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The Subjective Experience of Social Class and Upward Mobility Among African American Men in Graduate School

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Abstract

We used Consensual Qualitative Research Methodology to analyze responses from 14 African American men (Mdn_{Age} = 25 years-old) in graduate school at a predominantly-White university in the Midwestern region of the United Sates regarding how they acquired awareness of their social-class status; how social class was related to their sense of masculinity; how social class was related to race and skin tone; and the role that education and a romantic partner could play in upward mobility. School peers were the main source for their early awareness of social class. Many believed that discrimination maintains social class stratification that disadvantages racial minorities and that one's race will always trump any personal characteristics—including having light-complected skin and an advanced degree. Finally many overcame several obstacles during their educational career, and most believed that a romantic relationship with a woman from a privileged background could facilitate upward mobility. Psychological scientists and practitioners are encouraged to consider the role that social class plays when examining men's well-being.

Keywords

classism; colorism; racism; socioeconomic status; gender roles

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During the recent recession, initial job losses within the United States (U.S.) were greatest within male-dominated sectors (e.g., manufacturing and construction; Sahin, Song, &

Hobijn, 2010). Consequently, much attention was given to the adverse effect that the poor economy—dubbed the "Man-cession"—was having on men's self-esteem given that many men associate being successful with "being a man" (Dunlop & Mletzko, 2011; Singh, 2010). Yet, such gross generalizations overlooked the fact that not all men may believe that their sense of masculinity was tied to their social class, especially given sociohistorical factors that have disadvantaged racial minority groups (Pais, 2011).

In the United States (U.S.), there is a prevailing myth that all men—regardless of their racial background—have equal opportunity for upward mobility (Jost, Banaji, & Nosek, 2004). *Social class* typically refers to a system of economic stratification that reflects one's education, occupation, and income (Grusky, 2001). *Upward mobility* is defined as the ability to increase one's social-class status (McGuire, 1950). In line with this myth, any man should be able to facilitate upward mobility by earning a higher educational-degree, obtaining a socially-prestigious occupation, and bringing home a higher income compared to a man who does not "work hard enough." Furthermore, by working hard, men should eventually be able to transfer the benefits of their social-class status to their family members, thus fulfilling their roles as the "bread winners" and being seen as successful men (Liu, 2002).

This myth, however, discounts the role that one's racial background may play in social class. For instance, a potential avenue for upward mobility is via educational attainment as there is a positive correlation between the level of diploma earned (e.g., high school, associates, and masters) and one's level of income and social-class status (Ensminger & Fothergill, 2003). Yet, this relationship is stronger for White (non-Latino)[1] men compared to African American men (Johnson & Salmon, 2009). Furthermore, African American men continually lag behind White and Asian American men in earning college degrees (Planty et al., 2009, p. 57) and median income (DeNavas-Walt, Proctor, & Smith, 2009, p. 7).

This disparity has been attributed to many social barriers. First, African American men encounter greater discrimination than both men from other racial groups and African American women (McBrier & Wilson, 2004; Roderick, 2003). Second, many African American families are larger than White families, but they have fewer resources during economic distress, which often impedes upward mobility or causes "downward mobility" (Heflin & Pattillo, 2006). Third, African American men often have to negotiate between being academically successful and being perceived by other African Americans as "not Black enough" (Goff, Martin, & Thomas, 2007; Cole & Omari, 2003). Consequently, the myth of "just work hard enough" overlooks many barriers that certain men encounter due to discrimination and an unequal distribution of resources, which impedes their opportunity for upward mobility (Hochschild, 2003; Lott, 2002).

Given that African American men are less likely to pursue a college degree (Cohen & Nee, 2000; Hefner 2004), African American men in graduate school may offer a unique account of social class and their opportunity for upward mobility. Thus, we interviewed a group of African American graduate students to understand their subjective experience of social class. Specifically, we were interested in learning the role that social class played in their sense of masculinity; how race and skin tone were related to social class; and the role that education and a partner played in upward mobility. Before reporting our results, we briefly review the peer-reviewed literature on social class and upward mobility.

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[1]Henceforth "White" for simplicity.

Social Class Worldview Model

Within many economic and sociological paradigms, people are classified or categorized into social-class groups such as lower-, middle-, and upper-class (Beeghley, 2008; Grusky, 2001). Thereafter, it is largely assumed that people within a specific group see their economic and social-class world similarly. Although this view is important and meaningful, such a macro-level approach limits how psychologists understand the individual-level experiences (i.e., within group variation) of social class and classism.

