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## **African Americans' Perceptions of Workplace Equity: A Starting Point**

Kimberly J. Shinew  
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**ABSTRACT:** For the past several decades, leisure researchers have investigated the impact that race has on leisure behavior and preferences, but there remains a paucity of research that addresses the issue of race in the leisure services workplace. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to investigate the perceptions of inequity, discrimination, and promotion opportunities among African Americans in the field of public parks and recreation. The study was conducted in multiple phases, and all included African Americans who were working for public recreation agencies in a midwestern state. First, telephone interviews were conducted with 11 African American middle managers. A few months after the telephone interviews, a focus group was held at the state conference with African Americans who were employed in a variety of positions in public recreation. Finally, questionnaires were mailed to African Americans working in full-time positions in public recreation agencies in the state. The study's results indicated that many respondents perceived discrimination and inequity in their workplaces. Respondents felt that they were under-represented in the field, particularly at the upper administrative level. Most felt that people with minority backgrounds were given fewer promotion opportunities than were European Americans. Further, they reported that they were not being adequately prepared for management-related responsibilities. Many respondents indicated that they lacked mentors, which may inhibit their ability to matriculate to upper management positions. Based on the results of this study, as well as Allison's (1999) earlier study, it appears that race remains a salient factor within the leisure services workforce. The implications of the study's findings are discussed. There is general agreement among the study's respondents that greater efforts are needed to recruit and retain African Americans. Moreover, the results of the current study suggest that if these inequity and discrimination issues are not addressed, the parks and recreation field will not be viewed as an attractive career option for African Americans.

**KEYWORDS:** African Americans, discrimination, inequity, race, workplace, recruitment.

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## **Introduction**

A great deal of attention has been given to the topic of racial diversity in the workplace as society confronts the numerous issues that are emerging as a result of an increasingly diverse workforce (Adigun, 2000; Baugher, Varanelli & Weisbord, 2000; Digh, 1998; Fok, Hartman, Villere & Freibert, 1996; Mamman, 1996; McLeod, Lobel, & Cox, 1996; Orlando & Kirby, 1997; Rothman, 2000). Most people would agree after reviewing workforce statistics or anecdotal evidence that people of color currently make up a larger percentage of senior management than at any other point in U.S. history. However, African Americans and Hispanics still make up less than 2% of executive positions in Fortune 1,000 companies (Thomas & Wetlaufer, 1997). This figure is discouraging considering that the U.S. 2000 Census reported that the populations of African Americans ([www.cnn.com/2001/US/08/12/white.black/index.html](http://www.cnn.com/2001/US/08/12/white.black/index.html)) and Hispanics ([www.nytimes.com/2001/03/08/nation](http://www.nytimes.com/2001/03/08/nation)) both experienced tremendous growth during the last decade. Thus, the picture of racial diversity in upper levels of administration remains disappointing.

Currently, there is no clear sense of how many people of color are employed in public parks and recreation; however, there is general agreement in the field that they are under-represented, particularly in upper managerial positions (Hibbler, 1997). This perception is supported by the findings of Bialeschki and Dorward (1996). They examined leisure studies, parks, and recreation curricula to determine the state of professional preparation in the U. S. and Canada. They reported that only 11% of bachelor's students were people of color, a slight (3%) increase from 1990 to 1996. A meager 4% of the reporting institutions had a tenured faculty member of color, and although there was a slight increase at the bachelor's level, there was a decrease at the master's level (-6%) and Ph.D. level (-16%).

The nation's changing demographics should have an impact on the leisure services workforce. As mentioned earlier, the fastest-growing segments of the U.S. population are racial and ethnic minorities, especially Hispanics, African Americans, and Asian Americans. This change in demographics will result in a workforce shift as people of color represent a greater proportion of the workforce. Consequently, there should be an increase in the number of people of color working in leisure services in the coming years, but what are the perceptions of these individuals in the field today? Do they feel they are treated fairly and equitably? How will this influence their choice to remain in the field? Their perceptions could potentially affect the number of people of color who enter the field in the future. Although leisure researchers have investigated race as a variable in terms of leisure behavior and preferences, there remains a paucity of research that addresses issues of race in the leisure services workplace. Based on the results of Allison's (1999) recent study on workplace diversity, this issue deserves further investigation. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to investigate perceptions of discrimination and inequity among African Americans

employed in the field of public parks and recreation in a midwestern state. This study was designed to serve as a starting point for understanding the workplace issues that affect this particular racial group.

