Class advantages and disadvantages are not so Black and White: intersectionality impacts rank and selves

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At the intersection of race and class the consequences of being working-class or middle-class are not so Black and White. Rather, established and emerging research suggests that race/ethnicity and social class intersect to differentially afford benefits and burdens. For instance, racial/ethnic minorities often do not reap the social, psychological or economic benefits of higher social class; yet, in some key life domains (e.g. health and mortality) racial/ethnic minorities in the U.S. seem to be buffered from some burdens of lower social class. We integrate empirical evidence to suggest that such differential advantages and disadvantages along racial lines reflect that social class exists alongside, rather than separate from, race/ethnicity as two distinct yet intersecting sources of rank and in turn selves.

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Somehow America's largest demographic group caught the country by surprise this year. The white working class has received enormous attention since Election Day thanks to its critical role in electing Donald Trump . . . few other groups swung so far toward a particular party's direction since 2012 [1].

As captured in the opening excerpt from the *Washington Post*, the surprising election of Donald Trump has placed a spotlight on *white working-class* individuals — a group defined by the intersection of social class and race/ethnicity. Indeed, emerging attention and analysis of this group has suggested that it is distinctly at the intersection, distinguishable from White-Americans as a racial/ethnic group and working-class as a social class category. A failure to appreciate the intersectionality of this group has been cited as one reason why so many polls fell short of predicting the outcome of the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election. Borrowing a lesson from the election, this article proposes that attention to and appreciation of the intersection of social class and race/ethnicity can advance and enhance psychological science that seeks to examine, understand, and intervene to reduce social class disparities.

More specifically, we selectively review research on race/ethnicity, social class, and at the intersection. Survey and experimental research demonstrates that social class is tied to rank (e.g. status, hierarchy) and resources (e.g. material, social and cultural capital) [2–4]. Yet, at the intersection of race and social class the consequences of being working-class or middle-class are not so Black and White. Rather, established and emerging research suggests that race and social class intersect to differentially afford benefits and burdens. For instance, racial/ethnic minorities often do not reap the social, psychological or economic benefits of higher social class status (e.g. being middle-class relative to working-class [5,6,7•,8,9,10•]). Yet, in some key life domains such as health and mortality racial/ethnic minorities in the U.S. seem to be buffered from some burdens of lower social class status [11–15]. Why might social class foster advantages and disadvantages differentially across racial lines?

The present paper integrates empirical evidence to suggest that social class as a source of rank exists alongside, rather than separate from, race/ethnicity as another important source of rank. Although socially constructed, in the U.S. the ties that connect race/ethnicity to status and resources are historically, foundationally, and pervasively linked to U.S. institutions and opportunity structures (e.g. education, wealth [16–18]). Thus, we propose that conceptualizing social class and race/ethnicity as two sources of rank that intersect to impact lived experiences and life outcomes can facilitate theory-based insights into when and why social class affords benefits and burdens along racial lines. Throughout the review, we integrate psychological research on rank and the shaping of the psychological self, defined as the *me* at the center of experience which has consequences for motivation and behavior [19,20].

As shown in Figure 1, we conceptualize social class and race/ethnicity as two sources of rank that intersect to

