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Abstract

Research portraying the lives of working class (White) men has generally paid much more attention to class and gender than to race. By failing to problematize Whiteness, this literature obscures the racial privileges that working class Whites can access even as they are marginalized along the lines of class. This study applies critical race theory to analyze the dynamic intersection between the racial and gender privilege available to working class White men from their position of social and economic marginality. It empirically builds on the ethnographic study of a small North American company in the construction industry. This study makes three main contributions. First, it argues that even as the position of working class White men in the current class order limits their life chances, they nevertheless access small but significant benefits based on race. Second, it contributes to current conversations on White privilege by showing how such privilege manifests itself differently depending on social class position. Third, it underscores the importance of intersectional analysis in understanding how different social identities interact to reproduce racism and capitalism.

Keywords: class, whiteness, critical race theory, masculinity, intersectionality, ethnography

Critical Race Theory and Working Class White Men:

Exploring Race Privilege and Lower Class Work-Life

Research portraying the lives of working class (White) men (Simpson, 2014; Slutskaya et al., 2016; Thiel, 2007; Willis, 1977) has generally paid much more attention to class and gender than to race, which has led to understandings of this group that under explore racial dynamics. When this literature has discussed race, it has largely been to argue that discriminatory behaviors of working class White men represent resistance to feelings of class subordination, through the deflection of class-based stigma onto those they perceive as below them (Thiel, 2007). By failing to problematize Whiteness, this literature neglects the racial privilege that working class Whites can access even as they are marginalized along the lines of class (Roediger, 2017).

The present study challenges colorblind renderings of working class men prevalent in the organization studies literature. Applying a critical race theory (CRT) framework, I explore the racial privilege available to working-class White men who nonetheless remain socially and economically marginalized. The study draws on extensive participant observation at "Midwest Installation," a small US-based company employing 15 to 20 full-time White male employees in semi-skilled construction jobs on a continuous basis and an equivalent number of predominantly Black male contingent workers for short periods. Theoretically, the study draws from North American race scholars (Bell, 2018; Du Bois, 1935, 2010), who have long contended that status-enhancing deflections afford Whites the psychological benefit of having people to look down upon and lower-class Whites the space to imagine having common cause with White elites (with whom they share little other than racial status). In this effort, I engage with CRT and critical white studies (CWS) more specifically. These traditions take the continued pervasiveness of

racism as a starting point of analysis, while remaining mindful of its complex interplay with other social constructs, including gender and class (Crenshaw, 1989, 1991; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). This analytical framework prompts scholars interested in class to carefully attend to issues of race and to develop analyses mindful of the material and psychological ways that Whites benefit from racism (Du Bois, 1935; Harris, 1993).

My analysis advances the literature on working class men by showing that, even as their life chances are limited by their position in the current class order, working class White men access small but significant material and psychological benefits by maintaining racial solidarity. It additionally contributes to current conversations on White privilege by showing how such privilege manifests itself differently depending on class and gender positions. Overall, the current study underscores the importance of intersectional analysis for understanding how different social identities interact in the reproduction of racism and capitalism (Du Bois, 1935, Ignatiev, 2009; Roediger, 2006, 2007).

Race and Gender in White Working Class Occupations

Research regarding working class men tends toward analysis that situates class over gender and both class and gender over race. This leads to a situation where research on class frequently ignores or downplays race as a salient social construct and, in so doing, fails to account for the historical and structural aspects of White privilege shaping the lived experiences of working men. In some cases, discussions of race are completely ignored while (presumptively) White narratives are foregrounded (Ashforth & Kreiner, 2014; Simpson et al., 2014; Tracy & Scott, 2006), while in others they are limited to cursory mentions in lists of social identities to be considered (Slutskaya et al., 2016), or are noted as suggestions for future research (Gray & Kish-Gephart, 2013; Livingstone & Scholtz, 2016). Even in studies interrogating male

privilege using intersectional frameworks, race seems conspicuously absent. For example, in a paper with "seeing privilege where it isn't" in the title (Coston & Kimmel, 2012, p. 97), the authors argue that gay men, men with disabilities, and working class men are largely excluded from male privilege. By not including substantive discussion on how race affects male privilege (alongside these other aspects of social identity), the research indirectly contributes to the normalization of White men's narratives.

