African Americans in executive-level positions in the United States today must deal with extremely complex social dynamics. As blacks they are identified first and foremost as members of a historically stigmatized group; as corporate executives they are identified as members of an elite and powerful class. This ethnographic case study examining their problems and efforts to deal with them will yield insights into the situation not only of black executives but also of marginalized minorities more generally.

In preparing to enter the field, I requested complete access to the workers in a major financial service corporation in central city Philadelphia. Such access would have afforded me the opportunity to follow and observe the subjects of the study in their daily activities and to question them at will. I would have liked to have engaged in intensive participant observation, an ideal situation for generating slice-of-life portrayals of the work setting and for gleaning important insights into the corporate culture generally and the social situation of minority employees of the company more particularly. The company rejected this plan. Instead, I was permitted to roam the premises and interview persons referred to me by the vice president for employee relations, who is himself black.

The representation here is therefore based both on observation of the social setting and on intensive ethnographic interviews with a small sample of executive-level minority employees including blacks, Jews, and women. The resulting observations are meant to be not representative but rather suggestive of the quality of experience within the company. Over the course of six months, I conducted interviews on
the work premises or at area restaurants during the workday, and they frequently extended to ninety minutes. (In order to build on this primary research, I have been informally interviewing a variety of black and white, male and female executives of organizations throughout the Philadelphia area over the past ten years.) The company provided office space as well as time for employees to be interviewed, and the interviewees were most helpful and candid in their discussion of the questions put to them. The interviews were open-ended and informal in an attempt to elicit information and insights into the personal lives of employees and their situation within the organization.

Historical Basis of Affirmative Action

An adequate assessment of the present-day situation of executives in this company, and in the American corporate world in general, requires some historical perspective on black mobility. Such a viewpoint is important since social change within this corporate environment is related to important changes in other major institutions of American society. Over the past half century, American society changed profoundly in the area of race relations (see Myrdal 1944; Drake and Cayton 1962 [1945]; Cox 1948; Hacker 1995; Wilson 1980, 1987, 1996). Largely as a consequence of affirmative action programs, black Americans, long segregated in ghettos and treated as second-class citizens, began to participate in the wider society in ways previously restricted to privileged members of the white majority. This process of racial incorporation signaled the beginning of the still very slow decline of the American caste-like system of race relations, and it may be traced to certain general sociohistorical developments. The most dramatic changes were spurred by the civil rights movement, the subsequent major civil disorders, and the social and political responses to these new and provocative developments (see Kerner et al. 1968). Major policy responses included the civil rights legislation of 1964, 1965, and 1968. Perhaps most important for the subject of this chapter was the executive order issued and signed by President John F. Kennedy in 1961 and later revised by President Lyndon Johnson in 1964 prescribing “affirmative action” as an important remedy for racial discrimination, social injustice, and the resulting inequality. At the time, public support for these remedial measures was widespread and overwhelming, but by no means unanimous. Some critics have argued that because