

The Enduring Problem of Social Class Stigma Experienced by Upwardly Mobile White Academics

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This paper focuses on the paradox of upwardly mobile white academics in the United States who report difficulties in assimilating into their new class environment, despite a shared dominant racial status that would presumably facilitate their ability to “pass” or blend in. In this paper I draw on a number of autobiographical essays that describe the thoughts and experiences of a non-random group of upwardly mobile American white academics in order to gain insight into this process. In the absence of a widespread recognition of class differences, three salient patterns emerge from these personal accounts: 1) any residual primary class socialization is perceived by middle class colleagues as evidence of idiosyncratic character flaws; 2) the failure of colleagues to recognize their backgrounds results in feelings of alienation among upwardly mobile whites; and, 3) that these processes have a detrimental impact on outcomes of the mobile group. I introduce the concept of class-blind stigma in order to capture the paradox of assimilation difficulties among upwardly mobile white academics who are systematically recognized as deviant and treated as devalued, but are not given a subordinate group status by the dominant group.

In order for stigma to be applied to individuals from subordinate social locations or those with personal “imperfections” (e.g. physical or mental disabilities), members of the normative group must first recognize that a difference exists, mentally place the abnormative person into a devalued social group, and then treat them accordingly (Goffman 1963). Goffman’s findings on stigma center on devalued groups that social actors from dominant groups believe can be *clearly articulated*. However, not all structural sources of inequality receive an equal amount of attention in the public mind.

In this paper, I explore the paradox of upwardly mobile white American academics who report difficulties assimilating into their new class environments, despite a shared dominant racial status that would presumably facilitate their ability to “pass” or blend into the dominant group. Whereas this group suffers the negative effects of stigma, their group membership and common experiences are rarely articulated, never mind recognized, by dominant gatekeepers.

In order to explore the unrecognized experiences of upwardly mobile whites in America, I draw on data from 19 autobiographical essays written by upwardly mobile white academics from the published anthology, “This Fine Place So Far From Home” (1995). These personal accounts provide us with several examples of how stigma is experienced

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among individuals whose identities are shaped by the structural problem of class inequality, an issue that is often unacknowledged at the societal level and which also receives little attention in the field of social psychology (Hollander & Howard 2000). Three salient patterns emerge: 1) any residual primary class socialization was perceived by middle class colleagues as evidence of idiosyncratic character flaws; 2) alienation was experienced in the workplace because members of the dominant group fail to recognize that social class leads to socialization differences among whites; and, 3) this invisible class discrimination affected the prestige of their current job. I go on to introduce the concept of *class-blind stigma* in order to capture the paradox of assimilation difficulties among upwardly mobile white academics who are systematically recognized as deviant and treated as devalued, but are not given a subordinate group status by the dominant group.

Stigma, Social Marking and Structural Inequalities

The concept of stigma, first popularized in the sociological literature with the work of Erving Goffman, defines stigma as a “spoiled identity” or when the individual possesses an undesirable attribute that is perceived as making them different from others (Goffman 1963:3). Stigma is a phenomenon that occurs when power is exercised by a dominant group through means of labeling and stereotyping those that are perceived to be different. Specific individuals are characterized as abnormative because stigma symbols draw attention to a debasing identity that is at odds with what is culturally considered normative (Goffman 1963). This results in those that are labeled abnormative experiencing separation from the dominant group, status loss, and discrimination (Link & Phelan 2001).

Social identity theorists have since elaborated on Goffman’s ideas by explaining how devalued categories are constructed by means of social marking. Social markedness refers to the “...ways in which the ‘social mind’ actively perceives one side of a contrast while ignoring the other side as epistemologically unproblematic” (Brekhus 1996:500). On the one hand, a marked identity is heavily accentuated, and its importance greatly exaggerated. On the other hand, an unmarked identity is played down and passes relatively unnoticed. Those who are marked receive disproportionate attention relative to their numbers, even though individuals who are unmarked are usually more frequent. Distinctions between those with marked identities are papered over, giving a false impression of homogeneity. Also, existing characteristics of the marked person are generalized to all members of the category attributed to the marked individual. If a member of an unmarked category has common attributes with a marked identity, the overlap is assumed to be either idiosyncratic to the individual or universal to the human condition (Brekhus 1998). Common structural examples include gender and race: women are marked, men are unmarked; whites are unmarked and non-whites are marked.