Moreover, when race is discussed, it is generally to argue that working class White men embody racism and sexism to "'compensate for being underlings in the eyes of the managers that rule over them" (Coston & Kimmel, 2012, p. 108), or to deflect class-based stigma onto those below them in the social hierarchy (Thiel, 2007). Such accounts neglect to assess the role of race in securing white men's symbolic and material advantages over people of color (POC). Exceptions to this downplaying of race include Embrick and Henricks' (2013, 2015) studies which document how racial slurs and stereotypes contribute to the maintenance of inequality within the contemporary US workforce. Marxist labor historians have further argued that the racism embraced by working class White men undermines the possibility of interracial organization among working people (Du Bois, 1935, Roediger, 2006, 2017), and thus ultimately protects the continued power of capitalists.

Studying White Working Class Men through Critical Race Theory and Critical White Studies

Given the degree to which racial analysis is underdeveloped in discussions of contemporary working class White men, an opportunity exists to enrich this literature by incorporating analyses based in CRT and, more specifically, CWS. While sometimes criticized as focused too narrowly on issues of race, CRT's roots in Marxist scholarship (Yosso, 2005) and

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insistence on gender-conscious approaches to anti-racism (Crenshaw, 1989; 1991; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001) underscore the framework's capacity for integrating discussions of gender, class, and race. Moreover, by focusing on White peoples' complicity in racism, CWS is strongly informed by Marxist historiography (Du Bois, 1935; James, 1989) and feminist analyses of Whiteness (hooks, 1994; Macintosh, 1997; Morrison, 1992). Scholars who embrace CRT understand racism as a permanent and pervasive feature of North American society that manifests differently in different time periods and geographic locations (Bell, 2018; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). CRT researchers maintain that subject positionalities forged in the crucible of a variety of privileging and marginalizing identity markers require an adequate understanding of people's experiences with "isms" and the use of concepts like intersectionality (Collins & Blige, 2016; Crenshaw, 1989, 1991; Holvino, 2010; Ruiz-Castro & Holvino, 2016) to grapple productively with those multiple aspects of identity.

CWS also navigates this complexity using the concepts of Whiteness as property (Harris, 1993), White spaces (Anderson, 2015), White privilege (Macintosh, 1997), and interest convergence—i.e., that Whites accrue psychological and material benefits from racism, thereby giving them a vested interest in maintaining the inequitable status quo (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Du Bois, 1935). Whiteness as property maintains that White racial status contains a property value conferring a range of benefits, including the right to exclude others (Harris, 1993). Anderson (2015) argued that Black people often perceive themselves as unwelcome in overwhelmingly White spaces, and that access to vital resources—including employment (Carbado & Gulati, 2013; Bohonos & Duff, in press)—frequently requires POC to enter white spaces where humiliation and hostility are normative. Literature exploring White privilege (DiAngelo, 2018; Macintosh, 1997; Bohonos, 2019a) further emphasizes the ways that White

people benefit from systemic and interpersonal manifestations of racism. Macintosh (1997)

offered the following definition:

> White privilege is like an invisible weightless knapsack of special provisions, assurances, tools, maps, guides, codebooks, passports, visas, clothes, compass, emergency gear, and blank checks. (p. 291)

Yet this definition conflates White privilege with class privilege, thus suggesting that

White members of the lower classes benefit from the same levels of privilege as their middle or

upper class counterparts. Researchers can find a corrective to this tendency in older definitions of

White privilege rooted in 1960s labor organizing that presented working class White privileges

as mostly petty advantages that served the interests of elite Whites by undermining interracial

class solidarity (Roediger, 2017). In this formulation, working class Whites were able to benefit

psychologically from a shared racial identity with elite Whites while also benefiting materially

by enjoying slightly better life-chances than working class Blacks while, nonetheless, remaining

closer in economic position to working class Blacks than upper class Whites (Du Bois, 1935).

In this paper, I look at an organization staffed largely by White men who occupy

positions of racial and gender privilege, but who occupy low positions in the American class

hierarchy. While these working class White men face marginalization due to their class, they

simultaneously occupy privileged positions based on their gender and race. How these

contradictions are experienced, and how they racialize the everyday work of these men, is the

core investigation of this study.

