MOVIN’ ON UP: UNDERSTANDING IDENTITY CONFLICT, DISCRETE EMOTIONS, AND CLASS WORK FOR UPWARDLY MOBILE INDIVIDUALS

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**ABSTRACT**

1. Purpose;

The purpose of this paper is to develop a process model aimed at understanding how upwardly mobile individuals from lower social class origins navigate conflicting social class identities in a workplace environment dominated by middle class norms. While anyone can experience identity conflict, we argue that upwardly mobile individuals are particularly disposed, and that identity conflict occurs during “class-triggering events” - situations that make differences between childhood social class identity and current social class identity salient. Such events may include class-based microaggressions, interactions with others, or environmental cues that call into question how one makes sense of where they come from and where they are now. These events can then trigger a discrete emotional response and concomitant maintenance and resistance “class work.”

1. Design/methodology/approach;

We aim to build theory regarding the upwardly mobile experience, and thus the full paper is intended to be a theoretical piece. Here, we provide an extended abstract of our working paper.

1. Findings if paper is empirical;

This paper is theoretical in nature.

1. Research limitations/implications;

Our goal is to provide a process model for future testing, and therefore no empirical results will be provided. However, our paper has implications for future theory and empirics as testable propositions will be provided in the full paper.

1. Originality/value of the paper.

Our paper contributes to the burgeoning literature on social class by theorizing about the experience of upward mobility specifically, which remains largely understudied. We also contribute to the identity literature through considering how upwardly mobile individuals manage stigmatized identities and cope with identity transitions in the face of class-based microaggressions and other class-triggering events. Finally, by incorporating the role of discrete emotions as they occur in response to such events, this paper adds value to both the identity and social class literatures.

**Keywords:** microaggressions, resistance class work, social class, upward mobility, identity conflict

“My guard is almost up in these situations [in academia], and the solace or safety I experience with my working-class peers disappears, leaving me feeling as if my social class is on display for the world to see and judge. That judgment, either real or perceived, is inevitably followed by the sting of shame that comes with not measuring up to middle-class standards of speech, dress, knowledge, wealth, and so on. I do not have easily at my disposal the reference to the right piece of literature, knowledge of ‘good’ wine, or experience of traveling abroad” (Cannon, 2006, p. 108).

The promise of upward mobility plays a prominent role in Western society, romanticized in popular media and political discourse (Roberts & Rosenwald 2001). In the United States, for example, the classic Horatio Alger stories communicate inspirational stories about people who have “pulled themselves up by their bootstraps.” Despite such discourse, global rates of economic inequality are on the rise. In the top 24 richest countries in the world, upward mobility has stalled since the 1990’s - one in three children born into poverty will remain there, while the majority of the others will only experience a slight income increase beyond that of their parents (Inman 2018). For many, hard work and talent is simply not enough to achieve upward mobility (Corak 2013). Even when some individuals manage to defy the odds, they often experience a sense of ambivalence, anxiety, or discomfort, as evidenced in the opening quote.

Extant research in the fields of education, sociology, and psychology point to the many challenges and obstacles faced by the upwardly mobile. In addition to reduced access to key opportunities (e.g., economic resources, higher education, and high-profile connections), individuals on the journey upward experience exposure to and changes in class-specific norms and values, which can disrupt personal relationships and leave them with a sense of straddling the boundary between two worlds (Roberts & Rosenwald 2001). Students from lower social class backgrounds, for instance, report experiencing estrangement and alienation in the middle-class environment of higher education (Ostrove 2003). This sentiment is echoed in narratives of upwardly mobile adults (e.g., Muzzatti & Samarco 2006). While organizational scholars’ interest in the manifestations and effects of social class in the workplace has risen in recent years, the topic of upward mobility within organization studies remains largely understudied (see Gray et al. 2018; Kish-Gephart & Campbell 2015; Martin & Côté 2018 for exceptions).

To add to organizational researchers’ understanding of upward mobility, we develop a process model aimed at understanding how upwardly mobile individuals from lower social class origins navigate conflicting social class identities in a workplace environment dominated by middle class norms (Stephens et al. 2012). In particular, we define social class as relative social rankings of individuals based on differences in their economic (i.e. wealth), social (i.e. connections), and cultural capital (i.e. tastes/practices) developed through socialization within a particular class context (Bourdieu 1984); and argue that, while anyone can experience identity conflict, upwardly mobile individuals (or those who have achieved a higher social class than their childhood class of origin) are particularly likely to experience identity conflicts, which can then trigger a discrete emotional response and concomitant maintenance and resistance “class work” (Gray & Kish-Gephart 2013).