A number of sociologists have found that there is not enough research in social psychology that examines systems of social hierarchy. The research that does exist, tends to focus on specific deviances that are attributed to women, racial and ethnic minorities, and their consequences, and not on the experience and impact of inequality and social difference in general (Howard 2000; Hollander and Howard 2000; Frable 1997). This research has found that women are objectified, devalued in cultural symbolism, and ex-

perience gender inequality in the social and economic system (deBeauvoir 1953; Friedan 1963; Lorber 1995; Schur 1984; Smith, Mysak, and Michael 2008; Stewart et al 2008). And that racial and ethnic minorities are stereotyped by whites as uneducated, untrustworthy, and lacking in motivation and a proper work ethic (Scheer, Smith, and Thomas 2009; Onwuachi-Willig, Houh, and Campbell 2008; Cleveland 2008). Such beliefs tend to provide legitimization when racial and ethnic minorities receive unequal treatment in social, political, cultural, and economic spheres of society and are subsequently treated as devalued by whites (Du Bois 1982; Harris 1993; Hacker 1995; Bonilla-Silva 2003; Winant and Omi 1994; Feagin and McKinney 2002).

Women, racial minorities, and ethnic minorities who have obtained professional class or highly skilled occupations, either by inherited class privilege or social mobility, are usually unable to escape stigma and social markedness because their subjugated status is highly visible. For example, women experience overt discrimination and harassment as a result of the marked status resulting in a 'glass ceiling effect' that blocks workplace promotions (Cotter, Hermsen, et al 2001; Rosenfeld 1980). Several rationales exist for treating women according to their devalued marked status, including societal perceptions that women lack leadership qualities, are weakly committed to work because of domestic obligations, and do not take advantage of career opportunities that are available to them (Rosser 2004; Padomore and Spencer 1987; Pearson and Sachs 1980). Finally, women feel like cultural outsiders in male dominated professional occupations because they are excluded from male socialization practices (Kanter 1977; Epstein 1970).

Professional class racial and ethnic minorities are also subject to the ill effects of stigma and marked status. Individual, cultural, and institutional racism play a key role in explaining why racial minorities are systematically passed over for promotions at middle levels of corporations (Tolliver 1998; Hacker 1995; Zweigenhaft and Domhoff 1991; Demaiter 2009). Bowser (2007) observed that African Americans who hold professional occupations feel that their intelligence, work ethic, preparation, and leadership abilities are regularly held in doubt by their white coworkers. During the process of either maintaining or achieving the credentials necessary for professional class occupations, an enormous amount of psychological stress results from this Othering (ibid).

In order to manage their stigma, women and racial minorities engage in covering, which consists of taking efforts to minimize the visibility of devalued characteristics (Goffman 1963). For example, sanctions are applied against women who do not meet strict appearance norms. Professional women who wish to advance in their companies modify their appearance in order to downplay sensual feminine qualities (Davies-Setzley 2001; Pearson and Sachs 1980). Horvat and Antonio (1999) observed that middle class African-American girls at an elite predominately white high school suffered stigma and marking due to their race and class. This resulted in symbolic violence as the girls were expected to still try to "fit in," or cover, at their own emotional expense.

While attention to instances of widespread social inequality is sparse in social psychology, research on stigma and marked status emanating from class inequality is "invisible" (Hollander and Howard 2000:339). Earlier sociological research concerning the effects of social class on identity indicates that a substantial amount of stigma and markedness is bestowed upon the lower classes (Matza 1966). Among those in lower grade service occupations, feelings of importance and self-respect are difficult to engender because of

a societal emphasis on occupational status as a primary basis for social esteem (Saunders 1981). Although only popular for a short time, Lewis' anthropological research on families living in multi-generational poverty academically legitimized the stigma that the lower classes receive by suggesting that the poor perpetuate their material situation because they have developed an inferior subculture, or a "culture of poverty" (Lewis 1959). Research critiquing the culture of poverty argument suggests that devalued appraisals of lower class socialization reflect a middle class bias (Valentine 1968; Gans 1995; for the culture of poverty theory see Lewis 1959).¹