To address this limit, a new model was proposed that takes into account the subjective perception of differences within and between social-class groups known as the Social Class Worldview Model (SCWM; Liu 2002; Liu, Ali, Soleck, Hopps, Dunston, & Pickett, 2004; Liu, Stinson, Hernandez, Shepard, & Haag, 2009). SCWM posits that people live within different economic cultures that place certain demands and expectations on them, which affects their opportunities for accessing resources and for upward mobility. Instead of one "middle-class" culture, there are multiple middle-class cultures that place distinct emphases on how people may maintain their middle-class standing. Objectively, people in different geographical locations may have the same income, educational level, and occupation; however, the expectations and demands of someone living in Los Angeles will likely vary from someone living in Iowa City. Consequently, the economic factors specific to the region people live in influences their worldviews.

Additionally, a person's worldview is influenced by interpersonal relationships and expectations. Unique messages about social class come from and are based on a variety of social groups including a person's family of origin, racial/ethnic community, and same-sex peers. Liu (2002) suggested that people adopt or internalize these messages (e.g., "If you work hard enough, then you will succeed."), which influence how they feel about themselves and others. Furthermore, people vary in their awareness of the degree to which these messages impact their lives—known as the individual's social-class consciousness (Liu, in press; Liu & Hernandez, 2010).

Once adopted, social-class worldviews help people navigate around their environment so that they are in accord with others of a similarly perceived social-class. The person's worldview influences his or her social-class behaviors (e.g., manners, etiquette, language accents), lifestyle considerations (e.g., how one spends time), and relationship to material objects. To maintain one's social class, people may express various forms of prejudice such as upward classism (e.g., perceiving that someone is in a higher social class position and labeling him or her an "elitist" or a "snob"), downward classism (e.g., perceiving that someone is in a lower social class position and labeling him or her as "lazy"), lateral classism (e.g., perceiving that someone is in a similar social class position and reminding him or her to "keep up with the Joneses"), and internalized classism (e.g., feelings of anxiety, depression, and frustration resulting from not being able to maintain one's social class position; Lapour & Heppner, 2009; Liu et al., 2009).

Overall, SCWM emphasizes a subjective approach to understanding social class and classism versus focusing exclusively on macro-level and objective indices (e.g., income, education, and occupation). This model encourages psychologists to explore how a person's social-class worldview developed and how this worldview is related to behaviors, attitudes, values, and cognitions around relationships and classism (Liu et al., 2004). By understanding people's lived experience of social class, it is proposed that psychologists can better connect to the individual (Liu, 2001).

Social Class Status and Masculinity

Several theoretical models suggest that the need to be successful and a provider for others are important characteristics associated with traditional and pervasive views of masculinity (e.g., David & Brannon, 1976; O'Neil, 2008). Although the endorsement of such roles may vary between groups of men, studies have found that this view on masculinity is generally true cross-culturally and in numerous countries (Lease et al., 2010; Ojeda, Rosales, & Good, 2008). Consequently, if a man has internalized traditional messages regarding masculinity, then his psychological well-being may hinge on his ability to fulfill those roles (Glass & Owen, 2010; Rochlen, McKelley, Suizzo, & Scaringi, 2008). In fact, the more a man is concerned with success and work, the more psychological distress that he will experience relative to men less concerned (O'Neil, 2008, 2010). One reason given for this trend is that traditional messages regarding masculinity tie manhood to social-class status and financial success (Rosenfield, 1992).

Yet, how do different groups of men experience social class especially if there are systemic issues that prevent their ability to succeed? For instance, Faludi (1999) suggested that extrinsic factors (e.g., corporate downsizing and outsourcing) caused many working-class men in the U.S. to feel powerless and emasculated because they were often unable to find and sustain secure jobs. Furthermore, social commentators have suggested that the recent recession in the U.S.—during which African American men lost the most jobs—challenged men's sense of masculinity (e.g., Sum, Khatiwada, Beard, McLaughlin, & Palma, 2009; Salam, 2009). However, there is no known peer-reviewed report focused on men's subjective social-class worldview and how that worldview is related to their sense of masculinity.

Opportunities for Upward Mobility

A dominant message connected to traditional masculine norms is that a man should be able to succeed and improve himself by "pulling himself up by his bootstrap" or through his own effort (Connell, 2005). Yet, such messages ignore potential barriers faced by different groups of men in the U.S. In particular, racial and ethnic minorities seem to be disadvantaged as a group (Cawthorne, 2009). For instance, qualified African Americans are less likely to be hired for a job compared to qualified White applicants (Bertrand & Mullainathan, 2004; Stewart & Perlow, 2001). Furthermore, African Americans earn less money compared to their White counterparts engaged in the same occupation (Huffman, 2004). Consequently, the race of a person seems to be related to opportunities for upward mobility, which likely affects their social-class worldview.

