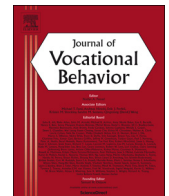




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# Are lower social class origins stigmatized at work? A qualitative study of social class concealment and disclosure among White men employees who experienced upward mobility<sup>☆</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

Despite recognizing that socioeconomic standing can influence workplace behavior, minimal research in psychology has explored social class as a stigmatized and potentially manageable identity in the workplace. Compared to women and people of color, White men who moved up from low-income backgrounds may be especially likely to experience their previous class status as a concealable stigma at work. In this study, we used qualitative methods to investigate whether having a lower social class background might be experienced as a stigmatized identity for some employees, using a sample of 20 White men who self-identified as having moved up in social class. Individual interviews were used to assess the nature of participants' social class concealment and disclosure at work. Thematic analysis revealed five reasons why these White men concealed their former, lower-income status at work: Judgment, Nobody understands, It's personal, Pity, and Don't want to feel embarrassed or vulnerable. Our analysis also revealed five reasons why participants disclosed their previous class identity at work: being Forced to, To relate, To motivate/help somebody, Noticing class cues, and Becoming close. Results indicate that having a lower social class background can be experienced as stigmatizing at work. Moreover, while disclosure of one's lower-income background is more common than concealment for men in this group, that disclosure is often unintentional or unwanted. Our results also indicate that, like other potentially concealable identities, social class disclosure is an ongoing process that happens unevenly across time and across people. Future research should expand on this work by examining the experiences of upwardly mobile employees from other identity intersections.

## 1. Introduction

Social class, or the social and economic standing of an individual in society, is a multifaceted construct, including access to money, education, social status, occupational and job prestige (Adler & Epel, 2000; Fiske & Markus, 2012). Social class has been shown to influence a wide range of behaviors, from the impact of stressful life events on one's mental health to the type of beer a person buys (Gronhaug & Trapp, 1989; Maisel & Karney, 2012). Despite this, Industrial and Organizational (I-O) Psychology has not

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explored the issue of social class in the workplace frequently or with much depth (Cote, 2011; Cotton, 1994; Weaver, Crayne, & Jones, 2016). I-O psychology commonly represents social class as a “control variable” in quantitative research (Obschonka, Andersson, Silbereisen, & Sverke, 2013; Watts, Frame, Moffett, Van Hein, & Hein, 2015), or examines it from a purely economic standpoint (e.g., salary, occupation status; Cheng & Furnham, 2012; Flouri, Tsivrikos, Akhtar, & Midouhas, 2015), but has not investigated whether and how social class may function as an identity at work.

Considering that social class is a grouping of people, some have argued it can be understood as a social identity (Destin, Rheinschmidt-Same, & Richeson, 2017; Kraus & Keltner, 2013) to the extent that people internalize and identify with this grouping (Turner-Zwinkels, Postmes, & van Zomeren, 2015). Indeed, like other social identities, social class helps people establish a sense of belonging, helps them make sense of their lives, and guides their decision-making and behavior (Destin et al., 2017). For instance, there are distinct differences in how people from different classes dress, choose their leisure activities, and form their core socio-political beliefs (Kraus & Keltner, 2013).

Supporting conceptualizations of social class status as a social identity, individuals' objective and subjective social class are related but distinct concepts. Recent data reveals that 70% of Americans identify themselves as middle class (Northwestern Mutual, 2017), yet objective measures show only about half of the U.S. population today being truly middle class (Northwestern Mutual, 2017; Sosnaud, Brady, & Frenk, 2013). Nonetheless, this subjective sense of belonging influences behavior (APA Task Force on Socioeconomic Status, 2006). For example, Singh-Manoux, Marmot, and Adler (2005) found that subjective social class was a stronger predictor of health than objective social class. Given the potential for social class to function as a social identity, and the importance of subjective social class for behavior, research is needed that centers investigations of class on participants' perceived class status.

### 1.1. Social class as a stigmatized identity at work

Though rarely directly examined in psychology, research suggests that having a low socioeconomic status can be stigmatized in the workplace (Durante, Tablante, & Fiske, 2017; Gottfredson, 2004; Loughnan, Haslam, Sutton, & Spencer, 2014). Sociological research finds that all social stigma are defined by four core conditions (Link & Phelan, 2001): (a) the distinguishing and labeling of some human difference(s), such as skin color, between the dominant and the stigmatized group, (b) a cultural association of undesirable traits with members of the stigmatized group, (c) the placement of stigmatized people into a separate and distinct category and, finally, (d) the loss of status by the labeled group that leads to unequal outcomes.

Research in psychology using the Stereotype Content Model (SCM; Fiske, Cuddy, Glick, & Xu, 2002) demonstrates that those from low-income or working-class backgrounds are, in fact, labeled based on some human difference(s), associated with undesirable traits, treated as an outgroup, and discriminated against. Specifically, in the U.S. and cross-culturally, those from lower-income backgrounds are stereotyped as being high in warmth but low in competence (Durante et al., 2017; Gottfredson, 2004). Typically, groups perceived as warm but incompetent are excluded from high-level leadership and work positions for which competence is valued (Cuddy, Glick, & Beninger, 2011; Judd, James-Hawkins, Yzerbyt, & Kashima, 2005). Instead, members of these groups are seen as being more fit for low-level positions that require social skills, such as customer service (Cuddy et al., 2011). People who are perceived as competent but cold, such as individuals from upper social classes, tend to fare better in the workplace, as only perceived competence positively relates to hiring and promotion (Cuddy et al., 2011; Judd et al., 2005).

Low socioeconomic status (SES) has also been associated with incompetence in school settings. In the classic study by Darley and Gross (1983), the same test performance was perceived as less competent when the child test taker was from a low-SES family in a resource-poor neighborhood than when she was from a high-SES family living in a resource-rich neighborhood. Research also shows that high school students who are high-achieving, but from lower social class backgrounds, are disliked because they threaten the system-justifying belief that they are less competent than upper-class students (Batruch, Autin, & Butera, 2017). In another study, students low in SES presented as outperforming their high SES peers were remembered less accurately, presumably due to being inconsistent with mental representations about the working class (Batruch et al., 2017).

