

Race, Class and the Dilemmas of Upward Mobility for African Americans

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We use the concept of intersectionality to explore the psychological meaning of social class and upward mobility in the lives African Americans. Throughout, we pay special attention to the context of education, a site which many Black Americans feel represents their best hope for upward mobility. Literature related to three themes is reviewed and discussed: (a) the history and significance of class divisions within the Black community, (b) experiences of educational institutions as entryways to upward mobility, and (c) the hidden costs of mobility. It is suggested that future research should address the intersection of gender with class and race, the relevance of class to racial identity, and the experience of downward mobility among Black Americans.

William Julius Wilson (1978) observed that Black America was increasingly polarized into an educated, affluent middle class and an economically marginalized underclass. This economic pattern, he argued, suggested that class had become a more powerful determinant of African Americans' life chances than race. Since the publication of this thesis, many scholars have challenged this position. Some questioned whether macro-social indicators do indeed support the trends Wilson identified (Pettigrew, 1981; Wilson, 1995); others sought to document the continuing importance of race to the daily lives and psychological well being of middle

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class Blacks (see, e.g., Feagin, 1991; Hughes & Thomas, 1998; Thomas & Hughes, 1986). In general these analyses, like Wilson's, attempt to evaluate the size of the effect of one social status relative to the other. Yet at the level of individual experience, where race and class are necessarily experienced simultaneously, this may not be a meaningful line of inquiry.

As Ortner (1998), an anthropologist, has observed, because every individual occupies multiple social locations, all identities are fundamentally intersectional. In her study, respondents were nonplussed when she asked them to discuss their experience of social class without reference to their ethnic identity as Jewish. Ortner thus demonstrated that attempting to isolate one identity (e.g., race or ethnicity) in order to get at the "true meaning" of another (e.g., class) is a hollow project in terms of individuals' lived experience. Recognizing this problem, Pettigrew (1981) called for an interactive model in which we would "expect racial phenomena to operate differently across the social class lines within both Black and White America. Likewise, class-linked phenomena will often vary according to race" (p. 244). This approach is in line with research in social identity, which is increasingly concerned with how individuals experience, organize, and negotiate their membership in the full range of social categories to which they belong. This project, often described as "intersectionality" by those working in a feminist tradition (Particularly in critical legal theory, see Crenshaw, 1994), and "multiple identities" by psychologists, is formidable in its complexity (see Deaux & Stewart, 2001 for a brief review). In this article, we use this concept of intersectionality to explore the psychological meaning of social class, and social class identity, in the lives of African Americans. Throughout, we pay special attention to the context of education, a site that many Black Americans feel represents their best hope for upward mobility (Landry, 1987). Our discussion centers on three questions: (a) What is the meaning of class *within* the Black community? (b) What is known about the subjective experience of upward class mobility for African Americans, particularly when education is used as a vehicle for mobility? and, (c) Are there hidden costs of upward mobility?

Black America: A Classed, and Class-Conscious, Society

An intersectional model of race and class does not assume that class categories have the same meaning for members of different racial or ethnic groups. To situate our discussion of class within the specific African American context, we begin with a brief review of the history of class divisions within Black America. Attention to the recently widening divide between the Black middle class and underclass to the contrary, class and, perhaps more importantly, status divisions have long existed within the African American community (Frazier, 1957; Graham, 1999). Even under slavery, there already existed a "mulatto elite," a segment of the Black population who, by virtue of their light skin and blood relations to the White, slave-owning class, received benefits such as assignment of choice work tasks,

training in skilled occupations, and for some, freedom (Frazier, 1957; Hughes & Hertel, 1990; Landry, 1987). In the period following emancipation, this small group attempted to maintain their privilege and elite status by segregating themselves from the rest of the Black community, maintaining their proximity to Whites (Graham, 1999).