### **Theories on Race, Inequality and the Workplace**

Over the years, information has been presented theorizing on the nature of racial differences within the U.S. workforce. It is difficult to peruse the electronic or written media without stumbling upon a discussion surrounding affirmative action, racial inequalities, race relations, and other issues related to race in the workforce. Consequently, a number of theories have been postulated about the current state of inequality in the U.S. workforce. Morrison and Von Glinow (1990) explained that many of these theories fall into three general categories. First, there are the theories that assume that personal differences deter women and people with minority backgrounds from succeeding. These theories claim that personal differences in under-represented groups are largely responsible for their differential treatment in management. Second, some theories cite discrimination by the majority culture as the cause of inequalities. That is, issues surrounding bias and stereotyping on the part of White males in power are the cause for the slow progress of women and minorities. The third type is the structural or systemic discrimination theories. These theories claim that widespread policies and practices in the social system perpetuate discriminatory treatment of women and people of color. Considering the complex nature of American society, it is difficult to identify a universal theoretical explanation for the inequity that exists within the U.S. workforce. This issue is further confounded by the empirical support for all three approaches (Cabezas, Shinagawa, & Kawaguchi, 1989; Larwood, Szwajkowski, & Rose, 1988; Thomas & Alderfer, 1989). Thus, perhaps certain aspects of all three categories are in some way related to the issues affecting people of color who are working in parks and recreation agencies.

### **Related Studies**

Although the issue of racial and ethnic diversity in the workplace has been widely researched in other fields, relatively few studies on this topic have been published in leisure journals. Allison's (1999) recent article brought attention to this important and timely topic. Allison's in-depth interviews with 18 professionals, including women and people of color, examined how parks and recreation agencies addressed workplace diversity issues. The findings indicated that many agencies responded in a symbolic rather than substantive manner. Many respondents felt that their agencies did not demonstrate an appropriate level of commitment to diversity and many reported problems associated with hiring, promotion, and job placement practices. Allison wrote, "Patterns of hiring in the comfort zone and a tendency to hire their own appeared to the respondents to be relatively pervasive" (p. 97). Allison concluded that in the next millennium, the success or failure of community programs might, in part, be determined

by the ability of agencies to effectively deal with diverse populations. She urged agencies to create “meaningful organizational change” in the ways they deal with a diverse workforce.

Scott (2000) extended Allison’s ideas to constituents and identified factors that prevent many leisure service agencies from better serving disenfranchised groups, including racial and ethnic minorities. One of the factors that he identified was agencies’ failure to develop “a workforce that resembles the population and a concomitant inability to relate to diverse constituents . . .” (p. 136). He stated that many practitioners lack the skills to appreciate and recognize the unique needs of disenfranchised groups. Scott explained that without a diverse staff, leisure agencies may fall prey to what Allison (2000) referred to as “cultural imperialism”, a tendency to focus on the dominant groups’ customs and practices without any regard for diversity. This tendency can cause misunderstandings, resentment, and hostility (Silver & Valentine, 2000).

Philipp (2000) wrote “race still matters in the United States of America” and described the racial separation that typically occurs in “leisure spaces.” He stated that “perhaps no where else does race matter as much as during leisure” given that leisure is “freely chosen.” (p. 121). Although Philipp did not specifically discuss employees of parks and recreation agencies, certainly his concerns regarding leisure spaces apply to workplace issues. The under-representation of people of color working in park and recreation agencies clearly affects the diversity of leisure participants and their feelings of being “welcome” in leisure spaces. Similarly, Floyd (1998) stated that practitioners have “witnessed the shift in demographic trends up-close and have been challenged to re-orient programs and services to meet the needs of a more racially and ethnically diverse clientele” (p. 4). Part of this challenge is to recruit, retain, and effectively manage people of color to serve diverse constituent groups.

A number of articles outside the leisure field have been written about managing racial diversity in the workplace (e.g., Adigun, 2000; Baugher et al, 2000; Digh, 1998; Mamman, 1996; McLeod et al., 1996; Orlando & Kirby, 1997; Rothman, 2000). Many of these articles are based on the premise that the U.S. workforce is becoming increasingly diverse, and that the initial step in managing diversity is acknowledging and valuing differences in people. For example, Rothman (2000) found that managers who self-identified themselves as Asian-Pacific Islander, African American, Hispanic/Latino or Caucasian statistically differed in their responses to the socialization and responsibility scales of a psychology inventory. He concluded that organizations should value these racioethnic differences, and consider how they might impact their workplace. However, Thomas (1991) provided a framework that went further than simply valuing differences. He stated that managing diversity is a “comprehensive managerial process for developing an environment that works for all employees” (p. 10). His definition implies an on-going process that goes beyond simply

implementing diversity training and raising the level of awareness. It implies “growth and development on the part of the organization and its people—movement on both sides” (Hermon, 1996, p. 428). Further, to develop environments that are receptive to all people, workplace cultures need to become more open. According to Thomas, currently people are expected to assimilate into the corporate culture. However, more and more people are reluctant to assimilate and want to maintain their uniqueness. The workplace culture must allow for this uniqueness among its employees.