#### 1.1.1. Social class concealment and disclosure at work

If coming from a poor or working-class background functions as a stigmatized identity at work, employees may be motivated to hide working class origins to the extent that they are concealable (Newheiser & Barreto, 2014; Newheiser, Barreto, Ellemers, Derks, & Scheepers, 2015). A concealable stigmatized identity is one that is not necessarily visible to others, leaving it up to the bearer of the stigma to engage in identity management behaviors (Goffman, 1963; Jones & King, 2014). People manage these invisible identities through several different strategies, such as concealing, revealing, and signaling (Jones & King, 2014). Concealing can include both actively and passively hiding the stigma, either by omission and avoidance or outright lying (Stenger & Roulet, 2017). On the other hand, revealing involves exposing the stigma to others, while signaling involves “testing” if the other party would be accepting of the stigma, by hinting at it (Einarsdottir, Hoel, & Lewis, 2016; Jones & King, 2014). For example, an employee might make a comment about a lower-income neighborhood to his supervisor to gauge her reaction, before deciding to reveal that he used to live there.

Identity Management Theory explains that concealing or revealing a stigmatized identity comes with costs and benefits, including social, health, and workplace outcomes (Jones & King, 2014). Concealing a stigma can impact people by isolating them from their own community (Stenger & Roulet, 2017). For example, a person concealing her lesbian identity may be inadvertently isolated from the LGBT community (Stenger & Roulet, 2017), depriving her of social support. However, when an individual discloses a stigmatized identity, they risk being excluded or rejected by others (Stenger & Roulet, 2017). This is concerning because workplace relationships can impact performance evaluation, compensation, and promotion decisions (Jones & King, 2014).

Research on LGBT identity in the workplace finds that people with concealable stigmas may engage in intentional concealment of their identities, intentional disclosure, and unintentional disclosure (Duguay, 2014). Individuals tend to intentionally conceal their stigmatized identities at work when they fear prejudice or discrimination, such as losing professional development opportunities, jeopardizing relationships with co-workers, and risking job security (Ragins, 2008). Employees may intentionally disclose stigma, on the other hand, when they sense that it is safe and helpful to themselves or others. In studies of LGB identity disclosure, individuals have reported that intentionally disclosing their sexual orientation in the workplace often occurs in conversations with co-workers who ask about the participants' weekend plans, significant others, holiday plans, etc. (Einarsdottir et al., 2016). These employees explained that they would assess the safety of the situation with the coworker, and then decide to disclose their sexuality or not. However, initiating the conversation was often out of the LGB person's control (Einarsdottir et al., 2016).

Finally, research suggests that even "concealable" stigmatized identities can become apparent in the workplace by chance or accident (Ragins, 2004, 2008). Some members of the LGB community, for example, report feeling that specific situational cues gave them away at work, such as being single in their late forties, not talking about members of the opposite sex, or being more private about their personal life in general (Einarsdottir et al., 2016). Situations such as being seen with a partner of the same sex, or even a picture on social media, could disclose them involuntarily (Einarsdottir et al., 2016). In the case of employees who came from "lower" social class backgrounds, to the extent that this background is experienced as stigmatized and concealable at work, any and all of these forms of identity management may be enacted, including intentional concealment and intentional and unintentional disclosure.

### 1.1.2. *The intersection of class with other social identities*

Whether social class is a concealable identity, and can be effectively managed by a stigmatized individual, depends tremendously on his or her other social identities. Intersectionality theory (Cole, 2009; Crenshaw, 1989, 1991; Shields, 2008) reminds us that all people hold multiple social identities, such as race, class, age, gender, and sexual orientation, and these identities intersect and interlock to produce unique and emergent experiences for individuals in the workplace and beyond (e.g., Rabelo & Cortina, 2016). Intersectionality suggests that the way class status is experienced by and affects Black employees, for example, is likely to be qualitatively and quantitatively different from the way class status is experienced by and affects White employees. Indeed, an abundance of research supports the contention that perceptions and experiences of class are qualified by people's race and gender.

First, people of color are routinely stereotyped as working class or as coming from low-income backgrounds (Goodwin & Fiske, 1996). Black and Latinx people, in particular, are typically viewed as poor and low in social status (Goodwin & Fiske, 1996; Jost, Pelham, & Carvallo, 2002). These associations are so strong that the category "Black person" automatically activates the concept of being poor in undergraduate participants (Cox & Devine, 2015), and people experience expectancy-violating stress from exposure to Latinas from high SES (vs. low SES) backgrounds (Mendes, Blascovich, Hunter, Lickel, & Jost, 2007). In addition, research by Brown-Iannuzzi, Dotsch, Cooley, and Payne (2017) found that people's mental representations of welfare recipients are significantly "Blacker" than their representations of non-welfare recipients. Work by Lei and Bodenhausen (2017) similarly finds that participants high in economic prejudice imagine the poor to be Blacker than middle-income and wealthy people.

Finally, the very definition of race is intertwined with class status, and the definition of class overlaps with race. In the Stereotype Content Model (SCM), the category containing "Blue-Collar workers" also contains "Hispanics" and "Blacks," while "Middle Class People" fall into the same cluster as "Whites" (Fiske et al., 2002). Experimental and longitudinal research finds that when men or women decrease in SES, or lose employment, perceivers are more likely to categorize them as Black (Penner & Saperstein, 2008, 2013; Saperstein & Penner, 2012). Individuals who are themselves unemployed, incarcerated, or impoverished are also more likely to self-identify as Black, and less likely to identify as White (Penner & Saperstein, 2008).

To a lesser degree, research also suggests that women are seen as lower in social class and status than men (Ridgeway & Bourg, 2004). While the groups "women" and "middle class" are near one another in the SCM, "men" are closer to the category of "rich" people than women (Fiske et al., 2002). Men, compared to women, are also more often assumed to hold high-status and power positions at work, like leadership positions (for a review, see Eagly & Carli, 2007). The qualities we assign to those in power are also more similar to the qualities we assign to men than the qualities we assign to women (Schein, Mueller, Lituchy, & Liu, 1996).