Some members of this group formed a very small “old-guard” Black upper class, which included entrepreneurs, bankers, funeral home owners, and other professionals. This elite maintained strict standards about who belonged and who didn’t based on criteria such as light skin color, wealth, attending the “right” educational institutions, having an acceptable family background, and belonging to certain exclusive social clubs and organizations (Graham, 1999). Even though some members of the Black upper class did not meet all of the criteria, families lacking too many of these qualifications simply were not admitted. Graham describes the Black elite as “a study of contrasts” characterized by “a pride in black accomplishment that is inexorably tied to a lingering resentment about our past as poor, enslaved blacks and our past and current treatment by whites” (p. 18). Reflecting these contrasts, perhaps, there was diversity within the Black elite regarding their relationship to less accomplished Blacks. Some felt an obligation to participate in the struggle for equality and to aid the less fortunate, while others felt superior to and embarrassed by the working class and their plight. The exclusive social organizations and concern with wealth, status, and skin color continue among the Black upper class in the present. Notwithstanding their important contributions to the advancement of the race overall, they are very insular and quite small when compared to the Black middle and working class.

In contrast, in the period following emancipation, the vast majority of African Americans were confined to a very narrow range of poorly paid occupational classifications (Landry, 1987). A sizable professional class did not appear within African American society until the period of Black northward migration, when residential segregation in cities solidified and there arose a need for professional services within Black communities (Pattillo-McCoy, 1999b); some members of this class merged with the older mulatto elite through marriage (Landry, 1987). Eventually, the general tide of prosperity in the United States after World War II lifted even the boats of Black Americans, bringing an unprecedented expansion of the Black middle class (Landry, 1987; Vanneman & Cannon, 1987). Between 1960 and 1970, Landry (1987) argues, the Black middle class doubled in size. On this basis, Landry (1987) refers to a “new Black middle class,” which came of age after the restrictions of Jim Crow began to lift, and consequently had access to a wider range of occupations, residential neighborhoods, and opportunities to purchase goods and services with their middle-class incomes than did the older middle and upper classes. The literature discussed in this article will focus primarily on upward mobility among the Black middle and working classes, rather than the experiences of the upper class Black elite.

The relationship between classes within the Black community can be understood only from a position of intersectionality. Since emancipation, Black Americans have struggled not only for upward mobility measured in material terms, but also for freedom from the restrictions imposed by the wider society based on race. On the surface, these struggles may appear to be complementary, but they are not without tension. At the end of the 19th century, many Black leaders, educated and from elite backgrounds, embarked on a political project for the improvement of the race based on the idea of “uplift” (Gaines, 1996). Uplift ideology held that Black Americans would progress as a race when they adopted the culture and values of the White middle class. Thus, privileged Blacks worked to “uplift” the Black working class, largely through encouraging education, vocational training, and other kinds of “respectable” conduct (particularly for women; see Wolcott, 2001). The ideology of uplift served to confound class with status in the minds of laypeople (Landry, 1987); indeed, many who studied African American culture between World War II and the civil rights movement argued that members of Black communities classified themselves and others as middle class based primarily on values and social behavior with respect to family and community (such as the pursuit of education and attendance at church and cultural events, i.e., “respectability”) rather than material circumstances per se (Vanneman & Cannon, 1987). Gaines (1996), a historian, has argued that uplift ideology also included a presumption that the establishment of a clearly classed hierarchy within the Black community would be grounds from which to argue for the humanity of African Americans, and their attendant entitlement to civil rights. Put another way, proponents of uplift viewed civil rights as essentially middle class rights, and thus believed that Whites ought to see the Black bourgeoisie as worthy of full citizenship. By implication, members of the Black working class were not as worthy. Thus, “uplift” is both a racial formation project (Omi & Winant, 1994), and a classed project.

These tensions continue in conflicts between school administrators and Black youth today. Cousins’ (1999) insightful ethnographic study of an urban, predominantly Black high school highlights some of the multi-faceted tensions between identities of class and the ideology of uplift, between Black students and school administrators, and the contested meanings of academic achievement and respectability playing out in secondary schools today. Cousins described a struggling school district that adopted an initiative called “The Pride is Back,” emphasizing “reclamation of academic achievement, a stable family life, respect for elders, [and] sexual responsibility (p. 302).” This set of values was imposed by school administrators and community leaders as an antidote to student behavior they considered “underclass,” that is, styles of dress and social conduct, and aesthetic preferences (e.g., in music) influenced by Black youth culture. Particularly stigmatized was “loud” behavior, which not only marked the individual as “underclass” but also was viewed as a dishonor to the race. In doing so, school administrators endorsed the traditional ideology of racial uplift; that is, upward mobility will follow from

the attainment of middle class values and standards of behavior, thus equating the material basis of class with the social and cultural practice of class.