For their 75th anniversary issue, the *Harvard Business Review* (Thomas & Wetlauffer, 1997) asked ten senior managers of color from around the U.S. to discuss the complex and urgently important issue of diversity in the workforce. Two of the questions included in the discussion were how far has American business come in terms of racial equality and inclusion, and what does—and should—the future hold for people of color in business? A three-hour roundtable discussion took place, and several themes emerged. The participants noted that many White Americans still consider effective or intelligent people of color to be an anomaly. Therefore, a successful person of color is often the subject of skepticism, resulting in him or her having to work much harder to be accepted or forcing him or her to devise other methods to make the majority culture comfortable with ideas and actions. One participant said, “People of color believe they are still not considered real insiders, a perception that makes inclusion an uphill battle” (p.121). The authors suggested an agenda for moving forward. First, they posited that we must recognize that race does matter. Regardless of one’s racial background, race influences an individual’s experiences within an organization. Second, our efforts in the future must look beyond simply recruiting people of color into an organization. We must also seek to create conditions that allow all people to contribute fully and benefit from their work experiences. Finally, the responsibility for change lies with both people of color and the White majority, but especially with those who occupy positions of leadership and authority, regardless of race.

Tomkiewicz’s (2000) study focused on understanding the perceptions and expectations of other racial groups. He conducted a study in which students from predominantly White and Black universities were asked to respond to a job expectation questionnaire. Black students were simply asked to rate 25 job expectations according to their importance; conversely, White students were asked to “answer as you believe a Black person would answer.” Examples of job expectations included “requires originality,” “provides job security,” and “provides a feeling of accomplishment.” Comparisons were made between the respondents. Findings indicated that the two groups rated 23 of the 25 items significantly different. On each item that was different, Blacks recorded a higher score than did Whites. Thus, on 23 items, Whites perceived that Blacks desired less of a job characteristic than Blacks said they desired. Tomkiewicz concluded that given “the likelihood that organizational decisions will be made (for the foreseeable

future) by White managers, there exists the potentiality of misunderstandings between White managers and Black aspirants” (p. 502). Further, he suggested that unless it is acknowledged that one group (Whites) may not know what a historically disadvantaged group (Blacks) desires, there may be little progress made in understanding the dynamics that workplace diversity demands.

Clearly, this is a national issue. A bipartisan federal commission issued a report in 1995 titled “A solid investment: Making full use of the nation’s human capital” (Department of Labor, 1995). The report concluded that persons with minority backgrounds and women are still under-represented at the highest levels of corporate America. Specifically, 97% of the senior managers of Fortune 1000 industries and Fortune 500 companies were White and 95%-97% were men (Department of Labor, 1995). The Commission stated “it is against the best interest of business to exclude those Americans who constitute two-thirds of the total population, two-thirds of the consumer markets, and more than half of the workforce” (Department of Labor, 1995, p. 11). An earlier report issued by the Department of Labor (1991) identified the barriers that women and persons with minority backgrounds often face, including limited career enhancing assignments and lack of acceptance by top management.

In response to this report, Hermon (1996) examined whether communication between advisory panels representing diverse groups of employees and company executives resulted in a shared understanding and commitment to diversity. The panels, representing African American managers, women managers, and Hispanic managers, met regularly with the officers of the organization to discuss issues and policies affecting their represented groups. The findings indicated that the primary role of the panels was to advise senior management on the problems and issues of diversity. Other roles of the panels were to monitor data on diversity and to act as the “conscience of the organization.” Hermon found that most of the interviewees believed that the panels had raised the sensitivity of the top executives to issues of diversity, but fewer believed that the sensitivity of middle managers had been raised. Further, many of the interviewees believed that the panels had led to career advancements for women and minorities. However, some negative effects were associated with the panels, such as causing resentment among White males within the company, and creating an adversarial relationship that damaged efforts to manage diversity. Thus, it seemed that the use of advisory panels may have the potential to help with diversity issues in the workplace, but they should be implemented within the framework of open communication in an effort to offset any resentment among other employees.