Figure 1
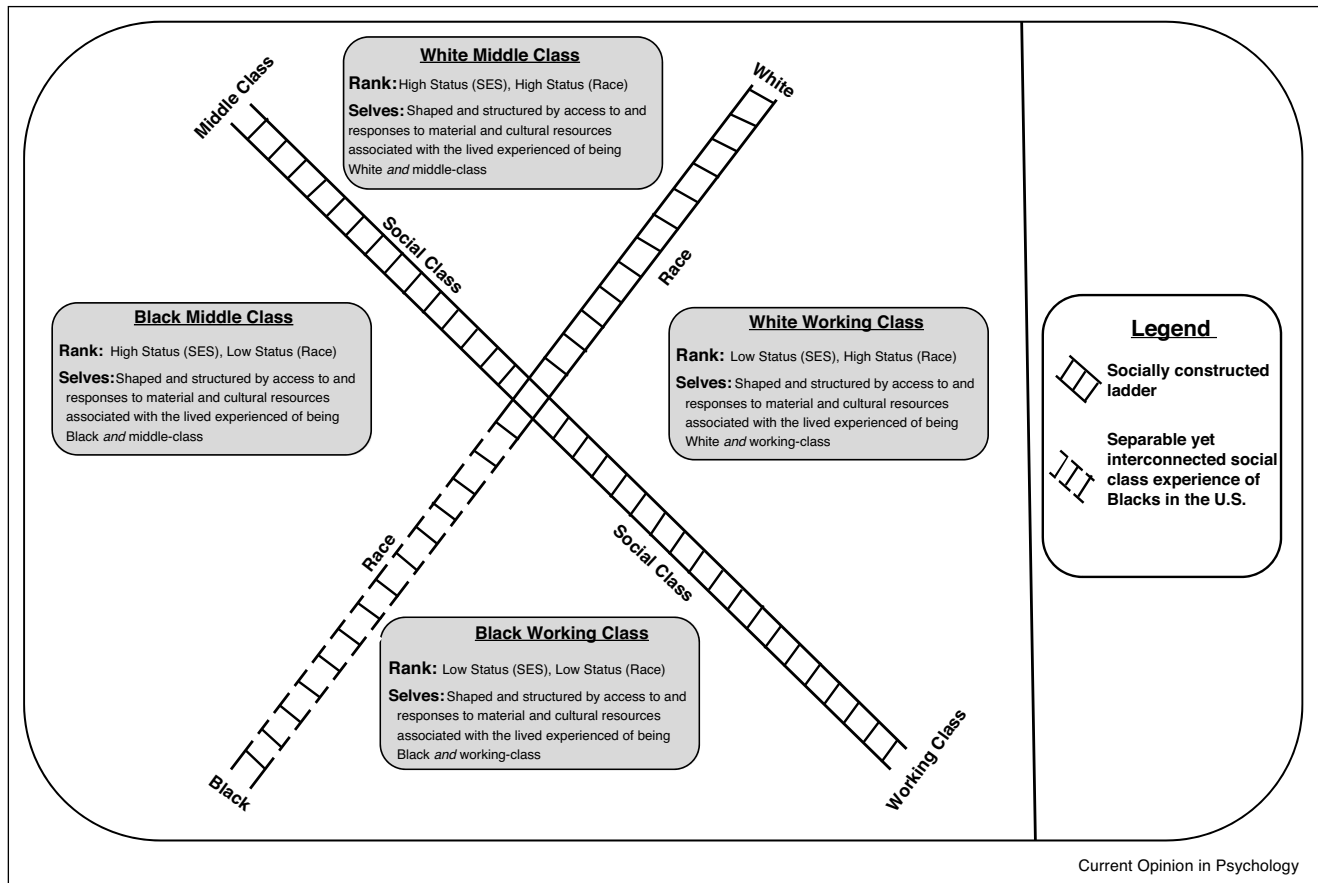
Intersecting ladders: social class and race/ethnicity as two sources of rank — social class and race are depicted as two hierarchies, one a social class ladder in which middle-class relative to working-class occupies higher status and the other a race/ethnicity ladder in which White-Americans relative to Black-Americans occupy the higher status position.

influence access to resources (e.g. material and cultural capital) and in turn selves. This conceptualization highlights that selves take shape within two distinct, yet intersecting, hierarchies — socially constructed ladders of social class and race/ethnicity that afford and restrict movement including the navigation of status. Further, in the review, we highlight intervention findings that have leveraged understandings of psychological selves associated with being from working-class or racial/ethnic minority (i.e. Black-American) backgrounds to separately address social class and racial/ethnic disparities. Finally, we motivate the potential for intersectional understandings of psychological selves (e.g. White working-class, Black working-class) to illuminate interventions that can reduce complex, contemporary social problems that reflect intersectional disparities.