Methods

More than 5,000 hours of participant observation of behavioral patterns related to a

culture-sharing workgroup and personal narratives inform this study (Creswell, 2013). For three

years (2003-2006), the author worked at "Midwest Installation" (MI) (all names except my own

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are anonymized throughout this research). At MI, full-time staff were all White and

predominantly from the working class or the working poor. MI did not afford Black workers,

who were almost exclusively hired as temporary help, the same economic opportunities as it

afforded White workers. I learned the internal culture of MI and journaled about the experience. I

originally produced these journals as a personal sense-making project as I grappled with how my

Canadian upbringing contrasted with my work-life experiences in the Midwest and difficult

feelings related to pervasive pressures to conform to US standards of Whiteness (Baldwin, 1985;

Du Bois, 2010; Roediger, 2007, 2006). The workplace encounters described in this study

strongly influenced my gradual movement from being a person who identified as Ukrainian-

Canadian to a person whose identities include White and American (for an in-depth discussion of

my positionality, see Bohonos, 2019b).

I entered MI when one of its (White) managers walked into the gas station where I was

working and offered me a job that came with a 25% increase in my hourly pay as well as access

to large amounts of overtime—a potential to nearly double my weekly income and cover my

studying and living expenses. I expressed some concerns to him about having no experience with

anything to do with construction, the manager said he had no doubt he could train me on the hard

skills required for the job and that he was hiring me for my ability to deliver quality customer

service.

The majority of data in this paper is drawn from journals I composed during or

immediately prior to my doctoral study. Once engaged in my doctoral program, I expanded on

my initial journaling project, relying on headnotes (Emerson et al., 2011), which are mental

catalogs of interesting or significant experiences that I did not write down in the moment, but

rather explicated once removed from the organization under study. To reduce my dependence on

personal memory, I also consulted with old text messages, social media posts, mass media consumed at work, resumes, tax records, and song lyrics to sharpen my recollections and give depth to my narrations. One limitation of my method is that I did not make recordings or transcribe exact conversations with coworkers, so this precludes direct quotations. When re-creating recalled conversations, I use quotation marks to enhance the orderliness and clarity of the exchanges.

Analysis of my journals involved using focused coding (Emerson et al., 2011) to identify passages related to racializing experiences within MI's organizational culture. I focused on these themes because my socialization into American Whiteness predominantly transpired through organizational participation and because this process was brought into focus for me when I was exposed to "becoming White" literature (Baldwin, 1985; Ignatiev, 2009; Roediger, 2006; 2007) while studying labor history.

After completing the first draft of this paper, I submitted it to individuals who combined to cover Forber-Pratt's (2015) phases of review, as well as to people from a variety of identity groups (including US-born men and women of color, immigrants to the United States, and US-born Whites). I also subjected the work to a series of member-checks with five White men—four of whom had deep ties to the Midwest, four of whom had deep engagement with male-dominated working class professions, and one who worked at MI for over five-years, including the three years I worked at MI. Feedback from these men helped me to gain perspective on the relationships between the organizational culture at MI and broader trends in its occupational and regional areas.

While the initial focus of this study was race, early into the analysis, it became apparent that the salience of both race and gender in the data meant that proceeding with a racial analysis

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that did not account for additional constructs would lead to oversimplified and misleading conclusions regarding race. Intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989, 1991; Collins & Bilge, 2016) thus provided a guiding framework for facilitating the exploration of complex interactions between various privileging and marginalizing factors.

Reflecting on how I entered MI, I see today that my hire was raced and gendered in its reflection of a longstanding managerial practice of viewing White men as capable of learning any trade (Roediger, 2017). It was also classed in that my future manager's positive appraisal of my customer service ability was likely rooted in the middle class communication styles that my college-educated parents modeled for me in my formative years along with the fact that I was pursuing a college education myself.

White working class men's gendered workplace culture

The $11 per hour and average 50- to 70-hour workweeks during peak season enabled employees at MI to earn wages more than sufficient for men like me, who split a three-bedroom house with five tenants and who were free of dependents. The majority of the men at MI, however, struggled to provide for their families, particularly during the slow seasons when hours were cut and especially through the layoff months. Over the course of an average year, I earned just under $20,000. This figure would put my coworkers with families of four almost exactly on the federal poverty line in the years under discussion.

Socially, the long hours worked also provided employees with a strong sense of camaraderie and kinship, and these feelings were enhanced by the fact that there were several sets of brothers or cousins who worked for our small organization. The following passage describes my entry into MI and the raced and gendered aspects around how management appraised my ability to learn and approached my training on job-necessary skills.