Regrettably, Morrison and Von Glinow (1990) reported that many organizations tend to be stuck in what they referred to as the “first generation of affirmative action,” which is characterized by a focus on numbers that stimulate superficial and crisis-oriented actions. It would appear that these organizations are merely concerned with compliance with

government regulations. Morrison and Von Glinow explained that some organizations have evolved to a “second generation,” where they meet most numerical goals and attempt to provide support and role models. These organizations focus on retaining high-performing women and people from minority backgrounds by effectively managing diverse groups of people. However, Morrison and Von Glinow recommended that organizations move beyond the first two generations of affirmative action and progress into true “multicultural management” (Merenivitch & Reigle, 1979). In multicultural organizations the workplace culture recognizes and appreciates diversity, resources are distributed without regard to race or sex, and policies and practices are responsive to all employees’ needs. In effect, the multicultural organization capitalizes on its diversity. As the field of public parks and recreation promotes the message of “programs for everyone,” it is important that the leaders of the field relate this philosophy to the workplace as well, and strive to become multicultural organizations.

In order to accomplish this we need to gain a greater understanding of the issues affecting people with minority status who are currently working in the parks and recreation field. This understanding will put us in a better position to recruit and retain people of color. The present study builds on an earlier report by Hibbler (1997) who reported that some African Americans working in the field perceived racial inequity and discrimination in their workplaces and felt under-represented, particularly at the upper administrative level. The purpose of the present study was to serve as a starting point for understanding these issues and others that affect this particular racial group.

### **Methods**

The study was conducted in three phases, and all included African Americans who were working for public parks and recreation agencies throughout a midwestern state. First, telephone interviews were conducted with African Americans who were in middle management positions. The interview questions were adapted from an earlier study that examined racial issues in the soil and conservation field. As a follow-up to the interviews, a focus group was held at the state’s annual conference with African Americans who held a variety of public recreation positions. The information that was gathered from the telephone interviews and the focus group was then used to help construct a questionnaire that was sent to African Americans working in full-time positions in public recreation agencies throughout the state. The primary focus of this paper will be on the results of the questionnaires. The first two phases of the study served primarily as preliminary data gathering exercises and helped elucidate the issues that would be the focus of the questionnaire.

#### *Telephone Interviews*

The President of the Ethnic Minority Society (EMS) of the state association was asked to provide names of African Americans who could share insights regarding their work experiences in the field of public parks

and recreation. Thirteen middle managers were contacted, and 11 of those participated in a 15-20 minute telephone interview that consisted of nine open-ended questions. Of the 11 respondents, four were women. Their city sizes ranged from approximately 20,000 residents to over 1,000,000 residents, and their job tenure ranged from 1 year to 25 years. The interviews were conducted by one of the study's authors who is an African American male. Several questions were asked during the telephone interviews, including questions about their career aspirations, personal experiences with racial discrimination on the job, and perceptions of African American representation in the field.

#### *Focus Group*

A few months after the telephone interviews, a focus group was held at the state conference with African Americans who were employed in public recreation. The primary purpose of the focus group was to verify some of the issues that emerged from the telephone interviews, and to determine if these concerns were prevalent at various levels of management. The same African American male who conducted the telephone interviews facilitated the focus group. Focus group participants were selected utilizing a purposeful sample. Working with the President of EMS, individuals with various professional backgrounds were selected as key informants; their job titles ranged from recreation leader to commissioner. All participants worked in predominantly African American communities. The focus group lasted approximately two hours and was tape-recorded. The major issues that were discussed during the focus group surrounded the general topics of promotion opportunities, discriminatory practices, and minority inclusion in the field.

#### *Questionnaire*

The information that was gathered from the telephone interviews and the focus group was used to adapt a questionnaire that had been used to investigate issues facing women in the workplace (Shinew & Arnold, 1998). From the interviews and the focus group it became clear that the role of race in promotion decisions should be investigated, and that the underrepresentation of African Americans in the field should be explored. Also, concerns about the recruitment and retention of racial minorities needed to be examined.

Questionnaires were mailed to African Americans in full-time positions in public recreation agencies throughout the midwestern state. The names of these individuals were gathered from an earlier survey that was sent to all registered park districts in the state. Potential respondents were assured that the questionnaire was for research purposes only, and that their responses would remain completely confidential. After a postcard reminder, 31 completed questionnaires were returned for a response rate of approximately 35%. While this response rate is fairly low, it is comparable with questionnaire response rates among people with minority backgrounds as reported by Wicks and Norman (1996), although their paper referred to

participants as opposed to members of a profession. Due to the low response rate, follow-up telephone calls were made to 12 randomly selected non-respondents. They were asked to respond to several of the survey's questions. Analysis was then conducted comparing respondents and the telephoned non-respondents and no significant differences were found, and thus they were added to the sample.