Tellingly, Cousins noted that within the student body, the material and cultural basis of class were not so tightly yoked: He sketched case studies of students from middle class families who played the role of “gansta wannabes” (p. 306), and of others who lived in housing projects yet comported themselves in accordance with the ideals of the administration’s “Pride” initiative. Cousins showed, also, how these classed identities were unrelated to students’ attitudes toward achievement (see also O’Connor, 1999). Thus, he argued that class must be understood as “complexly relational and cultural” (p. 310). This insight has three important implications for this discussion. First, individuals actively shape class as they engage in different class practices across time and contexts. Second, schools work to instill particular meanings of class and classed-identities in students. Third, Cousins shows how classed identities and performances are gendered, thus drawing attention again to the centrality of the concept of intersectionality to the psychological study of class (for a similarly intersectional analysis based on White and Latina high school students, see Bettie, 2000).

Despite the long history of these class divisions and their continuing ability to polarize, at every historical period including the present, the Black middle class has enjoyed less economic privilege than their White counterparts. For example, Black families who would be classified as middle class according to traditional measures of educational attainment and income lag far behind their White counterparts in terms of accumulated wealth (Conley, 1999). Being born to middle-class status does not offer African Americans the same degree of “protection” from downward mobility enjoyed by Whites of similar socio-economic status (Davis, 1995; Pattillo-McCoy, 1999a). This is true partly because most middle-class Blacks have achieved, rather than inherited, their status, so few have large assets to bequeath (Conley, 1999; McAdoo, 1997; Oliver & Shapiro, 1997). Thus, members of the Black middle class are not much better off financially than their working-class counterparts (Collins, 1983), and other research suggests that middle class African Americans are well aware that there is little guarantee that their upward mobility will be sustained either in the short term or for future generations (Vanneman & Cannon, 1987). Thus, there exists within the African American population a prevalent consciousness of belonging to the working class, one that persists even among those who have achieved success in the educational and occupational arenas. Although the growth of the Black middle class in the period following the civil rights movement was accompanied by a great increase in middle class identification among Blacks, as of 1987 they were still significantly more likely to identify as working class than were comparably educated Whites (Vanneman & Cannon, 1987).

Thus, African Americans who attain middle-class status have a distinct cultural experience of class, rooted in their very specific experience of their double

stratification by race and class. Neckerman, Carter, and Lee (1999) identified what they term a “minority culture of mobility” within African American culture. This culture provides a refuge to help Black Americans cope with the psychological stress and practical logistics of day-to-day life in the White mainstream (which members of the Black middle class typically face at work and school), and supplies an ideology to explain classed relationships within the Black community. These functions are accomplished through the establishment of political organizations and caucus groups, and through formal and informal social interactions which provide support, as well as a space in which they can “debrief” from interactions with Whites. Additionally, this culture instills the importance of “wearing one’s class” through patterns of consumption and behavior (Lee, 2000) to signal class status to Whites. Finally, the culture of mobility validates the belief that middle class status confers a moral obligation to “give back” to less fortunate members of the race, and therefore it encourages continuing involvement with “lower class” Blacks (see Pattillo-McCoy, 1999a, for a discussion of the short social and spatial distance between the Black middle class and the working poor and underclass). In these ways the culture of mobility “expresses and validates the practice of straddling two worlds” (Neckerman, Carter, & Lee, 1999, p. 954).

This short review encapsulates two opposing themes of class ideology within African American society. First, within African American culture, there has been a great emphasis on self-improvement and the importance of striving for achievement, both as an individual value, and as a strategy for advancing the race as a collective, both historically and in the present. African Americans have viewed education as the most respected and most effective mechanism for accomplishing the goal of upward mobility, the achievement of which challenges race- and class-based oppression. At the same time, African Americans have protected and preserved their consciousness of their race as a socially and economically oppressed group: in part, this reflects the on-going experiences of discrimination faced by African Americans (Feagin, 1991; Feagin & Sikes, 1994), but it is also a strategy for individual and group coping. We turn now to a review of research investigating African Americans’ subjective experiences as they attempt to navigate educational institutions toward this goal of upward mobility. We will see how these two ideologies at times support and, at other times, challenge each other.

