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COMMENTARIES

Social Class and Race: Burdens but Also Some *Benefits* of Chronic Low Rank

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To argue that blacks form the sediment of the American stratificational order is to recognize the extent to which they began at the *bottom* of the hierarchy during slavery, and the cumulative and reinforcing effects of Jim Crow and de facto segregation through the mid-twentieth century. Generation after generation of blacks remained anchored to the lowest economic status in American society.—Oliver and Shapiro (2006, p. 5)

As illuminated in the preceding excerpt, societal rank in the United States is fundamentally tied to race and socioeconomic status. A particular and pervasive history of exclusion and oppression (e.g., slavery, segregation, discrimination) has created chronic conditions of low rank for African Americans (see Massey & Denton, 1993). These long-standing institutions and practices marked African American as an underclass by assigning negative stereotypes to this social group and restricting economic opportunities to establish wealth, a key metric of power, influence, and position on the social ladder (Conley, 1999; Shapiro, 2004). In this commentary, we propose that examining African Americans' chronic position of low rank can elaborate basic psychological theory and research on the experience and consequences of being at the bottom (or top) of a societal ladder. Specifically, we suggest that identity as an African American (i.e., racial-ethnic minority) affects rank in complex ways—it can amp up the effects of low rank, damp down the effects of high rank, and paradoxically sometimes buffer the effects of low rank.

The target article by Kraus, Tan, and Tannenbaum integrates research from across the social sciences to theorize that social class signals one's rank on a societal ladder and that one's rank shapes daily life experience. They further propose that a rank-based perspective on social class can inform understandings of how class influences a variety of psychological processes (i.e., social, cognitive, emotional), as well as an array of im-

portant life outcomes (e.g., health disparities). Their theory is a heuristic one that creates new questions and affords novel insights with the potential to inform both psychological theory and efforts to address social inequalities. We suggest that their perspective could be widened and sharpened; it can become more valuable for further theorizing and application by explicitly considering how nondominant social identities affect an individual's societal rank.

As theorized by Kraus and colleagues (this issue), individual rank matters. Having access to material resources, possessing status as a well-liked, respected, or admired person affects daily life experiences, psychological processes, and life outcomes (Anderson, John, Keltner, & Kring, 2001; Anderson, Kraus, Galinsky, & Keltner, 2012; Fiske & Markus, 2011; Stephens, Markus, & Fryberg, 2012). But for the majority of the U.S. population, those who are members of nondominant social groups including women and racial-ethnic minorities, as well as religious and sexual-orientation minorities, determining one's rank on the societal ladder requires the consideration of additional factors. For this majority, the consequences of social class are often affected by one's membership in a chronically low rank group. That is, nondominant social identities can influence the burdens and benefits of individual rank vis-à-vis others.

As an example, higher socioeconomic status, an indicator of individual high rank, is often associated with superior health outcomes (see Adler et al., 1994). However, African Americans typically do not reap the same benefits of higher social class as do dominant group members. Instead, some studies find that racial disparities between African American and European American women such as the prevalence of infant mortalities and infant low birth weights persist and even widen as education levels increase (Collins & Butler, 1997; McGrady, Sung, Rowley, & Hogue, 1992; Pamuk, Makuc, Heck, Reuben, & Lochner, 1998; Schoendorf, Hogue, Kleinman, & Rowley, 1992; see also Hauck, Tanabe, &

Moon, 2011). Similarly, other studies find that although higher socioeconomic status is a negative predictor of suicide rates for European American males, it is positively related to suicide rates for African American males (Williams, 2003).

Still other studies document paradoxes in which racial-ethnic minorities have better health and well-being outcomes than European Americans, despite socioeconomic disadvantage. Notably, these findings suggest that racial-ethnic minorities do not always experience the expected burdens of low rank. For instance, African Americans have lower rates of major depression and mood disorders (e.g., Blazer, Kessler, McGonagle, & Swartz, 1994; Kessler et al., 1994) and routinely report higher self-esteem (see Phinney, Cantu, & Kurtz, 1997; Twenge & Crocker, 2002) than European Americans. Relatedly, other racial-ethnic minority groups like Latino Americans have lower mortality rates (Abraído-Lanza, Dohrenwend, Ng-Mak, & Turner, 1999). And more recent work reveals that ethnic pride and a sense of interdependence associated with membership in a racial-ethnic minority group can be sources of strength that buffer some of the burdens of low rank. This work documents that meanings and values attached to identity as an African American or Latino American can be associated with mental and physiological resilience (Adbou et al., 2010; Ratner, Halim, & Amodio, 2013).