However, the degree to which a person physically appears to be from or to exhibit stereotypical traits of a particular racial group may be a bigger factor than race alone (e.g., Livingston & Pearce, 2009; Peterson-Lewis & Bratton, 2004). Studies have shown that people's assessment of others is affected by "racial complexion" or how light-complected or dark-complected they perceive a person to be (e.g., Caruso, Mead, & Balcetis, 2009; Maddox & Gray, 2002). For instance, lighter-complected job applicants are more likely to be hired than darker-complected job applicants (Harrison & Thomas, 2009; Wade, Romano, & Blue, 2004). Once employed, skin tone can further affect the wages one receives (Goldsmith, Hamilton, & Darity, 2007). Consequently, a person's complexion can affect opportunities for upward mobility (Hochschild & Weaver, 2007).

Although men cannot control their heredity, two factors that men have some control over are earning an education and choosing a romantic partner—both of which have been suggested to influence upward mobility. First, education is associated with the type of occupations people have and their level of income (Lleras, 2008; Van de Werfhorst, 2002). Thus, African American men who earn an advanced degree should have a greater opportunity for

upward mobility compared to men with less education. Second, men who date or marry partners who have greater social or financial privilege than they do may have greater access to resources and opportunities compared to men with partners who have less privileges (Blackwell & Lichter, 2000; Qian & Lichter, 2001). Thus, an African American man who dates or marries a woman from a socially-advantaged class should have greater opportunity for upward mobility than if he partners with a person from a lower class-status. Yet, what role do African American men believe that education and a partner can play in their upward mobility?

Purpose of the Study

There are specific messages men receive regarding social class and upward mobility that can affect their sense of masculinity. Yet, personal characteristics such as race and skin tone may affect a man's opportunities to improve his social class status and consequently his social-class worldview. Two somewhat controllable factors that may open up opportunities for him are his level of education and the status of a romantic partner. Thus, we sought to directly ask a group of African American graduate students about their experience with social class issues. In particular, we were interested in understanding how they became aware of their own social-class status and how they felt it was related to their feelings of masculinity. Furthermore, we were interested in hearing how they felt social class and their opportunity for upward mobility were related to race, skin tone, education, and romantic partners.

Method

Participants

We used a convenience sample of 14 men who self-identified as African American or Black (Mdn_{Age} = 25; Range = 22–37) and who were graduate students at The University of Iowa —a predominately-White university. The decision to use this convenience sample was based on recommendations that homogenous groups (e.g., graduate students from the same university) are more effective in reaching saturation or fully describing a specific concept or construct versus qualitative results from heterogeneous groups (e.g., mixing students, homemakers, businessmen, and retirees; Ponterotto, 2005). Furthermore, we limited the sample size given previous recommendations of using 8–15 participants for the qualitative analysis we employed (Hill, Knox, Thompson, Williams, Hess, & Ladany, 2005; Hill, Thompson, & Williams, 1997).

The participants came from five different academic areas: Seven were in the School of Law, three were in the College of Engineering, two were in the African American World Studies Program, one was in the Department of Health & Sport Studies, and one was in the Student Development in Postsecondary Education Program. The men were also at various stages in graduate school: Seven were in their first-year, four were in their second-year, two were in their third-year, and one was in his fifth-year. The participants self-identified as being in the following social classes while growing up: Six said "lower class"; seven said "middle class"; and one said "upper class." When asked about marital status, half of the participants reported being single, while one was in a monogamous, romantic relationship with a woman; one was engaged to a woman; three were married to women; and two were separated from their wives.

Procedures

After reviewing the racial identity, masculinity, and social class literature, the team developed a semi-structured interview protocol. A pilot interview was conducted with an African American first-year graduate-student in the Actuarial Science Program. The pilot

interview data and participant were not used in further analyses. Based on his feedback, some of the protocol questions were revised. During the actual data collection, investigators probed for additional information when necessary.

The initial solicitation of participants was done through the university's Black Graduate and Professional Students Association via emails and flyers. The solicitation detailed the study, inclusion criteria, and the researchers' contact information. Solicited participants were asked to forward the announcement to other potential participants.