Schools as the Entryway to Upward Mobility

The social changes of the 1960s afforded unprecedented access to the professional middle class to some African Americans and to some White women. Yet in the 1970s, the study of social mobility was dominated by quantitative studies of social structure and intergenerational status attainment (Higginbotham & Weber, 1992), and thus little was known about African Americans’ subjective experience of mobility until a small number of studies began to appear in the 1990s (Shaw &

Coleman, 2000). Most of these studies explored Black Americans' experiences in high schools and colleges, demonstrating that although the doors of colleges, universities, and elite secondary schools have increasingly opened to Black students, the prevailing culture of these institutions has been less welcoming, often serving to maintain Black students' sense of their "otherness" by virtue of both race and class. In this section, we review studies of African American students' experiences of upward mobility in the context of education.

Since the 1960s, Black enrollment has increased in the most selective secondary schools in the United States, due in no small part to the efforts of several organizations that have worked to identify gifted students from the inner-city, and to help them to enroll in elite, usually private, schools (The best known of these organizations is the "A Better Chance" [ABC] program; Datnow & Cooper, 1996). Although many Black students have used their elite educations to their material and career advantage (Zweigenhaft & Domhoff, 1991; see also Bowen & Bok, 1998 for a discussion of positive outcomes among Black alumni of selective colleges), much of this research focuses on the difficulties faced by Black students in these institutions. Like Kuriloff and Reichert (this issue), a number of studies have focused attention on the experiences of Black students at elite prep schools. Cookson and Persell's (1991) characterization is typical of the findings of these studies; they describe their representative national sample of African American students attending elite secondary boarding schools as "outsiders within . . . caught between two cultures and, in this sense, doubly marginalized" (p. 220). The authors argue that the intense proximity between students of different races in the boarding school context served to "accentuate racial differences that are compounded by class differences" (p. 220). Thus, despite the fact that many of the students sampled were from families in which at least one parent either had a college degree or worked in a professional occupation (e.g., physician, lawyer), in response to anonymous surveys these students reported a double burden of having to acclimate to both White culture, and to upper middle-class culture. Unfortunately, the educational institutions themselves did not adequately facilitate Black students' adjustment to this confusing milieu; although race differences were widely discussed, class differences remained a silent subtext. Cookson and Persell concluded that it is double stratification (both race and class) that keeps Black students from ever fully entering the upper middle-class world represented by the prep school.

Cookson and Persell (1991) argue that prep schools reproduce the upper class "through unspoken codes and subtle symbols that indicate class membership" (p. 225). Horvat and Antonio (1999) provide a fine-grained analysis of these codes in their ethnographic study of African American students at an elite girls' prep school. They suggest that the culture of the school inflicts its "habitus" (that is, a set of class-based practices, values, and standards for individual conduct and social interaction) on individual students. For those from outside the traditional population served by the school, this imposition represents a form of symbolic

violence, in which the outsiders are continually reminded that they are different and, consequently, less worthy than the other students. As in Cookson and Persell's (1991) study, most of the Black students in their sample were from middle-class families, yet they reported that their status within the school took a great emotional toll upon them. They reported physical exclusion (e.g., in students' common space), alienation from a school culture in which tremendous economic privilege was taken as normative, and obliviousness to cultural difference (as when the valedictorian's speech glowingly compared the school to Tara, the plantation in *Gone with the Wind*). However, the students believed, also, that they were willingly paying a price for the chance of upward mobility. They felt that they were learning important lessons about how to cope with White society that would benefit them as they moved into college and careers (indeed, Zweigenhaft and Domhoff, 1991 refer to the prep school experience as an "initiation" into power for Black students, p. 162).