Because perceptions of and beliefs about race, class, and gender covary, with people of color and women being seen as lower in class status than Whites and men, class status should be more concealable for Whites and men than for other groups. Moreover, White men, as a group, are among the most likely to be associated with prestigious work positions, such as lawyer or business professional (e.g., Koenig & Eagly, 2014), and have a disproportionately large amount of wealth and status in the U.S. (Hanks, Solomon, & Weller, 2018; Pew Research Center, 2016). Because we are interested in social class as a stigmatized identity, and the management of social class identity at work, we intentionally focus this paper on the experience of lower-income status among White men employees. Compared to other groups, White men from lower-income backgrounds are perhaps the most likely to be able to conceal their stigmatized class status, and consequently might be more likely to engage in identity management behaviors.

### 1.1.3. *The need for qualitative inquiry*

To our knowledge, research has yet to identify identity management practices around social class at work. Nevertheless, the identity literature has called for investigations of how employees who have experienced social mobility navigate workplace environments with middle- and upper-class norms (Bosson, Weaver, & Prewitt-Freilino, 2012; Jones & King, 2014; Kish-Gephart & Campbell, 2015). Specifically, there is a need to investigate the benefits and harms of class disclosure and concealment; people who conceal a lower-income background may reap the benefits of being affiliated with a higher class, such as increased perceptions of social power (Kraus & Mendes, 2014), but may also suffer from reduced authenticity and increased stress (Kraus, Tan, & Tannenbaum, 2013).

Due to the dearth of research on social class as an identity in the workplace (Cote, 2011; Cotton, 1994; Weaver et al., 2016), and the APA Task Force on Socioeconomic Status' (2006) call for more qualitative work on social class, we used qualitative methods to better understand the nature of disclosing or concealing a lower social class in the workplace, helping establish whether low-income social class identity is managed like other stigmatized identities. Because the disclosure of stigmatized identities is a highly sensitive issue, we selected private, one-on-one interviewing as our data collection method, as research has found it to be a positive experience for those discussing personal and sensitive information (Decker, Naugle, Carter-Visscher, Bell, & Seifert, 2011). Specifically, participants have reported less distress and trauma in studies that used interviewing methods to discuss sensitive topics (Kassam-Adams & Newman, 2005). Participants in our study were interviewed individually, given that research has shown that group interviewing, such as in focus groups, leads participants to volunteer less information about stigmatized topics (Wutich, Lant, White, Larson, & Gartin, 2010).

Thematic analysis was chosen as our method for analyzing the interview data. Thematic analysis is a well-established qualitative analysis used both within and outside of the realm of psychology (Braun & Clarke, 2006). It allows for a flexible analysis of complex data and reduces the bulk of the qualitative data into themes that allow for analysis of the data into succinct themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Crowe, Inder, & Porter, 2015). The data is rich and detailed because it allows the researchers to summarize what participants say in their own words (Aguinaldo, 2012; Braun & Clarke, 2006). The purpose of thematic analysis is to record the participants' subjective experiences, feelings, thoughts, or behaviors as accurately as possible (Aguinaldo, 2012), which is essential for understanding the lived experience of stigma. Furthermore, given that there are so many facets of social class (Adler & Epel, 2000; Fiske & Markus, 2012), and it is not a static identity, we determined that the flexible approach of a thematic analysis would be most appropriate.

In the present study, we use interview methods and thematic analysis to investigate the extent to which individuals decide to disclose or conceal their former, lower social class background at work. We specifically focus on employees who were in a lower socioeconomic class in childhood or early adulthood than they currently occupy.

## 2. Research questions

Because coming from a low social class background is associated with incompetence (a characteristic incongruent with workplace success) and other undesirable characteristics, we posed the following research question:

Research Question 1: Do employees formerly from lower-class backgrounds strategically conceal and/or disclose their class backgrounds at work? Under what circumstances and to which individuals do employees intentionally conceal or disclose their lower social class background?

In addition to conscious identity concealment and disclosure, research also suggests that employee's current and former identities can become apparent in the workplace by chance or accident. Thus, our second research question is:

Research Question 2: To what extent do formerly lower-class employees accidentally reveal their former social class background through situational cues?

We focus on class concealment and disclosure of individuals who came from lower-income backgrounds but are now in a higher class for two reasons. First, having moved from a lower to a higher class, these individuals are now in a more privileged position, and may be better able to disguise their former class status using clothing, job status, expertise, language, etc. Second, research has shown that childhood social class is embedded in individuals' identities from both an objective and subjective standpoint (Bluestein, 2006; Kish-Gephart & Campbell, 2015; McCall & Lawler, 1976). Imprinting Theory, for example, suggests that characteristics formed by the environment during a sensitive period in one's life can persist across time and changes to the person's environment (Marquis & Tilcsik, 2013). These social imprints are likely to occur during sensitive or vulnerable periods in a person's life, such as their childhood (Marquis & Tilcsik, 2013). Along these lines, social class has been theorized to leave a social imprint during childhood, as childhood is the period during which children learn how to be part of their social class group (Stephens, Markus, & Phillips, 2014).

However, research has not examined if individuals who change classes retain a part of their former class identity (Williams, 2009). Other minority groups have shown evidence of retaining their stigmatized identities in workplace settings, but we do not know if low-income individuals who have experienced social mobility have similar experiences. Mahoney and Zmroczek (1997) claim that class is integrated into one's identity and retained throughout the life span, explaining that people from working-class backgrounds have different cultural experiences and norms than those who grew up in middle-class environments, and that this difference can result in uncomfortable social interactions as an adult. Research in the medical field also supports the idea that childhood class exerts a lifelong effect on individuals, finding an increased risk of heart and cardiovascular disease among people from low childhood SES, even after experiencing social mobility and controlling for other risk factors (Marin, Chen, & Miller, 2008).

## 3. Material and methods

To explore our research questions, we collected data from participants in several cities in the state of Florida, ranging from rural towns to metropolitan areas. The cities included were Tallahassee, Perry, New Port Richey, Tampa, Palm Beach, West Palm Beach, Miami, and Key West. The project was reviewed by the Institutional Review Board at the authors' institution and was approved as

compliant with all regulations for studying human subjects.