After the critique of the culture of poverty argument, interest grew in approaching differences in socialization as differences in realities, or the acknowledgment that different ways of doing things and interpreting the world arise between social locations because of different histories and unequal access to societal resources. Bourdieu's (1984) influential notion of habitus suggests that a system of dispositions is created in response to objective conditions that arise in everyday life, and which give rise to lasting acquired schemes of perception and action. In the American academy, the habitus of the middle class combines with cultural capital—which is the set of knowledge, skills, and education that reflect the culture of the dominant group—in order to generate the institutionalization of privilege for individuals with a middle class, white socialization. At the same time, this process devalues knowledge derived from all other social locations (Schwartz 1997; Bourdieu 2001). From a sociological standpoint, the recognition of multiple realities implies that middle class habitus and cultural capital are just one way of knowing; lower class ways of knowing and doing are also valid in their own context (Stack 1970; Davis 1983; Collins 2000; Anderson 2000; hooks 1981). However, relatively little research underscores differences among whites of various classes beyond pioneering studies which emphasize contradictory feelings of inferiority and pride when comparing themselves to whites of higher classes and whites of their own social class, respectively (Rubin 1992; Hibbenbotham and Weber 1992; MacLeod 1986; Fine and Weis 1998). These early studies did not explore the kinds of systematic differences in learning and normative viewpoints examined in this paper.

A great deal of American research has examined occupational mobility as an outcome variable, however, they have paid little to no attention to subjective experience of mobility and its social context (Breiger 1990; Blumer 1969). They focus their analysis instead on various observable regressors—things like father's occupation, father's education, or education of the child—with little attempt to explain the specifics of the relationship between the regressors and their outcome (Duncan and Featherman 1972; Hauser and Featherman 1977; Hout 1983; Jenks 1972). Social mobility for women was later added to take into account issues such as job discrimination, female headed households, gender workplace segregation, and taking time off from careers to raise children (Jacobs 1990; Payne and Abbott 1990). However, an absence of subjective accounts begs the question of how individuals that have achieved social mobility experience their new social context, independent of their current material situation. The United States has a distinctive

¹In situations of multi-generational poverty Lewis suggests that the poor cannot achieve social mobility due to the emergence of a subculture of hopelessness, marginality, and dependency which develops in response to long-term material deprivation and structural inequality (Lewis 1959). Lewis' (1959) thesis was critiqued because of the implications that the poor are partially responsible for their own inequality and should attempt to adopt middle class, white socialization patterns if they hope to achieve social mobility (Valentine 1968; Gans 1995).

interpretation of social class compared to many European societies resulting in a nationally specific experience of upward mobility. For example, in Great Britain unofficial and private images of class suggest a strong awareness of a working class culture. Although systematic class differences also exist in the United States, their distinctive features are largely ignored.

This research project draws on my analysis of 19 autobiographical essays written by upwardly mobile white academics, and found in the published volume, *This Fine Place So Far From Home* (1995). The critical analysis of discourses can provide us with sociological insight into the patterned lives of their authors, because of the role these texts play in the organization and mediation of their social relations and world views (Chouliaraki & Fairclough 2004). Like other types of qualitative methods, the analysis of discourse, then, is simultaneously oriented to the processes of how social structures shape the parameters of interaction. I make use of autobiographical material for my analysis, because my goal of my analysis was to explore how social reality is organized from the perspective of upwardly mobile whites who now work in the academy. These more specifically, because the upwardly mobile white academics largely frequently report a difficulty assimilating in their new environment. The focus of this paper is to explore their subjective accounts of alienation in order to describe how, and then explain why, social class stigma continues to be a problem for individuals with a privileged racial and/or gender status who have already achieved social mobility. Due to a possibility of selection bias, the purpose of my study is not to generalize the experiences of these select academics to all upwardly mobile whites, but rather to explore structural reasons relating to why some upwardly mobile whites that work in academic settings might experience assimilation difficulties.²

This research question was posed within the context of the United States where—due at least in part to a public myth that America is a classless society (Marwick 1980)—few social actors are able to clearly articulate the existence and effects of social class as a structural variable, and lower class whites are often assumed to be middle class because of their dominant racial status (Gilbert and Kahl 1982; Coleman and Rainwater 1978; Frankenberg 1999).