Assembling playground equipment and basketball hoops provided my introduction into the rough and tumble masculinity of Midwestern semi-skilled blue-collar work. At this job, I learned to drive big trucks, back up a trailer, use hand tools, smoke a cigar, talk shit, catcall women, mix concrete, and generally what it means to be a man in a room full of good ol' boys. Showing up to work on an average summer day, our warehouse would bustle with our virtually all-White male staff and our parking lot would be filled with a mix of employee vehicles and company trucks. Our regular fleet consisted of a couple of used panel vans bought at auction, a White Ford F-150, a golden Chevy Silverado, and an Isuzu flatbed. All of these trucks were dinged up, but they were considered to be in good shape compared to the trucks parked in back. These included a Ford F-250 that looked like it survived a side impact collision and had probably been an insurance write-off. We also had an old box truck that was considered such a death trap that it was only used when one of the "good" trucks was in the shop.

After six weeks on the job I was informally promoted to crew leader and because I was the "low guy on the totem pole" my crew usually had to drive the F-250. This vehicle had its passenger side door held closed with a bungee cord. I liked it because I was just learning how to drive a truck and trailer combination. It took me a while to learn how to back up a trailer, and I certainly jack-knifed the trailer into the side of that old cab-and-a-half a few times before I got the hang of it. The damage I did to the truck was laughed off by my supervisor. But it was understood that when I moved up to a better truck, I'd have to be more careful.

The above passage suggests that management assumed that I—a White man—would be able to learn the necessary skills to do the job (Roediger, 2017) and that my demonstrable failings were laughed off in the tradition of "mate management" (Gouldner, 1954; Thiel, 2007). The expectation of ability and the leniency regarding my shortcomings illustrates well the workplace experience one would expect for a White man in a low-status occupation. This example and the one that follows shows how the White spaces of MI were both racialized and gendered:

Part of what made the job fun were the long rides we took to job sites because we serviced our entire state and also did work in three neighboring states. The time in the truck, typically with one or two other coworkers, provided a stage for us to roughhouse, tell jokes and tall tales, brag (or lie) about sexual exploits, and discuss philosophy or politics.

Favorite roughhouse activities included aggressively flicking someone in the penis when they looked distracted and "slug bug," a game that allowed an individual to punch his coworker in the shoulder as hard as he could each time he saw a Volkswagen Beetle.

We also enjoyed joke-telling rituals, which could be initiated at any time by one member of the crew telling a joke. Once the first joke was told, other members of the crew were expected to share a joke, and from there, we would take turns telling jokes until either we ran out or we got distracted by something else. While the first jokes tended to be relatively clean, the pattern of the ritual was that jokes tended to get either more sexually explicit or more racist as the game progressed. It was common for the ritual to climax with jokes about either assaulting women or enacting murder or genocide against a racially minoritized group.

Humor, roughhousing (Thiel, 2007; Willis, 1977), embodied sexual play, and invocations of hegemonic masculinity (Collins, 2013, 2015; Coston & Kimmel, 2012) are important in masculinized dirty work occupations—and here, sexually explicit humor is strongly connected to racially degrading jokes. In this case, the work truck becomes a space for straight White men to fluidly move between expressions of White supremacist ideology and embodiments of hegemonic masculinity. Thus, the work truck comes to fit Anderson's (2015) definition of White spaces in that it is a space that would be experienced as hostile by racial minorities, but also builds on this concept through intersectional observations about related hostility regarding women and gay men. The fact that MI did not hire women or (out) gay men as installers prevents me from relating any observations about their treatment; however, their absence itself is suggestive of the powerful influence of hegemonic masculinity at MI.

Awareness of Class Distinctions

The complicated class realities of working class White men become tangible in how some members of the group enjoyed some middle class-like privileges but sometimes had an underclass-like dependence on food stamps and food pantries. Perhaps the most salient middle class-like privilege was the ability to hire and to protect the employment of friends and family members. One man named Bill, for example, hired at least three family members to work for the organization, including his oldest son. He was also able to reserve an extended leave of absence for a cousin who needed to serve jail time and provide accommodations for a family member to

continue working in a position that typically required driving after he lost his driver's license.

