. This is despite the fact that all services explicitly instruct promotion board members that atypical assignment patterns among minorities and women may be due to the services’ assignment policies, rather than a reflection of the caliber of the officer.

We could not independently assess whether blacks are less likely to receive career-enhancing or damaging assignments; the information on job assignments in the administrative records available to us was too limited to distinguish such positions. However, a recent GAO study (1995) of a limited number of high-profile, career-enhancing jobs in the Army, Navy, and Air Force found no significant difference in the relative chances of receiving such assignments between white and black officers. It should be noted that the GAO study did not examine the relative chances of assignment to positions thought to be career damaging. However, the Army’s Office of Economic and Manpower Analysis has reported that black officers are twice as likely as white officers to be serving in a recruiting assignment, although black officers appear no more likely to be serving in ROTC commands.21

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21 Original calculations conducted by the Office of Economic and Manpower Analysis for RAND based on the March 1997 Army Officer Master File.
COMPETING OPPORTUNITIES

In our discussions, white officers frequently stated that black officers disproportionately choose to leave the military to pursue civilian careers. White officers offered two explanations for this phenomenon. First, civilian companies “bid off” black officers from the military to fulfill their own affirmative action goals. Second, black officers are believed to use the military as a stepping stone to a good civilian job, never intending to pursue a full military career.

Black officers emphatically rejected the notion that they are using military service as a stepping stone to civilian employment. They also did not believe that their civilian opportunities were better than those of other officers. It is also worth noting that many black officers in our discussions expressed the belief that any disadvantages that they have experienced during their military career probably would also occur if they chose to work for a civilian employer.

If black officers were leaving to pursue civilian opportunities, we would expect to see higher losses between promotion points. However, in Chapter Three we showed that black officers are substantially less likely to separate during “retention periods,” when their separation decision would be voluntary.

There is little broader evidence to support a contention that black officers believe that they have greater civilian job opportunities than do their white counterparts. Data from the 1992 SOEP show few differences in civilian opportunities, career intentions, or satisfaction with military life between black and white officers (of either gender). Black officers are actually less likely than are white officers of the same gender to have received a job offer from a civilian employer and no more likely to have actively looked for work in the past year (see Figure 10).22 Similarly, black officers are no more likely than

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22The tabulations in Figures 10 and 11 are for officers in grades O-1 through O-4 only. The statistical significances of the racial differences between males and between females for receipt of job offers (Figure 10) and having actively looked for a civilian job (Figure 10) were evaluated by using a logistic regression where the regressors were dichotomous variables for race, for gender, and for a race/gender interaction. The statistical significances of the racial differences for the chances of finding a good civilian job (Figure 10) were evaluated by using both an ordinary least squares regression and an ordered logistic regression on the 11-point scale given to respondents with similar regressors as before. The statistical significances of the racial differences for the ex-
are white officers to believe that they could easily find a good civilian job (see Figure 10). There are no substantive differences between black and white officers in the year of service at which they expect to separate (see Figure 10) or in satisfaction with the general way of life in the military (see Figure 11).

BIAS IN FAVOR OF BLACKS

White male officers believed that any bias that exists in the system is against themselves rather than against blacks or women. One white participant stated: “If a minority has everything, is qualified for something, but has lower test scores than a white with all the right qualifications, the minority will get it.” A few white officers stated that they understood that boards are given either explicit orders or heavy pressure to promote blacks and women at rates equal to white men, regardless of their career record. One white officer stated, “I think some officers get promoted because they are female, because they are black. . . . I don’t know how they promote people in D.C., but I know they have quotas. I have seen too many incompetent minorities.” Another stated:

This is the rumor, that the board was given a letter of instruction that said “when you read a woman’s or minority’s OPR, you must assume that they were discriminated against, so you must score them higher than you do the others.”


pected years of completed service (Figure 10) were evaluated by using both ordinary least squares regression on actual expected years of completed service and by logistic regression on whether the respondent expected to complete 20 or more years of service with similar regressors as before. The statistical significances of the racial differences for the satisfaction with military life (Figure 11), satisfaction with coworkers (Figure 11), support from supervisors (Figure 11), and effect of current assignment on promotion chances (Figure 11) were evaluated by using an ordered logistic regression on the 5-point scales given to respondents with similar regressors as before.

23There are no statistically significant differences between black and white men or between black and white women in their reported chances of having received a civilian job offer, their reported chances of having looked for a civilian job in the past year, their perception of their civilian job opportunities, the number of years they expect to serve, or their satisfaction with the military way of life.

24Officer Performance Report.
Figure 10—Civilian Job Expectations of O-1–O-4 Officers

Minority and Gender Differences in Officer Career Progression

Figure 11—Satisfaction of O-1–O-4 Officers with Career Attributes

This perception also runs counter to the data we reported in Chapter Three on the relative diminished promotion chances of black officers. Yet since board results are not published in an aggregated format by race or gender, officers generally have little information by which to confirm or reject their beliefs about the board outcomes for blacks and women.25

Many white midcareer officers misunderstood the precepts that govern the deliberations of promotion boards. As we described in Chapter Two, at the time of our fieldwork, the precepts stated as a goal rather than a requirement the promotion of women and minorities at rates equivalent to white males. The services had procedures for tracking how well the goals were being met during the board’s proceedings, although in some cases the procedures were carried out only if requested by the board president. At the conclusion of all boards, the results were tallied to assess how well the board had met the precept goals. A board could be asked to reconsider its decision if the outcome was substantially out of balance with the goals; yet the board members we talked to reported that reconsideration rarely occurred.