Failure to Recognize that Social Class Leads to Socialization Differences

Upwardly mobile white academics perceive that there is a failure among higher classes to acknowledge not only the existence of lower class whites, but also that the latter have different socialization practices, diverse ways of knowing, and will generally interpret actions, behaviors, and attitudes differently than individuals that are white and middle and upper class. The intersection of a white and lower class social location provides further complications because of the status inconsistency between a dominant racial identity and a subordinate class location. An American cultural bias concerning racial and ethnic minorities incorrectly imagines that the majority of the nation's poor are non-white (Gans 1995). Wray and Newitz (1997) have observed that there has been very little recent academic focus on the class predicament of working class, working poor, and underclass

²Since academics are presumably more likely to write about themselves and their experiences, the findings of the paper may extrapolate to upwardly mobile whites who are employed in other professional occupations. More data is needed, however, before the concept of class-blind stigma is applied to the experiences of other upwardly mobile whites.

whites. What does exist is largely produced by the mass media and tends to blame lower class whites for their own misfortune (ibid). A combination of biased perceptions of racial and ethnic minorities and a lack of current research on poor whites provides the framework for the false impression that whites in the United States are largely uniform in terms of having a privileged class status.

The oversight of higher social classes regarding lower class socialization is well known to upwardly mobile academic whites. Although divisions between social classes are a social construction, one upwardly mobile white woman of lower class origin suggests it is to recognize that lower class whites interpret the world differently:

Possibly the experiences of the working-class attachment and membership have received less attention to gender, race, and sexual orientation because while (apparently) one's sex, race, and sexual orientation remain more or less intact upon entry into the academia, working-class people seem to leave their class background behind in order to succeed in the university. In late twentieth-century North America, class is, unlike sex and race, fairly readily admitted to be a constructed identity rather than an essential one. So it appears to be a superficial characteristic, perhaps a matter of the clothes we choose to wear or the foods we happen to like, rather than what it is: *a status that can be constitute of one's sense of oneself, one's place in the world, one's hopes and prospects* [Emphasis added] (Overall 1995:212-213).

In the United States, members of lower social classes are viewed as possessing little cultural worth (Gans 1973; Ryan 1974). One professional class white woman from a lower class background observed that middle class colleagues had a "lack of appreciation for lower class forms of knowledge" (Capello 1995:128). In an autobiographical essay entitled "Stupid Rich Bastards" a professional class white woman with a lower class background laments on how those with a middle class background fail to see how storytelling, which is a common form of communication amongst the lower classes, is a legitimate method of transmitting ideas (Black 1995).³

Working class ways of knowing validate the knowledge derived from the everyday life experiences of the poor. For instance, one upwardly mobile academic woman learned from her parents' experience of financial hardship that hard work and the perception of one's own merit do not necessarily lead to occupational success (Charlip 1995). Charlip suggests that her middle class peers interpreted her uncertainty regarding whether her merit would translate into occupational success as a lack of self confidence (ibid). Another upwardly mobile academic claims that she has always been uneasy about social theory regarding people on the margins. Black (1995) was hesitant to apply theory to lower class individuals because she feared turning research participants into objects of study by being disloyal to their lived experience and experiential intelligence. Luttrell (1989) suggests that for working class people, "common sense"—which is the most valued form of intelligence—is not obtained through the guidance of school authorities, but instead is based on communally working through everyday problems with peers, thus fostering social bonds and a sense of community. Belanoff reports that the academy is insensitive to

³Ironically, members of the cultural elite celebrate narrative tradition in literature which is also understood through an interpretative process involving symbols and analogies.

the gendered preference of lower class women to excel as members of a group, rather than as individuals (1993). From the perspective of women with lower class origins, a strong desire to please others does not indicate confirmatory behavior or a predilection for rule following, but instead reflects the fact that one is striving to understand the insights of others that speak from different experiences (ibid). If middle class academics “lack appreciation” for cultural differences that emanate from class inequality, it is unlikely upwardly mobile white academics believe their middle and upper middle class colleagues see lower class cultural traits as a contribution to other ways of knowing, or as inhabiting discrete realities or worldviews.

1) *Idiosyncratic Character Flaws*

Although socialization differences stemming from class are not usually attributed to upwardly mobile whites, variation in socialization nonetheless exists. However, when members of the dominant group attempt to interpret a behavior or action that reflects a lower class socialization, the autobiographical essays of upwardly mobile white academics suggest that the cognitive process of assigning a marked group label to the devalued social location is derailed because the stigmatized actors are white.