While these privileges were significant—in that they provided prestige that flowed from their

ability to fulfill patriarchal roles (Simpson & Hughes, 2014) and included being able to provide

employment for family members and close friends—they also could not mask the gulfs in class-

based wealth and life chances perceived by these same men.

> Once, while taking lunch, Bill talked about how hard the times were. I responded with a cliché I had learned on the news. "But the economy is in a record growth stage. Some economists are wondering if, with expanding markets abroad, we will be able to sustain economic growth for another decade." Bill laughed. The problem was I didn't get the joke. "Ha," he said, "stuff they talk about on the news doesn't affect people like us."
> He was right; he was experiencing hard times. He had a job and worked long hours, his son worked under him, and his wife also worked fulltime. But, he still relied on his adult daughter's food stamps from time to time.

Clearly, while Bill is aware that stock market growth did not generate wealth for him the

way that it did for those above him in the economic hierarchy, he nevertheless stops short of an

articulation of class consciousness. The failure of this coworker to evolve from a recognition of

inequality to politically engaged class consciousness appears to flow from the discursive moves

by which he addresses class only indirectly. This is consistent with other findings that show

construction workers almost never specifically discuss class (Thiel, 2007). Workers at MI,

however, become deeply aware through their interaction with their rich clients that they belong

to another social class, one that is unable to equip its children with opportunities to become

wealthy.

> We did our installations in the region's most affluent neighborhoods, and our customers often paid more for these toys than Bill could have sold his trailer home for. At the end of a long day, while driving out of one such gated community, he said something that haunted me. "Jeremy, I love my kids. I'd never want to send them away. But I wonder what they could learn if they could live like these kids for a few years. These kids' parents must know things I never learned and are teaching their kids. Someday my children will work for the children sleeping in this neighborhood because I can't teach my kids what it takes to be successful in America. I don't know how to be successful myself."

In this passage, Bill clearly maintains no realistic hopes for his children's upward mobility. Thus, the ability to hire family members is a form of privilege, albeit one which reproduces these men's class subordination and stands in sharp contrast to "American" ideals relative to 'bootstrapping' and upward mobility. These findings qualify Macintosh's (1997) presentation of White privilege as affording nearly boundless opportunities and rather offers a bleaker picture of privilege serving primarily to keep working class Whites from descending further down the socioeconomic ladder. This complements related findings (Simpson & Hughes, 2014), where working class men are shown to take pride in their roles that their incomes play in facilitating college completion and occupational mobility for their children. In Bill's case, he has no access to that source of pride.

Cross-Class Interactions Between Whites

In addition to constituting a space where working class Whites sometimes discussed their economic positions, the job also provided varied forms of cross-class interaction. These included interactions between working class men who depended on MI as their primary means of financial support and college students from the upper classes who worked with us in the summers for beer money, as well as interactions between working class employees and customers from the upper classes.

> The college students often asked me to "translate" instructions from a senior worker named Bill, and marveled at how well I understood the man. They called his way of speaking "Billanese."

College students from the upper classes expressed their contempt for the lower classes when they asked me to "translate" Bill's directions and denigrated him by referring to his speech as "Billanese." By using a suffix most commonly found in English names for Asian languages, these students resorted to racialized critiques of Bill's lower class linguistic codes (Bernstein,

1975, 1977; Heath, 1983). This reflects the historical practices of upper class Whites disparaging working class Whites by comparing them to members of racialized minority groups (Roediger, 2017). Similar effects were created by a manager who frequently denigrated underperforming White employees by telling them to stop acting like "Mexi-Cants" and start acting like "Ameri-Cans."

In addition to cross-class interactions between employees, MI created spaces for cross-class interactions between White workers and upper class customers. For men living in trailer parks or multi-occupancy rental units, driving into gated communities with million-dollar homes could be fun or even awe-inspiring but it also could underscore the distance between us and members of the upper classes. Things were made worse by the ways rich people sometimes treated us as we worked at their homes.

> The wide disparity in the way workers are treated by the upper classes is remarkable. Some people would make us sandwiches and tip us. Others would bring out jugs of water and lemonade or even take the time to share a few beers with us. It was also frequent for customers to indicate a spigot, in case we were thirsty. Others expressed disgust that we drank out of their garden hoses when our water ran dry.
> Once as Bill was stooped over his toolbox, a suburban four-year-old picked one of our hammers off the grass and hit Bill on the crown of the head with it. It baffled me that a child would act that way, maybe the upper-middle class child had watched too many cartoons where hammers fall on construction workers without consequences. Maybe those cartoons and his life-experiences were reinforcing each other in the devaluation of members of the lower classes. This child was learning that it's okay to watch another man do labor on your behalf and that it's okay to wander through another man's workplace like you own it.