In some services, the precepts instructed board members to be aware that discrimination may have disadvantaged minorities and women during their careers. Board members reported that this instruction

25The perceptions of the precepts regarding women and minorities among white officers in our discussions were consistent with the range of more general societal attitudes regarding affirmative action programs. Support of affirmative action programs among whites has been found to vary considerably under a variety of scenarios. Support decreases when programs run counter to an individual’s immediate self-interest (Bobo and Kluegel, 1993; Kluegel and Smith, 1983; Nosworthy et al., 1995). The military’s up-or-out promotion system combined with force downsizing has created the widespread perception of a zero-sum environment for advancement. As a result, white officers may see personnel policies that focus special attention on minorities as increasingly running counter to their own self-interest.

On the other hand, support increases when programs are seen as limited to increasing equality of opportunity. Programs focused on recruiting or initial training receive more support than programs that treat minorities differently once they are incorporated into an organization (Kravitz, 1995; Kravitz and Platania, 1993; Nosworthy, et al., 1995; Steeh and Krysan, 1996). Correspondingly, support for programs is weak among those who view the stratification system of an organization, or society, as already basically egalitarian (Kluegel and Smith, 1982). To the extent that an officer perceives that career success is driven solely by performance, he or she may be less likely to support personnel policies that treat minorities differently.
sometimes helps them to understand an anomalous negative performance report in an otherwise consistent record of strong performance reports. However, the board members we interviewed generally felt that, except in the most obvious cases, it is quite difficult to distinguish subtle discrimination against an officer from average or weak performance by the officer. As one board member stated,

> You could be very sensitive to [race and gender] issues after the [board’s instructional] briefing, but when you get ready to raise your hand, you cannot say whether a minority officer has a poor file because he is a poor performer, or because he was victimized. The training you get gives you some understanding of how these people were disadvantaged, but it still would not help because it was too late.

Further, board members generally felt that the board process is not the place to make corrections for past injustices. A board member observed,

> If there is a weakness, it is in the information you are given. If OERs\(^{26}\) do not accurately reflect performance, or if a person never had the opportunity to serve in good jobs, then the board cannot compensate for that, and should not.

Nearly all officers interviewed who had been involved with a board proceeding expressed a belief that the boards do the best job possible given the materials that are before them. They believed that if members of a group tended to have less success in the board process, it came from the quality of the files presented to the board rather than from differential treatment by the board.

Most board members in our discussions felt that if all indications of race and gender were removed from the file, little change would occur in the board outcomes. A recent analysis of Navy and Marine Corps promotion board results by Mehay (1995) provides some factual basis for this perception. Mehay has found that Navy and Marine Corps O-4 promotion board decisions closely reflect the performance evaluations that officers receive, regardless of race. In

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\(^{26}\)Officer Evaluation Reports.
addition, some board members felt that removing race and gender identifiers from the file might hurt the promotion chances of women and minorities because they would have no context for understanding particularly anomalous performance reports. Many minority and women officers agreed. The consensus was that, except in the most obvious cases, it was quite difficult to distinguish subtle discrimination against an officer from average or weak performance by the officer. Further, officers who had served as board members generally felt that, since there is an appeals process for performance evaluations, the promotion board is not the place to make corrections for past injustices.

Most black officers whom we interviewed readily recognized that some white officers perceive board precepts to favor minorities and women, but they scoffed at the notion that they receive an advantage in the career-management system. Some black officers expressed concern that such policies reinforce the stereotypes that blacks are less capable and do not succeed on their own merit. There is concern among some that these policies give little benefit to minorities yet provide military leadership with a claim to have adequately addressed racial inequities. While many black officers expressed some sympathy with this argument, few advocated removing the relevant statements from board precepts.

To be clear, no black officer was interested in receiving a promotion or assignment that he or she did not deserve or was not fully qualified for. As one black officer commented, “Personally, I would hate to get a billet because of affirmative action—I would feel less qualified than the next guy.” The precepts are not seen as providing an advantage, just as “a check to make sure that everyone is playing honest.”

**SUMMARY**

A common perception among white officers for why fewer black officers attain senior ranks is that more black officers choose to separate to pursue civilian employment opportunities. We found no evidence to support this common perception. In fact, black officers appear more likely to choose to remain in the service. Instead, our data analysis showed that the key to understanding racial differences
in career development appears to be the lower probability that black officers receive promotions.

Midcareer officers, regardless of race, believed that promotion boards are fair in their deliberations, and the available evidence supports this view. The more limited career progression of black officers appears to be due to difficulty in compiling competitive performance records. On the basis of both our research and the research of others, we believe that the most likely causes of this difficulty are weaker precommissioning preparation and more limited social integration.

The structure of our study did not allow us to directly evaluate the precommissioning preparation of black officers. Officers told us that an officer can overcome a slow start, but this must happen early in his or her career. Other research, although limited, does find that, on average, white officers enter with more competitive educational backgrounds than black officers. However, the differences in precommissioning preparation were insufficient, in and of themselves, to explain the racial differences in promotion chances.

Our discussions with both white and black officers suggest that a key problem for black officers is their greater difficulty forming peer and mentor relationships. White and black officers both discussed how such relationships provide important resources for succeeding at one's current assignment as well as for opening future career opportunities. We could not objectively measure differences in the ability to form and draw from peer and mentor relationships, yet comments from both white and black officers made it clear that a certain level of social segregation continues to exist between the two groups.

The limited access to peer and mentor networks and limited precommissioning preparation described by focus group participants may lessen the chances, on average, that black officers get selected for career-enhancing assignments and duties. Disproportionate assignment of minorities to duties outside their occupations may further disadvantage black officers by placing them in assignments that are generally seen as less career enhancing. The final result appears to be that black officers, as a group, bring somewhat less competitive career records before promotion boards.
The degree to which this stems from limited opportunities to demonstrate their skills and abilities or weaker precommissioning preparation is worthy of further consideration.