### *Sample*

Most (64.5%) of the sample was male and there was a fairly even split between married (34.5%) and single (37.9%) respondents. Many of the respondents indicated that they were divorced or widowed. The average age of the sample was 37 years ( $SD=11.7$ ). Most of the respondents (93.3%) reported that their annual income was under \$40,000. The most common response for education level was "some college or technical school," however 19.4% had completed a bachelor's degree and 9.7% had some graduate work. The average number of hours worked per week was 42.4 hours ( $SD=10.7$ ), and the average "expected" overtime was 5.4 hours ( $SD=6.1$ ). The average number of years worked in the recreation profession was 9.2 years ( $SD=6.4$ ); however, the average number of years worked in their current position was 4.0 years ( $SD=3.8$ ). The average number of employees for whom they were responsible was 1.8 ( $SD=2.5$ ) full-time and 6.4 ( $SD=10.7$ ) part-time employees. Most (83.3%) indicated that their current Executive Director was not a person with minority status. The job titles of the sample ranged from Director of Recreation to Maintenance Supervisor.

### *Instrument*

Many of the questionnaire items were developed based on the earlier work regarding women by Bialeschki and Henderson (1984), Henderson and Bialeschki (1993; 1995) and Frisby and Brown (1991). Additionally, questionnaire items were adapted from a similar study of women conducted with architects (Anthony, 1996). Moreover, information gained through the telephone interviews and the focus group assisted with the development of items that were particularly pertinent to African Americans in the workplace. The key concepts included in the questionnaire were perceptions of discrimination, perceptions of equity, preparedness, and aspirations for promotions. The questionnaire was pilot tested by African Americans working in public recreation to assess its face validity. Several questions were modified based on their suggestions.

Respondents were asked to answer a set of questions that were designed to obtain general information about perceived discriminatory practices in the workplace. The items included: a) Whites are given fewer promotion opportunities than are minorities; b) Minorities are given fewer promotion opportunities than are Whites; c) There are adequate efforts made by the profession to promote minorities; d) Race is not a significant factor in promotion opportunities; e) There are adequate efforts being made to recruit minorities. A five-point Likert-type scale was used to measure

responses with the anchors of “strongly agree” and “strongly disagree.” Respondents were also asked, “Do you believe that your organization racially discriminates in any of the following areas: recruitment practices, selection practices, task assignments, performance evaluation, salary levels, and promotion decisions.” They were asked to indicate if they had “personally experienced racial discrimination on the job,” if they had “seen or heard about racial discrimination on the job,” and if they had “seen or heard about a co-worker quitting a job due to racial discrimination. A yes/no response format was used for these questions.

Several questionnaire items were related to respondents’ perceptions of racial equity in the public recreation profession. Respondents were asked to indicate whether management positions are “equally represented by race throughout the state at the senior, middle, and entry management levels.” A yes/no response was given. They were also asked to respond to the question, “In time, the recreation and parks field will see more minorities move into senior management positions.” A five-point Likert-type scale was used to measure responses with the anchors of “strongly agree” and “strongly disagree.”

Perceived racial equity was also evaluated by asking, “Indicate how you compare to members of the majority race in similar positions. Comparisons may be made with individuals in your agency or at another recreation and park agency.” The factors included in this question were such issues as opportunities for advancement, amount of encouragement received from supervisors, and extent of participation in management decisions. A five-point Likert-type scale was used to measure responses with the anchors of “much more” and “much less.”

Several questions on the survey were based directly on the comments made in the focus group. Respondents were asked, “Do you feel that minorities in the field communicate effectively with each other?” Additionally, they were asked, “Do you feel that you are treated differently by members of the majority race because of your affiliation with organizations that represent minorities (i.e., Ethnic Minority Society)?” Finally, they were asked, “Do you feel that minorities are being adequately prepared for management-related positions?” A yes/no response format was used.

Several questions were asked to determine career aspirations. First, respondents were asked, “Do you currently feel prepared for a top management position in recreation and parks?” Additionally, they were asked, “Do you desire another promotion during your career in the recreation and parks field? If you check no, please check all that apply.” Options included: too much family stress; lack of support from family; too much of a time commitment; lack of self-confidence; lack of energy; lack of support from friends; too much work stress; poor health; satisfied with current position. Finally, they were asked, “Do you have a mentor?” If they responded yes, they were asked to describe how the relationship developed (formally versus informally), whether the mentor was older or younger, and whether the mentor was of the same race.