The upwardly mobile are in a unique position to experience identity conflict for two main reasons. First, Curtis (2015) demonstrated that both social class origins and current social class influence where people perceive themselves in the social class hierarchy. While everyone possesses multiple identities (e.g., mother, wife, sister, professor, marathon runner), rarely are two identities in direct contrast with one another as in the case of the upwardly mobile. For them, childhood social class identity is inherently associated with differing values, norms, and roles than their current social class identity that is derived from a middle or upper social class standing (Stephens et al. 2012). Thus, managing class identities among the upwardly mobile may be problematic as competing motivations and needs between their social class background and current class identities may prevent the formation of a coherent self-narrative and/or affiliation with social categories (Radmacher & Azmitia 2013). Indeed, Bourdieu (2000, p. 16) argued that dramatic changes via upward mobility create a “cleft habitus” wherein individuals experience their sense of self as “torn by contradiction and internal division.” He viewed such individuals as possessing a sense of self-ambivalence, “doomed to a kind of double perception of self, to successive allegiances and multiple identities” (Bourdieu 1999, p. 511).

Second, for the upwardly mobile from the lower social class, their childhood social class identity is subject to stigmatization (Durante et al. 2017) and class-based microaggressions (Gray et al. 2018), especially given the predominance of middle class norms and beliefs that “everyone is middle class” in the workplace (Skeggs 2004). An example of class-based microagressions, or “everyday verbal, nonverbal, and environmental slights, snubs, or insults, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostility, derogatory, or negative messages to target persons based solely on their marginalized group membership” (Sue 2010, p. 3), was illustrated in the opening quote of this extended abstract. Moreover, work by Gray and colleagues (2018) showed that upwardly mobile students from lower social class origins encountered class-based microaggressions that “create[d] identity threats with…destabilizing consequences for their identity development.”

In this paper, we argue that upwardly mobile individuals are likely to experience identity conflict during “class-triggering events,” or situations that make the conflicting norms, values, or roles between one’s childhood social class identity and current social class identity salient. Such events may include class-based microagressions; interactions with a coworker, family member or friend; or cues in one’s physical environment that call into question how one makes sense of where they come from and where they are now. We argue that these types of events have the potential to interfere with identity transitions and lead to negative self-conscious emotions for individuals from the lower class (Gray et al. 2018; Warnock & Hurst 2016).

Despite widespread assumptions that identification has a strong affective component (Ashforth et al. 2008), relatively little identity research has considered the role of discrete emotions in the management of stigmatized identities. Research on identification suggests that whether the affect associated with a particular identity is negative or positive is situationally contingent, with both cognition and affect reinforcing identification (Ashforth et al. 2008). At a broad level, negative emotions such as shame or guilt are elicited in response to identity-goal incongruence (Tracy et al. 2007). We argue that upwardly mobile individuals are likely to appraise class-triggering events on how they are accomplishing navigation of their new social class context or how they are comfortably maintaining their childhood social class identity. Depending on variations in these appraisals, we propose several discrete emotions may be triggered.

Finally, drawing on “identity work” (Sveningsson & Alvesson 2003) and “class work” (Gray & Kish-Gephart 2013) literatures, we consider the intra- and interpersonal ways in which upwardly mobile individuals attempt to reconcile their identity conflict and concomitant emotions. Identity work involves “forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening, or revising the constructions” that provide a coherent sense of self and a notion of distinctiveness; and is induced by specific events, transitions, or constant strains” (Sveningsson & Alvesson 2003, p. 1165). Conceptualized as a type of identity work with institutional-level implications, Gray and Kish-Gephart (2013, p. 671) defined “class work” as the “interpretative processes and interaction rituals that organizational members individually and collectively take to manage cross-class encounters.” Although class work was originally theorized as a response to anxiety-provoking and immediate cross-class interactions, the authors called for additional research to consider how class work “works” for people in class-discrepant positions (i.e., those who have experienced upward or downward mobility) who must deal with class inconsistencies on a more regular basis.

In the full paper, we draw on the literature on class work and identity work to theorize the unique types of class work employed by the upwardly mobile in response to class-triggering events and concomitant emotions. For example, upwardly mobile individuals who experience envy and its associated action tendency (to obtain the object of desire; Grandey 2008) may engage in associational embracement (Kaufman 2003), or intentionally associating with middle or upper social class individuals in an effort to obtain the desired resources (e.g., tastes, hobbies, language, etc.) of that social class. Shame—associated with concealing aspects of oneself or escaping the situation (Tracy et al. 2007)—may elicit class work such as identicide (Ashforth et al. 2008), or figuratively forgetting one’s childhood social class identity by making the conscious choice to move away from family, for example (Pratt & Foreman 2000). In contrast, class triggering events may elicit a form of resistant pride, wherein upwardly mobile individuals resist the negative connotations placed on their childhood social class identity and choose to “withdrawal from the game” (i.e., distance themselves from contexts dominated by middle- and upper-class ideology; Gray & Kish-Gephart 2013) or strategically build peer support networks of similar others to help resist the stereotypes (Gray et al. 2018).

To the extent that the best-case scenario for the upwardly mobile is to reduce identity conflict by eventually forming and maintaining a coherent self-narrative, we propose a long-term feedback loop whereby success or failure influences future identity conflicts and the resulting affective responses.

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