### 3.1. Participants

Twenty White men, ranging from ages 21 to 74 with a mean age of 43.40 participated in the study. The criteria for participation were as follows: First, participants had to identify as having transitioned from a lower social class to their current, higher one. Second, all participants had to have a history of paid employment in an organizational context. Due to the importance of subjective social class (APA Task Force on Socioeconomic Status, 2006; Singh-Manoux et al., 2005), participants were permitted to self-define their previous social class and their current, higher social class. Consequently, we describe participants' classes using their own words (e.g., "dirt poor"). These terms are the chosen language of the participants, who identified their social class status using a range of features, from annual income to educational attainment to the prestige of their job titles. Finally, while our sample is similar in the sense that they have all experienced social mobility, they are heterogeneous in terms of their initial and current classes. Thirteen of our participants experienced poverty or working-class conditions early in life, and seven began in lower middle class or middle class and transitioned to middle class or higher.

### 3.2. Recruitment

Participants were recruited online, via snowball sampling and through social media, using a flyer designed to express the eligibility criteria. When participants responded to the advertisement they were contacted through their preferred form of communication to set up a time for an in-person interview. After the interview, participants were given a \$20 cash gift.

### 3.3. Instrument

A total of 33 interview questions were developed with the second author and a subject matter expert at Pennsylvania State University, who studies social class and organizations. Participants were asked questions regarding their present working conditions (i.e., "How did you get interested in this field of work?"), their class transition ("How/when did you know that you had changed social class? What was different for you?"), their family and childhood (i.e., "Can you tell me what your social class was as a child?"), and their current workplace disclosure and reactions ("Are there people you work with on a regular basis who know about your previous social class?"). For this paper, we focused mainly on their answers to questions about why they conceal or disclose their previous social class at work (Appendix A). All questions were chosen to support participant reflection, and follow-up questions were added as appropriate to encourage participants to elaborate.

### 3.4. Procedure

After agreeing to participate, participants were scheduled and met in person by the first author. Consent was obtained using written consent forms, and then the interviews were audio-recorded. Transcriptions of the interviews were conducted by three trained research assistants and proofread by three different research assistants. To preserve anonymity, each participant was given a pseudonym, and the names of their co-workers, bosses, and workplaces were deleted.

### 3.5. Analysis

While a sample size of 20 may seem small by quantitative standards, the data for qualitative purposes was rich enough to reach saturation, meaning that we reached the point where we achieved regular redundancies between participants (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Therefore, we had a large enough sample to test the research questions and to generalize the meaning across the population of this specific sample (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2013). To investigate our research questions, we conducted thematic analysis using guidelines established by Braun and Clarke (2006). We coded our data based on their inductive thematic analysis, meaning that we identified themes that strongly emerged from the data themselves, and did not try to fit them into a pre-existing coding frame (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Patton, 1990).

The data was analyzed separately by both authors using the following steps, in order to reduce bias and promote consistency across coders and time (Strauss & Corbin, 1998): (a) three transcripts were selected from participants who were each from different class origins, and the transcripts were read individually by each author to obtain a general sense of meaning; (b) the authors identified "initial codes," which captured features of the data relevant to the research question; (c) each code was organized into sub-ordinate themes, which were codes that were repeated and similar between the participants, and allowed for discrimination in differences and similarities between the participants (Braun & Clarke, 2006); (d) an initial code book was created, where each sub-ordinate theme was described; (e) a second set of three transcripts was selected, and the authors identified content that was similar to the original transcripts, as well as new repeated content. The data was organized in a second document; (f) the authors then analyzed the content from both sets of transcripts, and re-created sub-ordinate themes, based on the content that was repeated and similar throughout the transcripts; (g) following this, the authors developed super-ordinate themes that captured all sub-ordinate themes; (h) the codebook was updated again, with descriptions of each super-ordinate and sub-ordinate theme; (i) in order to ensure that we captured each person's individual experiences, a third set of interviews was independently analyzed again, without a conscience attempt to incorporate results from the previously analyzed documents; (j) the authors met to discuss agreement on how the content

was organized into themes, and the interrater reliability was  $\kappa = 0.88$ , Inconsistencies between the themes were addressed together until there was 100% agreement, resulting in two super-ordinate themes and 10 sub-ordinate themes. The authors updated the coding manual to reflect these decisions; (k) finally, using this code book, the first and second author finished coding the remaining 11 interviews independently, and the resulting interrater reliability was  $\kappa = 0.86$ . All final inconsistencies between the themes were addressed again until there was 100% agreement.

#### 4. Results

The majority of participants reported that there had been times when they intentionally concealed or disclosed their previous class in the workplace. Five subthemes emerged for why participants would conceal their previous social class identity at work, and five subthemes emerged for why they would disclose it.

##### 4.1. Concealing

Data analysis revealed that 70% of the men in this sample had intentionally concealed their previous social class at work.

##### 4.1.1. Judgment

Judgment was the most prominent theme among participants' reasons for concealing, with 78.6% of the men who concealed claiming it was due to this reason. This was described as a fear of being stereotyped due to their previous lower class.

We all stereotype. Then, stereotype isn't necessarily bad, sometimes it could be very good and advantageous, it keeps us safe. But, you know, if I was introduced as Michael, the guy who makes less than \$30,000 a couple of years ago and is, you know, they knew that history. "Oh, this is the new person that's going to take charge of your children." You know, is that very exciting? Is that very reassuring? Maybe not. And so, I do, I think there are positions in certain career fields that class or the perception of a person's class is important.

Michael (age 32, "Fee Waiver" to "Lower Middle" [these terms are participants' self-descriptions of their former and current social class])

This fear of judgment was closely related to the stereotype that those from lower social class backgrounds are incompetent, as they specifically feared others in their workplace would not think they were capable of doing their jobs.

Uhm, I would feel exposed. Uh, primarily because, you know, people associate that type of background with certain stereotypes and certain problems. So, if they know that you come from, you know, a broken home or anything like that, the immediate thing is that you have some kind of psychological disorder or things like that. Uhm, you know, but yeah, there's a stigma with it and they look down on you and frankly, I don't need that sort of thing.

Jack (age 39, "Poverty" to "Regular Middle")

Disadvantage would be people, someone using it against you, judges you... Like, you know, maybe uses it at as a reason not to give me work.