Styles of communication are one area of division between lower and middle class whites. Compared to their colleagues, upwardly mobile white academics indicated that they practice a more direct communication style, which is “more expressive of our feelings,” even when those feelings are negative (Overall 1995:216). When faced with conflict in the workplace, an upwardly mobile academic male experiences what he calls the “Bronx Syndrome,” which is the urge to directly confront conflict in order to facilitate a quick resolution (ibid). In a situation where a colleague was launching personal attack on a public speaker, Leslie resisted the desire to confront his colleague for fear that his peers would assume that he was an aggressive male (ibid). Lower class individuals perceive freely speaking one’s mind as evidence of honesty, which is a highly valued moral trait. In professional workplaces, middle class coworkers perceive this direct style of communication to be tactless and disrespectful (Lubrano 2004).

In addition to style of communication, speech patterns vary between lower and middle class whites. On the one hand, lower class whites speak with a vernacular that includes a variety of slang and neologisms, and have a colloquial manner of speaking that bends the rules of Standard English. On the other hand, middle class whites speak with a more sophisticated vocabulary and have greater constraints on acceptable speech (Overall 1995). Bernstein’s research on linguistics suggests that lower class individuals speak in a restricted code and the middle class are socialized to communicate in an elaborated code. In the elaborated code, vocabulary is used to differentiate logical and temporal relationships between objects and ideas. In the restricted code, speakers use a subjective observation for analysis and do not make adjustments to accommodate the perspective of the listener (Bernstein 1964). Since residences, schools, workplaces, and leisure activities are often segregated by social class, a lower class speaker and listener are more likely to have a similar perspectives because their shared activities. Individuals of a lower class background have difficulty speaking in elaborated code and are often left wondering if their style of communication is fully understood by higher classes.

Grimes and Morris suggest that lower class speech patterns impede full acceptance

among middle class peers (1997). The following is an example of an academic interpretation of restricted code that betrays a middle class bias.

Not only does such language [elaborated code] more fully describe reality, its user can more fully analyze reality. This suggests that the egocentric quality of the restricted language indicates that the speaker does not adequately take the role of the other and thus does not adequately monitor his own speech in an effort to ensure that he is fully understood. Under such circumstances, it is more likely that the speaker will not be fully understood, although it is also suggested that his more restricted cognitive structure leads him to have less complex messages to transmit (Kerckhoff 1972:49).

Kerckhoff's analysis of restricted code displays its class bias when it assumes that since speakers of elaborated code have difficulty understanding it, those who speak restricted code must also have difficulties. In other words, if middle class whites cannot comprehend a foreign type of speech pattern then it is perceived to lack structure, and therefore suggests a lack of intelligence. The assumption that members of the lower class fail to develop language skills to the point that they are misunderstood by even their own peers assumes that the elaborated code is the only acceptable way of communicating. Alternatively, an upwardly mobile white male describes how a middle class individual's misinterpretation of a rhetorical technique that is common among lower class whites results in stigma for the latter:

Double negatives, for example, signal and emphasize negativity in working class discourse; for members of the professional classes, they signal ignorance, and the message is obscured by cross-class dissonance" (Peckham 1995:267).

Class differences among upwardly mobile whites may be incorrectly identified as curiously idiosyncratic behavior by colleagues with higher class backgrounds because of a failure to recognize that lower class whites are a group that has its own socialization practices. The manifestation of labeling and social markedness is not necessarily lessened due to absence of an easily articulated devalued social location. Subtle *faux pas* committed by those who originated from the lower class negatively affected women more than men because women are socialized to be more aware of the reaction of others (Grimes & Morris 1997). The relative personal and psychological cost paid by professional class whites who originated from the lower classes falls on a continuum from mild to severe. Mild psychological stress includes embarrassment over minor violations of middle class social norms; moderate psychological stress results in the feeling that one is less worthy than middle class colleagues; major psychological strain may lead to the feeling that one will end up a permanent stranger in their new environment (Grimes & Morris 1997). Lubrano notes that counselors actually exist that help those with a lower class social origin with middle class socialization issues (2004).

2) *Alienation Within the Workplace*

Ethnographic statements from upwardly mobile white academics indicate that, despite an outward appearance of success, interaction with colleagues that have a middle class socialization prove to be alienating and problematic. Bourdieu suggests that embodied cultural

capital is necessary for assimilation into the middle and upper middle classes and cannot be offset by superior educational credentials possessed by upwardly mobile individuals. Embodied cultural capital is defined as, “the set of distinctive features, bearing, posture, presence, diction, and pronunciation, manners and usages, without which...all scholastic knowledge is worth little or nothing” (Bourdieu 1984:91). Embodied cultural capital can only be obtained through experience because it is part of the normative socialization, or habitus, of the middle and upper classes.