Shaping psychological selves: rank tied to social class

Psychological research has shown that rank (both objective and subjective perceptions of status) and resources

(material, social and cultural capital) provide an informative lens for understanding how and why social class influences a variety of outcomes including the fostering of psychological selves [2,4, 21, 22; see also, 23]. Consistent with the metaphor of social class as a ladder, such research has shown that the psychological experience of being middle-class[1] is akin to occupying a high power or status position. Thus, relative to the psychological experience of being working-class[2] or subjectively occupying the bottom rungs of the social class ladder, middle-class individuals have been shown to value and enact a more *independent* sense of self. That is, an independent sense of self that is more self-focused — makes choices that reflect individual preferences, pays less attention to others or to context more broadly, gives less to others, and relies more on dispositional (versus structural/situational) attributions

[1] Middle-class is conceptualized as relatively higher class, involving attainment of a bachelor's degree or higher.

[2] Working-class is conceptualized as relatively lower class, involving attainment of less than a bachelor's degree.

[24•,25•,26,27]. Importantly, rank, access to resources, and engagement with mainstream-American cultural institutions (e.g. schools, workplaces) that foster, and often reward, independence converge to afford this more independent sense of self among middle-class individuals.

For working-class individuals, lower subjective rank, scarcity of resources, and adaptive/culturally derived responses to limited agency and restricted independence (e.g. sharing resources with others in a community, helping others) facilitate and foster a more *interdependent* sense of self. That is, an interdependent sense of self that is more other-focused — makes choices that reflect others' needs, pays more attention to others or to context more broadly, gives more to others, and relies more on structural/situational (versus dispositional) attributions [28–30]. Together, insights on how rank and resources shape psychological selves, and related motivation and behavior, across social class lines have informed theory and policy aimed at intervening to improve opportunities for access, retention, and achievement within educational settings (e.g. [31•,32,33]) as well as health outcomes (e.g. [34,35]).

Shaping psychological selves: rank and resources tied to race/ethnicity

A rank and resource lens demonstrates that social class is tied to a socially constructed hierarchy — a simultaneously visible and invisible ladder that can have powerful consequences for creating and curing disparities. Yet, race/ethnicity is another socially constructed hierarchy, one that pre-dates and cannot be separated from the founding and making of the United States [16]. Thus, race/ethnicity and its influence on rank and resources is historically entrenched within American institutions; the legacy of this history fueled with contemporary discriminatory, prejudicial, and oppressive practices continues to maintain and create disparities along race/ethnicity lines [17,18; see also, 36, 37]. Like social class, rank and resources associated with race/ethnicity interact with mainstream-American cultural ideals and institutions to shape psychological selves [38]. Notably, observed and robust findings that demonstrate the effects of engagement with mainstream-American culture for facilitating and activating independence across a variety of outcomes (e.g. self-construal, motivation, behavior) have largely and overwhelmingly used White-American samples [19,20, see also, 39].

For Black-Americans, a racial/ethnic group constructed to occupy a low status position within the U.S.'s racial hierarchy, race/ethnicity can impede and restrict access to broader mainstream-American institutions and cultural ideals of independence [40,41]. For several reasons, experiences of impeded and restricted access within mainstream-American cultural institutions is likely to forge and foster a more interdependent sense of self among Black-Americans. This interdependent sense of self associated with one's racial/ethnic group also reflects multiple sources including: (a) imposed experiences tied to discrimination, oppression and prejudice that constrain individuality and promote group membership in devalued ways (e.g. being seen through the lens of a stereotype about one's racial/ethnic group [42,43]), but also (b) claimed and valued adaptive/culturally derived responses to discrimination, oppression and prejudice that define racial/ethnic group membership in positive ways, celebrate and reinforce a sense of interconnectedness with one's racial group as a strength and resource [44••,45].

Consistent with this theorizing that imposed experiences and agentic/culturally shaped responses to the U.S.'s racial hierarchy is likely to shape psychological selves, Black-Americans have been shown to possess an elaborated interdependent self-schema. For example, across experiments and longitudinal analysis of survey data, Black-Americans can understand the self and behave (e.g. cooperation, working with others) in ways that reflect an interdependent self-schema associated with their racial/ethnic identity [44••]. Similar to research on social class and selves, understandings of an interdependent sense of self among Black-Americans have informed theory and application aimed at addressing racial/ethnic inequalities in education [44••; see also, 46] and health (TN Brannon, A Lin, unpublished data; CS Levine *et al.*, unpublished data).