George (age 48, "Middle Class" to "Upper-Middle")

##### 4.1.2. Nobody wants to hear it, nobody understands

The second most prominent theme among those who concealed, was feeling that nobody cared or could understand (50%).

That's the other issue, nobody wants to hear all of that. You know, that's kind of like, uh, if they have an experience like that and you start talking about that sort of thing, you're kind of like a Debbie Downer.

Jack (age 39, "Poverty" to "Regular Middle Class")

Other participants felt a lack of understanding would cause the other person to disregard the conversation, change the topic, or say it was inappropriate to discuss at work. This included feeling that discussing a previous class would be seen as inappropriate or unprofessional.

Like, at [workplace name], when somebody talked about the, the horrible state that they're in? I wanted to just tell them about mine, and how I got out of it. And, and, I wanted to take them aside and be like "Here, call these people, do this, do this, do this. And I'll help you, I'll keep, I'll keep rooting for you." But, um, my professor, [name], says you cannot do it. You, you can't. It's, it's unprofessional.

Ed (age 60, "Dirt Poor" to "Middle")

If at lunch I was just to tell my uh, my local supervisor about it, I don't think that he'd get upset or like he would, he would be like "You can't talk about that at work," but I just don't picture myself in a scenario where I would bring it up to him without being prompted to.

Leon (age 23, "Lower Middle" to "Upper Middle")

#### 4.1.3. *It's personal*

Text for this theme included concealing because the participant (42.9%) felt that social class was too personal to be discussed at work, and that they kept this piece of their image separate from who they self-presented at work.

There are people that don't know, and it's just, uh, it's not a secret, the relationship just isn't such that we're sharing in that way.  
Ray (age 47, "Rich Poor" to "Middle")

Mm, I don't know, it's a—I mean, I have mixed feelings about it just cause at work I'm a really personal person.  
Jud (age 34, "Lower Working" to "Middle")

Uh, I can't think of a time I told somebody, "No, none of your business." But I, eh, I just prudence. I mean, if I don't know you, you know... I mean, my interactions in this business position are pretty formal and so, there's no good reason to go into my personal life. I'm not going to.

Michael (age 32, "Fee Waiver" to "Lower Middle")

#### 4.1.4. *Pity*

Text for this theme includes concealing for fear of being pitied by others (35.7%). This included any references of unwanted sympathy due to their previous living conditions.

Letting them know how, you know, how bad off I was, I don't think, uh... I don't like, um, pity parties, or, feeling like I'm whining, you know?

Ed (age 60, "Dirt Poor" to "Middle")

It's like something you don't know about a person. You feel? Like, and that's what would change, like, your perception of them? Like, like an assault victim or something like that. Like, you don't know that they've been through something like that unless they tell you, and then like once you know that... you kinda change how you speak to 'em. But like I don't want that. I don't want somebody to talk to me because they feel sorry for me... You know like, because like, because I went through different hardships than them, that all of a sudden I'm some pity case.

John (age 21, "Dirt Poor" to "Lower Middle")

This theme also included concealing to avoid being given work benefits based on pity instead of the merit of their work.

I don't really think there any advantages to it. Um, someone else might say um, they feel sorry for you, so they'll give you an opportunity here, but it's not, I'm not looking for a handout. Um, which, would also be the disadvantage in my opinion.

Steve (age 25, "Borderline Poverty" to "Middle")

#### 4.1.5. *Don't want to feel embarrassed or vulnerable*

Text for this theme described when the participant concealed because revealing his previous class would make him feel embarrassed or vulnerable (21.4%). This is different from the judgment theme, because the judgment is fear of stereotyping or judgment. This code is applied when the previous identity is concealed because of shame, discomfort, or embarrassment.

With my advisor, I still see her as a professional colleague so it's definitely changed the way I interact because she knows this very personal information about me. It makes me feel a little bit vulnerable to her. And I don't think anybody likes feeling vulnerable. So again I try and monitor.

Bob (age 26, "Uneducated Poverty" to "Educated Poverty")

Whenever you're subpar in level, you don't really want anybody to know about anything that's going on with you, you know, or at least for me I was just all - I was buckled in. I just didn't want anyone to know what going on with me and so it was hard for me to reach out for help and certain times, I was just embarrassed for - for where I was.

Doc (age 60, "Lower Class" to "Upper Middle Class")

## 4.2. *Disclosure*

Ninety-five percent of the men admitted they had disclosed their previous social class at work at least once, in certain situations. This theme included intentionally (63.2%) and unintentionally (36.8%) revealing their previous class status.

#### 4.2.1. *Forced*

The most prominent reason for disclosing class at work was when the participant felt he had no other option, as 73.7% of the men who disclosed said it was because they were forced. This can include being asked to do things they do not believe in, needing to correct people who made false assumptions, or having to explain a situation they cannot get out of.

Um... but I think, yeah, more times than not, it's me telling them rather than them asking me where I grew up. Um, often when people find out I'm from Kansas, they're like, "Uh-ho, like \*laughs\* like you grew up on a cow farm or something?" and I was like, "well, actually I grew up on a pig farm, yeah."

Daffy (age 28, "Poor" to "Lower Class but Not Poor")

If I were to ah... engage in an interview I certainly want to put my, you know, my best clothing on, my tie, be all spiffed-up so I can't imagine that ah, being homeless and not shaving or bathing for weeks, sometimes, would initially come up but I certainly, if I were - if I were asked that - and I think that I have - um... because I have worked in a bunch of different facilities... and applied for jobs with people who're like, you know, very low income, not a lot of insurance money coming in so essentially street addicts, they were cycling in and out detox and they wanted to get, you know, are you gonna be able to identify with... you know, three hundred dollar tie, you know? You gonna be able to work with these people? And so, at that point I would disclose to them that, you know, "hey, I have ah, not always been this guy."

Bill (age 58, "Below poverty" to "Middle")

For others, the disclosure was because there were people at work who knew them in other areas of their life.