## **Results**

### *Summary of Comments Made in the Telephone Interviews*

Respondents were asked to react to several questions during the telephone interview. They were asked whether race would play a role in their promotion opportunities. Four of the 11 indicated that race would not play a role, their reason being that they were working in predominately African American communities. However, other respondents indicated that race would play a role in their ability to be promoted. One interviewee responded that “Whites are traditionally promoted to executive director in White communities and Blacks are promoted in Black communities,” and that minority status is still a central issue in hiring in the field. When asked if they felt they could be hired into an executive director’s position in a predominantly White community, four of the 11 indicated that they could be hired in a predominately White community, but only if their credentials were considered and not their race. Others indicated that they could not be hired in a White community because of racial issues. In essence, they indicated that racial stereotyping and/or discrimination continue to present promotional barriers to African Americans. Among the interviewees who indicated that they had encountered racial problems, the responses were as follows: “I have been called nigger,” “I feel my decisions are overly scrutinized,” “minorities are generally paid less and receive unfair treatment,” “racism is alive and well and has been a significant factor in my position,” and “staff treats me with disrespect.”

All interviewees indicated that the African American representation in the field is not adequate. The consensus was that there are still significant racial problems in the field at both the state and national levels. All respondents indicated that they were surprised and pleased that someone was taking the time and interest to study under-representation and inequity issues of the field. Further, all were hopeful that this study would produce tangible results in the form of recruitment and retention strategies for African Americans. When asked for suggestions regarding the recruitment and retaining of qualified African Americans, all indicated that the recruiting efforts should be initiated at an early age, as early as high school in some cases. Also, the consensus was the field needed to do a better job of working with faculty at colleges and universities in an effort to deal with the recruitment problem. Further, many interviewees indicated that there were inequity issues in the field, and that to retain African Americans, these issues needed to be addressed. Finally, according to all interviewees, additional training and mentoring is needed to retain African Americans.

### *Summary of Comments made in the Focus Group*

Many of the concerns that surfaced during the telephone interviews were also evident during the focus group, and this suggested that these might be issues at various levels of management. The discussants reported that racism and discrimination are still prevalent in the workplace, which leaves people with minority backgrounds feeling excluded. When asked

whether a minority would be hired as an executive director in a predominantly White community, one discussant replied, “no because, White boards hire White directors, it is rare that you see a minority in charge in a White community...in fact, it just does not happen. The result is that we have limited opportunities...the White man makes the rules, controls the resources and we must find a way to fit into those rules.” Further, the group perceived that there was an overall under-representation of people of color in the field, adding to the feelings of minority exclusion. A discussant responded, “I am surprised, but happy that someone from a University is even interested in talking to us about this issue...just look around this conference, there are very few of us. When you walk down the halls here people don’t even speak to you when you pass, they just look down like you don’t even exist...the same is true and even worse at the NRPA.”

#### *Results from the Questionnaire*

Respondents were asked to react to a series of statements regarding discriminatory practices. The findings are reported in Table 1. The results indicated that respondents tended to disagree with the statement, “Whites are given fewer promotion opportunities than are minorities,” but agreed with the statement, “Minorities are given fewer promotion opportunities than are Whites.” Strikingly, none of the respondents agreed (either agree or strongly agree) with the first statement and similarly, no one disagreed (either disagree or strongly disagree) with the second statement. Further, respondents tended to disagree with the statement, “Race is not a significant factor in promotion opportunities,” and tended to disagree that there are adequate efforts being made to recruit and promote minorities.

**Table 1**  
**Respondents’ reaction to statements regarding perceived discriminatory practices in the recreation and parks profession**

Statement	Mean Scores (n=43)	Percentages				
		Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither	Agree	Strong Agree
Whites are given fewer promotion opportunities than are minorities	1.58	58.1	25.8	16.1	0	0
Minorities are given fewer promotion opportunities than are Whites	4.33	0	0	12.9	41.9	45.2
There are adequate efforts made by the profession to promote minorities	2.47	13.3	46.7	20.0	20.0	0
Race is not a significant factor in promotion opportunities	2.03	25.8	51.6	16.1	6.5	0
There are adequate efforts being made to recruit minorities	2.05	12.9	41.9	22.6	22.6	0

Note: Mean scores are based on a 5-point Likert-type scale of 5 (strongly agree) to 1 (strongly disagree)

Respondents were asked about perceived racial discrimination in their current organization. The findings are reported in Table 2. The areas where the greatest number of respondents reported racial discrimination were recruitment practices, selection practices, salary levels, and promotion decisions. When asked to indicate if they had “personally experienced racial discrimination on the job.” 46.4% indicated “yes”, and 86.2% reported that they had “seen or heard about racial discrimination on the job.” Further, 41.4% indicated that they had “seen or heard about a co-worker quitting a job due to racial discrimination.”