Datnow and Cooper (1996) found similar challenges faced by the Black students sampled from the elite, predominantly White independent schools they interviewed. These researchers focused their inquiry on the way that students used peer networks to help them cope with their outsider status. Contrary to studies based on Black students in inner city schools, they found that the culture of Black students at these elite schools did not encourage an oppositional identity that disdainfully views academic success as "acting White" (Ogbu, 1986). Instead, Black students, feeling marginalized from the school (and at times, torn between two worlds, even distanced from their families of origin), turned to each other as role models. They formed peer groups that created and maintained academic identities in which "if you're not smart, you're not cool" (Datnow & Cooper, p. 64). Datnow and Cooper argued that these peer groups supported, also, a strong and positive racial identity, particularly through the establishment of culturally-based clubs. In these schools, Black students defined "acting White" as not taking part in Black social life, which included informal social activities, formal student organizations, and mentoring across grade levels. As one student put it, "It's all about how you act in the hallway, whether you want to speak to us, whether you acknowledge the fact that you are a Black person" (Datnow & Cooper, p. 66). Thus, "acting White" was not defined by one's closeness with Whites, but in terms of how one treated other Blacks.

Yet, these racially homogeneous networks did not completely insulate students from the difficulties of this route to upward mobility. Students in the sample reported, also, that African American age mates outside of school did not always accept them, although many made efforts to maintain these contacts. Especially for students who attended these elite schools for many years, over time the school environment became these students' entire social world.

In contrast, Shaw and Coleman (2000) investigated the experiences of Black working-class women enrolled in community colleges, a very different population seeking the same goal of upward mobility through education. Unlike the traditional literature on men's mobility, which characterizes mobility as a competitive

process that permanently isolates them from their families of origin, they found that that family members were among the most important motivators for women's attendance. Many women spoke of wanting to make a better life for their children, or to serve as a better model for them. Almost paradoxically, certain family members were also sometimes identified as the biggest obstacles to their success as well (as in unsupportive partners, or young children requiring a great deal of care). The African American women in this study spoke of the ways that their college attendance, including their commitment of time to classes and studying, changed and challenged their family relationships; they counted on family members to substantially support their aspirations, and struggled to maintain those relationships, even when their new commitments as students threatened those relationships.

Higginbotham and Weber's (1992) study of class mobility compared African American and White women who currently held managerial positions and who had college degrees. They also made comparisons between women from working-class families of origin and those from middle-class families, with attention to racial differences. They found that Black women from working-class families were more than twice as likely to feel they owed a debt to their families for help and support than were White women from similar backgrounds. However, Black women from working-class families felt, also, that they give more assistance to family members than they receive. In this, they were different from the other race/class groups. Black women of both class backgrounds described parental messages that their education not only promised individual gain, but also represented a process of bettering the race. The authors reported, also, that most Black women in the study had been raised in segregated settings, and both upwardly mobile Black women and those from middle-class, stable families experienced discrimination and social rejection when they first came into contact with Whites. For many women, this contact took place either in college or as they began their professional careers. Thus, Higginbotham and Weber (1992) concluded that upward mobility carries an extra burden for Black women.

Taken together, these studies of African Americans' experiences of upward mobility through education suggest that at every level, from the community college to the prep school, they experience "the continuing significance of race," (Feagin, 1991, p. 101). Each of these studies reveals Black students as caught between two cultures in which their membership is contingent, challenged, and problematic. As described by Neckerman et al. (1999), some students worked to build a "minority culture of mobility" within their school environment. Yet, Higginbotham and Weber (1992) and Shaw and Coleman (2000) show that there are more obstacles to mobility than merely the impermeability of the culture of the White establishment. Perhaps because the respondents they sampled were older than those in the other studies reviewed here, they reported the tug of obligations to their families of origin. Indeed, their findings are supported by Pattillo-McCoy & Heflin's (1999) quantitative study which found that middle-class Blacks are more than three

times more likely to have a poor sibling than are comparable Whites. Demands for economic assistance made by these siblings may contribute to the economic vulnerability of the Black middle class. Thus, both the social and structural aspects of class frame the experience of upward mobility for African Americans.