They, you know, uh, in small town, whether you're Perry, or Dixie County, Cross City, or, uh, everyone goes to church together. Everyone went to school together, um, everyone sees each other in the gas stations. We all eat in the same restaurants. Um, for them to know anything about my class, is, is a, it's my hobbies or my lifestyles. Somebody else may look down on 'em. We're just different. We're just different.

Jeffrey (age 52, "Middle" to "Middle... but... higher")

#### 4.2.2. To relate

The second most prominent reason to disclose (63.2%) was to relate to other people. This theme included disclosing to people in order to demonstrate empathy, show understanding, and to connect.

Well again, um... with most of my - most of the treatment team of direct contact, I think it has been an advantage to disclose because it's um... helped develop trusting relationships with them.

Bill (age 58, "Below poverty" to "Middle")

This theme was especially prominent with sharing experiences with someone of a similar class background.

Um, probably for the most part, yeah. I-I think if anyone asked me, other than like, like I said either a client or um, well that's probably not even true. Because if you were going after a client, if you're going after a job with a client, and they had done something similar, then saying that I've gone through something similar might make them more likely to award us the job, or, to come to us for future jobs.

Leon (age 23, "Lower Middle" to "Upper Middle")

On a few occasions, uhm there have been times where someone has been talking about, you know, this is... 'we grew up not well off, we grew up, moving houses cause we couldn't really afford stuff', and I would say like, you know, in order to relate... I will offer up information about, my past, where I was growing up and stuff like that.

Matthew (age 25, "Lower Middle" to "Middle")

#### 4.2.3. To motivate/help somebody

Text for this theme included any time the men revealed their previous class to encourage or help someone else in a lower class (47.4%). This could be encouraging someone who is in a lower working condition, or who they know is from a lower class in general. It could also be an attempt to help someone from a lower class at work, or to encourage or inspire them.

Because they know I've been there, so, and they recognize it, so, uh, the advantages of see it, so, at work, is someone that works for ya, or someone can see that they can get there too.

Jeffrey (age 52, "Middle" to "Middle... but... higher")

I guess an advantage would be someone in a similar situation who comes in as a law clerk and who is struggling financially who came in the same background I did, I could give them courage, show them where I come from, where I've gotten to and where I'm going.

George (age 48, "Middle Class" to "Upper-Middle")

This support extended across ages, in the case of Jud, a high school teacher, who mentioned that he even disclosed to his students, in order to encourage them.

I tell my kids, you know, like, "Look, you always talk about what you wanna do or how you wanna do it, what you have in a dream, but if you're not doing anything to better yourself, become something different..." So, you know, I give them experiences, I give them real life stories.

Jud (age 34, "Lower Working" to "Middle")

#### 4.2.4. Noticing class cues

This theme included any references to when class was disclosed in the workplace without the participant intending for it to be known (36.8%). This involved any behavior that the participant exhibited that was identified by another person as a behavior from a



lower class. For some, this was revealed through their speech patterns.

“Y’all” “howdy” you know like stuff like that, they’ll be like, and people associate southern slang with dirt poor country bumpkins. Like that’s some of the reactions.... But you know like, you can like, facial expressions give people away... you know like eyebrow raise or like pupils get real big, something like that where their body straightens up a little, stuff like, stuff like that, definitely.  
John (age 21, “Dirt Poor” to “Lower Middle”)

For others, these cues became visible through extracurricular activities in the workplace.

But, I have found myself in context like that, being—being drawn near to them, to the CEO and those people. Being in these context, going with them to Las Vegas, where I felt a little like... uh, uh, uh, what’s the term... Kind of just a novice in that environment... You know, not really sure. I didn’t grow up playing golf so that’s obvious to them.  
Wesley (age 41, “Fluctuating Living Conditions” to “Upper Middle”)

Additionally, simple conversations about past experiences revealed difference in class background for others.

Yeah, maybe, so hope this doesn’t get too weird, um, when I grew up, we didn’t have cable so I didn’t grow up with cable shows and all my friends or most of my friends grew up with cable shows, so there’s a lot of references... I’m not gonna get so they’ll start referencing things and they’ll start looking at me and I’m like, ‘I don’t know what... you’re talking about’.  
Daffy (age 28, “Poor” to “Lower Class but Not Poor”)

#### 4.2.5. *Becoming close*

Text for this theme involved when the person disclosed their class because of becoming close with a person at work (26.3%). This could be becoming close friends, or simply developing a trusting, safe relationship. The participant disclosed because he knew enough about the person to feel that there would not be negative consequences of disclosing with this person, regardless of the other person’s class experience.

We went off for just drinks and you know I feel he is more of a friend than just a colleague. I have no problem sharing with my friends some information about my past because I am not ashamed of it I just don’t want to be judged for it.  
Bob (age 26, “Uneducated Poverty” to “Educated Poverty”)

## 5. Discussion

The primary purpose of our study was to perform an in-depth exploration of lower social class concealment and disclosure in the workplace among White men, to examine whether it is managed like other stigmatized social identities. In this section, we discuss the major themes that emerged in the study in the broader context of the disclosure literature.

### 5.1. *Intentional vs. unintentional disclosure*

Our first research question investigated whether social class disclosure occurred, and if so, if it was intentional or unintentional. Our data supports the suggestion that lower social class is a stigmatized identity at work for White men and confirms that individuals attempt to manage their class identity disclosure and concealment, with 70% of our sample admitting having to conceal for some reason. The most common reason for concealing was to avoid being judged (78.6%). This included a fear of being perceived as unable to do their job. Social class disclosure in our study was similar to LGBT identity disclosure in that disclosure was an ongoing process, varied across time and people, and was sometimes unintentional (36.3%) (Einarsdottir et al., 2016). Our data indicates that the majority of the disclosure was done intentionally, but not necessarily because the participant was willing and ready; instead, 73.7% of participants disclosed their former, lower class status because they felt forced to by the situation. This implies that social class, for White men who have moved up in social class, is a potentially concealable identity, but that concealing can be very difficult.