**Table 2**  
**Percentage of respondents who perceived racial discrimination in their organizations**

Area	% of Respondents Indicating Discrimination (n=43)
Recruitment Practices	46.3%
Selection Practices	50.0%
Task Assignments	26.7%
Performance Evaluations	26.6%
Salary Levels	40.0%
Promotion Decisions	50.0%

Note: Respondents were asked, “Do you believe that your organization racially discriminates in any of the following areas: recruitment practices, selection practices, task assignments, performance evaluations, salary levels, and promotion decisions.” A yes/not response format was used.

To assess perceptions of racial equity, respondents were asked to indicate whether management positions are “equally represented by race throughout the state at the senior, middle, and entry management levels.” The percentage that disagreed with the statement increased as the level increased. At the entry level, 63.3% indicated that there was not equal representation, but this increased to 86.7% at the middle management level and to 90% at the senior management level. In general, the respondents neither agreed nor disagreed that “in time, the recreation and parks field will see more minorities move into senior management positions.” On a five-point scale, the mean response was 2.97.

Respondents were asked to compare themselves to “members of the majority race in similar positions.” In general, respondents reported below the “equal” mark (3.0) in the following areas: opportunities for advancement, amount of encouragement received from supervisors, extent of participation in management decisions, respect from supervisors, respect from co-workers, respect from subordinates, salary, access to occupational resources, and inclusion in non-work social activities with co-workers. In other words, respondents perceived that they receive “less” in these areas than do members of the majority race in similar positions. The findings are presented in Table 3.

**Table 3**  
**Means of how African Americans compared themselves to “members of the majority race in similar positions”**

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Area	Means (Standard Deviations) (n=43)
Opportunities for advancement	2.33(.80)
Amount of encouragement received from superiors	2.67(.84)
Extent of participation in management decisions	2.80(1.03)
Amount of respect from superiors	2.97(.94)
Amount of respect from clients	3.30(.75)
Amount of respect from co-workers	2.90(.96)
Amount of respect from subordinates	2.87(.78)
Performance expectations	3.53(.90)
Desirable work assignments	3.17(.95)
Salary	2.33(.92)
Employee benefits	3.03(.56)
Access to occupational resources	2.86(.51)
Inclusion in non-work social activities with co-workers	2.89(.85)

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Note: Respondents were asked, “Indicate how you compare with members of the majority race in similar positions. Comparisons may be made with individuals in your agency or at another recreation and park agency.” Mean scores are based on a 5-point Likert-type scale of 5 (much more) to 1 (much less)

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Some items were included in the questionnaire to better understand specific comments that were made during the focus group. For example, respondents were asked, “Do you feel that minorities in the field communicate effectively with each other?” More than half (54.8%) responded “no.” Additionally, 43.3% indicated that they feel that they are treated differently by members of the majority race because of their affiliation with organizations that represent minorities (i.e., Ethnic Minority Society). The majority of the respondents, 83.9%, indicated that they do not feel that minorities are being adequately prepared for management-related positions. Conversely, when asked, “Do you currently feel prepared for a promotion in the field of recreation and parks,” 86.2% indicated yes. Similarly, 83.3% indicated that they did desire another promotion during their career. For those who indicated that they did not want another promotion, the most common reasons were “satisfied with current posi-

tion” and “too much work stress.” Respondents were asked several questions about mentors and most (58.6%) indicated that they did not have a mentor. However, for those that did have mentors, most reported that their mentor was an older African American male. The majority also indicated that the mentoring relationship developed informally.

### **Discussion and Implications of Findings**

The purpose of this study was to investigate perceptions of discrimination, inequity, and representation among African Americans employed in the field of public parks and recreation in a midwestern state. This study was designed to serve as a starting point for understanding the workplace issues that affect this particular racial group. The findings support the results of Allison's (1999) earlier study. Many of the African Americans involved in this study perceived that they are under-represented in the field, particularly at the upper administrative level. Moreover, many felt that African Americans are not being adequately prepared for management-related positions. Many of the respondents reported that they had personally experienced or had seen discrimination and inequitable treatment in their workplace. Many also perceived that minorities are given fewer promotion opportunities than are Whites Americans, and that race remains a salient issue in promotion decisions.

The findings of this study, however, should be interpreted through the limitations imposed by the methods used. First, the samples for this study were not randomly selected, and thus generalizations are not warranted. Another limitation is the small sample size. The response rate for the questionnaire was fairly low, which restricted the data analysis. According to Floyd (1998) small sample size is a persistent problem in the race literature. Floyd reported that small samples “may not be of sufficient size for subgroup analysis, sophisticated multivariate techniques and statistical controls common in social science research” (p. 10), and this was the case in the present study. Thus, the small sample size and the restricted nature of the population (African Americans from one midwestern state) greatly limit the generalizability of the findings; further research is needed using larger, more diverse samples. Limitations notwithstanding, the findings from this study do provide some insight into the issues affecting some African Americans employed in parks and recreation.