Although 15 men responded to the solicitation, one was excluded from this analysis because he was born and raised in an African country and thus was exposed to a different cultural experience than the other 14 who were raised in the U.S. (Constantine, Anderson, Berkel, Caldwell, & Utsey, 2005). Six key questions related to their personal experiences and perceptions were used for this analysis: (a) How did you learn about what social class you are in? (b) How does your social class affect your sense of masculinity? (c) What effect does race have on social class? (d) What effect does skin tone have on social class? (e) Does education influence your upward mobility? (f) Does the person you date influence your upward mobility? Interviews were audio-taped and each took approximately one hour. All interviews were transcribed verbatim by the interviewers for analysis.

Data-Analysis Procedure

We used Consensual Qualitative Research (CQR) methodology for this study because of its ability to evoke detailed data pertaining to people's phenomenological or subjective experiences (Hill, et al., 1997, 2005). The team of interviewers and primary raters consisted of two African American female doctoral students in counseling psychology and one African American female undergraduate student in psychology. An Asian American, male faculty member in counseling psychology served as the internal auditor. Two of the investigators had previously implemented CQR: They trained the other team members in the application of the method. As recommended by Hill et al. (2005), we included an external auditor who was not involved in the study to review the work and provide feedback on the analysis process: She was a Pakistani American female doctoral student in counseling psychology.

Prior to conducting the interviews—and consistent with Hill et al.'s (1997) recommendations —the investigators discussed their preconceived expectations and biases regarding the experiences of African American men with social class. The dominant preconceptions were that the men would have experienced multiple instances of discrimination that would be attributed to their race, and that discrimination affected their ability to access resources needed for upward mobility. Once discussed, the team members held one another accountable for these biases as the data-analysis process unfolded.

To abstract the core ideas for this study, the questions served as the key domains or subject-areas used to group the data—a technique that is acceptable for this methodology (Hill et al., 2005, p. 200). The interviewers independently read the transcripts and developed a "beginning list" of ideas for each domain. Each list was presented to the team. After some deliberation, the team developed a list of core ideas and exemplars that captured "the participant's perspective and explicit meaning" (Hill et al., 2005, p. 200): The external auditor reviewed this list. Once approved, the interviewers reread the transcripts. During the second reading, the ideas that had been consensually chosen were focused on to verify their accuracy and quality. The research team met again to reach consensus on a final list of core ideas, which was reviewed by the external auditor.

The team used the consensually-derived list to characterize the frequency of occurrence in the transcripts during the cross-analysis phase of CQR. All participant remarks were coded into the established core-ideas. The end result was a single document that listed each domain, the core ideas that characterized the domains, and the number of participants who endorsed the core ideas. The team reviewed the document before sending it to the external auditor. The external auditor read through the collated data and reviewed the wording and accuracy of the categorization of ideas. Any discrepancies were presented to the research team, who revised the wording and categorization of data for the core ideas.

Results

Table 1 presents the core ideas generated for each domain. An excerpt is provided to illustrate the types of responses coded for each core idea. As per Hill et al.'s (2005) suggestion, the team used frequency labels to categorize the occurrence of the themes in the transcripts: General (13–14 participants), Typical (7–12 participants), and Variant (≤ 6 participants). In both the table and text below, the excerpts have not been corrected for grammar except as needed for comprehension (noted by enclosing in brackets).

Early Awareness of One's Social Class through Social Comparison

Participants were asked how they learned about what social class they were in: School was the primary source for everyone. Specifically, they gauged their social class status by comparing themselves with their peers (e.g., clothing and having a car). For instance, one participant described his experience going to high school with children from families that were wealthier than his family:

> I went to a high school that was pretty affluent and so you were always conscious about what clothes you were wearing, if you had the newest stuff, what kind of car you drove….My mother was divorced with three kids who couldn't afford to buy us everything. And, so you were always conscious of those people who lived in big houses, the kids that had a car to drive to school, and the kids who went out and always had the most nicest stuff. So, that was a sensitive issue for me going to high school…How much money we had in comparison to my peers was a struggle I wasn't comfortable with at the time.

Participants also talked about comparing themselves to their neighbors, people at church, and images that they saw on television. Finally, a few men recalled that family hardships made them aware of their social class:

> Sometimes we would have to heat the crib with…with the oven and go down to the payphone, you know, when your phone got cut off. So, you know in that way, I [knew] I was poor.

A Man's Social Class is a Measure of His Masculinity

Participants were asked how social class affected their sense of masculinity. Most believed that the inability to provide for others—especially for one's family—was the "worst" experience a man could have:

> I have seen it in my community and in my close friends that they struggle to keep their children with clothes and food…and it hurts and it breaks down their masculinity because in society the man is suppose to be this provider—this ultimate being—especially being Black. Those things you have to deal with and when you can't provide for your family that's when you start to ask, "Am I really a man? How can I handle this?" and that's when a lot of men leave their family.