Shaping intersectional selves: two sources of rank

Separately, research on social class and on race/ethnicity have contributed psychological insights related to mitigating disparities in education and health, domains linked to key life outcomes that can have long-term and generational effects. Yet, historical and contemporary statistics across a variety of important life outcomes suggests that psychological perspectives that target social class *or* race/ethnicity are not sufficient to fully explain and address social inequalities. For example, Harackiewicz, Canning, Tibbetts, Priniski, and Hyde [47••] used a large, diverse sample of college undergraduates ($N = 1040$) enrolled in a biology course sequence, a critical series of gateway courses for STEM[3] majors, to directly examine the intersection of social class and race. Strikingly, Harackiewicz and colleagues' baseline data tell an intersectional story in which racial majority (e.g. White-American) and minority (e.g. Black-American) working-class/first-generation college students have qualitatively different experiences with poverty and relatedly with access to and preparation for biology courses. In short, their data convey an intersectional disparity in which close to 30% of racial majority first-generation students attended high poverty high schools versus close to 45% of racial minority

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[3] Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics.

first-generation students. Notably, this qualitative difference mirrors statistics on poverty and access to educational resources observed in large-scale population studies [36] and it motivates a critical and timely need for an intersectional approach.

As illustrated in Figure 1, we advance an intersectional approach in which rank tied to social class and race/ethnicity converge to suggest differential associations with high and low status at the intersections. The figure encompasses two intersecting hierarchies: one a social class ladder and the other a race/ethnicity ladder. Further, the figure depicts a solid ladder between the categories White middle-class and White working-class to represent relatively *separable* lived experiences and life outcomes along social class lines. Yet, the figure depicts a perforated ladder between the categories Black middle-class and Black working-class to reflect relatively *similar* lived experiences and life outcomes along social class lines. Evidence of a relatively more separable class experience among White-Americans and a more similar class experience among Black-Americans reflects neighborhood patterns (e.g. regardless of social class Black-Americans, unlike White-Americans, are more likely to live in lower income neighborhoods [48]), intergroup stereotypes and perceptions (e.g. perceivers are more likely to associate indicators of lower class-based status with racial Blackness [49–52]), and access to and retention of cultural resources tied to race/ethnicity (e.g. use of African-American Vernacular English) among working-class and middle-class Black-American [53•], and observed differences in same race, cross-social class interactions [54].

This intersectional approach has the potential to motivate novel research questions about psychological selves. For instance, conceptualizing social class and race/ethnicity as two sources of rank motivates questions about the experience of White working-class individuals navigating *both* a relatively lower status (connected to class) and higher status (connected to race/ethnicity) position. For White working-class individuals, how might their race/ethnicity afford privileges relative to working-class individuals from racial/ethnic minority backgrounds? Yet, given that lower social class is associated with Blackness [49–52], how might their race/ethnicity create invisibility and in turn additional burdens? Similarly, this intersectional approach suggests questions about the experience of Black middle-class and Black working-class individuals navigating low rank connected to their race/ethnicity. For example, how might connection to and access to Black-American cultural resources (e.g. Black church, kinship networks, language practices) afford a higher sense of subjective rank and in turn buffer against low rank associated with race/ethnicity and/or class?

Finally, this intersectional approach acknowledges that social class and race/ethnicity can have similar/overlapping yet also distinct consequences. This is consistent with emerging research on social class that is applying research methods originally used to study race/ethnicity and finding that social class is associated with similar consequences for intergroup interactions [55,56•, 57••; see also 58] and academic performance [59,60] as race/ethnicity. Thus, the intersectional model offers a novel yet integrative lens to interpret a variety of motivations and behaviors at the intersection of class and race.

Conflict of interest statement
Nothing declared.

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