The Price of the Ticket: Hidden Costs of Mobility

In this section, we borrow from Baldwin, the novelist and essayist, to ask whether intergenerational class mobility is worth “the price of the ticket” (1985). Do those who achieve middle-class status suffer in terms of their psychological well-being? Is upward mobility from one’s family of origin associated with politicization around race and gender issues, or do those who climb accept and identify with the status quo? Many believe that for African Americans, upward mobility via education carries with it hidden costs that accrue both to those individuals who aspire to middle class status, and to the Black community as a cultural and political entity. One such cost is in terms of psychological well-being. The suicide of journalist Leanita McClain, who wrote poignantly of her feelings of alienation from other Blacks and condescension from Whites (Collins, 2000), is often cited as an anecdotal illustration of the acute and chronic stress experienced by many Blacks who succeed in White-dominated professions. A proliferation of journalistic accounts, memoirs, and qualitative studies (e.g., Cose, 1993; Feagin & Sikes, 1994; Nelson, 1993; Williams, 1991, to name several) have argued, also, that despite the inroads made by many Blacks into white-collar and professional occupations, the Black middle class continues to confront such frustrations as tokenism, residential segregation, subtle and overt discrimination, and a glass ceiling that limits their advancement, and that these frustrations result in deep dissatisfaction and cynicism.

Research suggests that these negative effects are felt throughout the family. For example, St. Jean and Feagin (1998) found that because middle-class Black Americans used their families as a resource to help them cope emotionally with discrimination and racism, kin shared the pain and emotional costs of negative experiences. Similarly, Tatum’s research (1987) suggests that these psychological costs of class mobility are borne, also, by children in successful Black families. She studied upwardly mobile, Black, middle-class parents who moved to predominantly White communities. Her informants reported that they felt their children were isolated from their extended families, and that they had no Black peer group in their communities. Tatum found that the children had weaker identification with Black culture than their parents, and parents feared this would leave them ill-equipped to cope with White racism that they might encounter. Hochschild (1993) suggests that these may be the reasons that increasing economic status is not associated with greater happiness among Black Americans as it is among Whites (Jackson, Chatters & Neighbors, 1986).

Some popular opinion holds that a second hidden cost of upward mobility for Blacks is that attainment of middle class status can result in a disidentification or political distancing from the Black community, particularly if class mobility is associated with migration out of Black neighborhoods. This argument suggests that middle-class Blacks will experience “class realignment,” that is, they will be accepting of the government’s policies and existing social relations because they have benefited from them (Hwang, Fitzpatrick, & Helms, 1998). Although there is evidence that middle-class Blacks do have more politically conservative views on government spending than do poorer Blacks (Hochschild, 1993), the small body of research that looks at the relationship between social class and racial attitudes among Black Americans has generally found little support for class realignment among the Black middle class. For example, Hughes and Demo (1989) found that measures of class were positively associated with racial self-esteem. Similarly, Hwang, Fitzpatrick, and Helms (1998) found that middle-class Blacks were more likely to take a structural analysis of the causes of inequality and were more politically active than their working class counterparts. They found, also, that middle class Blacks felt just as close to Blacks as a group as did poor and working class Blacks. The authors of both studies suggested that education, as well as the frequent contact with Whites that accompanies it, increased middle-class Blacks’ sense of deprivation relative to Whites. Allen, Dawson and Brown (1989) and McDermott (1994) found more mixed results—middle-class Blacks expressed greater racial consciousness on some measures, but less on others—but both studies rejected a simple narrative of class polarization among Blacks.

It is important to view these findings concerning the hidden cost of mobility in the larger economic and political context facing African Americans as a group. Some observers might view these arguments with puzzlement. In light of the great educational and economic gains made by African Americans in the past sixty years, why do privileged Blacks continue to protest their disadvantaged state? How can we persuasively argue that middle class Blacks suffer, if we compare their status to that of the Black poor? Is it a culture of “victimology,” as conservative pundits have argued (e.g., McWhorter, 2000; Steele, 1990)? Collins’ (1983) work on the social policies that contributed to the large growth of the Black middle class is an important corrective to these often-raised questions. She argued, “by dividing Blacks on the basis of class, researchers have separated the process which creates the Black underclass from that which elaborates the middle class. I believe that the same process is involved in each case” (p. 370). Her work shows that the Black middle class has grown largely through government mandated policies that create a demand for Black professionals, particularly in job classifications designed to cater to the needs of poorer Blacks (e.g., affirmative action officers, social workers, etc.). Because the creation of these jobs are policy driven, rather than market driven, they are inherently vulnerable, and rarely offer routes to promotion. Her