The majority also felt that financial wealth and income were the most important characteristics of being a man:

> Even in the upper class that I have interacted with, it was very much about stuff and conquering. You're a man the more stuff that you own and the faster you climb the money ladder no matter how you get there. So, I think it definitely affects how I look at my manhood and how I go about achieving that.

Some believed that earning money was a source of empowerment and self-esteem for African American men, while others suggested that social class and masculinity were not linked. Finally, some offered their view that media images (e.g., Hip-Hop music videos) play a role in the link that exists between social class and masculinity within African American communities.

Racism Hinders Upward Mobility

Participants were asked how race affected social class. The prevailing idea was that racism within the U.S. maintained the current social class structure including the lack of available resources, the inability to get jobs, and the inequitable enforcement of rules and laws. Some suggested that race always trumped one's social class:

> No matter how much money I'm making and no matter how I operate as a professional, [being a] Black male will always be this internal and external thing. I can never forget the fact that I will be seen as a Black male first and [then] I'll be seen as a father, a husband, a graduate student, and hopefully a professor…those will always be second and I realize that.

Finally, some believed that African American men who are poor experienced "double the discrimination."

Skin Tone Can Hinder Upward Mobility

Participants were asked how social class and skin tone were related to each other. Many believed that one's skin tone affected opportunities for upward mobility. Specifically, it affected the ability to access resources (e.g., beneficial mentorship and guidance counseling), opportunities (e.g., internships and fellowships), and certain jobs (e.g., white-collar vs. blue-collar). As one participant put it, "My skin tone will determine the barriers and the opportunities that I may have to move through in a school system or an employment system." Others believed that skin tone had little or no effect on upward mobility because a person's race will ultimately trump skin tone: "Once you're Black, you're Black." Finally, a few believed that it was personal characteristics and not skin tone that influenced social class and upward mobility.

Uncertainty about the Role of Education in Upward Mobility

Participants were asked about the role that education plays in upward mobility. The men reported hearing conflicting messages regarding how education contributed to upward mobility. Many recounted how education was seen as neither important nor as the means for upward mobility by their peers. For instance, one man stated, "A lot of my friends were in that 'lower class' thing…and it was more if you're athletic or if you're out there hustling whether it be legal—but mostly illegal—not the grades that you got."

Even though education was important to these men, there were many barriers that they encountered in working towards their degrees including expectations that they would fail and intrinsic pressure to succeed:

> I am proud to be a Black man and I am proud to have gotten where I am, but I'm real conscious of the fact that people are expecting less of me. There are days where I go at 150%, and there are days where I am tired and I can't go that hard; I can have great class presentations and I can have a crappy presentation sometimes. When I am on a bad days or when I have a bad presentation—those stay with me longer than the good ones because of the fact that there are very few of us [in graduate school] and thus it's a burden that we've got to project…we got to come tight with our game. And, not all the time I'm feeling that.

However, some stated that low expectations from others fueled their desire to do even better to "prove people wrong."

Finally, several pointed out that the unequal distribution of primary- and secondary-educational resources put African Americans at a disadvantage that in turn undermined self-efficacy and upward mobility:

> [Growing up] there was a strong urge to integrate Blacks into White schools: I'm not sure if it was looked upon as giving a better opportunity to get educated…But after they bussed us in [to the White schools], I noticed that most of my Black peers…that our grades weren't as good as most of the White counterparts. So, I think we grew up in the mindset "Whites are smarter." But in all actuality there were a number of things that were going on. Of course my parents couldn't explain it to me and they didn't know what the significant difference was at that time, so of course you grew up thinking, "Man they're better and you're less."

Being with a Socially-Privileged Partner is an Avenue for Upward Mobility

In regards to the role that a partner could play in upward mobility, most of the responses focused on interracial and interclass relationships. Specifically, dating a White woman was seen as opening opportunities and gaining acceptance for African American men:

> You'll probably be granted more in resources if your spouse is White. Were a couple an African American woman and man, it is a lot more harder to get those resources; [they] have to work harder for it. So, I think socially it would be easier, though you would have to get over how society is so [discriminatory about] interracial mixing: It is the hard thing to get through. But I think ultimately that they would socialize better in America than Black [couples].

Another man simply stated: "For Black men, if you want to get upwardly mobile, you need to have a White woman on your arm."

In addition, dating a woman with more financial wealth—regardless of her race—was seen as a means to upward mobility:

> Your mate's background has a heavy effect on how far you'll go…I've definitely heard [Black men] talking about how their girlfriends or their wives were the daughters of "so and so." So, now they're running their father-in-law's company and you learn [how dating a wealthier woman] has an effect on you.