In an effort to cope with a lack of embodied cultural capital, upwardly mobile lower class white academics engage in covering. Covering reduces tension among the normative group because it keeps devalued characteristic from looming too large. Christine Overall, a professional class upwardly mobile white, indicates that she felt pressure in her workplace to not identify with her lower class socialization; her social class identity was to be kept “a secret” so her co-workers with a middle and upper middle class socialization would not feel uncomfortable (Overall 1995:214). When Overall engages in covering, she is compelled to put aside her wish to act out her primary socialization by tacitly agreeing with the middle and upper middle class assumption that her behavior and actions are unacceptable.

Despite their efforts, upwardly mobile white academics are conscious that they do not fit in to their new environment. A white woman of lower class origins, upon reflecting on her time spent at Radcliffe University suggested that efforts to prepare students to take their position among the professional class resulted in personal feelings of alienation.

Radcliffe forced me—slowly and painfully—into awareness of a more cosmopolitan intellectual social class than my provincial background would have done. Educationally, there was little of real value (except perhaps the effects of surviving and later understanding the shock of discovery that in this subculture, words and thoughts are a commodity). Emotionally, it was a destructive experience (Stewart & Ostrove 1993:491).

Upwardly mobile white academics struggle with stigma and a marked status in the workplace because they feel that they are unable or discouraged to act out their primary socialization. Colleagues with middle and upper class backgrounds devalue such behavior and actions by their perceived display of discomfort and disapproval. A gendered strategy for avoiding alienating confrontations within the workplace is to associate more with clerical workers and low-level administrative staff rather than other university professors. Although developing friendships with working class or lower middle class women satisfies the need for sympathetic companionship, middle class academic colleagues may see this strategy as evidence that upwardly mobile whites do not take their academic endeavors as seriously as those who develop friendship groups around a shared discursive topic (Miner 1993).

In addition to the feeling that one is a cultural Outsider, feelings of inferiority surface among upwardly mobile lower class whites due to the interaction between a cultural belief in the myth of meritocracy and their residual identification with a lower class cultural identity. Ryan and Sackrey (1996) argue that in the United States, it is presumed that individuals at the top of the class hierarchy are there because of meritocratic selection rather than inherited class privilege. On the surface, it may appear that all upwardly mobile whites would enjoy taking personal credit for their accomplishments because they

have achieved the American Dream when they secure professional class employment. Instead, they still internally perceive themselves as having qualities in common with the lower classes, despite their external material success. A closer examination reveals that upwardly mobile white academics question whether they actually possess the necessary merit that is required for their employment. An upwardly mobile white woman indicated that she felt like an “impostor” and “not as talented” compared to co-workers with a middle and upper class background (Charlip 1995:38). After spending a significant portion of one’s lifetime in a subordinate class location, individuals internalize and identify with their primary socialization.

3) *Exclusion from Networks*

Although professional class whites that come from lower class backgrounds have achieved social mobility, enduring class discrimination results in an increased likelihood of a lower social status *within* their occupation. This lower status tends to hamper inclusion in social networks, further contributing to a stigmatized and marked status.

Previous research suggests that the amount of social prestige of an accrediting institution has an effect on the level of social status of the place of employment, regardless of the talent or ability of the individual (Burris 2004). For many working class and poor students, choices regarding the selection of a university are bounded by finances and a lack of information about career options. An upwardly mobile white male reflects upon his decision to attend graduate school, which was largely happenstance due to weak economic prospects, and the fact that he was not informed of post-graduate options due to his attendance at an undergraduate institution that served a lower class population:

Then I heard about graduate school. I had never understood graduate school or ever really known what it was. People who had graduated from Youngstown State didn’t go to graduate school; they went out and found work. But, with unemployment close to 30% in the former “Steel Valley,” graduate school looked like the closest thing to a job that might come my way” (Leslie 1995:71).

Similarly, in academic careers, the most important factor that determines employment opportunities is not merit [i.e. demonstrated by the number of publications] but the prestige of the department in which an academic received a his or her doctorate degree (Burris 2004). Compared to earning a degree at lower status university where most professors are not nationally known for their research, studying under faculty at highly ranked universities may allow students a greater opportunity to borrow status from their adviser, in addition to creating a favorable impression among anyone who is part of the faculty members’ social network (ibid).