interviews with Black executives (Collins, 1997) suggest that they are well aware that their positions are racialized and politically at risk. Thus, the discontent of the Black middle class is best understood not primarily as “the rage of a privileged class” (Cose, 1993), but as a predictable result of a system of racial discrimination to which all Blacks, regardless of income or education, remain subject. Collins’ analysis makes plain that we cannot consider African Americans who attain middle class status to be middle class in the same way that we construe the term when it is applied to Whites. The particular economic context faced by African Americans as a group, both historically and in the present, shapes the psychological meaning of class. Their experience can be understood only in terms of an intersectional approach.

Future Directions

The aim of this article has been to assist psychologists and others who are interested in the psychological meaning of social class for Black Americans to understand class differences among Black Americans and, perhaps less obviously, to understand the class dynamics within the Black community. Because of the emphasis traditionally placed on education by Black Americans as a means to upward mobility for individuals, and for the race as a whole, the process of education and the organization of educational institutions is fundamental to this inquiry. In this section, we identify several areas that are ripe for future research.

Systematic Exploration of the Intersections of Class, Race, and Gender

Taken to the extreme, the argument for an intersectional approach could result in research of such specificity that we are no longer able to make useful generalizations about any experience shared among group members. However, some recent research suggests that class and race intersect with gender in ways that are discernable through systematic research. For example, Sellers (2001) has identified differences in the moderators of the relations between social mobility and psychological distress among African Americans. For example, among upwardly mobile men, discrimination exacerbated distress; however, she found no such relationship among women. She argued that gender roles and available role models shape the messages about upward mobility that men and women receive, and thus their experience of their own mobility. At the level of daily interactions, Cousins (1999) similarly observed the importance of the intersection of these three identities. He explored the way that the “underclass” identity, stigmatized by school authorities concerned with “respectability,” is gendered in a predominantly Black high school. Research in this area, although scarce, suggests that adding this additional layer of intersectionality is key to understanding the mechanisms and meaning of

race and class (see Cole & Stewart, 2001 for a discussion of the importance of foregrounding differences within racial groups).

The Role of Class in Racial Identity

This article has sought to demonstrate the importance of class to the experience of Blacks in America, with attention to the ways class colors their in-group and out-group experiences. This suggests that class may be an important, yet little explored, aspect of racial identity. The research reviewed for this article suggests that there is no straightforward relationship between class and measures of Black racial identity and consciousness, and similarly, Carter and Helms (1988) found no relationship between socio-economic status and their measure of Black identity. But perhaps the relationship is more subtle. In her discussion of the relationship between Jewish identity and class, Ortner (1998) argued that “American class discourse is in certain important respects fused with ethnicity and race . . . there seems always to have been some sort of tendency to merge race/ethnic and class categories in American cultural thought” (pp. 12–13). Jewish ethnicity is coded as middle class; African American ethnicity is coded as lower class, and these cultural connections permeate the identity of group members in important ways. For example, Ortner links this assertion to Vanneman & Cannon’s (1987) finding that Blacks are more likely than comparable Whites to identify as working class. Relatedly, numerous scholars of Black culture have written about the American tendency to equate inner city youth culture with “authentic” Black culture (Kelley, 1997). Future research should explore the prevalence and importance of this cognitive linking of class and race. How does it affect the experience of mobility? How does it affect interactions between members of different classes within the Black community?

Downward Mobility Among the Black Middle Class

This review (like this issue of *JSI*) has focused primarily on experiences of upward mobility. Given that middle-class status has only recently become widely accessible to Black Americans, this seems appropriate. However, the fact that many Black Americans who achieve middle class status do so only tenuously (Conley, 1999), suggests that downward mobility may be an all too common experience as well. Newman (1988) has written poignantly of the experiences of those who “fell from grace” from the middle class; however, her book has very little analysis of race. A similar investigation of Black American’s experiences is certainly called for. Future research in this area should attempt to understand class as potentially fluid over the life course. What is the frequency of class transitions in the average African American’s life? How do those who experience downward mobility make sense of it? Given the high degree of psychological distress reported

in the literature on middle class African Americans, is there any positive aspect to downward mobility, however small? These are, of course, only a few suggestions in a research area that is largely untapped.