Finally, a few men believed that one's spouse or partner had no influence on upward mobility.

Discussion

The aim of this study was to understand how a group of African American men in graduate school viewed social class in relation to their masculinity and how they believed different factors affected their opportunity for upward mobility. As a group, the fact that these men

are in graduate school and that most of them are earning a doctorate would be seen as successful in and of itself. The fact that they are African American makes their success even more significant given the low percentage of African American men pursuing post-bachelorette degrees (Planty et al., 2009). Yet, these men have encountered and continue to encounter many barriers in their upward mobility, which is seen as key to their sense of masculinity.

Several important themes arose from this exploratory study. First, the men gained awareness about their social class standing via social comparison—chiefly in relation to their childhood peers. Whereas most experienced feelings of inferiority and shame because many of their peers displayed material possessions associated with wealth that they did not have (e.g., having specific clothes and toys), a few realized that they had more material possessions than their friends. Unfortunately, some of the men grew up with constant uncertainty about basic needs being met, which reminded them of their social-class position.

The idea that school is the primary source of gaining awareness of one's social class reflects the findings from studies on school children showing that they have an early understanding of class stratification and are able to classify people based on their appearance (Short, 1991; Tudor, 1971). Such early awareness via social comparison likely influences one's general perception and attitude regarding social class, which may affect how one behaves (e.g., intentionally projecting that one belongs to a specific social class via material possessions). The degree to which this awareness affects a child's subsequent attitudes and behaviors can be influenced by several factors including the degree to which they identify with their community and the moral values instilled by significant caregivers (Chavous, Rivas-Drake, Smalls, Griffin, & Cogburn, 2008). Nevertheless, social comparison in school seems to play a significant role in how people assess their social class standing.

Second, these men believed that financial success was the single best indicator of one's degree of masculinity. There was a perceived constant pressure—both intrinsically and extrinsically—to be able to provide for oneself and one's family. For some, financial wealth made them feel like "a real man." Thus, being the "breadwinner" was an important, if not critical, role for these men.

The idea that wealth and being a provider are dominant in these men's perception of masculinity is congruent with both theoretical models and empirical research on masculine norms (Connell, 2005; O'Neil, 2008). Furthermore, qualitative studies examining how African American men construct masculinity have found that many equate manhood with taking responsibility and being a provider (Hammond & Mattis, 2005; Johnson, 2010). Granted, not all groups of men believe that their sense of masculinity is singularly tied to their economic stature (Liu et al., 2009). Regardless, the majority of these men believed that it was the biggest defining characteristic of masculinity.

Third, systemic discrimination was perceived to perpetuate poverty and to impede upward mobility for African American men. The general belief was that these factors were out of their control and maintained the status quo. Indeed, the feeling for some was, "Once you are Black, you are Black."

The belief that discrimination continues to adversely affect African Americans is a theme seen in several areas of research and public debate (e.g., Cawthorne, 2009; Huffman, 2004). Such discrimination has also been implicated in recent calls for the federal government to address health disparities (Adler & Rehkopf, 2008). Although some argue over the constitutionality of programs such as Affirmative Action, there is a need to address the disproportionate racial distribution in educational and occupational settings, which

undermine people's opportunity for upward mobility (DeNavas-Walt et al., 2009; Planty et al., 2009).

Fourth, many of the men believed that African Americans with lighter complexions had a better chance at upward mobility than those with darker complexions. This included the ability to be evaluated more favorably by professors (especially in grades), which in turn impacted the ability to obtain more desirable jobs. Yet again, the fact that one was African American would ultimately adversely affect even light-complected African Americans.

The idea that people's appearances affect how others perceive them is in line with studies looking at how skin tone affects people's access to opportunities and upward mobility (Goldsmith et al., 2007; Wade et al., 2004). Specifically, people treat in-group members and out-group members differently (Riek, Mania, & Gaertner, 2006). If a light-complected person is seen as being "more White" or "less Black," then this may positively affect the opportunities they have to accessing resources that would foster upward mobility (Goff, Martin, & Thomas, 2007; Peterson-Lewis & Bratton, 2004).

Fifth, although education was seen as a means for upward mobility, there were many barriers to overcome in earning a college degree. Many of the men attended schools that were poorly funded or lacked the resources to provide for an adequate education—a realization some did not have until they transferred to a predominately-White school. Furthermore, many of their peers saw athletics or music versus education as the means for upward mobility. Yet, even as they tried to earn a graduate degree, many felt that they had professors and classmates who expected less of them or expected that they would fail out of graduate school. Whenever they performed poorly, some of the men felt that they were judged more harshly than when White peers performed poorly.