Due to future staffing needs and the changing demographics, the hiring base utilized by public parks and recreation agencies must be expanded to include more under-represented groups, including African Americans. However, based on the results of this study, several issues must be addressed if African Americans and other racial and ethnic groups are going to be attracted to and remain in the field. Simply adding them to an organization will not suffice, and has the potential of being unsuccessful given the inequity perceptions that were expressed by respondents in the current study.

Leisure service managers must learn how to effectively recruit and manage a diverse workforce. This may be one of the most challenging tasks facing management today (Rothman, 2000). A sincere commitment to diversity must be ingrained into an organization's culture creating an environment that will allow all types of people to contribute fully to the organization's mission and to benefit from their workplace experiences. This commitment must not only come from top management, but must be embraced at the grassroots level of an organization. Allison's (1999) finding that recreation and park agencies are responding in a "symbolic rather than substantive manner" to diversity issues is unsettling, and indicates that change is needed. Allison concluded that parks and recreation programs must "decide on their level of commitment to diversity and develop short and long-term strategies to address related issues in substantive ways" (p. 97).

For inclusion to be successful, organizational adjustments will have to accommodate people of color entering a traditionally White controlled workplace. As suggested by Thomas and Wetlauger (1997), the responsibility for change lies with both people of color and the White majority, especially those who occupy positions of leadership and authority, regardless of race. Previous research has suggested that effective strategies for managing diversity should include providing mechanisms for identifying and resolving problems associated with managing a diverse workforce (Morrison, 1992), creating a culture where diversity is considered an asset (Thomas, 1991), and developing an environment where all employees are valued (Fine, 1995). Leisure service organizations must decide how they will meet these three standards. Perhaps advisory panels that represent diverse groups of employees, as described by Hermon (1996), could be used to help assess an agency's effectiveness in managing diversity. Although the panels were certainly not panaceas, Hermon found that many people believed that they had helped in the career advancement of women and people of color.

In general, the findings of this study indicated an overall feeling of disparate treatment among African Americans. Therefore, the potential for work-related conflicts among various racial and ethnic groups may be a problem. Tomkiewicz (2000) concluded from the results of his study that there exists the potentiality of misunderstandings between White managers and African American aspirants, which could result in little progress being made in understanding the dynamics that workplace diversity demands. Thomas and Wetlaufer (1997) found that many of the managers of color perceived that White Americans view a successful person of color with skepticism. This results in people of color having to work harder to be accepted or forcing them to devise other methods to make the majority culture comfortable with their ideas and actions. The long-term negative impact of this skepticism is clear. Managers need to gain a greater understanding of employee differences so that diversity is allowed to work to the advantage of the organization.

Given that most professional positions in public parks and recreation require a minimum of a bachelor's degree, leisure professionals are turning to colleges and universities to produce more qualified applicants among people of color. As mentioned earlier, Bialeschski and Dorward indicated in their (1996) SPRE survey of leisure studies, parks, and recreation curricula that the percentage of people of color was still quite low in all degree areas. Clearly, alternative recruiting strategies need to be explored to successfully attract and retain people of color.

One option, for example, is for academicians and practitioners to work together to identify young people of color who have shown interest in the field at an early age. Many practitioners could identify young people who have shown a particular interest in recreation. Practitioners could then introduce them to the concept of recreation as a career option early and work with them as they matriculate through high school and on to the university to study recreation and leisure. This illustrates the concept of academicians and practitioners partnering to develop alternative recruitment and retention strategies to develop greater involvement with people of color in the field. These types of partnership are necessary if we want to have a more diverse workforce in the future. However, after successfully recruiting persons of color, it is vital that they feel they are valued by their organizations, and that they are treated equitably. Otherwise, the recruitment efforts will be for naught.

The study's participants have sent a message. If the parks and recreation field hopes to do a better job of serving disenfranchised groups (Scott, 2000), it is important that we develop a workforce that resembles the changing population. In an effort to do this, Thomas and Wetlaufer (1997) suggested that we create workplace conditions that allow all types of people to contribute fully to their organization while maintaining their uniqueness. Recognizing and appreciating diversity will hopefully prevent "cultural imperialism" (Allison, 2000) from occurring and would be a positive step towards creating multicultural organizations. The field of public parks and recreation needs to focus on recruiting, retaining, and effectively managing a diverse workforce in order to better meet the needs of a nation that is becoming increasingly colorful.

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