Taken together, these findings highlight that rank indeed matters; but for individuals who belong to chronically low rank groups, the consequences may not be straightforward. Findings like these motivate the need for a wider conceptualization of the social ladder—one that examines the role of social class in conjunction with nondominant social identities (e.g., chronic low rank). We suggest that conceptualizations that consider social class together with racial-ethnic minority identity such as being African American have the potential to illuminate the not so straightforward consequences of rank. That is, this wider perspective might facilitate insights and new research questions that can explain why African Americans often do not always reap the anticipated benefits of higher social class or experience the expected burdens of lower social class.

The Burdens of Stereotypes Affect African Americans' Societal Rank

If there were no black people here in this country, it would have been Balkanized. The immigrants would have torn each other's throats out. . . . But in becoming an American, from Europe, what one has in common with that other immigrant is contempt for *me*—it's nothing else but color. Wherever they were from, they would stand together. They could

all say, "I am not *that*" . . . Every immigrant knew he would not come as the very bottom. He had to come above at least one group—and that was [African Americans].—Morrison (1994, p. 255)

Historically race has been a device, a system of ideas and practices, used to establish rank among groups of people; to associate different value, power, and privilege based on this rank; and then to justify the arrangement (see Moya & Markus, 2010). As underscored in the preceding excerpt by Toni Morrison, the origins of White or (European) American as a dominant social identity in the United States is linked to the creation of a racial hierarchy—one that relegated African Americans to the "very bottom." This racial hierarchy was justified by and served to justify long-standing institutions, attitudes, and beliefs including stereotypes that created and maintained difference and inequality between European Americans and African Americans. For instance, stereotypes about intelligence and physical strength marked difference and were deployed to rationalize unequal access to rights and opportunities. In the process, subordinate and devalued traits were imposed onto African Americans and superior and valued traits were assigned to European Americans.

Today, despite considerable racial progress and egalitarian norms, stereotypes that associate low rank with African Americans and high rank with European Americans remain persistent and powerful. An extensive literature on stereotype threat (e.g., Inzlicht & Schmader, 2011; Steele, 2010; see also Walton & Cohen, 2003) documents these lingering consequences. Specifically, this research demonstrates that subtle cues in a setting can make stereotypes salient and lead to stereotype-consistent (and rank maintaining) outcomes. The power of stereotypes to adversely affect life outcomes, for instance, by undermining academic performance and elevating blood pressure in African Americans (Blascovich, Spencer, Quinn, & Steele, 2001), is one way in which African Americans experience burdens that can dampen the effects of individual high rank.

Moreover, stereotypes can influence African Americans' societal (and situational) rank by influencing interpersonal perceptions and judgments. Specifically, the need to contend with stereotypes can shape the ways that African Americans interact with and are perceived by dominant group members such as European Americans (see Feagin & Sikes, 1995). Consequently, stereotype consistent judgments of African Americans can reinforce (racial hierarchy) low rank and lead to negative consequences (Blair, Judd, & Chapleau, 2004; Blair, Judd, & Fallman, 2004; Eberhardt, Davies, Purdie-Vaughns & Johnson, 2006). On the flip side, counter-stereotypical judgments of African Americans can sometimes facilitate positive consequences such as liking and access to high-power and influential roles

(e.g., leadership positions; see Livingston & Pearce, 2009).

Examining chronic low rank can also extend theorizing on the signaling of social class. In the target article the authors write, “Communication of position on the social ladder of society is likely to occur both effortlessly and below conscious awareness” (p. 83). Yet, for individuals whose identities require them to negotiate stereotypes, the communication of position on the social ladder of society might, in fact, be effortful, intentional, and in the service of undermining stereotypes. Although the need to negotiate and contend with stereotypes is a burden of belonging to a chronically low-ranking group, the intentional signaling of social class might be associated with some benefits.

The title of Claude Steele’s (2010) book about stereotype threat—*Whistling Vivaldi*—captures the intentional broadcasting of social class to communicate position and allay stereotype-related concerns. The title refers to the story of Brent Staples, an African American *New York Times* columnist who, while a graduate student at the University of Chicago, recalls walking through the affluent area of Hyde Park and observing European Americans respond to his mere presence with fear (e.g., crossing the street to avoid passing by him). Over time, Staples developed the strategy of whistling the music of the Italian composer Vivaldi while walking through these areas. This changed how European Americans in these spaces responded to his presence; it signaled to them that he belonged in these upper middle-class settings and that he was not a threat (e.g., a potential mugger).

Future research on social class as rank could directly investigate the burdens and benefits of intentional signals of social class by individuals who have nondominant social identities. Of interest, Brent Staples’s story of whistling Vivaldi suggests that attention to context and awareness of others may be particularly beneficial for middle-class African Americans. Perhaps middle-class African Americans who are more sensitive to contextual cues are more likely to strategically shift their behaviors in response to the stereotype-related concerns of dominant group members. Such shifting, although potentially associated with costs, may allow African Americans like Brent Staples to gain full access to traditionally (European American) middle-class spaces, and in turn secure higher social rank. If so, this suggests a counterintuitive prediction, although higher rank is often associated with less attention to contextual factors (Kraus et al., this issue), more attention to contextual cues might be associated with higher societal (and situational) rank for African Americans. Finally, past research finds that interacting with a cross-race (African American) peer elicits threat responses from college students, even when that African American peer’s middle-class background is made explicit (Blascovich, Mendes, Hunter, Lickel, & Kowai-

Bell, 2001, Experiment 3). Future work might investigate whether middle-class African American interaction partners who “whistle Vivaldi” or subjectively signal their knowledge of upper-class culture elicit less threat.