These reports on the minimization of education by peers and the low expectations of their academic performance echo other reports of these problems (Blustein et al., 2010; Davis, 2006). This problem of "crabs-in-a-barrel"—where people in a similarly low social-class-situation actively work against people's success—has been documented (Newman, 1999) and serves as the premise of upward classism (Liu, in press). This upward classism is no small problem since expectations of failure have been shown to predict lower grades among racial-minority men (Steele, 1997). Furthermore, the personal experiences of having unequal resources and being alienated by peers for deviating from the norm for their social groups illustrate quantitative reports on this problem (APA Task Force, 2007; Moss-Racusin, Phelan, & Rudman, 2010). Consequently, many of these men have overcome numerous external forces to earn an advanced degree that will likely facilitate their upward mobility (Van de Werfhorst, 2002).

Finally, women were seen as a possible means to a better life. Specifically, dating White women could increase acceptance by the dominant culture, which would open up many opportunities. Yet, even dating an African American woman who was wealthier than the participant was seen as at least granting opportunities for upward mobility, though dating a wealthy White woman was the ultimate relationship for some.

This idea regarding women is one that is often not reported or found in other studies. In fact, most studies have found that women worry more about a partner's status than men do (e.g., Okami & Shackelford, 2001; Smock & Manning, 1997); however, most of those studies have used quantitative instruments and not interviews. Furthermore, we do not know how the men made sense of the contradiction between a provider-role being an important masculine trait, yet seeing women as a potential way for upward mobility.

Limitations

This study was exploratory in nature, and any conclusions taken from it should be considered in light of some limitations. As is characteristic of most quantitative and qualitative research (Hill et al., 1997), we used a convenience sample in our study. African American men in graduate school represent a small proportion of the African American community and this small sample was derived from a predominately-White institution. Thus, the results may not generalize to African American men with less education nor to graduate students at Historically Black Colleges and Universities.

Implications

Despite the limitations, some important themes arose from this analysis that warrant further attention in research and clinical practice. In terms of research, future studies can focus on the role that women play in men's upward mobility and how partners negotiate wealth and resources when it is the woman in the provider role. Furthermore, the experiences of African American men who date White women versus African American women can be compared, including how psychological well-being and relationship satisfaction change for the men after marriage. Finally, given that families can affect relationship quality (Hohmann-Marriott & Amato, 2008), are parents' reactions to their children's partners mediated or moderated depending on varying degrees of social class and skin tone?

In terms of clinical implications, given that many factors can influence the therapeutic relationship (e.g., race and sexual orientation; Chang & Berk 2009; Mohr, Weiner, Chopp, & Wong, 2009; Townes, Chavez-Korell, & Cunningham, 2009), psychologists should remain mindful of the possible influence that social-class statuses can have within the therapeutic relationship (Liu, Pickett, & Ivey, 2007), how issues of acculturation may interact with notions of masculinity (Neblett, Hammond, Seaton, & Townsend, 2010; Obasi & Leong, 2009), and how best to frame therapeutic interventions (McKelley & Rochlen, 2010; Steinfeldt, Steinfeldt, England, & Speight, 2009; Wester, Arndt, Sedivy, & Arndt, 2010). For instance, is advice giving more effective for low income versus high-income clients (Liu et al., 2004)? May atypical methods in counseling be more effective in tapping men's feelings regarding the impact of the economy on their self-esteem (e.g., writing) versus talk therapy (Owen, Wong, & Rodolfa, 2010; Wong & Rochlen, 2009)? Moreover, given the recent recession, issues related to social class may be salient for men presenting in therapy with depression and anxiety, especially if traditional notions of masculinity are central to their identity (Chuick et al., 2009; Dunlop & Metlzko, 2011). Even in "good" economic times, it may be appropriate to explore social class and classism concerns with male clients given how central they are to many men's sense of self (Liu, 2002).

Indeed, the recent "Man-cession" officially lasted from December 2007 until June 2009, yet its aftereffects continue to be felt (Hurd & Rohweder, 2010). Unemployment rates and housing problems continue to disproportionately affect those without education and racial/ ethnic minority men (Saporito, 2011). Thus, psychologists should regularly consider how one's social class status may affect their livelihood (APA Task Force, 2007). In this paper, we have illustrated how a unique group of underrepresented men believed social class affected their self-perception and the barriers that they have encountered in pursuit of improving their class standing. The role that their skin tone, education, and romantic relationships will ultimately play in their successes has yet to be determined. Nevertheless, the struggles that these well-educated men have encountered in their pursuit of upward mobility undermines the colorblind myths that suggest anyone can improve their situation so long as they work hard enough.