Conclusions

To conclude this article, we draw some comparisons between the very different experiences of two African American authors who have used their own autobiographies to foreground the importance of class to the development of personal identity. hooks, a well known Black feminist, has written poignantly about “the human costs of class mobility” (p. 156) in a series of essays on class and race (2000). hooks acknowledged that her journey from a poor, working class background to one of economic privilege via her educational achievements was psychologically traumatic. Although economic privilege may provide security and well being, it is often accompanied by some guilt and grief with respect to those left behind in poverty. In the case of African Americans, those left behind are often loved ones and family members. hooks described her first interactions with the Black elite while attending Stanford University, and how these experiences awakened her to class differences among Blacks for the first time. The realization that all Blacks were not united in their fight against racial oppression and that members of the elite held in disdain anyone not as privileged as themselves, regardless of race, was the beginning of her class consciousness.

Based in part on her own experiences, hooks (2000) wrote that the “politics of class” presents her with the deepest challenges when opposing “systems of domination In the space of race and gender I am most likely to stand among those victimized; class is the one place where I have a choice about where I stand” (p. 161). She pointedly observed that the freedom that privileged women enjoy may come at the expense of poor and working class women, who perform the labor that liberates the privileged career woman. However to recognize this relationship requires a level of introspection and an acknowledgement of privilege that many feminists are not willing to undertake. hooks asserted that to challenge the sexist mistreatment of women by men, without challenging the inadequate compensation of poor and working class women world wide denies the intersectional relationship between economic exploitation, racism, and sexism. hooks’ personal journey related to class consciousness reinforces many of the assertions posited in this article—primarily that the psychological experience of class, race, and gender are inherently intersectional, and that these identities shape our perceptions of who we are and, in turn, our relationship with the larger society in which we live.

In contrast, Graham (1999) provides us with intimate details about his life as a member of the Black elite. Although he lived a life of privilege where he primarily associated with other members of the Black upper class, Graham wrote

about becoming keenly aware of class differences among Blacks, the “haves and have-nots,” at a very young age. He noted that even among the haves, there were distinctions based on various elite club memberships, schools attended, family history, and physical characteristics such as skin tone, hair texture, and eye color. He spoke of the dissonance he experienced during the Civil Rights movement when other Blacks were fighting for equality, and he was learning to sail yachts on the weekend, his class privilege completely insulating him from the societal upheaval that was taking place in the outer world. He emphasized, however, that most of the families that were members of the Black elite had a strong sense of racial identity and took great pride in their accomplishments and the accomplishments of their ancestors in a world where Blacks were openly discriminated against and sometimes brutally punished for obtaining wealth and success.

The stories of hooks and Graham serve to exemplify the tensions between classes, as well as the common values such as education, shared by the Black middle and upper class. hooks’ story provides an example of how education facilitates the transition from working class to upper middle class status, thus reinforcing the idea that many Blacks view education as the primary vehicle for upward mobility. On the other hand, Graham’s story emphasizes the shared value of education from the perspective of class privilege, where the function of education was not so much upward mobility for the elite, but rather a means of further distinguishing themselves from the other classes based on the quality and reputation of the institution attended, (i.e., Ivy League universities and elite historically Black institutions such as Spelman, Morehouse, and Howard University.) Their stories are real-life demonstrations of the ways that the value and purpose of education may differ among Blacks based on class status.

The literature reviewed in this article highlights the complex nature of the experiences that inform the attitudes and behaviors of African Americans, and underscores the necessity for the inclusion of class as a variable when examining those experiences. Through the use of the concept of intersectionality, we can better understand the ways in which social identities interact to influence individual identity; the complexity of these interactions defy attempts to accurately evaluate the psychological effects of any one identity separately. Although the issue of class differences has always been a volatile one among Black Americans, we cannot ignore its relevance in our quest to understand the psychological consequences of racial oppression in America.

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