This finding is consistent with research demonstrating that social class “characteristics” can be recognized from social cues, such as speech patterns (Kraus & Keltner, 2009). In one study, participants of different socioeconomic statuses were recorded interacting, and the video was later shown to other participants (Kraus & Keltner, 2009). Those who viewed the video were able to discern which class the original participants belonged to with greater-than-chance accuracy just based on their non-verbal behavior (Kraus & Keltner, 2009). The higher the participant’s SES, the more “disengagement cues” they performed, which included anything that would turn attention away from the other person, such as self-grooming, fidgeting with objects, and doodling (Kraus & Keltner, 2009). The lower-SES participants demonstrated more engagement cues, such as nodding one’s head, raising eyebrows, or laughing.

Additional research has shown people can categorize rich and poor people, with better-than-chance accuracy, simply based on looking at their neutral expression faces (Bjornsdottir & Rule, 2017). In one study, participants were more likely to think a target was rich if the target appeared happier, more positive, and attractive, which are indicators of well-being (Bjornsdottir & Rule, 2017). However, targets with facial musculature that indicated repeated expressions (evidence of a more arduous life style) were more likely to be classified as lower class (Bjornsdottir & Rule, 2017). The study also found negative consequences to being perceived as lower class, with participants rating the rich targets as more employable than the poor targets.

To ensure accurate representation, we compared our codes between the responses of the men who experienced poverty/working-class living conditions versus those who began in lower-middle class. To our surprise, we found no substantial differences between the

two groups in their disclosing/concealing differences. Regardless of the extremity of the initial lower social class, nearly all of the men carried the same weight of the lower-class stigma.

## 5.2. *The intersection of class, gender, and race*

Given that our study included a relatively small and non-representative sample, our findings cannot be generalized to all populations of White U.S. men from lower income backgrounds. However, our study does contribute to the literature on intersectionality and identity by focusing on the workplace experiences of a sample located at a particular juncture of race, class, and gender.

### 5.2.1. *Class concealment to maintain racial and gender privilege*

Research suggests that White men are seen as generally high in competence and low in warmth - a stereotype that is beneficial in workplaces (Fiske et al., 2002). However, our first concealment theme, the fear of judgment, found that these men believed revealing their class background could lead them to be perceived as incompetent. In effect, their class disclosure would interfere with their current privileged status, relocating them from the high-status quadrant on the Stereotype Content Model into a lower-status quadrant (i.e., incompetent but warm) where women, minorities, and the poor reside (Durante et al., 2017).

In the United States, privilege is explicitly given to individuals who appear to be male, White, heterosexual, and middle class (Johnson, 2006; Kendall, 2006), and these are advantages that women and people of color do not receive (Case, Iuzzini, & Hopkins, 2012; McIntosh, 2004). Privilege is an unearned benefit, which is afforded to powerful social groups within systems of oppression (Case et al., 2012; Kendall, 2006; McIntosh, 2004). People with privilege experience invisible unearned assets, such as being in the company of people of their own race most of the time and turning on the television to see people of their race being widely and positively depicted (McIntosh, 2004). Considering these participants had two privileged identities (White and male), their active concealment of their oppressed identity (a lower-income background) demonstrates how powerful class-based stigma can be. Moreover, it suggests these participants were implicitly aware of their privileged position, acknowledging that they could easily lose their status if other aspects of their identities were made public. Future research could probe this issue further, assessing the extent to which various White men from lower class backgrounds consciously and thoughtfully recognize the unearned advantages their race and gender confer, and how this affects their identity management and general beliefs about social hierarchies and systematic oppression.

### 5.2.2. *Class concealment to conform to hegemonic masculinity*

Additionally, 42.9% of the men in our study who concealed their former social class did so because they believed their class status was too “personal” a topic for the workplace. This explanation may merely be an attempt to disguise, deny, or distract from the fact that revealing their former social class could interfere with the privileges they enjoy as White men. Indeed, there were a number of private but non-stigmatized experiences these men did disclose at their workplaces (e.g., their marital status). However, the desire to not expose the “personal” at work may also reflect efforts to conform to the demands of hegemonic masculinity (Bird, 1996; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). In the workplace, women endorse traditional and patriarchal ideals for men, idealizing men who are who are ambitious, assertive, and hardworking, and not affectionate or sensitive (Quayle, Lindegger, Brittain, Nabee, & Cole, 2018). Thus, men who are able to produce or support hegemonic masculinity in the workplace are bestowed with privilege (Connell, 1987; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005), while men who do not comply with idealized masculine roles at work may face exclusion from valued experiences and domains (Quayle et al., 2018). Consequently the “it’s personal” theme may be evidence that these men are separating their “work selves” from their more “personal selves,” consistent with literature on the value of hegemonic masculinity at work.

In addition, many participants believed that if they revealed their former social class, they would be exposing themselves to pity and vulnerability - traits inconsistent with the Western male gender role (Barrantes & Eaton, 2018; Coston & Kimmel, 2012; Herek, 1986; Seidler, 2007). In the United States, men are expected to be brave, dependable, and strong (Coston & Kimmel, 2012), and heterosexual masculinity is intended to portray toughness, independence, aggression, and dominance (Eaton & Matamala, 2014; Herek, 1986). Meanwhile, men are expected to stifle, contain, and conceal emotional vulnerability, as this is perceived to be feminine (Seidler, 2007; Sloan, 2012). Given that our participants perceived their low-income identity as warranting pity and/or vulnerability, they had to navigate to access their privilege within the confines of their oppressive social class identity (Coston & Kimmel, 2012). Therefore, concealing their social class due to fear of pity and vulnerability is also consistent with efforts to conform to hegemonic masculinity.

### 5.2.3. *Class concealment among White men compared to others*

Our work leaves open whether having a lower-income background is an additional or multiplying stigma at work for those who already bear observable stigma. On the one hand, given that White men are expected to be middle class, they may experience more negative repercussions for having a lower-class status than groups automatically assumed to be low-income, such as people of color and women (Goodwin & Fiske, 1996; Jost et al., 2002). In his seminal work on stigma, Goffman (1963) distinguished between the “discredited” (those whose stigma is clearly known or visible) and the “discreditable” (those whose stigma is unknown and can therefore be concealed). When it comes to social class, women and people of color may be automatically discredited as poor or working-class because they are visibly stigmatized on dimensions that intersect with class. White men from low-income backgrounds, however, may qualify as “discreditable” (Murphy, Steele, & Gross, 2007; Richeson & Shelton, 2007), and may therefore take greater pains to conceal their low-income background than those from groups assumed to be low-income.