Surveys from sociologists with lower class backgrounds indicated that the majority of their appointments were with institutions that did not have a sociology graduate program (Grimes & Morris 1997). Material constraints limited the range of job searches; general proximity and economic necessity rather than prestige and working conditions strongly influenced considerations for the first position. When compared to a larger sample of sociologists with a middle and upper class background that were members of the American Sociological Association, sociologists with a lower class background were *more likely*

to hold current academic appointments at institutions that were ranked lower than the institution of their last degree (Grimes & Morris 1997).

A micro level analysis reveals that differences in socialization also result in difficulty gaining access into social networks, which further contribute to lower status appointments and a stigmatized identity. Bourdieu (1986) suggests that social capital, or resources that are based on group membership which provide networks of influence and support, are an essential part of understanding class inequality. In other words, access to a network of acquaintances who mutually reciprocate professional favors (e.g. providing inside information on job searches and business deals, opportunities for mentorship, etc.) greatly improves one's ability to locate employment and receive favorable performance ratings in the workplace. Uzzi argues that socially embedded ties lead to a greater chance of success in social networks, although arms-length ties are also important (1996). Establishing embedded and arms-length ties, which are prerequisites for forming networks of social capital, may be more difficult for any individual whose primary socialization deviates from the white, middle class social norm.

The literature on normative isomorphism describes the phenomenon of homogeneity among colleagues that form social networks in various occupations. Due to gatekeeping mechanisms, personnel at educational institutions generally have the tendency to view problems in a manner that reflects the viewpoint of dominant social locations, and therefore see the same policies and procedures as normatively sanctioned and legitimized (DiMaggio & Powell 1983). DiMaggio and Powell argue that normative isomorphism works to reinforce the status quo both formally and informally by the process of professionalization which equates a middle class habitus with 'professional' workplace behavior (ibid). As a result, the use of normative isomorphism systematically puts social pressure on any individual from subjugated social locations vis-à-vis others who work in the same occupation. Presumably, fewer individuals with lower social status will be willing to put up with an unfriendly organizational climate resulting in the maintenance of the status quo, including whites with a lower class background.

Performing labor outside legitimized social networks also affects occupational prestige and occupational performance. Upwardly mobile academic women have a heightened sense that they have achieved a privileged occupational status vis-à-vis other members of their family and feel more pressure than men in the same situation to reciprocate their good fortune. Since upwardly mobile whites are often excluded from academic networks, those who feel the need to "pay back" do so in areas that are officially considered extraneous to the professional labor of an academic because such work does not heavily factor in progress toward tenure (e.g. political activism and mentoring students) (Tokarczyk & Fay 1993:17). The effects of unequal access to social networks, professionalization, and the academic caste system combine to inhibit access and high social status within occupations among upwardly mobile lower class whites.

Class-blind Stigma

Class discrimination and oppression are intrinsically connected to forms of gender and racial inequality. Structural oppression in society makes it difficult for members of subordinated groups to achieve mobility, whether it is from class, racial, or gender discrimi-

nation. Despite achieving class mobility, class discrimination continues to systematically disadvantage upwardly mobile white academics. When taking the specific social location of upwardly mobile white academics into account, however, the social markedness and stigma create a unique situation because of the normative groups' inability to articulate a marked group status:

Class poses different dilemmas than those posed by either race or gender in the academy- We do not cease being men or women, for instance, when we become doctors of philosophy. But, most of us do cease being working class when we become professors. (Thus the oxymoronic puzzle in the phrase "working class academic.") (Law 1995:5).

When women and racial minorities are able to obtain professional employment, sexism and racism continue to act as a discriminatory force through stigma and a socially marked identity. The process is slightly different for upwardly mobile whites who come from a lower class background:

But what about *culturally* disadvantaged people, those of us who started out working class, no matter our color or gender, and moved "up"? What does "culturally disadvantaged" mean, anyway? You're culturally disadvantaged if you don't come from the mainstream bourgeois culture. But aren't you disadvantaged only if you want to move into that culture? ... So it's my very mobility that created my disadvantage... I will never stop being disadvantaged as long as that familiar pain remains centered in my chest, the pain that has come from so much dislocation, separation, and loss (Christopher 1995:149-150).