Acknowledgments

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Table 1
Domains, Categories, Frequencies, and Illustrative Excerpts

Domain/Category	Illustrative Excerpt	Frequency
1. Early awareness of one's social class through social comparison		
a) From school experiences	"I was bussed to a White school and the kids had the best of everything. Their parents are dropping them off at school; they were bringing their lunch while we were with the free lunch program. That was the difference that let me know what class I was in."	General
b) From community experiences	"My interaction with my church, family, and friends who were Black."	Typical
c) From the media	"When you see television and you see what middle class in America is really like, I mean that wasn't my family."	Typical
d) Family's difficulty with basic needs	"It was obvious what social class we were in because you had to worry about things that other people didn't have to worry about, like the phone getting cut off or the lights."	Variant
2. A man's social class is a measure of his masculinity		
a) It affects one's sense of being a provider	"I want to be financially stable so that I can provide for my family."	Typical
b) It is the most important indicator of one's masculinity	"You may be as real as a real man can get and be as manly as manliness can be, but you're diminished in the eyes of others if you can't [financially] support yourself."	Typical
c) The media links it with masculinity	"Look at the media and it's attaching money with masculinity."	Variant
d) Earning wealth/income is a source of empowerment	"A lot of people feel empowered because they feel stronger when they are working hard and making money."	Variant
e) It is not related to one's masculinity	"I don't really feel like having money or being high in a social class affects my masculinity because I haven't had any money but I feel like even if I did I would still be just as masculine."	Variant
3. Racism hinders upward mobility		
a) Racism perpetuates class stratification	"There's racism that pushes Black people into a lower class…not being able to get jobs because you're Black and you are not allowed to get the resources White people may have. It works to force you down."	Typical
b) Regardless of one's social class, you are always seen as Black.	"I may have whatever more degrees than they do, and I may make more money than they do. But, I don't think that is a factor in their mind [because I'm Black]."	Variant
c) The poor experience even more oppression	"If you're Black and from a lower class, then it's like a double negative against you."	Variant
4. Your skin tone can hinder upward mobility		
a) It affects access to resources and opportunities	"Being light-complected—where you can pass for White—helps the jobs you're able to get. If you're very dark, then it depends on what type of job because some people aren't comfortable with Blacks in general, especially dark-complected Blacks."	Typical
b) Once you are Black, you are Black	"I think that once you're Black, you're always going to be judged as being Black."	Variant
c) It has no effect	"If you are a dark man, you can still excel. The thing that comes into play [regarding one's skin tone] is psychic. That's a bigger barrier than your skin tone."	Variant
5. There is uncertainty about the role of education in upward mobility		
a) Education is not seen as important	"We're not going to move up unless we get educated, but it's not a priority on most Black people's minds or at least not in New York…People want to do better and they want to be millionaires, but they don't want to put in the time with the books. They feel like if they are going to change social classes, they are going to do it by getting discovered as the big rap star."	Typical
b) People have low expectations of you	"I think [the system is] negative because people around you think, 'Most likely he's going to drop out,' or, 'He's going to fail out because he's not going to be able to keep up with the coursework.'"	Typical
c) Low expectations fuel desire to achieve more	"It makes me want to do better because I always think they are thinking less of me and I'm trying to break the mold or break their view point."	Variant
d) Getting an education opens up opportunities	"Mobility is more about what education level that people have reached."	Variant

Domain/Category	Illustrative Excerpt	Frequency
e) Unequal educational resources perpetuates class stratification	"I am out of Washington, D.C. I can now see just how rundown the public schools are there…in classrooms that were only supposed to fit 15–20 students have 35 students —some students have to sit on top of tables in the back or on window sills to learn. So, it's harder for you to learn, to get a good education in the city just because you don't have the resources to do it and I think the system is set up to keep the Black people down."	Variant
6. Being with a socially-privileged partner is an avenue for upward mobility		
a) Dating a White person opens up your opportunities	"The closer you are to 'Whiteness,' then you become more accepted to a degree…you get more opportunities because of that person."	Typical
b) Dating a person of higher social class opens up your opportunities	"If you date somebody that's already in an 'influential' position because they have money, you could be trusted into that level yourself a bit quicker."	Typical
c) They have no influence	"I think my upward mobility is going to be determined by the goals I set for myself… I don't think [my partner] is going to be a big factor."	Variant

Note. Excerpts have not been corrected for grammatical errors in speech except as noted by brackets.