On the other hand, individuals from visibly marginalized groups may report greater efforts to conceal a low SES background than White men, for the fear of being stereotype-confirming. Marginalized individuals avoid confirming negative stereotypes about their group, and experience anxiety when they risk confirming them or see members of their in-group acting in a stereotype-confirming manner (Schmader, Johns, & Forbes, 2008; Taylor, Garcia, Shelton, & Yantis, 2018). Further, people of color and women who have moved up in social class might employ additional concealment measures related to a low-SES background because they are already burdened with negotiating visible oppressions at work. Given that our research demonstrates the power of a lower-income stigma to impact privileged White men, it is imperative that future research analyze the nature and effects of this identity as it interlocks with other oppressed identities.

#### 5.2.4. Class mobility through racial and gender privilege

One lingering question this study did not attempt to address is whether our participants' privileged identities helped them gain social class mobility. Research shows that the social norms of privileged groups become the expectations for marginalized groups, giving the privileged the option to remain blind to their privilege and others' oppression (Case et al., 2012; Johnson, 2006; Kendall, 2006). For example, agentic traits are considered typical and desirable for a manager or leader to possess, which privileges men in the workplace because it is perceived as typical and desirable for them to possess agentic traits (Koenig, Eagly, Mitchell, & Ristikari, 2011). In systems of higher education, the middle- and upper-class value of independence is considered "normal" as compared to the working-class value of teamwork (Stephens, Fryberg, Markus, Johnson, & Covarrubias, 2012). This difference in norms serves as an additional barrier to the low-income student's adjustment to university life (Jury et al., 2017). Consequently, it is possible that our participants had fewer new social norms to learn when seeking class mobility; considering that they already possessed White and male social norms, they only had to learn middle or upper-middle class norms. On the other hand, women and people of color would have to learn new class norms in addition to White and/or male gender role norms.

#### 5.3. Implications

Research on other concealable stigmatized identities has indicated that concealing a stigmatized identity can have negative consequences at work, such as a reduced sense of belonging, self-esteem, job satisfaction, and work-related commitment (Newheiser, Barreto, & Tiemersma, 2017). Additionally, our findings indicate a concern for the occupational health field, as research on other concealable stigmatized identities has found that concealing these identities can lead to work stress (Keith, 2013; Ragins, Singh, & Cornwell, 2007). For example, members of the mental health community who disclosed their mental illness at work have reported feeling shame and embarrassment, but also relief in experiencing honesty and self-acceptance (Keith, 2013). However, concealing this identity increased psychological strain and distress (Keith, 2013).

Experiencing psychological strain can have devastating individual and workplace consequences, such as physical ailments (e.g., Chandola, Brunner, & Marmot, 2006). Therefore, future research will need to investigate the health implications for individuals from lower social classes. Also, concealing a stigmatized identity has been related to psychological disturbances, such as increased work fatigue (e.g., Frone, 2016). These employee consequences can result in the organization suffering from reduced employee job performance and motivation (e.g., LePine, Zhang, Crawford, & Rich, 2016) and increased intent to turnover (Applebaum, 2008). In the LGBT community, concealing one's sexual orientation resulted in decreased job satisfaction, organization commitment, satisfaction with promotion opportunities, career commitment, work participation and self-esteem at work (Ragins et al., 2007). However, when LGBT members disclose, they report higher job satisfaction (Griffith & Hebl, 2002; Lyons, Brenner, & Fassinger, 2005), which is potentially related to increased job performance and reduced turnover intentions (Judge, Thoresen, Bono, & Patton, 2001). Given the gravity of the health and workplace consequences correlated with concealment/disclosure practices among stigmatized individuals, our research findings indicate significant negative consequences for workplaces with employees concealing their lower-class backgrounds.

#### 5.4. Limitations and future directions

While our sample was homogenous in terms of race and gender, it was diverse in terms of participants' former and current social class, and the nature of their class mobility. We included men who moved up from any social class level to any higher-class level, which we feel revealed important commonalities among those who moved up in class. However, moving from middle class to upper-middle class is certainly different from moving from being poor to middle class, especially in terms of how much stigma the former class identity carries with it. Moving forward larger samples of each class level should be collected to investigate differences between those who started - and ended - in different class levels.

Furthermore, our sample was diverse in location, ranging from small rural towns (i.e., Perry, FL, population of 7045) to large metropolitan areas (i.e., Miami, FL, population of 453,579). The class demographics in these cities are also quite different from each other, with Miami having a wider range of wealth (U.S. Census Bureau, 2016a, 2016b). Therefore, the experiences of these individuals could be influenced by how common their previous class level is in their particular city or town. Future research should investigate each setting more thoroughly, to determine if there are differences in stigmatized identities based on the location participants live and work in.

Finally, as our participants were homogenous in terms of race and gender, future research should examine the experience of class concealment and disclosure in other samples, especially among women and people of color. Workplace research has found that when employees are assumed to be women (vs. men) or African-American (vs. White) they receive fewer call backs from employers, lower

perceived performance in interviews, lower perceived availability for work, are hired at lower rates, and are given fewer leadership opportunities than their otherwise identical counterparts (Aranda & Glick, 2014; Fiske et al., 2002; Gungor & Biernat, 2009; Latu, Mast, & Stewart, 2015; Swencionis, Dupress, & Fiske, 2017). The effects of lower social class concealment or disclosure among employees already stereotyped as low in competence and high in warmth may be less profound than among White men, or it may have additive or interactive effects.

## 6. Conclusions

Taken together, our results support the contention that a lower social class background is experienced as a stigmatized identity at work. Among White men, these backgrounds are concealed to avoid judgment, a lack of understanding, revealing personal information, avoiding pity, and not being embarrassed or vulnerable. However, these men admitted to disclosing their identities when they were forced, felt it would help another person, to relate to others, when a class cue was noticed, or when they became close to a co-worker. Given that low social class is a somewhat concealable stigmatized identity, at least for White men, future research should investigate if people from lower classes suffer the workplace consequences traditionally associated with having a concealable stigmatized identity (Newheiser et al., 2017).

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