As children from the upper classes played in our workspaces or tagged along as their parents directed our work, they were observing how their parents managed economic subordinates. This provided early socialization into the middle class realm of management. Bill's children's experiences on jobsites were much different. His son completed projects with him around the house until he was old enough for paid employment. Then Bill helped him get a job at

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MI, where he applied the skills he learned working alongside his father. The difference in experiences between Bill's son and the children from the upper classes who visited our jobsites underscored class differences between them. Bill's son was being socialized and educated for construction or semi-skilled labor (McLeod, 1995; Willis, 1977), while children from the upper classes were being socialized to manage. Bill's ability to hire his son highlights differences between the experiences of his children and the children of the Black temporary workers who sometimes worked at MI. While these Black men may have been teaching their children the same skills Bill taught his son, they lacked the privilege to grant them employment.

Maintaining White Working Class Spaces through the Policing of Black Workers

While I generally discuss MI as an almost all-White organization, this characterization only holds up when employment with the organization is narrowly defined as those who received paychecks directly from MI. The organization also used temporary agencies to complement the regular staff, and these temporary workers were almost exclusively Black. Moreover, a racialized dynamic in the treatment of temporary Black workers was readily observable.

> One day I showed up to work and there was a group of Black men standing around the time clock. I asked my boss about them. He explained that when we got big deliveries of heavy parts, we hired temporary workers to help unload the trucks. I asked where the rest of our regular crew was, and my boss explained that they had loaded up all the hand-tools in the warehouse and were moving them to another location. This was being done to prevent the Black "temps" from stealing property that could easily be resold at a pawn shop.
> Given that we were perpetually short-staffed during the busy season, I asked my boss why we did not keep some of the temps as permanent employees. He said that whenever the company tried that, the employees ended up getting fired.

The fact that Whites were generally hired as full-time employees to do semi-skilled labor, and Blacks were almost exclusively hired as temporary laborers to do menial work, underscores the way that race shaped the opportunities and experiences of working class men at the organization. In this case, full-time permanent employment was reserved for Whites,

guaranteeing the property value of Whiteness (Harris, 1993) in the contemporary US

construction industry. This had a corollary effect of constituting MI as a White space (Anderson,

2015) whose boundaries were maintained by policing Black bodies that entered the warehouse.

The following passage demonstrates how a move towards the integration of MI's White space

was derailed.

> The next time I saw a Black person in our warehouse was the only time during my employment that the company hired a Black person as a full staff member and not just a temp. It was only a few weeks before he was fired for accidentally damaging a few work trucks. It is worth noting that this Black man was the only employee who never drank alcohol on the job (White employees often drank in the presence of management and even the company owner) and that this Black worker was among the few staff who did not use illegal drugs on the job.
> White employees would 'no-call-no-show' without facing serious discipline. White employees would even sometimes get leaves of absence to serve jail time and be allowed to return to the job. In the most extreme case, I watched a White coworker choke another coworker into unconsciousness on the shop floor and in full view of a manager (the employee was promoted to a management position shortly after). With all this permissiveness shown to Whites, the only Black person we hired was fired within a few weeks for causing damage to some beat-up old work trucks. All of my coworkers could have seen this obvious inequity, but not a single one openly objected.

A double standard allowed White employees who damaged company trucks, abused

drugs, and physically assaulted their coworkers to be retained, while a sober Black man was fired

for damaging a truck. White employees enjoyed indulgency patterns (Gouldner, 1954) and "mate

management" (Thiel, 2007) while they worked at MI. "Mate management" has been connected

to efforts to decrease workplace conflict and construct a form of authority that requires less

prescriptive forms of control (Theil, 2007). In this approach, supervisors steer workers' efforts

utilizing a combination of fraternal humor and disciplinary leniency. In contrast to how

leadership treated White employees, it took a disciplinary approach to managing its Black

workers. Additionally, it appears that when the all-White status quo was altered by the hiring of a

Black man, there was a quickly executed corrective impulse: as workers protected themselves

from "taint" by distancing themselves from a member of a socially stigmatized group (Tracy &

Scott, 2006). Thus, White working class employees resisted the integration of non-Whites into

White working class spaces in an effort to protect the property and psychological value of

Whiteness (Anderson, 2015; Harris, 1993).