Leveraging Some Benefits Tied to Chronically Low-Ranking Groups

Ranking at the bottom on a societal ladder is often tied to greater risk for negative outcomes in a variety of life domains. However, in response to the adverse conditions of chronic low rank, many cultural ideas and practices associated with racial-ethnic minorities groups have been developed to act as armor—to collectively and creatively deflect the negative views of others (see Markus & Conner, 2013). Such cultural ideas and practices can serve as a source of belongingness, meaning, pride, and motivation that can facilitate resilience and other positive outcomes. Our past research with colleagues provides two illustrative examples of the potential for cultural ideas and practices associated with racial-ethnic minority groups to afford some benefits. Specifically, this past research highlights the value of leveraging these cultural sources of belongingness, meaning, and motivation to address (a) racial disparities in education and (b) improve intergroup relations.

Although African Americans have experienced a pervasive and extensive history of low rank, identity as an African American can also be associated with historically derived ideas and practices that foster interdependence—a fundamental connectedness of the self to others (Jones, 2003; Nobles, 1980). Individual differences findings suggest that interdependence for African Americans is a source of meaning and motivation that can be linked to positive consequences. For example, interdependence, and related constructs like collectivism and communalism, is related to higher grade point averages and the formation of more achievement-related strategies for African American students (Komarraju & Cokley, 2008; Oyserman, Gant, & Ager, 1995). Building on these individual differences findings, our experimental work has shown that efforts to reduce racial achievement disparities within educational settings can be further enhanced by integrating celebrated African American ideas and practices associated with interdependence. Specifically, our research finds that African American college students exhibit greater task persistence, increased problem-solving skills, and more creativity when educational settings are manipulated to *both* reduce stereotype related concerns and to be inclusive of African American culture (e.g., having a diverse and multicultural curriculum; Brannon, Markus, & Taylor, 2013). Thus, an important implication of this work

is to suggest the benefits of creating inclusive multicultural educational settings that allow students like African Americans who belong to chronically low-ranked groups to draw upon valued aspects of their identity.

Moreover, valued cultural ideas and practices associated with chronically low-ranked groups can be leveraged to benefit intergroup outcomes. In the target article, Kraus and colleagues (this issue) highlight that intergroup contact between individuals from different class backgrounds can incite psychological threat. Given that differential access to opportunity structures (e.g., college education, social networks) can meaningfully contribute to social class disparities, contact between individuals from diverse class backgrounds, especially within institutional settings such as schools and workplaces, is crucial and consequential. Thus, how to improve intergroup relations and attitudes across social class categories is an important theoretical and applied question.

Work on intergroup contact by Brannon and Walton (2013) highlights how attention to valued cultural ideas and practices associated with chronically low-ranked groups like Latino Americans can illuminate new processes of improving intergroup outcomes. This work shows that contact with a Latina American peer that involves cues of social connection and the freely chosen opportunity to take part in activities associated with Latino American culture can improve intergroup attitudes immediately (i.e., reduced implicit bias) and on average 6 months later. This work suggests potential extensions that might improve contact between working-class and middle-class individuals. Future research might consider what psychological conditions can promote interest in and openness to ideas and practices associated with working-class contexts. And this work might examine the potential intergroup benefits of interactions that allow working-class individuals to share aspects of their background, such as celebrated practices that are a source of pride and meaning.

Concluding Considerations

By presenting a rank-based perspective, the target article by Kraus and colleagues calls needed and deserved attention to social class and its consequences for psychological processes and life outcomes. Consistent with the target article's theorizing, we suggest that rank matters. However, we propose that a rank-based perspective on social class could be more fully elaborated and sharpened by considering race (a chronic low rank) and social class. In particular, examinations of chronic low-rank groups can illuminate the complex ways in which rank matters. For instance, identity as an African American can sometimes exacerbate the effects of low rank and sometimes dampen the effects of

high rank, yet it can also have positive consequences that buffer effects of low rank. Our suggestion is relevant to many research and public policy discussions about how to address social inequalities. Some argue that efforts to address disparities should focus solely on class; others argue that race cannot be reduced to social class. Similar to proposals that champion the need to consider both class and race, we propose that psychological research and theory aimed at understanding and undermining social inequalities can be optimized by considering where people think they stand on the social ladder, but also where others think they stand on the social ladder—a fact revealed by their nondominant social identities.

Note

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