This paper has argued that upwardly mobile whites feel that they are mistakenly assumed to have a middle class background because of gatekeeping mechanisms that usually segregate occupations by class and because of a cultural misconception that the majority of the nation's poor are non-white. Consequently, *faux pas* committed by actors who portray a lower class socialization and language style are seen as negative individual traits, rather than as evidence of different class socializations. In this case, upwardly mobile white academics perceive that their middle class peers have an incomplete understanding of how socialization and language styles differ by class. The perception of members of the normative group's negative interpretations and evaluations largely contribute to feelings of alienation among upwardly mobile white academics. Upwardly mobile white academics suggest they are constantly recognized as different, systematically stigmatized, and socially marked by professional class whites with a middle class background when they act out their primary socialization. Since class differences are downplayed or unrecognized in the United States, upwardly mobile white academics experience the stigma of being marked, but are not afforded the status of being a member of a marked group. In what follows, I argue that it would be worthwhile to draw attention to this experience of stigma in the absence of markedness, by referring to it by its own term: *class-blind stigma*.

According to the upwardly mobile white academics, they are stigmatized in their workplace because they cannot shake off their working class habitus and do not possess middle class cultural capital. Meanwhile, middle class colleagues seem to take their cultural capital and habitus for granted as the only correct way of knowing and doing. Although

Bourdieu reminds us that objective conditions contribute to one's habitus, sometimes members of the lower class misrecognize their class interest largely because those from dominant social locations choose not to acknowledge the formers' structural situation or subsequent cultural differences (Schwartz 1997). Every individual must rely on others to validate their self-image. In a stratified society, members of the middle and upper classes have more power to define others' sense of self. Although their stigmatizers misrecognize the impact of class, the stories of upwardly mobile white academics covered here suggest that they cannot ignore their primary class socialization because of the daily emotional struggle they face due to their inability or unwillingness to adopt middle class cultural capital and habitus. Even though white middle class academics are not class-blind, they suffer from class-blind stigma because upwardly mobile white academics suggest their middle class colleagues do not acknowledge class as a relevant factor in explaining cultural differences.

Those from subordinate social locations in society bear a heavy burden as a result of stigma and social markedness. In most models of stigma and social markedness, a clear conception of a devalued social category is required (Goffman 1963). I have argued that in the case of upwardly mobile white academics, class-blind stigma allows the possibility for an entire group of people to be stigmatized without the dominant group being able to clearly articulate the devalued category. If individuals come from marginal social locations that are more clearly conceptualized (e.g. subordinate gender or racial identities), they may be in a position to make group complaints about their marked status simply because they are stigmatized as members of a devalued group, not as individuals with idiosyncratic and personal shortcomings. Conversely, if upwardly mobile whites are stigmatized as a result of perceived individual shortcomings, rather than as members of a devalued group, then any attempt to make complaints as a group may be met with confusion on behalf of their middle class colleagues.

However, it would be a mistake to assume that it is a "privilege" to come from a social location that is more clearly conceptualized as a devalued group merely because group complaints may be waged in a more direct fashion. Instead, it is more fruitful to suggest that upwardly mobile white academics enact a strategy of agency that both acknowledges and mobilizes their ambiguous group status. Upwardly mobile whites can take advantage of their ambiguous group status but similarly refusing to artificially construct boundaries between themselves and a number of other structurally related but often subjectively dissimilar groups (e.g. any other group who feel they have little control over how their identity is constructed by others). Combining complaints with several other apparently unrelated devalued groups may be the most efficacious strategy for lodging anti-stigmatic plaintiffs (Skeggs 2004).

Class-blind stigma can be identified in the case of professional class white academics that have a lower class background. Instances of a marked status are evident when problems of assimilation are experienced by upwardly mobile white academics because of a lack of embedded social capital, and when they feel intimidated due to a perceived lack of merit as a result of the myth of meritocracy. Class discrimination, which results in a marked status and stigma, occurs when upwardly mobile white academics have difficulty securing social networks, experience social pressure in their occupation as the result of professionalization, and have difficulty obtaining high status jobs within their occupa-

tion because of the academic prestige system of accrediting institutions. According to upwardly mobile white academics, their middle class colleagues demonstrate a perceived failure to recognize that social class leads to socialization differences when a lack of appreciation is shown toward lower class ways of knowing. Consequently, when upwardly mobile white academics act out their primary socialization in their new professional context, they perceive that their middle class peers constantly label them as having strange idiosyncrasies or character flaws. As a result of this analysis, the concept of *class-blind stigma* was introduced to capture the experiences of upwardly mobile white academics that are not given a group status by the dominant group, but are nonetheless systematically treated as a devalued social group.

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