White-Black Cross-Class Interaction, Racial Backlash, and Class Resentment

As previously discussed, while workers at MI demonstrated an understanding of their

inequitable life-chances rooted in social class distinctions, they generally exhibited envy or

admiration rather than bitterness or resentment towards upper class Whites. Their actions

towards upper class Blacks reveals something quite different.

> The first time Larry and I did a job for a Black customer. After parking the truck, he looked at the name on the paperwork and exclaimed, "Damn! I think this customer is going to be Black."
> I replied, "So?"
> "Have you ever had a Black customer before?"
> I responded, "Yes."
> "Aren't they always the worst?"
> I rejoined by saying, "No."
> My boss replied, "I don't know, man, maybe you don't pick up on this stuff like the rest of us do. Whenever I do a job at a Black person's house, they treat me like dirt. It's like because they are Black and rich and can afford an $8,000 playhouse for their kids, they feel the need to rub it in my face that I'm White, poor, and I'm working at their homes for shit wages."
> I replied by stating, "I've never seen it that way. Black customers have always treated me fine."
> "Just watch, and pay close attention."
> "Okay," I agreed.
> Larry approached the home with his fists balled, and his face flushed red. As soon as the homeowner opened the door, the two of them started yelling. Despite the fact that, per Larry's instructions, I had been watching very closely, I could not tell who drew first blood in the verbal altercation. It seemed like as soon as they both laid eyes on each other they knew conflict was the only possible outcome, and their shared belief made it a reality.

While Bill expressed envy for rich Whites (Williams, 2017), his belief that they must

know more than he did about how to make it in America demonstrates his assumption that they

earned their positions of class privilege. Larry, on the other hand, was willing to express full-out

class resentment toward those at the intersection of Black and the upper classes. Larry's behavior

could easily—and correctly—be characterized as White backlash. Seeing this backlash as solely

about race, however, risks obscuring the class-based issues intersecting with Larry's backlash.

This suggests that for working class Whites, Blacks in the upper classes continue to be

safe targets on which to vent simmering class-based frustrations (Greenberg, 2009). This

continues a historical pattern in which working class Whites attack upwardly mobile Blacks for

rising above their station while accepting the positions of elite whites.

Discussion and Conclusion

The present study set out to critique class-blind formulations of white privilege,

attempting to integrate race in discussions of contemporary working class (White) men that have

been dominated by colorblind scholarship. By accounting for the types of marginalization that

working class white men face, this work pushes for moving away from homogeneous renderings

of privilege towards more nuanced understandings that account for multiple aspects of identity.

The findings also show that, in the case of working class white men, the dynamic interaction

between racial privilege and class marginalization contributes to the reproduction of the existing

class order, thus demonstrating that the racial privileges White men enjoy contributes to their

continued economic marginality (Du Bois, 1935; Roediger, 2017).

The Role of Race in Studies of Working Class Men

In this study that explored the dynamic interactions between race, gender, and class

among working class White men, it was observable that these men envied and admired upper

class Whites while excluding women and racial minorities from the organization. These men

clearly observed their own exclusion from wealth-building practices of the upper classes and

their children's bleak prospects for upward mobility. They also engaged in exclusionary practices in the workplace that protected access to the meager economic resources they enjoyed. This demonstrates that discriminatory workplace practices of working class White men are more than efforts to deflect social stigma (Coston & Kimmel, 2012; Thiel, 2007). They also represent defensive maneuvers in which the policing of organizational White spaces (Anderson, 2015) serves to protect the property value of Whiteness (Du Bois, 1935; Embrick and Walters, 2013, 2015; Harris, 1993).

Future research can build on this study's insights by exploring the racialized dynamics among the working class in different organizational contexts, including those that are more diverse in terms of race, gender, and ethnicity. Such studies should include perspectives of people of color whose opportunities are limited by White (working class) racism and discussions of how management works to sustain or disrupt racialized divisions at work. Similarly, given the recent global resurgence of nationalism and nativism, researchers should explore workplace interactions between native and immigrant populations. Emergent research should also work to better understand how racism manifests differently depending on class position through comparative studies of race at different levels within an organizational hierarchy.

The White Privilege of Working Class Men

The class-based subordination experienced by Whites in this study requires reevaluation of the most prominent definition of White privilege (Macintosh, 1997), with an eye to understanding how White privilege manifests itself differently depending on class position. Perhaps Macintosh's definition might be better understood as a formulation that conflates White and upper class privileges, and thus leaves out the experiences of working class Whites. Bill's comments about wishing that his kids could learn from the rich Whites for whom he worked

suggests that he did not have the "tools, guides" and "codebooks" that were the purview of the upper classes. Likewise, he fully anticipated that his children would someday work for the children of the rich. Thus, he did not have the "map" needed to help his children navigate out of near-poverty or to even navigate himself fully out of the lower classes.

As I worked to construct meaningful representations of MI, I have had to wrestle with the reality that the White men in this organization were all struggling to make it in America. Bill, myself, and others worked long hours and multiple jobs—often in dirty and dangerous conditions—just to make ends meet, and many still relied on government assistance. To these men, their lives did not feel privileged. For this reason, I argue that Macintosh's (1997) definition of privilege needs to be put into conversation with older definitions of White privilege rooted in the practical experiences of labor organizers Theodore Allen and Noel Ignatin. These organizers argued that limited privileges were extended to working class Whites to create a "cross class, elite-dominated political coalition" (Roediger, 2017, Kindle location 393) of Whites in which poor Whites policed Black labor while remaining virtually propertyless. Historians have argued that in this context, the term "privilege" should be understood as an "ironic and bitter" description of pitiable advantages offered to poor Whites, which working class Whites should reject in favor of interracial solidarity (Roediger, 2017).

Put another way, it is difficult to imagine that Macintosh's claim that all Whites have access to "blank checks" properly describes the experiences of men who, too tired to drive home after a double shift of physical labor, assembled makeshift beds by stacking cardboard boxes on concrete floors of their company's warehouse. For the men at MI, their working class White-male privilege boiled down to the expectation that they would be fully considered when applying

for low-status jobs, and the opportunity to work hard in poor conditions for subsistence-level wages.

White Working Class Privilege as an Impediment to Class Consciousness

Exclusion based on both race and gender combined to help develop an iteration of White working class male workplace culture rooted in hegemonic masculinity and White racial solidarity. By depending on racist and sexist practices to cultivate a sense of fraternity, employees of MI constituted workspaces hostile to racial and gender minorities. They created White Spaces (Anderson, 2015) while simultaneously demonstrating exclusionary behaviors along the lines of those associated with masculinized industries (Collins, 2013; 2015). As a result, the White Spaces at MI can be seen as masculinized White spaces where toxic masculinity (Connel, 2005) dynamically interacts with endemic racism (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017) within a working class context. Given that access to employment in this organization was mediated by one's ability to personify Whiteness, maleness, and straightness, we can see the property value of Whiteness (Harris, 1993) being reinforced by related property values defined by embodiments of ideals associated with hegemonic masculinity. All the while, these racist, sexist, and homophobic actions contribute to the continued class marginalization of all working people, including the working class White men who enact them.

Their better chances to find (low-level) jobs gives Whites from the lower classes access to the relative security of working class employment compared to lower class Blacks. Their assurance that "now hiring" signs apply to them provide lower-class White men with the opportunity to demonstrate a willingness to work hard and some protection against a descent into the underclass. This is a form of privilege, although it may not always feel like it to men who are trapped in a cycle where hard work does nothing to alleviate near-poverty living conditions. The

actions taken by working class White men to protect their advantages over working class POC

contributes to the maintenance of racial divisions in the lower class and thus protects the

property interest of—predominantly White—economic elites by forestalling the development of

interracial class solidary or action (Roediger, 2017).

It might have been easier for my workmates and myself to exclude minorities from our

privileged spaces rather than embrace them as allies in pushes for systemic reform, but this

practice did not offer a meaningful path to better conditions either for us or them. As it was in the

antebellum and Jim Crow South, and as it frequently was in the early days of Northern

unionization, it is still easier for Midwestern Whites from the lower classes to scapegoat and

exclude minority groups than it is to develop a class consciousness that cuts across racial lines

(Bell, 2018, 2006; Du Bois, 1935).

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